



The
WOMAN
on the
EXAM TABLE

a mafia romance

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Jessica Gadziala

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CHAPTER ONE

Whitney

“Move your ass, new girl,” my boss snapped at me as he moved between me and the back counter, grinding his whole front situation against my whole... back situation.

Biting my tongue was an art I was, luckily, practiced in, thanks to decades in the workforce, dealing with various superiors who took their title to heart and believed themselves very much above everyone in their employ.

I hated this job.

Every single minuscule aspect of it.

From the obnoxious “retro” dress in a bright blue color with a white collar, buttons, and matching apron to the way the scent of grease almost seemed permanently embedded in my pores, to the often impatient and rude customers, and the crummy pay.

But there was nothing I hated quite as much as I hated my boss.

Tommy Dolin was all of five years my senior, but his years hadn’t treated him quite as kindly. On my more bitter days—which were happening more and more frequently lately—I would claim that his outside had just slowly but surely caught up with the ugliness inside.

Tommy was five-four with an extremely round head and face, wacky brows that shot off in all directions, small dark brown eyes, and a head that was eighty-percent bald. He refused to accept the latter fact and shave it off completely or invest in some hair regrowth solution, choosing instead to actually comb over little strands from one side of his head to the other like it would hide the baldness beneath.

I mean, who actually had a comb-over these days?

Tommy, that's who.

He had a love of camp shirts that didn't fit, making the buttons pull across his belly, and slacks that he wore way too low down. Meaning you never wanted to look in his direction if he just so happened to bend over.

In my experience, a lot of the world's ugliest souls had some of its most beautiful faces. It was sort of refreshing to have a case like Tommy. Where it was all-around bad.

I would never have stayed working for him if it wasn't necessary. But it was. And I didn't have time to waste trying to find another job.

It was only temporary anyway.

Or, at least, I hoped it was.

Who knew.

Life was just a bit... overwhelming lately.

Especially financially.

So there was a good chance I might be dealing with Tommy for a while. Which was why I bit my tongue and slid away to grab the pot of coffee I'd just brewed for an extremely particular regular of mine who insisted he get a new pot each time he came in, so I'd gotten it going when I saw him walking in the door.

The other girls claimed that since he didn't tip well, I should just tell him to eff off, that I didn't need any extra work. But, I don't know, he sort of reminded me of my grumpy old Great Uncle Robert, so I had a strange fondness for his curmudgeonly self.

"New *girl*, eh?" Danny, my regular, said with a quirked brow as I made my way to his table. "That's stretching that word, don't you think?"

"Hey, look who's talking, old man," I said, getting a chuckle out of him as I poured him a cup of coffee.

"Gonna miss that smart mouth when you go back to teaching," he said, genuinely looking upset about the prospect.

"Well, Danny, you might be in luck. The way things are looking, I might

be pulling two jobs for a while,” I told him.

“It’s a shame you don’t got yourself a man to ease that burden,” he said, as he often did. A retired widower who worked his fingers to the bone so his wife could live a nice, comfortable life, he was forever going on about my singleness. “Don’t get why you don’t. You’re sure pretty enough.”

I couldn’t help it. My gaze slid up the large picture window, looking at my obscured reflection.

It was the same one that greeted me in the mirror every day as I slipped into the ugly blue dress and apron. Except, maybe, my hair had gotten a bit messy from the hours on my feet, running around.

Danny was, perhaps, a bit generous in his description of me, or it was skewed because of his fondness for me.

I’d always been just very... average.

Average brown hair, average brown eyes, a body that was neither thin nor plus-sized, just perfectly—you guessed it—average.

I would make one small caveat, though.

My smile.

I really liked my smile.

It was my mother’s smile beaming out of my face, which was probably why I liked it so much.

But, yeah, when you were in your body for a solid thirty-seven years, you kind of came to accept yourself where you were.

And I was not like one of the other waitresses who had multiple marriage proposals in the same year because she was so drop-dead-gorgeous.

That was okay with me.

I was happily single.

Fine, maybe not *happily*. But contentedly single, at least. I learned long, long ago that relationships should only ever be the cherry on the pie, not the whole pie itself.

So I was content with my carefully crafted dessert. But I wasn’t going to exactly turn down the right cherry if it came along either. I just wasn’t outright looking for it.

I didn’t have the time.

“I am a busy woman, Danny. A man would only slow me down,” I told him as I reached past him to secure the lid on his sugar dispenser. The kids who’d had the table before him must have thought it would be funny for the next person to have the lid fall off and spill all over.

After teaching their age group for the past ten years, I knew all their tricks.

“But maybe *slowing down* would be good for you,” he said, shaking his head at me.

“What? Are you making me an offer?” I asked, smiling at the way his face flushed.

Danny was, and always would be, loyal to his beloved, but departed, wife. And at seventy-two he was, of course, a little old for me, even if I did tend to like a man with a little silver in his hair.

“Go on now. Get out of here,” he said, giving me a rare smile. “You tell that man in the back I want those eggs of mine burnt, you hear?”

“As always,” I agreed, walking away from his table to take the next order.

By the time my shift was coming to an end around three-thirty in the morning, I’d all but forgotten about how my boss ground himself against my ass.

Until, of course, the bastard came out of his office after a nice, long nap while we busted our ass thanks to a local club that had opened up nearby.

We could have used an extra set of hands to bus tables in between guests. But, apparently, that would have cut into his beauty rest.

“Is there a problem, Tommy?” I asked as he clucked his tongue while he looked over the totals for the night.

“Just thinking, with this many people in the door, there could have been much bigger bills. How many times I gotta tell you about up-selling?”

Up-selling what? It wasn’t like we served anything fancy at the place. We were typical American fare. The best I could do was offer appetizers and desserts, which I always did.

Besides, the bar across the street was geared toward young twenty-somethings. You know, the kids who could barely afford rent with five roommates, let alone buying three-course meals.

“What’d you make in tips?” he asked, even though I was reasonably sure that was not something he was allowed to ask.

Every instinct told me to lie. It was in the way my spine tingled and my hairs stood on end.

“Just seventy,” I said, shrugging. “Not a lot of deep pockets tonight, I guess,” I said, glad I’d carefully tucked away my cash in my bra after tipping out the busser and a little to the back of the house staff because things had gotten crazy and I’d messed up the POS system orders twice, and they’d been

quick to fix my mistakes for me.

He didn't need to know it was actually just over one-seventy that I had as take-home cash.

Not enough, that little voice in my head whispered. *Not nearly enough*.

But it was something.

It would help.

"Hm," Tommy said as he looked around the diner that somehow managed to look spic and span despite the hordes of people who'd come through.

Dolin's Diner never closed, but once the after-bar scene cleared out, there was usually a pretty good lull until the breakfast crowd shuffled in.

So there was almost no one around to see when Tommy moved closer to me and snagged a strand of my hair that had fallen out of my bun.

"This is a violation, you know," he told me. Like I hadn't attended all the food safety courses. Like I was the only woman who ever had a strand of hair escape her tie. "I might be willing to forget all about it if—" he started, and I felt my stomach tightening, knowing where this was going.

It was why I avoided the man like the plague, why I tried never to be caught alone with him.

But the kitchen staff was turning over, so no one was near the window. The guests were situated in a back corner behind a pillar. And I was the only waitress in the building.

Damnit.

How the hell could I get out of this and keep my job?

"Tommy Martin Dolin, if you don't keep your grubby little sausage fingers to your damn self, I will slice them off with a very dull butter knife."

That was Maureen.

The force of nature morning waitress who had worked at the diner since Tommy Senior was running the place.

She was tall and skinny with orange-red hair, a bit too much eye makeup, and a chain-smoking habit.

All she did was smart-mouth our boss.

I think the only reason she still had a job was because Tommy was genuinely too scared to fire her.

I adored her.

She was like the diner's grandma. She'd seen it all, done it all, and rarely ever got flustered. She was who'd trained me. If it weren't for her, I don't think I would have lasted a week.

“I was just—“ Tommy started even as he snatched his hand away and took three large steps to the side.

“Leaving. Yes. Good idea. I don’t want you breathing down my neck while I’m working. Hey, girl. How’d it go?” she asked, physically placing herself between me and Tommy, a power move that had me smirking and wishing I was half as badass as she was when I got to her age.

“Busy,” I told her truthfully.

“Busy is good. Keeps you from noticing how your feet are hurting and your back is aching and your underwire is cutting into your left one,” she said, getting a chuckle out of me. “What did he want?” she asked, giving me a knowing look.

“He was complaining that my hair fell out of my bun. But I was more worried about him wanting to start getting a cut of tips.”

“Over my dead and decaying body will that ever happen. If he mentions it again, you tell me. I’ll take care of it, no problem.”

“Maureen, you are truly the best of us,” I said, giving her a one-arm hug.

“Yeah yeah yeah. Now get. You need some rest.”

She was right about that. I was dead on my feet. And my feet were still going to need to walk me all the way home. I couldn’t afford to waste any money on cabs or even the subway.

It wasn’t that far anyway.

It was just a not great neighborhood in the dead of night.

I got a stomach ache every time I left work.

Even if I carried a little hidden can of mace, an eye-gouger, and a large umbrella with a pretty pointy thing at the top.

Just in case.

“Be safe,” Maureen called as she started loading up the coffee filters with coffee, preparing for the upcoming rush.

“I’ll try my best,” I called, waving at her before slipping my fingers into the holes in my eye-gouger.

I was a native city girl.

I was accustomed to the streets.

But not since I was a reckless college student did I walk them alone at night if I could avoid it.

These days, though, there wasn’t a lot of choice.

I needed to save every dime I could.

And not just in my usual “get a summer job to hold you over while

schools are out and so you can buy much-needed classroom supplies” kind of way.

No.

This was in a more pressing way. In a way that said I might have to make some of my own classroom decorations and put some wishlists up on my social media, begging people to contribute to my classroom since I couldn’t do it myself.

I was lucky, I had to remind myself quite often, that I worked in New York City, where teacher salaries started much more reasonably than other places in the country. The problem was, of course, that the cost of living in the city was also much higher.

I once read somewhere that the ideal income to live comfortably in the city was just over eighty-grand. Not even working a summer job put me close to that.

Which meant that I was really in the red these days.

It was fine, though. Temporary and fine. I could do it. Deal with the hard work and the creepy boss. Just another year or two, that was all.

Maybe one of the other waitresses was right. It was time to start selling pictures of my feet or my old, worn socks from the nights at the diner. Apparently you could “make bank” if you knew what you were doing.

I was only halfway joking when I said I was considering it.

If push came to shove, I could paint my toes and snap some pictures.

That was what my mind was on while I was walking home, since I knew better than to listen to music or an audiobook.

You had to be vigilant about your surroundings.

Which was why I was keeping one eye on the unhoused man who seemed to be watching me and a small cluster of young men who were probably not up to anything productive standing around after three a.m.

Once I passed them, though, it seemed like everyone was tucked in for the night.

Or so I thought.

Until I rounded a corner that would eventually lead to my apartment building and heard a strange, muffled, pop-pop-pop sound.

It was oddly familiar, like something I’d heard before, but just couldn’t quite place.

Not until, of course, I felt something pierce into me.

Once.

Twice.

Then I knew the sound.

A gun.

Because bullets were now lodged in my body.

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CHAPTER TWO

Salvatore

“The legend!” Cesare said as he walked into the brownstone, his arms wide, as if we were the oldest of friends.

When I got pinched, Cesare was probably a kid just like Lorenzo, Emilio, Santi, and Brio had been.

When I got out, he’d been pushed out of the city thanks to some beef he got into with the Lombardi Family, a rival of ours. He’d, apparently, fucked a Lombardi wife, which got a hit put on his head.

The only reason he was allowed back was because that particular Lombardi capo had been caught talking to the Feds. Somehow, Lorenzo—the boss of all bosses—had managed to agree to a deal.

Cesare could come back from Maine.

But only if he took out the man who was talking to the Feds.

From what I heard, he hadn’t found the rat yet. But he was looking, that was for sure.

“Cesare, how you been?” I asked, going in for the hug because that was just what you did, even if it was distant family.

“Turning over rocks looking for a rat,” he said, stepping back. “Looks

like we're getting paired up on a job."

"Seems that way," I agreed, nodding.

No one got summoned to the boss's house after midnight unless there was a pressing situation that needed handling. And, typically, the permanent kind of handling.

I didn't know a whole lot about Cesare, but I did know that he single-handedly ran things at one of our docks up in Maine, which meant he had to have a lot of guts and an ability to handle problems on his own without any assistance.

That was a good man to have doing a job with you.

Sure, the likes of Brio were the more obvious choice, but he was also not known for his self-control. Or, well, sanity. I preferred a more careful and detached partner for jobs.

"Hope you two got some coffee in you," Emilio said as he led us into the dining room where Lorenzo—the *capo die capi*—was waiting for us. "It might be a long night," he added, taking his seat.

"Hey guys," Lorenzo said as he pinched the bridge of his nose.

"What's going on, man?" Cesare asked, looking over at his cousin. Second cousin? Third? Who knew. It didn't exactly matter. Family was family.

"We tracked down the crew who jacked our shipment last month," Lorenzo said, his head going up to the ceiling where a baby was letting out the beginnings of a cry.

"The Lewis Crew. Apparently, the stupid fucks were going around bragging about it," Emilio piped in, making everyone's brows raise. Everyone but the boss, whose face went dark.

It seemed that, during Lorenzo's father's reign as *capo dei capi*, the respect for the mafia had clearly taken a bit of a nosedive. More so than I realized, what with being locked up and all.

On the inside, bosses still got a shitton of respect. They didn't exactly run the whole prison system anymore, but they damn sure had their fair share.

So it was always a bit of a shock since I got out to realize that the world had sort of forgotten about the mafia. Or believed it no longer existed, or had the same authority it used to.

You heard a lot more these days about gangs, cartels, and even the skinhead organizations. And, sure, they were a force to be reckoned with, even for us.

But Lorenzo had brought the mafia back from the brink of death. This generation was going to be the one to restore the glory to the Family.

I guess it bugged me that not everyone could see how many strides he'd taken already, how much shit he'd cleared up, how much money he'd made.

From the looks of things, it bugged Lorenzo too.

He didn't work so fucking hard to be disrespected by some two-bit crew that was too stupid to know that shit had changed in the criminal world since he took power.

"Are we giving them a talk or making them an example?" I asked, watching as Lorenzo's gaze lifted to mine.

I knew the answer before he even said it.

"Example. You know what that means better than most," he said, giving me a nod. "Excuse me. I need to go help her," he said as the baby's cries became shrieks. "Emilio will answer any questions," he added as he rushed out of the room and ran up the stairs.

"What do you know better than anyone?" Cesare asked, looking over at me.

"That if we want to make it look like its an example and a warning, it has to have classic signs that it was done by someone in the Family. On their knees, face to the wall, bullets to the back of the head."

Execution style, as they call it.

Classic mafia shit.

Almost as classic as cement shoes.

Classic also meant it was more risky, more difficult to pull off. Which was probably why we were being put on the job so late at night.

"You want this done tonight?" I asked, looking over at Emilio.

"If it is possible, yeah," Emilio said. "If it's not, no big deal. We just want this done as quickly as possible. These crews need to know who they're fucking with," he told us. "There are clean guns, gloves, and duct tape in the bag on the sideboard," he added, nodding behind us. "Don't need you catching another murder charge, do we?" he asked, clamping a hand on my shoulder as he moved past. "Keep us posted," he added before disappearing into the kitchen.

"My first official hit order," Cesare said, nodding his head.

"You're shitting me," I said, surprised.

"I was left to my own devices up in Maine," he explained. "Because the boss man didn't exactly know the intricacies of the shit going on up there, he

let me use my own discretion in... handling people who needed handling. And since I've been back, it's mostly been Brio getting the kill calls. It's finally starting to feel like I'm part of the crew," he added, turning to take the bag. "You driving or me?" he asked.

"Didn't bring a car," I admitted. "So you are."

I bought myself one in case of jobs that required me to head out of town. But as a whole, I used public transport or walked.

"I'm halfway down the block," Cesare said, leading me to his sleek black car.

The two of us climbed inside. As he put the car into drive, heading us out into Lewis Crew territory, I slipped on the gloves, so I could inspect the guns.

"Any idea how many fucks there are in the Lewis Crew?" Cesare asked, glancing over at me.

I was usually the one who felt out of the loop.

It had taken me a long-ass time to catch up on crews and major players after I got out.

It felt kind of good not to be the one most in the dark.

"I don't know an exact number. But I'd say ten or fifteen. Not a big crew."

"And he wants us to take them all out?" Cesare asked, brows pinching.

"Nah. I figure we get the high-level guys. Leave them as a warning for the rest. If we leave no one to talk, then word won't get around to the other organizations that our Family isn't something to be fucked with."

"Do you know which ones are the heads?" Cesare asked as we parked up the block and watched the guys standing around on the sidewalk under the dappled lights of the street lamps, looking up to no good.

"Blue basketball jersey is one," I said, looking through the binoculars.

"And that one sitting down? In the black. He's the second. I don't see their enforcer, though," I said, having a bit of a sinking feeling at that realization.

I really should have trusted my gut.

It never failed me.

If something in me was saying there was a problem, there was probably a problem.

But it was late.

The two big guys were there.

And Lorenzo was counting on us.

"There we go," Cesare said as the last two lower-level guys did some

elaborate handshake with the leaders before taking off. “We moving?” he asked, deferring to me since I’d been made way back before he was even old enough to do scouting work for the Family.

“Yeah, let’s do it,” I said, passing him his gun.

Adrenaline thrummed through my veins, old and familiar at this point, so it didn’t cloud my mind as we quietly exited the car and made our way up the block.

“Shit,” Cesare said as one of the guys turned and spotted us approaching.

“Execution style,” I reminded him even as the guys reached into their waistbands to find their own weapons.

“Fuck,” Cesare growled, tucking his gun away and breaking into a run.

Clearly, having no one to rely on but himself had made the fucker quick and ruthless on his feet.

The man sprang forward like he was bulletproof, taking down one of the guys.

And distracting the other for long enough for me to be able to get a jump on him, wrapping an arm around his neck and applying pressure until I felt him go limp.

I couldn’t strangle him to death, but it was easier to duct tape and position a bastard for an execution if he wasn’t awake and fighting you.

I’d just gotten my guy against the wall and pulled the trigger when we heard them.

Shots fired.

From somewhere behind us.

Damnit.

I knew it.

I’d felt it.

I should have waited.

“The fuck...” Cesare said, slamming his guy’s head down onto the ground to make him quit his writhing for a second.

“It’s the enforcer. Get it fucking done. I’ll cover you,” I said, turning and blocking Cesare as he turned his back to the shooting, and wrestled his man up beside his dead friend against the wall.

My eyes scanned in the direction I’d heard the bullets coming from, looking for the hidden enforcer.

I saw nothing for a long time.

Until his arm raised from behind a car.

Taking aim, I went for the windows, trying to keep him low until Cesare was done, then we could close in on him from two different sides and take him out too.

It was as Cesare was getting to his feet to take over for a minute while I reloaded that I saw her.

She had on a pretty hideous blue waitress outfit that was masking her curves instead of putting them on display.

She was about five-six in her flats with a great ass and hips and chest with her brown hair pulled back in a bun with a few strands falling around her pretty, somewhat round face.

I couldn't make out her eyes in the dark, but something told me they were likely a shade of brown.

Pretty.

Far too pretty to be walking alone in this neighborhood in the middle of the night.

With nothing but an eye-gouger and an umbrella as protection.

I needed to yell, to warn her.

But it was too late.

To stop shit in time.

To let her get away.

Because the bastard ducked down low behind the car raised his arm and let out several rounds, completely oblivious or indifferent to who he might hit.

And hit her he did.

The first bullet sank into her thigh, and she stood there for a second, frozen, like she couldn't quite process what had happened.

Then her head lifted.

And she looked right fucking at us.

It wasn't until she heard the second round get squeezed off that she seemed to snap out of it, her body jerking around, turning away from us.

And away toward the bullets coming her way.

I saw as the second bullet hit, her body jerking back hard, then falling to the ground.

It was right about then that we heard them.

Sirens.

"Fuck. We gotta go," Cesare said, giving my shoulder a shove because I was frozen in the spot, looking at the woman who was writhing around on the

ground, her pretty face twisted up in pain. “We gotta go!” Cesare barked even as the enforcer turned and booked it down a side street.

“She saw us,” I said.

“What?”

“The woman. She looked right at us.”

“Fuck. What the fuck do we do then?” he asked.

The answer was simple, really.

“We take her with us,” I said. “Get the car,” I added, rushing across the street toward the woman’s prone body.

“Ow ow ow ow,” she whimpered, one hand clutching her shoulder, the other pressing against her thigh.

Both hands were getting covered in blood.

She was losing a lot and fast.

She needed help.

“Don’t kill me!” she shrieked when my hand moved out, trying to press her hand harder into the wound on her shoulder.

“I’m not going to kill you. I’m trying to help you,” I told her as I heard Cesare’s car pull up a few feet away.

“We have to fucking *go*, man,” he called as he rushed out of the driver’s seat to open the back door. “Pick her up and let’s go.”

There was no other choice.

That was exactly what I had to do.

“No!” she shrieked as my hands went under her back and legs, gathering her, and holding her against my chest as I ran toward the car, awkwardly ducking down to fall into the backseat.

Cesare wasted not a second, throwing the car into drive, and pulling off.

“Let me go. I won’t say anything. Let me go. I can’t die like this,” the woman pleaded, her eyes still pinned shut. Like if she didn’t look again, maybe she would be set free.

“Where are we going, man?” Cesare asked, looking at me in the rearview after taking a turn off the road we were on, wanting to put some distance between us and the cops that were closing in on the shootout scene.

“The only place we can go to deal with this,” I told him.

To that, he gave me a nod.

Because since I got back, there was only one place to go when you were hurt, when you were in need of medical attention.

And that was the old doctor’s office the Family had bought to let me use

as an office when shit needed some serious mending.

It was just an old, defunct family doctor, but we'd done some work to turn one of the rooms into a makeshift surgery room for when the situation called for it.

Stabbings and shootings weren't exactly rare in our profession. And when you went to the hospital with those sorts of wounds, they had to report that shit to the cops. Which meant if we wanted care, we had to do it ourselves for the most part.

I didn't have the nickname Surgeon for no reason.

I was who you wanted if you got hit.

And, apparently, if you got hit during a shootout of ours.

"She okay?" Cesare asked as I pushed my hand down hard against hers that was on her thigh, making a wail escape her.

"Gotta get her on a table and look," I said, gritting my teeth before pressing my other hand into the one on her shoulder. "I know. I know it hurts," I said as her shrieks of pain turned to sobs.

"Got anything there you can give her for this?" Cesare asked.

In the rearview, I nodded at him.

Because I didn't want to say the truth out loud and upset the woman any more than she already was.

I had enough shit to knock her out cold so I could work on her without her making the job harder.

"Next right," I said, getting a nod out of Cesare before looking down at the woman.

Whitney, if her name tag was accurate.

"Everything is going to be okay," I told her.

Though, yeah, that was probably not entirely true.

CHAPTER THREE

Whitney

I wanted a refund for every single movie I paid to go see where some guy gets shot and keeps walking like nothing happened.

Yeah, what complete and utter bullshit all that was.

I mean, the second I realized what happened, the pain seared through my system. It seemed to start at the point of entry, but spread outward until it encompassed my entire thigh, then my whole chest. A burning, searing, blinding sort of pain that made it hard to breathe and impossible to think straight, let alone try to move.

Which was probably the only reason one of my goddamn shooters had managed to scoop me up off the ground, load me into the back of a car, and drive off with me.

As the car pulled away, and with it, my hopes for freedom—and perhaps life itself—I honestly couldn't tell you which was the dominant feeling coursing through my system.

Fear.

Or pain.

Okay, fine, I lied.

It was the pain.

I was a big old baby when it came to any sort of injury. I've been known to bitch and moan about a *paper cut* all day after it happened.

So having two gaping holes inside my body? Yeah, I was nauseated from the pain. My entire body felt like it was screaming. And then the bastard in the back with me pressed his hands harder into my wounds, and I swear I almost blacked out from the agony.

When the car stopped and the man grabbed me again, jostling me to get me out of the car, I actually did start to go in and out of consciousness, my body deciding it had endured enough, that it didn't want to be aware of anything else happening to me.

I was vaguely aware of a door closing, of a cold table beneath me.

It wasn't until I felt something cold and hard slide around my wrist and tighten that consciousness came back completely.

Because I knew.

I knew without looking, without asking.

Those were handcuffs.

These barbarians had handcuffed me to a table.

Why?

So they could rape me before I bled to death?

Suddenly, I wished unconsciousness had continued to claim me. If those were to be my last moments on Earth, I'd just much rather not experience them.

I wanted to flail, to fight, but the screaming in my shoulder and opposite thigh made it impossible to move.

Taking a slow, deep breath, I let my eyes slit open.

I'd kept them closed in a sort of juvenile attempt to assure them that they could let me go, that I wouldn't tell the police about them because my eyes were shut and I didn't see them.

It seemed pointless now to keep them closed.

I might as well look at the men who were going to end my life.

I couldn't have prepared myself for the unexpected and completely inappropriate gut punch of desire that spread through my body as my gaze finally landed on the man who'd been in shadow on the street, the same one I'd been in the backseat of a car with.

He was six-two with a broad chest, wide shoulders, and a strong core beneath his well-tailored dark gray slacks and a black button-up.

It wasn't just the body, though.

Oh, no.

The man had a chiseled face a five o'clock shadow covering his face, including the cleft in his chin. And that silver that was mixed in that five o'clock shadow? Yeah, he had a lot more of that streaked through his dark hair.

The absolute last thing I needed right then was to feel the stirrings of something damn near forgotten in my body.

Attraction.

Toward the man who not only shot me, but was holding me hostage.

"She's losing a lot of blood," another voice said, making my gaze shoot over toward the door to find the man who must have been the driver.

He was younger than the other man with no silver in his dark hair. And unlike the other man, this one had a lot of tattoos. Including ones that went down from his eye and down his cheek, but he was too far away to make out what it was.

"Yeah. Tell me about it," the first guy said. "Hand me that," he demanded, waving to something behind me.

Maybe I should have looked, seen what was coming my way. But my gaze was locked on the attractive older man who was pressing hard on my shoulder.

"What do I do?" the younger man asked.

"Take over for me. A lot of pressure. I'm doing that."

Doing what?

But before I could come to any sort of conclusion about that, though, the pressure let up, and then pushed down again, making a cry escape me.

It was right after that, though, as I felt my arm being swiped with something, then something jabbed under my skin, that I had the most peculiar thought.

It sort of seemed like they were trying to treat me.

But then the world went black for a while.

I woke up startled, my entire body jerking hard, making my shoulder scream in pain and pins and needles, confusing me for a long moment before it came flooding back.

Leaving work.

Walking home.

The pop-pop-pops.

The men in the shadows.

The pain.

The car ride.

The... medical attention?

As soon as that thought formed, my eyes shot open, looking around with dry, bleary eyes for a moment until they adjusted to being open once again.

I was in a doctor's room.

Not a hospital.

An actual private doctor's exam room.

On the exam table.

It was a dated space, something right out of the 90s.

From the ugly sand-colored linoleum to the dark faux wood cabinet and sink area, and the halfway painted walls in a light blue color, and even to the table itself that I was on with its pale green vinyl material.

I half-expected that the waiting room out front would have those round-backed, rounded-armed, mismatched-colored cushion chairs.

The fluorescent light overhead had a wooden frame where several moths found the end of their days.

It even smelled like a doctor's office. A strange mix of plastic and antiseptic with a trace of blood.

Blood.

In this case, my blood.

My gaze shot down my body, making dread spread through me. Because my clothes were gone. Everything except for, it seemed, my panties and bra.

A thin sheet was draped over me to keep off the chill of the air conditioning in the room that seemed to be set to Arctic.

Through that thin material, I could see a bulge around my thigh.

Bandages?

My hand went to inspect instinctively, but the motion was halted by the

handcuff around my wrist.

Taking a deep breath, I tried to move my other hand, feeling my shoulder cry out in objection, but not nearly as sharply as before.

Slipping the blanket to the side, I saw gauze wrapped entirely around my thigh.

They'd... treated me.

Why would they shoot me, only to take care of me after?

As if sensing the direction of my thoughts, the door creaked open, and someone leaned their head in.

There he was.

The sexy older man who'd picked me up and carried me around.

I wasn't exactly accustomed to being carried. In fact, no man had ever even attempted to pick me up before. Yet this one had scooped me up like it was nothing at all to do so.

There absolutely should not have been a strange fluttering in my chest at the memory. But there was no denying it was there, either.

He said nothing as he observed that I was awake, just moved silently into the room and over toward the cabinets, fiddling around with something. But the exam table was faced away from him, so no matter how much I tried to crane my neck to see what he was doing, I succeeded only in making my shoulder hurt.

"Stop moving around," he said in a deep, smooth voice that had shivers coursing through me.

"Why am I here?" I asked, watching as he moved into my field of view.

"To get those bullets plucked out of you," he said.

It wasn't just what he said, but the way he said it. Like it was no big deal. Like it happened every single day.

"This isn't a hospital," I said, looking around.

"No, it's not," he agreed as he wiped a thermometer in an alcohol swab.

"Open," he demanded as he moved in at my side.

And what did my damn traitorous mouth do? Yep. Opened right up for him.

I tried to tell myself it was because I genuinely did need to know if I had a fever or not, if I was dealing with a possible infection from some back-room, makeshift surgery to remove the bullets. But even I knew it was more like a knee-jerk reaction to something firm in his voice, something that brooked no argument.

The man was walking around the city streets firing weapons, so, yeah, I felt like it was probably in my best interest not to piss him off.

Pressing my tongue against the thermometer to keep it in place, my gaze slid up from under my lashes to look at the man who was both holding me captive and taking care of me, two actions that just didn't seem like they were supposed to go together.

I couldn't get a read on him.

He was in the same outfit I vaguely remembered him wearing when he'd picked me up. Gray slacks, black button-up. But now, his sleeves were rolled up to show off some strong forearms, and there was dried blood on his pants.

My blood, if I wasn't mistaken.

Before I could take in much more than that, though, the thermometer beeped, and he reached to pull it out.

"What is it?" I asked when he looked at it, then wiped it down with another alcohol wipe.

"Normal."

"Can I leave?"

I hadn't meant to say that. At least not yet. But it just... blurted out of me.

"No."

"No?" I hissed. "What do you mean, no?"

"You're not leaving. You were just shot, Whitney."

And with that, he turned and walked back out of the room.

While I tried to tell myself that the strange little shiver I felt when he said my name had nothing to do with how good it sounded in that far-too-appealing voice of his, and everything to do with the fact that he wasn't going to let me leave.

A frustrated sound bubbled up and burst out of me just as the door opened again.

This time, though, it wasn't the salt-and-pepper guy. It was someone younger with a lot of tattoos. Just as attractive, objectively, but less my type since I was pretty sure he was younger than me.

"Yeah, Surgeon can get to people like that. Great at what he does. Terrible fucking bedside manner," the man said as he moved into the room, holding a tray with what looked like tea and some kind of food nestled on it.

"Surgeon? That's his name?"

"Well, a nickname, at least," the guy said.

"And who are you?" I asked, since he seemed like he was okay with

talking.

“Well, I guess you can call me Maine for the time being,” he said, hooking the rolling stool with his foot and pulling it over toward the exam table with him. “And you are Whitney. Unless that name tag was fake.”

“I, ah, no. I’m Whitney,” I said.

What good would lying do?

They likely had my purse with all of my identification in it.

“Alright. Whitney. Well, Surgeon thinks it is probably a good idea for you to get some food in your stomach. You lost a lot of blood. And while we can provide a lot of services here, transfusions are a little out of our reach. Well, tonight they are, at least. And there’s also an iron tablet here,” he said, as he grabbed the rolling equipment tray and put the food tray on top of it, since he couldn’t rest it on my bandaged leg.

“Why am I here?” I asked, looking down at the tray. And, sure enough, there was a little round red pill. I knew it because I took them daily since I was deficient. A fact that was likely exacerbated by all the blood loss I’d just endured.

My actual doctor’s words came back to me, prattling on and on about fatigue, weakness, headaches, and chest pain that could, eventually, lead to more serious issues.

So I lifted my good hand, grabbed the iron pill and the small cup of water, and took it.

“Because you were shot,” Maine said.

“No. I mean... why am I here and not at the hospital?”

To that, Maine took a slow, deep breath and released it before he spoke. “See, Whitney. There’s this protocol at the hospital where they have to report gunshot wounds. And when that happens, the police come. And when the police come, they have questions.”

“Questions you don’t want me to answer,” I concluded.

“More or less,” Maine agreed, nodding. “But we couldn’t exactly leave you to bleed to death in the street either, could we?” he asked, slapping his knees before standing up. “Eat some of that food. And that other cup of fluids. It’s electrolyte water. Lemon-lime flavor,” he added before making his way out of the door.

Alone, I stared down at the plate to my side.

Aside from the water and the electrolyte water, they’d brought me a bowl of soup and half a sandwich. Both of which looked too nice to have come

from a convenience store or diner, which had to be the only things open at that time of night.

Or was it morning?

I'd lost all track of time thanks to whatever it was that Surgeon had stabbed me with. There were no windows or clocks in the bare space, leaving me with no choice but to guess that at least an hour or two had passed if he'd been able to fish out the bullets, clean the wounds, then wrap me up.

Where did that leave us? Five am? Six? Somewhere around there.

The city would be waking up soon, early birds chasing that proverbial worm, the health-conscious strapping on their sneakers to run the streets or parks before they were too packed to provide any peace.

I didn't know where I was. But I did know there was no such thing as a desolate area of the city. People were piled on top of each other in every corner of the place.

So if I screamed... someone would hear me.

That was kind of the perk to living alone in a big city. You were never truly alone. If you screamed loud enough for long enough, someone would eventually get sick of it and call the cops.

What can I say? Us city folks weren't *nice* but we gave a damn on occasion.

Decision made, I sucked in a deep breath, fought with my insecurity about it—decades of being told to be a *good girl*, to be quiet, to never draw too much attention to myself—and screamed.

I screamed until my lungs hurt, until my throat felt raw, until defeat made frustrated tears flood my vision.

It was right then, in one of my lowest moments, that the door opened up again.

This time, it wasn't "Maine" who came in, but Surgeon himself.

Stepping inside, he leaned back against the door, crossing his arms over his strong chest.

"You done?" he asked.

Was I done?

Was I done?

Oh, no.

No, I was just getting started.

CHAPTER FOUR

Salvatore

“Ah, yeah, so... that was nasty as fuck,” Cesare said as I washed the blood off my hands, watching as it mingled with the soap and water, becoming a milky pink color instead of the stark red that was on my pants and the tweezers I hadn’t sanitized yet.

“That didn’t even make the top ten nasty wounds I’ve seen,” I told him, shrugging. “Only the third woman I’ve treated, though,” I said, thinking back.

What can I say? The mafia was a historically male-centric profession.

“That’s because there’s only one Family with female capos,” Cesare said, making my gaze slide in his direction. “The Lombardis,” he told me.

“How the fuck do you know that? We don’t have any kind of intel on their organization.”

And from what I heard, the attempted peace talks between our two Families were going nowhere. Not even our alliance with the Esposito Family had softened the Lombardis feelings toward us. Or, truth be told, ours to them.

“Pillow talk,” Cesare said, smirking over the memory of the dumbest

mistake of his life. “Kind of smart, if you ask me.”

“Why’s that?” I asked, grabbing a towel to dry my hands.

“Because who the fuck would know? It’s the perfect way to get intel or sneak up and handle business without someone getting suspicious.”

That was fair.

“So what now?” Cesare asked, looking over at Whitney’s unconscious body, now almost completely covered in a sheet.

Cesare had tried to talk me into just pulling up her skirt and down her shirt, worried the woman would lose her shit if she woke up nearly naked. But with the way she was bleeding, I reasoned that it might have freak her out more if she woke up with giant stains of blood all over her.

“Now we wait until a respectable hour to call Lorenzo to see what the next move is,” I told him, tone a little pointed.

Cesare was used to working alone, to not needing to run shit past the boss. Things didn’t work like that in the city.

“Why not just call him now?” Cesare asked, checking his phone.

“Because he’s got a fussy baby that’s keeping him up all the time as it is. He needs to get some sleep here and there, or he’s not going to be thinking straight. We have this under control for the time being,” I told him, slapping a hand on his shoulder as I went toward the door.

As I moved out, I could have sworn I heard him mumble under his breath, “You call this under control?”

I didn’t bother responding.

Because, yes.

It was under control... enough.

The bullets were out. The bleeding had stopped. She was unconscious. There were no signs so far of her being in any sort of imminent danger.

We could give Lorenzo a couple hours to catch up on some much-needed sleep.

That decision had nothing at all to do with the fact that Whitney was the prettiest patient I’d ever had.

That would be fucking ridiculous.

I was way too goddamned old to base any sort of decisions on that kind of thing.

