

BLAKE BLACK



TOUGH  
SOUL

MEMENTO VIVERE DUET  
BOOK TWO

# TOUGH SOUL

Memento Vivere Duet Book Two

Blake Black

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There is content within this book that may set off triggers [click here](#) for details and help.

If you find an error or you would like to discuss something with me, please email:  
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# CONTENTS

[Blurb](#)  
[Glossary](#)  
[Author's Note](#)

[Chapter 1](#)  
[Chapter 2](#)  
[Chapter 3](#)  
[Chapter 4](#)  
[Chapter 5](#)  
[Chapter 6](#)  
[Chapter 7](#)  
[Chapter 8](#)  
[Chapter 9](#)  
[Chapter 10](#)  
[Chapter 11](#)  
[Chapter 12](#)  
[Chapter 13](#)  
[Chapter 14](#)  
[Chapter 15](#)  
[Chapter 16](#)  
[Chapter 17](#)  
[Chapter 18](#)  
[Chapter 19](#)  
[Chapter 20](#)  
[Chapter 21](#)  
[Chapter 22](#)  
[Chapter 23](#)  
[Chapter 24](#)  
[Chapter 25](#)  
[Chapter 26](#)  
[Chapter 27](#)  
[Chapter 28](#)  
[Chapter 29](#)  
[Chapter 30](#)  
[Chapter 31](#)  
[Chapter 32](#)  
[Chapter 33](#)  
[Chapter 34](#)  
[Chapter 35](#)  
[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[The End](#)

[Want more?](#)

[On a more serious note:](#)

[Playlist](#)

[Also By Blake Black](#)

[About the Author](#)

## BLURB

He almost killed me this time.

Almost.

All the struggles have made me tough, but I will come back stronger.

Opening up did not go as planned, and my feelings are all over the place. I finally found someone to rely on, someone who is made for me.

So why can't I stop thinking about his two best friends?  
Despite all the warnings, my search for the truth continues. I need to know what happened the night my parents died, even if it means I might meet the same fate.

With hints of involvement from people I least expect, I will have to fight harder than ever for myself and my family. And if I fail... the consequences could be deadly.

Is my need for justice worth jeopardizing my new life? Or will my path to the truth be the last twist of the knife?

*From Blake Black comes the second book in the  
Memento Vivere Duet.*

*This is a reverse harem, hurt/comfort, slow burn, curvy, abused FMC, found family, sugary sweet, and must be read as a duet.*

*When life gives you curves, flaunt them.*

## GLOSSARY

How to pronounce [Carolina](#) in Italian

How to pronounce [Lina](#) in Italian

How to pronounce [Chiara](#) in Italian

*Mi dispiace moltissimo* – I am so sorry

*Dio* – God

*Piccola* – Little one (girl)

*Grazie tantissimo* – Thank you so much

*Porca miseria* – Holy crap

*Pronto* – Now

*Cazzo!* – Fuck!

*Grazie, Papa* – Thank you, Dad

*Oh Dio. Incredibile* – Oh God, incredible.

*Si* – Yes

*Bastardo* – Bastard

*Ti prego* – I beg you

*Vaffanculo* – Fuck you

*Buonasera* – Good evening

*Carina* – Pretty one

*Idiota* – Idiot

*Cretino* – Jerk

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you so much for coming back for the second part of Carolina's story, it means the world to me.

Please be aware that this book might have some triggering content due to a binge eating disorder. Any inaccuracies depicting this real eating disorder are meant to be under creative license to fit the story and not spread misinformation.

This book might have some triggering content due to abuse, body shaming, and bullying.

For a more detailed list of content warnings, please check my [website](#).

You can find a [Playlist](#) at the end of the book.

# CHAPTER ONE

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## **Joshua**

“What happened?” I ask, shoving Clay aside to move closer to Chiara. Her eyes are red and swollen, her cheeks streaked with smudged mascara and tear tracks. “Chiara!” I shout, needing answers.

I can’t afford to show compassion for her now, not when my girl is in a hospital and Chiara still hasn’t managed to tell me why.

“Easy there,” Clay soothes, turning her toward him. “Where’s she at?” he asks, his tone calmer and more in control than mine.

“I’ll get the truck,” Xander announces, already heading to the driveway.

“Harlem Hospital Center,” Chiara manages to choke out between sobs.

That’s a twenty-minute ride, and I need to be there *now*. My heart is in my throat, and I want to shout for Xander to hurry the fuck up when he rolls up abruptly in the Ford. We scramble toward the truck, the urgency palpable in all of us.

The truck has a spacious front bench seat, and Clay helps Chiara get in while Sophia and I pile into the back. Clay gets in after Chiara, and since she still hasn’t managed to stop crying, he puts an arm around her, pulling her close to soothe her trembling. Meanwhile, Xander raises an eyebrow at him, waiting for directions.

“Harlem,” Clay states.

Xander floors the accelerator, exceeding the speed limit. I shoot him a warning glance and hiss, “Xan!” I want to get there as fast as possible, too, but I also want us to arrive there in one piece.

“Either look away or forget you’re a cop for a sec, Josh,” he snaps back.

I lean forward, my hand on the back of the bench seat, my heart pounding with worry, desperately trying to keep myself in check. “What happened? Please, Chiara, talk to me.”

“She... she fell down the stairs, hit her head,” she murmurs.

I glance at Clay, who’s already staring back at me over her head, disbelief in his eyes. “She *fell*?” he asks slowly and carefully.

Chiara doesn’t reply, and a horrible feeling sinks in my gut.

*What the fuck happened?*

---

When we arrive at the hospital, Chiara leads us to Carolina’s room. But just as she’s about to push open the door, a doctor steps out. She’s probably in her fifties and looks worn out, but her eyes light up when they land on Chiara.

“There you are. You okay, dear?” she asks, her voice laced with genuine concern.

Chiara just nods. She has finally stopped crying, but her eyes well up again with unshed tears, and her gaze drops to her shoes.

I try to move past the doctor, mumbling a quick “Hello,” but she stops me with a firm hand on my chest. “Visiting hours are over. Only family now,” she states, glancing at each of us.

“We’re the cops on her case,” Clay chimes in immediately, getting out his badge to show her, and I shoot him a surprised look.

*What is he thinking?*

“Didn’t realize cops investigated accidents these days,” the doctor’s tone is skeptical while she sizes up Clay.

“Please?” Chiara whispers.

She hesitates a second, but then her face softens. “All right.” She sighs, leading the way as she pushes open the door.

As I enter, my eyes fall upon Carolina, laying in a hospital bed. She lies motionless, her face showing signs of distress, her eyes closed, surrounded only by the hum of medical equipment. Her face is beaten up, but it is unmistakably *my* girl.

The surge of emotion catches in my throat, and I have to take a deep breath to steady myself before I can walk over to her bed.

Taking her hand in my trembling ones, I can't help but notice how her sun-kissed skin looks paler than usual. She seems fragile in the sterile white hospital room. The sight of her battered face fills me with a painful mix of emotions—fear, anguish, and a desperate need to protect her.

My voice quivers as I whisper, "I'm here, my Carolina."

Gently, I press a kiss to her forehead, my lips lingering for a moment as if my love for her can somehow mend what's wrong. I brush her disheveled hair back from her face. Turning to the doctor, I ask, "How is she?"

She eyes me critically. "Do you have more than a professional interest here, Officer?"

Internally, I'm seething. I want to shout at her to just tell me what the fuck is wrong with Carolina. But I bite my tongue, knowing that losing my composure won't help Carolina in the slightest.

"She has a traumatic brain injury which led to cerebral edema. Her brain swelled after the impact, causing a subdural hematoma. She lost consciousness, but we've also given her sedatives to keep her calm, helping the brain heal and reducing the swelling."

*Cerebral edema?*

*Hematoma?*

*Brain swelling?*

I'm trying hard to grasp the medical terms, but my anxiety and panic prevent me from having a clear enough head to truly understand what this means. But one thing's for certain—it sure as fuck isn't good. A sense of helplessness claws at me.

"Is she going to be all right?" Clay asks, moving closer to Carolina's other side, flanked by Xander.

Both their faces are etched with concern, lines of worry deepening around Clay's eyes. Sophia and Chiara stand beside me, their expressions mirroring my worry.

"The swelling should decrease in a few days. Once that happens, she'll likely wake up and feel a lot better," the doctor explains.

"And if it doesn't?" Xander's voice is tense with an edge I haven't heard from him before.

"We'd then consider alternative treatments, possibly surgery. But we're optimistic the swelling will subside in three to four days."

I nod, my heart heavy with the weight of uncertainty, and I gently kiss the back of Carolina's hand. I mumble against her skin, "You're a fighter,

Carolina. You've got this. We're all here for you."

"It might be good for someone to delve deeper into this. We discovered indications of long-term abuse." The doctor looks thoughtful and glances toward Chiara.

*Wait, what?*

I straighten instantly, gripping Carolina's hand tighter. "What are you talking about? What did you find?"

The doctor sounds somber as she explains, "There are several old fractures, none of which were treated properly. They could be from unrelated incidents, but there are just too many to ignore. Multiple ribs show signs of fractures that didn't set right. One appears to be a recent fracture. Her left collarbone seems to have been broken a few months back. Her left shoulder seems to have been injured a few weeks back. And there's a noticeable cut on her temple. But I'm most alarmed by the fresh cuts on her arm."

My head is spinning, and my heart pounds in my chest as her words sink in. I can't believe what I'm hearing. I kissed this beautiful body from head-to-toe last night. *Was I so fucking blind?*

I let go of her hand and stand. My fists clench involuntarily, and a surge of anger rises within me. *How did I not notice any of this?*

I can't believe I missed all those injuries. *How did I not see the signs of pain in her eyes?* I grind my teeth together, the frustration building inside me. She trusted me enough to let me close, closer than anyone before, and I *failed* her.

The mention of fresh cuts on her arm sends a chill down my spine. I look at her, my jaw clenched so tight it aches.

*I should have seen it.*

Should have been more attentive.

But I did see *something*, didn't I? I noticed that something was off. I just did not want to press too hard and make her push me away.

I run my hands down my face, feeling the weight of my inadequacy crushing down on me. I need to do better, *be* better for her. She deserves more than this, more than a boyfriend who is too afraid to lose her by speaking up.

"Fuck!" Xander growls, bringing his hands to his hair and nearly pulling some strands out. "I should have done something. I told her to reach out, but I should have fucking done something."

"What are you talking about?" Clay asks, placing a calming hand on

Xander's chest. "What should you have done?"

"I shouldn't have let her go home yesterday! We have a spare room, for fuck's sake!" Xander shoots a glare at Chiara and points a finger at her. "You're not going back either."

Chiara's voice is barely above a whisper, "He only hurts her. She makes sure of it."

*My selfless, brave Carolina.*

Xander's fingers twitch into a tight fist, yet his touch is gentle when he reaches out to tilt Chiara's face to the side, revealing a bruise on her cheek. "What's this then?"

*Fuck, I hadn't even noticed that.*

She pulls away, avoiding his gaze. "It's nothing."

Sophia steps forward, wrapping a comforting arm around Chiara. "You can stay with me. I have two guest rooms, and maybe you'd feel safer with another woman around."

I'm grappling with the realization that Xander knew it first. Of course, there were signs, but she always had an explanation. She downplayed everything, and I trusted her word.

*I am a fucking idiot.*

I thought her uncle was just an asshole, and she sometimes stood in the line of fire when he did his drunken bullshit. Not that he was abusing her with intention. *How could I have been so blind?* I'm a cop. I've been trained to spot these things. I know the patterns, the behaviors, and the excuses abuse victims often give.

As I reflect on it, instances where she winced when I touched her stand out in my mind. The twitchy movements should have raised a red flag, but I dismissed them, thinking she was maybe sensitive.

The cut on her temple haunts my thoughts. I remember how she brushed it off as if it was nothing. I should have probed further. Demanded an explanation. Clay insisted something was up with that cut, and I explained it away as a hangover from the domestic violence case we'd seen that day.

*Fuck.*

The lump she had on her head flashes before my eyes. She said her uncle hit her while falling, flailing his arms. I should have investigated, asked more questions, and ensured she was safe.

I don't know where to go with all that guilt, so I lash out. "You knew?" My voice cracks, the betrayal evident as I confront Xander.

“I recognized the signs, but yesterday I saw this...” Xander picks up Carolina’s wrist and turns it over to show me her forearm.

The word *PIG* is brutally carved into her soft, beautiful skin. It hits me like a gut punch.

That bandage on her forearm. I grip strands of my hair, pulling on it. Not a burn after all. It was a sign of something darker, something more she was hiding from me. I can’t believe I missed it. It was there all along, and I did not push. I failed her, and the weight of that failure bears down on me like a ton of bricks.

*Could have all of this been avoided if I had done something?*

I can barely breathe.

But it seems I am not the only one who failed her.

“Why the hell didn’t you tell me?” My voice rises, anger bubbling over, mostly directed at myself, but now Xander is the one who will have to grapple with my rage.

“You know how it is,” he shoots back, frustration evident. “If I had told anyone without her permission, she would’ve pushed us all away.”

“She needed help!” My voice echoes in the cold room. Before I can stop myself, I’m shouting even louder. “You should’ve done something, Xander! You should’ve protected her. You should have talked to me!”

“Boys, can we talk about this civilly?” Sophia pleads, her voice quivering with anxiety as she tries to bring us down, her eyes darting from me to Xander.

Xander’s face contorts with anger, and he yells back at me, “I was trying to protect her, not make it worse! Don’t you think I wanted to do something?”

“You should have told us, babe,” Clay speaks up, looking at Xander with a mix of sadness and anger, his eyes holding a glassy sheen.

“She needed to open up on her own terms. I told her I was there, talked to her, wanted to help, but she just walked away,” Xander says, and I hear a pinch of desperation in his voice.

Chiara snuffles beside me, but I can’t think about her right now. My blood is boiling.

I walk over to Xander. He is at least a head taller than me, but I am not thinking straight and get chest-to-chest with him, fists clenched. It feels like the room is vibrating with my anger.

Clay jumps between us, pushing my chest so I step back. “Hey, calm

down. This doesn't help anyone."

"Listen to him, Joshy," Sophia says, putting a soothing hand on my shoulder, but I shrug her off.

"You both should've done more! Especially you, Clay. What an awesome best friend you are," I spit out, my frustration pouring out like a torrent.

Xander shoves me, and I stumble backward. "Don't you dare put this all on him just because you need to lash out. You were there too, Josh. What an amazing boyfriend you are!"

"You're not fair, Josh. I was there too, and the only thing I told her is that we would be there for her," Sophia mumbles from behind me.

"That's why I'm so fucking furious! We *all* failed her, and now look where she is!" My voice cracks, and I have to breathe in deeply to keep myself from tearing up.

"You guys done?" the doctor asks sternly from the doorway, lifting an eyebrow at us.

*When did she even leave the room?*

"Keep it down. This is still a hospital. I'll give you some privacy, but keep your voices low and mind your language," she warns, exiting the room again.

"Fuck," Xander grunts, letting his head fall back and his gaze go to the ceiling. "I told her I wanted to help her, but I should have just acted."

He looks as though he has deflated, and all the anger drains out of me, too, leaving only despair and guilt in its wake.

Sophia interjects, "Enough with the what-ifs. We have an opportunity to help now. Both of them are coming with us, and we put an end to this nightmare."

Chiara wraps her arms around herself, her face etched with worry. "He won't just let us leave."

"Why? Does he even care if you're around?" Xander asks, his brows pinched in confusion and frustration.

"It's not about that," Chiara answers, her voice trembling. "Carolina pays for everything. Food, rent, everything." We look at each other in surprise.

"No wonder she's working all the time and never gets to sleep," I mutter.

"If we made sure that everything's still paid, would he even notice if you both left?" Clay asks, and she shrugs. "We go grocery shopping, then grab your stuff. Rent should be paid for the next few weeks now, and when the time comes, we can cover that too."

“He gets money from her every morning after her shift to drink at the bar,” Chiara shares, her voice shaky and unsure.

“Then we leave him that too.” I shrug.

“You’re seriously considering giving that monster money to get drunk?” Sophia’s voice drips with disbelief.

“I *need* her out of there. I don’t care what I have to do to get it done,” I grumble, dragging myself over to sit beside Carolina and taking her hand in both of mine again.

Sophia turns to Chiara, her expression softening. “Why didn’t you two just leave him to his own devices?”

Eyes brimming with tears, her voice quivering with guilt, Chiara admits, “Lina tried, but she couldn’t gain custody of me. This is my fault. I stole money from him because I wanted to buy a Christmas gift for Leo. Lina said she couldn’t afford it. He slapped me for it, and she got in between. He pushed her down those stairs because of *me*.” Tears spill over, and she breaks down.

Sophia wraps Chiara in a hug. “It’s going to be okay. You know your sister is tough. And we’ll make sure this won’t happen again. We’ve got you... both of you.”

I look at the guys, who are both clenching their jaws. I swear this little brat should be lucky that I love her sister because I would gladly give her an earful for that stupid behavior.

Sophia pulls away from the hug, stroking Chiara’s hair. “We should head out. It’s late, and we can sort out everything tomorrow. For tonight, you can borrow whatever you need from me.”

“Why would you do that? You don’t even know me. And you hardly know her,” Chiara steps back from Sophia, frowning at her.

Seems like my girl is not the only one with trust issues. *What those two must have been through.*

Sophia offers Chiara a warm smile and explains, “It’s not about knowing you, Chiara. It’s about family. Carolina is family now, and that makes you family too. We look out for each other, no matter what. Family doesn’t turn their back when someone needs help.” She then turns to the rest of us, her tone serious. “Let’s leave for now. She won’t wake today, and we need to get things sorted so everything’s ready for her when she does.”

I rise from Carolina’s bedside but can’t resist the urge to bend down once more. Gently, I press a soft kiss to her forehead, feeling the warmth of her

skin beneath my lips. “Come back to me, my Carolina,” I whisper. “I won’t let anyone ever hurt you again.”

The vow is a promise I make not only to her but to myself.

## CHAPTER TWO

---



### **Joshua**

We spend the rest of the evening drinking tea on Sophia's side of the house, where Chiara tells us everything. How Carolina worked three jobs for years to afford a lawyer, only to lose the case. How she's been beaten, abused, and bullied by their uncle. How Carolina always ensured Chiara was taken care of while she struggled so much.

My thoughts are consumed by Carolina. *How could I not have noticed or acted sooner?* My mind spirals, and all I can think is that I really hope she will be okay, or I will get locked away for murdering her uncle.

I am not even kidding.

I just got her—everything I ever wanted. *And I will let absolutely no one take her away from me again.*

My girl is fierce—a true warrior—but I don't want her to have to be one. I want her to be safe and happy. I never want her to experience this pain ever again.

It's clear now why Carolina didn't talk about the abuse or why she didn't stand up for herself or leave—Chiara would most likely have ended up in foster care.

Sophia and I spent hours late into the night researching the possibilities while Chiara slept on the couch. After a while, Clay carried her to Sophia's guest room.

There's no quick solution for Carolina to gain custody. We could hire a better lawyer for her, but until she finishes college, it seems impossible. If

she reported the years of abuse, it would make it even more likely Chiara would end up in foster care than with Carolina.

*The system is fucking useless.*

When there is nothing left to research, we gather on the small couches in Sophia's living room. The weight of the situation hangs heavily in the air, and a somber silence settles among us. Clay finally breaks it, his voice hoarse from remaining silent for so long.

"Five years. He had her for five years and would have her for two more." He sighs.

"He won't," I reply firmly. "This ends now."

"He's never seeing them again. We'll make sure of it," Sophia says with a sniffle as she absently tears a tissue into pieces.

Clay continues, his voice shaky as he stares at his hands, "All her ribs were broken at least once. Remember when I broke a rib as a teenager? When I fell from that tree?" Xander huffs. "It was just one rib, and it hurt like hell for weeks. I couldn't even take a deep breath. And she's had all of hers broken."

A shiver runs down my spine as the full extent of Carolina's suffering sinks in. "Her collarbone too."

"He must've kicked her to break her ribs. There's no way he could've done it with his fists," Xander says softly, his voice filled with anger and sorrow.

Sophia rises from her seat and stands next to the couch, clutching the edge of it tightly, her knuckles turning white as tears stream down her face. "I can't believe what she's been through," she whispers, her voice quivering with grief and anger. "No one should ever endure such cruelty." A sob breaks out of her before she turns and heads to the kitchen.

I think about going after her, but I know she needs a minute to collect her thoughts. This isn't easy for any of us.

"The cuts..." I start, but I can't continue, tears filling my eyes.

"I'd love to carve something into his skin, see how he fucking likes it," Xander grumbles angrily, his fury boiling over.

"Fuck it, I'd hold him down for you," Clay states firmly.

I look up, surprised. Clay is usually against violence, but it seems this man had better not cross our path.

"He's never seeing her again," I echo Sophia's statement.

"Agreed," Clay responds, and Xander nods.

---

I didn't sleep a wink last night.