Going back to the waiting room of the defunct doctor’s office, I found her purse, and pulled the wad of cash I found sticking out of her bra, and slipped it into her wallet, bloodstains and all. Money was money whether it was

covered in plasma or glitter from a stripper's ass crack. It was the bank's problem to take it out of circulation if it wasn't fit to spread around.

There wasn't much else in her purse.

Some hand sanitizer, a collection of hair ties that she likely needed for working in a restaurant, a bottle of aspirin, and a piece of chalk. Like... an actual piece of chalk. Which seemed to make no sense.

Judging from the contents of her wallet, she lived a couple blocks over from where she'd been shot. In a neighborhood where I would feel a little uncomfortable walking in the middle of the night. Which made me wonder why the hell she hadn't taken public transit or a ride or something. She had the money on her to afford it, that's for sure.

It was something I would have to figure out.

Because I had a feeling that the Costa Family was going to have some sort of lasting relationship with Whitney Carlton. Whether either of us liked that fact or not.

See, we executed people without much thought.

But those were people in the life.

We didn't take out innocents.

Sure, yeah, there was a time when we lost the old ways, when we became primitive and barbaric, when men no longer cared who they hurt or killed.

Those were dark days for our reputation.

Lorenzo was making sure we didn't have that stigma attached to us anymore.

So we didn't murder women who just so happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time and saw some shit they were never meant to see.

The way I was looking at the situation, the only solution was to pay her for her silence.

No one was going to like the situation. It was complicated and expensive and would require some oversight for a long while, someone always around to make sure no one's lips were getting loose and spilling secrets they had no business sharing.

Sighing, I flicked on the TV, waiting for the news to cycle around again, and watching the coverage of the shooting with a knot in my stomach.

Because these were tricky times for criminals.

Not only did we have to worry about security cameras these days, but cell phones. Some random asshole ducked behind a car or hiding in the shadows, recording everything that went down.

“Execution-style—“ The news anchor was saying as Cesare came walking into the room, tucking his phone away.

“Why bother with that shit?” he asked. “Just heard back from our friend on the force. They don’t have shit. Way he sees it, they aren’t going to go out of their way to spend too much time trying to figure out who took out gang members. Too much other shit going on these days.”

That was good news.

I guess I was still a bit old-school with the way I liked to gather information.

The world had changed a lot in the years when I’d been away. Different connections had been made, new methods of gathering information had been enacted.

I was going to be playing catch-up for a while, it seemed.

“So what now?” Cesare asked.

“Now, we wait.”

“For her to wake up,” he concluded.

That, yeah.

But also to see if she caught an infection. To see what Lorenzo had to say. To see if she would agree to silence.

There was a lot of waiting to do.

I was good at waiting.

Cesare, not so much.

“You could run out and get her some food for when she wakes up. She’s going to need to eat after all that blood loss.”

It bothered me not to be able to do transfusions in this sort of situation.

But what could we do?

We weren’t the Red Cross.

We didn’t have people lining up to give blood that would go to waste in three to six weeks, no matter how optimal storage solutions were.

During times of a lot of duress, I’d talked Lorenzo into setting up a program where the top-level guys came in and gave blood once or twice a week to keep on hand in case shit went south and we needed it.

But for lower-level guys or innocents caught in the middle of our shit? Yeah, we were out of luck.

All we could do was hydrate them, feed them, and give them iron, then hope their bodies could make it work.

“I could do that,” Cesare agreed, nodding.

“Good shit, not crap,” I told him. “And electrolytes,” I added.

“Got it. Anything for you?”

“Coffee.”

I had a feeling neither of us would be getting sleep for a while.

With that, he took off while I continued to flick through the news stations until they eventually gave way to infomercials before the morning news cycles started up.

Then it was time to check on her, and I found myself at once both too eager and oddly hesitant because of that eagerness.

But no matter what was going on in my head, or other parts of me, I had to go in and test her for her temperature.

Then there she was.

Awake.

Freaked the fuck out.

Those warm brown eyes of hers watching me with the same sort of look a small prey animal stuck in a trap looks at the person circling them. With fear and suspicion. Even though that person was trying to take care of them.

“You could be less of a dick,” Cesare said after dropping off Whitney’s food.

“I could,” I agreed, tipping up my coffee to drain the last of it, annoyed to find it not sweet enough.

Years inside with somewhat limited access to sugar, I found myself craving it since I’d gotten out.

“She’s not one of us,” Cesare reasoned.

“Noticed that,” I agreed. “What’s your point?”

“That she’s hurt and confused and scared, and maybe being an asshole isn’t the right move.”

“Luckily don’t have complaint cards for her to fill out,” I said, reaching for my phone, figuring it was time to call Lorenzo, whether or not his baby kept him up all night.

And it was right about then that she started to scream bloody fucking murder.

“I got it,” I said, holding up a hand as Cesare stiffened.

“Well, are you going to get it this lifetime?” he asked when I didn’t rush right in.

There was no rush.

We hadn’t done a whole fuckuva lot to update the place, but we had

drilled some holes into the walls and blown in some thick fucking insulation to muffle the noises of people being treated without proper anesthetic.

It helped that we were on the ground level, too, with the two buildings next door not having basement levels.

“Sounds like she needs to get it out of her system,” I added, shrugging.

“Salvatore,” Cesare said, brows raised.

“Alright. I’ll go,” I said, moving out from behind the desk and toward the exam room.

“You done?” I asked as her gaze fell on me while I leaned back against the door.

I could see just how wrong that choice of words was almost the moment they were out of my mouth.

She went from freaked out to enraged in one second flat.

“Am I *done*?” she hissed.

“That’s what I said,” I said, nodding, doubling down.

“Am I done?” she repeated. “Ah, that will be a no. No, I’m definitely not done since I am being held against my will and treated by some guy named Surgeon who I am pretty sure has never spent a day in medical school.”

“Got me there,” I agreed.

“Just let me go home,” she said, her tone both defeated and pleading, creating this strange stabbing of guilt in my gut.

I wasn’t someone who struggled with a lot of guilt. Maybe Alessa getting taken while on my watch being the only thing in recent memory that I felt like shit about.

As a whole, though, I did what I did and I didn’t overthink it.

Guilt was a fucking useless emotion. Why would I waste my time on it?

“No,” I said despite the strange churning in my stomach that I was going to go ahead and let myself blame on too-strong coffee and not enough food.

That one word seemed to wipe away all traces of defeat and pleading.

She yanked relentlessly at the cuff that she didn’t seem to realize was attached to a ring anchored in the wall, a ring whose strength had been tested by men twice her size thrashing with every bit of pain and rage in their bodies as I sliced parts of them off or stitched parts of them back together.

“Stupid... fucking... ass... hats,” she hissed as she yanked harder.

“Shitting... dickhead...”

“Shitting dickhead,” I repeated, unable to stop the chuckle that bubbled up and burst out.

“Gee, sorry. I’m not up-to-date on my acceptable criminal profanities,” Whitney said, staring daggers at me. “I’m a teacher, not a gang member.”

“I thought you were a waitress,” I said, knowing engaging with her was probably not the right move, but now she had my attention. “That dress I peeled off of you had an apron. And there was a wad of cash stored with your tits.”

At that, her pretty face went almost tomato-red as she suddenly realized all the thrashing about had made the blanket slide down her body, exposing her plain beige bra and the tits that were just barely contained by it.

It seemed to be the age of the ass-man.

But I’d always loved a great rack.

I liked more than a handful, if I could find it.

And Whitney? Yeah, she had that going for her.

“You’re going to pull your stitches,” I warned her as she tried to use the arm near her damaged shoulder to grab the blanket. “Told you,” I said when she stubbornly kept trying only to let out a hiss of pain.

Pushing off of the door, I made my way over toward her.

“Don’t touch me,” she snapped, her tone sharp, but her chin was trembling.

“You want your tits tucked away or not?” I asked, reaching for the blanket. “I’m not bitching about the view,” I added, “But seems like you’re not comfortable with the goods being and display.”

She refused to respond to that, so I took it as permission to tuck the blanket more firmly around her.

“Did you take my money?” she asked, and something in her tone had my gaze jerking up to her face.

“Yeah. You were bleeding all over it,” I said. Were those... tears in her eyes? Did she think I was stealing from her? “I put it in your wallet,” I explained watching as she closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

It was only like a couple hundred bucks.

It wasn’t like it was her life savings we were talking about.

But, clearly, she needed that money.

It was a fact that should have made me feel better. It would be easier to get her to agree to silence if she was strapped for cash.

Somehow, though, it wasn’t satisfaction I felt.

It was something more like sadness or empathy.

Money, well, it hadn’t ever really been an issue for me. Or anyone I

know. That was a good thing about being a part of the Family. Cash was never hard to come by. And even if you found yourself strapped for some reason, someone was always around to toss a couple grand your way.

Hell, I'd been locked up for fucking fifteen years, but someone was always there to put money on the books for me, to send me shit, to bring me shit.

I'd never been financially hurting.

That said, I grew up in the city.

I saw homeless people and struggling people every single day I walked the streets.

I understood how hard it was to get and stay ahead in a city as expensive as ours.

And Whitney was, what, a teacher with a waitress side gig? Yeah, she couldn't exactly be rolling in it.

"How's the pain?" I asked, wanting my mind on something other than sympathy for her shitty financial situation.

"Don't drug me again," she demanded, jaw tight.

"I was going to offer regular pain pills, not to knock your ass out again," I said, shaking my head. That shit was precious. I wasn't going to waste it like that. "Getting shot hurts like a motherfucker."

"How would you know?" she grumbled. "What are you doing?" she hissed immediately after as I reached behind my neck to pull my shirt up and off.

"Showing you how I know," I said, balling the shirt in one hand, and waving down my body with the other, then turning to show her my back. "Take your pick," I added, facing her again. "They all hurt."

"You've been shot four times?"

"Five," I clarified.

"Wow. So you're a jerk to everyone, not just me," she said, holding back a smirk. And, hey, I had to give her credit for having the balls to snark off to someone like me.

"I'm a jerk for fishing those bullets out of you, cleaning your wounds, and stitching you up?" I asked.

"Well, maybe you wouldn't have needed to if you hadn't—" she started, but clamped her mouth shut when the door opened at the side.

"He's her—" Cesare started, then his brows furrowed. "Why is your shirt off?" he added.

“Who is here?” Whitney asked, straightening, her eyes going wide.
“Do you want the pain meds or not?” I asked, pulling my shirt back on.
She gave no answer to that, making me sigh.
“Suit yourself,” I said, leaving to go talk to the boss.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Whitney

I was punishing nobody but myself.

My shoulder and thigh were in absolute agony.

I was just being stubborn because the guy was kind of an asshole.

Not even *kind of*.

He was a complete asshole.

Some part of me just didn't want to take anything from him. Even if it would make me feel better.

I slammed my head back on the cushion of the slightly elevated table, staring at the ugly lamp above me, wondering who the hell had shown up that had made this Surgeon guy rush off like that.

His boss, I guess?

What did you call a gang member's boss?

Were they leaders?

Kingpins?

And what did it mean for me that one had suddenly shown up? Were they going to decide to let me go? Or would the boss say they screwed up in taking care of me? Was I going to end up with a bullet in the head after all?

No.

No, absolutely not.

I couldn't let that happen.

Taking a deep breath, I sat back up, letting the pain help me clear my mind of niggling thoughts.

Steadying myself, I lifted my bad leg and started to scoot my butt, using my handcuffed wrist to help me maneuver, and just barely managing to bite back a string of curses as the pain racked my system.

I could make out the deep vibrations of male voices from somewhere outside the exam room, and I figured I had at least a couple of minutes before the door opened again.

If I tried hard enough, I might be able to figure out how to get out of the handcuffs. Or at least find some sort of weapon to protect myself with.

I was nobody's action heroine.

I had a hard time even watching action movies with some kick-ass woman saving the day because it was just so far from my reality that I had a hard time suspending disbelief while I watched.

I didn't do cardio kickboxing for fun or pick up and put down heavy objects to tone my body. I damn sure never turned down a good, decadent dessert when I was having a rough day.

Sure, I traveled with an eye-gouger, but the idea of actually having to use it made me feel queasy.

That said, I did believe that no one truly knew what they were capable of until they were backed into a corner, until they were forced to address parts of themselves they may not have realized they were capable of before.

So maybe I had an inner action heroine inside of me, just waiting for the chance to, I don't know, stab a gang member with a scalpel or something.

I was dubious, of course, but that didn't stop me from carefully slipping off the table and sliding along the wall as far as my bound wrist would allow me, so I could just about reach the top drawer in the cabinet behind the exam table.

There was a keyhole on it, but I said a silent prayer that was immediately answered when it slid outward when I pulled it.

I wasn't met by any scalpels or knives or anything that I could use to inflict a lot of damage.

No, instead, the only drawer I could pull open without possibly dislocating my shoulder was old paperwork and folders.

“Damn it damn it damn it,” I hissed, defeat bullying its way through my system as my fingers kept rifling through the paperwork.

Then there it was.

A paperclip attached to the pages in one of the folders.

I mean, fine. I will admit it. I hadn’t ever picked a lock before. But I figured that if you could pick a handcuff lock with a bobby pin, then there was no reason you couldn’t pick it with a paperclip.

Feeling marginally better, I eased the tension in my shoulder, only to realize that to pick the lock, I was going to need to lift my other arm up. You know, the one near my shoulder that was screaming in pain since I hadn’t accepted the damn pain medicine.

Exhaling hard so I didn’t have any breath to cry out with, I yanked it up as quickly as I could, feeling the bile rise up my throat at the pain that assaulted my system.

But after a minute, it slowly became less blinding, giving me enough focus to unwrap the paper clip, then start poking around in the handcuff hole.

I guess a part of me thought it would be like that time I’d accidentally locked myself out of my own damn bathroom and I jammed a toothpick in the little hole and it popped the lock open.

It wasn’t like that, but after a minute or two of working at it, I felt a click that had my heart soaring as I yanked my arm free of the cuff.

It felt like dead weight to my side, pins and needles making my entire arm feel useless as I hobbled back toward the cabinets, trying to look through the remaining drawers until my good arm stopped tingling so I could lift it to look in the cabinets themselves.

My fingers had just closed around a bottle of something when the door swung open behind me, making me jerk around to find Surgeon standing there, his brow raised.

“What are you going to do? Disinfect me to death?” he asked, lips twitching in a way that had no right to be as appealing as it was, given the circumstances. His chin jerked toward the cuff still attached to the ring in the wall. “How’d you get the cuffs off?”

His tone had been curious, conversational. Not angry as far as I could tell. Which is probably why the truth slipped out.

“Paper clip.”

“Nice,” he said, nodding.

“You’re not putting it back on me. I just got feeling back in my arm.”

“And used it to try to find a weapon,” he said. “I took the pointy shit out with me. Most people can get out of cuffs if you give them long enough.”

Well.

Way to burst my bubble.

I’d been kind of proud of getting out of them.

Not that it mattered now.

He was back.

And I was not free.

“Why don’t you have a seat?” he said, waving toward the exam table.

“Is that a suggestion or a demand?”

“You lost a shitton of blood today. Don’t see you staying on your feet for too much longer. Gonna get lightheaded fast.”

He wasn’t wrong about that, and I was even more agitated with him for that fact.

“Why should I sit down? I want to go home,” I said, trying not to let the whine slip into my voice, but I wasn’t sure I succeeded.

I was too damn old to whine.

But I was exhausted, in pain, and quite literally scared for my life. I was entitled. Just this once.

“That’s what I’m back to talk to you about,” he said, jerking his chin toward the chair.

A part of me didn’t want to obey.

But it was kind of hard to stand your ground when you were shot in the leg.

So I hobbled over and carefully got my ass back up, reaching for the blanket and holding it against my chest.

“What are you here to talk to me about then?” I asked when he didn’t immediately start speaking.

“About the conditions and parameters for you going home.”

“You’re serious?”

“Do I look like a man who jokes around?” he shot back.

He had me there.

He didn’t seem like he knew how to genuinely smile, let alone laugh.

“What kinds of conditions and parameters?” I asked.

“I have some questions for you first.”

“Like what?”

“Do you live with someone?”

“How is that any of your business?”

“Babe, you’re just dragging this out. Think we’re all tired and over this. The faster you answer, the quicker we can get you back to your life.”

Well, it would be stupid to keep ticking him off if he was genuinely going to let me leave.

“I live alone. Sometimes, my sister will come and stay with me for a weekend, but not often.”

“Try to push that off until you heal then,” he said. It wasn’t a suggestion, either.

I was getting really sick of douchebag guys dictating my life. But it looked like I didn’t have a lot of choice in this matter.

“Because she will have questions that I can’t answer,” I said.

“Exactly that.”

“So, I’m supposed to just... go back to my life like nothing happened.”

“Pretty much. Except you’re going to need to treat those wounds. And come back to get your stitches out.”

“Come back here?”

“Yeah.”

“So... I... I have to see you guys again?” I asked, tone choked.

“No offense, right?” he asked, smirking. “Yeah, babe, you’re going to have to see us guys again. Well, me. You’re going to be dealing with me.”

“Lucky me,” I grumbled, getting a snort out of him.

“The deal is, you keep your mouth shut. In turn for that, we pay you.”

“You’re... paying me for my silence?” I asked, brows knitting. “There’s a phrase for that, isn’t there?” I asked, talking mostly to myself.

“Hush money,” he said, making my gaze shoot up. “It’s called hush money,” he repeated.

“Right. You want to pay me hush money. Just to... not tell anyone about this.”

“Yeah, babe, that’s what hush money is for. For you to hush.”

“For how long?” I asked.

Someday, someone was going to have questions about the scars I was sure I was going to have.

“For as long as we are willing to pay you for it,” he said, shrugging it off. Like it was no big deal.

Like they had an endless supply of cash to just toss at me. Forever.

“Wouldn’t it be easier to... you know...”

“Whack you?” he asked, chuckling.

Whack?

Whack me?

That wasn't gang terminology.

That was... that was the mafia.

Right?

I mean, those were the only guys I'd ever heard use that term in movies and TV shows.

My gaze lifted, looking at his dark hair flecked with gray, his dark eyes, his somewhat tanned skin, his slacks and dress shirt. And the other guy, Maine, he was dressed up too.

What gang members looked like they were ready to go out to a fancy dinner?

None that I knew of.

These guys were the mob.

For some reason, that fact let my stomach untwist a little bit.

It shouldn't have. The mafia was notoriously violent. But they also had a code, didn't they? Was that why they hadn't just killed me? Because of that code?

“We don't kill innocent women,” Surgeon said, shrugging off that fact.

“But you're willing to pay us indefinitely for silence?”

“It's just money,” he said.

Just money.

It was *just* money.

That was only something someone who'd never struggled would say. Because to those of us who cut coupons and bought used and pinched every last penny, money was not “just” anything. It was essential. There were days when it was all there was, all you could think about, all there was to worry about in your world.

I couldn't fathom a world where I didn't turn off the lights early or sweated in the summer heat to keep the electric bills low. Or when I refused to buy my favorite soup because they raised the price by twenty cents a can.

Things had been tight for my entire life.

And they'd gotten much, much tighter over the past six months. With no end in sight for several years.

Now here was this random guy who'd already saved my life—you know, after nearly taking it—offering to lighten the load of those worries?

“What are we talking about here?” I asked, ignoring the churning in my stomach when discussing money.

“Five grand a month in weekly installments.”

Five grand a month.

That meant an extra twelve-fifty every week.

Just to not go to the cops about what I’d seen.

Was there really even any choice at all?

“Okay.”

“Okay?” he asked, taken aback at my sudden compliance.

“Well, it really doesn’t seem like I have much of a choice here,” I said, trying to play it down.

“That’s true,” he agreed.

“So what now?” I asked.

“Now, I take you home and tell you how to take care of those wounds.”

“And the first payment?”

“Six days from now when we can be sure you’ve kept your mouth shut.”

“Then?”

“Then I will drop by and give you the cash. Same goes. Every week.”

“Where?”

“Your house. Or work. Whatever you’re more comfortable with.”

“*Work*,” I hissed, the reality dawning on me.

How was I going to work with a bum shoulder and thigh?

“Yeah, you have to keep working,” he told me, seeming to read my thoughts. “Don’t envy that,” he added. “But you can’t suddenly have a lot of cash with no way to explain it. From a tax standpoint, amongst other shit.”

He would know, I guess.

“Okay,” I said, thinking that if I took enough over the counter meds, I might be able to pull it off. Especially if I found ways to walk less and not carry plates with the one arm.

Sure, my tips were likely going to suffer while I healed, but I was just going to have to be okay with that.

The hush money would help make up for it.

“Okay,” he said, nodding. “You ready to get out of here?”

With him?

No.

But what choice did I have?

“Yeah,” I agreed, nodding.

“Ah, babe?” he called when I started to hobble toward the door.

“What?”

“Might want to go home in something other than a blanket,” he said, his gaze roaming over my barely covered body.

I swear each inch of it warmed under his inspection.

From, you know, embarrassment.

Nothing else.

“Right,” I agreed. “Where’s my dress?”

“In a bag. Covered in blood,” he said, turning to open the door.

“Then what am I going to wear?” I called to his retreating form.

Part of me wanted to follow him, but I didn’t know if there were other mafia dudes out there, and I didn’t want to step out in front of them in a thin blanket.

So I waited there until Surgeon returned with a men’s button-down, and a pair of black pajama pants.

“Best I could do. Don’t exactly have a lot of female patients here,” he explained, moving inside.

“What are you doing?”

“You think you’re getting into these without help?” he shot back.

“I’m going to have to figure it out.”

“Yeah, after you give your wounds and stitches a break for a couple hours at least,” he said, moving forward, making me step back until the exam table wouldn’t let me retreat any more. “Babe, I’ve seen it already,” he said, gesturing down at my body. “Don’t make everything hurt worse just to be a stubborn ass,” he said.

Were those, you know, nice words?

No.

But, hell, this was New York.

We didn’t expect nice.

But under all of that not-nice we were so well known for, was a lot more kindness than you’d expect.

Like this Surgeon guy. He was being a bit of a dick while doing it, but he was trying to do something good.

“Okay,” I conceded.

But stayed frozen on the spot.

Surgeon’s hand rose, grabbing the sheet where I was holding it between my breasts, his fingertips grazing the swells.

And, damnit, what can I say?

It had been a long, long while since I'd had the time of day to give a man. My body was just hyperaware of the sensation.

Thankfully, that tremble that moved through me, yeah, it was just on the inside.

The last thing in the world I needed was some mafia guy by the name of *Surgeon* thinking I wanted to sleep with him. Even if he was stupidly attractive.

"Alright. Bad arm first," he said, bunching up the sleeve of the shirt, then sliding it on. "You might want to consider a sling for a couple of days. It will prevent you from moving your arm too much and making the pain worse. I will grab one before we head out," he told me as he buttoned up my shirt, then gathered the leg of the pants. "Step in," he demanded.

And with one leg out of commission, I had no choice but to grab his shoulder to steady myself as I got into the pants.

"Alright. Give me two minutes to grab some shit."

"Okay. Ah, do you have anything for... you know... my feet? City streets barefoot. God knows what I could contract."

"Got some slipper socks. That's the best I can do," he said, motioning toward the cabinet behind me before making his way out of the room.

By the time he got back, carrying both a sling and my purse, I had the socks on and was ready to put this never-ending, nightmare of a night to bed.

"Ready to go?" *Surgeon* asked as he slipped the sling on me.

"Yeah."

"Give me an address," he said, leading me outside toward a waiting car. This time, though, it wasn't the Maine guy standing there, it was someone younger.

"What are you doing? I asked when we idled in front of my apartment building a few minutes later and *Surgeon* reached for his door.

"Walking you up."

After getting shot, kidnapped, operated on, and offered hush money, I was going to be walked up to my door by a member of the New York City mafia.

It didn't matter that I probably seemed deranged.

I couldn't help it.

A hysterical laugh bubbled up and burst out of me.

CHAPTER SIX

Salvatore

“What a clusterfuck,” Lorenzo said as he leaned back against the reception desk after hearing the fiasco.

“It wouldn’t be the first time we had to give someone hush money,” Emilio piped in, looking a lot more rested than the boss man himself, even though he’d probably crashed at Lorenzo’s place too.

The perks of the crying baby not being your responsibility, I guess.

“True,” Lorenzo agreed. “What do we know about her?”

“Cheap shoes. Job at a shitty diner. Living in a not great area,” I piped in.

“So she needs the money,” he concluded.

“That’s what I’m thinking, yeah.”

“Money troubles make for obedient witnesses,” Emilio said. “A couple extra grand will lighten her load a little. That relief will be addictive.”

“Unless she’s too moral for that,” Lorenzo said. “Some people can’t be bought.”

“I dunno. I get the feeling that she’s one bad day away from a breakdown,” I said. “She will accept this as a much-needed blessing.”

“Alright,” Lorenzo said, nodding. “Make the offer. And you can be the

one to keep an eye and make the payments. Let me know if anything looks fucked. You're too fucking valuable to go back to prison."

With that, he was gone, leaving me to make the offer to Whitney, the somewhat lost-seeming teacher and overnight diner waitress.

Of course she jumped on it.

Morals or not, money was a big motivator for people who didn't have it.

Her apartment building was almost identical to the rest of the ones on the block. A little old and dated, but made with good bones.

"You really don't need to walk me up," she insisted as we moved inside the elevator that sported some graffiti that made it clear someone with some street affiliations lived in the building.

That was not a fact that should have bothered me, but I couldn't shake the strange, protective sensation as we rode up silently to the fifth floor.

I really *didn't* need to walk her up. I wasn't really sure why I was insisting on doing so.

"Gotta write down the care instructions," I told her as we walked toward her door.

That was a bullshit excuse. If she thought so too, though, she kept her mouth shut as she unlocked her door, turned on her light, and allowed me to follow her inside.

I never really gave my own apartment much thought when it came to decorating it. That wasn't my forte, and I wouldn't pretend it was. I had a bed to sleep in and a TV to watch. And space I didn't have to share with some random con. That was what mattered to me.

But, clearly, I was missing out.

Because while my apartment *was* my home, Whitney's apartment *felt* like a home.

Nothing looked designer or expensive, but it seemed like she'd put a lot of care and attention to detail into making it her own little haven.

From the cheery mustard-yellow walls to the mid-century modern dark green velvet couch that looked like something my grandmother would have sported proudly in her place, right down to the little trinkets on the coffee table and the art scattered around.

There was a whole wall of white bookcases with books stacked double-deep on them, making the cheap fake wood shelves bow under the pressure. Other books were scattered around too. One on the arm of the sofa, another on the kitchen counter, and a stack of shiny plastic-wrapped ones with library

tags on the spines sitting on a chair, likely waiting to be returned.

Lined up behind the door to the hallway were two big plastic container totes that seemed to sport shit to decorate a classroom with, just sitting there waiting for the next school year to roll around.

If she taught in the same area she lived, it looked like some of the cash we were floating her way might go to helping some underprivileged kids' classroom to feel a fuckuva lot less depressing.

"Here's a notepad," she said, waving toward her kitchen island that cut the space off from the living area. "A supply list and instructions would be appreciated. I, ah, I am really not good with wounds," she admitted as she went to her coffee machine and started to make a fresh pot.

"Meaning you don't know what to do with 'em, or you can't stand looking at 'em?" I asked as I grabbed the pen and started to jot down some supplies.

"Ah, well, both, I guess. I mean I can, you know, not look and squeeze some peroxide on it if I have to."

"Ah, no the fuck you won't," I said, watching as she whipped around in response to the edge in my town. "Babe, how old are you?" I asked, watching as her brows knitted at me, making me think she wasn't going to answer.

"Thirty-seven."

"Thirty-seven years you've been on this planet, and you haven't learned that you don't use peroxide on a wound?"

"I, ah, I guess," she said, shaking her head a little. "Why not, though?"

"Because it eats away at the skin as its trying to heal. Don't over-treat a wound. There's a reason hospitals use saline, not peroxide. More isn't always better with this type of shit. You'll end up delaying healing. It's not always easy to find saline, and I don't advise making it yourself. I'll get some dropped off here later. Clean with fucking saline only."

"Okay. I can do that," I agreed, nodding. "Anything else?"

"Not unless it is looking infected. And by that I mean it is looking red or puffy."

"I know what infected looks like," she insisted, rolling her eyes at me.

"Hey, with that peroxide comment, I had to make sure."

"What if it looks infected?"

"Then you need to see me about it."

"Ah, and how will I do that? If I'm only going to be seeing you once a week, I mean," she said.

You didn't fucking give out your goddamn number to someone you were giving hush money to. As much as possible, you never wanted anything to ever be able to trace back to you.

So tell me, then, why the fuck I jotted my number down on the pad above all my instructions?

Clearly, I needed some fucking sleep or something.

"Just for emergencies," I clarified, as if that made it any better.

"Okay. Ah, thanks. What about showering?"

"What about it? You having shower emergencies?" I asked, unable to stop my gaze from doing a once-over, from imagining those curves under those baggy layers she was hidden under. "You can definitely call me for shower emergencies," I said without thinking, watching as her lips parted and her eyes widened.

Not in shock or fear.

Nah.

I'd been on the planet long fucking enough to know heat when I saw it on a woman's face.

That?

That was heat.

As if this situation wasn't fucked enough to begin with.

"I, uhm, I meant... can I shower? Like can the wounds get wet?"

"Yeah. If you use a mild soap, not that shit with like grit and a ton of garbage in it, it will actually be good to let it rinse over it and keep shit clean in between saline rinsing. Just don't go overboard. Don't scrub the spots. Try not to get anything but soap in them."

"Okay. Good."

"You got a work shift tonight?" I asked, and the way she seemed to go a little green at the idea answered me before her words could.

"Yeah."

"That's gonna suck," I told her. "A little rest is gonna make that pain really settle in," I added.

"Gee. Thanks for the pep-talk, Surgeon."

"Surgeon?" I repeated.

"That's what Maine called you," she explained.

Maine.

Christ.

Maybe I shouldn't have given her the truth. There was a chance she

wasn't going to look into me and my Family. But, then again, I'd never known a woman who couldn't double as an FBI agent or Private Eye with their investigative skills.

If she was going to uncover my name anyway, what was the harm in telling her myself?

"It's Salvatore," I told her. "Surgeon was an old nickname of mine."

"An apt one, apparently."

"Listen," I said, done with my list, and getting to my feet, walking over toward her. "Would you rather I sugar-coat it, and let you find out the hard way, or give you the cold-hard truth from the beginning, so you can mentally prepare for it?"

"I guess the reality," she admitted. "It wouldn't hurt for life to, you know, just once be a little softer and kinder," she said, mostly to herself as she turned away as the coffee machine beeped.

"Kinda hard to find a fairy tale in this day and age, babe," I said to her back, watching as she rested her forehead on the cupboard for a second before pulling it open and grabbing two mugs.

"Yeah, tell me about it," she said. "I'm being nice and making you a coffee for not letting me die of bullet wounds," she told me. "You can bring the cup back with the saline later," she added, making it clear that she wasn't inviting me to stay and drink it.

Which was probably a good thing.

Because my mind wasn't on what it should have been on right about then.

"Appreciate it."

"How do you take it?"

"Cream and sugar. Extra sugar," I added. To that, she shot me a smile over her shoulder. "What?"

"Nothing. It's just... big, scary mafia guys in movies always drink their coffee black, I guess. But I take it the same way," she added, going into the fridge for the creamer. "Okay. Salvatore, a coffee for the road," she said as she held the mug out to me.

I Put the Lit in Literature.

Her one had a picture of a raven with the word *Nevermore* beneath it.

"The blessing and curse of being a teacher," she said as she caught me looking at them. "Your students help you amass an insane mug collection."

My hand moved out, reaching for my mug, my fingers deliberately sliding against hers as I did so, watching the way the heat flickered in her

eyes again before she snatched her hand back, and grabbed her own mug instead.

“I guess I will see you in a week,” she said, clearly wanting me out of her apartment.

But was that because she didn't want me there?

Or because she did?

Jesus Christ.

What was going on with me?

“Name of the diner you work at, babe,” I demanded as I took a step back.

“Dolin's. What?” she asked, brows knitting.

“You work for that fucking sleazeball?” I asked.

“You know Tommy?” she asked.

“I've had the misfortune, yeah,” I said, lips twitching as a strange, choked laugh bubbled up and burst out of her.

“Well, luckily, I don't have to work with him too much. It's usually just me, the cooks, and the busboy at night.”

“Guess I will have to develop an appetite for some greasy hash browns and burnt eggs,” I said as I made my way to the door.

The most fucked up part, though, was I was actually looking forward to it.

Not the food.

I mean, I could get better food at the tables belonging to literally any woman in the family. Save for maybe Mira, one of Emilio's sisters. I never had a need to go to some crummy diner for food.

But I found myself counting down the days until I got to go.

Not for the food.

Or to drop off the money.

No.

To see her.

The fuck was that about?

I wouldn't even pretend to understand.

Granted, I loved women. I loved them in all shapes and sizes. I liked them sassy and sweet and everything in between.

When you were away for fifteen fucking years, you really learned to appreciate what you were missing.

So, yeah, when I got out, I dove face-first into some pussy before I even went to see my family, before I even grabbed a decent meal.

I'd been making up for lost time ever since.

But I never found myself thinking about any particular woman, wondering what she was up to, or if I would run into her again.

So why the fuck was I doing that with the random witness to a crime? Someone I barely knew. Someone who clearly wouldn't have picked to be associated with me if she'd been given the choice.

I had no fucking idea.

But I wasn't exactly someone who analyzed shit to death either, so I just rolled with it. Let the days pass me by.

There was one text two days in, a simple picture of the wound on her chest, taken so close it was almost out of focus.

Beneath it was one word: "Infected?"

"No."

I hated texting.

All the young bloods always called me Old Man when I admitted to that. But I just couldn't get used to the impersonal feeling to it. Or make my fingers seem to work right on the too-small keys.

I'd been told on more than one occasion from the women in the family that I had "terrible texting etiquette."

Which was probably the reason I didn't hear back from Whitney.

But that was what had me practically fucking itching to make my visit to Dolin's as I stood in Lorenzo's hallway, waiting for Emilio to bring me the cash.

My ass was half-tempted to offer to pay the hush money myself. The only thing holding me back was knowing the brows that would be raised at that, and the questions that might be asked.

"Did Cesare say that this woman works at Dolin's?" Emilio asked as he came down the hallway with a brown paper bag all rolled up around the small wad of cash. Small bills. That was how we liked to operate.

"Yeah."

"Christ. I think sexual harassment comes with your paycheck at that place."

"Isn't Tommy on the books?" I asked.

It was usually Brio who worked as the Family bagman, collecting the money that people owed to us from gambling or for protection, so I didn't know everyone we collected from, but I was pretty sure we had more than a passing relationship with Dolin's Diner.

“Yeah. We collect from him. He’s been late lately. Brio is almost done giving him slack,” he told me as I put the cash in my pocket.

“Can’t claim I’d be upset to see that fucker get a kneecap busted in,” I said, shrugging.

“Couldn’t happen to a nicer guy,” Emilio agreed, giving me a smirk. “You’re here late,” he added.

“Yeah. The waitress only works the overnight shift,” I told him.

To that, he nodded.

“Well, unless something is up, feel free not to report back to me or Lorenzo before noon tomorrow,” he said, and it was then that I noticed the smudges under his eyes, his heavy lids. Like he hadn’t been getting much sleep.

Sure, Lorenzo had an excuse for looking as crappy as he had lately, what with a new baby around.

But Emilio could go home if he wanted to so he could get some good sleep.

The fact that he wasn’t getting it was a little troubling.

“There something going on that I should be aware of?” I asked.

“Not yet. But possibly in the near future. We’re still... looking into it,” he said.

To that, I nodded.

“Know it’s not my place, but I’m gonna remind you that you and Lorenzo have a whole Family to lean on here. You don’t have to do all the shit yourself. Not gonna do anyone any favors by running yourselves into the ground.”

“It might not be your place,” Emilio said, giving me a tired smile, “But I appreciate the reminder. We will keep it in mind. Now go make that poor waitress’s load a little lighter,” he said, waving toward the door.

I had to fucking pace myself.

I made myself walk because of the urge to rush, to get there, to grab a table, and to speak to her again.

There was nothing amazing about Dolin’s Diner.

It was the typical brick building with a lot of large windows to look out on the city. There was yellowing linoleum on the floor that matched the tops of the tables. The booths had dark blue vinyl that was ripped in spots.

The booths lined the windows with tables down the center, and then there was a long counter to sit at with stools facing the kitchen window and the

coffee station.

Which was where Whitney was standing when I walked in. Wearing the same blue dress with the white apron she'd been wearing the night of the shooting. Her hair was pulled back in a sloppy braid, likely because raising her arms to do her hair was probably a chore.

She had on the sling I'd given her. I wasn't sure if that was because she genuinely still needed it, or if it was an easier way to get patience and sympathy from patrons without having to explain that she was injured over and over.

She'd just pulled a plate down from the window and turned when she spotted me.

And I swear to fuck it felt like someone kicked me in the gut.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Whitney

He was right.

After he left and I finally lowered myself into bed and crashed hard and long, waking up with only an hour to spare before it was time to get back to work again, I felt like absolute garbage.

I mean, no, it didn't have the same searing, agonizing pain like I'd experienced when I was first shot. But it was pretty horrific in an incessant, aching, burning way.

Each step hurt.

Anytime I tried to move my arm or even turn my head a certain way... hurt.

By the time I finished getting myself ready for work and got some food in my stomach, I was in tears, despite taking two separate types of over-the-counter painkillers.

They may as well have been candy for all they did to touch the pain.

In desperation, I slipped into the sling before heading out the door.

Thankfully, Tommy was not at work when I got there, so I didn't have to deal with his comments on my injury.

The girls who were on their way out were amazing not just that day, but

each following. They made sure extra side work was done, so I didn't have to do too much extra moving around. And when Maureen saw, once she showed up to relieve me, insisted that I not even bother to try to clean as I went, that she would cover it until I was better.

"I once had to serve tables with a broken leg. I was wheeling around this place on an office chair. If it weren't for the other ladies I worked with, I would have been out of work and quickly homeless. We have to stick together."

I won't lie.

Those first two or three days had me going into the walk-in to cry several times during my shift.

But once I figured out how to get around with as little pain as possible, I got the hang of it.

It wasn't pleasant, but it was doable.

And I found that the sling made the customers give me a little more grace than they would have without it. I even had a table of teenagers jump up and help me pass out food on a busy night.

It was frustrating to have to adapt everything in my life, but it was getting easier day by day, and because I was getting accustomed to the pain.

Soon enough, the stitches would be out, and things could mostly go back to normal.

Plus an extra five grand.

Almost as if I conjured him with my swirling thoughts, I turned around... and there he was. Standing there. Watching me with those dark eyes of his.

Over the past week, I'd slowly but surely convinced myself that there was no way Salvatore was as attractive as my memory would have me believe.

But then there he was. In black slacks and a matching button-up, looking devilish and so sexy that it felt like a gut punch.

"Hey," I greeted, using my overly cheery customer service voice. "I'm a little short-handed tonight," I said, as I'd been saying all week. "Would you mind grabbing yourself a table and a menu?"

While I attempted not to melt under his strangely heated gaze.

"No problem," he agreed, reaching for one of the laminated books that had a nerve to call themselves a menu, then going to the far corner booth, away from everyone else.

So he could pass me the money in secret.

Since that was the only reason he was there, I reminded myself as I

brought the food over to one of my tables, took the order for a second, then grabbed him a cup of coffee and creamers, then made my way over.

“Busy,” was what he said to me as a greeting.

“Yeah. It usually is. Not many lulls except on Tuesdays, for some reason. Or during bad weather.”

I liked the tips, don’t get me wrong, but I wouldn’t mind if a big storm blew through the city and gave me a little break either.

“I brought you a coffee,” I told him, even though he was already reaching to grab the sugar. “I know it’s late, but I figured you were the kind of guy who can drink it and go right to bed after,” I said.

Why was I rambling?

He clearly wasn’t interested in having a conversation with me.

I mean, I’d reached out to him about my wound, expecting a little back-and-forth at least, only to have him send me back a one-word answer.

I guess I was the only one dealing with a little residual, pesky, unwanted attraction.

I mean, I just... there had been a moment in my kitchen. Or, at least, I thought there had been one.

But maybe that was all due to pain and blood loss and confusion and lack of sleep.

Of course some hot, older, worldly mafia guy wasn’t going to have the warm and tinglies over some random waitress he’d fished some bullets out of.

God, what the hell was wrong with me?

“Babe?” Salvatore said, making me jolt, realizing with no small amount of humiliation, that he’d said something while I’d been lost in my own thoughts.

“Sorry. I, ah, spaced out there. What did you say?”

“I asked how your whole situation,” he said, waving toward my body. And, damn it, it warmed. Warmed. Maybe I was septic or something. Clearly, there was something not right with me, that was for sure. “Is doing?” he finished.

“Oh, well, I’m managing,” I said, sighing when I heard someone snapping their fingers at me.

“He fucking serious? Who the fuck snaps at a waitress these days?” Salvatore grumbled, and his grumpy tone made a smile tug at the corners of my lips.

“You’d be surprised,” I said, shaking my head. “Can you give me a minute?” I asked.

“Yeah. But don’t rush off to that motherfucker. He probably won’t leave you shit for a tip anyway.”

“You’re almost certainly right about that. But guys like that also leave nasty reviews. Which means I would have to have a meeting with my boss. A one-on-one meeting in his office,” I added, cringing. “Give me a second.”

I felt his gaze on me as I walked away, and as ridiculous as it may have been, if I was a little more healed, I was pretty sure I would have put some extra wiggle in my step for him.

Insanity.

But I was going to go ahead and try to tell myself that it was just because I hadn’t had a guy that hot in my presence in a long time. Not one who wasn’t a customer, anyway.

“Hey! What can I get for you?” I asked, getting back to the table that had been nothing but demands and complaints since they sat down.

The coffee wasn’t hot enough. Then it was too hot. The air was on too high. The table was sticky. The fries were soggy. The soda needed more syrup.

And, yeah, like Salvatore said, I would be lucky to get any tip out of them. I’d developed a sixth sense for knowing who was, and who was not, going to leave a fair tip.

Everything about this middle-aged guy with permanent frown lines and a shirt that was a size and a half too small, said I would likely get a note on the receipt about why I didn’t get a tip, rather than a tip itself.

“About goddamned time. My time is precious too, lady,” he said, and I had to bite back the urge to snap at him.

I wasn’t Maureen. I didn’t have the balls she did to give customers attitude, to snark at them, to outright tell them to get the fuck out of the diner if they didn’t like how she did her job.

Besides, I taught *teenagers* for a living. I was hardened when it came to nasty comments and even outright insults.

At least the teens had the excuse that their damned prefrontal cortexes weren’t fully formed yet, though. This guy couldn’t claim the same.

He was just an asshole.

But even assholes had to be served.

“I’m sorry. I’m a little shorthanded,” I said, using the line that had been

working so well for everyone else. Unfortunately, this was not one of those cases.

“Not my fucking fault you came to work injured,” he said. “This bacon isn’t crisp enough. How hard is it to understand the word ‘crispy?’”

“I will get that fixed right up for you,” I said, plastering on a smile that was so fake, my cheeks hurt as I grabbed the plate of bacon and made my way back toward the kitchen.

I went ahead and took my time even after the cook was done tossing the bacon in the fryer, “He wants crispy, it will be to a fucking crisp,” he said, tossing the shriveled pieces of meat onto a plate, giving me a sympathetic eye roll.

“Some people just can’t be pleased,” I said, shrugging it off, trying to ignore the shot of pain that still sent through my system, then making my way back out into the front.

I’d just made my way out of the swinging door when my gaze went to my picky patron.

To find him facedown in his plate of pancakes, a hand on the back of his neck, holding him there, as Salvatore growled something in his ear.

My gaze shot around the restaurant, seeing the looks of confusion, shock, and a little bit of fear in the eyes of the other customers.

I felt all those things as well.

But they were easily overpowered by a completely different sensation.

Heat.

Like, you know, *that* kind of heat.

Because, apparently, I now thought it was hot when a guy assaulted another guy for being rude to me.

Whatever Salvatore was saying, he seemed done as he gave my customer one last hard shove on the neck, making the syrup on his pancakes nearly get in his eyes, then releasing him to stand up.

“Tip your fucking waitress, asshole,” he said, taking a step back as the man reached with shaking hands for his wallet, pulling out a wad, and tossing it on the table without counting it, then making his way toward the door, nearly tripping over his own feet in the process.

From a back table, a group of young adults started clapping and whistling as the trash took himself out. They were quickly followed by several other tables.

It was right then that Salvatore turned to look at me, looking almost a

little, I don't know, bashful for a second.

Bashful?

A mafia guy?

Unlikely.

"You weren't supposed to see that," he admitted as I made my way over toward the table, where I could see that the man was so scared that he'd left me what looked like one-hundred bucks on a thirty-dollar tab, max.

"I'm kind of glad I did," I admitted, shooting him a smirk. "I think every server in the world has fantasized about that very moment. Thank you. I mean, the cops might show up, but thank you."

"He's too big of a pussy to go to the cops," Salvatore said, sounding sure of himself. And, I guess, when you made a living intimidating and beating people up, you grew to know who had balls and who just had big egos with weak spines.

"You're the expert," I said, starting to gather the plates and pile them for the busier.

"Take the cash, baby. You earned it," he added, reaching for it and putting it into my hand, like he didn't trust me to do it for myself, then making his way back to his table like nothing at all had happened.

While I stood there trying to convince myself that I didn't just develop a very ridiculous, completely selfish little crush on the man.

For just being a decent person, really.

What can I say?

I'd never had a man defend my honor for me. Hell, I once had a guy tell me—to my face—that if we were out on a date and some random guy punched me in the face, that he wouldn't do anything. Because "*how would it help if I got hit too?*"

Then, of course, there was that one guy who thought *he* could put hands on me. Luckily for me, my parents had instilled some good sense and at least a small amount of self-worth in me before they passed away, so I did not to stand for that shit, and got rid of him fast.

But, yeah, if someone made a rude comment about me, or was outright hostile toward me, every guy I'd known had just... looked the other way, pretended they didn't hear it, anything not to have to get involved.

And these were men I was *involved with* at the time.

Then there was this guy. One who I didn't really even know. One who'd freaking shot me. One who was paying me hush money to keep my mouth

shut, and literally had nothing to gain for standing up for me. Pushing a guy's head into his food just because he'd been rude to me.

That was some romance novel stuff right there.

I'd know.

I'd read a great many.

What can I say?

Amongst all the classics and school-required reading, and the latest bestsellers in literary fiction, sometimes I just needed something lighter and happier to lift my mood up.

So I knew me a romance hero move when I saw one.

"God," I hissed, shaking my head at the direction of my thoughts before the busser came over and finished the cleaning job for me.

Only then was it time to go back over to him to take his order.

"The breakfast special seems like the safest bet," he said.

"It really is," I agreed. "It's usually that or the grilled cheese for me. How do you want your eggs?"

"Over medium. And here," he said, passing me the menu, and it took me an embarrassingly long moment to figure out why it was wedged open slightly.

Because the hush money was inside of it.

Since, you know, that was why he was at the diner. The only reason. He wasn't here to have breakfast. That was just a cover. And he damn sure wasn't around just to see me.

I needed to get a grip.

"Alright. Great. I'll be back with your food in a couple of minutes," I said, forcing that fake customer service smile on my face before walking away.

The next hour or so got unexpectedly busy. Busy enough, in fact, that I almost forgot about my very special guest sitting in the corner booth, drinking cup after cup of coffee, his food long-eaten.

I say almost because I couldn't seem to make my gaze stop glancing in his direction anytime I found myself behind the counter to get drinks or condiments.

Since coffees were endless, I'd even given him his bill ages ago, and had seen him slip cash into the book, but didn't push it to the end of the table like most people did when they were looking for you to take it.

I couldn't help but wonder why the hell he was sticking around. Didn't

mafia men have better things to do with their time than sit in a diner alone, drinking cheap coffee and watching mostly-drunk patrons make fools of themselves?

Unless, of course, he was there because he was watching me, keeping an eye on me, making sure I was as trustworthy as I'd agreed to be when I'd said I would take their hush money.

I felt suddenly very scrutinized, like when the principal would sit in during a class, like someone was nitpicking every little thing I did, reading into it, coming to all the wrong conclusions because of it.

Annoyed with myself, I told the cook and busser that I was just going to run to the ladies' room, and made my way in that direction, ready to splash some cool water on my face and pull myself together.

I was just turning on the tap when the door flew open.

And there he was.

Now, the normal, healthy reaction to a man barging his way into the women's bathroom would be fear or surprise, maybe even a little anger.

Was that what my body felt?

No.

No, of course not.

My stupid, confused, clearly entirely too horny body felt... heat.

It bloomed from my core and moved outward until it overtook me completely.

And by the way I felt the flush creep over my cheeks, I was pretty sure it was all over my face.

"What are you doing?" I asked, hearing the breathlessness to my voice, and hoping he would think it was from hobbling across the restaurant to get to the bathroom.

His gaze held mine for a long second before he moved further into the bathroom and stepped behind me.

He said nothing as his gaze found mine in the mirror and his arms went around me.

I swear my breath felt trapped behind my ribcage as his hands went between my breasts and started to undo my buttons.

I should have been pushing him away, objecting, doing *something*. Instead, I was frozen my gaze fixed on his hypnotic eyes as he watched me in the mirror as my bra got more and more exposed, making me wish I'd gone for something cuter than my very basic black t-shirt one.

When he got to the center of my belly, his hands moved back upward, running his fingers up the sides of the material, his fingertips grazing my heated skin beneath.

This time, when I shivered, it was on the outside too.

And was I imagining that little vibrating that moved through Salvatore? Almost like a, I don't know, growl?

No.

That was probably just my imagination

As his hands got to the tops of the sides of the dress, though, his one hand grabbed harder and yanked, making one entire bra-clad boob pop out of the dress.

For one delicious moment, I thought that was his intention—to see more of me, to get a better view.

Until I realized his gaze had dipped and the other hand had gone across my chest to start peeling the medical tape up off my skin, pulling back the gauze as he went.

He wanted to look at my wound.

That was it.

Nothing else.

There was no accounting for the disappointment as it seemed to kick me in the stomach, knocking out all my air.

Salvatore's fingers probed around the edge of my wound, saying nothing, as my stupid body misconstrued the cold, clinical touch for something, well, a lot more heated and personal.

For a horrified second, I was worried he would hear the sound of my nervous swallow, would be able to know the source of it.

Finished with his inspection, he pressed the gauze back on, running his finger along the edge of the tape to make it stick again, going around in a square four times, and I swear to God, I felt that sensation... you know... somewhere else.

He didn't reach to pull up my bra strap, and while my brain was telling me that I was supposed to do it, I couldn't seem to get the message from my brain to my arm, so it just stayed there, dangling over my upper arm as his gaze slid up to mine in the mirror.

There was something dark reflected there, but before I could even begin to analyze it, his hands were suddenly sinking into my hips, grabbing, turning, and slamming me back against the sink vanity.

I'm not too proud to admit that the forceful, caveman move made excitement spark through my system.

He was just as close as before, his body a breath from mine, close enough that if I took a deep breath, my breasts would be brushing his chest.

I totally didn't consider taking a deep breath just to test out my theory. Nope. Not me.

Before I could fully talk myself out of the idea, though, Salvatore was suddenly moving.

Lowering.

Right down in front of me.

Until he was in a deep squat, his head level with, well, a particularly alive and interested part of my anatomy.

As soon as he was settled, his arm started to lift.

I swear I could feel the air between his palm and my thigh vibrating as he moved it up alongside me.

Then his fingers were snagging the hem of my skirt and starting to lift.

I swear, I damn near swooned.

Until, again, my damn rational mind realized his intention as he fisted the skirt to my hip so he could look at the wound on my thigh, peeling back the gauze, then inspecting the wound with the same intensity that he had my other one.

And, again, he started tracing the tape, pressing it down. Four times. Five. Six.

My poor body was crying out for his hand to just slid inward a bit, to press between my thighs.

Finished with his frustratingly chaste, yet wholly erotic, reapplication of my tape, his gaze slid up in my direction, but taking its sweet time to move over my body, making every inch of me hum under his inspection.

I knew I really needed to lift my head, to look anywhere but down at him, letting him see the desire that was etched across my features.

I didn't do that, though.

And when his dark gaze met mine, I knew what they were seeing. Every bit of desire that was thrumming through my body.

Whatever was going on in his mind, though, was a mystery to me. Nothing was reflected back at me as he watched me, as he took in the cheeks that had to be pink and the eyes that must have been heavy-lidded.

A rumbling sound moved through his chest.

Then, “Fuck it,” he said as his head ducked and his hand yanked my skirt even higher, exposing my very plain black panties.

His other hand grabbed ahold of those panties, yanking them to the side.

His mouth was on me then, and the surprise of it sent a shock through my body, making me jolt hard as his tongue traced up my cleft before finding my clit and working it in circles.

Both my arms shot out at once.

One settled on the back of his head, holding him to me like he had any intention of pulling away.

The other slapped down on the sink vanity behind me, steadying me as I swear my legs lost half their strength immediately.

He worked me with perfect pace and pressure, never relenting, never giving my desire even a second to ebb away.

My hips rocked into his movements as my hand crushed into the back of his skull.

God, it had been so long.

And no one, I was sure, had been anywhere near as good as he was, as intuitive, as determined.

As he drove me closer and closer, I was torn between the desire to shut my eyes and focus, and keep my gaze on him as he kept working me.

The latter won out, finding myself oddly fascinated by watching the man in his fancy slacks and button-down, with his silver-streaked dark hair, buried between my thighs.

My slight whimpers grew to muffled moans as I tried to keep my lips together, knowing there was a restaurant with guests just a couple of feet away.

Sensing the orgasm, he kept the same pace, but applied just a little more pressure.

And it was seconds, actually seconds, before the orgasm was slamming through my system, making a choked sobbing sound escape me while the waves crashed over and over again.

He worked me through it, dragging it out.

But I swear I’d just come back down when my panties were snapping back into place, he was pulling away, and my skirt was falling back down to cover me.

Before I could even open my eyes to look, he was at the door, then making his way out.

He didn't look back.

What the actual hell?

I jolted back to myself, reaching to tuck my boob away, then buttoning my dress with shaky fingers as I turned to face myself, seeing the proof of the orgasm clear on my face, but knowing I didn't have the time to let my flush calm down, or school my features into calm nothingness.

So I smoothed my hair back, splashed a little cold water on my cheeks, and made my way back out into the restaurant, feeling like everyone was going to know what had happened.

But no one paid me any mind as I moved back behind the counter, noticing that Salvatore was standing beside his table, fiddling with something, then turning and walking to the door.

He didn't look back at me.

Taking a steadying breath, trying not to allow myself to feel the disappointment that started to spread through my chest and belly, I made my way over toward his table.

There on the surface was a crisp hundred-dollar bill.

To pay for the food he didn't eat.

And a tip.

I knew that.

Like, of course.

But I couldn't help the strange, shameful little voice that said it had little to do with the cheap food and more to do with what had happened in the bathroom.

I mean, it was ridiculous.

A hot mafia guy didn't need to pay for sex.

And it wasn't even sex.

He'd gone down *on me*.

No guy would pay to go down on a woman and get nothing in return.

I tucked the money into my book and let my gaze move out onto the street, watching his retreating form as he walked down the street.

He didn't look back.

And I tried like hell to tell myself that I didn't care.

But every freaking ounce of me was begging for him to look back at me.

The thing was... he didn't.

And I would just have to learn to live with that.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Whitney

It had been days.

Days and days, even.

But, still, when I heard a knock at my door, my stupid heart leaped into my throat like there was even a small chance that Salvatore was going to show up and finish what we'd started in the bathroom at my work.

"One second," I called, pulling the tray out of the oven and setting it on the stovetop before rushing to the door.

It wasn't him.

Of course it wasn't.

It was my sister.

And I was furious with myself for being disappointed with that fact as I reached up to slide the locks.

"Hey you! This was unexpected," I said, forcing my voice to be cheery even though it was just that—forced.

So, all that stuff I had to say about myself? About being perfectly... average? Yeah, that did not apply to my baby sister.

A late-in-life whoopsie-daisy, Wren was born when I was already thirteen

years old.

I'd been infatuated with her from the day my parents brought her home. She'd been this chubby, inconsolable thing that spat up all the time and constantly needed to be changed, but you couldn't peel me away from her.

All that stuff about new moms not being able to sleep? That wasn't true in my house. Because I was the one rushing into Wren's nursery to coo over her and change her and feed her while my mom got rest.

The first thing I did after school after dropping my backpack on the floor was pull her out of my mother's arms.

When our parents passed tragically when I'd just turned twenty-six, I'd rushed right over to scoop up Wren, to mourn with her, then to talk the social workers into letting me raise her.

She'd been twelve.

And I'd become a stand-in mother figure for her.

She was my whole world.

And where I'd gotten average brown hair, hers was laced with streaks of spun gold, waving in just the right way, never going frizzy or flat. And where my eyes were just plain brown, hers had starbursts of gold. Her features all fit together perfectly, making her look absolutely gorgeous, but also approachable.

She, too, got our mother's smile.

I liked it even better on her face than I did on my own.

Even if it had been a long, long time since I'd seen one truly light up her face.

She'd always had a killer body, too. Though, admittedly, she'd lost way too much weight over the past few years.

It was my goal to change that.

Which made it serendipitous that I'd just pulled a lasagna out of the oven.

We were going to go ahead and pretend that I didn't think way too much about Salvatore as I prepared the traditional Italian fare.

"I know I should have called," Wren said, kicking out of her flat strappy sandals.

"Are you kidding? You know you never have to call," I told her, moving inside, letting her follow me into the kitchen. "I just made lasagne," I told her. "So now you have to stay, or I am going to end up eating it all myself."

When all else failed, guilt worked.

Did it feel good to use it? No. But if it got her to eat, that was what

mattered.

It wasn't that she was actively starving herself. But she'd just been... not herself. It was like she forgot to eat. Or had just lost her appetite in general.

I wanted to have twice-weekly dinner dates with her, but my schedule just wouldn't allow it. And I was trying not to make a big deal out of my "summer job." In fact, I went ahead and let Wren believe that I only had it so I could splurge on fun classroom supplies for the school year and because "I don't like having that much downtime."

Lies.

I mean, yes, I did sometimes work odd jobs in the summer to buy something big for my classroom. But I'd been teaching for years. Most of the bigger-ticket things were already bought.

And I loved downtime.

There was never enough time, in my humble opinion, to read books. Summer was usually my catch-up time, checking out endless books from the library that I'd had my eye on all year as they released, but just never had time to get to.

"Hey, what's this?" Wren asked as I started to grab plates, even though I knew the lasagne really needed some time to set before we cut into it.

"What's wh—" I started as I turned, then felt my stomach drop when I saw her holding my sling in her hands.

I didn't need it anymore.

I still had my stitches in, and I guess I needed to make an appointment with a doctor to get them removed since I hadn't heard from Salvatore, but I wasn't in agony anymore.

As soon as I could take that damn thing off, I did. It was nice to be able to use my arms at work again.

"Oh, that. I had a little, ah, strain," I said, since it wasn't a full lie. It had been a strain on my shoulder to be shot.

"A strain? Bad enough that you were wearing a sling. And you didn't tell me?" Wren asked, her emotive eyes letting me know immediately that she was hurt by the very idea.

"It was no big deal, really. It was just bothering me, so I wore the sling so I didn't make it worse," I told her.

"Whit, I know you've always been the mom figure in this relationship, but you can lean on me too, okay? Lord knows I've leaned on you enough," she said, her gaze sliding away.

“Hey, that’s what family is for,” I told her, not wanting to bring up the topic, knowing it was never good. It was better, when we could, just to breeze past it and focus on more positive things. “So, how are classes?” I asked, scooping some too-liquid lasagne onto a plate for her. My instinct was to give her a giant portion, but I went for one the same size as mine.

That was the right thing to ask.

Because Wren lit up.

“Oh, it is so great,” she said, eyes going bright, taking her plate over to the couch to sit down, using her legs as a table. I grabbed us some drinks and headed over to join her.

Our parents had always been strict “eat at the table” types.

When I took Wren in, I’d never had space for a proper dining room. Besides, it always felt more casual and intimate to eat on the couch. And when we were trying to navigate our new living dynamic after our parents were gone, it was helpful to have that lack of formality. It helped us open up to each other.

“Yeah?” I asked, slicing open my lasagne with my fork so it could cool.

“I never thought I would enjoy it. You know how much I hated school when I went.”

It was more that she had a lot of issues with her peers giving her a shit all the time, making it hard for her to focus and apply herself in class.

I never understood that whole situation. I hadn’t exactly been popular in school, but no one ever teased me. And I’d been kind of pimply and oily and awkward. They would have had ample reason to pick on me.

Wren, however, had never gone through an awkward phase. She’d always been pretty and kind and good.

But maybe that was the problem.

The other girls saw her as a competition or something.

Which was absurd since Wren never dated in high school.

“I think college is so different because you get to explore your interests and passions.”

“That’s true,” she agreed, face bright. “But, yeah, I’m so loving it. I even found a study group to hang out with at the library. It’s so hard to make friends as an adult. And, yeah, I mean... I’m a little older than most of them, but not by too much, so it has all worked out.”

“I’m so happy you’re loving it.”

“Did you like college this much?” she asked.

“Yes and no. I didn’t have a lot of friends.” Or any friends, to be exact. I’d gone to one frat party, got so drunk that I blacked out and woke up with a butch woman sitting guard over me, then half-dragging me home while lecturing me about the shitty guys at college parties and what they’d been known to do to unconscious girls, and then I never really attempted to be a part of that scene again. “I loved some of my classes, though.”

“And all of the extra reading time,” she said, smiling.

I didn’t have the heart to tell her that I didn’t exactly have a lot of reading time.

I’d gotten a partial scholarship and a couple textbooks paid for by family, but it wasn’t nearly enough. And not wanting to be fresh out of college and handling debilitating debt, I’d decided to work my way through. Which I did.

I worked a night job at a supermarket and then did odd jobs on the weekends.

I’d been the queen of couponing and figuring out free ways to spend my off time. Which meant a lot of time in the library or the park, or just window shopping with a coffee I made at home so I didn’t waste a bunch of money on to-go fancy coffee.

Even with all that frugality, I’d needed to take out some loans. But thanks to buckling down, it hadn’t been astronomical. Thank goodness, because then I had a little sister to raise, which wasn’t cheap.

Did I miss out on some of the most fun and carefree years of my life? Yes, absolutely. And, quite frankly, I never got them back. In quiet moments, I had some regrets about not living it up while I could have, before life forced me to grow up.

But if I’d done that, Wren’s life would have been a lot harder too. No new school outfit shopping every August. No concerts or Broadway shows. No spending money for coffee or going to the movies.

So I just kind of had to move on and accept that I’d missed out on that light, carefree stuff.

It made me happy, though, that Wren didn’t need to.

When she’d chosen not to go to college, taking off with her first boyfriend instead, you could say I’d been a little miffed.

Then...

Nope.

Not going there.

I was trying to keep things positive.

Wren talked to me about her professors, her dorm room, her roommate, about the food. She got more lively and animated with each passing moment. And because she was distracted, she shoved all the lasagne in her mouth.

Because, for a few short minutes, she forgot.

And it was my goal in life to make those “few short minutes” become hours, then days, then maybe even weeks or months.

It would all be worth it if we could get to that point.

“You know what sounds amazing? Ice cream,” she said, shooting me a wicked little smile. “Do you have strawberry?”

Did I have strawberry?

What an absurd question.

It didn’t matter what day of the week or week of the month or month of the year you opened my freezer, you could always count on finding three things. Frozen pizzas for lazy nights, a bag of questionably freezer burnt broccoli for when I’d been eating too many frozen pizzas in a row, and a tub of strawberry ice cream.

I didn’t even really like it that much. But it was Wren’s favorite. And I always had it on hand.

“No, you know what? Nevermind. This was too much already,” she said, putting her plate on the coffee table like she was suddenly disgusted by it. “I don’t need it.”

“Ice cream is never about need,” I told her, jumping up to go to the freezer. “Ice cream is about want. And if we want it, and it’s here, I don’t see any reason not to have some.”

With that, we did.

And it wasn’t long before Wren was stretching and yawning.

“I should get going,” she said. “I have an early class,” she added, getting to her feet.

“Okay. Yeah. Sleep is important. Give me a second to get my shoes and bag.”

“You don’t need to wait with me for an Uber,” she insisted, rolling her eyes the way only someone who saw you as a parental figure could.

“First of all, you’re taking a cab, not a predator-laden Uber. Secondly, I am taking it with you, making sure you get into your dorm, then coming home.”

“That’s ridiculous, Whit. It costs twice as much.”

“It’s worth it keeping my little sister safe,” I told her, figuring that the

hundred-dollar bill I'd been stashing in my wallet like a keepsake could go to much better use. And maybe I'd stop obsessing about what had happened just before he'd given it to me.

"You're over-the-top and I love you for it," she told me as we moved out into the hall.

We both knew I had reasons for going with her, reasons that made it worth cutting into the money I was trying to save to use toward her college tuition.

Half an hour later, I was making my way back down the hall toward my apartment, feeling the weight of the last few days trying to push me deeper into the ground with each step.

I'd been trying to sleep. Truly, I had. It wasn't my fault that my brain refused to shut off, that it just kept me tossing and turning while it played the highlights reel of Salvatore over and over and over.

I woke up tired, trying to convince myself that the only reason it was occupying so much of my mind was because it was the first time in a long, long time that I got to think about anything as it pertained simply to my own life.

And, of course, everything was easier to obsess about when you couldn't talk about it to anyone.

Keeping it all bottled up was going to make me burst if I couldn't release some of the pressure eventually.

That was what was on my mind as I slipped my key into the lock, which was how I didn't notice that it didn't actually unlock.

Because it was *already* unlocked.

I didn't know that, though, until I'd pushed open the door, and reached to put my bag on the table nearby only to see a man leaning back against my kitchen counter.

Panic swelled for the half a second it took for my brain to recognize him.

Not a stranger.

Or even a familiar threat.

Oh, no.

It was Salvatore.

Standing in my kitchen like he belonged there, holding one of my plates, and one of my forks.

"Did you break into my apartment and help yourself to my lasagne?" I asked, not sure if I was more shocked or amused by the turn of events.

“I knocked.”

“What typically follows a knock?” I asked, smirking as I set my keys down.

“Dunno. Usually just walk in,” he said, but the little smirk toying with his lips let me know he was fully aware it was inappropriate.

“With family, maybe. I’m not family.”

“Coulda fooled me with this,” he said, waving his plate of food. “This is fucking good. Celeste’s isn’t even this good.”

Celeste?

Who was Celeste?

And why did an absolute insane surge of jealousy swell through my system at the idea of her?

“Celeste?” I asked, proud of how breezy my tone came out.

“Celeste Costa,” Salvatore said. “Lorenzo’s mom.”

“Lorenzo?” I asked as I moved across my apartment.

“Baby, you’ve gotten yourself involved with the mafia, and you haven’t even done a quick internet search?” he asked, shaking his head.

“If I recall correctly, I didn’t get *myself* involved in anything. That happened with the whole getting shot down in the street thing.”

It was probably not a good idea to bait a known criminal like that. But I got the feeling from Salvatore that he wasn’t the type to get all bent out of shape because someone got a little snippy with him.

“Fair enough,” he agreed, nodding.

“You could sit, you know,” I said, waving toward the stools.

“Didn’t want to be presumptuous.”

“You’ll break in and steal my food, no problem, but sitting in my chair is too presumptuous?” I shot back as I passed him in the kitchen, putting on coffee I didn’t need or particularly want just to have something to do.

“So who is Lorenzo and Celeste?”

“Lorenzo is the *capo dei capi*.”

“The what now?” I asked, turning to look at him, finding him studying me with scrunched brows. “Gee, sorry I’m not up on my mafia lingo.”

“The boss. There are five Families. Each Family has its own boss. Under the bosses are the underbosses. Under the underbosses are the capos. Under the capos are the soldiers. But on top of all of their bosses, is the boss of all bosses. The *capo dei capi*.”

“Oh, alright. Sure. So then who is Celeste? His wife?”

“His mother,” Salvatore said, and I swear all the jealousy washed through and out of me like a wave. “What?” he asked, catching the strange look that must have been on my face.

And since I couldn’t exactly tell him that I’d been momentarily jealous of a woman who’d cooked for him in the past, I rushed to cover.

“Why are you telling me all of this?” I asked instead.

“I’m not telling you anything that isn’t already public knowledge,” he said, shrugging. “Where were you?”

“Are you my keeper?” I asked, stiffening.

“Just curious. Not saying you have to tell me.”

“I was dropping my sister back off at campus. She came over for dinner.”

“Explains the dishes,” he said, and I couldn’t quite tell if he was actually maybe momentarily jealous that I’d possibly spend my evening with a man, or if I was just sort of hoping he was jealous. “Didn’t know you had a sister.”

“Yeah. Wren. She was born when I was thirteen.”

“Still puts her a little old for college, no?”

“You’re never too old to get an education,” I said, then immediately cringed at how much of a teacher I sounded like right then. “She decided not to go when she was younger. But she’s really enjoying it now.”

“You got a car?” he asked.

“What?”

“You said you dropped her off.”

“Oh, no. I, ah, I took the cab with her, then back here.”

“Why?”

I didn’t want to answer that.

It was touchy territory.

“I’m overprotective, I guess,” I said, reaching for mugs.

“Your sister, she look like you?” he asked.

“Oh, no. She’s so gorgeous. I mean, drop-dead pretty. We have the same smile, though.”

“You got a mirror around here?” he asked.

“I know. The spinach gets in your teeth, right?” I asked, turning to look at him, finding him shaking his head at me.

“Nah, baby. Figure you must not have a mirror around this place if you don’t think you’re gorgeous too,” he said.

And I swear... butterflies.

I was pretty sure I went my whole adult life never getting butterflies.

Unless we were counting ones caused by fictional men in spicy books. I was starting to think they were a made-up phenomena.

Yet there was no mistaking the fluttering in my chest at his words.

“So, what’s she like?” he asked as I just stood there dumbly, watching him with two empty mugs in my hands.

“Wren?” I asked, snapping out of it. “Wren is amazing. She’s sweet and kind and just... good. On the quiet side, though. And inclined to doubt herself. I worry I didn’t do a good enough job with her to boost her self-esteem.”

“How would that be your responsibility?” he asked as I handed him a mug, then turned to get the cream and sugar.

“When Wren was just shy of thirteen, our parents were driving back from a dinner party at a friends’ house on Long Island. Their brakes gave out, and they... they didn’t make it,” I said, still feeling the stabbing of shock and grief, even all these years later.

“Sorry,” Salvatore said, shaking his head. “That sucks.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “It was hard. Harder on Wren, though. She had to pick up and leave, move in with me in my tiny apartment, deal with me as I tried to figure out how to not only take care of myself, but her too.”

“Sounds like she turned out alright. So you must have figured it all out,” he said, shrugging.

“Do you have any siblings?”

“Nah. Got a big family, but no siblings.”

“Your parents...” I started, knowing it was a touchy subject, and since he was a fair bit older than me, I figured there was a higher chance they were no longer with us.

“Passed while I was inside.”

“Inside of what?” I asked because, clearly, this whole criminal lifestyle thing was new to me.

“Inside of the prison walls,” he said, lips twitching.

“The... oh! *Oh*,” I added. “Wow. Ah... were you... you know... there long?”

“Fifteen,” he said.

“Months?”

“Years.”

“Fifteen years?” The words choked out of me.

Fifteen years.

That was a long time to be away from your life, from your loved ones. I couldn't imagine.

"Yeah, it felt every bit as long as your face says you're thinking."

"Have you been out long?"

"A few years."

"Wow. Was it weird? You know... to be free again?"

"Yeah. And no. Spent more time free than locked up. Shit had changed, but not enough that I felt too lost. Still can't get behind all this shit, though," he said, producing his cell phone, and casually tossing it onto the counter. Without a case on it.

My frugal heart clutched itself in my chest.

I only ever got a new phone every five or six years, when they refused to hold a charge anymore. And I kept them in the toughest cases available until the day I got a new one, so I was sure nothing ever happened to them.

"What about the phone can you not get behind?" I asked. "Aside from putting it in a proper case," I added.

"Case, huh?" he asked looking down at it. "Probably why I shattered six of these so far this year."

"Six?" I croaked.

Six?

Six phones in one year?

That had to be, what, upwards of six-thousand dollars.

God.

"But, yeah, all the shit. The apps and the fake bullshit everyone posts about their life. Once sat next to this kid at a restaurant doing some fucking five-second video or something about being out to lunch with their significant other and how they were loving life. They were alone. And sad the entire time. Fucking fake-ass shit. I'm too old for that shit."

I mean, he wasn't wrong. I'd seen it countless times with my own students. Hell, even with fellow teachers. They post the highlight reels of their lives, not what it was really like. And that, in turn, creates a false narrative about what their life is like and what other people think their own lives should be like.

It was a vicious cycle.

I was kind of glad I didn't have social media of my own. I mean I used to. But it always got weird when a student found you. Or even a previous student. It always felt strange to me for them to see my personal life.

Then, well, I had other reasons for shutting it down.
I never looked back.

Though I did still have my book site that was social-media-lite. How else was I supposed to rate and shelve my books? And I did have a couple of book-world associates on there. But it was all about literature, so in my mind, it was different.

“Yeah, I can’t see you on social media, posting pictures of your food.”

“This would be picture-worthy, though,” he said, scraping his fork along the plate to get the last of the cheese and sauce and a tiny wedge of noodle.