The weight of guilt and frustration kept me tossing and turning, haunted by the images of Carolina laying in that hospital bed. Those haunting thoughts clung to me even during my shift at work, making every minute feel like an eternity.

It's past six in the evening, and we've all agreed to meet in the hospital after Xander and Sophia's workdays are over to get an update from the doctor and see Carolina. Xander should be bringing Sophia and Chiara in a few minutes.

I look over at Clay, and I can tell he's also struggled with the same sleepless night and restless thoughts. His usual styled hair is ruffled and dark circles are forming around his eyes. We haven't really talked all day. We've just been driving around, hoping for a case to keep our minds occupied and divert our attention until we could finally head here.

*To her.*

She's still asleep, but the doctor informs Clay and me that everything looks good and the swelling is slowly subsiding.

The fact that everything seems to be healing is like a balm to my frayed nerves. I'm grateful that she's on the path to recovery and safe.

Yet, anxiety still gnaws at me like an unrelenting itch beneath that relief. I can't help but worry about what lies ahead and how this will ultimately affect our lives. The uncertainty of it all lingers, and I know that despite the positive news, we're far from out of the woods.

I'm so exhausted and in desperate need of coffee. So, I leave Clay with her for a moment to fetch cups for both of us.

Balancing the two coffees, I navigate the cold, sterile hospital hallway. My footsteps echo softly against the linoleum floor and through air that smells faintly of disinfectant.

I finally reach Carolina's door and turn, using my elbow to press down the handle and my shoulder to nudge the door open. Once inside, I see Clay standing beside Carolina's bed, bent over her, his thumb gently stroking her cheek.

Despite my entrance, his eyes, filled with concern and affection, never leave her face.

"I know you are his, but a third of your heart is mine, just as half of mine

is yours. We both know that's true," he murmurs, his voice barely above a whisper. He presses a kiss to her temple. "I am here. Whether you want me to be or not, I am here. I'll always be, just like I'll always come for you. I promised, remember?"

I place the cups of coffee on a side table, and Clay's gaze finally shifts toward me, his eyes widening in surprise.

"What did you just say?" I press, my hackles rising. The room is suddenly charged with tension.

"Josh, I..." Clay starts, standing up straighter, his expression torn.

"Did you just confess your love for *my* girlfriend?" I demand, my brow furrowing, a wave of nausea washing over me at the mere thought.

*This is a joke, right?*

It has to be. This can't be real. I feel sick and betrayed, and my heart aches with a strange mix of anger and hurt.

"Josh, just hear me out..." he starts, stepping closer, his voice pleading.

"Fuck no! What kind of lousy best friend does that?" I accuse, my voice rising as I get into his personal space. Just as I am about to shove him, the door swings open, and Xander, Sophia, and Chiara enter the room.

"What's going on here?" Xander asks, his gaze darting between Clay and me, uncertainty playing across his face, his brows furrowed.

"Well, what's happening is that your *boyfriend* just declared his love to my unconscious girlfriend," I accuse, the words tumbling out of my mouth, my fists clenching involuntarily at my sides.

"What?" Sophia asks, sounding taken aback, but my gaze doesn't leave Xander.

His eyes snap back to Clay, surprise evident on his face. He seems at a loss for words.

"You didn't know either?" I ask, my tone filled with incredulity.

Xander's gaze flickers down to Carolina and back to Clay again, his eyes now reflecting a deep sense of hurt. He hesitates for a second before wordlessly turning and leaving the room, accompanied by Chiara's gasp.

"Babe," Clay yells, his desperation evident, and he instinctively moves to chase after Xander, but I grab his arm to hold him back, my grip firm.

"Are you fucking serious right now?" I seethe, my voice trembling, just like my hand. "She is *my* girlfriend. She's everything I've ever wanted. I thought you were my best friend. But no, you can't let me have one good thing. You and Xander have each other. You always have. All my life, I've

wanted someone like her. Yet here you are, trying to wedge in? For what? Your little arrangement? A bit of fun?”

“Turn it down, Josh. We’re in a hospital,” Sophia hisses out.

“Josh, I know how this looks, but it’s not like that. It’s more than that. I love her,” Clay pleads with me, eyes desperate.

I huff, shake my head, and look at the ceiling.

His shoulders sag, and the guilt is written all over his face.

*The audacity!*

“And I love you too, man. You’re my best friend. I would never do anything to hurt you. We’re family. You’re like a brother to me.”

The bitterness in my voice cuts through the tension like a knife as I lock eyes with him again. “Oh, what a great brother you are, trying to steal my girl.”

“I wouldn’t dream of taking her from you,” Clay defends, but I know what I heard. “She could have us all, we could share—”

“Out!” I erupt, my voice echoing through the room, making Sophia flinch and pull Chiara to her side. I release my grip on Clay’s arm and thrust a finger toward the door. “Get out now, or I can’t promise I won’t punch you in your pretty face, Clay.” I’m seething.

His eyes dart to Sophia, who’s holding Chiara in a side hug. Her expression is one of disappointment as she tells him sternly, “I’ve got this. Go.”

He nods but hesitates. “Josh, please, let’s just talk about this later. I promise I would never...”

I can’t bear to listen to his pleas. Instead, I walk over to the bed and gently stroke Carolina’s hair, trying to regain my composure and taking deep breaths.

“I think it’d be best if you leave now,” Sophia snaps, tone icy, and the next sound I hear is the door closing behind him, leaving behind an unsettling silence.

“Wow, I always thought Lina was a prude, but look at this now,” Chiara comments casually, her words like salt in an open wound. My frustration boils over, and I whirl around to face her, my anger now directed at her.

“Are you fucking kidding me? Your sister, who’s been working three jobs for years to support you and bends backward for you, is lying hurt in a hospital bed because of you. And all you can say is something that dumb?”

“Joshy, she’s just a teenager,” Sophia interjects, her voice softening as

she tries to mediate.

“Yeah, I get that,” I reply, my tone still tense. “But is it so damn difficult to appreciate what Carolina does for her?” My gaze shifts to Chiara. “You have no idea how amazing she is.”

She crosses her arms over her chest. “Oh, and you think you do? You don’t even know her.”

I gaze down at Carolina. At her still, beautiful face. My eyes follow the gentle rise and fall of her chest, and I try to synchronize my breaths with hers, a soothing rhythm to help me calm down.

“Yeah, you’re right. I don’t. But still, here I am, appreciating the fuck out of her. It’s not that hard.” I meet Chiara’s eyes again, noticing them welling up before she walks to the other side of Carolina’s bed and takes her hand.

She lifts it to her lips, kissing the back of it. “I’m sorry, Lina. *Mi dispiace moltissimo*, <I am so sorry,>” she whispers, bursting into tears.

Sophia crosses the room to wrap her arms around her from behind. “Shh, it’s going to be okay.”

I look back down to Carolina, hoping like hell my sister is right, and everything will eventually be okay for the woman I love.

## CHAPTER THREE

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### Clay

*I fucked up.*

I fucked up so fucking badly, I can't even think straight as I run out of the hospital, hoping like hell I can still catch Xander before he drives away from me. Thankfully, I find him sitting in his truck, just staring out the window.

I get in on the passenger side, and he doesn't even turn to look at me when he huffs. "Took you long enough," he accuses sharply.

"Josh had to decide if he needed to punch me or not before I could follow," I joke, though it seemed like Josh was on the verge of doing just that.

But Xander doesn't laugh. His expression makes me think he wouldn't have stopped Josh if he decided the punch was necessary after all. The silence is a heavy weight in the confined space of the truck, pressing down on my chest, and I struggle to swallow with how parched my throat has become.

I reach over to take his hand, but he pulls it in his lap. *Fuck*, he is never evasive. When we fight, we yell it all out and make up afterward. But right now, he doesn't look furious. He looks *hurt*. Hurt like I haven't seen him since we were kids.

"Babe, I swear I—"

"Aren't we enough?" Xander interrupts, his voice filled with vulnerability as he finally meets my eyes.

"We are! Of course we are," I assure him, scooting even closer. This time, he allows me to take his hand in mine. "But we could be more than

enough. We could have everything... with *her*.”

His searching gaze holds mine, and he hesitates before speaking softly but sternly. “I am not going to risk this family and Josh’s friendship if you’re not a thousand percent sure that this is what you want.”

I sigh, frustration and longing swirling within me. “I am sure. I’ve never been more sure about anything in my life besides my love for *you*. Can’t you see it? She’s not just anyone. She’s a part of us. I can’t ignore what I feel for her.”

His eyes well up with hurt and confusion. “And what about what I feel, Clay?”

I bite my lip, my heart sinking more. *He never calls me by my first name.* “I know you care about her too, babe. This isn’t just about me.”

Xander nods slowly, his grip on my hand tightening. “You’re right. I care about her a lot. But I care about us too. I can’t bear the thought of losing you because of this.”

I reach out to wipe away a tear that has escaped from the corner of his eye. The guilt gnaws at my insides. I never wanted to cause him pain, but my heart aches because I can’t simply turn off the feelings I have for Carolina.

I lean in, my forehead touching his, and whisper softly, “But if you wouldn’t lose me over this, would it be what you want?”

I know the answer already. I’ve seen the way he looks at her and the sketches he’s hidden away, filled with longing. I would have never considered this or let myself fall so hard if I didn’t know that he was in deep too.

*He is my fucking life.*

Xander huffs, his shoulders relaxing a little as his gaze drops to our hands in his lap. “You can’t promise that.”

I gently lift his chin with my free hand, ensuring our gazes meet. A tender smile graces my lips, and I whisper softly, “My sixteen-year-old self told you the same thing my twenty-six-year-old self tells you now and what my sixty-year-old self will tell you. You will always be my forever.”

His gaze flicks between my eyes, and his breath catches. “I am so fucking scared, love,” he admits, his voice trembling with vulnerability.

I run my fingers gently along his neck, trying to ease more of his tension. “Why?” I press, wanting him to share his fears with me. “Why would you be scared, babe?”

“What if...” he starts, taking a deep breath, his beautiful gray eyes

coming back up to mine. “What if I lose you because she can shine back at you, and I can’t.”

I huff a laugh, *my little drama queen*. My hand stops massaging his neck and pulls him to me, fusing our lips while my fingers slide into his hair. We kiss like it’s the last time, trying to convey our love through that single connection until I pull back, resting my forehead on his again.

“That’s a fucking silly question. You’ll never lose me. You are my soulmate, the love of my life. There is no me without you.” The questions in his eyes are still evident when I lean back a bit. I tenderly push some of his hair away from his face, allowing my thumb to find his cheek and gently stroke it. “But she is my twin flame, and now that I found her, I can’t let her go again.”

“I can’t either,” he admits, furrowing his brows with worry. “But I am scared out of my mind. She’s with Josh.” I feel a twinge in my gut. “And she is in a bad place in her life. I know you only see that you could swoop in and help her, make her whole again. I worry that I will be the anchor that finally sinks her.”

I squeeze his hand reassuringly before I tease, “I can be the floaty that keeps us all above water.”

He chuckles softly. “You’re a fucking idiot.”

“And you get way too poetic when you’re sad,” I tease some more, letting my thumb stroke his bottom lip.

“Okay, I want this. Bad. When you want it, too, and she wants us both—” he starts, but I cut in.

“She does.” *I am sure of it.*

She looks at me, at us, the same way we look at her, with longing in her eyes.

“Then there’s just Josh. We want him in this, right? We are not going to break them up, right?” He looks at me sternly, searching for assurance, but it’s clear he will whoop my ass if I give him the wrong answer.

“I would never. They need each other and are good for each other. I just want to be included.” He raises an eyebrow at me. “Not in their relationship. No, na-ah, I don’t love Joshy that way.” I scrunch my nose and purse my lips, eliciting a soft laugh from him.

“So, what’s the plan, love? How do we make this work?” Xander asks, tilting his head.

I shift uncomfortably on the bench seat, uncertainty gripping me. “Well, I

wanted to talk to you first, and then we would have discussed it with Josh, but then she got admitted to the hospital, and I fucked things up, so that plan is out the window,” I admit, rubbing my neck.

Xander’s expression softens as he places a reassuring hand on my thigh, squeezing it. “You have to fix things with Josh before we start discussing what this could be with Carolina anyway.”

Just then, Josh, Chiara, and Sophia emerge from the hospital. Sophia looks like she wants to say something to Josh, but he walks past her, heading straight for our police cruiser without so much as a goodbye. His brows are furrowed, and his fists are clenched at his sides, a visible storm of emotions raging within him.

I let out a sigh, watching Josh’s retreating figure. “Piece of cake,” I mutter, my voice heavy with sarcasm.

“Let’s hope this will not break our family,” Xander whispers quietly, stroking my thigh.

“Well, the rest of the shift is going to suck balls. We still have a few hours left,” I mutter.

“Look at it as karma and take it like a good boy,” Xander teases, a smile tugging his lips as I look back at him. Seeing him smile lifts the weight off my chest.

“Oh, I am going to take it like a good boy, but later, when we’re alone,” I whisper seductively, leaning in to kiss him once more. With a sense of relief, knowing that at least *we* are good again, I slide out of the truck.

When I walk past the girls on my way to the police cruiser, Sophia gives me a death look as they head over to Xander’s truck to drive home. Josh doesn’t even glance my way as he climbs into the driver’s seat and starts the engine. I have to hurry to the passenger side before he speeds off without me.

“Should I drive? I don’t want us crashing because you’re mad at me,” I attempt to lighten the mood, but he gives no response. “Josh,” I begin, my voice soft.

“Don’t,” he snaps, never taking his eyes off the road, but I notice his knuckles turning white on the steering wheel. “I don’t want to hear it, and I don’t want to hear you. We’re professionals. Let’s keep it about the job. Say one more unnecessary word, and I can’t predict what I’ll do.”

My heart sinks, and I nod as I settle back into my seat. I’ve never seen Josh like this. I’ve truly fucked up. I wanted to discuss my feelings with him and discuss the options. But for him to find out the way he did? I understand

why he'd feel betrayed. I get that he needs time to cool off. Maybe we can talk it out when some time has passed.

With that in mind, I do my best to keep out of his way and remain as quiet as possible for the rest of the evening.

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Once the shift of hell ends and we're home, we head upstairs to our rooms. Josh enters his with a heavy step, and I watch as he stands at his dresser and begins stuffing clothes into a laundry basket. Frozen in place, I watch him walk into his en suite bathroom and return with toiletries, throwing them on top of the clothes. Then he lifts the basket and heads for his door.

He either doesn't see me or is choosing to ignore me. "What are you doing?" I ask, finally breaking the silence between us.

"None of your damn business," he barks out, moving around me and making his way downstairs.

I follow him, determined to clear the air. He struggles to open the front door, and I take the opportunity to place a hand on his shoulder. He instantly jerks away from me.

"Josh, this is your house. You don't need to leave," I plead, tears filling my eyes. "Let's talk about this, please. I swear I haven't done anything yet, and I wanted to talk to you about—" I start, but he interrupts with a scoff.

"Oh, you haven't done anything *yet*? I should be grateful you managed to keep your dick in your pants, right?" His expression hardens.

"What? No, that's not... fuck." I exhale, overwhelmed and frustrated, letting my head fall in my hands.

*I'm terrible at handling shit like this.*

"I'm requesting a new partner tomorrow," he states, and I feel the air knocked out of me.

"Joshy," I whisper, tears streaming down my face.

"Don't call me that," he snaps back. "You two can start looking for another place. I'll stay with Sophia until you've moved. I can still work with you professionally until they figure out our new partners. But keep it job-related, or I'll file a complaint that I won't work with you a second longer."

I bite my tongue and nod, realizing there's nothing more I can say to make this right. I drop my gaze. The last thing I hear is the front door

shutting behind him.

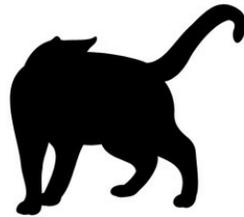
“Come here,” Xander beckons from the top of the stairs, extending his hand to me when I turn to him. I trudge up the stairs and let him draw me into a tight hug. “It’s going to be okay,” he murmurs against my hair.

“I always ruin everything,” I cry out, my voice breaking into a sob as I clutch the back of his shirt.

He gently kisses my forehead and pulls back slightly to meet my gaze. “Do you really think Carolina would let him cut you out of his life over this?” He wipes away a tear from my cheek with his thumb. “She’s going to kick his ass, and he’ll come around. You know it. Come on, let’s go to bed so I can hold you,” he soothes, guiding me toward our bedroom.

## CHAPTER FOUR

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### **Joshua**

The lack of sleep for the second night is taking a toll on me. The constant stress, worry, and emotional turmoil have left me feeling mentally and physically sick. My body aches all over, and a gnawing nausea churns in the pit of my stomach, making it impossible to eat.

I head to the hospital as soon as visiting hours begin so I can spend time by her side. I just need to be back home in time to help Chiara before my shift starts this afternoon. Sophia asked Xander if we could borrow his truck to help her move her things.

The doctor said the swelling is receding, but it's taking longer than they initially expected, which only heightens my anxiety. I can't bear to think of complications or the possibility of her not waking up. Yet, the doctor told me to keep faith and be patient.

"I've waited for you my whole life. I can wait a few more days," I whisper to Carolina, leaning in to kiss her temple. "But don't make me wait too long, my Carolina. I have so much planned for us."

I gently squeeze her hand before leaving the hospital and taking the subway home.

The ride is rough but necessary. Whenever I have needed to drive anywhere during my off-duty hours, I have always asked Xander or Clay for a ride or borrowed Xander's truck, but with things as they currently are, that wasn't an option today.

*I was so happy just days ago. What the fuck happened?*

Sure, I take the blame for not noticing anything earlier and doing something for Carolina, but Clay? We've been best friends since kindergarten and roommates since we were eighteen. We completed police training together and kept each other motivated even when everything sucked. I was there for him when his mother died, and he was there for me when my parents just up and left. I can't think of a time when he wasn't by my side, whether it was good or bad. And he just threw all that out the window because...

... because of *her*.

I sigh. At least that part I can understand. She is worth a lot of trouble. I love Clay like a brother, but when it comes down to it, which it does now, I would always choose her. I just wish I didn't need to. But I can't just forgive him for something like that, right? I mean, what would that mean? Living with them and knowing that my best friend has a major crush on my girl? Never knowing if he is trying stuff behind my back? How do I know if he hasn't already?

It's all so complicated, and I can't help but wonder what the fuck I should do.

The subway car rumbles on, and I close my eyes for a moment, using the time it takes to get home to try and find some semblance of peace amid the chaos that has become my life.

As I walk up to our house, I see the Ford parked outside, ready to collect Chiara's and Carolina's things. Xander is in the driver's seat with Chiara next to him.

I open the driver's door, my frustration at him is evident as I snap, "Thanks, I can take it from here."

"Get in. I'm coming," Xander grunts out, and I mentally prepare myself for another fight.

"Xander—" I begin, but he cuts me off with a stern look.

"This guy is dangerous. I need to make sure Chiara is safe. You can either come with me or wait here."

"Fine," I relent, albeit reluctantly, moving to the passenger side and signaling for Chiara to slide over on the bench seat.

The drive is silent, the air thick with tension.

"He's probably home, but he's usually asleep in the mornings," Chiara informs us when Xander parks the truck in front of the apartment building.

We exit the truck, and Xander collects three laundry baskets from the

back. I recognize the one I collected my things in to move to Sophia's yesterday, and my heart sinks. I wonder how Xander feels, considering his shocked and hurt expression when I told him that Clay unintentionally shared his feelings for Carolina. But now isn't the time to discuss Clay.

We head to the apartment, and my unease grows as we enter. The place looks so worn out. It's crazy that they still live here. It is clean, though. Someone—probably my girl—tried to make it feel homey, but there's only so much one can do.

We tread lightly, following Chiara into a room. It's small, with just one bed in the middle, and I look at Xander, who grimaces.

Chiara goes to the only chest of drawers and begins piling clothes in her basket. Once the bottom three drawers are empty, she moves to the bedside table. She adds shoes, jackets, and school items to her pile.

"Where's Carolina's stuff?" I whisper.

She points to the top drawer. I pull it open and look inside and am immediately puzzled. "Where's the rest?"

"She has some makeup in the bathroom, and here's her laptop and college stuff, but that's about it," she whispers, continuing to load her basket.

I remove a hoodie, two Henleys, two black T-shirts, and a pair of black jeans from the drawer. Then, I take out a few socks, panties, and a bra—all in black. A pair of black leggings and a scarf follow. That's all that was in the drawer. It doesn't even fill a third of the basket.

This just isn't right. Carolina deserves so much more. All the beautiful things. Not just a few basic items that look nearly worn out. There isn't even a set of pajamas. Or fuzzy socks.

*Girls love fuzzy socks, right?*

"Let me get that," Xander offers, and his frown deepens as he takes the college stuff Chiara points out and puts it on top of the clothes in my basket.

"Okay, that's everything here. Bathroom next," Chiara declares, and we follow her but stop in the bathroom doorway. It's so small that there's no way all of us can fit inside.