“Thanks. I don’t get to cook often. Especially now with serving tables at night. I end up eating my shift meal for the next day’s lunch instead of making something decent.”

“You planning to serve when you start up the school year again?” he asked.

“I don’t know. I’d like to quit. But it might not be... feasible right now.”

“Feasible,” he repeated. “Why not?”

“Money,” I said, shrugging.

I hated talking about money.

It had been drilled into me as a kid that it just wasn’t an appropriate topic. But it was the only answer to his question.

It all came down to money for me right now.

“Even with the money we’re kicking you?” he asked, watching me with thoughtful eyes.

“Even with,” I agreed. Especially because I didn’t know how long the hush money went for. Could they decide at any point to just stop paying me? I couldn’t take that risk.

“What do teachers make? Fifty? Sixty?”

“Sixty to eighty-five, depending on several factors. I’m somewhere in the middle of that.”

“And the diner?”

“Most of my checks are voided. You know, for taxes. They take it out of the two-whatever I make on the books.”

“And off?”

“Average night is about one-fifty to three, thanks to the location. And the fact that I’m usually working alone.”

“So, say that’s another forty? Combined, one-ten. That’s not a huge amount of money, but it should get you a ticket out of this neighborhood at

least. Then tack on what we're kicking you. That's, what, another sixty? One-seventy. That's a good egg."

"Your math skills are pretty impressive," I said.

"Learn a lot about counting when you work the streets as a kid. Where's the money going, Whitney?" he asked, and I swear there was a weird shivering sensation up my spine as he said my name. But, like, a good spine shiver. I didn't even know those existed. "You got a shoe shopping problem? Gambling? Debts?"

"That's just... incredibly personal," I said, crossing my arms over my chest. "But, no. It's none of those things. It's... it's my sister."

"Ah," he said, nodding, putting it together. "You're the one footing the bill for her education. You know you don't have to do that, right? Most parents don't even do that anymore."

Yeah, well, it was a little more complicated than that.

But that was not exactly my story to tell, was it?

"I don't have to, no. But I want to. And, unfortunately, it isn't cheap. So the more I can work, the more I can save, and then the less worries I will have moving forward."

I mean, chances were, Wren would be in college for four years. At minimum. That was, what, a little over thirty-grand per year for a grand total of one-hundred-twenty grand, all said and done?

That was a big nut to cover.

Sure, it was much easier done thanks to the hush money. But if that went away six months or a year from now, I would be back to square one. Wouldn't it make more sense to work as much as possible for the time being, save it all, and then have the money waiting for me to use when I needed it?

"You gotta have time to live your life too, baby," he said, bringing his plate back into the kitchen to put it in the sink, which put him way too close to me.

Dangerously close.

Close enough that I could smell his cologne.

Did I take a few deep breaths to breathe it in?

Yes, yes, I did.

"I will. When all this is done," I said, nodding.

"That's not how it works. You're not promised that day when all this shit is done. So you're breaking your back day in and day out for some day you might never get. It's a waste of a life, babe. Trust me. I wasted fifteen years

of mine. I know a thing or two about this.”

“I get what you’re saying,” I said. “Really, I do. I think all the time about the years I’ve spent mostly just surviving, but what am I supposed to do? I have to work. I *want* to help my sister. It doesn’t leave a hell of a lot of time for anything else.”

He clearly had a lot of money.

And, sometimes, it was really difficult for people who did to understand what it was like not to. To know that daily struggle, the constant worry, the way you were constantly trying to find ways to lighten the load of that burden.

It was in the big things, of course, like getting a second job. Or even letting your phone get cut off so you could pay for the lights.

It was just as much in the smaller things, though, too.

Like putting back the “good” three-dollar canned soup for the cheap tomato concentrate. It was learning to be okay with brittle hair because the conditioner that works for you just costs more than you can excuse to pay for it. It was putting things in your cart—both online and in the store—and then taking it all back out again.

It just... eats away at you. Little by little. Year by year. And for many people, there just never seemed to be an end in sight.

You could only work so hard.

You could only sacrifice so much.

It felt like an uphill battle, only the hill just kept stretching higher as you approached it.

“Just because you have to work,” he said, and I felt his fingers snag my chin, forcing it up and over to look at him while I tried to school my features into indifference even as a thrill coursed through my system, “doesn’t mean you can’t make time to live too.”

Was he just... subconsciously rubbing his thumb across my jaw? Or was he doing that intentionally?

Either way, I felt like I was melting into it, as chaste as it was.

What the hell was going on?

CHAPTER NINE

Salvatore

What the hell was I doing?

I mean, for fuck's sake, it was bad enough that I was showing up at her place unannounced, but getting all soft with her in her kitchen? When I'd been spending the last few days reminding myself why the hell I needed to stay away from her.

You can see how fucking convincing I was.

Showing up at her door.

Picking her lock.

Walking around her apartment like I had any business being there.

Then getting fucking jealous about the dishes in the sink.

Don't get me wrong, I enjoyed women. I wasn't unfamiliar with one being on my mind. But it was in a very specific way.

I didn't wonder what she was doing with her time when she wasn't with me, or who she shared her time with.

It was fucked.

At first, I'd been able to tell myself it was just because I'd walked out of that bathroom with a throbbing, unsatisfied cock with her sweet taste still in my mouth, with the echoes of her cries ringing in my ears.

It was easy to dismiss the interest as unfulfilled desire. That was some shit that I could understand. But as the days went on and my thoughts drifted even more to shit that had nothing to do with going down on her, or her on me, or getting inside her sweet pussy, yeah, I started to wonder what the fuck was going on with me.

I never did figure it out.

But that strange interest eventually led me over toward her neck of the woods, up her stairs, down her hall, then into her apartment when she didn't answer when I'd knocked.

And, well, the lasagne looked and smelled good.

Some strange part of me really wanted to taste it. Not because I was hungry; I'd just eaten. But it felt more important to me to taste it because Whitney had made it.

I didn't get that desire, but I didn't fight it either.

And I also didn't stop to analyze why I was so pleased that it was fucking amazing.

Then the door was opening, and there she was.

It was the first time I'd seen her in her own clothes.

She went with a simple pair of blue jeans that cut off around mid-calf and a plain white t-shirt that tapered in just right, highlighting her waist, and showing off her great tits.

It was simple yet somehow sexy in its casualness.

Her silky hair was loose around her shoulders, lending her face even more softness than usual.

How she didn't look at herself and see someone gorgeous staring back at her was beyond me.

I mean, maybe if she was trying to compare herself with someone like those famous-for-no-reason celebrities who were more plastic than flesh, creating an unattainable, almost inhuman sort of beauty, she might not be able to see how naturally pretty she was.

And, sure, a lot of men liked hot however they could get it. But I was old-fashioned. I liked the natural ways a woman was pretty. Scars and stretch marks and some jiggle.

It wasn't long, though, before I wasn't thinking about how pretty she was, or how much I wanted to bend her over the counter and fuck her from behind.

Because we got to talking.

And I got to see some shit that I got a feeling she didn't share with a lot

of people. Not even her baby sister that she'd raised like her own kid.

The struggle.

She showed me the struggle.

In her words, in her eyes, in the tension in her body as she spoke of it.

She'd been struggling uphill for a long fucking time, with no end in sight.

And from the way she talked about it, I was pretty sure she had no one to talk to, no one to lean on, no one to even share the burden with.

She had her sister, but it was clear she was trying to make the woman's life easier. Whitney would think that sharing her money woes with Wren would make her sister feel guilty.

Money had only been a minor concern earlier in my life. When I was a kid and had no say in the matter. But as soon as I was old enough to figure out that even a kid could hustle for some extra cash, I always made sure I had more than enough.

I was always the kid with the nicest shoes, with the best clothes, with as much money as I wanted to go to movies or bowling or whatever the fuck else was going on at the time.

Then, when I was old enough to start working for the Family? Shit. The money poured in.

When I took my time without opening my mouth to the feds, yeah, the Family repaid me by making sure I always had more than enough money on the books.

When I got out, I busted my ass to make myself valuable, which meant I got paid really well.

I didn't have to worry about money.

So, no, I couldn't quite relate to her struggle. But I could empathize with it. I could read the strain of it all over her face.

Maybe that was why I'd reached for her, why I'd found myself stroking her face—something I wasn't sure I'd ever done before.

Because I got to see through to the heart and soul of her. Which, I'll admit, I'd never really tried to do with a woman before.

When it came to the opposite sex, I was down for a good time. Be that a night, a weekend, or a casual on-again-off-again thing.

Never more than that.

Likely because I never spent much time talking to any of them. We were busy doing other things.

But most of what I'd done with Whitney so far was talking.

Save for that little incident in the bathroom that I had to force right out of my head because I didn't need my cock getting hard when we were standing so close.

Whitney's eyes fluttered closed for a brief second as her head leaned to the side, giving me more access to run my fingers up and down the soft skin of her jaw.

My hand, operating with a mind of its fucking own, shifted down a bit, then back, sinking into the hair at the nape of her neck, curling into it, about to tug her head up so her soft lips were more available to me.

It was the damned vibrating of my phone on her countertop that snapped me out of my thoughts, that made me jerk suddenly away.

The spell of the moment broken, we both stiffened, created distance.

"I, ah, so were you just here to steal my food?" she asked, voice sounding huskier than usual, and it was like a stab of desire through my system.

"No."

"Then why?" she asked, busying herself with running water over my plate, acting like the task required all of her focus.

"Your stitches," I told her, using the excuse I'd come up with for seeing her again.

"My stitches?" she asked, turning around with scrunched brows.

"They need to come out," I reminded her.

"Oh, right. Yeah. I was about to make an appointment with my doctor for that."

"A doctor who would have questions you can't answer," I said, reaching into my back pocket for the small medical kit I'd stashed there. "Ten minutes," I said, then turned to head down the short hall and into the bathroom, setting the kit on the sink counter.

It was a solid minute before I heard Whitney making her way down the hall as well. I couldn't help but wonder if she'd been using that minute to try to calm the desire building in her system. Like it was in mine.

She stood there in the doorway, unsure.

And I was sure that what came out of my mouth next didn't exactly help that situation.

"Take off your clothes," I said as I turned on the tap to wash my hands. At the strange choked sound she made, my head swiveled over my shoulder. "I can't just unbutton your top and pull up your skirt this time, can I?" I asked, watching as a way too fucking appealing flush spread across her

cheeks.

Knowing I saw it, a bit of stubbornness must have built inside her, because she angled her chin up, then reached down to snag the hem of her shirt, drawing it up and over her head.

I had approximately two seconds where her head was covered in the material of the t-shirt to let my gaze move over her.

And fuck if the bra she chose to wear on her off days wasn't the kind that had no goddamn padding or even much lining.

So her nipples pebbled up against the material, and it was impossible to stop my mind from imagining sucking them into my mouth, scraping them with my teeth, teasing them with my tongue.

But then the tee was on the floor and I had to look away, pretend to busy myself with looking at my supplies. When all I really needed was the sharp little scissor and the tweezers.

My peripheral vision, though, was good.

So I got to partially watch as her fingers undid her button and zipper, then as she shimmied the pants down her soft hips, exposing those thick thighs and the swatch of black material between.

I couldn't stop it.

My mind flashed back to being at her feet in that bathroom, to pulling her panties to the side, and burying my face between her thighs, working her clit until her body was spasming into an orgasm as her hand crushed my skull, as her moans filled my ears.

"Okay. What now?" she asked, making me look over.

Not wanting to seem shy or overly modest, given that I'd already seen her in various stages of undress, she nervously fussed with her hair, tucking then un-tucking it from behind her ear.

"Come over here," I said, realizing how thick my voice was only after it was out of my mouth.

Judging by the way her breasts rose sharply, like she'd sucked in her breath, she heard it alright. And liked it.

Fuck if that wasn't the worst part.

It wasn't like the desire was one-sided.

But there I was, having to be the good guy.

It wasn't a mask I wore well.

And I was pretty fucking pissed that I needed to at all.

The boss man, though, was pretty clear.

Don't fuck the witness.

Those were the very words he'd said to me the other day. It didn't exactly leave much room for interpretation. And I was committed to my loyalty to my Family.

So, yeah, I couldn't fuck Whitney.

No matter how much we both wanted it.

I went ahead and convinced myself that eating her out was just a... gray area.

It certainly wasn't fucking.

So it didn't exactly count.

"Hop your ass up on the counter," I said, patting it. When she didn't do it, I glanced over.

"You're serious? Why can't I just stand?"

"Because if you're standing, I'd have to get on my knees in front of you," I said. And added the silent *again*.

"Oh, right," she said, shaking her head as if to knock loose the same memory that had popped into my head.

With that, she awkwardly scooted herself up, hissing a bit as the cold counter met her warm skin.

"So, ah, will this hurt?"

"Compared to what you've been through already? No," I said. "It just pulls a little. More uncomfortable than painful," I added.

"Okay," she said, eyeing the little scissors as I came closer with them.

Now, did I need to press into her knees until her thighs parted on either side of my body to get a close look at her shoulder?

No, no I did not.

But did I do it anyway?

Sure as fuck did.

And did Whitney suck in a deep breath? Yeah, she did.

With an excuse to have my head ducked, I watched her chest as it rose and fell a few times before I remembered what I was supposed to be doing.

I was almost painfully aware of the heat of her, of the sweet scent of her as I started to snip the stitches.

Done, I swapped the scissors for the tweezers.

Feeling her tense, I reminded her. "Just a little pulling."

"Kind of like when the dentist tells you 'just a little pressure' when they are tugging a tooth out of your jaw?" she shot back, dubious.

“Nah, baby, I’m telling the truth,” I told her, sharing a smirk with her before ducking my head and pulling the little stitches, dropping them down into the trash at my side as I went.

She’d healed alright. A big pink circle was expected. As were the little dots that ran along it from the stitches. They’d fade. The bullet wound? Probably not. She’d have to find inventive ways to explain that to future doctors and lovers.

I was going to go ahead and pretend that the idea of that last part didn’t sent a jolt of newly familiar jealousy through my system.

“See?” I said when I was finished.

“That’s going to stay ugly, isn’t it?”

“Eh, scars are attractive to the right people.”

“On men, sure,” she agreed, rolling her eyes.

“Into scars, are you?” I asked, thinking of all the ones I had that she might be into.

“Not on myself. I mean, that stupid one on my knee from falling off a merry-go-round as a kid still bothers me,” she told me, making me pull back and look down at her knee.

“This one?” I asked, tracing my finger over the faint gash that was almost skin tone with age. Did a tremble move through her at that barely-there touch? I was pretty sure it did. “That’s nothing,” I said, putting down the tweezers to reach for the scissors again, this time turning my attention to the outside of her thigh.

But I stubbornly stayed put standing between her thighs as I worked, even though the angle made the task more difficult, not easier.

Within a minute or so, I was closing the tweezers around the third to final stitch, finding myself ridiculously disappointed at the idea of almost being done, of having no logical reason to be in her apartment for much longer. Or ever again.

But as soon as I started to pull, her whole body jolted. Then her hand was slapping into my hip, fingers sinking in, as a surprised “Ow,” escaped her.

“That hurts?” I asked, head jerking up to look at her face.

“Yeah,” she said, nodding. Her hand stayed there, holding my hip, and neither of us mentioned it.

“Hmm,” I said, brows pinching as I lowered down closer to her thigh, getting a better look. “Fuck,” I grumbled to myself, pissed that I’d been so distracted by her nearness that I missed how the lower part of the wound was

a little puffy and red.

“What?” she asked, tone sharp, worried.

“This is a little infected,” I told her.

“What? It was, like, all healed.”

“Shit can still happen when you have stitches in. Alright. Well. Fuck. I already snipped all of these without realizing,” I told her, shaking my head, beating myself up for being so stupid.

I mean, if it was one of the guys in the Family, that would have been different. But Whitney wasn't in the Family. And she'd come by the wounds accidentally, through no fault of her own.

I should have been paying closer attention.

“Okay,” Whitney said, forcing her voice to be calm. “So, what now?”

Exhaling hard, I looked up at her.

“I have to take them out. And it's not going to feel good. And I don't have shit with me to help with that.”

“Oh,” she said, grimacing. “I, ah, I'm a big baby,” she admitted. “Like, I can't let it go if I stub my toe in the morning. Or I got a paper cut.”

Yeah, then this was really going to suck for her.

“I'll be quick,” I assured her.

To that, she took a deep, steady breath, accepting that there wasn't really a choice in the matter.

“Okay,” she said, giving me a nod.

“Deep breath. And one, two,” I counted, tugging the first one out at two, wincing as she let out a squeak of pain. And the last two were only going to be worse, being closer to the red, puffy spot. “Three, t—“ Out came the second one. This time, her whole body jerked, and that hand tightened hard on my hip. “I know,” I said, voice soft. “Deep breaths. It will pass,” I assured her. “This is the last one,” I added.

And the worst one.

But I didn't want to tell her that.

I just waited for her to suck in another deep breath, then grabbed it and pulled as quickly as I could, getting some resistance from the wound.

A cry escaped her as she jolted forward, her head pressed into my shoulder as she kept exhaling hard over and over, trying to breathe through it.

“It's alright,” I told her, dropping the tweezers so I could grab the back of her neck, holding her against me. “It's over. That's going to pass.”

I knew that pain.

It was sharp and throbbing somehow at the same time. But it got more tolerable after a minute or two.

And I wasn't exactly complaining about having her so close while she let the pain subside.

In that silence, I got the strangest fucking thought.

A man could get used to this.

The fuck?

Maybe other men could. Many did. But I wasn't that kind of man. And, by my age, I'd like to think I knew what I did or didn't want out of life.

I'd long-since decided I wasn't the father type. Or the husband type.

I liked my life focused on work and Family and my family. I liked having my time to do with what I wanted. I liked good meals. And thought variety was the spice of life. That went for women too.

I didn't commit.

I didn't envision holding women or cuddling them or any of that kind of shit.

That wasn't me.

Yet, there I was. Holding a woman and thinking about how nice it would be to be able to do so again in the future.

The fuck was that about?

"Okay. Alright," she said, sucking in a deep breath as she pulled back. "I'm okay. Sorry. I know I'm dramatic about this kind of thing."

"It's not dramatic if it hurts," I said, moving away because the moment was gone, and I needed to get my fucking head together. I couldn't do that while standing between her thighs and thinking about pulling her to my chest again. "You got the shit under here to clean..." I started, squatting down to look under her sink. "There is too much of this left," I said, coming back with the little saline tubes. "This should have all been gone. You weren't cleaning it enough."

"I know," she said, shaking her head. "I just... work was exhausting before getting shot. But then after, everything was ten times harder. I could barely shuffle down the hall to my bed before I passed out every night. I know I should have been better about it."

"Not doing yourself any favors beating yourself up about it," I said, shrugging. "Shit happens. Wounds get infected. Even if you are doing all the shit you're supposed to. We'll fix it. But I'm gonna want to keep a closer eye on this for the next week. Wounds can get bad fast. You don't want to have it

weeping.”

Not only was she bad about pain, but just the mention of a leaky wound made her go an impressive shade of green.

“I’ll clean it, I swear,” she said, damn near looking ready to cry at the possible consequences of not doing so.

“I’ll be keeping an eye to make sure,” I said, twisting the top off the saline tube, then pouring it over the wound. “Does that sting at all?”

“No. Just cold.”

“Good. Alright, we’ll give that a second then put some antibiotic cream on it,” I said, finding what I was looking for, then twisting off the cap. “I’m going to put some gauze on this so we can see if there is any oozing on the bandage,” I said, watching her go a deeper shade of green as I brought it up again. “Better to know,” I reminded her.

“Okay,” she agreed. “I can’t guarantee I won’t throw up all over myself if I pull it off and find something on the gauze, but okay.”

A low chuckle escaped me at that. “Well, we can’t have that, can we? I’ll change it.”

“What? Daily?” she asked, brows lowering.

No, absolutely not.

“Yeah.”

“That’s too much.”

“It needs to be done. It would take me two minutes, but I’m getting the feeling it would take you an hour.”

“You’re not wrong,” she agreed, shaking her head at herself. “Okay.”

“I’ll come to the diner,” I said, not fully trusting myself treating her at home every night. With the bed just a few feet away. With no one around.

“That works,” she agreed as I found some gauze and tape, then covered her up. “Thank you. I know it’s a huge inconvenience.”

“It’s not.”

“Right. Like you have nothing better to do with your—“

“Babe, it’s five minutes. I can spare five minutes each day for you.”

Her gaze slipped away at that. “Okay. Thank you. Really, I appreciate it. I don’t do well with gross stuff.”

“I’m good with gross stuff,” I told her as I cleaned up all my shit.

She stayed right where she was, half-naked, watching me.

“How did you get into, you know, medical stuff?” she asked.

“Guess it started when my grandpa got gunned down in front of me,” I

told her. “We were heading out for ice cream late at night. My gran had a migraine, so we thought we were being slick sneaking out for sweets because she wouldn’t notice.

“We’d each just gotten mint chocolate chip on sugar cones and he was opening the car door for me when a car peeled out of nowhere. The bullets rang out. At first, when he fell forward, I thought he was just trying to protect me. Wasn’t until I felt the hot blood soaking through my shirt that I realized he was hit.”

“Oh my God. How old were you?” she asked, her hand going to her heart for the boy I’d been.

“Seven? Maybe eight. Young. But when you’re young in the Family, especially back in those days, you knew about this kind of shit. Drive-bys and hits. That was shit we were all aware of. So, yeah, it had been shocking, but not that shocking. I think I was more shocked to find my ice cream cone all streaked with red. Still can’t eat that flavor,” I told her.

“Was he... did he make it?” she asked.

“I pushed him back so I could climb out, then I ripped open his shirt. He was hit three times in the shoulder, chest, and stomach. So I pulled off my shirt and kept pressure on the ones that were bleeding the worst until the ambulance showed up. He was in the hospital for a couple nights, but he pulled through. He was a tough old fuck.

“Anyway, when he came home, he had a lot of wound care to do. And my gran was like you. She couldn’t handle that shit. She actually passed out if she saw blood. So my old man would bring me over to go and take care of the wounds. I learned a lot of shit. What to do. What not to do. One of those wounds festered. So I watched as my old man drained it and, okay too much detail,” I said, shooting her a smirk when her eyes went round and her lips pressed together.

“But, yeah, this life means you are going to see a lot of shit. Not always as dramatic as a bullet wound. But knife wounds. Even just broken bones or busted knuckles. And since we can’t go to the hospital all the time, someone has to take care of that shit.”

“And that person was you.”

“Yeah. Until I went away.”

“Who did it then?”

“I dunno. That was under different leadership than we have now,” I told her, tucking my kit into my back pocket. The movement made her suddenly

remember that she was sitting there almost naked, so she jumped off the counter, and reached behind the door for a robe that she slipped on.

“Did you ever consider going into the medical field?”

“No, babe.”

“Why not?”

“Because when you’re in the life, you’re in it. This is all there is.”

“But don’t some of the others have actual jobs? Like legitimate jobs?” she asked.

Yeah.

Because we needed to wash the dirty money.

“Sure. But not careers,” I told her, following her out of the bathroom and down the hall.

“Do you need to get that?” she asked, making me aware of the buzzing on the counter just as it stopped vibrating.

The screen lit up.

Ten missed calls.

“Fuck,” I hissed, reaching for it and having to fumble with my goddamn passcode three times before I got it open.

Lorenzo. Emilio. Lorenzo.

Not good.

They didn’t call ten times in a row unless shit had gone sideways.

Just as I was about to call them back, the phone started to vibrate in my hand again.

“What’s wrong?” I answered, looking over at Whitney who actually looked concerned.

“It’s Anthony,” Lorenzo said, tone tight.

“What happened?” I asked, stomach tightening.

“Drive-by,” Lorenzo said, and I could hear Emilio in the background demanding to know where the fuck I was. Anthony was his little brother. Who had the worst fucking luck in the whole goddamn world. Shot, stabbed, shot again. I felt like the bastard was constantly living on my couch so I could keep an eye on some wound he had going on.

“Are you at the office?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“I’m on my way,” I said, cutting the call off.

“Go,” Whitney said, nodding. “You don’t need to explain yourself.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow night,” I told her, rushing off to deal with another

Family crisis.

And all the fucking while, all I could think about was getting to see her again.

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CHAPTER TEN

Whitney

It was kind of sick to be turned on when a guy was treating a wound he was trying to keep from “festering” and “weeping,” right?

I mean... try to tell that to my body.

I tried.

It didn't give a damn.

All it cared about was how he got down on his knees in front of me and ran his fingers over my skin.

I found myself looking forward to it each shift, looking for him any time the door opened, and feeling a crushing surge of disappointment each time it wasn't him.

Nothing happened again.

Though, not from lack of wanting.

I tried to remind myself as I walked out of the bathroom with need thrumming between my thighs that it was for the best.

I mean, in what universe did someone like me—a goodie goodie through and through—get involved with an actual member of the New York City mafia?

That said, what red-blooded woman raised on steamy books *didn't* have a thing for the bad boys? The ones who would burn down the world to be with you. There was something undeniably sexy about that.

Even if, clearly, Salvatore Costa did not want to burn down the world to be with me. He just wanted to make sure I didn't die of sepsis.

And my needy ass was happy to let him tend to me instead of sucking it up and taking care of myself.

What can I say? It felt good to be touched. Even in such a clinical way.

I was going to let myself be that needy and pathetic because, quite frankly, I knew I didn't have time for a man in my life. Even if I did, the prospect of having to go through the process of online dating made me a little queasy.

So this was as much action as I was going to get for a good, long time. Hell, by the time my life calmed down, maybe I would be all dried up and disinterested. So I might as well take what I could get while I could still get it.

"Pick up, Whit," the cook called, ringing his little bell three times, making it clear I'd missed the first call. Or two.

"Right. Sorry," I said, shaking my head as I turned to grab the plates to bring them to their table.

"You okay?" he asked when I came back with another order for a new table.

"Yeah. Why?"

"You've been distracted tonight is all," he said, shrugging it off.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just tired, I guess. It's been busy this week." Especially because I'd picked up an extra shift.

But he wasn't wrong.

I had been distracted.

Because we were getting close to the end of my shift, and Salvatore still hadn't shown up.

I couldn't set a watch by him. He seemed to operate on a different schedule each night. Sometimes he came in for what was something like a late dinner. Other times, it was for a midnight snack.

I purposely kept his booth empty all night because of that. Which was pretty pathetic of me, to be honest.

Almost as pathetic as feeling upset that he maybe just... wasn't going to show up that night.

I mean, the man had a whole life outside of tending to my wounds. It was ridiculous to expect him to show up every single night.

Babe, it's five minutes. I can spare five minutes each day for you.

That was what he'd said.

I guess I'd taken it to heart.

Maybe he'd run out of time to spare for me, some random woman he was paying hush money to.

Not his girlfriend.

Not even his casual hook-up buddy.

Just a no-one.

Part of his job, really.

That was all I was. And I needed to keep reminding myself of that.

Still, when I made my way out of the diner a few hours later, there was no denying the disappointment swirling through my system. Even though it had been a surprisingly good tip night. Everyone just seemed more generous than usual. Which meant I was heading home with an extra three-hundred-fifty dollars to my name.

Sure, having the money from the "Family," as Salvatore seemed to refer to them as, helped a lot. But Wren's education was expensive. And I wanted to have a little something stashed away for emergencies too. You never knew what life was going to throw at you.

I had no idea how I was going to be able to function working the overnight shift, then having classes just a couple hours later.

But it was possible.

If I stopped tossing and turning and fantasizing about Salvatore and passed out right when I got home from my diner shift.

Three-thirty, that was about.

That would give me, what, a solid three and a half or four hours of sleep.

After school, I could squeeze a nap in. Maybe, if I was lucky, another three and a half hours.

Six or seven hours of sleep total.

I mean, I'd survived on less.

It wasn't ideal, but it could be done. And that was only if I did all my diner shifts on the weekdays. If I worked the weekend overnights, I wouldn't have to worry about class on Saturday and Sunday mornings, allowing me to catch up on sleep and errands.

It could be done.

I would figure it out.

Just to ease the financial strain, to put future-me at ease.

The only flaw in the plan was a near future that included me not staying up half the night thinking about a certain silver-fox mafia guy.

And that was what was on my mind as I made my way down the hallway toward my door, slipping my key into the lock.

But this time, I felt that it wasn't engaged.

I'm not proud to admit this, but my heart leaped right up into my throat, thinking about Salvatore "letting himself into" my apartment again. Maybe he knew he'd be running late, and decided to meet me at my apartment instead.

My mind went wild with fantasies about how that could go. Me, half-naked on the sink counter. But this time, we didn't have the same self-control as the last time. Which would lead to no clothing and my bed and some good, sweaty fun that might finally make me less obsessed with him.

Long shot, maybe, but, I mean, if we had to go a couple of rounds—or a couple dozen, or hundred—rounds, to get us out of each other's system, I was okay with that too.

"I don't have any lasagne this time, but there is some leftover rav—" I started to say, a smile tugging at my lips as I kicked the door behind me and reached to set my bag and purse down.

And along with it, all of my self-defense weapons.

That I didn't think I'd need.

Not with a smoldering Salvatore Costa in my house, a man who'd assaulted a guy in the diner just for being rude to me.

But it wasn't Salvatore "The Surgeon" Costa in my apartment.

Oh, no.

It was someone I'd been hoping never to see again, even if a part of me knew that was a pipe dream, that there was no way he wouldn't stalk back into my life at some point.

I guess I'd gotten a false sense of hope because it had been a solid five months of no word, no nothing.

But there he was.

Standing in the middle of my living room.

Unlike my boss Tommy, whose ugly inside was reflected on the outside as well, Josh Davis wore the skin of a stupidly handsome man, making it impossible to see all the evil underneath.

He was an intimidating sort of tall with a strong, but not overly wide, build, a chiseled jawline, big green eyes with lots of lashes, medium-brown hair with some reddish highlights, and a nose that had been broken once, so there was a slight crookedness to it that gave his face some character.

I knew about the nose because I'd been the one to break it.

After breaking his front window with a tire iron, and crawling through the jagged glass, making me leave a blood trail all through his living room until I got to him in the kitchen, cocking back, and knocking him on his abusive ass, so I could grab my battered little sister and run.

That was three years ago now. The night I'd gotten the hysterical call from her telling me she was hiding in the closet because Josh had hit her again, and she was pretty sure he was going to do worse.

And that feral sort of rage I'd felt that night still rose inside of me. Even though Wren was finally, freaking finally, free of him.

"Josh." His name exhaled out of me, like my brain was struggling to solidify his presence, assure me that he wasn't just an awful figment of my imagination. Then, clearing my throat, "Leave," I snapped, taking a step toward the side of the door so that I could open it. To make him leave, or to be able to run myself if it came to that.

But before my hand could even turn the knob, he was across the room, grabbing my wrist, yanking it up, then back down, wrenching it behind my back as he spun me and slammed my face into the door.

"Where is she, Whit?" he asked.

He had an appealing voice too, damn him. I could see how Wren believed him when he apologized, when he love-bombed the hell out of her, when he swore it would never, ever happen again, breaking down her defenses until she went back to him. And again and again. The most vicious, brutal cycle. One I was powerless to break, no matter how many talks I had with her, how many times I picked her up from his place, how much I tried to convince her to see a therapist to understand what was going on.

"Eat shit, Josh," I said, though the words came out tight because my mouth was squished against the wood of my door.

"You're going to tell me where she is," he told me, voice even, completely unaffected as he wrenched my arm up my back, making my shoulder scream. But I bit back my cry of pain, not wanting him to get the satisfaction.

"Like hell I am," I said.

I didn't give a shit what he did to me, he was never getting her location.

That was why she was where she was, why I'd *strongly encouraged*—ie, forced—her to stay on campus instead of with me.

It was why all the mail for the college went to a PO Box and not my address.

Why I was careful not to go directly to the university without stopping off other places first, making sure I wasn't being followed.

She was safe there.

She wasn't safe with me.

Josh's appearance in my living room was proof of that.

I was never so glad that I was cautious to the point of paranoia. Because there wasn't a single doubt in my mind that if he'd broken in and found Wren in my living room, she would be with him at his place again. Willing or not.

She hadn't been away for long enough to be mentally and emotionally rid of him. Not after so many years of relentless abuse, of tearing her down to her foundations, then rebuilding a shadow self back up, one who forgot her worth, who believed she deserved his abuse, who was too sad and small and weak to leave.

He couldn't get to her.

Over my literally dead body if that had to happen.

Though, objectively, I knew it wouldn't.

Couldn't.

Because I was the only connection he had to Wren. If he was coming to me, it was because he'd already been searching for her. Likely for months. And after hitting too many dead ends, he finally got desperate enough to go after the only woman who'd likely ever stood up to him before.

He'd never put a hand on me before. Not even after I'd decked him. Not the countless times I'd practically dragged Wren out of his home before.

I don't know if it was because I was capable and willing to hit him, or if he was worried that because I wasn't brainwashed by him, that I might create actual trouble for him.

I guess him never hurting me made it all the more shocking when he did. When his other hand went up by back, grabbed a handful of my hair at the base, yanked it back, then slammed my head forward into the door, making my vision shoot off little sparks that I fought back as hard as I could, knowing I needed to stay conscious.

If for no other reason than to protect my phone.

Granted, I had a passcode on it, but I knew Josh well enough to know he was more than capable of breaking it if he worked on it long enough.

And inside he would find texts to Wren about her classes. Granted, I didn't even have her saved as Wren in my phone. But he wasn't stupid. He would figure it out. Then he would start stalking the college campuses until he found her.

I didn't work this goddamn hard to get her life started over just to have him drag her back with him.

No way.

So I ignored the way a splitting migraine started almost instantly after the slam, and used what little knowledge I had of self-defense—all of which I'd learned from a weekend course on women's self-defense that I'd forced Wren to take with me before she started school—and butted out my hips, then used the little space that gave me to slam my free elbow back into his ribs.

There was a satisfying hiss of pain as he released my arm. Turning, my arm shot out toward my mail table, knowing there was a letter opener there that I'd taken from my father's study when we'd cleaned out the house. It had belonged to his grandfather. So it was old and sturdy and sharp as hell.

I didn't feel relief until my fingers curled around the handle, until I pulled it and held it out as Josh recovered, ready to charge at me again.

"You don't have the guts, Whit," he said, that cocky, condescending smirk toying with his lips.

"I think you underestimate how much I hate you," I shot back.

I mean, no, I was not a violent person. I didn't even like action movies or that show on TV with all the swords and stuff. It just wasn't my cuppa tea.

That said, there was this sort of innate, divine, animal rage inside of me toward the man who'd hurt my baby sister.

I didn't think I would even hesitate to plunge the knife into his gut and drag the sucker upward, slicing through every organ I could as I went.

"Wren told me, you know. How you can't handle blood."

"Oh, I've had to handle blood many times in my life. Thanks to you," I added, jerking my chin up.

I operated on love and autopilot the nights I needed to clean up my sister. I didn't get sick. I barely even registered what was going on until she was all cleaned up and tucked in my bed with some tea.

"Funny thing is, I really am kind of looking forward to seeing your blood again," I said, gaze going to his nose.

“Yeah, you bitch, I never made you pay for that, did I?” he asked, advancing a step, ready to test his theory about my willingness to kill or seriously maim him.

The more he focused on me, the less he was thinking about Wren.

“Why don’t you try?” I suggested.

It all happened so fast.

He lunged.

I stabbed.

I felt some resistance as the knife hit something, but I knew instantly that it wasn’t deep enough to cause serious harm.

And by then, he had me by the throat.

Then my head was being slammed against the wall once again. That time, I was pretty sure I blacked out for a couple seconds. Because when I fully came to again, he’d grabbed my hair again, yanking backward as his hand tightened around my throat.

Everything was getting a little slow, a little thick. My thoughts, my breathing, my awareness of time.

He was cutting off my air.

I was going to pass out.

No.

No, I couldn’t pass out.

My mind flashed back to one particular move from that self-defense class.

I lifted my arms, clasping them together, then bringing down my forearm on the inward bend of his elbow, knocking his grip loose.

It was right then that I heard it.

The bleep of the elevator.

Someone was coming.

And given the time of the night, I knew who it was.

Marshall. The friendly neighborhood heroin dealer. Done with his time spent working the streets.

We weren’t exactly on neighborly terms.

But he was a massive wall of a man.

And he was nearby.

So I did the only thing I had left to do, given that I was out matched with Josh.

I sucked in a breath that burned and I screamed as I yanked open the

door.

There he was.

A giant who looked tired and taken aback at what he saw.

“The fuck?” he asked, taking a step forward.

But before he could do anything, Josh decided to cut his losses, and rushed out from my apartment and down the hall.

“No, don’t,” I said, holding a hand to my throat that felt like I’d gargled glass from being choked.

“Why the fuck not?” he asked, shaking his head.

“You don’t want that kind of trouble.”

“Girl, have we met? I live for trouble.”

“Not that kind,” I assured him. “He’s the police commissioner’s son.”

“Aw shit,” he said, shoulders slumping.

“Yeah,” I agreed, nodding.

“You alright? You don’t look so hot.”

“I feel like shit,” I admitted. Adrenaline depleted, all the pain was assaulting me at once.

“You look it,” he agreed, nodding.

“Gee, thanks.”

“Being honest. That fucker going to come back? You want a weapon?”

“You have weapons?” I asked.

To that, he lifted his shirt, and there one was, tucked in his waistband.

“I don’t... I don’t even know how to shoot,” I admitted.

“You point, you pull the trigger, pretty simple shit. I got five more in my place. Let me bring you one. Hopefully, you won’t need it. But if someone is all up in your place and you need to, you’ll have it.”

I didn’t want to say yes.

I mean, even having possession of a gun that wasn’t registered to me was a crime. That said, I really didn’t like the feeling of being powerless against a bigger attacker.

“I would really appreciate that,” I said, nodding.

“Get some ice for your face. I’ll be right back,” he said, then disappeared down the hall.

I didn’t hesitate to take his advice. Especially given that my face felt like one giant, throbbing wound.

I had soft icepacks in my freezer. For Wren. For the many times I’d needed to give her one to ice her face.

She was also the reason I had a bag full of bruise-concealing makeup in the back of my closet. Stuff I would need to use to go to work the next day without every single person I encountered asking me what happened.

What the hell had happened to my life?

I'd been a nice, quiet, unassuming teacher once.

Now I was getting shot by the mafia and accepting hush money and beaten in my own home.

Tears stung my eyes and I blinked them stubbornly back as I heard Marshall's heavy footsteps coming to my door. He'd stopped to knock before letting himself back in.

"Alright. Simple here. It's loaded. So don't fuck around with it," he said, showing me the gun. "This is the safety. You gotta do this," he said, demonstrating, "if you are going to shoot. Then that's it. Not gonna give you extra bullets because I can't imagine you'd need 'em. Not for close range like with that fucker."

"Thank you, Marshall. Really, I mean it."

"It's nothing. I got me a mom and a sis and a load of cousins. Wouldn't want that shit happening to them either. Stay strapped and you stay safe. Also, gotta get some better locks for this door, yeah?" he asked, waving at it. "The chain and the knob lock ain't gonna cut it."

"First thing in the morning," I assured him.

"Good. I'll be up for a bit. If you even think he might be back, scream. I'll hear you, even if I pass out. I sleep like a ma with a newborn. Fucking everything wakes me up."

"You're amazing. Thank you. I will find some way to repay you, I swear."

"Next time you're cooking something good up, drop a plate at my door. Haven't had a home-cooked meal in years. Always take a deep breath when I walk past your place and something is cooking."

"Absolutely. Every single time I cook," I promised him.

To that, he gave me a nod as he started to close the door behind him. "Get some rest. You'll feel like shit in the morning, but at least you won't be tired."

With that, he was gone.

And I was rushing across my apartment to slide the locks I did have, making a mental note of how much space I had to add additional locks. I'm not saying they would keep him out, but they would make him take longer to

get in, which might alert some of the neighbors.

It gave me a chance.

I made a cup of tea with shaking hands before making my way into my bedroom, deciding to skip the look in the mirror, figuring I'd endured just about enough shock for the one day.

Falling into bed, icing various parts of my face in fifteen-minute rotations, I found my mind not wandering back to what had happened with Josh, or how I was going to avoid Wren until I healed since I had no intentions of telling her what had happened, else she go back to him just to spare me.

Nope.

I didn't think of any of that.

I thought about Salvatore.

And why he hadn't shown up that night.

That was a whole new kind of pathetic for me.

But he was still the last thought on my mind as I drifted off to sleep as the sun started to come up.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Whitney

Taking a deep breath, I lifted my head and opened my eyes to finally check my reflection.

Once I'd finally passed out the night before, I was out hard and long, only waking up around nine hours later, feeling groggy and in more pain than I'd anticipated.

I'd never really endured much physical violence in my life. I had no frame of reference to what it felt like to be strangled or slammed into hard, unmoving objects.

But if this was what Wren had been through time and time again, there was no end to the well of rage inside of me toward the man who'd done it to her.

Before I'd even gotten out of bed, I reached in my nightstand for my trusty bottle of Ibuprofen that I kept there for the intense foot and back pain I'd felt the first few weeks of being on my feet serving tables.

I gave that a good half hour to kick in before I finally ventured into my bathroom.

I even brushed my teeth and showered before checking myself out, some

part of me not wanting to accept the reflection of a beaten woman looking back at me.

But whether I liked that or not, that was what I was. There was no use trying to hide from it.

“Shit,” I whispered to myself, my throat still screaming in pain despite the pills, making me cringe at the idea of talking to customers all night long.

It was as bad as I’d expected.

It was a family trait, I’m afraid, that we bruised like peaches. I was constantly finding ones on my skin and trying to recall doing anything to cause them.

So if I bruised from a little bump with the doorway or desk, you can imagine how vivid the colors were that I was confronted with in the mirror.

One eye had a big old black eye, smatters of purple and blue grazing my cheekbone and going around the outside of my eye. There was a bruise running along the side of my face from the door as well.

There was a bracelet bruise around my wrist from him grabbing me and pinning me.

Then, of course, there were the little finger-shaped bands running across my throat from him strangling me.

I’d gotten good with the bruise makeup, but even I was having some doubts in my ability to cover them up completely.

But I’d just have to try my best.

With that in mind, I found the bag with all the makeup, most of it created to cover up tattoos for important events. It was thick and felt like a blanket over my face, strangling my pores, and making me immediately uncomfortable.

Better uncomfortable than a thousand questions and sad looks from customers and coworkers, though, I guess.

With my throat screaming, I couldn’t bring myself to eat anything, just sipping some tea and promising myself to get some soup at work to sip on.

“Hey girlie!” Danny, my favorite grumpy regular greeted me a few hours later.

“Hey you.”

“Hey now... you’re not sick are you?” he asked, leaning back in his booth as if that could protect him from my germs even if I were.

“No, no. I, ah, I did karaoke last night,” I lied. “Went a little too high on those high notes,” I said, rolling my eyes at myself.

I hadn't been a good liar earlier in my life.

But having to tell half-truths to my sister to protect her, well, it sort of honed my skills.

"That's why you look off," he said, old and without a filter, just what I loved about him. "Your face is all weird."

"That would be makeup," I told him. "To hide how pale I am from not getting enough sleep. So can I get you your usual?" I asked, trying to be friendly, but also limit how much I needed to talk.

"Yep. You know me. And can you turn off the air? It's too cold in here."

"Sure thing," I told him, as we always told the customers. But we couldn't touch the air or heat. It was controlled by a thermostat in the locked office. But even just telling people you could change it seemed to placate them.

It was a grueling shift.

Not because it was busy. In fact, it was slower than I'd expected. But because I just felt like crap. Every time I had to laugh or fake a smile, my whole face started to throb. And since tips were my livelihood, I had to put on the mask of happiness.

It was sometime around midnight, though, when the door opened.

And there he was.

I'd stopped looking for him.

I'd almost convinced myself that I didn't care that he hadn't shown up.

But there he was.

Looking even better than I remembered in his dark gray slacks, black button-down, and his expensive-looking watch.

His gaze was on me and his eyes scrunched a little, likely thinking that I looked different, like everyone who knew me at the diner had noted.

"It's open," I said, waving toward his booth, internally cringing at how raspy my voice sounded, something that made a frown etch deeper on his face.

But he nodded and made a way to his booth anyway.

I fidgeted behind the counter, putting on new pots of regular and decaf, refilling the little saucers of pre-packed creamers, wiping down the counter.

Nervous.

I was nervous to go to his table.

How absurd was that?

Annoyed with myself, I grabbed his water and his coffee and his cream

and headed over to him.

I felt his gaze on me the whole way. And for just a short moment, I didn't feel all the throbbing aches in my body as it warmed under his inspection.

"Hey," I greeted, keeping my voice low to make the rasp less noticeable.

I'd just passed him his coffee and put down the creamers and was about to move back a step when his hand suddenly shot out, grabbing me at the wrist, and pinning my hand to the table.

Startled, my gaze shot to his, finding a ferocious sort of intensity there.

"Who did it?" he asked, his voice barely more than a growl from how tight his jaw was.

My heart hammered in my chest, realizing I hadn't looked in a mirror in a long time, that maybe my makeup had started to fail me. I had the stuff in my purse in case of this kind of situation, but I likely would have checked before he showed up if I knew he'd be coming.

"Who did what?" I asked, forcing a small smile, trying to play it off.

"Don't," he said, voice somehow both harsh and soft at the same time.

"Who put their hands on you?"

I yanked my hand out of his hold so I could take the step back I so desperately needed right then, finding myself both troubled by and oddly turned on by his sort of seething anger right then.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said, shaking my head.

He moved so fast that I almost missed it.

He grabbed the stack of napkins, dipped it in his glass of water, then rubbed it across my wrist.

Sure enough, the makeup started to smudge away, showing a bit of the purple bruise beneath.

"Let's try this again," he said, his dark gaze holding mine. "Who. The. Fuck. Put. Their. Hands. On. You?"

"It's a long story," I said, pulling my hand back and tucking it behind my back, feeling oddly insecure about the bruise even if it clearly hadn't been my fault.

"Unless it ends with you dumped the fucker's corpse into the river, I'm afraid I'm going to need to hear it, babe."

"Why?" I asked, shaking my head.

"Why?" he parroted, brows drawing down.

"Yeah, why? Why do you need to hear it? It has nothing to do with you."

Was that a little bit of hurt slipping into my words? Yeah, yeah it was.

Even if it was silly to be hurt because he missed one night of treating my wound that was really pretty much all healed anyway.

Clearly, my fantasies about Salvatore Costa were screwing with my actual emotions. Which was just not okay. I had to get a grip.

“It has to do with you,” he said, sliding off the seat and standing, towering over me.

“Meet me in the bathroom,” he demanded, already moving off in that direction.

Some stubborn part of me wanted to refuse, to leave him there waiting. The other part of me, though, had a feeling that Salvatore was not the kind of man who would be refused. And he was just crazy enough to bring it up in front of my coworkers or customers if I didn’t give in and give him the private audience.

Steeling myself, I checked on my tables, then made my way toward the bathroom, finding him watching the door expectantly.

As soon as the door swung closed, his hand shot out to lock it.

“What the fuck happened?” he asked, voice a little softer, and I could just imagine him pacing the floor in the bathroom, trying to make himself calm down.

And damn if that image didn’t make my heart do a little flutter.

“I have tables that need me,” I told him.

“Fuck the tables. They can all choke on their food for all I care. What happened to you? Who did this?” he asked, reaching for my wrist with a surprisingly gentle hand.

There was no way he was going to let me out of the bathroom without an answer.

“My sister’s ex broke into my apartment and confronted me.”

“Your sister’s ex?” Salvatore repeated, brows pinching. “What’s he got against you?”

“Maybe that one time I broke his nose,” I said, getting a small smirk out of him.

“Seems like the kind of fuck who would have it coming.”

“He is. He beat Wren mercilessly for years. I kept getting her to leave, he kept luring her back. It was horrible,” I told him. “But this last time, he fractured a rib. It was the first time there’d been really lasting damage. And I think something finally clicked for her. That he wasn’t going to stop. That it was only going to get worse, not better. So when I got her away, she was

making plans to stay away.”

“That’s why you’re putting her through college.”

“Yes. And no. I mean, on the one hand, I just want her to have an education and career to fall back on. It’s harder for a man to control you when you have a way to leave him and survive on your own. But, yeah, it is a way for me to have her safely put somewhere that he can’t really get to her.

“I’ve been really careful not to let anything to do with the college trace back to me.”

“Which means the only way he can find Wren is to go through you,” Salvatore guessed.

“Yeah. And last night... he tried to go through me.”

“Tried pretty hard, if those shadows under your eye, on your face, and around your neck are anything to go by.”

“I lucked out when my neighbor was coming home as it was going down. Having a witness scared him off. And my neighbor he, ah, he gave me a, you know, gun. Just in case.” There was a strange look on his face then, something I couldn’t quite interpret, but had me scrambling to add, “I mean, I’m sure I won’t ever use it. But it is for the peace of mind, at least. That’s—“

“Why didn’t you call me?” he cut me off.

“What?”

“Why didn’t you call me?” he repeated.

“Call you?” I asked. “Why would I do that? You’re just... paying me hush money. That’s all,” I told him, as I’d been telling myself for days.

“That’s all, huh?” he asked, taking a step closer, backing me against the door. His other hand rose, gently snagging my chin, forcing it up so my gaze held his. “You sure about that?” he asked.

Then his lips were on mine.

Soft and careful at first, seeming to wait for rejection. When it didn’t come, though, his hand moved to frame my face and his lips got harder, hungrier.

My own hands were greedy, sliding up his back, feeling the muscles of his back and shoulders, then going back down again only to slip under the fabric, feeling his warm skin against my palms.

A low rumble moved through his chest, vibrating into my own, as my fingers teased up his sides.

He seemed to lose control of his own hands right then as well.

They released my wrist and jaw, sliding over my body until they were

working the buttons free on my dress, then reaching inside to close over the swells of my breasts.

A moan vibrated against his lips as his hands slid up and then inside the cups, closing over me with nothing in between. His hands squeezed before his thumbs and forefingers started to work my nipples into tightened buds.

Desire surged through my system, wiping away any doubts, any reservations.

My own hands slipped out of his shirt to start undoing his buttons as his teeth nipped my lower lip.

He didn't let me finish, though, as his lips left mine so he could lower down and suck one of my nipples into his mouth.

The shot of white-hot desire caught me off-guard, making a surprised whimper escape me as I arched deeper into the sensation.

His tongue circled, flicked, then his lips sucked hard before moving across my chest to continue the sweet torment.

His hand slipped down between my thighs, pressing against the material between my thighs.

Feeling how wet I already was, another of those delicious growls moved through him.

He wasted no time slipping under my panties and finding my clit with his thumb as two of his fingers thrust inside of me.

His head lifted, his lips crashing down on mine again as his fingers started to thrust inside of me, driving me up hard and fast.

His other hand went behind my neck, using it to hold him against my body as he pulled me away from the door.

I didn't know where we were going until I felt my butt hit the sink counter.

He kept fingering me for another minute or two before his hand moved from between my thighs, taking my panties with him.

"Salvatore," I sighed, reaching for him, my hand going toward his waistband.

But he didn't let me.

Because the next thing I knew, his hands were grabbing the backs of my thighs, yanking me up and off my feet, only to drop my ass down on the countertop.

Before I could even fully adjust to that, he was going down in front of me, pulling my legs over his shoulders, then running his tongue up my cleft

to toy with my clit.

A shiver racked my system as my hands grabbed the back of his head, holding him against me as he worked my clit methodically, relentlessly.

His hand slipped between my thighs and inside of me once again, thrusting for a moment before his fingers twisted inside of me to stroke against my top wall, creating a whole new sensation.

Gone were any thoughts about being at work, about people just a couple yards away, about the pain that had been bothering me all day.

All there was in the world was Salvatore and the way he was driving me up, pushing me toward that edge.

“No!” I cried when he yanked suddenly against my hold, moving out from between my thighs.

“I need you to come around my cock,” he growled in my ear, his scruff teasing the shell of my lobe before his teeth nipped it, sending another sizzle of desire through me.

It wasn't a question, but the pause after it was.

“Yes,” I sighed, my hips wriggling impatiently against the bulge in his pants.

His arm went into his wallet, finding a condom as my hands went to the fly of his pants, undoing the button and the zip as he took the foil toward his face to nip the edge and open it.

Curiosity piqued, my hand went inside his pants, freeing his cock from his boxer briefs, and closing my hands around his thick, straining length.

That delicious rumble moved through Salvatore again as my hand started to work him.

His free hand grabbed my thigh, squeezing hard enough that I knew there would be marks afterward. But this time, the idea of those private little marks filled me with excitement, not dread.

It wasn't long, though, before his hand left my thigh and pushed my hand away so he could slip on the condom.

“Salvatore, please,” I whimpered when he paused when finished with the protection.

Again, that rumble. And my body's instantaneous response to it. My sex tightened. My heart fluttered.

But then he was stepping closer and his cock was sliding against my slick cleft.

A soft whimper escaped me, and the sound made Salvatore's eyes go

molten.

“So sensitive,” he mumbled as his hand went to the back of my neck again, holding on as his other hand fisted his cock and pressed it against the entrance of my body.

“No, open your eyes,” he demanded, body tense as he paused. “I need to look at you as your pussy squeezes my cock,” he added, making my sex tense hard even as he started to slide in.

“Fuck,” he hissed as my breath caught at the feel of him, the thick, full sensation within me. “Yeah, just like that,” he said as he kept slipping in, taking every inch of me.

Settled deep, his hand pulled the back of my neck a little tighter. The touch felt almost possessive, and for reasons I didn’t begin to understand, it made my sex tighten around him.

“You feel so fucking good,” he said as his hips started to rock, as his cock slid ever so slightly inside of me.

“Salvatore,” I whimpered, wanting more, needing more. The need was a clawing ache, more pain than pleasure, and I needed relief. “Faster,” I added, watching as his eyes closed as he sucked in a deep breath.

Then he was fucking me.

Faster.

Harder.

Taking damn near every inch of me with each thrust.

As my moans got louder and louder, his hand on my neck pulled me until my face was against his chest, my mouth pressed to his warm skin, muffling the sounds as he drove me closer and closer, then down and through the orgasm that seemed to start at the base of my spine and explode outward, overtaking me completely.

“Fuck.” Salvatore’s growl was what made the post-orgasm daze, making me realize he was still hard and thick inside of me. “Again,” he said with a wicked smirk as he started to move inside of me once more.

Slow.

Borderline gentle.

Like he knew my body needed a chance to rekindle the desire.

His hand held the side of my face again, his intense gaze holding mine.

“You need to see this too,” he said, and I didn’t really understand his intention until he was grabbing my hips, pulling me down off the counter, then slipping out of me so he could turn me so I could watch our reflection.

Only then did his cock slide back inside of me, the new angle making my desire come back with a fury, my sex clenching him as he settled deep.

“See?” he asked as one arm went around my midsection, and the other held my jaw, forcing me to look at myself when my first instinct was to look away. “Fucking gorgeous,” he said, then started to fuck me before I could have any sort of reaction to that declaration.

In that moment, seeing myself as he did—cheeks flushed, eyes full of heat—I had to admit I was seeing a version of myself I’d never seen before.

But before I could even get used to that thought, though, my body was being driven up hard and fast.

Salvatore’s hand slid between my thighs, engaging my clit as he continued to fuck me.

“Fuck, yeah, baby, come around my cock,” he hissed as my walls tightened, as I felt myself start to come.

The moan started to escape me, silenced only by Salvatore’s hand slapping over my mouth, muffling the sounds of my orgasm as it slammed through me.

He fucked me through it, milking it for all it was worth before wrapping me up tight, so tight it was almost hard to breathe, holding me against his chest as he slammed deep and found his own release.

Afterward, his forehead slammed into my shoulder as he let out a tight, “Shit.”

Was that regret?

A sharp sensation stabbed through my center at the very idea.

But then his head turned, and his lips pressed a soft kiss to my neck before he moved away from me, and I was pretty sure it was safe to assume that a man who regretted fucking you didn’t sweetly kiss you before moving away.

I mean, yeah, it had been a while, but still. In my experience, guys who wanted casual didn’t do soft and sweet.

By the time I finished rebuttoning my uniform, Salvatore had dealt with the condom, buttoned up, and was washing his hands.

When my gaze slid to his, he shot me a sexy little smirk as he tucked my panties into his back pocket.

“I have a shift to do still!” I objected, caught between shock, amusement, and a little bit of hope.

“Gonna have to do it without your panties on. Bet you’ll think about me

each time you feel a breeze up your skirt,” he added, chuckling.

I was pretty sure I’d be thinking of him every damn second, actually. But experience told me that those were the private kinds of thoughts that you didn’t share with new men in your life.

“Go on,” he encouraged when I just stood there, not sure what to do or say. “I’ll head back out at an inconspicuous time,” he added.

Checking my reflection, I was a little worried that my face was too flushed and my eyes a bit too alive, but at least my uniform was situated right and my hair was mostly in order.

“Right. Okay,” I said, trying to keep my tone light and casual. Even if, on the inside, I was all sorts of, well, worked up.

From the sex, yes.

But also his reaction to my bruises.

And what the hell this meant moving forward.

I didn’t have to wonder for long, though.

Because after tending to all my tables who genuinely didn’t seem like they’d noticed my absence, I made my way back over toward Salvatore’s booth with a fresh coffee since his other had to have gone cold.

“Hey,” he said when I went to turn away.

“Yeah?” I asked, schooling my face into careful, unaffected lines.

“You’re coming home with me tonight.”

“I’m... what?” I asked, shaking my head, sure I’d misheard him.

“I’m going to hang here. And when you’re done with your shift, I’m taking you back to my place.”

“For, like, more sex?” I asked.

To that, a devilish little smirk tugged at his lips.

“Well, I damn sure wouldn’t turn that down, but no. You’re not going back to that apartment alone where that fuckhead has access to you.”

“Oh,” I said, the air rushing out of me. I didn’t want to be as charmed as I was by that, but there seemed to be no helping it. “That’s really not, you know, necessary.”

“It is.”

“I am picking up new locks. And I have the, you know what, from my neighbor.”

“First, you either have the locks on that door already, or it’s too late.

“Second, even if you did, I doubt that shit is gonna stop him, not if he’s willing to do what he’s already done to you.

“Third, guns are good. If you’re willing enough to use them. Can I see you using one to defend your baby sister? Yeah. Yourself? I dunno. And that uncertainty, that shit won’t fly.

“So, you are going to come back to my place where, even if he does track you down, you’re with someone who won’t fucking hesitate.”

“I... but...”

“Got something you can sleep in tonight. After you get some rest, we can head back to your place to pack a bag to last you a while. Know this is probably starting to sound like you don’t have a choice. And that’s because you don’t. You’re coming back with me.”

“But... why?” I asked, since it was the one dominant thought in my head right after how much I liked his desire to protect me.

“Why what?”

“Why would you do that?”

“What? Not wanting to see a woman get the shit kicked out of her by some shithead isn’t a good enough reason?” he asked, but I got the feeling there was something he wasn’t sharing with me.

“I mean... for most men, not really.”

“Then those aren’t men, babe,” he said, shaking his head. “Want to see you safe. So you’re coming back with me. If that leads to us touring the sheets until we’re too dehydrated and exhausted to move? Then so be it. You got a table looking around for you.”

“Right. Okay,” I said, a little too frazzled to manage anything else as I went to check on my table.

And all through the rest of my shift, there he sat.

Patently waiting for me to finish up.

Like he had nothing better to do with his time.

Like I actually mattered enough for him to be so inconvenienced.

Oh, and he was right, too.

I thought about him every single time a breeze blew up my skirt.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Salvatore

“You gonna be able to manage not getting stabbed or shot for the next couple of hours?” I asked Anthony as I got ready to make my way out to the diner.

Objectively, Whitney didn’t really need me to keep treating the leg. The slight infection that had been there had already gone away.

I was milking that shit.

Because I liked being around her.

I was just choosing not to analyze it beyond that.

“Talking like it’s the highlight of my fucking life to be crashing on your couch again,” Anthony said, shaking his head.

“You keep getting hurt, your damn brother is going to put you in a head-to-toe Kevlar vest,” I shot back.

“Tell ‘em to stop sending me on jobs that get me stabbed and shot,” he said, shaking his head. “But, yeah, I’m good. Got all my shit,” he said, waving toward the coffee table that was loaded down with drinks and snacks, provided by his ma and sisters who’d dropped by to check on him. There was lasagne, meatball subs, and soups in the fridge too.

“Won’t be too long,” I assured him.

Before I got there, of course, and noticed something was off.

I figured at first that my eyes and the shitty lights of the diner were playing tricks on me. Or that she was trying out wearing makeup she didn't need. Some shit like that. Because the alternative didn't make sense.

But then she got close.

And there was no denying the shadows. Sure, they had some pretty thick makeup covering them up, but I knew bruises when I saw them.

I had no frame of reference for the rage that surged through me right then. Sure, I'd been pissed at shitheads who owed us money or fuckers who thought they could step to the Family.

But that was work.

It was a different type of anger.

What I felt when I'd seen that someone put their hands on her, fuck, that felt personal.

I'd genuinely just wanted answers when I'd had her meet me in the bathroom. I wanted to know the name of the fuckhead who thought he could put his hands on her. Or, short of that, a physical description so I could track his ass down myself.

Then, well, shit just got out of hand.

In the best goddamn way possible, granted, but out of hand.

Before I could even think better of it, she was coming around me, and I was coming inside her.

And I'd broken my word to Lorenzo.

I didn't pride myself on a lot in my life. But my loyalty to my Family was absolute. I'd shaved fifteen years off my life for them. I'd threatened other members who were getting shady and not letting the boss man know. I never went back on my word, ever.

Until Whitney.

With her soft sighs and her tight pussy and her sweet begging for more, for harder, for faster.

I was just going to have to find a way to tell Lorenzo what had gone down.

I didn't, on principle keep secrets. If he was pissed at me for my honesty, then so be it. He had a right. I'd gone against his word.

The thing was, though, Lorenzo Costa was nothing like his shithead of a father. He understood that minor fuck-ups didn't need to hold the same weight of punishment that the big shit did. There was nuance to life. Lorenzo

understood that.

He might sigh and grumble at me when I told him, but that would probably be the extent of it.

Shit had been too crazy in the city the past few years to really give a damn about something as little as who I was fucking.

And I would be fucking her. Many times.

I felt like a damn teenager as I watched her walking around the diner, knowing she was being extra careful about how she bent or turned, being acutely aware that her panties were still stuffed in my pocket.

My cock was getting hard just thinking about it.

So, yeah, there was no way it was going to be a one-and-done sort of deal.

As I watched her, too, ruminating on her situation, I knew there was no way I was going to leave her alone and defenseless against a sadistic bastard like her sister's ex.

Sure, she had a gun. But unless you were real comfortable and trained with them, you were more likely to be the victim of your own gun used against you, than using it against someone else.

I had to keep her safe.

More than that, I wanted to.

“Really, it’s okay if you’ve thought about it and changed your mind,” she told me after the last of the tables left. “I’m sure I’ll be fine,” she added, but averted her gaze and tucked a loose strand of her hair behind her ear as she said it.

What can I say?

I’d played a lot of fucking card games while locked up.

I knew a tell when I saw one.

She was lying.

She was genuinely worried he was going to show up again. And do worse.

“I haven’t changed my mind. I’m just waiting for you to finish up so we can head out,” I told her.

“Hey now, who is this?” another female voice asked, making both of us jolt like we’d been caught fucking, not just talking. “Aren’t you a yummy thing?” she asked, her eyes moving up and down me.

She was clearly a career waitress, older than me, skinny as a garden rake, with an orange shade of red hair and a lot of eye makeup.

There was something fierce about her, though. And, I guess, you didn't get to serve tables in the city for decades without developing some real grit.

"Maureen! Hey. This is my, ah, friend. Salvatore."

That name had her gaze shooting back to me, eyes even keener than before.

"Salvatore Costa," she said, making Whitney stiffen. "I thought you looked familiar. Shave off a couple of those charming fine lines and those silver hairs... you were all over the news almost, what, twenty years back?"

"Give or take," I agreed, nodding.

"And now... here you are. With my girl Whitney," she said, looking between the two of us.

It happened to fast.

One moment, her gaze was moving over Whitney casually. Then landing on the bracelet bruise on her wrist that I'd uncovered.

The next thing I knew, I had a fucking steak knife pressed to my carotid.

"Maureen!" Whitney hissed, eyes going huge.

"That was fucking smooth, lady," I said, letting out a low chuckle.

"You know who laughs when they have a knife to their throat? Psychopaths, that's who," Maureen declared.

"Maureen, what are you doing?" Whitney said, reaching out for the older woman's arm, trying to pull it away. But despite the woman being skinny and small, man, she wasn't budging.

"I've lived a lot of life, you know?" Maureen said. "The more years you get, the more you reevaluate some stances you had when you were younger. Gotten a lot less rigid on shit like stepping out on your spouse or stealing shit off the shelves at a store. I'm even cool with some killing if some sonofabitch had it coming. But putting your hands on a defenseless woman? Yeah, let's just say my patience for that shit has gotten thinner and thinner with each passing year."

"He didn't put his hands on me," Whitney insisted, trying to keep her tone calm, but I could hear a hitch in her voice.

"Listen, honey, it's not your fault. You don't gotta defend him anymore. You leave him to me."

"No, no, Maureen. It's not like that. He didn't put his hands on me. He's waiting for me because he's... he's trying to protect me from the guy who actually did beat me up."

That seemed to get Maureen's attention.

She let her gaze slip toward Whitney, trying to gauge her truthfulness. But as she did, she pressed the knife tip just a little deeper into my skin.

“Yeah?” she asked.

“Yes. I swear. My sister’s ex was the one who beat me up. He’s trying to find her. And I wasn’t... cooperating with that.”

“As you shouldn’t,” Maureen said, pulling the knife away from my throat like nothing at all had happened. “Fucking assholes thinking they have a right to access any of us they want whenever they want us. You,” she said, pinning me again with her intense gaze. “You better keep my girl safe. Know you aren’t afraid to use... any means necessary,” she added, giving me a nod, making it clear she knew the details of my case.

“I will keep her safe.”

“And you,” she said, looking back at Whitney with narrowed eyes. “You don’t keep shit like this from me, you hear? I need to know if there’s some shady character I should be keeping an eye out for.”

“For now, if anyone is asking after me, just... don’t tell them anything, okay?” Whitney said.

“Mums the word. Okay. Get her home. She needs some rest,” Maureen said, nodding at me. “I got the rest of the side work. Shit looks slow. Slow means I’ll go stir crazy if I don’t have anything to do,” she added, cutting off Whitney’s objections.

“You ready?” I asked as Whitney grabbed her bag.

“Yeah,” she said, nodding, letting me press a hand to the small of her back to lead her out of the diner.

“Oh, forgot to mention this. Got a family member of mine crashing on the couch. He won’t bother you. He’s just there so I can keep an eye on his wound. He’s notorious for doing stupid shit like pouring fucking peroxide on it even though I’ve told him dozen fucking times not to do that. What?” I asked when Whitney shot me a smile.

“You sound kind of like a dad or uncle bitching about one of the youngins, is all,” she said.

“Wouldn’t have to if young and stupid didn’t always go so fucking hand-in-hand,” I said, shaking my head.

To that, she let out a twinkling sort of laugh.

“What’s his name?”

“Anthony. And he grumbles about everything. Doesn’t help that this is the third time in, what, two years that he’s been laid up at my place.”

“Geez. Is your life really that... dangerous? I mean, of course it can be, but...”

“Nah, babe. He’s just got shit luck. Seems like half of the incidents the Family has dealt with lately have come from him and shit involving him.”

I had no business telling her any of this.

But, then again, she was the last person in the world I expected would run their mouth about it. And not just because we were paying her for her silence.

“Well, that explains him being grumbly,” she said, shrugging. “He’s probably the baby, too, right?” she asked.

“That he is. His ma and sisters were by fussing over him already.”

“It’s good to have that,” she said, and there was a hint of wistfulness, of longing, in her tone.

She’d been so used to being the caretaker for so long. When had anyone ever taken care of her?

And why was my first fucking instinct to be that for her? When I knew damn well I wasn’t exactly the caretaking sort. I wasn’t soft like that.

But, still, the urge was there.

I guess taking her back to my place was part of that too, however much I wanted to dress it up to look simply like protection.

“Do you not have a car, or do you just prefer to walk?” she asked a few blocks later.

She wasn’t complaining, obviously, since she generally chose to walk as well.

“I have one. But traffic and parking suck. And walking helps you clear your head. What?” I asked.

“Says a man who doesn’t really need to worry about someone jumping out of the shadows and assaulting him.”

“Fucking ridiculous world we live in,” I agreed. “We have our own worries, being in the business we are in, but we chose that. We volunteered to live with that potential for danger. All you did was be born the ‘wrong’ gender. Here, this is me,” I said, steering her toward the steps to my building.

“This is a step up from that office you work out of,” she said, giving me a smirk.

“Don’t get yourself too excited. I’m not much of a decorator.”

And I wasn’t.

The guys and Alessa Morelli, when they came over to play cards, all teased me relentlessly about how “bare bones” my place was.

It was hard to explain to people who hadn't been inside how much that shit fucked with your head.

You became institutionalized after a while. Used to shit being sparse. So much so that just having a couch was a massive luxury to me. The other shit—curtains and art—just didn't really matter. And I wouldn't know what to pick anyway.

I didn't give much thought to it beyond their ribbing, but found myself oddly concerned about what Whitney would think about it as we made our way to the elevator.

Her own apartment reflected her personality and the fact that she'd clearly lived there happily for a long time. It was in the little details. The art. The extra blankets. The collection of trinkets.

"It's so quiet," she said in a whisper as we made our way down the hall toward my apartment. "It doesn't seem to matter what time of night it is, there is always a racket somewhere in my apartment building. That's probably because the walls are made of plaster-covered newspaper. I swear you can't even put a nail into it," she added.

Babbling.

She was babbling.

Was she nervous?

Oddly, I understood.

Because that strange jumpy sensation in my chest and stomach? Yeah, I was pretty sure those were nerves as well.

I had to admit, I wasn't exactly familiar with the sensation. When you lived your life constantly stepping over the line of the law, you kind of got used to those sensations until your body no longer even produced adrenaline when in a risky situation.

Leave it to my confused fucking body to over-produce that shit while having a woman to my place for the first time. One of the least threatening events to ever happen to me.

"Everything is quiet to me," I admitted as I fished for my keys. "After being locked up with a couple hundred people, apartment racket is like white noise."

"Everyone was loud? Even at night?"

"Not as much at night. But you'd hear the buzzing of the doors opening. The jangling of keys from the C.O.s. People dreaming. Snoring. And occasionally trying to kill each other since they're locked up and can't get

away.”

“Sounds horrible.”

“You know, you can get used to almost anything,” I told her. “After a while, shit just becomes your new normal. Besides, on the inside, if you are connected at a high enough level, you’re pretty safe. And if your family gives a shit as much as mine did, you always had money on the books.”

“The books?”

“For your commissary,” I explained. Then when her brows pinched, clarified, “It’s an account your family can put money in or you can earn money on so you can buy shit. Personal hygiene stuff. Food. Little luxuries. And if you know the right guys who got a knack for it, you can buy them some random-ass mix of food shit, and they can make a prison delicacy out of it.”

“Really? That’s nice. Making the most out of a bad situation. Can I ask a personal question?”

“Women are my thing. Nothing wrong with the guys who were happy to substitute, but that wasn’t my thing. Fifteen long fucking years...”

“I, ah, no. That, you know, I would never ask about that. That’s personal,” she said, going a little pink. “I was... God... *fifteen years?*” she asked, mouth falling open a bit. “I thought my dry spell was bad.”

“Well, you can imagine how fucking good it is after all that time, though,” I said, shrugging. “What were you going to ask then?”

“Oh, well, it’s stupidly tame in comparison to that,” she said. “I was just wondering if you got any prison tattoos,” she said. “I, ah, I noticed you have some.”

“More than some,” I told her. “Figure we got some time for you to find ‘em all. Then I can show you which ones I got inside. Spoiler, they’re the fucking best ones I got. The artists on the inside are insane. So much talent just sitting in cells,” I said, finally unlocking the door and stepping inside. “You coming?” I asked.

As much as I hated to admit it, even to myself, a part of me wanted her to say that, no, she wasn’t coming in. And could we go to a hotel instead. Anything to stop the strange nervousness sparking through my system.

But, of course, she didn’t say that.

She just followed me inside.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Whitney

I can't say I had any idea what to expect of a mafia guy's apartment.

I guess, if pressed, I might say that I expected a lot of black and either chrome or gold.

What I didn't expect, though, was what Salvatore's apartment actually was. Meaning... sparse. Almost empty.

It wasn't a huge space, something that took me by surprise since I knew he definitely had a decent amount of money. But even more so than that, it was just so... impersonal.

White walls.

No drapes.

No carpet.

No pillows on the sectional sofa in the living area to the side of the door.

I mean, didn't nice couches like that *come with* pillows? That was how they were typically sold, right? But if they'd come with his sectional, they'd found a new home.

There was a large TV. Because, well, he was a guy. And there was a pool table toward the end of the living space.

Then, and this was a crime in my humble opinion, the man had a poker table in place of an actual dining table. I mean a *felt-topped* poker table. The chips sat in a little spinning thing in the center next to a stack of unopened cards.

There was no art on the walls, either, save for a crucifix that was placed above the door to the hallway. I got the distinct feeling, though, that Salvatore hadn't put that there himself.

Maybe one of the women of the family.

Though how they'd come in with that and not some curtains was beyond me.

My gaze moved back toward the living room where a TV was playing reruns of some old sitcom.

The coffee table was littered with snack wrappers and empty bottles of drinks on their sides.