Chiara hands the full basket to Xander and takes his empty one to fill with her toiletries. She has a few shampoo bottles and some makeup, which she handles more carefully than she does her clothes.

Then she hands me a shampoo bottle and maybe three makeup items. I look at the shampoo and note that it is apple-scented.

"That's all?" I ask, comparing her modest collection to Carolina's meager

four items.

Chiara nods. "She's not really into makeup."

While scrunching my nose, I frown at her. I bet that's not true. I remember the pretty dark lip shade she wore a few times, the tube of which I am holding right now, and think how I wish I could kiss those full lips again. To clear my head, I give it a quick shake. Not the time or place.

*Fuck, I miss her.*

"Let's take this to the truck and bring up the groceries," Xander grunts out.

"You already got some?" I ask.

"Couldn't sleep." He shrugs.

*Good to know that I am not the only one.*

We do as he suggested and stow the groceries in the refrigerator and cupboards. I place a hundred dollars on the kitchen counter, and Chiara gives me a startled look.

"What? I don't plan on coming here every day to give him money," I hiss out.

"With that much money, he'll drink himself to death," she whispers.

"Who would even care?" I shrug, surprised by my coldness.

"I would since it'd land me in foster care," Chiara snaps back, crossing her arms over her chest.

I hesitate, taking a deep breath. "All right," I concede, taking back the money and leaving twenty on the counter instead. "Better?"

"Thank you." She nods, a flicker of relief flashing in her eyes.

We leave the apartment, and I instantly feel some of my unease lifting. I vow that Carolina won't spend any more time here than she absolutely has to.

After we are safely back in the truck, all sitting on the bench seat in the front again with the baskets on the back seats, Xander starts the engine to drive back home. Chiara takes Carolina's laptop from the basket behind her and puts it on her lap.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Carolina said she'd buy me a new laptop for Christmas, but I don't think that's happening now. So, I'm just going to use hers until she can get me one," she explains nonchalantly.

The truck comes to a screeching halt, and I quickly put my arm out to keep Chiara from being thrown forward.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Xander snaps, glaring at her from the

driver's seat, his grip tight on the steering wheel. "Do you even listen to what comes out of your mouth? How the hell you turned out to be such a spoiled brat living like that is a mystery to me."

I let out a sarcastic laugh. "Yeah, Carolina gave up everything so she could have all she wanted."

I already guessed as much, but what we just saw confirms it.

Chiara rolls her eyes, her face flushed with a mixture of embarrassment and defiance. "It's not like I asked her to do that for me. She chose to."

I lean forward, locking my gaze on hers. In a calm but firm voice, I tell her, "Chiara, it's not about what Carolina chose to do. It's about recognizing the sacrifices she made for you and being thankful for them. Using her laptop without her permission and expecting her to buy you a new one is fucking ungrateful."

Chiara crosses her arms, her gaze fixed on the window. "I don't understand why you're making such a big deal out of this. It's just a laptop."

Xander takes a deep breath, obviously trying to control his temper. I can see his jaw clenching. "It's not about the laptop, Chiara. It's about the principle. Carolina has given up so much for you, and instead of seeing that and being thankful, you act entitled. She went through years of abuse to protect you and was even willing to stay in this fucked-up situation to make sure you're okay, and you can't even bring yourself to treat her with respect?"

I add, "We're not saying you can't have nice things or that you shouldn't want them, but you need to understand the value of what you have and the sacrifices made for you to have them."

Chiara remains silent for a moment, her gaze distant. "I just... I just wanted to fit in with my friends. They all have the newest stuff, and I feel left out." I watch her cheeks turn a little pink, and she gnaws on her bottom lip.

Xander's expression softens a bit. "We get that, but there are other ways to fit in without taking advantage of your sister's kindness. And maybe it's time to think about what kind of friends you have if they only value you for the things you own."

Chiara looks down, tears forming in her eyes. "Fine."

Xander takes the laptop and puts it back in the basket. He nods to himself and starts the truck again, the atmosphere heavy between us when he speaks again, "It's never too late to change, Chiara. Just remember the love and sacrifices that have been made *for you*. It's time to give back, even in small

ways.”

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## Clay

Cold water streams over my body, washing away the sweat and tension and cooling me down.

I completely overdid it. Pushed myself to the brink, but fuck, I didn't care. I needed an outlet for all these overwhelming feelings. Since drinking was out of the question, given my upcoming shift, jumping rope was the only distraction I could think of. I'd done it for hours, more intensely than ever, trying to silence my chaotic thoughts, but it didn't help.

I have never felt so lost and torn. One of my best friends, the only true friend I've had since kindergarten, now hates me with a passion. And my other best friend, the one I've fallen in love with, is lying injured and unconscious in the hospital.

I wonder what she would think about this entire fuck-up. I let out a wry chuckle, imagining her reaction. She'd probably give us that signature unimpressed look before calling us both fucking idiots.

Stepping out of the shower, I reach for a towel. “Come on, kitten, wake up. I need you to come for me this time,” I murmur to myself.

I'm desperate to be by her side, to hold her hand and tell her this to her face. But Xander told me not to do it, knowing that Josh was going to visit her this morning. The last thing I want is to further complicate things by running into him there. Instead, I plan to visit her tonight. Hopefully, I'll be able to get into her room without being caught by her doctor.

I dry off, and the dark circles under my eyes stare back at me from the mirror. They look like they are here to stay. “Deserved,” I whisper to myself in the reflection.

The weight of my guilt feels suffocating. I'll never forgive myself if my carelessness has ruined our family.

I spend a few more moments cursing myself out, and then I get ready for another shift from hell with my former best friend.

After a few hours of driving around in silence, I park the police car just outside the bar where Carolina works, and I feel Josh's eyes on me. He hasn't said a word to me. Instead, he napped in the passenger seat, and I let him.

I guess he got as little sleep as I did, and he deserves a break.

I unbuckle my seat belt and step out of the car. The sound of his car door slamming makes me jump in surprise.

*Okay then, sure, why not? Come along.*

I enter the dimly lit bar and spot Carolina's blonde coworker behind the counter, struggling with the cash register. A guy with a beer belly, whom I've seen here before, stands next to her, berating her. I believe he's the owner, so I approach him.

He looks up, eyes wide, as I stand in front of him across the bar.

"Officer," he greets. "Is there a problem?"

I smile at him. "Are you the owner of this fine establishment?"

"I am." He nods.

"I'm here to inform you that Miss Costa has been requested to assist with an investigation. The case is so top secret that she's not allowed to talk to anyone about it or keep her phone with her. That's why she hasn't called in. She can only return to work after New Year's."

His eyes go wide. "After New Year's? What am I supposed to do over the holiday season short a worker?"

"I know, it's very unfortunate, but the law states that she has to comply. She told us she couldn't just abandon her responsibilities, but our hands are tied." His face scrunches up, looking like he's on the verge of exploding, so I add, "Just as your hands are tied."

"Tied with what?" He spits.

"Oh, haven't you ever had an employee be summoned by the police?" I ask, feigning surprise.

"No," he grumbles.

"You can't fire her for being away, and you still have to pay her the same amount as if she has been working," I explain.

"What the fuck?" He nearly yells.

"I know, it's ridiculous. But the state always checks in a few times after the employee returns. If they aren't working anymore, or if they're getting reduced pay, there's a hefty fine coming your way."

His eyes widen in shock, and he glances at Josh. Josh gives me a big side eye but then nods to the owner. "What he said."

"The rich people in power think they can do whatever they want with us small business owners. I'm doing my best, being honest, and this is the thanks I get."

“It’s a shame.” I nod like I care, but the truth is, she won’t work another day here if I have anything to say about it. “So, can we count on you to pay her and not fire her? I really don’t want to deal with all the paperwork.” I roll my eyes as I look at him.

“Fine, fine,” he mumbles. “Can you leave now? You’re scaring off the customers.”

“Have a good night.” I nod at him, winking at the blonde who giggles before her boss shoots her a glare, and she pulls her shoulders up to her ears as if she’s cowering.

Josh and I head back to the car, and I grin at him over the roof of the police car, but he just climbs in.

## CHAPTER FIVE

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### Joshua

It's been five days.

Five days since Carolina fell down the stairs...

... since Carolina looked at me with her golden eyes.

Five days since I lost my best friend...

... since I lost my family.

And five days since I last slept or ate properly.

Sophia forces me to eat now and then, and I manage some naps, more involuntary than not, but I haven't truly rested. Every time I sit by Carolina's side, I fall asleep. It's like my body knows I am where I am needed and can take a break while she rests.

Tomorrow is Christmas, and I've just returned from picking up Carolina's gift. I have known what I wanted to give her for a while, but it took some time to have it made. I hope she likes it. *I hope she wakes up to see it.*

No, I can't think like that. *She will wake up.* The swelling is down, and everything looks fine. There's no reason why she wouldn't.

While I was sitting by her side this morning, her eyelids fluttered, and her hand twitched in mine. It was a flicker of hope, a sign that she might be on her way back to us. It was enough to make my heart race with anticipation. The doctor said we need to allow her time to come around on her own, but to me, it seems like she should wake up any minute now. I'm growing restless.

*With everything appearing to be fine, why doesn't she wake up? Did Roberto cause more damage than they initially thought?*

Just as I'm about to open the door to Sophia's side of the duplex, the door on my side opens, and Xander steps out, apparently headed to work.

My hand pauses on the door handle as he greets me with a "Hey."

"Hey," I reply quietly, pulling open the door.

"Do you have a moment?" he asks, causing me to hesitate.

"What do you want?" I ask coldly.

"I just... I miss my best friend, Josh," he admits, his voice laced with hurt.

Pain surges in my chest. *God, I miss them both so much.* This entire situation is tearing me apart. Clay really screwed up, though.

When I see Xander's sad gray eyes, I remember that Clay didn't just hurt me. He hurt Xander too. I don't even know if they've made up or are still fighting.

The pain is evident in Xander's gaze. And it doesn't feel right to leave him standing there, not when he was blindsided like I was.

"Okay," I say hesitantly. "What's your decision? Have you forgiven him or—"

"What is there to forgive?" Xander interrupts, frowning.

"He confessed his feelings for my girlfriend, Xan," I hiss out, gritting my teeth.

"No, I get why *you* need to forgive him, but why would I need to? He fell in love with her, Josh. It happens. It happened to you, and it happened to me too. For some reason, she has that effect on people."

I stare at him, taken aback. "Wait a minute. Did you just say—"

"Yes, Josh. I'm in love with her too. You love her, Clay loves her, and I love her. We all fell for her. And if you'd just talk to us, maybe we could find a way—"

"Fuck you. Fuck the fucking both of you," I snap, stepping inside and slamming the door behind me.

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## Xander

The dim, bluish glow of the television screen bathes me in its light as I sit on the couch. The farming documentary drones on, but it's just background noise for the storm brewing in my mind.

I've been waiting for Clay to come home, but he is later than usual.

Everything is a mess. I tried to stay away from Josh to give him space, but I needed to say something when I saw him this morning. We need to talk this out and fix things, or it will tear our family apart. I can't ignore this rift any longer.

The front door creaks open, and Clay steps inside, his eyes red and sad. He looks exhausted like he's carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders, and his normally styled hair is disheveled.

*My poor boy is hurting badly.*

I turn off the television and sit up, bracing myself for what he's going to tell me.

"Hey," I say softly. "How was it?"

Clay lets out a heavy sigh and collapses onto the couch next to me, his head falling into his hands. "A fucking nightmare, just like the last few shifts. He still refuses to talk to me the whole damn time. It's impossible to work together, but I don't think he requested another partner yet. At least nobody told me about it. I am sitting on needles, not to mention that the whole silent treatment is killing me."

Just as Clay finishes his sentence, the door swings open again, and Josh stomps in. I only catch a glimpse of him going upstairs to his room, and I shoot Clay a look. He just shrugs. A few moments later, Josh returns with some clothes in his hand, already heading for the door again.

I can't take it any longer, so I stand and walk down the hallway to him. The footsteps behind me tell me Clay is following suit. "Josh, stop! Please," I insist, my voice quivering with frustration. "We need to sit down and talk. We can't go on like this. It's Christmas Eve, for fuck's sake."

Josh stops in his tracks and scoffs, his eyes blazing with rage as he turns to face me. "You want to talk? What would that help?"

Clay speaks up, his voice cracking with emotion. "We've never had a Christmas without each other. Can't we just sit down and figure this out?"

"True, it's Christmas Eve! How could I forget? Please, pull the knife out of my back so we can sit around the Christmas tree and hold hands."

"Josh..." Clay is now standing beside me, and when I look over at him, tears are brimming in his eyes as he talks, his voice barely audible. "I can't accept that I lost you."

"What did you even lose?" Josh's voice is bitter. "You lost a friend who wasn't even that important to you in the first place, or you wouldn't have let

it come this far.”

“That’s not fair or true,” Clay’s protest is weak, and he has to bite his lips to keep them from trembling.

“Isn’t it?” Josh’s anger is palpable. “Then why does it feel like you didn’t think of me for a second while you ‘fell in love with her’? Huh? Maybe because you didn’t?”

Clay looks sheepish, his gaze falling to his feet as he takes a deep breath.

“And you?” Josh turns to me. “Do you *really* want her? Or did you just have to decide to do what Clay wants or leave him, and because you guys are codependent, you decided you’d rather lose me and join that pretty picture Clay painted in his head before you end up alone?” He huffs a bitter laugh. “Good choice because let me tell you, it is fucking lonely on the other side. But I’d rather be lonely than watch my back forever. If I were you, I would just hope that Clay isn’t going to get what he wants, or you’re going to be the next one he’ll cut.”

His words hit me like daggers, and I catch a glimpse of what he must be feeling. His eyes are brimming with angry tears now too. The clothes he collected from upstairs are clenched in his fists. I feel like our friendship is hanging by a thread, but words seem to escape me.

After a few ragged breaths, Josh turns, takes the few steps to the door, and utters “Merry Christmas” sarcastically before slamming the door shut behind him.

## CHAPTER SIX

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### **Joshua**

Sophia and I head into the hospital. Even though it's Christmas morning, it doesn't feel like it. Sophia tried to lift my spirits by baking cookies and decorating the house, but nothing seems to help. I was taught not to cry—always told to be strong—but right now, all I want to do is break down. My heart is fucking heavy, and since I can't cry, I just bitch about everyone and everything to Sophia.

*She is a saint for putting up with me.*

“Can you hold this?” she asks, stacking another present onto the pile I'm holding, freeing her hands to open the door to Carolina's room.

Sophia wanted to add some decorations around Carolina's bed, hoping to bring a touch of Christmas cheer while we spend the morning by her side.

Chiara is celebrating Christmas with Leo and his family, and honestly, I'm okay with that. Whenever I see her golden eyes, I'm reminded that my girl is not opening hers, and it's torture.

As we walk in, I stop in my tracks. Xander and Clay are right there by Carolina's bed, each holding one of her hands. Xander quickly lets go and shifts back when he notices us, but Clay just stares at me, defiance in his eyes.

I drop the Christmas decorations onto a nearby table and turn to Sophia, my frustration boiling over. “Why the fuck are they here?”

Sophia sighs and looks at me with a mix of concern and exasperation, her face not at all matching the cheery Christmas sweater she is wearing. “You

boys need to talk this shit out. It's Christmas. The girl you are crazy about is still in a hospital bed, not waking up. Have you thought that maybe she doesn't want to wake up and see that she's the reason our family is falling apart?" I give her a sharp look. "Imagine her waking up to find out she's why you are fighting."

Her words hit me like a punch to the gut. I drop my gaze, a wave of guilt washing over me. *She would hate that.* Really hate it. Maybe even think about leaving me so our family could be okay again. Of course, I wouldn't let her, but she'd still feel bad.

I turn my gaze to Carolina, her unmoving form a painful reminder of how fucked up life is right now. The room is filled with tension, and I know I can't keep avoiding this conversation. Even if it means we will tear each other apart before we go our separate ways. Either way, being in this limbo will not help anyone, least of all Carolina.

I take a deep breath. "You're right," I tell Sophia, and Clay sits up, looking at me in surprise. I nod to him. "We should talk."

He lets go of Carolina's hand, stands, and walks over to me. "Here?"

I give a half-hearted shrug. "Sure."

Sophia takes the seat Clay just left and takes Carolina's hand. Xander gives me a pointed look and then clasps Carolina's other hand again.

"Listen, Josh," Clay begins. "I get why you might think our feelings for her seem like a betrayal, but they aren't. You haven't even let us explain—"

But I'm still so angry, and it bubbles to the surface before I can stop myself. "I wanted her first!" I blurt out, frustration and jealousy coloring my words.

Clay rolls his eyes. "That's just childish, and you know it. We're not kids anymore." He lets out an exasperated huff. "And get your facts straight. I fell for her at the exact same time you did. The only difference is that you acted on your feelings while I hid mine."

That stings because I know he is right. I noticed him flirting with her often enough and how he looked at her because it always gave me a pang of jealousy.

"And doesn't that count?" I demand, my voice rising in volume. "Doesn't me being in a relationship with her, being her boyfriend, mean anything?"

"Of course it does!" Clay yells back, his arms open in a gesture of exasperation. His frustration mirrors mine.

"Guys," Sophia exclaims, and we turn our heads to her. "Her eyelids just

fluttered, and I could swear she just gripped my hand.”

We watch Carolina for a moment, all of us silent, but nothing happens besides her breathing steadily. “She did that yesterday too. It just means she isn’t as fast asleep anymore, but not that she is waking up,” I mutter, the familiar pain in my chest squeezing my heart again.

“I am sorry, continue,” Sophia nods at me, making me huff.

“As I said,” Clay starts again. “It does matter that you guys are together, I just think—”

I cut him off. “Then why can’t you respect that? Why do you always have to have everything? You’re the one with the looks, the charisma, the good grades, the proud mother, the picture-perfect relationship,” I snap, my voice drips with jealousy, each word a bitter accusation. “And now you want to take away the one person I’ve found for myself, who truly loves me? What kind of best friend does that?”

Clay’s expression tightens, his jaw clenched as he listens to what I say. He takes a step closer, his voice laced with anger and hurt. “Oh sure, I’m the guy with charisma, but with no friends other than the one best friend who hates me right now. The guy who worked his ass off for those grades while you breezed through every test. The guy with an amazing mother, who died when I was nineteen.” His words are sharp, and the pain in his eyes is undeniable. “The only thing you got right is the picture-perfect relationship, and that’s only because that big fucker is dumb enough to love me.” He gestures over his shoulder to Xander, who lets out a half-hearted huff. I see the turmoil in Clay’s face, the same frustration and sorrow that mirrors mine. It dawns on me that this situation has hurt him just as much as it’s hurting me, and the weight of my anger and jealousy feels heavier with each passing moment. “I never wanted to steal her from you, Josh,” Clay continues, his voice softening with sincerity. “Not in my wildest dreams. Neither of us would.”

I glance at Xander, who nods in agreement, his expression tense and serious. “So, what’s the deal then?” I demand, my words dripping with bitterness. “She’s my girlfriend, but you two want to share her in bed from time to time?” I nearly spit the words out. “She’s precious, not just another one of your fuck buddies.”

“Whether you want to hear it or not, whether you believe us or not, we love her. We love her just as much as you do. She is fucking precious, and we don’t want her for sex. I mean, yes, of course, we want to have sex with her,

but—” Xander coughs loudly, cutting off Clay’s words with a hint of amusement. “What I’m trying to say is, we’re serious about this. We’re done playing.”

My heart is racing as my frustration and fear battle for dominance. “And what do you expect from me?” I retort, my voice rising again, my fists clenched at my sides. “To just step aside and say, ‘Sure, I’ll break up with my girlfriend so you two can have her?’”

Clay’s anger flares again, his voice raises in response. “You’re not getting it!” he shouts. “I want us to be in this *together*.”

I shake my head. “I’m not into guys,”

Xander barks out a laugh.

“Does he not want to understand me, or am I doing this wrong?” Clay asks, pulling on his hair as he turns to Xander, his eyes pleading, prompting him to stand and move to Clay’s side.

“What Mr. Big Words here is trying to say is we want to share her,” Xander explains.

“I don’t—” I start, but he holds up a hand, urging me to listen.

“You have your relationship with her, and we want to include her in ours. We won’t interfere with yours, and you won’t be a part of ours. We remain a family, just as we always have. Nothing changes for you except allowing her to love and be loved by more than just one person. Let your brothers, who you trust and love, love your girl too. Let us help you make her happy. Keep her safe. Let us be in this together. The way we always were.”

“You should’ve let him talk from the beginning,” Sophia mutters.

I look from Clay to Xander, then down to Carolina.

*I’m so done hurting.*

These past six days have been the worst of my life. I can’t imagine life without these guys. I love them. And if I’m truly honest with myself, I will always want them in my life, as close as possible. I just always felt like the odd one out, the fifth wheel. But now, I understand why. The puzzle piece that truly connects us was missing.

I watch Carolina’s chest rise and fall.

*It isn’t missing anymore.*

I am willing to work through my jealousy, to try this, and give it my best if it means I can keep them all.

“Joshy,” Sophia whispers softly from Carolina’s bedside, her voice filled with warmth and reassurance, making me look over at her. “You know they

would never do anything to hurt you or her intentionally. It's Clay and Xander, your best friends since forever. We're a family, and we've just added one more member."

My gaze wanders to Carolina, who is furrowing her brows in her sleep, her nose scrunching up adorably, and my resilience is wavering. This isn't just about me.

I can try.

*For her.*

"Only if she wants this too. She has to say it herself. And it has to come from her without any influence from you, Clay," I warn him with a pointed look. "If she truly wants this, and it makes her happy... I am willing to try." Clay's grin spreads from ear to ear, and he starts to approach me, but I hold up a hand to stop him. "If you ever pressure her or hurt her, I swear, I'll kick your ass so hard you won't be able to sit for weeks. Got it?"

He moves quickly, brushes my hand aside, and pulls me into a tight hug. "I promise we'll make her incredibly happy. We'll give her all the joy she's missed out on all these years."

I hug him back fiercely, feeling tears well up. "Fuck, I missed you, asshole," I whisper.

"I missed you more, dickhead." Clay laughs out loud.

"Shh, my head hurts." We release each other and turn to see Carolina holding her head, her face scrunched up in pain and blinking slowly. Her voice is so faint and raspy that I can barely make out her words. "What happened?"

She looks up at me with those golden eyes, and it's suddenly easier to breathe again.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

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### **Carolina**

The room is too bright.

It feels like my head might explode and my mouth is full of cotton.

I glance around and see Sophia sitting beside me, smiling down at me. When I turn to the guys, Joshua quickly moves to my other side, bending down to kiss my forehead. His sudden move makes me flinch, causing a spike of pain. But as soon as his lips touch my skin, I find it easier to breathe, and the pain fades.

“I love you. I love you so fucking much,” he murmurs against my skin.

There’s a dampness against my skin, and when I look at him, tears stream down his face, even though he’s smiling. “Joshua,” I whisper, reaching out to touch his cheek, and he closes his eyes, a sob escaping him.

“No one will ever hurt you again,” he mutters. “I’d die before I let him hurt you again.”

Suddenly, what happened comes back to me in a rush, and the heart monitor beside me starts beeping faster.

“Kitten,” Clay’s soothing voice reaches me from the other side of my bed, and as I turn to look at him, the sight of dark circles under his eyes, brimming with tears, tugs at my heart. “You’re safe. Breathe.”

I try, but panic surges through me, and my breathing becomes erratic.

*I feel like I am still falling.*

“I’m going to get a doctor,” Sophia declares, her voice filled with urgency as she hurries from the room.

Xander stands at the foot of my bed, gently holding my feet. I meet his gaze as he says, “Just breathe,” and slowly exhales.

I match my breathing to his rhythm, and gradually, my panic subsides. He gives my feet another reassuring squeeze once I’m breathing normally.

“How’s your head? What hurts?” Joshua asks, placing a hand on top of my head. The warmth emanating from his palm provides an extra layer of comfort as if his touch has the power to chase away the shadows of fear that just plagued me.

Just as I’m about to respond, Sophia returns, two people in scrubs in tow.

“Well, if this isn’t the Christmas miracle we’ve all been hoping for,” the doctor says, smiling warmly at me.

“Christmas?” I glance at Joshua in panic, and he nods in response.

I quickly scan the faces around the room, my heart racing once again.

“Chiara is with Leo. She’s fine,” Xander reassures in a deep voice.

I inhale deeply, exhaling slowly.

*She’s okay.*

“Miss Costa, I am Dr. Martinez,” the doctor introduces herself, stepping to my side. “You certainly gave us quite a scare.” She shines a light into my eyes, prompting me to blink. “Follow my finger,” she instructs. “Good, your pupils are dilating quickly. How are you feeling? Do you know who you are? Recognize these people?” The doctor gestures to those around me.

“Yes,” I reply, my mouth parched.

The nurse places a glass of water and a bowl of ice cubes on the table next to my bed. She hands me the water, but Joshua stops her.

“She’d prefer this,” he insists, picking up an ice cube and pressing it to my lips.

I give him a thankful look, allowing him to slip the ice cube between my lips. Closing my eyes, I relish the cold sensation, glad that the uncomfortable dryness in my mouth is fading as I suck on the ice.

Joshua gazes down at me, love evident in his eyes, and then he leans in to give me a brief peck on my lips.

“Do you remember what happened?” the doctor asks, and I nod.

Clay, on my other side, takes my hand. Meeting his deep chocolate eyes, I’m overwhelmed by the emotions I see in them, prompting me to look away.

“We’ll need to complete some tests to ensure there’s no lasting damage,” the doctor explains. “However, everything seems promising so far. Your family can either wait or return later. The tests will take a few hours.”

A funny feeling bubbles up at the mention of the word ‘family.’

“We’ll be here when you’re back,” Joshua reassures me, stroking my head.

“We won’t be going anywhere,” Clay adds, giving my hand a reassuring squeeze before releasing it.

The doctor leaves the room and an orderly enters to help the nurse prepare my bed before wheeling me out of the room. “One of them was always by your side,” the nurse tells me as we move through the hospital corridors.

“They were?” I ask, surprised, a sense of gratitude welling up inside me.

She chuckles. “The handsome Korean boy was here every morning for a few hours. The big tattooed one came in the afternoons, and we had to ask the charming one to leave at least three times each night.”

“Really?” I ask, my heart swelling.

*They came for me every single day.*

“It must be fun having three boyfriends. Oh, to be young again,” she muses.

“Actually, only Joshua is my boyfriend. The other two are just friends,” I clarify, a hint of embarrassment coloring my cheeks.

“Sure,” she replies with a teasing tone. “It must be lovely to have three guys care about you so much then.” I’m about to respond, but she speaks first. “Here we are.”

For the next two hours, I undergo various tests and procedures. Thankfully, they all show the same results—the swelling has disappeared, and I am fine. There is no other damage, and after a few more days of rest, I’ll be back to full health. They still want to watch me overnight, but I can go home tomorrow, which I dread. I really don’t want to run into Roberto when I am still not one hundred percent.

But right now, I am just drained. My energy has been zapped by the rollercoaster of emotions and physical ordeal of the tests I’ve just had.

I’m gently rolled back into the room where the guys and Sophia wait for me, sitting with pizza boxes on their laps. They’ve kept their promise, patiently waiting for me, even though all the tests took ages.

The aroma of pizza fills the room, but the mere thought of eating makes my stomach churn. Xander, ever attentive, notices how I turn up my nose at the food and springs to his feet, hurrying over to the window to open it, allowing in a breath of fresh air.

“You okay, kitten?” Clay asks, concern evident in his eyes. He sets down his slice of pizza and takes a moment to clean his hands with a cloth before he stands up.

“Thank you all for waiting,” I whisper, my voice quivering slightly as I struggle to contain my emotions.

“Nowhere else I’d rather be,” Joshua says from next to me, leaning down to kiss my temple.

“That looks like a nice little Christmas dinner,” the nurse observes, smiling at all of them.

“It’s great not to have to cook for once.” Sophia grins at me. Her smile is infectious and lifts my spirits.

“I am going to help you shower, and then you can join this little gathering, all right?” The nurse asks me, and I nod.

*I definitely need that shower.*

After what feels like an eternity, I finally settle back into the freshly made bed, taking a deep, calming breath to center myself. I look at each of them, hoping that the depth of my gratitude is evident in my eyes, and say, “I’m so sorry I ruined Christmas for you.”

Xander replies with a warm smile, “You made it better by waking up.”

“You granted me my Christmas wish.” Joshua smiles down at me.

“But you’re in a hospital eating pizza. I bet you usually sit around a tree, eating something fancy,” I whisper, feeling guilty for keeping them here.

“Shut up, kitten. If we wanted to be home, we’d be there.” Clay sighs, rolling his eyes.

“Keep rolling your eyes. You ain’t gonna find nothing back there,” I mumble.

His smirk turns into a broad smile, then he starts laughing, and Xander and Joshua join in. Sophia reaches out and gently squeezes my knee.

“We missed you,” she whispers, and I smile at her, sinking deeper into the pillows.

Overwhelmed with fatigue, I close my eyes, listening to their soft chatter until I drift off to sleep.

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“Worthless pig,” Roberto sneers. “Just as useless as your father! Do exactly

*as I say, nothing more, nothing less.” he threatens. “You choose. Your arm or your throat. What will it be?”*

“No!” I shout, my voice quaking with fear as I yank my arm free from the unseen grasp, my whole body trembling in the grip of the nightmare.

“Kitten,” Clay’s voice reaches me, a lifeline in the darkness, but I’m still trapped within the nightmarish tangle of my mind.

I sit up abruptly, cold and shaking. Darkness surrounds me. The shadows press in on me, and I hold my forearm close to my chest, gasping for breath.

“No, no, no, please, don’t,” I whisper, my voice trembling with lingering fear.

A soft light from the bedside lamp flickers to life, casting a gentle glow over the room and pushing back the oppressive darkness. The bed shifts, and I’m pulled into a strong chest. “Shh, I’ve got you. You’re safe,” Clay murmurs, his voice a soothing balm to my frayed nerves. He caresses my hair and holds me close. “He won’t come near you again, Carolina. I promise.”

I look up at him, puzzled, his words and touch finally pulling me free. “How do you—”

“Chiara told us everything,” he whispers.

He adjusts our position so I’m lying with my thigh over his waist, my head resting on his shoulder, and my arm draped over his chest. It’s comforting and familiar, reminding me of how we cuddled on the couch a few days ago, *or is it weeks now?*

Then I process what he’s just said. “You can’t—” I start to protest, my voice laced with concern.

“Shh... we know. We won’t do anything. We’ll just get both of you out of there.”

“But—” I attempt to argue further, but he cuts me off with a gentle command.

“Hush. We can discuss this tomorrow. You need to rest now,” he soothes, gently stroking my thigh over his hip.

I think about the nightmare and shudder. “I don’t think I can sleep again.”

“Do you have nightmares often?” he asks softly, concern evident in his eyes.

“No, I’m usually too exhausted to dream, I think,” I admit, taking a deep breath.

“I can be your plushie for tonight. They keep bad dreams away,” Clay says with a hint of humor in his voice, his attempt to lighten the mood

bringing a faint smile to my lips.

“I don’t think I ever had one,” I muse, trying to recall.

I remember having a snuggle blanket and dolls as a child, but not a plushie. I did give Chiara a teddy bear when our parents passed away, though, and it worked for her.

“Come here,” he murmurs, pulling me even closer and gently kissing my forehead. “Sleep so I can take you home with me tomorrow.”

I gaze up at him, my heart skipping a beat. “Home with you?” I whisper, my voice filled with both surprise and hope.

“We’d never let you go back there, kitten,” he murmurs gently, his fingers gliding through my hair. “I’m sorry it took us so long to intervene.”

Tears form in my eyes. “Thank you for coming for me once more.”

“Thank you for coming back to me. Now sleep, my kitty cat,” he soothes.

I rest my head back on his shoulder and close my eyes, comforted by his warmth and the gentle rhythm of his touch, making me feel so safe.

Just as I teeter on the brink of sleep, I faintly hear him whisper, “I love you.” But I’m fast asleep again before I can figure out whether his words are real or a dream.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

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### **Carolina**

“Knock, knock,” Joshua calls, opening the slightly ajar door wider.

I sit on the bed in only my underwear, a towel wrapped around me. My hair is in two braids, and I’m searching the laundry basket for my leggings.

I know we all have a lot to talk about, but I needed a shower first.

It was already afternoon when I was finally discharged from the hospital. Now, back at their place, I have chosen to occupy one of Sophia’s guest rooms beside Chiara’s.

The room is decorated in soft shades of pink, and since it’s a guest room, it is pretty empty beside a bed, dresser, and en suite bathroom, but it’s the nicest room I’ve ever had. And it’s the first time I will have one to myself since my parents died. So, I am more than grateful, especially considering I didn’t have to return to Roberto after everything that happened.

I shudder at that thought.

I look up to see Joshua standing in the doorway, leaning against the doorframe, looking bitable, dressed in blue jeans and a black Christmas sweater with Santa’s head on it. The writing around the image reads, *Sleighin’ these Hos*.

I burst out laughing, clutching the towel to my chest to keep it from falling. “*Dio*, what is that?”

“This, my sweet Carolina, is our Christmas tradition, and you’re not spared from it.” He smiles, pulling a sweater from behind his back and offering it to me.

Traditions are something we lost when we lost our parents, and it makes me miss them and not for the first time today. Sophia and the guys were and still are amazing in supporting and being there for me, but lying in the hospital and celebrating Christmas are probably two of the top ten things you'd want to have your mom and dad by your side for.

I stand and walk over to Josh as he closes the door and leans back against it. The towel drops to my feet as I reach for the sweater, leaving me standing in my underwear. I want to bend and grab it, but his eyes dart to my chest, taking on a hooded look, so I leave it on the floor, appreciating his gaze on me.

I unfold the black sweater and read *Santa's favorite Ho*. "This is so ridiculously absurd. It must be Sophia's doing." I cackle.

"It sure is," Joshua affirms, snatching the sweater from my grasp and letting it drop to the floor too.

His hooded eyes make my heart flip, and as he steps closer, he places his hand on my hip. With his other hand, he brushes aside one of my braids, and his lips descend to the spot where my neck meets my shoulder. I shudder, goose bumps erupting in the wake of his lips.

It feels like forever since he touched me like this, even though I slept most of the time. But my body knows, and it's craving him now.

"I'm trying really hard to remind myself that you need rest," he murmurs against my skin, his breath hot, and I gasp as he's squeezing my hip.

I close my eyes, my voice barely above a whisper as I reassure him, "I'm fine."

"You're not," he counters, trailing open-mouthed kisses along my neck.

I clutch his sweater tightly, seeking something to anchor me. His hands slide to my ass, pulling me closer, so I can feel his hard-on through his jeans.

"I know you'll be gentle with me," I breathe out, my hand sliding to his belt buckle, my finger slipping between the waistband of his jeans and his hard abdomen.

He pulls back slightly, lifting my chin with a finger. "I'll always be gentle with you, but you're still hurt," he states, pressing a soft kiss to my lips. "And the others are waiting next door for us."

"They can wait a bit longer." I pout, making Joshua chuckle softly and squeeze my ass. I can't help but gasp, pressing my thighs together.

"My Carolina, I am going to fuck you nice and slow, drawing out all those beautiful sounds from you," he vows, cradling my face in both hands.

“But it will be when you’re fully healed, and it will be in my bed.” He leans in, sealing the promise with a deep kiss. “Fuck, I’ve missed you. Remind me again why you’re in Sophia’s guest room and not in mine. Or hell, even sharing my room? I’ve learned to share these past few days.” He grins, his eyes dancing mischievously.

*What does that mean?*

“You know I want to be where Chiara is,” I mumble, though truthfully, I’d rather be with him.

“Then you’ll have to deal with me coming over every night,” he retorts, bending down to trail his tongue across my chest. My breath catches, and I let my eyes fall close, but just when I want to grip his hair, he steps back. “Fuck, please get dressed, or I can’t promise anything.” I smile, glancing down at the evident bulge in his jeans. “No, Carolina, seriously, get dressed,” he insists, pointing a finger at me, turning and exiting Sophia’s guest room as if it were on fire.

Letting out a long sigh, I pick up the holiday sweater and shake my head. Despite the reasons that brought me here, I can’t deny the sense of happiness settling in.

Chiara is safe. Something I didn’t think would be possible until she turned eighteen.

A smile spreads across my face as I get dressed, and there is a slight pep in my step as I make my way to Joshua so we can join the others on their side of the duplex.

It feels like we’ve stepped into a Christmas village. Sophia’s home is also festively decorated, but Christmas music fills the air here, the scent of cookies and mulled wine wafts around, and a Christmas tree stands proudly in the living room near the large couch.

It looks like one of those cringy Christmas movies Clay likes so much.

*I love it.*

Xander and Clay stand next to the couch. Xander has an arm wrapped around Clay’s waist, and they both hold a cookie. My eyes drift to their sweaters, and I nearly choke on a laugh.

Clay’s sweater is red and says, *It’s not going to lick itself*, accompanied by an image of a candy cane. Xander’s is green and reads, *If you jingle my balls, I’ll give you a white Christmas*.

“Oh Dio,” I wheeze.

Clay’s eyes meet mine, and he smirks. Letting go of Xander, he comes

over and teases, “Kitten, have you had your candy today?”

“Shut it, Clay. We have young ears here,” Sophia calls out from the kitchen, pointing a spatula at Clay.

I turn to see Chiara hopping off a stool at the kitchen island and rushing over to embrace me tightly. “*Pensavo di averti perso. Non puoi lasciarmi anche tu.* <I thought I had lost you. You can’t leave me too.>” She sobs into my shoulder.

“*Sai che sono troppo testardo per andare da qualche parte,* <You know I am too stubborn to go anywhere,>” I reply, holding her close.

Holding her in my arms, in a home where no one is out to hurt us, a tremendous weight lifts from my shoulders, leaving me almost breathless.

“I bet this particular teenager knows more dirty words than I do. And besides, those sweaters were your idea,” Clay states.

Chiara steps back, pushing away the tears with the arms of her sweater, and I glance at her pink one, which reads, *Sleigh all day.*

*At least hers is age-appropriate.*

My gaze then shifts to Sophia’s white sweater, which reads, *I’m so good, Santa came twice.*

I can’t help but chuckle. “You’re unbelievable.”

“Thanks, I know.” She smiles, stepping in front of me and pulling me in for a quick hug. “Merry Christmas.” She nearly shoves a cookie into my mouth. “Try, they turned out delicious.”

I take the cookie and nibble on it. It’s sugary awesomeness, but my stomach hasn’t fully recovered yet. Not eating solid food for several days has taken its toll. Still, I’m hoping to eat something later so I’m not just filled with pain medications and birth control.

“They’re so good,” I tell her honestly, a warm smile spreading across my face.

“I know. Time for presents,” Sophia exclaims, nudging me toward the couch. “Since you needed to rest yesterday, we thought we’d celebrate Christmas today.”

And here I thought I could have avoided this, but not even being in a coma spares me from Hurricane Sophia.

I mentally slap myself, realizing my ingratitude.

*They’ve done all of this for me.*

They waited for me.

The least I can do is be grateful and make an effort for them.

“I don’t have any presents for you guys,” I admit, pulling my shoulders to my ears in a weak shrug and scrunching up my nose.

“Oh, really? You couldn’t spare a moment during the last seven days when you were unconscious to get us some presents? I’m deeply hurt, kitten,” Clay jests, feigning pain as he clutches his chest.

I shoot him a disapproving look, but a smile tugs at my lips.

*That little jerk.*

Joshua settles down on the couch, gently pulling me to sit beside him and draping my legs over his lap. Xander sits down next to Josh and cradles my feet in his lap. Finally, Clay sits on my other side, so close that my back rests against him.

Sophia settles on the other side of the couch, a warm smile gracing her lips as she remarks, “That looks cozy.”

Joshua, however, shoots a sharp glare at Clay and then shifts his gaze to Xander. His grip on my knee tightens, and I feel the tension radiating from him as his jaw clenches.

I start to withdraw, feeling the weight of the situation and not wanting to upset Joshua. Tentatively, I try to pull my feet from Xander’s lap, but he simply reaches out for them again and grips them gently yet firmly. He doesn’t allow me to go anywhere before he starts massaging my toes, and I feel guilty when it sends a soothing wave of calm through me.

Chiara, her hands tightly clutching a present from the pile beneath the Christmas tree, comes to stand before me. Her gaze shifts from Clay to Josh, then to Xander, and finally back to me. Furrowing her brows, she starts to open her mouth as if to speak but then hesitates, closing it again. With a sigh, she turns to look at Sophia, searching for some guidance. Sophia just shakes her head lightly, to which Chiara shrugs.

“*Tutto bene, piccola?* <Everything okay?>” I ask, searching her face.

“*Certo, non vedo l’ora di vedere come va a finire questo.* <Sure, I can’t wait to see how this turns out.>” She snickers, but before I can ask what the hell she is talking about, she extends a gift to me and smiles. “Here, open mine first.”

“I haven’t been able to get your laptop yet either, *piccola*,” I admit, feeling a pang of guilt.

I should have gotten it earlier, directly after I got the paycheck, but I thought there was still time, and I had other things on my mind. Because of my selfishness, Chiara is left without a Christmas present for the first time

ever. My stomach sinks, and I can't help but feel awful.

"Don't worry about it. Maybe we can get a used one for me when you're feeling better," she remarks, casting a hopeful glance at Xander, who nods approvingly.

She looks visibly proud at his agreement, standing a little taller.

I frown at her. *Who is this girl?* "No, I saved up for it. I'll buy you the one you wanted tomorrow, okay?"