Then there on the couch was Anthony Costa himself. The unluckiest man in the Family, it seemed.

He was a sturdy sort of guy, someone who clearly spent a good chunk of time in the gym when he wasn't recuperating from some new, horrific, work-related injury.

His leg was up on a wedge, and there was gauze wrapped around his foot.

Objectively, he was a good-looking guy, but at the moment I was so darn smitten with Salvatore that I barely even registered.

"Seriously?" Anthony asked, sighing hard as he shook his head at Salvatore. "Just gonna rub my nose in what I can't have."

"It's just your foot, kid. You want pussy, go get some pussy," Salvatore said, tapping Anthony on his bandaged foot, making him let out a string of curses. "This is Whitney," he said, and if my name meant anything to him, he didn't show it. "She needs to stay here for a few days too."

"Yeah? You got stabbed or shot too?" he asked.

"Not recently," I said, getting a surprised smile out of him.

"She's got an issue. She needs somewhere safe to be. So she's here," Salvatore said.

"It's nice to meet you," I said, brows drawing low at Salvatore's tight tone. "I'm sorry about your foot. Can I get you something?"

"Don't go waiting on him. He's spoiled enough with the women in his life," Salvatore claimed. "This woman was waiting tables the day after she was shot in the shoulder and thigh. So don't you dare ask her to get the

clicker you dropped under the coffee table.”

“Hey, I can’t help it if women like to help me, man,” Anthony said as he bent awkwardly to lean off the couch and fetch the remote, making it clear that Salvatore totally knew the guy like the back of his hand.

Salvatore ignored that.

“One perk to having him as a patient again is the moms and sisters and cousins and fucking everyone else all dropped off dishes. So we got some good shit to eat if you’re hungry.”

“Honestly, I’m just tired,” I admitted, sighing.

Sure, I’d gotten a lot of sleep the day before, but for some reason, I felt like every drop of energy had been sucked out of me.

It was probably just the accumulation of all the stuff that had been going on in my life recently truly catching up to me.

“So we’ll go to bed,” Salvatore said, putting his hand to the small of my back again and leading me down the hallway.

He didn’t have a guest room—which was why Anthony was crashing on the very comfortable-looking couch—but his bedroom was actually pretty massive for an apartment in the city.

It was so big that the king-sized bed didn’t even seem like it was swallowing up the space.

But his complete lack of design was evident in that room as well. No art. No curtains. No rug. Not even any personal trinkets on the dresser across from the bed.

He did have a headboard though, thankfully, and some decent-looking bedding.

And, of course, the TV hanging on the wall above the dresser.

“Here, I’ll get you a shirt to wear,” he said, digging in his dresser and handing me a white tee. “You wanna take a shower? Or just wipe that shit off?” he asked, and I knew he meant the makeup.

My face felt like it was screaming for air.

“Yes. To both,” I added.

“Clean towels are in the closet,” he said, waving toward the bathroom. “Call me if you need anything,” he added, giving my hip a little squeeze.

With that, I made my way into the bathroom that I found almost sterile it was so clean. And maybe that was the case. He kept it so clean in case of emergencies or when he had to treat wounds from friends and family crashing on his couch.

Bathrooms were hard to show personality with, but he at least had a couple more personal items in the drawers.

Aftershave.

An oddly wide array of different toothpastes.

Three types of floss.

Unscented lotion.

I scrubbed my makeup off with one of his washcloths, cringing at how it stained the material after, wondering if it would come out, then climbed in his shower, oddly aware of him being close by while I was naked in his shower, flipping open his bottle of body wash and taking a long sniff of it.

I'd barely managed to start washing up when the need started to build through my system once again.

I guess when you went so long without, and once you got some, it was amazing, you became the sluttiest version of yourself.

"Hey, Salvatore?" I called, the pulse of desire making me need to press my thighs together as I heard his footsteps coming toward the bathroom.

"What's up?" he asked, moving inside, and closing the door behind him.

"I need help," I admitted, feeling the flush on my cheeks at how brazen I was being.

I'd never really been super sexually confident. I liked the task. I was as enthusiastic as I felt comfortable being with any given partner. But I'd never really been one to initiate. And definitely never as boldly as I was doing right then.

"Help with what?" he asked, brows drawing together.

Lifting my hand, I grabbed the edge of the shower curtain, slowly sliding it back, revealing myself to him.

And if I ever had a moment of doubt about doing so, it all melted away as his head slammed back against the bathroom door and a rough, "Fuck," escaped him.

I stood there, watching his hungry gaze slide over me for a long moment before asking, "Are you going to help me or not?"

Even over the water running and splashing off the shower floor, I could hear the little growling noise that moved through him as he reached up behind his neck and pulled off his shirt as he kicked out of his shoes.

His pants and boxer briefs were off next, but he took a second to grab a condom for his already straining cock, bringing it with him as he moved into the shower stall, backing me against the wall, and claiming my lips.

I melted into him for a moment, into the intimacy, the rush of sexual power I felt right then.

It wasn't long, though, before my body was screaming for touch, for release, for more.

My hands moved out, running down the slope of his back to sink into his ass, pulling him closer to me as my thigh lifted, sliding up the side of his hip, opening myself up to him.

Salvatore's teeth snagged my lower lip, pulling to the point of pain as his cock settled against my cleft—a thick, hard promise—and my hips started to rock against him, building just enough friction to start driving me up.

His hands started to roam then, too, sliding down my sides, then back up to close over my breasts, rolling my nipples into buds as I continued to rock against him, feeling that pressure build inside until it was so acute it was almost painful.

“Fuck,” Salvatore hissed, his hips rocking against me. “I need to be inside you,” he growled as my writhing got faster.

Reaching between us, he made short work of protecting us before he was grabbing my ass with both hands, yanking me up until I had no choice but to wrap my legs around his waist, pinning them there as best I could with his slippery skin.

My back slammed against the shower wall before his cock surged inside of me.

Hard.

Deep.

There was no such thing as control right then as the need gripped our systems.

My arms wrapped around his neck, pulling him closer so our lips could find each other's again, muffling the sounds of pleasure in the echoey space.

“You feel so fucking good,” he growled against my lips as he drove me closer and closer, making my walls tighten around his cock.

If I could manage words right then, I would tell him the same.

“Feel how you're squeezing me?” he asked, fucking me faster, knowing how close I was. “Come around my cock,” he demanded.

And just like that, I did.

He fucked me through it, but came with me, both of us crushing our lips together, trying to keep the pleasure of that moment between the two of us.

“Did that solve the problem?” he asked, climbing back in after dealing

with the condom, dripping water carelessly all over the bathroom floor in the process.

“I dunno,” I said, leaning into him when he pulled me flush against his front, my breasts crushing against his chest. “I have a feeling that this might be, you know, an ongoing issue in need of treatment.”

“Really? That sounds pretty serious,” he said, shooting me a devilish smirk. “Just know I take your health very seriously, so anytime you need more... treatment, you just let me know,” he said, and we were both still smiling as his lips pressed to mine.

Softer.

Sweeter.

Then, and I kid you not, this man reached for the body wash... and started to wash me. His hands slid over damn near every inch of my body, igniting tiny fires that sizzled out because the moment wasn't meant to be sexual. Just... intimate.

When he was finished, I reached for the bottle too, doing the same for him, getting to know every inch of his perfect body. Every jagged and smooth scar. Every birthmark. Every tattoo. And I had a fun time trying to figure out which of his were done professionally, and which were done with a pen and a needle inside prison walls when officers weren't watching.

By the time we climbed out of that shower, I was pruny and absolutely exhausted. But... happy.

God, I don't know if I even remembered the last time I actually felt happy.

Satisfied for a job well-done? Sure. Glad my sister was away from her abusive ex and getting her future sorted out? Absolutely.

But happy just for myself?

Years?

Longer?

I didn't know.

All I did know was that nothing had ever felt quite as right as being wrapped up in Salvatore's tee. That is, of course, until I woke up in the middle of the night wrapped in his arms.

I had no idea how I'd gotten there.

Ever-aware of not wanting to come off as too clingy, I'd curled up on my side facing him, but not trying to snuggle into him.

Had he reached for me?

Had I rolled into him, giving him no choice?

It had been so long since I'd shared a bed with a man that I kind of had no idea what my mattress-sharing etiquette was like anymore.

"I'm gonna go put the coffee on," Salvatore said, giving me a squeeze, then releasing me.

Did I roll over in the bed to watch him walk shirtless out of the room? You bet your ass I did.

Then I stared at his ceiling with a stupid grin on my face.

For all of, you know, fifteen seconds. Before the uncertainly and insecurity and fear set in, of course. It was bound to, but I was hoping I might get a little longer.

The problem with joy was that it had always been fleeting for me. I could never get comfortable with it, settle into it, and I definitely couldn't expect it to be part of my daily life.

So I couldn't help but wonder what the timeline was on this. Did I get Salvatore for a few days? Week? Months? It seemed absurd to hope for anything longer. Nothing about Salvatore Costa screamed "settling down material" to me.

I mean, not that I was planning on settling down with a mafia capo or anything.

A strange, choked laugh escaped me at that thought.

I mean never in a million years did I think that would even be a thought that could run through my head. Not literally. When fantasizing about a dark romance book? Sure. But no one ever actually hooked up with a mafia capo, y'know? That was all fiction.

Except, of course, it wasn't fiction for me.

I was a little surprised that the internal monologues of all the heroines I'd read didn't run across my mind right then. All the reasons mafia guys were a bad choice.

The lifestyle was dangerous!

Yeah, well, I'd already been shot.

They are cold and domineering!

Maybe, but they were also protective and kind.

They could go to jail!

Salvatore had already been there and done that.

The only thing that pulled me out of my swirling thoughts was the sound of male voices coming from the living room. At first, I thought it was just

Anthony and Salvatore having a morning chat while the coffee brewed. But then I realized it was at least three voices out there. Maybe four.

Taking a deep breath, I climbed out of the bed, trying to settle my hair as best I could as I went to Salvatore's dresser and pulled out a pair of black and gray flannel pajama pants, pulling them on, then making my way toward the doorway.

Why?

I couldn't say.

Curiosity, I guess.

Wanting to meet more of his people, maybe.

I don't know. To be honest, I didn't give the urge too much thought as I moved out into the hallway.

And that was when four heads turned almost in unison.

Salvatore, Anthony, some guy in jeans and Timberland shoes with lots of tattoos, and...

"Maine," I said, the name coming out a little tight.

"It's Cesare, actually," Maine said, shooting me a boyish smile. He opened his mouth to say something, but was cut off by the other guy that I'd never seen before.

"What's his name?" he asked, head nodding in an oddly, I don't know, intimidating manner.

"Sorry? Who?"

"Your face. What's his name?"

"Oh," I said, my hand automatically going up, remembering the bruises. If my history of bruising was repeating itself, then each day for the first three or four would make them look darker and uglier until, eventually, they started to fade a bit. I probably looked worse than I had before I'd slathered on all that pancake makeup.

"Just wanna have a nice talk with 'em," the guy said, shrugging. "Me and my knife, we can sweet-talk him all night," he went on.

And the crazy thing was, I think he not only meant that, even though he didn't know me, but that he would... *enjoy* that.

"Brio..." Cesare said, his tone a warning that the Brio guy promptly ignored.

"Start with the eyelids. You got any idea how fucking painful it can get not to be able to blink your eyes? Couldn't look away when I started peeling some other—"

“For fuck’s sake, Brio,” Cesare said, nudging the guy with his arm. “You don’t even know her,” he added.

“She’s here, ain’t she?” Brio shot back, shrugging.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Way I see it, two things,” Brio said. “One, she’s a woman who someone put their hands on. And she’s here where we can see it, so that requires some action. Two, she’s here. At Salvatore’s place. Which means something else too. So, whose eyelids am I slicing off?” he asked, looking back at me.

And I was pretty sure the man was actually expecting a name.

I mean, yeah. In fiction, guys like Brio existed. Guys who did the dirty work. Enforcers. Contract killers. That kind of thing.

Objectively, I guess, you had to imagine that art imitated life.

It was just weird to be face-to-face with one who wanted to murder someone for me. After a long night of torturing him first.

“How about we try this again,” Cesare said, trying hard to be the voice of reason while Salvatore just stood there looking kind of amused by the whole thing. “Brio, this is Whitney. The teacher and part-time waitress Salvatore fished a couple bullets out of recently.”

“Oh, no shit,” Brio said, shooting me a smile like he suddenly recognized an old friend.

“Whitney, this is Brio,” Cesare went on. “He’s feral,” he added.

I couldn’t help it. A strange, high-pitched sort of laugh escaped me at that very accurate description.

Embarrassed, and feeling very out of place suddenly, I took a step backward.

“I’m sorry if I interrupted a meeting or something. I was just looking for a cup of coffee.”

Why was Salvatore saying nothing?

Did it bother him that I was interacting with his Family?

“No meeting,” Cesare, clearly the one with the best manners out of the bunch. “We were just dropping in to check on the invalid,” he said, gesturing toward Anthony.

“And yet none of you fuckers has offered to get me a cup of coffee yet,” Anthony grumbled.

“Oh, I can—“ I started, moving toward the kitchen, only to have Salvatore step in my way.

“Don’t. His lazy ass needs to move around more than he is. If you start

waiting on him, he won't do it."

"It's just a cup of coffee," I said, shrugging. "I don't mind."

"Hear that? She doesn't mind. And I had to get up to answer the door since someone wasn't going to," Anthony said, shooting Salvatore a raised-brow look.

"How about you sit your pretty ass down and I'll get you a coffee?" he asked instead, voice low. "You wait on people enough. Unless you'd rather have it in the room," he said. Then, leaning closer, "I know Brio can be a little..."

"Psychotic?" I offered in a whisper.

"I was going to say intense. But that shoe fits him too."

"I'll take it in the room. It seems like you haven't explained my presence here to them yet."

"They just got here," he insisted as he led me over toward the coffee.

And got me a... throwaway cup?

"I am going to lay it all out. Just haven't gotten a chance yet," he said, almost as if he was trying to assure me that he wasn't hiding me or my situation from them. Or was I looking too much into things?

"Okay. Well, I'll go enjoy my coffee and your massive TV that I assume has all the channels I refuse to pay for while you catch up with your family," I said, giving him a smile as I put the cream and sugar into my coffee.

"Spoon?" I asked.

And then this man, this full-grown adult man, handed me a plastic spoon out of a cutlery drawer full of plastic utensils.

Like... he didn't have proper silverware.

Now, I wouldn't judge if I thought he couldn't afford it. But the man wore shoes that cost more than my couch.

"After I get them out of here, I think we need to talk more about your... treatment options," he said, his fingers giving my side a little tickle as he leaned down and snagged my earlobe with his teeth.

"That is a very serious matter that we definitely need to... figure out. In depth. It could take hours," I agreed, shooting him a smirk as I moved away. "Sorry, Ant, I tried," I told Anthony as I passed, giving his shoulder a sympathetic squeeze.

I mean, sure, I understood that Salvatore wanted to make sure that his patient was moving an appropriate amount after an injury. But it didn't seem so wrong for someone to want to have a little pampering. Especially when

they were hurt. I'd have given anything to have someone bring me coffee or snacks when I was laid up with my injuries. Especially after a long day of work irritating them.

I made a mental note to do something nice for the kid before heading back to Salvatore's bedroom to curl up in the bed and drink my coffee. And watch his cable, a luxury I hadn't known since I still lived with my parents.

Eventually, the voices in the other room got quieter, then stopped entirely.

Curious when the silence dragged on for a bit, I popped back out into the hall, finding Anthony half-dozing on the couch.

And Salvatore nowhere to be found.

"He just popped over to the boss man's house for a couple minutes. He figured you'd passed back out. Hey, since you're up..."

"What do you need?" I asked, giving him a small smile.

I spent the next half an hour fetching things for Anthony before popping into the bathroom to try to find a spare toothbrush, then spend a silly amount of time choosing between his toothpaste collection.

As I suspected, my face was a mess.

But underneath the bruises, I swear my face had more color than usual. My eyes had a little more life, more sparkle.

It was amazing what some great sex with a good man could do for the complexion.

Done with that, I took another cup of coffee back to Salvatore's bed, not sure what else to do with myself, and not wanting to invade Anthony's makeshift bedroom when he didn't need me to be out there.

It was maybe an hour into my movie when I heard him come in the front door, speak quickly to Anthony, then make his way down the hall.

I won't lie.

My heart fluttered.

My sex tightened.

Then the door opened.

And there he was.

A man I was pretty sure I was starting to fall for.

"Good. Just where I wanted you to be," he said, giving me a sexy smirk as he made his way to the bed, climbing up it from the bottom and coming over me. "I could get used to this," he declared after his lips sealed to mine.

My whole heart, well, it *wholeheartedly* agreed.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Salvatore

I should have known better than to expect peace and quiet.

There was no such thing when a member of the Costa family was down and out.

It was endless streams of guests in and out of the apartment. And, normally, that didn't bother me. I liked having everyone around. Especially after so many years of being virtually by myself while in prison.

It was nice to have family around.

Especially when they weren't there on Family business.

But when I had a beautiful woman in my bed waiting on me, yeah, I was all too happy to just not answer the door.

Anthony, though, wanted some guests to distract himself from being couch-bound and bored, heaving his solid frame off the sectional, and hobbling over to let Brio and Cesare in while I was making coffee.

I still hadn't figured out how I was going to broach the topic of Whitney to the guys, especially Lorenzo. And while I knew it should have been on the top of my priority list since I was forcing Anthony to be a part of my disloyalty, I couldn't seem to bring myself to prioritize the confession when

Whit was waiting for me.

Then, well, she walked out.

And I had no choice but to explain to Cesare and Brio what was going on. Though, clearly, they understood it the second they saw her.

Because I didn't do sleepovers.

I didn't have random hook-ups in my personal space.

First, because I felt it might send the wrong message.

But second, because it was just an unspoken rule around the Family.

Strangers in your space presented a unique danger. They had access to your home. Which meant your weapons, your money, and even all the places they could place cameras or listening devices.

That sounded paranoid, but that was the life we lived now that technology had advanced so much. It wasn't the feds dressing up as cable guys and wiring your house anymore.

It was slicker and more intimate than that.

So to be safe, you went to the woman's house and kept your space sacred.

That meant that seeing Whitney there told them all they needed to know.

That shit was more than work. And it was more than a random hook-up too.

I hadn't exactly had a lot of time to think that over for myself yet. I'd been fucking beat the night before. So after following the uncharacteristic urge to put my arms around her and pull her close, I'd passed the fuck out.

I think it went without saying, though, that this wasn't casual. And while I wouldn't even pretend to understand all that a relationship entailed, I had to admit that it seemed to be heading in that direction.

Because not only did I like having her around, talking to her, being with her, I found myself more invested than I expected in her ability to interact with my people.

She'd probably thought I was a fucking asshole for being so quiet while she talked to Cesare, Brio, and Anthony, but some part of me just wanted to see how she fit in with my family, how comfortable she was with them.

I'd been pleasantly surprised. Even by her wish to help take care of Ant, who really needed a reality kick to the ass to see that not every woman he crossed paths with was going to wait on him hand-and-foot like the women of his family did.

"So..." Cesare said, lips twitching, after Whitney went back into my bedroom. "That's a development."

"He's fucking one-hundred or something," Brio said, smirking. "It's

about time he settled down.”

“I gotta ask, man,” Cesare started, giving me a knowing look.

He might have been newly back in the city after a long gig up in Maine after fucking a married woman in the Lombardi Family who, understandably, wanted him dead, but he knew how shit worked around here.

You didn’t keep shit from the boss man.

No exceptions.

Hell, I’d been a dick to Brio not long before because he’d been keeping shit from Lorenzo.

“I haven’t talked to him yet. This... this is new,” I said, waving toward the bedroom.

“Is it new, or did you just finally cross that final line last night?” Cesare, more astute than I gave him credit for, asked. “I’m pretty sure Lorenzo’s exact words were that you can’t fuck her. And I can see you interpreting that as you can do other shit and not be going against his order.”

“You’re not wrong,” I admitted.

“This is against Lorenzo’s orders?” Anthony asked, stiffening.

He was still relatively new to the Family. He’d joined up younger than was typical for us, but because of his connection to Emilio, who was our second-in-command, exceptions had been made.

He’d been hungry to prove himself, taking on way too many jobs. Which was likely why he’d gotten hurt so many times already. He wanted to be an important part of the organization some day. And to do that, he needed to be loyal.

He was understandably upset that I was, in a way, involving him in my own disloyalty.

“I’m heading over there now,” Brio said, shrugging. “Can get it all squared away now before it gets out and he gets pissed.”

My gaze slid down the hall. Because all I really wanted to do was go back in that room and slide inside of her again.

But it had to be done.

I had to get it over with.

“I’ll let her know you’ll be back in a little bit,” Anthony said, shrugging.

With that, I dipped into the bathroom, slipping on something more appropriate, then followed Cesare and Brio out.

Lorenzo’s house was unusually quiet when we strolled up the steps. Sensing my confusion, Brio shrugged. “Giana and the kids are over at my

place. Someone in the extended family is knocked up. They're planning a shower."

That explained it.

And Brio's eagerness not to be in the house.

What can I say, a place full of Costa women? Yeah, it was loud and chaotic and overwhelming.

"Salvatore," Emilio greeted, shooting us a surprisingly easy-going smile as he walked up the center hallway in his gray slacks, matching button-up, and ridiculous, oversized belt buckle with a goddamn mermaid on it.

I hadn't known Emilio much before he'd gone away. But for the brief period between when I'd gotten out and when his sister had been forced into a marriage with a rival Family, I'd known him as calm and boyish, someone who shirked too much responsibility, but had a good head on his shoulders.

After Isabella had been forced into that marriage, though, something inside of him had cracked, broken. He'd become darker and colder and serious. He developed a workaholic mindset, and rarely had that laidback, boyish charm he'd once been so known for.

The change had been jarring to me. I couldn't imagine how shocking it had been to those who had known him well.

Even after Isabella came to love her new husband and reconnect with her family, the changes seemed lasting in her brother.

I had to admit, it was nice to see even a glimpse of the old Emilio around.

"Brought 'em with me," Brio said, shrugging.

"Yeah, well, Enz definitely wants to have a word with your ass," Emilio said, exhaling hard as he shook his head. "Was it really necessary to cut the guy's ear off? The situation couldn't have been handled any other way?"

"Hey, what, it's my fault the fucker wasn't listening to us? Figure I'd at least give him a good reason to do that shit. But think the boss man wants to talk to him first," Brio said, jerking his head over at me.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Emilio said, letting out a tired chuckle. "What now?"

"What now, what?" Lorenzo asked, coming out from the kitchen with a mug of coffee. "You," he said, sighing at Brio.

"Him first," Brio said, nodding at me. "Let him take some of the heat first."

"What? Whose ear did *you* cut off?" Lorenzo asked, smirking.

"I got something to confess," I admitted, watching as the boss man

stiffened, and Emilio lost his easy smile. I had to admit I felt a little guilty to be the cause of that.

“Alright. I’m listening,” Lorenzo said. “You know... because I still have both my fucking ears,” he added, and I had to let out a cough to cover my laugh as Brio just shrugged that off.

“So, you know the chick who got shot while Cesare and I were doing that job?”

“The one you’re supposed to be paying to keep her quiet?” Lorenzo asked. “Tell me you didn’t fuck that up. If she’s talking to—“

“No. It’s not like that. She hasn’t said shit to anyone.”

“What is it then?”

“You remember what you said to me about her?”

I watched as realization dawned on him.

“Come the fuck on, Salvatore,” Lorenzo said. “At your age, you haven’t learned to keep your dick in your pants? What happens when she is pissed off that you didn’t call her, huh?”

“Gets better than that,” Brio said, rocking back on his heels, clearly enjoying himself. The bastard. “Guess who’s staying at his place.”

“Wait... say what?” Emilio asked, looking taken aback. Because, well, everyone knew I had no interest in anything serious.

And I never had.

Not until Whitney, anyway.

“You got the witness in your apartment? She’s there now?” Lorenzo asked.

“Yeah.”

“The fuck, Sal?”

“It’s worse than that, actually,” I admitted.

“Great. Eventful morning,” Lorenzo grumbled. “How is it worse than that.”

“Girl got bruises all over,” Brio interjected.

“Not by me. The fuck?” I asked when both Lorenzo and Emilio sent me hard looks. “You don’t know me better than that?” I added. “No, I went to her work to check on her leg wound. It had been infected. I’d been treating it again to make sure it didn’t get worse, and she’d need to see an actual doctor. But when I got to the diner, I noticed she was covered in bruises.”

“Was it that fuck?” Emilio asked. “The enforcer who shot her? Did he track her down?”

“Almost would have preferred that, but no. Turns out her sister has an abusive ex. Whitney has done everything she can to hide her sister, so since he couldn’t find her, he tried to force the information out of Whitney. It got ugly.”

“Oh, so she just needed some protection?” Emilio asked, relaxing slightly.

“Don’t let those shoulders slump just yet. There’s a problem.”

“Other than you fucking her?” Lorenzo asked.

“Yeah, other than that. The guy who did this—“

“Who I offered to cut the eyelids off of,” Brio chimed in again.

“Don’t you think you’ve done enough removing of body parts lately?” Lorenzo shot back.

“There’s never enough removal of body parts,” Brio mumbled under his breath. The sick fuck.

“What is it?” Lorenzo asked.

“The sister’s ex, the reason she’d been so trapped, and it had been so hard for Whitney to get her safe? The ex’s dad is the police commissioner.”

“Oh, fuck,” Emilio hissed, reaching up to rub the back of his neck.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “I couldn’t exactly go and just... take care of him. Though, trust me, I wanted to. I might have a good parole officer, but not even he can be bribed out of keeping me out of jail if that shit went down.”

“You understand the implications of this?” Lorenzo asked. “If you’re harboring this woman, if it gets out that you’re involved with her... there’s going to be a target on your back. And that impacts the whole Family.”

“I understand that,” I said, nodding. “And I get it if you’re pissed. It’s just...”

“Yeah,” Lorenzo said, sighing. “Sometimes... it’s just...” he agreed, likely recalling how he and his wife had come to be together. And, for that matter, how Brio and his woman had as well. “Alright. I need to give this some thought. Look into this sister’s ex. She’s safe with you for now, but I don’t think she should be left alone at the diner at night either. So if you can find someone who isn’t busy to volunteer to sit with her when you can’t...”

“You know, I think I have someone sitting his lazy ass on my couch right now who could be persuaded,” I said, giving Emilio a smirk.

“He fucking eats up the attention he gets when he’s sick or hurt,” Emilio agreed. “It’d be good for him to have some responsibility.”

“Alright. That’s settled for the time being. I appreciate you coming here

and leveling with me,” Lorenzo said. “Even if you did fuck her when I told you not to. I get that sometimes... when it’s the right woman, you can’t control shit like that.”

I didn’t know what the future held for me and Whitney, but if she was the right woman, if that was what this sort of string was that seemed to pull me back to her over and over, then, well, I guess I could get used to that fact.

“You can go,” he said, but when Brio went to turn with me, he barked, “Not your crazy ass. We need to have a talk about appropriate punishments.”

“Good luck, man,” I said, giving him a nod as he followed Lorenzo into the dining room.

“He’s had this talk with him at least a dozen times in the past,” Emilio said, walking me out. “Don’t know why he thinks this time will be different.”

“Hey, what can you expect when you let a feral dog off its leash?” I said, shrugging.

“That’s what I said. So, you got a girl now?”

“Looks that way,” I agreed, nodding. “What?” I asked when he shook his head.

“You’re all dropping like flies around me.”

“Maybe that means you’re next,” I suggested, then laughed when his face twisted in horror.

“Take that shit back. I don’t have any intentions of settling down any time soon, no matter how many times my ma bitches at me about it.”

“Neither did I, man. And you think fucking *Brio* was planning on finding someone who would love his psychotic ass?”

“What’s she like?”

I didn’t even think about my answer.

“She’s perfect,” I said, shrugging.

“Yeah? Then what the fuck are you doing here instead of back there with her?” he asked, shooting me a smirk that I felt myself return before turning and making my way back toward my apartment.

“You still got your balls?” Anthony asked when I made my way in, finding that not only had Whitney cleaned up his mess, but had clearly heated him up and brought him some of the lasagne from the fridge.

“You conning that woman into bringing you shit?” I asked, shaking my head at him. “She’s hurt too, you know.”

“She offered!” Anthony insisted, looking upset that he hadn’t considered her injuries as well. “Everything squared up?” he asked.

“Yeah. Lorenzo is looking into some shit with the guy who put his hands on her. Then he’ll get back to me. But things are fine.”

“Alright. Good.”

“Oh, and if there are nights when I can’t sit with her at the diner, your ass is going to be there.”

“Sit at a diner and get any food I want? Doesn’t sound too bad,” he said, shrugging.

“Where is she? In the room?” I asked.

“Yeah. Think she didn’t want to feel like she was invading my bedroom.”

“It’s my living room,” I said, lightly pushing him in the back of the head as I passed.

“I tried to tell her that too,” he said, but I was already halfway down the hall, mind fully on her. In my room. In my bed.

Opening the door, I found her sitting slightly up against the headboard, the pants gone, her legs crossed over each other, showing me her bare thigh right up to the curve of her ass.

Because she still didn’t have any panties.

A low rumble moved through me as her head whipped over. Her gaze went from startled to pleased to heated in the span of a moment as I prowled toward the bed.

“Hey! You’re back. Are you hungry? I just heated up some—“ she started, then cut off when I got to the side of the bed.

“I’m hungry, alright,” I agreed, dropping down beside her, then reaching for her hips, pulling her until she was straddling my face.

“Salvatore!” she hissed, a mixed of surprised and needy as my arms tightened around her, pulling her down so I could trace my tongue up her pussy, until she was writhing. Only then did I find her clit and start working it in circles.

Above me, she sat back a bit, her hands gripping my arms as she threw her head back and got lost in the moment.

Fucking beautiful.

It wasn’t long, though, until she was getting closer and closer to that edge.

I freed one arm so I could thrust my fingers into her tight, wet pussy, feeling my cock twitch with the need to feel her again.

But not yet.

I wanted her to come with just my mouth first.

Even as I thought that, her pussy spasmed around my fingers as she let out a whimpering sound as she came.

I barely let her finish that before I was grabbing her again, tossing her down on the mattress as I yanked down my pants, freeing my cock, and quickly slipping on a condom, pulling her legs onto my shoulders, then slamming inside her welcoming cunt.

“Oh, my God,” she whimpered, her thighs pulling tightly together to feel me more intensely.

“This is a good fucking view,” I said, smiling down at her. Her tee had slid up when I’d pulled her legs up, exposing her breasts that bounced as I started to fuck her.

Leaning forward, I pressed her knees into her chest and pushed my hand down on her lower stomach, making a deep moan escape her at the sensation.

“You gonna come for me?” I asked, fucking her faster.

“Y...yes,” she whimpered, her hands grabbing my arms, fingernails biting in as I drove her up toward that crest, then sent her crashing over it.

Her pussy clenched my cock over and over as she came, damn near taking me with her.

But as soon as she came back down again, I was grabbing her, turning her onto her side with her knees up by her chest, fucking her from a different angle that had her going from the rock-bottom of one orgasm to the height of another in what felt like just a few minutes.

“Salvatore... I can’t...” she whimpered even as her body was proving otherwise.

“You can. You are,” I added as she started to come, this time taking me with her.

I swear I damn near fucking blacked out at the intensity.

“That just keeps fucking getting better,” I said a while later after I’d crashed down on the mattress beside her.

Whitney made some sort of noise that I took as agreement to that.

“Come here,” I said, reaching for her and pulling her closer as she slowly but surely recovered from the back-to-back orgasms. “You good?” I asked when she finally snuggled in a little closer.

“Actually,” she said, turning her head up to rest her chin on my chest and look at me. “I’m kind of starving,” she admitted. “I was thinking of making some spaghetti to go with those meatballs.”

She was a fucking mafia wife in the making.

And, somehow, after a life of being happily single, I was totally fucking okay with that.

“I could go for spaghetti.”

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Whitney

I'd never lived with a man, not really.

Sure, there had been times when I'd crashed at their house, or theirs at mine, for a few days in a row before heading home to do laundry. And, inevitably, life stuff would get in the way, so it would be another couple of weeks before we'd spend back-to-back nights together.

Eventually, we'd grow sick of each other, and things would fizzle out before it got anywhere close to serious.

So being in Salvatore's apartment was the closest thing I'd ever gotten to living with a man. And after the first three or four days, it stopped feeling strange.

Especially after we'd gone back to my place to pack some bags of essentials.

And, for me, essentials included things like a frying pan—because he didn't have one—, a coffee cup because it felt wasteful to use disposable all the time, and books for both my upcoming lesson plans and just for pleasure.

“What's this one about?” Salvatore asked, knifing forward toward the coffee table, snatching one off the top of the stack, and flipping it open before

I could stop him.

And I would have stopped him.

Because despite its unassuming floral cover with a somewhat generic title, there was no way he could have known from the outside that it was, apparently, one of the smuttiest books ever written.

I crossed my fingers that he'd just flipped to a page of dialogue or descriptions, but that hope got squashed when he let out a bit of an awkward cough before looking up at me and declaring, "You like some filthy stuff, baby."

"I haven't read it yet," I reminded him. "But I've heard good things."

"There's a thing or two on this page alone I think we should explore," he decided, shooting me a heated look.

"Don't look at me like that," I demanded, feeling desire bloom through my core as I finished tying my sneaker laces.

"Why not?" he asked.

"I have to go to work," I reminded him.

"No, you don't."

"If I don't show up, there's no one to serve the tables."

"Yeah, what's with that?" Salvatore asked. "Why is there only one server on the night shift?"

"In short, because Tommy is cheap as hell. When I started, there was another server on at night. But the cooks and busboys kept spreading rumors about her, ah, taking breaks to... get down and dirty with customers in the bathroom or in the alley. Eventually, one of the other women caught her in the act and forced Tommy to fire her. I guess he just figured that if I could handle it for a few nights after she was fired, then I could just... keep handling it."

"You were fucking slammed last night," he recalled.

"Yeah, that was insane," I agreed. I felt like I'd been running all my shift. Even Salvatore had hopped up to help here and there—clearing tables and wiping down the surfaces so new guests could sit down, or fetching some condiments or drink refills. "But I made great tips, so I can't complain too much."

"You shouldn't have to work so hard."

"It's not so bad. I mean, yeah, it is going to get a lot harder when school starts, but I will manage."

"When school starts," Salvatore repeated, face going a little dark. "Seven

to almost three. Then you have to go into work at five or six until two or three in the morning.”

“Yeah, it’s a lot,” I agreed. “But I don’t work every night at the diner.”

“I’m never going to see you,” Salvatore said, mostly to himself.

“Hey,” I said, feeling my heart squeeze in my chest at the hint of disappointment and sadness in his voice. “We will find some time,” I assured him, reaching over to pull the book out of his hands, and placing it down on the table, then climbing up to straddle him.

We hadn’t exactly talked about what was clearly a budding relationship. We were both more than old enough to actually sit down and have a grown-up conversation about what was going on. I imagined we would do that eventually. It just never felt like the right time to have that talk. And I was enjoying what was going on with us too much to force that discussion.

But, clearly, things were heading in a serious direction for us.

Did I stop to give that the serious thought that getting involved with a member of the mafia probably might mean?

No. No, I did not.

Because just this once, I was going to do what felt good, not what I had spent endless hours analyzing and deciding was right or wrong.

Lord knows I’d earned a little fun, a bit of happiness.

Even if it ended up being short-lived.

“Yeah?” Salvatore asked, his hands sinking into my hips. “What should we do with that time we find?” he asked, shooting me a smirk.

“Oh, I bet we can think of something,” I said, leaning forward and sealing my lips to his.

I really did need to get to work.

But just this once, I didn’t give a damn if I was going to be late, if someone was going to see my flushed face and dreamy eyes.

It wasn’t long before Salvatore had my dress unbuttoned and my breasts exposed as I lifted up to slide off my panties.

“Take me in,” Salvatore groaned as his hand fisted his cock, waiting for me to lift up, then slide down his hard length. “Fuck, you feel so good,” he hissed as I settled deep, my walls tightening around him.

He did too.

Always.

It didn’t matter how many times we’d done this—and we were like horny teenagers who’d just discovered sex—it was always exciting and intense and

just... right.

It felt right.

Maybe that was cheesy to admit, but that was how it felt.

“Baby, ride me,” Salvatore ground out as his hips thrust up into me once, giving me all the encouragement I needed.

I started slow and almost gentle, but it wasn't long before the need for release grew until I was riding him hard and fast.

“Lean back,” Salvatore demanded as I felt his knees coming up behind me for support.

Following instructions, I felt his cock start to rub against my top wall, engaging my G-spot even as his hand went between us, his thumb working my clit as he started to grind up into me as my hips did circles.

“Fuck, yeah, squeeze my cock just like that,” he demanded, voice rough, as the orgasm tore violently through my system, making me fold forward, not trusting my own legs.

He thrust upward through the orgasm, milking it for all it was worth before holding my hips tight and thrusting up into me until he found his own release with my name on his lips.

I don't know how long we stayed that way, with him inside me and my face buried in his neck, breathing in his scent, trying to commit it to memory to hold me through a few hours of not being able to be close to him.

“Ugh,” I grumbled when I heard his phone vibrating on the coffee table at our side, interrupting our little perfect moment.

“I know,” he agreed, giving me another heart squeeze because he was annoyed by the interruption as well, but the damn phone kept vibrating, demanding his attention.

He folded up with me still in his lap, his one arm going around me to hold me close as he reached for the phone.

“Yeah?” he answered as his face nuzzled into my neck, his scruff creating another little surge of desire through my system, making my sex tighten around him again.

A pained groan escaped him as his forehead hit my shoulder.

I couldn't make out what was being said on the other side of the phone, but whatever it was had Salvatore both sighing and tensing at the same time.

“Yeah, I heard you,” he agreed. Then, “Okay. Yeah. But Anthony... okay. Right. Yeah. I'll be there.”

He'd be there.

Which meant that he wouldn't be at the diner.

It was absurd how strong the surge of disappointment was in me right then.

It was one work shift. And, normally, people didn't see each other when they were working.

I'd become unexpectedly needy with Salvatore. And while the strong, independent part of me was tensed and worried, the slightly romantic side of me was loving being so into someone finally.

"You have somewhere to be?" I asked when he hung up, scooting back enough to look at him.

"Yeah. Remember that guy who shot you?"

"Wait... what?" I asked, brows scrunching. "What are you talking about?"

"What'd I fuck the memory right out of that pretty head?" he asked, tapping my temple as he gave me a lopsided grin.

"While I think you're perfectly capable of that, no. I mean... what do you mean? You're the one who shot me."

"I sure as fuck didn't," he said, looking taken aback by the declaration. "You've been spending all this time thinking I was the one to put those bullets in you?" he asked, almost sounding hurt. "You let me inside of you when you thought I'd been the one to hurt you?" he added, voice lower.

"I... why would you pay me if you didn't shoot me?" I asked, feeling like my head was spinning a bit as I slowly climbed off of his lap.

"Because of what you'd seen," he said, walking over to the kitchen to toss the condom. He washed his hands before turning, shaking his head at me. "I don't shoot innocent women, Whitney."

"I mean, I didn't think you'd done it intentionally. I figured I was, you know, in the way of the actual target."

"You were. In the way of Cesare and me. We were the targets. You got in the way of the other guy's bullets."

"Oh," I said, the word coming out like an exhale. "Well," I added, letting out a strange laugh as I started to button the front of my dress. "I guess I don't need to worry about what it said about me on a psychological level that I was okay having sex with a guy who shot me anymore." To that, Salvatore let out a low chuckle. "But what about him?"

"We found him," Salvatore said. And, well, I knew what that meant, didn't I? Guys who shot at made members of the mafia didn't get to keep

breathing.

I knew that this was the moment where I was supposed to sober up from the high of the love hormones I was flying on. Most normal, sane people drew the line at murder. At execution.

I was shocked to find when searching for shock and disgust, only understanding and acceptance.

Maybe it was because I'd been spending a lot of time with Salvatore, and even several other members of his family, including the wives and children. And they were all just so... normal. And kind. Welcoming.

To an extent, everyone simply understood that being a part of the Family came with certain rules, with codes, and that anyone who broke those, well, they had consequences. Sometimes of the fatal variety.

Maybe I would have been more shocked and appalled had I not spent many a nights holding my sobbing sister and imagining new and terrible ways to slowly and painfully murder the man who'd put those bruises and cuts on her body.

If I'd been given half the chance, I would have done it too. Without hesitation.

We were all capable of great violence.

Some of us were just more honest about it than others.

"So Anthony will be at the diner tonight?" I asked.

I watched as surprise melted to pleasure on his face, and I wondered if him telling me was a test of sorts. To see what conclusions I came to, and how I reacted to those. It seemed, by his smile, that I'd passed.

"Yeah. He's gonna be a bit. He's on his way back from a meeting. But I will drop you off. And things are usually busy for the first hour of your shift, so I don't think we have to worry about you too much."

"I'll be fine," I assured him as I slipped my panties back on.

I wouldn't say that I'd stopped worrying about Josh. I mean the man had been an ever-present problem in my and my sister's lives for years. I never stopped being aware of his threat lingering around any given corner.

But the fact of the matter was that I was protected now. I wasn't alone anymore. Things had changed. I didn't have to be so afraid.

So with that, Salvatore actually pulled his car out of the parking garage he kept it in, and I was pleasantly surprised to find he liked classic muscle when it came to vehicles, and dropped me off at the diner.

Where I quickly fell into work tasks for the first hour and a half.

I'd only been mildly aware that Anthony hadn't shown up when the door opened, and there was Wren.

"I thought I'd surprise you!" she said, giving me the easiest smile I'd seen in a long time as she came up to the counter and dropped down on one of the stools. "Also, I am craving something fatty and greasy," she added.

My gaze moved over her, finding that her face seemed fuller than it had just a week or so ago. Her wrists didn't look quite so breakable. Her shirt even seemed a little tight.

She'd been putting on weight.

Happy weight.

Because that was what she was.

One look at her eyes told me everything I needed to know.

She was finally, freaking finally, finding some joy in her life.

See, I'd been assuring Salvatore the past few days that I would tell Wren about Josh, about what had happened. He'd been the one to tell me that it wasn't protecting her—but rather, putting her in danger—to keep her in the dark.

I'd seen his logic.

And agreed.

But, looking at her, there was no way. There was just no way I could take that light out of her eyes, not after so many years of seeing her without it.

Because I knew my sister.

She would feel guilty.

She would lose focus again, would be pulled back into that hole again, into the traumas of her past.

I couldn't do that to her.

"Greasy and fatty is pretty much all we serve. Oh, and once, salmonella. So just... don't order the chicken, okay?" I asked, giving her a smile as I pushed a Sprite in her direction. "You seem happy. How have things been going?"

"Oh, my God. So good. I think I was struggling a little at first. I just felt out of place. Too old, I guess. But once I got over that, I really started to make a lot of friends," she told me. "I, ah, I even met this guy."

My stomach tensed.

And I hated that.

But I couldn't seem to stop it, either.

A trauma response, I guess.

Because it hadn't just been Wren who'd been impacted by the whole Josh situation. She'd had it the worst, of course, but that didn't mean that I didn't have some scars as well.

"Really? What's he like?" I asked, glad when my tone didn't come out as tight as my throat suddenly felt.

"He's... God, how do I put this that doesn't sound wrong? He's... not charming," she said, rolling her eyes at herself.

"Oh yeah?" I asked, almost feeling a little relieved. Because, a lot of the time, abuse hid behind charm. It certainly had with Josh.

"He's sort of... nerdy actually. Shy, even. He's got these horrible glasses that are just all wrong for his face. And I don't think he's had a haircut in like six months."

I kind of liked that image already.

"Where did you meet him?"

"The library. I'd, ah, accidentally dropped a stack of books on his head."

"That is a great meet-cute," I said, starting to feel excited for her.

If anyone deserved a chance to meet a guy who would treat her right, it was Wren.

Was it soon? Maybe. But sometimes, you just couldn't control that kind of thing.

"Right? His name is Liam. He's actually older than me. It's so nice to meet someone older than me on campus," she added, raking a hand through her shiny hair. "He's going for a doctorate in history."

Oh, I knew a few professors of history.

And, yes, they did tend to be the shy, library-hiding types with ill-fitting glasses.

"We're just friends," she said, giving me a small, hopeful smile, making it clear that she would be happy if it became more than that. "He's actually going to meet me here in a little bit," she added. "He's excited to meet you. He wants to get into teaching. I mean, he wants to be a professor, but he is interested in what you have to say about working in education."

"I can't wait to meet him," I assured her.

That was another green flag, right?

Because Josh never wanted to meet me. And he always made sure when Wren and I had plans, that he was nowhere around. Maybe he was afraid that I could see through his bullshit.

And, honestly, I could.

When I finally did meet Josh, I'd instantly disliked him, but for no good reason, so I'd kept my feelings to myself about it. Wren had been deep in the love-bombing stage at that point, so she wouldn't have listened to my criticisms anyway.

"Please don't go interrogating him. I know my history with guys is—"

"Not your fault," I cut her off.

"I know," she agreed. "I just want to give this a chance, okay? As friends. Then maybe more when I really, really get to know him."

"I think that's a great plan," I agreed.

"So what does he like? Aside from history and libraries?"

"Food," she said, smiling. "He's a complete foodie. Earlier this week, we met up at this hole-in-the-wall place but it ended up having some of the best food I've ever had in my life. Apparently, he likes to cook too. He just doesn't have as much time anymore with all his classes and work."

"What does he do?"

"He narrates books!" she said, practically bouncing in her seat because she knew how interesting I would find that.

"Really? That's an interesting career."

"He's got a really deep voice, so I guess that is really in demand, so he... oh, here he is!" she beamed as the door opened.

And there he was.

Tall, lanky, shaggy-haired, brown-eyed, with round glasses and baggy clothes. He had a messenger bag hanging from his shoulder, and the bag part was swinging and whacking hard against his thigh, making me think he had some serious books in there.

"You must be Liam," I said, giving him a warm smile.

"And you're the best big sister in the whole world," he said, smiling at me as Wren went goo-goo-eyed at him.

"Well, top ten maybe," I said, smiling. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"Coffee."

"Ah..." Wren said, making him look over at her, giving her a sheepish smile that he turned to me.

"She's right. Decaf."

"If he has regular this late, he gets heartburn," Wren told me. "And then he can't sleep."

"Then I'm useless in class. It's a vicious cycle."

Turning away, I started making his coffee, but something that deep voice of his said had me tensing and then turning.

“Wait a minute,” I said, mouth falling open. “Sir Arthur, the Mad Monk, Mackinnion?” I asked, slapping a hand on the counter.

To that, Wren looked perplexed, but Liam shot me a sheepish smile as a blush crept across his cheeks.

“You’ve heard my work,” he said.

Oh, I’d heard his work, alright.

Now that I recognized it, I knew that voice from half a dozen of the smuttiest romances I’d ever read.

“What is it? What’s got him blushing like that?” Wren asked, smile wicked, wanting to be in on the scoop.

“Oh, little sis. Your charming little studious-looking friend here... he narrates super smutty romance novels,” I told her, watching her eyes light up.

“No way! Which ones? I want to listen!”

“No!” Liam barked, more panicked than angry, and I was so happy to see that Wren didn’t jerk away from the sound.

“Come on! Why not? I want to hear your work.”

“Not that work.”

“Why not?”

“Because I want you to hear...” he started, then let out a strange cough before clearly changing what he was originally going to say. “I want you to hear my more serious work.”

That was not what he was going to say.

What he was going to say was that he wanted her to hear him say those things *to her*.

Wren seemed a little oblivious to that, though, as the two of them discussed which of the books he’d narrated that she might be interested in.

They stayed at the counter for over two hours, talking, laughing, picking off each other’s plates. And I couldn’t stop watching.

Because, my God, did happiness look good on her.

And I just hoped for her sake that Liam was every bit as good as he appeared to be.

“Okay. We are going to head out,” Wren said as the two of them got up. “Apparently, there is this all-night ice cream place we have to check out. It’s geared toward stoners, but...”

“But stoners have great taste in desserts,” I said.

“Exactly.”

“Have lots of fun,” I told them. “And text me when you get home, okay?” I asked, giving her a hug.

“I will. Liam, it was really nice to meet you,” I said, shaking his hand when he offered it.

“You too,” he agreed, giving me another of those shy smiles that I decided were my new favorite thing. For Wren at least. For me, I preferred Salvatore’s little cocky smirks.

With that, they headed out.

And it was right about then that I finally realized that Anthony hadn’t shown up.

I made a mental note to text Salvatore, mostly out of concern for Anthony himself, after I handled a few more of my tables who hadn’t been getting the best attention since I’d been a little focused on my sister and Liam.

Liam, who I hoped to see again.

Liam, who I would see again.

Soon.

Way too freaking soon.

And covered in blood.

Practically falling in the front door, clutching his face.

“He took her!” he yelled.

I didn’t have to ask.

I knew.

I knew who took her.

I didn’t stop to think.

I didn’t call for backup.

I just grabbed my purse and ran.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Anthony

I had no idea what the fuck I'd done in this life—or a past one—to deserve the absolute shit luck I'd been dealt.

I mean... shot, stabbed, shot, and now a fucking car accident? Seriously?

That was all I could think of even as I sat there trying to figure out how to get my body untangled from the mangled wreck that was my car.

What the hell had I even hit?

It was all a bit of a blur.

And the impact of the airbag must have knocked me out for a couple of seconds, because my brain felt weird and foggy.

I remembered driving back from the meeting Emilio had sent me on. And traffic being a nightmare. Because it always was.

Then... nothing.

Not until I woke up, that is.

“If I have to spend another fucking week on Salvatore’s fucking couch, I swear to God...” I mumbled to myself as I felt around for my seatbelt clip and pushed the button to disengage it.

My head was hammering, and there was a trickle of blood sliding down my arm.

I didn't bother to look.

If it was a bone sticking out, it would only psych me out. If it was a piece of glass embedded in my skin, I knew better than to pull it out without someone medical nearby.

So I just ignored the pain as I attempted to pull my legs out from under the steering wheel, finding the foot compartment crushed to a third its usual size.

"Oh, motherfucker," I hissed as my ankle let out a scream of objection as I started to try to pull it free.

At best, that was a strain.

At worst, I was looking at crutches and a cast.

Maybe my ma was right. I needed to get my sinful ass to church more, get right with the Lord, figure out why he's got such a damned grudge against me.

For fuck's sake, Brio sliced peoples' ears off and he wasn't constantly getting injured.

Suddenly, there was a frantic tapping on the window at my side, catching me off-guard, making me jerk.

"Hey! Hey, are you okay in there?" a honey-sweet voice called. "I'm on the phone with the police. The ambulance is on its way, okay? Can you hear me? I don't know. He looks pretty rough," she went on, clearly talking to the 911 operator. "Yeah, he looks like he hit his head on something. Hey, sir! Sir, are you hurt anywhere else?"

"My foot," I said when I remembered to speak. "I can't get it out."

"He said he can't get his foot out. Okay. Hey! The lady said to stop trying. Leave it where it is. The cops or firemen or whoever will come in and get you out, okay? Just sit tight. No. No. I don't see any other car around," she said, turning her attention back to the operator.

There wasn't another car?

How was that possible?

There was no way, no fucking way, I'd crashed into a parked car or some shit like that.

I was a damn good driver.

Never an accident.

Never even a near-miss, not even in the crazy city traffic.

"Um, yeah, you know what," I heard her say as she looked toward the front of the car. "Yeah. There's paint like there was another car. Maybe it

was a hit-and-run?”

Hit-and-run?

Yeah.

It sure sounded like my ass needed to get to church.

Shot, stabbed, shot, hit-and-run.

I needed to douse my whole fucking body in holy water. They needed to bring in one of those damn kiddie pools and let me bathe in blessed water.

I needed to get to my phone.

I had to call Salvatore, let him know that I couldn't get to the diner.

But it wasn't in the cupholder where I'd had it.

The crash had likely sent it flying onto the passenger floor. But I couldn't move to try to find it.

It was right about then that I heard the sirens, making their way toward me, then stopping.

Within a few minutes, I was surrounded by paramedics and firemen, everyone trying to see how I was and how to get me out.

“No, I don't need to go to the hospital,” I insisted even as they were putting me on the gurney.

“Listen, I will feel better knowing you got an x-ray done of that foot, at least, okay?” the female paramedic said as the ambulance pulled off.

And, well, I couldn't exactly object to that, could I?

I figured that once I got to the hospital, I'd find some way to call my mother who could call my brother who could call Salvatore, since hers was the only number I knew by heart since it hadn't changed since I was a little kid and she'd been drumming it into my head for emergencies.

But, as it would turn out, no, that wasn't as easy as I'd thought.

I'd tried to tell myself that it was going to be okay, that despite Salvatore's overprotectiveness, Whit was safe at the diner with the cook and the busser and all the customers.

It was fine.

But it damn sure didn't *feel* fine.

I was given a job.

And I'd been working really fucking hard to make a name for myself, to be someone that the Family trusted, despite all my fucking mishaps.

I was fucking up royally.

Eventually, the scan came back.

Broken tibia and ankle.

Because, again, of-fucking-course it was broken in two places.

After the doctor finished casting me up and giving me crutches, I signed my ass out, despite his insistence that he wanted to monitor me for a little bit because of a possible concussion.

He didn't understand that I'd have a definite concussion if Salvatore found out I'd been shirking my responsibilities.

Grabbing a cab since I'd luckily had my wallet in my back pocket, I'd made it across town and into the diner, sure I would find Whitney looking over with concerned eyes, then insisting I sit down while she brought me some food and drinks.

Yeah, okay, I was a sucker for being waited on a little bit. Sue me.

The problem was, Whit didn't greet me when I got there.

Because Whit wasn't there at all.

But there was a guy beaten to a bloody fucking pulp.

Who'd told me that Wren was taken by 'some guy named Josh.'

And that Whitney had gone to save her sister.

Shit.

Goddamnit.

What the fuck?

"How long?" I asked, whipping his cell out of his hand and dialing my mom's number.

"Five minutes. Tops," he insisted.

"Did you call the cops?"

"No. Not yet. I was..."

"Don't," I cut him off. "That guy? He is a cop," I added, watching as the guy's eyes widened, seeming to put all the pieces together in a blink, then giving me a nod. "Ma. Give me Lorenzo's number now. Ma, I don't have time for this. I know you want more grandchildren. Jesus fucking... no, I know. I won't take his name in vain. Ma, I mean it. Family emergency shit. I need Lorenzo's number."

Leave it to your mother to lecture you about being single while two women's lives were hanging in the balance.

"Enz, it's Anthony," I said as soon as he answered. "We got a problem. Whitney's sister was taken by that shitbag ex of hers. And Whitney went after her. Yeah. Okay. I'm at the diner. Long story," I added when he questioned why I hadn't gone to save Wren. "Yeah. Okay. Right. Good. Yeah, you can get me on this number," I assured him, not bothering to ask

the owner if I could cop his phone.

“Is Wren going to be okay?” the guy asked after I finished my call.

“What? She your girl?”

“No. Not yet. I mean, I hope one day,” he added, uncomfortable. “She’s not gonna want me now,” he claimed, hanging his head.

“Why not?”

“Because I didn’t protect her.”

“Listen, I’m not the comforting sort of guy. But I can say by looking at you that it looks like you put up a hell of a fight. I mean, no offense, but it doesn’t look like you’ve ever hit a gym, so it’s impressive you fought hard enough to bust open those knuckles. This girl, if she’s anything like her big sister, she will be over-the-fucking-moon that you’d done what you could. Even if, in the end, it just wasn’t your lucky day.”

“Hey, you,” I called as a busser moved past, eyeing us carefully. “I’m gonna need you to take over for Whitney for a while, okay?” I asked. “Give you five grand to do it and not say shit about this. Same for you,” I said to the cook through the window. “Not a fucking word to the shithead boss of yours, and you get five-k for keeping this place running for the night.”

No one turned me down, not with that kind of money on the line.

So I hobbled my ass behind the counter to get the poor guy who’d lost Whit’s sister some ice and paper towels to clean off the blood.

It was probably all of fifteen minutes before my brother was bursting into the diner, his gaze falling on me.

“Jesus Christ. The fuck, Ant?” he asked, waving a hand up and down me.

“Long story that ends with a hit-and-run and me getting here too late. So I might need some fucking Witness Protection after Salvatore finds out what is going down.”

“Salvatore is already on his way to go get Whit and Wren,” Emilio said, jerking his chin toward the guy at the counter.

“Ah, this is...”

“Liam,” the guy supplied.

“Right. Liam. He’s hoping to bag Whit’s sister some day.”

“Looks like you got a chance,” Emilio said, looking over his injuries.

“You need to see a doctor?”

“I’m fine. I think,” Liam said. “I think I bruised some ribs,” he added.

“Just think, if that girl is in good shape when she gets free of that fuck, she’s gonna want to be waiting on you hand and foot for trying to save her,” I

said, giving him a nod as hope rose in his eyes for the first time.

“The fuck is with you and wanting to be waited on?” Emilio asked.

“You’re just jealous that you haven’t been sick or hurt in a decade, so no one is waiting on your ass,” I said.

“Yeah, that must be it. So you said you were hit-and-run on?” he asked, since there was nothing else we could do but just talk and wait to hear some news.

“Yeah. I don’t really remember. It’s all fuzzy. I mostly remember coming to and some chick was calling the ambulance for me and she said there was paint on my hood. And the cops said something about glass on the road. But there was no car. What? You think it wasn’t random?”

“You never fucking know with our Family,” he said, reaching for his phone and dialing, I imagined, Lorenzo. “Enz. Ant was hit-and-run on tonight. Yeah. Looks like a broken foot. I know, right?” he asked, and I could just imagine there was some joke at my expense. “Yeah. No. I’ll tell my mom so she doesn’t have an aneurism. Okay. Keep us posted.”

“Everything alright?” I asked.

“Yeah. Are you?” he asked, losing some of the bravado, becoming just my brother. My worried big brother.

“Still running on adrenaline. Bet I’m gonna feel like shit when that wears off. And my car...”

“Fuck your car. I’ll find you a new one. Sit your ass down for a minute,” he demanded, grabbing a chair and moving it toward me.

“Salvatore is gonna fucking kill me,” I said, sighing.

“If you were out back getting your dick sucked, maybe. But you were in a fucking accident, kid. You couldn’t help that shit.”

Maybe that was true.

But if something had happened to Whit on my watch, even if Salvatore forgave me, I wasn’t ever going to forgive myself...

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Whitney

Panic, fresh and electric, sparked through my system.

Because something within me told me that this wasn't like every other time Josh had possession of my sister.

First, because she'd run away from him, had stayed away from him. That distance had clearly been eating away at him for a long time. Enough so that he's been willing to put his hands on me after breaking into my apartment.

Second, though, he'd seen Wren with another man.

I mean, objectively, the two of them were probably just walking side-by-side, not doing anything romantic. But to a possessive, abusive, narcissist like Josh, that was unacceptable. That was "his" woman trying to step out on him. That was some other man trying to take her from him.

I knew as I threw myself into a cab that this was it. This was going to be the "big one."

There were so many times in the past where I thought that things had gotten as bad as they could get with Josh. Times when my sister was more seriously injured than before, more emotionally beaten down, and even sickeningly thinner than ever.

And while he wouldn't have the time to emotionally manipulate her, to make her starve herself until she lost most of her weight, he could have the time to absolutely batter her, maybe even permanently, fatally.

"Please, please go faster," I begged the cabbie. His gaze looked up at me from the rearview, taking in the desperation in my gaze, then gently tapping the gas with a little more force.

He didn't have a huge head start.

I was going to get to her in time, damnit.

And Josh was going to want to rant and rave for a while. Scream. Strike.

As much as my heart crushed in my chest at the idea of Wren being at his utter lack of mercy for even five minutes, at least if he was raging and hitting, he wasn't strangling her or something like that.

Even at just the thought, it felt like a hand was closing around my throat, squeezing, cutting off my air, making me gasp, causing my head to go fuzzy.

I knew he was capable of that.

I'd sported the bruises for well over a week.

But it took several minutes to strangle someone. And I was running on the assumption that they hadn't been far from the diner when they'd been intercepted by Josh, that Liam hadn't been knocked out cold, that he'd ran as fast as he could back inside to me.

That left them, what, five minutes ahead of me? Ten, tops.

"This is it," I said, hitting the partition when the driver didn't seem like he was slowing down.

I barely managed to toss a tip at him before I was all but spilling out of the cab, rushing up the front steps, and hitting every button for each apartment in the building.

"Come on come on come *on*," I whimpered, running my hand over all of them again.

"Is that my pizza?" a voice called through the speaker.

"Yep!" I answered then rushed to the door as I heard the buzz of it unlocking.

I was painfully aware of the twists and turns of the building. I could run it in my sleep.

I braced myself for the cries, for the screams, as I got to his door and found it locked in my hand.

But all I heard from the inside of the apartment was the loudest kind of silence.

“Open this door!” I yelled, pounding my hand on the unyielding wood as my other hand plunged into my purse, rummaging around for a bobby pin or anything like that.

I was no pro at it, but I’d gotten myself out of those handcuffs when I was desperate. I could get his door open too.

“Goddamn it, Josh! Open the fucking door!” I shrieked.

“Ah, he’s not here,” a voice said behind me, making me jolt and turn, finding a teenager standing there with an energy drink in her hand and her hair pulled up in spacebars.

“You’re sure?” I asked. “He should have gotten in just a couple of minutes ago.”

“No. He hasn’t been around in a few days,” she said. “I don’t like him, so I keep an eye so I don’t accidentally run into him.”

“You’ve got good instincts,” I told her. “Stay the hell away from him.”

Could I have beat them to the apartment?

Not unless they stopped somewhere first.

But if he hadn’t been around his place in a few days, why would he bring Wren back?

He wouldn’t.

Where would he take her, then?

I don’t ever remember Wren saying he had another apartment or anything like that. He didn’t have that kind of money.

“Think, damnit, think,” I hissed to myself, trying to sort through all the ugly abuse conversations I’d had with her to find the conversations where she was, once again, gushing about him.

To be honest, I half-zoned out during those. Maybe that made me a shitty sister, but I think it was a coping mechanism for me, a way to muzzle myself to keep from screaming that this was the guy who’d given her a black eye and a split lip and a dislocated shoulder.

But I remembered her talking about Josh’s mother. Likely because it infuriated me that I couldn’t get any help for my sister because the entire damned police department defended him, covered for him, even refused to come to the apartment to take a report about the abuse from him.

It had been naive of me to imagine that the only favors that were afforded to the police commissioner’s child was, maybe, a speeding or parking ticket that went mysteriously away.

Not a get-out-of-jail free card for spousal abuse.

I'd been sure that if Josh's mother heard about what he'd been doing to his girlfriend, she would do something about it. Talk to her son. Or, at the very least, tell the police force to drag him in anytime he got physical with her.

The thing was, I'd contacted her.

And after that was when the abuse not only got worse, but the police stopped coming to domestic disturbance calls at their address.

Josh's mom, Angela, was the one person I'd ever heard Wren speak ill of, though. In general, my sister always tried to see the best in people, to focus on the good.

But with Angela, well, it seemed all she had to say was bad.

Angela had been a young, pretty girlfriend to a rich husband in her late teens and early twenties. A man who traded her in for a younger model when her pre-frontal cortex threatened to finish developing.

Apparently, that same man "mysteriously" fell to his death from a drop off into the water behind his home a few months later.

It would have just been a tragic accident, something no one ever thought of again, until Angela, after her fourth marriage and subsequent ugly divorce, had enough money to get herself a nice summer home.

And which property did she pick?

Oh, the one overlooking the water.

Where the ex who had dumped her had died many years before.

"I just think that's a little bit suspicious, you know?" Wren had said, poking around at her plate, but not actually eating anything. "I mean, maybe I would have believed she just really liked living there once when she was young and it reminded her of good days. But when she told me about it, there had been, I don't know, a dark kind of glee in her eyes."

At the time, I found the story a little crazy, a bit over-the-top. And, quite frankly, I'd been too focused on my sister to really give it much thought at all except to think that it would make sense if the mother was a monster too. Josh was fruit of a poisoned tree.

It had to be the summer house, right?

If he was looking for a place to take my sister where no one would hear, no one would see, and no one would even know what was happening, then the summer house was the place to be.

I didn't know the address, but it wouldn't exactly be hard to find. A rich man falling to his death would have made the news.

Turning, I ran back out of the apartment building as I grabbed my phone, doing a quick search, and coming back with some town in New Jersey.

I didn't think twice.

I hopped in a cab and gave them the address. If he had any reservations about the drive, they disappeared when I produced a wad of cash and passed it to him.

"Alright then," he said, nodding, and focusing on the road.

The drive felt like it took forever, but was only about forty minutes, all in all.

Forty minutes was a long time for Wren to be trapped with that psychopath, though.

Even if she'd spent the biggest chunk of that time in the car. Likely the trunk.

If Josh had been away from his apartment and life for days, spending time at the summer house, what did that mean, though? Had he been there... preparing it? To hold her hostage there?

That would be, in a way, a good thing, right?

If his plan wasn't necessarily to hurt and kill her right away.

If he had cracked in the head and wanted to, like, keep her trapped like a little doll to play with, that was sick, but it also meant that Wren would be alive when I got to her.

It was a disgusting thing to hope for, but I found myself praying for that harder than I'd ever prayed for anything in my life.

So hard, in fact, that when my phone started to ring in my hand, I shrieked and dropped it, making me scramble to try to find it on the floorboard of the car.

"Wren?" I asked, having slid to answer it without even looking to see what the ID said.

"No, baby, it's me. Where the fuck are you?" he asked, sounding a little winded. "I'm at the bastard's apartment, but the kid across the hall said—"

"Yeah, I know. I was there about twenty minutes ago," I cut him off. "I'm in a cab. On the way to the summer home," I said.

"He has a summer home?"

"No, but his mom does."

"Fuck. Okay. Baby, you need to pull over and wait for me," he said, and I could hear him running, likely making his way back out toward his car, ready to jump on the road to come to me.

“I can’t do that. I can’t waste any more time. You know what could be... happening,” I said, choosing my words carefully, acutely aware of the driver just a couple inches away from me.

“Baby, not trying to sound like a dick here, but what are you going to be able to do about it?” he asked.

That was a fair question.

I didn’t have my gun.

That was still—hopefully—tucked in a box in my closet at my apartment. All I had on me was an eye-gouger and some mace.

“It’s harder to fight off two of us than it is one,” I reasoned, keeping my voice low.

“He could hurt you both. He could kill you both,” Salvatore said, tone tight. “I can’t let that happen.”

“Well, I can’t let anything happen to her,” I said, shrugging. “You would do the same.”

“It’s different.”

I didn’t bother to argue with him on that, to say his comment was sexist, or whatever else might have come to mind. Because the fact of the matter was, he was right.

It was different.

Salvatore was bigger. He was stronger. He had a history of taking care of himself. And, as always, he had a weapon on him.

Salvatore absolutely stood a good chance against someone like Josh, no matter how deranged Josh might be at the moment.

It didn’t matter to me, though, if I got hurt or killed in the process. I had to get Wren free. She’d just barely gotten her first taste of freedom and happiness, and the promise of a man who wouldn’t hurt her.

“I have to do this,” I told him, tone half-apologetic, knowing Salvatore well enough at this point to know he would feel responsible for any hurt I came to.

“I know you do, baby,” he said, tone sadder than I’d ever heard it. “But I’m on my way, okay? Keep that in mind. You just need to bide time, not be a hero. Give me the address.”

I rattled it off, feeling a bit of an ache in my chest at the idea that I might not get to see him again, that my first twinges of happiness cut be cut short.

“Whit?” Salvatore called as I started out the window at the darkened world outside, wondering what was going through my sister’s mind right

then.

I prayed she knew that I would come for her.

I always came for her.

“Yeah?” I asked.

“Don’t take any unnecessary risks, okay?” he asked.

“I can’t make any promises,” I told him honestly.

“I can’t fucking lose you,” he said, voice rough.

I’d been right there, teetering on the edge, afraid to fall, terrified of the crash at the bottom.

But right then, with his voice telling me that he didn’t want to lose me?

Yeah.

I fell.

Hard.

Tears, useless at that moment, flooded my eyes. And no amount of blinking made them go away.

“Just so you know, just in case, I’ve been happier with you than I think I’ve ever been.”

“Fuck, baby, don’t talk like that,” he demanded, voice wrecked. “That sounds too much like goodbye.”

“Hopefully just for now,” I said, ending the call and turning off my ringer.

It was too much.

I was too fragile right then.

And I needed not to be thinking about myself and my situation. I had to be thinking about Wren and what was happening to her.

Tossing my phone in my purse, I pressed my forehead to the cool glass, trying to clear my mind of anything related to Salvatore—a task that was harder than I could have anticipated as I pictured him hearing the call end, tossing his phone to the passenger seat, letting out a savage curse, and pressing the pedal to the floor.

Trying to force the thoughts away was impossible, so I worked on replacing them instead.

With every single late-night phone call with my sisters hysterical voice on the other end. With every session of sitting in my bathroom trying to clean her up, reassuring her all the while that it wasn’t her fault, that it didn’t matter what she may have said or done to Josh, that it never gave him the right to put his hands on her. With the times she’d managed to call me early, so I was

able to rush over there, witnessing the violence with my own two eyes. With all the times he'd conned her into coming back as I waited on bated breath for that inevitable phone call again.

Rage, old and familiar, bubbled up with each passing mile, until it felt like lava surging through my system, ready to pour out and destroy any and everything in its path.

"You're sure this is the spot?" the driver asked when we pulled to the end of a narrow tree-lined driveway.

"This is it," I agreed, passing him more money, not caring about rent or college tuition or anything at all. None of them would matter if I didn't get Wren out of this. Or myself, for that matter.

"Want me to wait to make sure?" he asked. "Don't feel comfortable dropping a woman in the middle of nowhere like this."

"My boyfriend is coming," I told him, since I was sure he'd overheard at least part of our conversation earlier. "Knowing him, he's speeding and is likely right behind us," I added, not wanting him to stick around.

"Alright," he said, not looking happy about it, but accepting it.

"Thanks," I said, trying to put some peppiness in my voice as I climbed out of the backseat.

I only walked up a few feet, waiting to make sure he drove away, watching the orange of his taillights disappear before reaching into my purse for my two weapons—if you could even call them that. Tucking them into my hands, I left my purse there near the end of the driveway, figuring it would only get in the way, then made my way up.

I wanted to run, to barge right into the house, but it was Salvatore's voice in my ear telling me to go slow, to take my time, to assess the whole situation to give myself a better chance at success.

So even as nerves jangled in my very bones, I made my way up the long driveway, watching as the house came into focus.

The lights were on.

And Josh's black sedan was in the driveway.

From what I could tell, there were a few other houses on this side of the river on both sides of this estate, but the properties were wide and long, flanked by old trees, creating plenty of privacy to protect all sorts of sins.

It was standing there, in the clearing of the driveway, trying to figure out my next move, that I heard it.

Her.

I heard her.

Screaming.

There was no more thinking, or plotting, or taking my time.

I was running toward the house, come what may.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Salvatore

I'd forgotten about him, to be honest.

The enforcer.

The one who'd shot Whitney.

He'd burrowed back into a dark corner of my mind.

I was sure he would creep back to the surface at some point, but the present moment had been full of too many other thoughts and feelings to waste any time on his ass.

What can I say?

I was pretty fucking sure the impossible was happening.

I was... falling in love.

Fuck, it even sounded cheesy.

But there was no denying the feelings that had been weaseling their way in over the past few weeks. The interest that became more than interest. The way I couldn't stop thinking about her. The way I wanted her in my life, wanted her around my people.

We'd hardly spent more than a few hours apart since she moved into my place to protect her from that asshole ex-boyfriend of her sister.

And, somehow, even just those few hours had been fucking excruciating. I mean, I'd let the woman convince me to open a website on my phone and pick out flatware for the kitchen. I'd given her a drawer in the bathroom. I'd made room for her in the closet.

That was serious shit to someone like me who'd never even let a woman in his house for the night.

I'd been too busy enjoying watching her move around the kitchen, making breakfast in the pan she'd brought from her place, and coffee in the cups she'd brought too, her hips shimmying around to the music she had coming from her phone, making one of my tees that she chose to wear every night instead of her own pajamas, sway around her thighs.

Inevitably, breakfast would burn because I found it impossible not to walk over there behind her, running my hands over her, slipping my fingers inside her until she stopped even mentioning breakfast, and was begging for more, then sliding my cock into her waiting pussy, and fucking her until we both were even hungrier than before.

I'd gotten used to having her in my bed at night, too. Her soft body curling into mine, making me wrap my arms around her, making me see for the first fucking time that there were things in life worth holding onto tight.

So, yeah, the fucker who'd mistakenly brought us together was the furthest thing from my mind as my cock was buried inside of Whitney as she rode me, giving me a great fucking view to watch her come.

But then there'd been the phone call.

The orders.

The unexpected surge of disappointment.

Which, because it was so ridiculous, I battled back down, reminding myself that no matter how much I liked being with Whit, that I would eventually have to get used to her not being around all the damn time.

Sure, I could visit her at the diner, but I was pretty sure the school wouldn't look too fondly on a known mafia member on parole showing up and sitting in a classroom because he just couldn't get enough of his woman.

I needed to get a grip.

And I didn't have to worry about her.

Anthony would be there.

Sure, the bastard could potentially get impaled by a fork or scalded by some coffee or something, knowing his luck, but he would do everything in his power to protect Whitney while she was under his watch.

So I'd met up with Cesare out front of Lorenzo's place.

"Coming up for air finally, huh?" he asked as we went into his trunk to grab some extra guns.