"*Grazie tantissimo,*" she gushes, nearly leaping to wrap her arms around my neck in a tight hug.

"Hey, take it easy," Xander cautions, and she releases me with an apologetic grin.

"Sorry," she says sheepishly. "Now, open it."

I unwrap the package to find a mason jar filled with what looks like pink salt. Glancing up at her, I comment, "This is so pretty."

Her smile broadens. "It's a body scrub. Monica and I made it ourselves. It's a mix of sugar, coconut oil, and peach scent."

I open the jar, and the sweet aroma wafts up. "This is amazing. *Grazie, piccola.*"

Clay takes the jar from me, giving it a sniff. "It does smell pretty good," he remarks.

Handing it back to me, I then offer it to Joshua for a sniff, and he smiles appreciatively. "This is really cool, Chiara."

Xander then takes the jar and inhales, passing it to Sophia.

"Oh, I made one for you too, Sophia. And I have enough for the rest of you if you'd like some," Chiara offers.

I bite my lip, trying to stifle a laugh at the mental image of Xander pampering himself with pink peach sugar scrub.

However, the side of his mouth lifts in a half smile, catching me by surprise. "Can't wait to try it."

My heart swells with gratitude. Their kindness toward Chiara isn't something I take for granted, and I adore them for it.

"My turn," Sophia announces, handing me a pink-wrapped package.

*Here we go.*

Fuck, I haven't got anything for her either, and she's the one letting me stay in her guest room. Not to mention my little sister, who comes along with my baggage, seems to be making herself right at home in her house. "Maybe someone else would like to open their gift?" I suggest, but she shakes her

head, excitement evident in her eyes.

“I can’t wait.” I give her a mock-exasperated look but unwrap the gift. Inside is a mug, similar to the countless ones she owns, with the words, *You’re my best-tea*.

I smile at her, then chuckle. “I love it. Thank you.”

“I knew you would.” She beams.

“Can someone else open one, please?” I ask, feeling a bit overwhelmed with all the attention. I would love to be invisible for just a little while.

Sophia seems to take pity on me when she hands a gift to Clay, and he unwraps it to reveal another mug bearing the words, *Could be tea, could be vodka*.

He laughs, leaning in to show me. “Our kind of mug, kitten,” he whispers in my ear, his warm breath sending shivers down my skin. While he’s thanking Sophia, my mind can’t help but wander back to that night at the bar and the drunken promises we made.

The day after, the hangover cuddles here on this couch and *the way he looked at me*. I turn to glance up at him, and he’s already gazing at me with his chocolate-brown eyes. I hold my breath, and a smile forms slowly on his lips as his gaze locks on mine, making my chest tingle.

“Thank you, they’re amazing,” I hear Xander say, breaking the spell of the moment. I turn to look and see that he got a set of high-quality pencils from Sophia.

Joshua squeezes my knee, and my gaze flicks to him. I look at him questioningly, but he only manages a forced smile.

*Fuck, did he notice?*

The gift giving continues, and Joshua receives swimming goggles from Sophia. In return, the guys all gift Sophia a luxurious spa treatment, which makes her squeal with excitement.

I feel increasingly out of place as they hand each other their gifts, and I glance at Chiara. This is what Christmas looks like when you have money, a beautifully decorated home, a festive tree, delicious food, and many nice gifts.

We have never experienced this, not even when our parents were alive. But Chiara doesn’t seem fazed. She laughs and smiles with them, genuinely pleased when she receives a nice makeup set from Sophia and the accompanying brushes from the guys, reminding me of another Christmas from our childhood.

*“Carolina, Chiara, come help me set the table!” Mama calls out from the kitchen, where she’s been busy preparing a feast for us all day.*

*We rush to her side, eager to lend a hand. Mama hands me the plates, and I carefully place them on the table. Chiara arranges the silverware with all the precision a six-year-old can muster. The room is filled with the soft sounds of Italian Christmas songs playing.*

*My parents always keep our traditions alive, even though I have never been anywhere but New York.*

*“Mia topolina, mia piccola, state facendo un lavoro meraviglioso, <you’re doing such a wonderful job,>” Mama praises us, ruffling my hair and kissing Chiara’s cheek.*

*Finally, the table is set, and Mama places a big panettone cake in the center. It’s a special treat only for Christmas Eve, and its sweet, citrusy aroma fills the air.*

*Papa joins us at the table, and we all gather around. He raises a glass of red wine and proposes a toast. “A Natale, tutto e possibile. <At Christmas, everything is possible.>”*

*We begin our meal, savoring each bite of Mama’s homemade lasagna and crispy fried calamari. Chiara’s eyes light up as she takes her first bite. “It’s so good, Mama!”*

*Mama smiles, and there is a glint of pride in her eyes. “It’s all made with love, mia piccola.”*

*After dinner, we move to the living room, where the soft glow of the candles on the Advent wreath dances on the walls. Its evergreen branches give off a festive scent that fills the room with a warm and comforting aroma. Papa hands us both a present wrapped in red Christmas wrapping. “Seems like Babbo Natale, <Santa Claus>...” he says with a twinkle in his eye, “... was already here.”*

*I’m twelve and know Santa isn’t real, but I play along for Chiara’s sake. “Grazie,” I say to Papa, offering a grateful smile as I sit next to Mama with the gift in my lap.*

*When I tear open the wrapping, my heart skips a beat. Inside, I find a set of paintbrushes, good ones like Mama uses. I’ve longed for brushes like this, and I can’t believe my eyes. I glance over at Chiara, who is eagerly unwrapping her own set of brushes.*

“So we can paint our masterpieces all together,” Mama whispers, pulling me into a side hug.

Xander gently squeezes my feet, pulling me from the past and prompting me to look up at him. He tilts his chin in my direction, silently asking if I’m okay. I simply shrug, my gaze returning to the mason jar and mug in my lap.

Joshua seems to have noticed me zoning out, too, only he’s not willing to let it go. He lifts my chin with his finger, searching my eyes brimming with tears.

“What’s wrong, my Carolina?” he whispers, stroking away a tear that escaped from the corner of my eyes.

“Just missing my parents,” I whisper, and his gaze fills with compassion.

Pursing his lips, he pulls me closer, kissing my temple and stroking my back.

“Me too,” Chiara says, settling in front of me on the floor.

“Here,” Sophia says, pushing a mug of tea into my hand before she gives an identical one to Chiara.

The mug is printed with a green face that looks like a reindeer with antlers, eyes, and a round red nose. Underneath the face, it says *Brew-Dolph*. I can’t help but laugh. “Your miracle cure for everything, huh?”

“It made you laugh.” Sophia shrugs, but her eyes have a proud sheen to them.

It’s just the right temperature to drink, so I sip it. The tea is a comforting blend of cinnamon and apple, and the warm liquid soothes a bit of the hole that had opened up in my chest. After I take a few sips, I set the mug down on the coffee table next to the presents I received from Chiara and Sophia.

“Here, open mine,” Clay murmurs, handing me a gift and giving Xander a similar-shaped one.

I cast him a curious glance before unwrapping it. Inside is a stunning black sketchbook with my name engraved in gold. I glance at Xander, who holds an almost identical sketchbook, except his name is shimmering in silver.

“Wow, those are so pretty,” Chiara observes, leaning in to have a better look before she goes back to inspecting her new makeup.

“Xander’s was full, and I noticed you didn’t have one. Every good artist needs a sketchbook.” Clay grins at me.

“Thank you,” I whisper, leaning in to kiss his cheek, which is conveniently close.

“You’re welcome,” he murmurs. He stands and walks over to Xander, cradling his face and kissing him deeply.

The longing I feel when I see them like this is nothing new, but it’s starting to bother me more and more. I lean my head on Joshua, *my perfect boyfriend*, I remind myself, and he pulls me even closer, kissing my nose.

“I can’t wait to see what you’re going to draw in there.” His voice is soft next to my ear.

I smile up at him. “Maybe you, if you’re up for posing for me for a few hours.”

“Can I be naked for that?” he asks suggestively, wiggling his eyebrows like an idiot, making me laugh.

“Ew, this is not *Titanic*, Casanova.” Chiara grimaces before she stands and goes over to sit next to Sophia, who is covering her mouth to hide a laugh.

I shoot her a mock glare.

Xander whispers something into Clay’s ear, catching my attention because it’s loud enough for me to hear. “I’ll give you your gift and a ‘white Christmas’ later.”

*Fuck, that’s hot.*

A shiver runs down my spine, and my toes curl involuntarily. Xander turns to me with a knowing smirk. “Your gift is the winter jacket hanging on the wardrobe. And you’re getting another tattoo.”

“What?” I ask, taken aback.

“I didn’t have any wrapping paper.” He shrugs. “And I am so done seeing you freeze to death, so don’t even start. You’re gonna wear it.”

My eyes widen at his tone. *Why is him bossing me around such a turn-on?*

“Thanks? But a tattoo... that’s a lot.”

“Decide what you want, and I’ll ink it for you. Merry Christmas.”

Joshua snorts in amusement. “That’s his go-to gift for all of us ever since he started tattooing. But honestly, it’s only a good gift now that he’s stopped drawing shaky lines.”

Xander flips Joshua off, eliciting a chuckle from him. As he laughs, the rush of air he exhales causes a few loose strands of my hair to flutter.

Clay gets another gift from the pile and sits close to me again, placing it

in my lap.

“Another one?” I ask, raising an eyebrow at him. “Clay, I can’t—”

“I didn’t have anything for your birthday,” he interrupts me with a shrug.

With a swirl of emotions, I trace the creases in the wrapping with my finger. I can’t help but tease him, raising an eyebrow in amusement.

“Wow, I think a ten-year-old could do that better,” Sophia mocks him, leaning back on the couch with her mug of tea.

“Hey, it’s much easier wrapping sketchbooks than plushies,” he defends.

“You got me a plushie?” I ask, tearing open the paper to reveal one of those irresistibly cute, round, squishy pillows—a black cat with golden eyes. My eyes water, and I clutch it tightly. “This is so dumb, I hate it.” My voice quivers with unshed tears.

Clay grins, his eyes twinkling mischievously. “Her name is Karen.”

“I hate you,” I whisper in a soft trembling voice. But it’s a lie. I don’t hate him. In fact, I feel anything but hate, and a pang of guilt hits me.

“I hate you more,” he murmurs into my ear, sealing his words with a gentle kiss on my cheek.

## CHAPTER NINE

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### **Joshua**

We all enjoy our Christmas together, and it feels like our family is finally whole with Carolina and Chiara here too. We eat the delicious meal Sophia and Xander made for us and talk for hours about everything and nothing.

After the mention of their parents, Chiara opened up, sharing some stories about how she remembers celebrating Christmas when their parents were still alive, with Italian Christmas songs and a cake called panettone. She smiles while telling us, a smile I've never seen on her before, but Carolina becomes sad and quiet again.

I also miss my parents at Christmas, even though they're just on the other side of the world and I can call them. I can't imagine how she must feel.

We settle on the couch, bellies full. I noticed that Carolina ate only a little, and I hope her stomach feels better soon. She seems to be slowing down after the busy day. She lays on the couch with her head in my lap, and I stroke her hair.

Chiara is showing Sophia how to apply blush the new, right way, and Clay sits in Xander's lap. We all watch as Sophia is transformed into a clown, and I silently laugh at her. The others wear the same tight-lipped smiles, which tells me they, too, are holding back giggles. The sight before us is comical, and I'm not sure Sophia quite gets it.

She shoots me a glare, but I notice Carolina's eyes growing heavy and eventually closing. Instead of saying anything to Sophia, I nudge Carolina gently. "Come on, let's go to bed," I suggest, and she nods, slowly getting to

her feet.

Taking her hand, I wish everyone in the room good night.

Carolina pauses to grab her plushie from beside Clay and Xander. “Night,” she tells them with a yawn.

“Sleep well,” Clay murmurs, looking at her with such longing that I almost feel sorry for him.

*Almost.*

I’m going to cherish my alone time with her for as long as possible. I noticed the way she looked at him when he gave her that plushie. Clay is right. *She’s definitely in love with him too.* But she needs to realize that on her own.

*Until then, I’ll be a bit selfish.*

Surprisingly, the plushie wasn’t what made me jealous. He made her happy tonight. He gave her something meaningful I didn’t even know she wanted. All I could think of was how grateful I was that he knows her so well and could get her something that brought her such joy.

What made me jealous were the glances and the closeness, them acting as if it was completely normal to touch and smooch her the whole time. The last time I checked, she was still *my* girlfriend. If things change, and let’s be honest, they will, I am going to have to come to terms with this. But as it is, I reserve the right to be upset when someone gets too close to my girl, even with the best intentions.

Although it wasn’t as bad as I initially thought.

*Maybe this situation will turn out better than I expected.*

As we make our way over to Sophia’s, my hand stays firmly on Carolina’s lower back. And when we reach her temporary room, I close the door behind us and guide her to the bed. Sitting on the edge, I gesture for her to sit beside me, which she does after she places the plushie on the bed.

“Aren’t you curious about what I got you?” I ask with a grin.

Her eyes go wide with surprise. “You got me something? I already got the phone from you.”

I chuckle softly. “Of course I did.”

Her brows knit together, and her lips curl downward. “I don’t have anything for you.”

“I think you have an excuse.” I smile at her warmly. “And like I said, you waking up and being okay was the best present ever.”

Leaning in, I gently press my lips against hers, feeling her melt against

me.

*Being able to do just that is all I could have wished for.*

Her eyes reflect a sense of guilt when I break the kiss, and she murmurs, “I still don’t like not having something for you in return.”

“I can take it back if you’d prefer,” I teasingly offer.

“Please don’t,” she whispers, her voice laced with sincerity and a hint of vulnerability.

Brushing a stray strand of hair behind her ear, I gaze into her eyes with pride and admiration. “You did good today with accepting all the presents,” I tell her, my voice filled with warmth. “I am proud of you.”

I really am. I was worried that Christmas would be too much, especially after only being out of the hospital for not even a day. But she managed everything like a real trooper, even receiving all her gifts. I only felt her being uncomfortable for a little while.

A faint smile graces her lips, and she shrugs modestly. “I tried.”

Her eyes are red, and she looks worn out from the long, exhausting day.

I can’t help but worry. “Does your head hurt too much? We can do this tomorrow if you’re too tired.”

“As if I could sleep now.” She huffs. “What did you get me?” Her gaze finds mine, her golden eyes shimmering with anticipation, making me thrilled that she’s honestly excited about my gift.

I reach into my jeans pocket, where I had carefully stashed the small box before we left our side of the house, and hand it to her with a smile. “Merry Christmas,” I whisper.

She delicately unties the ribbon and opens the box. Her eyes widen in awe and quickly find mine. “It’s so beautiful.” She carefully lifts the gold necklace from the box and holds it up to admire the pendant resting in her palm. “Joshua,” she whispers, her gratitude evident in her tone.

“I want you to always remember that you are strong and fierce on your own,” I tell her, touching the golden ‘C’ pendant in her hand. Flipping it over, I show her where the word *my* is engraved on the back. “But also, I am yours, and you’re mine, and I’ll always have your back.”

A tear slides down her face, and I wipe it away with my thumb. “I love you,” she whispers.

I take the pendant from her hand and gesture for her to turn around. She gathers her hair to hold it out of the way. As I fasten it around her neck, I whisper into her ear, “And I love you, my Carolina.”

I kiss her neck once, twice, and she lets her shoulders drop, turning slightly to give me better access. I can't help but give in to the temptation, letting my mouth wander to her collarbone, sucking and nipping, and eliciting a soft moan from her that gives me an instant hard-on.

"Joshua," she breathes out, grabbing my upper arm.

I lean back to take her in. I'm greeted by her face flushed with passion, her eyes closed, and her mouth slightly open. Needing more of her, I grab her chin and turn her face to me, lifting it slightly to kiss her deeply. My tongue glides over hers, tasting the sweetness of the Christmas cookie she was nibbling earlier.

I groan into the kiss but reluctantly pull back, pecking her full lips one more time before I let go to stand and shed my jeans.

Her eyes widen as she looks at me, standing in front of her, my crotch at eye level, and I don't miss how her breath hitches. When she licks her lower lip, I suppress the groan I want to release.

The air around us heats, and a sheen of sweat covers her skin. I feel myself getting even harder as visions of her sitting before me, her golden eyes looking up at me from those full lashes, her lips wrapped around my cock, me holding the back of her head, my fingers gently pulling her hair at her scalp flood me.

*Fuck!* She is still injured, still hurting. I can clearly see the exhaustion in her eyes, *and all I can think about is this?*

I remove my Christmas sweater, leaving me in a black T-shirt and boxers, and I know if I get any harder, the thin cotton will not keep me contained.

Carolina keeps her eyes on me, and I have to remind myself, *again*, that she's still recovering.

As I reach for her hand, it's a struggle not to guide it to my crotch, but I manage to pull her to her feet instead. Lifting her Christmas sweater over her head, I lean in to kiss her throat above the C pendant as I unclasp her bra, sliding it off her.

I let my eyes linger on her beautiful breasts, taking in how her nipples are peaked, taunting me to lean in and have a taste. Pulling my T-shirt over my head and slipping it over hers seems like a monumental effort.

The adorable scrunching of her nose betrays her initial expectations, and I can't help but smile. With a gentle touch, I stroke my thumb over her nose, attempting to smooth out that cute little wrinkle, but it stubbornly lingers. So I lean down and press my lips to her forehead. Sliding under the covers, I

hold them open, inviting her to join me.

Without hesitation, she slips in, snuggling up to me and letting out a contented sigh.

As I teeter on the edge of sleep, she whispers, “So, you know everything?”

I kiss her forehead and pull her even closer. “Chiara told us quite a bit. I don’t know if it’s everything, but you can tell me whenever you’re ready. For now, I know enough if you’d rather not talk about it.”

“I don’t think I can,” she murmurs, and I can practically feel the hurt radiating from her.

“That’s okay. I’m here whenever you change your mind.”

“What’s the plan? If we upset him, he will—” she begins but stops short, choking on her breath.

“You’ll both stay here until she turns eighteen at least. We’ll continue to cover his rent, groceries, and drinking habit. I believe he won’t mind where you guys are as long as it doesn’t disrupt his lifestyle,” I reassure her, gently stroking her back.

“I can’t afford two rents, or I would have done this already,” she mutters softly.

“You won’t be paying two rents,” I state.

“But—” she starts, but I cut in.

“Would you let me pay you rent if I needed a place and you had room for me?” I ask.

“No, but—”

I silence her with a kiss. “Everything will be okay. Don’t overthink it. Honestly, I should be paying you for spending time with me. This feels too precious to be free,” I tease with humor in my tone.

“Damn, Joshua, did you just call me a prostitute?” she asks, her tone icy.

“What? No, I—” I fumble for words, suddenly wide awake again. But then she starts giggling. Cupping her face in my hands, I lean in. “You’re evil,” I murmur against her lips, sealing them with a kiss.

## CHAPTER TEN

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### Clay

I can't sleep.

I lay in bed, shifting from one side to the other, while Xander lays beside me, his arm over his eyes, breathing softly.

He certainly gave me a 'white Christmas' when we went to bed, and it wore him out. He made me come so hard that I should be knocked out, too, but Carolina consumes my thoughts.

She doesn't seem to be a hundred percent okay. Throughout the day, I noticed how her hands trembled ever so slightly from time to time, and not a single, sassy retort came out of her beautiful mouth. She barely touched her food, opting instead to drink lots of tea, and while she doesn't typically eat a lot in front of us, I don't think she's eating enough. And it was impossible not to notice the exhaustion etched across her face, with red, droopy eyes that became even more apparent when Joshua guided her to bed.

*Should we take her back to the hospital?* I despise hospitals and hated spending so much time in one. Yet, I was there by her side for the past few nights, and now I feel lost.

The love of my life is beside me, and I know Carolina is resting peacefully in Joshua's arms. So why do I feel like she needs me? I'm not so jealous that I can't let go, especially when I know she's in good hands.

*What's wrong with me?*

Unsettled, I get up and head downstairs for a glass of water. I notice the kitchen light is on and hear soft sounds coming from the room.

Joshua is spending the night at Sophia's place with Carolina, and Sophia and Chiara are there too. With Xander asleep upstairs, there shouldn't be anyone in our kitchen.

*Fuck.*

I pause at the entrance and grab the gun we keep in the drawer next to the door, disengaging the safety. I cautiously approach the kitchen, but my tension eases when I see Carolina's familiar silhouette. I re-engage the safety and return the gun to its place.

When I return to the kitchen, I lean against the doorway, watching Carolina. She's hungrily scooping up leftovers as if she hasn't eaten in days. Technically, she hasn't, given she was unconscious.

She sets the bowl down and reaches for a cookie, but she nearly jumps out of her skin when she spots me.

*"Porca misera,"* she breathes out.

"Sorry," I offer with a smirk. "Having a little midnight snack?"

Her face flushes a deep shade of red, and she looks down, embarrassed as she mumbles, "I am sorry."