"What?"

"Seems like you've been buried between Whit's thighs for a solid week straight," he said, smirking.

"Hey," I snapped, making his brow lift. "Don't talk about her like that."

"Shit," Cesare said, sighing and shaking his head.

"What?"

"Brio said you were head-over for her. I'd insisted that your old ass wasn't going to suddenly become monogamous at this stage of your life. Now I owe that bastard a hundred bucks."

"I never saw it coming either," I admitted, shrugging. "Guess those fuckers were right about it just being different when it's the right one."

"The right one, huh?" he asked, climbing into the passenger seat of my car. "We talking rings and picket fences?"

"This is New York, man," I reminded him. "Best we can do is wrought iron in front of a Brownstone."

"Shit. Are you actually considering that? You know a house would likely mean you need to buy some actual furniture, right?"

"I have furniture."

"Man, you have a couch and a bed and a poker table. I mean actual decor."

"Guess that would be the perk of having a woman around. To add in all that soft shit. Curtains, carpets, all that shit."

I actually hadn't been giving that far in the future much thought. But the more we talked about it, the more I wanted it.

A ring and a better place full of her books and all that soft shit that made her apartment feel more like a home than mine.

A future.

Forever, even.

That was what I wanted with Whitney.

"Hey, think of it like this," Cesare said as we parked the car outside of the thrift shop that served as a front for the enforcer's gang's illegal activity, where we'd gotten word he'd been crashing for the past few weeks. "You get to finally put a hole in the guy who put holes in your girl. Granted, she wasn't your girl at the time, but still. He hurt her. You can avenge that."

That was exactly what I needed to hear to get my head on the job instead of on the possible future I wanted with Whitney.

“Getting rusty, old man,” Cesare teased when it took me a few extra seconds to get the lock undone on the front door.

“When you spend fifteen years behind bars, you can lecture me about rusty skills,” I said.

“Fair enough,” he agreed, reaching in his jacket for his gun with its silencer. “You take the lead. This is your kill,” he said, shrugging and moving to the side so I could go in first.

I didn’t know much about the enforcer of the Lewis Crew. What I did know was that while he definitely had some bodies on him, he wasn’t anything like Brio, or even like all of us.

What he had in his favor was no one really knew who he was and that he had a lot of guns. So he could easily roll through your neighborhood, shoot you and your crew up, and waltz right back out.

Hell, the bastard didn’t even have good aim.

He’d hit Whitney, for fuck’s sake.

Cesare’s tap on my back made me glance back to see he was pointing toward the left side of the building, making me veer in that direction, figuring he must have seen something I had missed.

And then, there he was.

On a roll-away cot with a gun tucked under it.

Out cold.

“Kinda anticlimactic, don’t you think?” Cesare whispered.

But, apparently, the guy slept light, because he shot up so fast, grabbing his gun as he went, that it was hard to take aim until he’d managed to squeeze off two rounds.

“Fucker,” Cesare hissed. “This was a nice suit,” he added, making me realize he’d been grazed even as I took aim and watched as the guy’s body jolted as my bullets landed.

Two.

Three.

Four.

“Think he’s good,” Cesare said, stepping forward toward the body. “You sentimental fuck,” he added, smirking over at me. “The thigh and the shoulder. Then two to the head. It’s practically poetic,” he concluded, giving the guy’s leg a little kick.

“Come on. Let’s get out of here. I’m sure the Lewis Crew is still scrambling, but I’d rather not wait around to make sure.”

“Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. You just wanna go send Anthony home, so you can make puppy-dog-eyes at your girl,” Cesare said, tucking his gun away and making his way back through the building.

He wasn’t wrong, so I didn’t bother insisting otherwise.

It wasn’t until I dropped Cesare back at his place, popping in for a couple of minutes to check it out, then got back in my car, that I got the call.

Anthony had never made it to the diner.

As if that news didn’t make my heart go into practical fucking arrest, then I was told the whole of it.

Wren was taken.

Whitney had gone after her.

And no one had any idea what the fuck to do about it.

Me, I was already doing an illegal u-turn and hauling it up toward Wren’s ex’s neighborhood.

After getting some details about that whole situation out of Whit, I’d gone ahead and done some digging myself. Just in case I ever needed to pay the bastard a visit.

Did I risk parole doing shit like that?

Yeah.

But if that bastard was going around threatening or hurting my woman, then, yeah, it would be worth it.

So I knew his apartment building.

I knew his number.

And I was pounding my fist on it until a voice from behind me made me stop.

“It’s been a busy night for that apartment,” a teenage girl said, nodding at me.

“What does that mean? Have you seen him? Did he have a pretty girl with him?”

“No. I just told the lady that he hasn’t been around in a few days.”

“What lady?” I barked, then winced, worried I would scare the poor thing, but she seemed nonplussed.

“I didn’t get her name. But she had on this awful blue dress. And an apron. She was here looking for that abusive dickhead too.” Something about her smug smirk told me she dared me to comment on her profanity.

“Any idea where the fuck he could be?” I asked, feeling panic gripping my system.

“Sorry, no. But that lady rushed out of here in a hurry like she had some idea.”

I hadn’t wanted to call her, to ruin her cover if she was hiding out outside the guy’s apartment, trying to find a way in.

But I had to now.

I couldn’t let her think she was alone in this.

I never felt relief like I’d felt when I’d heard her voice on the other end of the phone.

Until, of course, she started talking like she might not make it out of this, like she’d accepted that death was a possible outcome for her.

Which, well, it fucking *wasn’t*.

Not on my watch.

No fucking way.

In general, I was a careful driver. I didn’t want to give the law any excuse to pull me over, to give my parole officer a hard time. He was already a greedy bastard. I didn’t want to have to toss any more money his way.

But for Whitney?

Fuck.

The goddamn pedal was to the floor from the second she’d hung up until my car was speeding down the street in an expensive neighborhood in New Jersey.

I barely fucking remembered to cut the damn engine when my gaze found Whitney’s bag laying on the side of the driveway near the street, making me worry that the bastard had been laying in wait, had been anticipating her arrival, and had snatched her as soon as she’d gotten out of the cab.

“Fuck,” I growled, grabbing an extra gun out of my trunk along with enough bullets to take down a fucking herd of buffalo, then ran up the long driveway toward the house at the end of it.

It was a big place.

Lots of windows.

A rich guy’s house.

Probably built in the eighties. I could see a lot of black and chrome on the inside, if it was still original to the house.

I only slowed when I got near the front door, pausing to listen, finding it eerily silent save for the chorus of crickets and cicadas all around.

If he had the girls inside, why were they silent?

Had he gagged them?

Killed them?

No.

I couldn't let my mind go there.

I had to keep hope alive.

I moved along the front windows, wanting to get a look inside, knowing I would be useless to them if Josh saw me coming and took me out before I could get them free.

But as soon as I heard it, faint against the loud backdrop of nature, I turned and ran back to the door.

Crying.

Someone was crying.

I had no idea who it was.

But no matter which sister, it was my fucking job to protect them. So I ran through the center of the house, following the sound of the sobbing to the kitchen at the back of the house.

Where Whitney was standing over the bloodied body of Josh with a dripping chef's knife in her hand.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Whitney

I thought I'd experienced adrenaline surges before.

That time I'd broken Josh's nose being a prime example.

But nothing even came close to what I felt as I flew into that house.

I felt oddly in and out of my body at the same time. Like I felt the way my blood was rushing through my veins, the thrumming of my heart against the confines of my ribcage.

But I almost felt like I was watching myself from above as I charged in the house, rushing through to the kitchen at the back where the screams of my baby sister were originating from.

I saw her first.

I think I was somehow hardwired to always look for her instead of the man threatening her, like some part of me had to know she was okay before I could give Josh even a second of my attention.

There she was, backed against the kitchen island, her knees drawn to her chest, making herself a smaller target, protecting as much of her body as possible.

Her arms started up, trying to protect her face from damage.

From *more* damage.

It was naive to think he would finally get her again and she wouldn't be hurt. But I guess I'd just been hoping that I'd gotten there quickly enough.

The last thing Wren needed was more pain, more terrible memories.

Unfortunately, though, I couldn't spare her that.

Her lip was already split and there were bruises starting to peek through on her cheek and under her eye.

The arms she had raised had marks too.

Her arms suddenly shot upward as the man towering over her reached behind her head and grabbed a chunk of her hair, pulling so savagely that he dragged her up to her feet by it, making her let out another shriek of pain through her sobs, through her pleading.

"Please, please stop. You're hurting me!"

"I fucking hope so," Josh snarled. "You had this coming, you know. Running away from me. Letting that fucking bitch sister take your beatings for you. Whoring yourself out to that loser!"

His voice gained in ferocity as he ran down her list of supposed trespasses against him. And with each one, he gave her hair a hard yank, shaking her around like a rag doll as she cried.

My eye-gouger and mace were just... not going to cut it. Not with how enraged he was.

My gaze scanned the kitchen, landing on a block sitting right there a few feet away from the two of them.

I didn't stop to think.

About if I had what it would take.

About the repercussions.

I just charged forward, grabbing the hilt of what turned out to be a heavy, sharp chef's knife.

And I just... stabbed it into his back with every bit of strength in my significantly smaller body.

Which, as it turned out, was more than enough.

Josh's body arched and jerked hard even before the howl of pain escaped him. His sudden movement had me yanking the knife back out, barely even registering the resistance as it pulled out of muscle and fat and whatever else it had sliced through inside of him.

Wren's body went flying backward and down, landing with a crash against the kitchen table, sending the chairs flying as she yelped.

But I couldn't look at her.

For the time being, she was safe.

I had to keep my eyes on Josh who was suddenly spinning, his eyes huge, his hand clutching his stomach.

"Fucking bitch!" he raged, taking a step forward, his other arm outstretched.

I wasn't even fully aware of what I was doing then. It was like my body had shifted into autopilot and I was watching like a passenger in the backseat as the driver plunged the knife into that outstretched palm.

Then his chest.

Then his throat.

Then his chest again.

And again.

And again.

And again.

It was the blood that finally seemed to put me back in the driver's seat of my own body.

The hot, sticky blood that was making my hand slip on the hilt of the knife, losing my grip.

Not that it mattered.

Josh was crumpling down to the floor, his hands holding his throat, his mouth opening and closing like he was trying to say something, but nothing came out but a horrific death rattle.

I watched as the life drained from those evil eyes of his, but it took me a solid moment before I realized that I'd done that.

I'd drained that life.

I'd *killed* him.

Just like that, I could suddenly think past the survival drive. I could hear past the whooshing of my pulse in my ears.

And that was when I heard it.

Him.

I heard him.

"Baby, it's okay," Salvatore said, making my head turn slowly to find him standing in the doorway to the kitchen, tucking his gun away, then slowly holding his hands up to me. "Hey, hey, it's alright," he went on, voice more soothing than I'd ever heard it.

Why was he talking to me like some scared animal?

Even as I thought it though, I felt it.

My entire body was shaking.

Head to toe.

My teeth were even knocking together.

My gaze moved from him back to my own hands, seeing the bloodied knife there, and dropping it with a yelp, like it was suddenly scalding me.

“Alright. It’s alright,” Salvatore said, and he was suddenly next to me, reaching for me, pulling me against his chest, holding me together when my body and mind threatened to fall apart. “You okay over there, kid?” he asked.

“I... ah... yeah. Is she okay?” Wren asked, sniffing hard.

“Yep. She got a heavy dose of adrenaline when she saw what was happening to you. The body can’t handle that much of it. So it tries to get rid of it. That’s why she’s shaking,” he explained, voice calm, patient, as his hand sifted through my hair and the other arm slung around my waist, anchoring me to his body. “She’ll be fine. You sure you’re okay? Anything broken? How’re your ribs?”

“I’m alright. Really,” she said, gasping a little as she, I imagined, got to her feet. “I’ve had a lot worse,” she added, her voice coming closer. “Is he...”

“Dead? Yeah,” Salvatore said, not dancing around the truth.

“Ah, who are you?” she asked, and I felt my insides tense, feeling suddenly guilty for not having told her, to bring her in on my growing happiness.

“Salvatore,” he supplied. “Costa. I’ve been dating your sister.”

“You’ve been... wait. Did you say Costa? As in... the mafia Costas?” she asked, tone sounding a little choked.

“Yep. That’s me.”

“You’re... you’re dating Whit? Since when? How did you meet? Why didn’t she tell me?”

“A couple weeks, about. It hasn’t been a traditional relationship progression,” he explained. “And I imagine she didn’t know how to explain that she’s been dating a known member of the mafia. And an ex-con to boot. But figure shit is a lot more gray now,” he added, and his lips pressed lightly to my temple.

“I can’t believe... Liam!” she gasped, and I could hear the fear in her voice. “Is he...”

“Yeah, kid. Your friend is at the diner with some of my friends. He’ll be

glad to hear you're okay. And I will get you back to him. But we've got a major fucking problem here now," he said, and I was yanked suddenly out of the shock that was assaulting my system as I realized what he was saying.

That there was a dead body at our feet.

That I'd killed him.

"Nope. Don't freak out," Salvatore said as I pulled against his hold, feeling my eyes go wide as my mind raced.

"Oh, God. Oh, my *God!*" I yelped.

"Baby, calm the fuck down," Salvatore said, holding his hands up at me again. "It's not that big a deal."

"It's not that big of a deal?" I choked. "I killed someone, Salvatore. That's a very big deal!"

"It was self-defense!" Wren piped in, making my gaze go to her, looking her over top to bottom to reassure myself that she was okay.

She was right.

It had been worse.

But it still broke my heart to see her hurt at all. Especially after her having gotten away and started to find some joy.

"Okay. Listen to me," Salvatore said, reaching for my wrists and pulling me with him until he pressed me down onto one of the kitchen chairs. "Wren, come sit too," he added, pulling up the other chair beside me. "I need you two to keep your asses in these seats, not touching anything, until I make a call or two," he said.

This was Salvatore in mafia-guy mode.

It had no right to be as sexy as it was.

Especially with a dead body just a couple feet away from us.

"I'm gonna need confirmation that you guys understand," Salvatore said.

"We've got it," Wren assured him, being a bit quicker to recover from the shock of it all than I was.

Maybe because she hadn't just killed a man.

"I'm just going out the front door for five minutes, tops, to make a phone call," he said, already moving in that direction, but not before giving me one long, worried look.

"Are you okay?" Wren asked, making me move my gaze from the dead body and toward her pretty, battered face.

"That's my question," I told her.

"Well, I'm borrowing it for a minute," she said, trying to lighten the

mood.

“I’m... I’m going to be okay,” I said, not sure if I was talking to her or trying to reassure myself.

“Can I ask you something?” she asked.

“Yeah, of course.”

“Josh...” she started, then winced. “He said that you... that you took my beating...”

My breath sighed out of me.

“He was telling the truth,” I admitted.

“What? When? What did he do to you? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“He was looking for you. And I don’t know. Ten or twelve days, I think? He broke in and attacked me to try to get me to tell him where you were.”

“I’m so sorry, Whit,” she said, pressing a hand to her heart. “What did he do?”

“It wasn’t that bad. Really,” I said, going to interlock my fingers, but feeling the sticky blood sliding against them, and pulling them apart. “I had some bruises, that’s all. But that was when Salvatore demanded I move in with him for a while.”

“I wish you would have told me,” Wren said.

“You were finally, finally getting some happiness, Wren. I didn’t want to ruin that. But, obviously, I wasn’t doing any of us any favors by not telling you.”

“Liam is never going to want to speak to me again,” Wren said, biting her lower lip.

“That guy fought hard for you, Wren. Believe me, men who aren’t into you don’t do that.”

“Salvatore came to save the both of us,” Wren said.

“Yes, he did,” I agreed, feeling my heart squeeze a little. “I know he’s in the mafia. And I know he’s an ex-con. But he is a really, really good guy.”

“Whit, the look in your eye is all I need to know about him,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m sure I am going to love him.”

“Yeah, if we all don’t go to prison, that is.”

“Baby, no one is going to prison,” Salvatore said, having reappeared, still tucking his phone away.

“Salvatore, I killed someone.”

“Yeah, who hasn’t?” he asked, shooting me a smirk. “Okay. So this is how it is going to go from here on out. I called someone. They’re on their

way. We are going to handle this.”

“Handle it?” I repeated.

“Yeah. Make it go away.”

“It’s a person. It can’t just go away.”

“It’s a body. And bodies go away all the time. Trust me,” he said, giving me a look that seemed to convey *The mafia makes a lot of bodies go away.*

“Unfortunately, this means you two aren’t going to be able to move from those spots until my friend shows up.”

“How long?” I asked, a little preoccupied with the blood on my hands.

“He’s about thirty minutes out,” Salvatore said.

“Okay,” I said, numbly, since there was really nothing else to say.

“Wren. Do you have any injuries you want me to look at in the meantime?” he asked, squinting at her face.

“I’m okay. I’m going to have a wicked headache later, but I’m alright for now.”

“Your ribs are okay? Nothing else like that?”

“They ache a little, but they’re not broken,” Wren assured him.

“What about you, babe?” Salvatore asked, looking at me with an intense gaze.

“I, ah, he never touched me.”

“Good. I just need you to hold it together for about an hour, an hour and a half, okay? Then you can lose your shit for as long as you need to, alright?” he asked.

“I can do that,” I agreed, thinking of all the years of picking my sister up off the floor the night before or living in the dark because there was no money for the electric bill... but going to work regardless, putting on a brave face, getting through the day, then breaking down in private.

We fell into a tense silence for what felt like forever before, suddenly, Wren broke it.

“So, how did you guys meet? Come on,” she said when I shot her a *Really, now?* look. “What else do we have to do but talk?”

I took a deep breath and exhaled hard. “We met when I was shot twice in the street, and Salvatore operated on me.”

“You’re a doctor?” Wren asked, looking at him.

“No, he’s not.”

“I don’t understand.”

“He’s the mafia’s version of a doctor,” I said.

“When did this happen? How could you hide getting shot from me?” Wren asked, then realization seemed to dawn on her. “The brace.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, nodding. “I was hit in the shoulder. The brace helped me not pull my stitches.”

Wren was silent for a moment, trying to get all these crazy things compute in her brain.

“I’m really not comfortable with you being so dishonest with me,” she said, making me stiffen.

Because Wren never said things like that. She never felt comfortable sharing something that someone else might get upset over or offended by.

It said a lot that she felt comfortable opening up like that. This situation hadn’t set her as far back as I was worried it would.

Maybe the reason for that was as obvious as the body on the floor. Josh could never hurt her again. She was free. To be who she wanted. To date who she wanted. To think and feel and say what she wanted.

“I understand that,” I agreed. “I was just... trying to protect you.”

“And by doing that, you make it sound like I’m too weak to handle what is going on.”

“Probably not my fucking business, but there was some truth to that for a while, wasn’t there?” Salvatore piped in, putting Wren on the spot, leaving me torn between my desire to defend my sister and be pleased by his desire to defend me.

“No, that’s fair,” Wren said, nodding. “It’s really only been the past two weeks or so that I’ve started to feel more like my...” she trailed off as the front door slammed hard, making Salvatore reach for his gun as he turned.

But then there he was.

A man dressed all in black with booties on his shoes and gloves on his hands.

“Silvano,” Salvatore greeted him by giving him a nod.

Silvano was younger than Salvatore, likely somewhere between Anthony and Cesare’s age, with appealing olive skin, rugged bone structure, stormy blue eyes, and an extremely tall and very thin body type.

His hair was covered in a knitted cap, but I would bet it was black or very dark brown, judging by his skin tone and brows.

His dark blue gaze moved across the room, taking in the body, the blood, the knife, and me, then looking back at Salvatore.

“Not bad. This will be relatively easy. Get the girl who isn’t bloody out,”

he said, seeming to mean Wren.

“Ah, no. She’s not going anywhere without me,” I objected.

His gaze slid to me, a brow raised.

“You’re asking a favor and giving me shit?” he asked, his rough voice raked over me, making me feel like he’d grated me.

“Hey, easy,” Salvatore snapped. “They’re sisters,” he explained.

“No shit,” he said. “But they’re not fucking conjoined. They can move independently of each other, can they not?”

“It’s fine. Really,” Wren said, slowly getting to her feet, wincing a bit as some bruises twinged her. “Where do I go? Just outside?” she asked.

“My car is near the end of the driveway. Get yourself in and lock the doors. We should be fine, but just for your own peace of mind. Oh, and grab your sister’s purse off the—“

“Already got that,” Silvano interjected. “It’s in my car. You can take it out,” he added. “But before you go, did you go anywhere else in the house? Upper or lower floors?”

“No. Just in his trunk, then dragged through the lower level until we got to the kitchen,” Wren said, tone very matter-of-fact.

I had a feeling she would break down again later, but like me, she was operating in survival mode at the moment.

“Okay. You can go,” Silvano said, dismissing her as he put a giant duffle bag onto the counter and started to unzip it.

“Is he always so pleasant?” I grumbled at Salvatore as my baby sister hobbled her way to the door.

“Hey, you’re the one asking favors of me. Don’t think I need to be Prince fucking Charming about it,” Silvano said, shrugging, as he whipped out bottles of unmarked cleaners, placing them on the island.

“Silvano is part of the Family,” Salvatore explained.

“Step-child of the Family, more like,” Silvano supplied as he pulled out the biggest black garbage bag I’d ever seen.

“You were raised in the fucking Family. Stop being such a dick for five minutes, would you?” Salvatore snapped. “Anyway, Silvano has some specialized skills that come in handy in situations such as this.”

“Iron-clad stomach and a hand mixing fun chemical cleaners,” Silvano explained.

“He’s... he’s going to clean our DNA out of here?” I asked, putting the pieces together.

“That, yeah,” Salvatore said, nodding.

“And make your little murder go away,” Silvano said.

“It was fucking self-defense, could you shut the fuck up if you can’t be halfway fucking decent right now?” Salvatore grumbled, losing patience by the second.

“Was he not murdered? Self-defense or not, there’s a bunch of fucking knife wounds in the bastard’s chest and throat. Or did he run into the knife himself? Five or so times?” Silvano asked, moving around the kitchen, making his way toward me.

“We’re just going to have to fucking endure him for a half an hour,” Salvatore said, voice low, so he didn’t overhear us.

“It’s fine. I just... I just want this part over with, so I can go check on Wren,” I said.

“Sil, can we handle Whitney first?” Salvatore asked, and I could tell it was taking actual effort to keep his tone that casual. “Then we can get out of your hair so you can focus.”

“Yeah, working on it,” Salvatore said, reaching into the sink to yank out the drain catch, and slipping his own one in instead. “Alright. Over here. Scrub the fuck out of your hands. Under your nails too. With this,” he said, dropping a little scrubber into the sink. “Then you’re going to strip out of those clothes and shoes. Right here,” he added, pointing to where I was standing. Then wash again with this,” he said, pushing a small bottle of some ominous-looking murky white liquid toward the sink.

“Right here?” I asked, looking over at Salvatore.

“Don’t worry. You’re not my type,” Silvano said with his back to me, then turning to drop the bloody knife into the sink, making me jerk back.

“Why are you washing that? Shouldn’t you just... get rid of it?”

“And leave the knife block missing a knife? Think that won’t look suspicious as fuck and have the cops sniffing around?” he asked, and I had to agree that made sense, even as my stomach twisted as I watched my bloody hands drip water and soap onto the blade beneath. “Fucking knife blocks. People are out of their fucking minds...”

“Why?” I asked, looking for any way to distract myself, even engaging with the curmudgeonly Silvano Costa.

“Cause of exactly what happened here,” he said, waving around. “Never a good idea to leave weapons out in the open for anyone to use against you.”

“Yeah, you can buy a lot of shit for the future place,” Salvatore said,

drawing my attention away from where Silvano was shaking open the black garbage bag. To, you know, slip the body into. “But no knife blocks.”

“Future place?” I asked, hearing how tight my voice sounded, the hope and shock mingled together.

“Yeah. My place is a little tight. Your place is in a shitty area. Time to move up in the world, I’d say.”

“You... you still want... after all of this trouble?” I asked, looking around.

“Trouble? What trouble?” Salvatore asked, coming up behind me to press a kiss to the top of my head. “This is your average weekday evening in this Family.”

“The sad fucking part is he isn’t joking,” Silvano said, voice straining a bit as he pushed Josh’s body into the bag, leaving his whole lower half out still. Coming back to the counter, he grabbed another black bag out of his kit. “This isn’t even my first body this week,” he added, shaking his head.

“Babe, think tonight only cemented my beliefs that you’re the one,” Salvatore said, reaching to help me slip out of my shirt as I finished my first round of hand washing. “My only concern I had was that some of the shit with this life, with the Family, would freak you out. But I think you proved you can handle just about anything that might come our way,” he added.

It was the wrong freaking time for my body to be reacting the way it was to him undressing me.

But that didn’t stop the desire from blooming through my core even as Silvano started rolling Josh’s black-bag-covered body toward the other side of the room.

“Hey, Salvatore?” I said, turning in his arms, pressing my forehead to his chest.

“Yeah?”

“I know this is a really, really weird time and place to say this, but I love you.”

“Oh, great story for the grandkids, yeah?” Silvano asked as he started squirting some solution that was so strong, my nose burned, all over the floor. “‘Yeah, Gran and Gramp first admitted they loved each other in the kitchen of the police commissioner’s house where Gran just murdered her son.’ Shit for the storybooks,” Silvano kept rambling.

“He’s not wrong,” I said, shaking my head at myself. “I mean, I don’t... I don’t know about you, but I never planned on having...”

“I’d be fucking ancient by the time the kids graduated high school if I had ‘em now. Nah. I’m happy with the kids around. You know, so they go back to their own homes at night and I can get some sleep?” he said, smirking. “You’re more than enough of a future for me,” he added.

“You guys want me to croon some love song now?” Silvano asked. “Or can I fucking focus on work without the running romance-novel monologue?”

“He’s positively charming,” I declared as I turned to scrub my hands and arms once more. “I can’t wait to see what woman knocks him on his ass.”

“Never gonna fucking happen,” Silvano said. “Give her the tee from the bag. That’s all I got for her for now.”

With that, I put on the oversized tee, feeling a little less exposed.

“What now?” Salvatore asked.

“Now you get me that sister’s clothes too. Shouldn’t have let her go out but your woman was so pushy,” Silvano said. “I need all of that. She can wash up back in the city. But you’re gonna need to get your car detailed,” Silvano told Salvatore.

“I can do that. Anything else?”

“Just the peace and fucking quiet of you all leaving, so I can focus,” Silvano said, shrugging.

“Come on, babe. Let’s get the hell out of here,” Salvatore said, wrapping a protective arm around me and pulling me toward the hallway.

“I, ah, thank you, Silvano,” I said, figuring I owed him at least that, even if he was an asshole.

“Yeah, yeah. Repay me by not killing anyone else in the future.”

With that, we made our way outside.

Salvatore found a blanket in his trunk that I held up for Wren, so she could get out of her clothes, then wrap it around herself like a towel.

“Are you okay?” I asked as Salvatore walked the clothes back to the house.

“I... I feel like I shouldn’t be, but I think I am,” Wren said, nodding. “I mean, I know it makes me a terrible person, but I feel like I can breathe now, knowing he can never bother me again.”

“That doesn’t make you a terrible person,” I assured her.

“And you’re not a terrible person either,” she told me, giving me a firm look. “In case you were doubting yourself.”

“Honestly? I wasn’t,” I told her truthfully. “There was no other way to

handle that situation, I don't think. We are just really lucky that Salvatore and Silvano could help us get out of this without getting in trouble. I mean, I think I'd do okay in prison. Lots of reading time," I said, smiling. "But I'd rather be free to, you know, build a future with Salvatore."

"I like him for you," she said, nodding. "He takes charge so you can step back. You've had to be the one in control of everything for so long. It's nice for you to get to be taken care of for a change."

"I like Liam for you too," I said. "You know... whenever you're ready for that."

"Oh, God. Liam. I need to apologize to him."

"Think he wants to apologize to you," Salvatore said as he walked up, pulling open the passenger door and folded up the front seat, so she could climb in the back.

"What? Why? I got him beat up."

"Because he wanted to be the guy who saved the girl, and he couldn't be," Salvatore explained as he pushed the seat back into place and waited for me to slip inside.

"I like that he tried," Wren said as the car started up. "But I kind of like that he's not a big, burly, strong, fighter guy. I like how calm and soft he is." I liked that for her too.

After so many years with someone so angry and hard.

"Oh!" I said a few minutes later, looking over at Salvatore. "Anthony. Is he okay? He wasn't at the diner."

"He got into a hit-and-run," Salvatore explained.

"Oh no," Wren said, worried about a guy she'd never even met, as was her nature.

"Is he okay?"

"Broke his leg, I think. Some bumps and bruises. But mostly just pissed at himself that he wasn't there for you."

"It sounds like I can make it up to him by waiting on him while he heals," I said, smiling. "I have a feeling it is something I am going to be doing for him often."

That poor, unlucky kid.

"Yeah. We need to get a place with a guest room," Salvatore decided, his free hand grabbing my thigh, and giving it a reassuring squeeze. "Someplace for him to crash that isn't in the middle of fucking everything."

"A place with actual dinnerware," I said. "And curtains. Maybe some,

and I know this is a radical concept, carpets,” I said, smiling when his fingers tickled my thigh.

“Anything you want, babe. Anything you want.”

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Salvatore - 4 months

“What is that?” Whitney asked, coming in the door from school with her arms loaded down with papers she would likely spend the night grading with her legs draped over mine as we both absentmindedly watched something on TV.

“What’s what?”

“The thing on the robot vacuum,” she clarified.

Yeah.

We now had a robot vacuum in our apartment.

Because, apparently, I was “worse than a toddler” with how many crumbs I dropped all around.

“Oh, fucking Anthony decided to attach my ankle monitor to it,” I said, smirking as she let out a little laugh.

“Did he finally head out then?” she asked.

“He wouldn’t have stayed so long if you didn’t treat his baby cut like someone sliced his fucking arm off,” I reminded her.

“I think someone got a lock of his hair and is casting spells on him or something,” Whitney joked, shaking her head. “I’ve never met anyone as unlucky as him.”

Shot, stabbed, shot, hit-and-run, then I shit you not, a random bar fight going on around him had him getting his arm all sliced up with a broken beer bottle, even though he wasn’t involved.

“He needs to be bubble-wrapped or something,” she added, coming over to the couch and dropping down at my feet before turning and leaning back until her whole back was against my whole front.

“How’d it go?” I asked, hands rubbing her temples.

“I got a kid to pick up a classic a few days ago. He came back today after class to tell me he really liked it and to recommend another.”

“Another successful convert,” I said, knowing how much she loved it when one of her kids started to read for pleasure, not just because they had to.

“If I can get just one each school year, I am a happy woman. I got a text

from Wren, asking if we wanted to meet her and Liam for dinner. Liam knows a spot," she said.

"He always does," I agreed. "Sounds good. I don't have any plans." I did, actually.

I was planning on bringing her over to the new condo I'd just bought. Then maybe get down on a knee inside of it.

Give her a ring.

The whole shebang.

But there would be time for that.

There was no rush.

"I think he's going to propose to her," Whitney said.

"Yeah? What makes you think that?"

"Because he was roundabout asking about her ring size, saying she saw something in an antique shop she liked and he was going to get it for her for her birthday," she said.

"That's suspicious?" I asked.

"Well, seeing as her birthday was last week, yeah, kinda. Also, Wren told me this was the place they'd had their first meal at. So it just all seems to line up."

I was happy for Wren.

From the sound of things, she'd damn sure earned her own happily ever after.

But, in my opinion, so did Whitney.

I just had to find the right time to offer it to her.

Whitney - Eight months

“So, what do you think about me lining this whole wall with bookcases?” I asked, waving toward one of them in the living room of the new place.

Our new place.

I had to keep correcting myself in my own head when I thought about it.

It was just proving difficult to wrap my head around.

Almost as difficult, in fact, as the ring on my finger.

The same one he’d slipped on the first time he’d shown me the new condo.

Our new condo.

It was significantly larger than anywhere I’d ever lived. Even as a kid living with my parents, our places had always been very modest.

But the Costa Family, well, they didn’t do a whole hell of a lot modestly. And, I guess, when you were bringing in that much money, you didn’t have to worry about things like the seven-figure price-tag of the condo you were about to move into.

Everything about the Costas was everything I’d never really known.

Big.

Loud.

Crazy.

Everything they did, they went all-out with. From decorations for parties to birthday gifts and even just the food that was available at the—many—family gatherings.

Having grown up in such a small family, it had been a bit overwhelming at first. But, eventually, I started to feel like I fit in. So did Wren and Liam, who’d been brought into the fold as well.

They were getting married in the spring.

The Costa women were already hard at work on the arrangements.

I was thinking of a fall or winter wedding, myself.

It was hard to believe my mind was on those things.

Marriage.

Decorating a new home.

When less than a year before, I was killing myself at a job I hated to try to help my sister hide away from the man who was bent on destroying her life.

I tried not to think about Josh much. There wasn’t exactly anything good to harp on there. Not the years that Wren was with him. Not the night in that

house where I'd made sure he would never be a problem again. Not even the months surrounding the news of his disappearance, living with a constant knot in my stomach, worried about someone finding a hair or fingerprint that would implicate one of us.

But, true to his reputation, Silvano was good at his job.

No one ever found anything.

Well, that's not entirely true.

Josh's mother's rival for her office eventually *did* "find" some things about her that *oh-so-conveniently* found its way into his hands.

She never got charged for that murder all those years before, but there had been enough speculation and outrage that she'd been forced to drop out of the race. And, eventually, sell the house, and move across the country where no one had ever heard of her before.

It was like a horrible chapter got closed.

And it was finally time to move forward.

"And the dining table, the *actual* dining table, not the poker table," I said, giving him a smirk. "Can go here. Which leaves room for the pool table over there," I went on, already seeing it all in my head. The colors, the textures, the combination of his things and mine. But spread apart more than in his cramped apartment we'd been sharing for a while already. "Then... who is that?" I asked when there was a knock at the apartment door.

Sure, everyone knew we were planning on moving into the place, but everyone also knew we were decorating first.

"Dunno," Salvatore said, walking toward the door, opening it to reveal Brio. Of all people.

"Heard you two got a new place," he said, oddly standing in the doorway, refusing to come in. "I got a reputation for new home presents. Usually give everyone an animal. Ezmeray said that a plant is a more appropriate gift, though. So, here's this spiky fucker," he said, handing a Mother-In-Law's Tongue plant to Salvatore. "And a puppy," he added, suddenly shoving a ball of fluff at me. "Aight. That's it. Nice place," he said, then turned and walked away.

"What if we didn't want a dog?" I asked as the puppy licked my neck with gusto.

"You know that trope in movies and TV where you go to the restaurant and you don't order because the chef knows better than you do what you should have?" Salvatore asked.

“Yeah...”

“Brio is like that, but with animals,” Salvatore said, putting the plant down, then reaching out to pet the puppy’s head. “He’s got big paws,” he declared, pulling one up to look at it. “Got any name ideas?” he asked.

It didn’t take me long to come up with one.

“Dolin,” I decided.

Sure, I freaking hated working at Dolin’s diner. I despised my boss. I didn’t like losing all of my free time.

But Dolin’s was where Salvatore had first kissed me, first been intimate with me. It was where he’d gone all possessive and protective on me when he’d seen me bruised, where he’d assaulted a rude customer for me.

Sure, that chapter of my book was closed as well, thanks to the fact that money wasn’t an issue anymore with Salvatore as a partner, allowing me just to focus on teaching, since I loved it, then reading and spending time with him after, because I loved those things as well.

I wasn’t entirely sure I truly understood how much weight was on my shoulders until there was someone there to help ease the burden, to take some of the weight on themselves.

I never saw that as possible for me. For a long time, it seemed like the only possible future for me was similar to the past. A lot of stress, of responsibility, of work. And little else.

So much had changed in so short a time.

And all of it because of Salvatore “the Surgeon” Costa.

The last man in the world I’d ever thought I’d settle down with.

Now, the only one I could ever see a future with.

Just the two of us.

And the occasional injured patient in the guest room.

And whatever critters Brio dropped at our door.

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Wolf
Repo
Duke
Renny
Lazarus
Pagan
Cyrus
Edison
Reeve
Sugar
The Fall of V
Adler
Roderick
Virgin
Roan
Camden
West
Colson

Henchmen MC Next Gen

Niro
Malcolm
Fallon
Rowe
Cary
Valen

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Mark

Eli

Charlie & Helen: Back to the Beginning

Investigators

367 Days

14 Weeks

4 Months

Dark

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Dark Secrets

Dark Horse

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The Ghost

The Messenger

The General

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The Client

The Cleaner

The Executioner

Rivers Brothers

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Pull You In

Grassi Family

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Peace, Love, & Macarons
A Navesink Bank Christmas
Don't Come
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N.Y.E.
faire l'amour
Revenge
There Better Be Pie
Ugly Sweater Weather
I Like Being Watched
Primal

Under the pen name JGALA:
The Heir Apparent

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