She quickly tries to move past me, but I block her path with my arm. "Hey," I soothe, gently turning her to face me. "Are you okay?"

She avoids my gaze, so I take a moment to observe her. She's wearing black leggings and what appears to be one of Josh's T-shirts. It fits her, though it's snug around her chest and belly.

I notice the outline of her nipples and find it hard to look away, especially since they become hard under my gaze. When our eyes finally meet, hers are filled with embarrassment, instantly dampening my horny thoughts.

"What's wrong?" I ask with genuine concern.

Her voice quivers as she replies, "I finally felt hungry, but there was no food at Sophia's place. I knew there were leftovers here. I feel so agitated and stirred up, and I couldn't sleep and—"

"Hey," I interrupt gently, cupping her cheek. "Do you want me to make you some food? I can cook us something. Whatever you need."

"It's not like I'm hungry anymore," she whispers, her vulnerability shining through.

"It's okay to eat your feelings," I reassure her, my tone filled with understanding. "We can talk, or we can stuff our faces. What do you prefer?"

She huffs, still avoiding eye contact, and it bothers me to see her like this. "As if you would do stuff like that."

I let go of her, taking a bowl of cookies with me as I make my way to the couch. “Come here,” I encourage her, patting the space beside me.

She comes and sits, and I take a cookie, popping it in my mouth, savoring the sugary taste with a contented hum.

She hesitates, a touch of guilt in her eyes as she comments, “You don’t have to eat that because of me. I know you don’t like sugary crap.” But she takes a cookie too.

“Oh, I absolutely love sugary crap. I love it way too much,” I respond, flashing her a reassuring smile. She looks at me critically, sitting in only my boxer shorts, her gaze going down to my abs. I set the bowl on the coffee table and take her hand in mine. “I know what it feels like to have a difficult relationship with food. You don’t have to hide from me.”

Curiosity fills her eyes as she asks, “How?”

I take a deep breath, gathering my thoughts before sharing a piece of my own vulnerability. “My mom died from cancer when I was nineteen,” I begin, my voice carrying the weight of the memory. “She was healthy, didn’t drink, didn’t smoke, and yet, she died from breast cancer. Watching my fierce, beautiful mother go through that was the hardest thing ever,” I admit, and she scoots over to me, wrapping her arms around my waist.

“Now, I’m terrified.” I laugh, though it’s humorless. “I can’t enjoy anything without thinking about the potential health consequences. I eat healthy and work out so much because I’m scared, not because I enjoy it. So, I get it.” I lean down to kiss the top of her head. “The subconscious is a powerful thing. If this is what you need to cope right now, then let’s eat. Don’t be too hard on yourself. The last few weeks have been a shit show.”

“But I got the best friend I could have ever asked for out of it,” she whispers against my chest, reminding me that I’m half naked and her mouth is on my skin.

I quickly grab a couch pillow and place it in my lap, hoping to cover my boner. Then I take the bowl of cookies, offering it to her with a soft smile. “Cookie? Or should I cook?”

“No,” she mumbles. “Can we just cuddle for a bit, please?”

“Sure,” I agree, setting the bowl aside again and laying down.

She snuggles into me, and I wrap my arms around her, holding her close and gently stroking her back. I marvel at how she’s let her guard down, allowing me to be a source of support even though it was clear that she felt more than uncomfortable having me find her like this. Her trust feels like a

gift. Being there for her is all I wanted. It doesn't matter what problem she faces, I want to be by her side for it.

Her breath is hot on my neck, and as she moves slightly, her shirt wanders up on her back, so my fingers graze her soft skin. I pause, wanting nothing more than to slip my hand under her shirt—not to start anything but to caress her bare skin, to stroke her the way it should be.

Instead, I grab the hem of her shirt and pull it back down to resume my strokes over the fabric. As we lay there together, the minutes pass in soothing silence, and gradually, her breathing becomes steady and even.

The front door opens, and I mentally kick myself for putting the gun back in the drawer. But it's just Josh, looking disheveled, with wide eyes, until he sees her laying on top of me.

"Is she okay?" he whispers, coming over to us.

"She couldn't sleep and was hungry," I whisper back, not stopping my circles on her back.

"Good. Good she ate something." He nods to himself, a faint but relieved smile tugging at the corners of his lips.

"Want to take her back to Sophia's?" I inquire softly.

"She stays here," Xander's voice interrupts from the doorway, startling us and causing Josh and me to twitch.

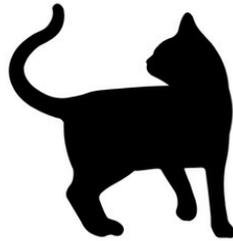
Xander walks over and gently slides his arms under her, lifting her effortlessly. "Your room or the guest room?" he asks Josh.

"Mine, thanks," he replies, his tone a little strained.

I watch as Xander carries her away with Josh following closely. She stirs slightly, one of her arms coming up to hold onto Xander's neck, and I can't help but think that she belongs in his arms.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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### **Carolina**

This morning, I woke up on a naked chest, being held tightly and feeling warm and safe. I remember falling asleep on Clay after he caught me binging. Somehow, he managed to turn an embarrassing and uncomfortable situation into a not-so-bad one. But as I take a deep breath and sigh, a cinnamon scent fills my nose, and I freeze. I'm not laying on Clay. It's Joshua.

*Fuck.*

I need to get my feelings in check quickly. I can't keep pining for all of them. Joshua is my boyfriend—my perfect, kind, and wonderful boyfriend. I need to shove Xander and Clay out of my head, pronto.

I pepper Joshua's chest with kisses, my eyes still closed, making him chuckle. "Good morning. How are you feeling?" he asks, his hand coming up to run over my hair.

"Better. My head doesn't hurt as much, and my stomach feels better," I mumble, keeping my lips on his skin.

He strokes my back. "That's good. We have to go back to work today, but I can stay if you don't want to be alone?" he offers.

"No, it's okay. I'm fine. I have some stuff to do anyway. Like going to the bar to beg for my job." I grimace.

*Oh, this is going to be so much fun.*

I can practically hear Donny shouting at me already.

"Clay handled that," Josh simply states.

"What does that even mean?" I ask, lifting my head from his chest to look

up at him.

I then realize we're in his room, not the one I chose at Sophia's.

*Oops.*

"It means you don't have to worry about your job. You can return after New Year's and still get paid as usual," he says with a yawn.

"Wait, what? How—"

"He's an idiot but also an evil genius." Joshua shrugs.

I let out a soft laugh. *That sounds just like Clay.*

"So, rest. Watch TV, read a book, take a bath. Whatever helps you recover..." he pulls me up his body, and his hand slips inside my leggings to squeeze my ass, "... because I really need you to be healthy again," he whispers in my ear.

A tingle spreads between my thighs, and my hand glides to his neck, lightly scratching the back of his head with my nails.

"I told you, I'm fine," I whisper back, teasingly shifting my knee between his thighs, making him groan.

"And I told you I'm going to fuck you when you're fully recovered." His promise sends shivers down my spine. He pecks my nose, then removes his hand from my leggings, giving my ass a playful slap. "Let's get up. I'm going to make you breakfast."

---

After Josh goes to work, I leave to buy Chiara's laptop, a few essentials for us so we don't have to rely too heavily on Sophia's generosity, and everything I need to make bracelets for everyone.

I work on the bracelets in my room at Sophia's until late in the evening, sitting cross-legged against the headboard.

Chiara is already wearing the pink one I made for her. They are two-toned and thin, so they're not too conspicuous. I hope the others like them. Even if they don't wear them, it's fine. I simply want to show my gratitude.

Chiara lays on her stomach at the foot of the bed, engrossed in her new laptop and listening to music. We only had our own rooms before my parents died, but not for the last few years, so I think she's a bit codependent, but I don't mind.

The door, which was slightly ajar, opens further, and Sophia peeks in.

“Hey, Costa girls,” she greets. “Fancy a cup of tea?”

I smile at her. “Sure, come in.”

She hands Chiara a mug before sitting next to me and passing me mine.

“What are you guys up to?” she asks before taking a sip from her mug.

“Chiara’s obsessed with her new laptop,” I tease, earning a finger from her. She doesn’t even glance up from the screen. “And I just finished your Christmas present.”

Sophia’s eyes light up. “I get a present?”

I smile and set my mug on the nightstand, then reach out to grab hers and place it beside mine. I take Sophia’s hand, draw it into my lap, and fasten the white and light blue bracelet around her wrist. I adjust it so the prettiest side faces up and whisper, “Thank you for being my friend.”

I don’t know where I would be if Sophia hadn’t been so inviting and amazing from the start. I can’t even imagine how different life would be now if my professor hadn’t taken a leap of faith in me, putting my name forward for the internship. I’m incredibly grateful for them both.

She practically tackles me, and we both tumble back onto the bed. “Forget friends. We’re besties,” she corrects, and I laugh, hugging her tightly.

“Can I come back to work tomorrow, boss bestie?” I ask when we sit up again. “I really need to do something, or I will go crazy. I am feeling way better.”

“Sure, it’s not like we’re doing heavy lifting, and you can take breaks.” She shrugs.

“Anyone home?” Xander’s deep voice echoes from downstairs.

“Up here!” Sophia calls out.

Xander knocks on the open door a minute later, then scans the room, his gaze shifting from one of us to the other. “What are you guys doing?” I can’t help but chuckle. “What? It’s unfair. You have a girls’ night, and I’m over there alone, boring myself to death with some documentary about farming.”

“Who watches documentaries about farming?” Chiara asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Well, I obviously don’t,” he retorts, sitting beside me, the mattress dipping under his weight, causing me to lean into him.

“Hey,” he mutters, glancing down over his shoulder at me with his signature half smile.

“Hey,” I reply with a smile of my own. “I have your Christmas present. But it’s okay if you think it’s silly. You don’t have to wear it, I—”

He silences me with a finger over my lips. "Show me."

I grasp the hand he just shushed me with and pull it into my lap. I reach out to get the solely black bracelet I made for him and secure it around his wrist, adjusting it.

My heart is beating fast, worried he might not like it or think I am silly.

He examines it, turning his wrist this way and that before a genuine smile forms on his face. My heart skips a beat when he directs that full-on smile at me. Shifting closer, he leans over me, placing his hand on my other side. We're face-to-face now, and he leans in, planting a soft kiss on the spot just below my earlobe.

He lingers for a moment, then whispers, "I'll wear it even when I wear nothing else. Thank you."

Goose bumps erupt on my skin, and I exhale sharply. He chuckles as he pulls back.

*Oh, he knows exactly what he's doing, the cheeky bastard.*

"You guys up for a movie downstairs?" Sophia asks. "I'll make popcorn."

"Sure," I reply, rising as Xander does the same.

"I'm going to video call with Leo," Chiara announces, scooping up her laptop and heading to her room.



"There you guys are! I thought I'd find you in her bed, babe." Clay's teasing voice stirs me from slumber.

I am warm, safe, and comfortable. Taking a deep breath and recognizing his woodsy scent tells me Xander is holding me.

I remember him telling me to lay my head in his lap when my eyes got droopy and how he let his fingers glide through the strands of my hair, playing with some of them.

*When did I fall asleep?*

*And how did I end up with my cheek pressed against his chest?*

"Shh... she's sleeping," Xander whispers, his voice muffled beneath me.

I feel a gentle hand on my head, and Joshua asks, "Did you guys have a good evening?"

"It was nice. We watched some movies. Sophia went to bed a few hours ago," Xander says softly.

Right after the second movie, she excused herself with a knowing grin, telling us to stay and watch as long as we wanted. I thought about going to bed then too, but when Xander asked if I wanted to watch another movie with him, I just couldn't say no.

*I don't think I even can tell this man no.*

"Why didn't you go to bed?" Clay asks, now sounding even closer.

"She fell asleep on me," Xander answers, his shrug gently moving me with the motion.

"You could've taken her upstairs," Joshua points out, his voice slightly agitated. "You know, to her bed. Where she sleeps."

*Is he mad at me?*

"I don't think I could've resisted joining her if I did. And I think you would have liked that even less," Xander huffs out, making me furrow my brows. *What is he even saying? Is he trying to provoke him?* "Which bed should I put her in?"

"Xander," I murmur, knowing I have to get up before they get into it even more.

"That's a good choice since it's my bed, too," Clay chimes in.

*Not helping the slightest, jerk.*

"No," I mumble, pushing myself up from where I was lying on Xander and standing. "I meant I can walk, Xander. Thanks."

I take Joshua's hand and lead him toward the stairs. My eyes are barely open, but I have to get him upstairs and make sure we're good.

"I need to shower and change first," he says, stopping to pull me into a hug. "But I'll hurry and come back to snuggle with you under the covers, okay?" He kisses my forehead, easing my worries a bit.

"Night, kitty cat," Clay says as he and Xander join us in the hallway, pulling me out of Joshua's embrace and into his own.

My hands are on his chest, and I turn my head to look at Joshua, who is biting his lips while Clay is squeezing me to him. I can't read Joshua's expression, but a new tension surrounds us.

The moment Clay lets go of me, Joshua pushes him toward the door saying, "Come on, dickhead. You need a shower too. You fucking stink," making Clay chuckle as they pile out of the door.

Xander leans down to kiss my temple before he makes his way to the door, following them without another word.

I don't know if it's the exhaustion pulling me under or if I'm imagining it,

but I swear there is a strain between them. Much like the edginess I felt in the room when I woke up in the hospital. But every time I go to say something, it's like they notice, and it quickly disappears, making me feel like I've imagined it all.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

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### **Carolina**

My heart feels full.

Slipping the yellow bracelet I made into my jacket pocket, I lean down to kiss Joshua's forehead.

I got ready quickly and quietly so I didn't wake him.

He looks so much younger with his eyes shut, sound asleep, nestled between the light pink sheets, and hair tousled. I'm so madly in love with this one, more than I ever imagined I could be.

Suddenly, thoughts of Clay and Xander cross my mind. I shake my head.

*Get a fucking grip.*

I scribble a note and place it on the sweater Joshua left on the floor, then head out and take the subway to Harlem. The train rumbles through the tunnels, the city's energy humming around me as I make my way to the shelter.

Thankfully, the shelter isn't far from the station, so it doesn't take me long to get there. I've been away too long and don't know how he will take it. We have never gone so many days without seeing each other before.

"That looks cozy," I say, sitting on the edge of Howie's bed.

He's seated on the floor in front of it, leaning against it. "Kid," he grunts, not even glancing my way, and I'm taken aback by his coldness.

"Here, I got you something," I tell him, offering him a burger and a Coke.

"Thanks," he mutters, still avoiding my gaze.

"Everything okay?" I ask, leaning back on my hands.

My head is swirling with possibilities. I can't have him mad at me.

He turns to give me a sharp look. "Two weeks, Lina. Two weeks without a word from you. And now you just show up as if I wasn't out of my mind with worry? You could've been hurt or in the hospital, for all I knew. I understand you're in love and happy, and I'm glad for you, but a little update would've been nice."

My eyebrows rise in surprise. "You really do care about me," I whisper.

His accusatory gaze hurts, and guilt settles in my stomach.

"You're unbelievable." He sighs, looking back down at his hands.

"I'm sorry I didn't come by sooner. But to be fair, I really was in the hospital for a week," I explain, hoping he'll understand that making him worry wasn't on purpose.

His head snaps up. "What? Why?"

"I fell down the stairs and hit my head." I shrug nonchalantly, but the memory makes my blood freeze, and my stomach suddenly feels sick.

"You fell? Of course you did. Lina, this has to stop. You can't go back there. I know some people here who can help, even if they're a bit shady. We could leave the state and start fresh," he urges, his tone growing more agitated by the second.

"We?" I ask with a hint of a smile. "You'd leave this warm new bed and the 7-Eleven for me?"

"This isn't a joke, Lina," he lectures, crossing his arms over his chest, and I feel bad for teasing him.

"I appreciate your concern," I state, touching his shoulder. "But it seems like the problem is halfway solved for the moment. Chiara and I are staying with my boyfriend's sister for now. She has two guest rooms, and we don't have to pay rent. This way, I can still support Roberto without having to live there and risk running into him."

"Boyfriend?" He raises an eyebrow.

"Your advice seemed to work." I shrug, dropping my gaze and smiling down at my hands.

"Just make sure he doesn't take advantage of the situation," he warns, finally unwrapping his burger.

I have to suppress a laugh. "He's not like that. He's a—"

"A cop, I know. When he turns on you, no one is going to believe you," Howie interrupts, speaking with his mouth full.

"That's not what I was going to say," I mutter, frowning at him.

I understand where his concern is coming from, but I also know that I'd never have to fear this possibility with Joshua. Or Clay, for that matter.

"But it's true." He shrugs, and we finish eating in silence.

Discarding our trash, I pull out the yellow bracelet. "Give me your hand," I instruct.

"Why?" he asks, but he extends it anyway.

I wrap the bracelet around his wrist and secure it, making sure it's tight enough. "Merry Christmas," I whisper with a smile.

"What's this?" He examines the bracelet, giving it a gentle tug.

"It's a friendship bracelet. I made it for you," I explain with a small smile, and again, I am tense, waiting for someone to tell me my gift is silly.

But he tilts his head to look at me, studying my face, then his expression softens, and he tells me in a soft, earnest tone, "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

---

When I enter Sophia's lab, she's sitting behind her desk, typing away furiously.

My eyes drift to my desk, where there's a bouquet of assorted flowers, and I'd bet there are twenty-two stems. I walk over, a smile lighting up my face, then take out my phone and snap a picture, sending it to Joshua.

I love them. Thank you.

Welcome back to work. Can't wait to see you later.

I was a bit worried about getting back here. I can't even pinpoint why, but this little gesture just made my entire day.

*I don't deserve him.*

"Everything okay?" I ask Sophia, but she dismisses me with a quick hand gesture that has me lifting my eyebrows in question.

"Yes, just use today to catch up on the cases I've handled over the past few days. We'll tackle a new one tomorrow," she states without looking up.

"All right," I grumble, settling into my chair and booting up the computer.

*Maybe she hasn't had her tea fix today.*

A few hours later, the door swings open, and I hear their laughter before seeing them. Joshua and Clay both stride in, looking incredibly sexy in their uniforms. Clay smirks at me, causing a flutter in my stomach.

*Nope, we're not going there.*

I rise from my seat as Joshua stands in front of me, planting a kiss on my temple. A swarm of butterflies erupts in my belly, but they have the same intensity as the flutter Clay just caused inside me.

*Fuck, this is not good.*

“How are you feeling? Is your head all right?” Joshua murmurs against my temple, prompting me to tilt my head to meet his gaze.

“Way better, thank you.” I smile at him.

He bends down, grabbing the back of my thighs to lift me onto my desk. He then nudges my knees apart, positioning himself between them. Taking my face in his hands, he whispers, “Good, then this shouldn’t hurt,” leaning in for a kiss. He tilts my neck back, deepening it, and my stomach tingles like crazy.

I can’t help it and get carried away, humming into the kiss.

“We get it. You missed her,” Clay remarks, his voice tight.

Joshua continues to kiss me for a moment longer, and then he pulls away, giving me one last peck and a grin. “Watch out, Clay, your jealousy is showing,” he teases, shooting Clay a look while helping me down from the desk.

*What is going on?*

“Anyway, we brought you something,” Clay adds, coming over to me.

“Do I need to pinch your nipple again? I think I got more than enough presents lately.” I huff, crossing my arms over my chest.

If he really thinks he can just shower me with stuff now, he’s going to get an earful.

“True, but you can’t make friendship bracelets for all of us and not have one yourself. That’s not how it works, kitten,” he explains, taking my hand.

He wraps a larger, multicolored friendship bracelet around my wrist, made from all the colors I used for theirs. It’s a beautiful chaos, and I feel my nose starting to burn.

“Did you make this?” I ask, surprised.

“He bribed Chiara to do it.” Joshua chuckles.

“Bribed her with what?” I raise an eyebrow. *I swear if he just gave her something expensive, I’ll...*

“Our Netflix password,” Clay admits with a shrug.

“I haven’t even given you guys yours yet,” I muse, to which Clay looks guilty. “What?”

“I saw Xander’s bracelet and got jealous. He mentioned you made one for all of us, so Josh and I just helped ourselves.” He grins, showing off the red bracelet on his wrist. Joshua then rolls up his sleeve to show the blue one on his. “Thanks, by the way. We love them.”

“How did you know which color was for whom?” I ask, glancing between the two.

“Come on, kitten,” Clay boasts as if it’s the most obvious thing in the world.

“What?” I question, still puzzled, but Sophia cuts in.

“Can we go eat? I’m starving,” she complains, letting her head fall to one shoulder and lifting her gaze to the ceiling.

“I—” I start, but Clay grabs my left hand at the same time Joshua takes my right.

They have a kind of stare-off, but Clay lets go, and Joshua pulls me to walk. “You need to start eating regularly again for your stomach,” he lectures quietly.

“Okay,” I give in, still not understanding what just happened between those two.

Once we reach the cafeteria, Clay and Joshua decide to grab plates of spaghetti for all of us, so Sophia and I sit at the usual table.

“Are you okay? You seem a bit off today. Want some tea?” I ask her.

Considering her usual demeanor, it doesn’t sit right with me how her bubbly personality is dimmed, and she is way too quiet.

“I’m just frustrated, that’s all. Don’t worry about it.” She shrugs, not easing my worries the slightest with her answer.

“Did I do something wrong?” My insecurities bubble up, and I find myself holding my breath.

*Am I the problem?* Maybe she already has enough of us in her home. Chiara feels way too at home for my liking, letting her stuff lay around everywhere. *I need to talk to her about it.*

“No, I’m genuinely happy to have you back, Lina,” she reassures, reaching over to grip my hand.

“Then what—” I begin with a relieved sigh, but I’m interrupted.

“Oh, look, how cute. Costa’s fucking the whole family. Maybe she

reminds them of those fat Buddha statues they worship in China,” Del Moro sneers to his partner, both standing behind us.

“Does your ass ever get jealous over all the shit that comes out of your mouth?” I ask flatly.

“Buddhism originated in Nepal, I’m Korean, and you’re an asshole,” Sophia snaps.

“Who would have thought China has a backbone, or are your hormones out of place? Is your pussy bleeding, baby?” he asks Sophia, tone husky.

I rise from my seat, positioning myself between Sophia’s chair and Del Moro. “Don’t talk about a woman’s hormones if you can’t even make a whore moan.”

“You fat piece of shit,” he barks out, grabbing the front of my hoodie and yanking me toward him.

A spike of fear hits me, but in the next second, Joshua is there. He twists Del Moro’s arm, forcing him to release me, and steps between us, pushing him back. My fear spikes again, but this time for Joshua, who jabs a finger into Del Moro’s chest, leaning into his space. “Touch her one more time, I fucking dare you,” he warns, so furious like I have never seen him.

“Josh, stop that shit. We’re at work, goddammit!” Sophia says, rising from her chair, but Joshua doesn’t seem to listen, still standing chest to chest with Del Moro, clenching his fists. “Clay!” Sophia yells over to the register, but I can’t take my eyes away from the stare-off.

The next second, Clay turns me to him to check in. “You all right?” I nod, and he then stands beside Joshua, arms crossed. “Easy, Josh. These fine gentlemen were just leaving, weren’t they?”

My worries ease a bit now that Clay’s here, making the playing field even and trying to defuse the tension, but Del Moro pushes away Joshua’s hand, causing Joshua to step even closer, their faces inches apart. Clay places a hand on each of their shoulders, urging them to step back. He glares at Taylor and growls, “Get your partner in line, or he’ll get both of you rookies fired.”

Taylor nods, grabbing Del Moro by the collar. “Let’s go,” he urges.

Del Moro shoots me a final glare as they leave and spits on the floor near Joshua’s feet.

I am grateful that the cafeteria is only occupied by a few other people, mostly office or lab staff, given their lack of uniforms, and they all return their attention to their meals after watching our little show.

The whole encounter leaves me trembling. Del Moro is a sick fuck, but

this whole thing just escalated way too quickly. If we carry on like this, there could come a day when Clay and Josh get in trouble for defending me.

“What the hell, Josh?” Clay asks with a concerned frown.

“What were you thinking?” Sophia chides.

Instead of answering, Joshua turns and pulls me into a hug. “You okay?” he murmurs, his voice muffled by my hair.

“I am. I’m sorry,” I breathe out, trying to pull away, but he holds me tighter, his body trembling, and I wrap my arms around him in response.

“No one will ever hurt you again,” he promises, planting a gentle kiss on my head.

“I know,” I reassure him, rubbing his back. “You’ll make sure of that.”

After a few deep breaths, he releases me. By now, Clay sits next to Sophia, and plates of spaghetti are set out on the table. “Feeling better?” he asks, looking at Joshua, who simply nods.

He guides me to the opposite side of the table, and once I’m seated, he pulls my chair closer to his. Without another word, he begins to eat, and I follow suit.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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### **Carolina**

Last night was quiet, even when we got home after work. Sophia remained distant, retreating to her room.

She told me she was happy to have me back, so what is the issue then? Everything was fine for Christmas, and now it feels like she's actively avoiding me. Maybe I am too self-centered, and it has nothing to do with me, but even then, why wouldn't she tell me what is bothering her?

I am determined to talk to Chiara about keeping Sophia's house clean, but she told me she's spending the night at Monica's, so we'll have that conversation another day. The last thing I want is to jeopardize things with Sophia because my little sister can't pick up after herself.

With all the doubt and worry circling about me, I was relieved when Xander texted to invite me to watch a movie with him. I was never good at being alone, but since I always have had one of the guys around me, it's nearly impossible for me to be alone with my thoughts. Which has been a blessing.

Having so much free time now that I don't work at the bar is strange. I always dreamed of being lazy, listening to music, sketching, or watching a film. But with all this newfound time, I find myself overthinking things. So I prefer to keep myself busy and with company.

Xander ended up choosing a documentary on fishing. I'm not sure why, but he was fascinated during the whole thing and watched while holding and massaging my feet. It has already started to feel like a new normal. Just him

and me, enjoying a relaxed evening together while the others are at work.

We are getting more comfortable with each other by the minute, and the growing closeness doesn't help my crush on him one little bit. The way he looks at me with his big gray eyes, how his large hands squeeze my calves, how he chuckles at something funny on the television with his deep voice, well, let's just say I am in trouble. At least this time, I manage to stay awake until Joshua and Clay get home, though it is a struggle to keep my eyes open. So I'm more than happy to go to bed when Joshua asks me to sleep in his room.

I promptly slide under the covers while he takes a quick shower, and the sound of running water lulls me to sleep.

---

This morning, Sophia texts us that she'll be bringing bagels, coffee, and tea for breakfast.

"Mm... morning," I greet Joshua as I stretch and roll over to face him.

He slides his hand over my hip, grabbing my ass and pulling me closer. "Good morning, my Carolina."

He looks sleepy, his hair disheveled, and I reach out to push it out of his eyes, making him smile. My thumb wanders down to his dimple. "I'm going to take a quick shower but don't wait for me. See you downstairs," I say, kissing him on the nose and slipping out of bed.

Joshua groans, and I peek over my shoulder to find him watching my ass as he rubs his erection. "Busted," I tease.

"Woman, you are cruel," he accuses with another groan.

I can't help the smile that spreads as I head into the bathroom, turn on the shower, and quickly strip.

After a swift shower, I join the others in the kitchen. "Morning," I murmur.

Joshua pulls me close, kissing my temple. "You look beautiful."

I feel my cheeks heat up with a blush. "Thank you."

I still don't feel beautiful, but I might be starting to believe that he thinks I am, and it's a heady feeling.

"True. A beautiful, blushing little tomato," Clay teases from the other side of the kitchen island, earning him a middle finger from me.

“Lina, can we talk?” Sophia’s voice carries a hint of seriousness, causing a knot of unease in my stomach.

“Of course. What’s up?” I ask.

Is she going to tell me I must pack my things and Chiara and I need to leave her house so it’s no longer drowning in chaos?

She glances around the table, taking a deep breath. “Would it be okay if I share the information with everyone? It’s about your parents’ case.”

*Well, that sure as fuck wasn’t what I expected.*

Clay’s eyes narrow in confusion. “There’s a case? I thought it was an accident.”

“You can tell them everything.” I nod, wringing my hands.

I would have told them someday, anyway. I was just too chicken to do it yet. I hope this doesn’t change anything between us. I mean, Clay and Josh are cops. If they believe the file and think my parents were drug addicts, would it bother them? Would they see me differently?

I look over at Josh, who has worry in his eyes but a reassuring smile on his lips.

*They won’t, I tell myself.*

They already know so much about me, and I feel like a part of this family now. It’s time they knew the whole story.

“Carolina’s and Chiara’s parents died in a car crash,” Sophia starts. “The police report states the accident happened because they were high on heroin.”

Joshua gently tucks a strand of hair behind my ear while Clay nearly chokes on his bagel in surprise.

Xander’s gaze is intense as he looks at me. “But that’s not what happened, is it?” he asks, and I shake my head.

Sophia takes a moment, sipping her tea before continuing. “Five years ago, when it happened, Carolina insisted that her parents never touched drugs. But no one listened to her. We requested the file two weeks ago, specifically the toxicology report. It did indicate a high concentration of heroin in their system. However, the levels were so high that it would’ve been impossible for anyone to even drive a car. Not to mention that the blood in the report is the wrong type.”

Joshua squeezes my hand. “You think the case was tampered with?”

I nod, waiting for Sophia to continue to the part I don’t know.

“We both suspect it,” Sophia adds. “There was other stuff that was suspicious, but I couldn’t look further into it because they took the file away

from us again.”

“Who took it?” Clay asks, his brow furrowing.

“The detective who originally handled the case,” I murmur, hating that it all connects back to the Del Moros.

Clay’s eyes narrow as he asks, “Who was that?”

Sophia and I exchange a glance before she says, “Del Moro senior.”

Joshua jumps up from his stool, clearly irritated. “Is that why his son has it out for you?”

“Possibly, but I don’t know. I don’t know what happened. All I know for certain is that my parents weren’t doing drugs. Everything else is a mystery to me too. But his father having a fall out with my uncle and him starting to bully me happened shortly after my parents had the crash.”

“Why didn’t you tell us earlier?” Clay asks, his arms crossed over his chest.

“I was trying to figure out how to get Sophia to still help me find out the truth, even though Del Moro threatened her position and job.” I still feel bad for pulling her into this whole mess.

Xander’s voice is a low growl. “He did what?”

Sophia raises her shoulders in a nonchalant gesture, dismissing his outburst. “He made it clear that if we kept digging, he’d ensure I was fired.”

Clay releases a weary breath. “He’s well-connected with the NYPD’s top brass. Those aren’t empty threats.”

“But you didn’t stop, did you?” I lean forward, my hope palpable.

Sophia grins mischievously. “I used the time while you were napping, sleeping beauty.”

My heart races in anticipation. *And she’s telling me this now?* “What did you find?”

She leans in, her eyes focused on mine. “I managed to speak with the toxicologist who worked the case. It wasn’t easy since he left his job shortly after and moved to LA to work for the LAPD. However, he recalled the case because he received blood samples, and not long after, Detective Del Moro brought in new samples. He claimed the original ones were mistakenly swapped with another case. The toxicologist didn’t think much of it at the time since he hadn’t started the tests, and such mix-ups had happened before.”

“Motherfucker,” Xander mutters, his hands gripping some of his hair.

“Is there any way to prove this?” Joshua inquires, his brows furrowed and

his nose scrunched.

He looks like he is already going over everything he just learned in his mind.

Sophia's pretty face contorts into a grimace. "No, he didn't keep any documents related to the switch. It would be hearsay. But it confirms our suspicions," she continues. "We need to get to the bottom of this."

"I don't want you risking your job over this," I admit. "Yes, I wanted the truth, and it seems my suspicions were right. But I can live with that knowledge without putting you in danger."

I couldn't live knowing she could be fired or even hurt because of me.

Sophia looks at me intently, her eyebrows pinched in confusion. "Don't you want justice? Don't you want to know *why* they framed your parents?"

Her words resonate deep in my soul, and it feels like someone finally understands my need for the truth.

"Of course," I whisper. "But we still don't know the full extent."

"Then let's find out. What do you need from us, Sophia?" Joshua asks, putting his hands on my shoulders to massage them from where he is standing behind me.

She takes a moment before answering, biting her bottom lip in thought. "There was a witness mentioned in the report. She claimed she saw Carolina's parents trying to avoid the crash, even though the official report says they drove straight into the wall. I'd like you to speak with her again. Maybe she remembers more details. Her name is Rebecca Stone, and she lives right across from where the accident happened."

"West Harlem," I whisper, taking a deep breath.

I could never forget the place. I visited it for weeks, asking myself what they thought in their final moments.

"We'll talk to her," Clay promises me, meeting my gaze with a nod.

"Thank you," I breathe out, though a sense of unease settles in my stomach.

*Am I putting all of them in danger with this?*

---

The day is flying by. Sophia and I are working on an interesting case, making the hours pass quickly.

Clay and Josh looked for Rebecca first thing this morning and found her apartment, but she wasn't there. And since tomorrow is New Year's Eve, they said they'd try again in a couple of days. As much as I want answers, my parents have been gone for a while now. It's not urgent, and I am grateful for any help.

We're in the cafeteria, and I'm eating the sandwich Joshua got for me, watching Sophia be her usual bubbly self. It's a complete one-eighty from her mood yesterday, but I'm relieved to see her back to herself.

"What are our plans for New Year's Eve?" she asks.

"We're on duty," Clay reminds her between bites.

"Yeah, but only until maybe one a.m., right? I thought we could have a small house party with Xander, Carolina, and some friends. You guys can join when you're done," she suggests.

*House party? With her friends? Again? Fuck.*

I can't really say that celebrating New Year's Eve with Professor Summers was on my bucket list.

"So, you want to have the party at our place and hope we agree so the mess isn't at your house," Joshua points out, giving her a pointed look.

"That's true," she admits, not the least bit embarrassed. "But I also think it'd be fun to have people over. Last New Year's Eve was so boring." She glances at Clay. "Don't tell Xander, okay?"

She doesn't even have to spell it out. I bet his idea of a good New Year's Eve party is a boring documentary with the option of sleeping in front of the television.

I smile to myself, my gaze on my sandwich.

Clay chuckles. "I won't, but I think he wanted it to be quiet so he could go to sleep early."

"Well, not this year! Carolina, what do you think? Ready to party into the new year?" Sophia asks me, eyebrows wiggling.

I am not going to get out of this, am I? *I need to at least try.*

"I'm not really into New Year's Eve stuff," I share, hoping she'll get the hint.

Seemingly genuinely interested, she leans in, her eyes searching mine for an explanation. "Why not?"

I pause for a moment, considering my response. "I don't know, it's mostly because it's the day in the bar that sucks the most," I admit with a nonchalant shrug, hoping the explanation will suffice.

“See, but you always worked, and now you don’t have to. You don’t even know if you would enjoy a New Year’s Eve party,” she counters, her tone eager to convince me.

I have no idea what else I could tell her to change the outcome, so I find myself conceding, albeit reluctantly.

“True,” I admit. “But it’s not my place, so I don’t decide.”

Sophia turns to Joshua, her expression pleading. Joshua, in turn, looks at Clay, who responds with a casual shrug. I get the sense that my fate has been sealed.

“All right,” Clay concedes too, his voice carrying a hint of amusement. “But you have to help clean up afterward. I am not going to clean up your friends’ mess again while you’re conveniently absent with a hangover.”

Sophia’s face lights up with excitement, and she can’t contain her enthusiasm. “Yay! This is going to be so much fun,” she exclaims, clapping her hands together.

“I’m sorry in advance,” Joshua whispers to me, making me smile.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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### **Carolina**

It's almost midnight, and I'm standing by one of the fire pods Xander and I set up in the garden yesterday.

Work was slow today, and when we got home, Sophia started baking and preparing finger food for her guests while Xander and I made sure the living room and kitchen areas were clean and decluttered for the people coming over.

Then I watched Xander light the fires in the pods in fascination. They look like big stone bowls, each containing a burner surrounded by decorative stones and glass, creating a mesmerizing flame that dances within the bowl. They are super pretty to look at and radiate enough heat for people to enjoy standing outside for a while.

There are way too many people in the house for my liking, but it would be rude of me to leave now and wait for Joshua in the bedroom.

He's texted me a few times. They're having a relatively quiet New Year's Eve, but it will still be a while before they arrive.

I pull Joshua's beanie further down over my ears and glance at my phone—11:57 p.m.

The new black winter jacket Xander bought me is beautiful and long enough to keep me cozy. The material is soft against my skin, a stark contrast to my old leather jacket, which couldn't hold a candle to this one in terms of keeping me warm.

But after spending so long out in the biting cold, the chill seems to have

seeped deep into my bones.

“Aren’t you cold?” Xander asks from behind me, and I see him coming out and closing the glass door behind him, joining me on the porch.

“No, your pods are great,” I reply, but my hands *are* freezing, so I stretch them out to warm them by the fire.

He takes one of my hands and remarks, “You’re cold. We should go inside.”

“I don’t want to. I’m not a fan of all the New Year’s festivities and the crowd,” I admit.

He grunts, a low, almost teasing sound. “Neither am I. I usually give Clay his New Year’s kiss and head to bed.”

His eyes hold a mischievous glint as he says this, and I can’t help but chuckle.

Memories of chaotic New Year’s Eve parties at the bar flash before my eyes. “The past few years, I’ve been busy keeping the bar from being destroyed by drunk patrons.”

I think about last year when a full-on bar fight was happening during the countdown, and the new year was rung in with a stool being shattered over the bar, barely missing me.

He ponders for a moment, his gaze thoughtful. “So, you’ve never had a New Year’s kiss?”

“Oh, thanks for the reminder,” I reply sarcastically. “I’m hoping for at least a post-midnight kiss this year.”

“Ten, nine, eight...” We hear Sophia and her friends counting down from inside the house, the excitement building in the air. I turn to look through the windows. “One... Happy New Year!” they cheer, and at the same time, fireworks start to light up the night sky.

Xander reaches out, his touch gentle as he holds my chin between his thumb and forefinger, making me look up at him. “Happy New Year,” he murmurs, his voice soft and warm.

Leaning down, he closes the distance between us, and our lips meet. His kiss is gentle, a tender exploration that sends shivers down my spine. It’s just a brief touch of his lips against mine, but it’s enough for my heart to nearly leap out of my chest.

Pulling back slightly, he looks into my eyes, his gaze intense and searching, as if he’s trying to find an answer in them. It’s a silent question, one that lingers in the air between us. One I’m not sure how to answer.

“Happy New Year,” I whisper back, my voice barely audible over the lingering fireworks.

A smile spreads slowly over his face. And I am reminded how beautiful this man is. “Wanna go inside for a drink?” he suggests, his warm breath mingling with mine in the frigid air.

“Only if we can bring it back out here afterward.” I grin.  
He smiles, taking my hand. “Let’s go warm up for a bit.”

---

## Clay

When Josh and I arrive home, we can already hear the chatter from the people in our living room as we step up to the front door. We exchange glances and head upstairs, eager to freshen up quickly before joining everyone.

Not really feeling like dressing up for the crowd tonight, I slip into gray sweatpants and a matching hoodie after a quick shower. I’m exhausted and would rather head straight to bed, but I know I need to at least greet everyone.

Joshua comes out of his room, dressed in pants and a stylish sweater, which earns him a frown from me.

“What? I bet Carolina made an effort. The least I can do is match that,” he explains, making me regret my casual clothes.

We head downstairs, offering hellos to everyone. However, my eyes scan the room for my man and girl.

“Outside.” Josh points to the windows leading to the garden, having spotted them.

We head back to the entrance to grab our coats before we step out into the garden.

Two fire pods light up the night, providing some warmth, and Xander and Carolina stand side by side in front of one of them. They aren’t talking, but she’s holding onto his pinky finger.

*It’s so fucking cute.*

Joshua rushes over to Carolina, wrapping his arms around her from behind, pulling her close in a tight embrace.

“There you are,” he exclaims, causing her to turn toward him, her face

lighting up. He doesn't waste a moment and plants a kiss on her lips. "I've lost count of how many kisses I owe you, so let's start every New Year's from a thousand again." His words are met with a soft giggle from Carolina.

He ushers her toward the other fire pod, seemingly wanting to steal a moment of privacy, but his voice carries over to us.

"Nine hundred ninety-nine..." he pecks her lips, "... nine hundred ninety-eight..." Then he leans in for a deeper kiss.

I turn to Xander, our smiles mirroring each other's. "So, where's my New Year's kiss, babe? I've been waiting all night," I tease, my voice filled with playful anticipation as I pull him close, my fingers lightly stroking his cold-reddened cheek.

"Would you still love me if I told you I gave your New Year's kiss to someone else?" he asks, his eyes dancing with mischief, a sly smirk playing on his lips.

"That depends on who it was," I reply with a lifted brow. "But if it were a black kitty cat, I'd wholeheartedly approve."

"I thought you might." He nods, his grin widening. "Happy New Year, light of my life." He leans down to kiss me, and I indulge him for a moment, savoring the taste of his lips. Then, reluctantly, I pull back, needing to know more.

"You can't just drop a bombshell like that and act like it's nothing," I protest.

"Giving my boy his New Year's kiss was, and still is, more important. Now, shut up and let me kiss you properly," he commands with a growl.

He grabs my neck, pulling me close and kissing me so passionately that I'm left breathless. I'm still catching my breath when he finally breaks the kiss, resting his forehead against mine.

"That was incredible," I breathe out. "Now, spill. What happened?"

"I don't know, we were alone, it was midnight, I stole a small kiss. It was brief. But it was... fuck. Her lips are so soft," he muses, his voice turning husky.

I glance to where I saw her last and spot Carolina standing alone by the other fire pod, lost in thought. "Where's Josh?" I ask Xander.

He looks inside, and I follow his gaze, seeing Sophia clinging to Josh's arm, chatting with one of her friends.

"I'm going to..." I start, nodding toward Carolina.

"Steal your kiss back?" he teases. "Fill me in later."

He kisses my temple and heads inside while I join Carolina.

“Happy New Year, kitten,” I whisper, stepping up behind her.

She turns her head, smiling. “Happy New Year.”

I open my parka and draw her into my chest, wrapping both of us in its warmth. “Seems like the new jacket isn’t working properly. Your nose is all red,” I murmur, resting my chin on the beanie atop her head and holding her close. She feels chilly, making me shiver in response.

She chuckles softly, the sound a melodic whisper in the dimly lit space around us, as she leans into me, her body fitting perfectly against mine. “How was your shift?”

A playful smile tugs at the corners of my lips, and I can’t resist the urge to tease her a bit. “I would’ve preferred being here with you all. I heard you got my New Year’s kiss.”

She turns to face me, the soft, crackling firelight dancing across her features, casting a glow on half of her face, accentuating her beauty. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

I gently interrupt her with a tender touch, my fingers tracing her jawline before tangling in her soft, silken hair. “Hush,” I murmur. “I was just joking.”

Drawing her closer, our bodies press together, her breath mingling with mine. “Both you and Xander deserved a midnight kiss.” I continue, my gaze locked on her lips, “I’m glad he stole the kiss from you.”

She relaxes in my embrace as a quiet sigh escapes her lips. My heart races as I lean down, our faces drawing together.

“I’ve been thinking about stealing it back from you,” I whisper, my voice barely above a breath.

My gaze dances between her captivating eyes and slightly parted lips. In response to my words, I feel her sharp intake of breath.

With gentle fingers, I use my hand tangled in her hair to tilt her face upward, the flickering firelight casting a mesmerizing shimmer in her eyes. The world fades away, and it’s just the two of us in this moment. Our lips draw closer, the promise of a kiss hanging in the air. But just as our lips are about to meet, a voice calls out, breaking the spell.

Chiara hollers Carolina’s name, and I quickly change course, shifting to gently kiss her cheek instead.

“Go, see what little sister wants from you,” I whisper in her ear, a hint of longing lingering in my voice.

“I’d rather know what you want from me,” she whispers.

A soft smile plays on my lips as I lean in, my breath warm against her cold earlobe. “I don’t want anything *from* you,” I murmur, my voice filled with sincerity. “I want everything *with* you.”

I release her from the warmth of my parka just as Chiara approaches, interrupting our stolen moment.

“Lina, can Leo sleep over?” Chiara pleads.

“Did you ask Sophia?” Carolina asks.

“No, can you please?” Chiara gives her best puppy dog eyes, making me chuckle.

Carolina is pulled away, but not before she looks back at me with a promise in her eyes.

“Talk later?” she asks, her voice a soft plea.

“Later, kitten,” I promise.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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### **Carolina**

“I’m sorry I left you outside like that. I just thought the sooner I said hello to everyone, the sooner we could have some time alone,” Joshua apologizes, guiding me upstairs to his room.

“It’s okay. I’m just glad to have you all to myself now,” I respond.

I am genuinely relieved I no longer have to be around all those people. To be perfectly honest, being inside right now feels amazing. Although I can still feel the chill in my bones.

Once inside his room, he closes the door behind us. “Trust me, I’m the happy one here.” He grins at me, his voice filled with affection.

A soft, contented sigh escapes my lips as he brushes a stray strand of hair from my face, his touch tender. The way his eyes lock onto mine makes my heart flutter.

“Have I mentioned yet this year how beautiful you are and how much I love you?” he asks softly.

“I think that’s the first time you’ve said it this year,” I tease, a mischievous smirk playing on my lips.

“Oh, so many firsts to have when the year is new,” he muses, his finger tracing a slow, tantalizing path from my neck down, sending shivers along my spine.

His gaze remains intensely on me.

“Xander kissed me at midnight,” I blurt out, the confession tumbling from my lips before I can stop it. Joshua’s touch pauses, and his gaze locks onto

mine. His eyes are filled with a mixture of surprise and apprehension. I can feel my heart pounding as I continue, my voice shaky with guilt, “And Clay almost did too.”

Joshua doesn’t respond immediately, but his silence speaks volumes. I can see the questions swirling in his mind, the uncertainty, and maybe even a hint of hurt in his expression. It pains me to have to admit this, to have let it happen in the first place.

“Did they now?” Joshua seems to have found his voice, trying to sound casual but clearly struggling.

“I shouldn’t have let it happen, and I’m so sorry,” I confess, my voice filled with regret.

Joshua takes my hand, his touch reassuring as he guides me to the edge of the bed, where he sits, gently pulling me onto his lap. His eyes never leave mine as he speaks, his tone measured but with a hint of vulnerability.

“I noticed that there is something between you guys.”

“Joshua—” I begin, but he interrupts, determined to express his thoughts on the matter.

“Let me finish,” he says softly. “It would be okay if you have feelings for them. Truly, it would. You deserve the world times two, or rather three.” He flashes me a warm smile and kisses my neck gently, his lips comforting. “If that’s what you truly want, I’m open to exploring it, to give you the freedom to see where it goes. You won’t lose me over this.”

He leans in, ready to seal his words with a kiss, but I place a hand on his chest, gently stopping him. My heart aches as I look into his eyes, grateful for his understanding yet torn by the complexity of my emotions.

“I want *you*, Joshua,” I whisper, tears brimming in my eyes.

“One doesn’t exclude the other,” he says gently, tracing my jaw with his thumb.

“I promise, it’s just you and me. This...” I place a hand over my heart, “... is only about us.”

Joshua’s response is to take my hand and bring it to his lips to tenderly kiss my palm. “Whatever you want, my Carolina.” His voice remains soft and filled with affection, but I detect a subtle undercurrent of relief in his words.

He stands, gracefully pulling me up with him and drawing me close. A shiver of anticipation courses through me as his hands move with purpose, lifting my Henley over my head. His lips, warm on my cold skin, find their way to my shoulder, planting soft, lingering kisses.

“Have we talked enough for tonight? I believe I still have a promise to keep, myself.”

“You do?” I ask, my breath quickening.

His lips trail upward, tracing a path of slow, sensuous kisses along my neck until they reach my ear. His whisper, filled with promise, sends tingles through my chest. “Nice and slow.”

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## Joshua

“I can’t decide whether I want to taste you or fuck you,” I murmur as I reach behind her to unclasp her bra, then gently slide it down her arms, revealing her beautiful tits.

Sleeping beside her every night since she got out of the hospital and not using them as my own fucking plushie should earn me a medal.

“Why not both?” she counters huskily, making me chuckle.

Kneeling before her, I place my hands on her hips and draw her closer. I take one of her nipples into my mouth, and she arches her back, pressing her tits into my face. To think I went weeks without caressing her. My hands find the waistband of her jeans. I open them and tug them down, and I can’t stop the growl that erupts from my chest. Her panties follow suit, and soon, she stands before me, entirely naked.

And she is a beauty to behold.

A hint of insecurity flashes in her eyes, and she self-consciously grabs her left elbow with her right hand, attempting to cover herself.

We can’t have that. I need to see all of her. It’s been far too long.

I gently nudge her leg, prompting her to widen her stance, and I lean in to grasp her ass cheeks, giving them a firm squeeze, making her suck in a breath.

“You can’t imagine how often I’ve fantasized about this,” I confess, leaning in to trace my tongue along her slit.

This prompts her to immediately let go of her elbow, and both her hands come down to my head, her fingers threading through my hair.

She gazes down at me, maintaining eye contact, as she whispers, “*Dio.*”

“I could kneel in front of you forever, Carolina,” I whisper, delving in to lick her clit, circling and nibbling on it, pressing her more to me with my

hands on her ass.

My eyes remain focused on hers as I lock my lips around her clit and suck it into my mouth. She starts panting, her grip in my hair bordering on painful, but I love it and groan into her pussy.

She starts to tremble under my touch, and I wonder if it's too soon, if I should have waited a little longer. She looked fine the last few days, but maybe this is too much.

Her pulling on my hair brings my thoughts back to the present. *I can worry after I make her come.*

I lap her up, tracing my name with my tongue around her clit, and her moans get louder. *Fuck it, I hope every one of them down there can hear how I get my girl off.*

“Joshua, fuck, I—” She gasps, closing her eyes and letting her head fall back.

I let a hand wander from her ass to her pussy, pushing a finger inside her. She clenches around me so hard it makes it hard to move my finger.

My cock twitches in anticipation.

*She is so fucking tight.*

With a few more pumps and licks, she falls over the edge, her hands wandering to my shoulders, her nails digging into my skin. She's moaning and trembling, but I continue to lick her as she comes down from her high before I stop, giving her a few seconds to breathe.

“Next to chocolate, you're my favorite,” I whisper, kissing her belly and making her sigh with a laugh.

After wiping my face on her thigh, I grab the back of her legs to lift her as I stand. Instinctively, she wraps her arms around my neck, holding on tightly. I chuckle softly against her shoulder. “I've got you.”

Setting her down on the bed, I stand straight again to tug my shirt over my head. Then I swiftly slip off my pants and stand before her in only my boxer shorts. Her gaze travels down my chest appreciatively, and I get even harder, my cock throbbing.

I am so fucking lucky this stunning woman seems to find me as captivating as I find her.

Wordlessly, she reaches out to tug down my boxers, and I help her, stepping out of them. Then, I gently prompt her to move further up the bed, positioning myself above her.

“Just because we did it once does not mean we have to do it now. We can

stop right here,” I whisper, leaning down to kiss her, my thumb brushing along her cheek.

Her arms come around my neck, pulling me closer. Her taste and touch drive me crazy, and I can't help but be selfish and hope she allows me to fuck her.

I can be gentle with her, making sure she's okay.

I just need to be inside her...

... but only if she wants this too.

“I missed you. I thought about it so many times. I want you, Joshua,” she whispers.

*Thank fuck.*

*God, I missed her and her tight pussy too.*

“Lift your pretty hips for me,” I instruct, reaching for a cushion to place beneath her, and she obliges.

I gently tug her closer by her calves, squeezing her beautiful softness. I lean back down to kiss her deeply, the head of my cock positioned at her entrance. She is so fucking wet, I slip right in, but I only push slowly, wanting to give her time to adjust to me. The sensation makes both of us gasp in a delicious form of torture, and I only halt when I am fully seated inside.

This is home

*This is where I fucking belong.*

“I love being yours,” she murmurs, prompting me to trail kisses up her neck.

“You have all of me,” I whisper into her ear, followed by a gentle lick that makes her shiver.

I kiss her again while I pull out slowly and push back in, enjoying every inch, moaning through our locked lips, massaging her breasts.

She is so wet, taking me inch by inch and moaning, seemingly enjoying it as much as I do. I push in a little deeper, and she whimpers.

“Does it still hurt?” I ask, needing to make sure I'm not causing any pain.

“No, it's just... it feels so good,” she whispers, her eyelids fluttering closed.

I keep a deep and unhurried rhythm, teasing her and myself at the same time. Drawing her hips closer, I grind into her, sinking until there is no room between us. Her breath catches as her eyes snap at me, and she releases a breathy “Fuck.”

Leaning down, I nibble on her bottom lip, then grasp her wrists, guiding

them above her head, making her arch her back and push out her tits. With a groan, I grind into her tantalizingly slow, making sure my pelvis rubs her clit while peppering the side of her face with kisses.

“I could lose myself in you. God, you’re so tight, Carolina. Such a beautiful pussy. All mine,” I tell her, leaning in to kiss her again.

But too soon, she breaks away from our kiss, gasping for breath.

One of my hands keeps her wrists pinned above her head while the other explores her beautiful body. My fingers trail over her soft skin, marveling at the goose bumps that mix with the slight sheen of sweat. I tease her nipple, venturing further down, my thumb locating her clit and circling it, even as I maintain my deep rhythm.

“Joshua,” she breathes out, her eyes pleading with me to give her what she needs.

“I know, shh... I know,” I soothe, applying slightly more pressure with my thumb. Carolina closes her eyes, letting her head tilt back. “No, Carolina, keep those beautiful eyes open. Look at me. I want to see your eyes when I make you come.”

Her eyes snap open, her gaze finding mine, and I pinch her clit at the same time as I thrust inside her. She shatters around me, squeezing me hard. I try to thrust a few more times, but her pussy holds me in a chokehold, and all I can do is come with a low grunt and a growl, my teeth clenching.

“Holy shit,” I murmur, resting my forehead against hers and releasing her wrists, tremors running through me.

She takes my head in her hands and pulls my lips to hers, kissing me deeply. “Happy New Year,” she whispers.

I let my forehead fall to hers and huff out a laugh. “Happy New Year, my Carolina.”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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### Clay

That training session with the jump rope was brutal.

I stand in the kitchen, dressed in my usual workout attire—gray sweat shorts, white sneakers, and a red cap worn backward. Sweat still trickles down my chest, and I'm slightly out of breath. I've just finished my normal workout routine, though I pushed through much longer this time.

*I needed the distraction.*

With Xander's and my room right next to Joshua's, hearing her moan and come for him last night was the sweetest form of torture I've ever experienced. Xander thought it was funny to suck me off against the backdrop of her moans, intensifying the torment.

That knocked me out for a few hours, but as soon as I woke up, one of her whimpers played on repeat in my mind. I couldn't stay in bed any longer, or I might have been tempted to go over to their room and ask her if she'd let me try to get one of those out of her myself.

Xander joins me downstairs and sits at the kitchen island while I make coffee for us. I'm handing him his mug with a smirk when Carolina comes into the kitchen.

"Good morning, kitten," I greet with a genuine smile.

She rubs her eyes tiredly, coming over to the coffee machine. "Can I have one too, please?" she asks, and I oblige, pouring her a mug and stirring in some sugar.

As I turn to hand her the mug, I catch her gaze fixed on my chest, her

eyes following a bead of sweat making its way down my abs. I can't help but smirk, thoroughly enjoying her attention.

"Did you sleep all right?" I inquire, breaking the silence and handing her the mug.

Her eyes meet mine, and I notice a faint blush coloring her cheeks as she takes a sip. "Yes, thanks. You?" she responds, her voice soft and somewhat bashful.

I can't resist the urge to tease her. "Oh, I bet Josh wore you out," I say with a wink, fully aware that I'm pushing her buttons. Her frown is all too telling. "I was hoping we could continue our conversation, but you'd already left," I add, taking a step closer.

In response, she takes a cautious step back, her expression growing serious. "About that..." she turns to Xander, her tone filled with remorse, "... I shouldn't have kissed you, Xander. It was out of line."

"I kissed you," Xander grunts out.

"It doesn't matter. I'm with Joshua. It shouldn't have happened," she says, clearly stressed. "I'm sorry I let it."

I step closer to her, my tone reassuring. "Kitten, relax. It was just a little New Year's kiss. I bet if you talked to Josh, he'd tell you it's okay."

She meets my gaze with a mixture of regret and remorse. "I did talk to him. He knows. I'm still sorry, though, and it won't happen again." Her gaze drops to her feet while she speaks. "I'm going to get ready at Sophia's," she adds softly, a hint of sadness in her tone. "Thanks for the coffee."

As she starts to move away, I can't help but reach out and gently grasp her arm, my heart heavy with uncertainty. "Why does it feel like I am losing you when you're not even mine?" I ask, and even though I know I need to keep my emotions under control, my voice is a mixture of frustration and longing.

Her eyes dart between mine and then linger on my lips for a fleeting moment. But she quickly shakes her head, shifts her gaze to Xander, then gently pulls her arm free, her posture now defensive. "Have a nice day," she murmurs, her words barely more than a whisper as she exits the kitchen.

Moments later, the front door opens and closes, leaving an unsettling silence in its wake.

"I love you, love, but that was just plain-ass stupid," Xander says with a sigh.

I groan in frustration, letting my head fall back. "I know! Fuck, I just got

nervous. She pushed me away just when I thought she was starting to see it too.”

“I get that you want this badly, but you need to give her time. You’re pushing too hard. Josh is her first boyfriend. Everything is new to her. And now we’re expecting her to be open to a very unconventional relationship? You need to be patient. Don’t push too much, but also don’t retreat too far. Keep tension on the line.”

“Oh, so my babe’s a fishing expert now?” I tease.

“I end up watching too many damn documentaries while waiting for you at night,” he grumbles, making me laugh. “But I’m serious. I would love to bend her over the island and fuck her silly too, but we’re not there yet. This is our forever. There is no rush. I wanna take it slow with her. I want to show her how much I want her, but let her set the pace and come around. Make her want me so much that she takes the initiative.”

“That sounds hot,” I muse.

“Oh, I know what’s hot,” he murmurs, standing to approach me from behind, then he reaches around, grabbing my crotch and pulling me close.

“Be a good boy, and don’t scare her off. It’d be such a waste. I can’t shake the image of both of you kneeling in front of me, licking up my cock at the same time. I really want that fantasy to become a reality, even if it means waiting a bit longer,” he whispers in my ear. The mere thought makes me hard, and with his hand still on me, he can undoubtedly feel it. “You’d like that too, wouldn’t you?”

“I can go upstairs again for a few minutes if you guys are just about to start something,” Josh comments from the kitchen doorway.

Xander releases me and plants a kiss on my neck before stepping away. “No need. I was giving him a little reminder.”

Josh chuckles. “Of course.”

“Someone’s in a good mood today,” I observe, leaning back against the kitchen counter and sipping my coffee.

“I am,” he replies with a smile, getting some orange juice from the refrigerator.

My anxiety gets the better of me, and I can’t help but ask, “Did you talk to Carolina last night by any chance?” Even I can hear the unease in my tone.

He smiles, pouring himself a glass. “Some of what we did was talking.”

“Yes, you lucky bastard, we heard,” I retort, jealousy evident in my tone.

His eyes lock onto mine, and he chuckles. “You did?” The smile on his

face remains unapologetic. “Sorry, not sorry. After years of hearing you two next door, it’s only fair.”

I decide to redirect the conversation back to the pressing matter. “Anyway, did you talk about the situation?”

“She mentioned that Xander kissed her and that you almost did,” he accuses, giving me a pointed look. “Didn’t I tell you both that it has to come from her?”

Choosing to sidestep his question, I ask, “What did you say to her?”

“I told her it’s okay if she has feelings for both of you, that she wouldn’t lose me over it, and that I’m open to exploring.” He shrugs nonchalantly.

*That sounds good.* “And?” I prompt, gesturing with my hand for him to keep talking.

He hesitates, biting his cheek, then reluctantly meets my gaze. “She told me she wanted only me, that it would be just the two of us.”

My skepticism creeps in, and I ask hesitantly, still not entirely convinced he’s all in with us, “Did you really tell her it would be okay?”

“Careful, Clay, I still have a scar on my back from your knife.” He glares at me, his tone turning cold.

I relent, frowning as I search his face. “Fine, I believe you.” Still, my doubts linger, and I can’t help but push it. “But she didn’t mean it, right? She was just scared?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. It’s clear as day that she has feelings for both of you. But just because she has those feelings doesn’t mean she’s ready for what you’re proposing. She’s inexperienced, has trauma, and is fragile despite her tough exterior. Give her time. I can’t make any promises. And remember, this isn’t easy for me. It’s going to be an adjustment for us all that will require patience, something you lack. I’ll remind her at every opportunity that she can have all of us. But as I’ve said, the decision has to come from her, Clay. If she doesn’t want this—”

“Then it won’t happen,” I cut him off, finishing his sentence and nodding. The pang in my heart has me wincing just the same.

“I’m sorry,” Josh says sincerely, patting my shoulder.

“It’s okay. I’m going to take a shower,” I reply, placing my mug in the dishwasher and heading toward the hallway.

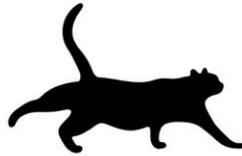
As I attempt to walk past Xander, he pulls me close, his lips sealing ours in a kiss. My poor, hurting heart flutters at the contact.

He nips my bottom lip, his voice a soft, teasing murmur as he speaks.

“Patience, love. It might not be your strong suit, but what a chance to grow.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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### **Carolina**

For the last two hours, I have been over at the guys' place, helping clean up the mess from yesterday. Since the vibe with Clay and Xander feels off, I stick to Joshua and Sophia as much as possible.

Maybe it's just me overthinking things, but the way Clay looks at me, like a hurt puppy, hurts me too.

*What the fuck did I do?*

I know what I did. I let myself fall, and now I'm dealing with the consequences.

I have feelings for all of them. Fuck, I messed up. Joshua is my boyfriend, and he's perfect in every way. I'd never leave him for Clay or Xander. But his suggestion yesterday that I could explore my feelings—that's bound to end in a fucking mess. Xander and Clay clearly love each other. Anyone can see that.

*What would I be to them? A temporary play toy before they lose interest again?*

Somehow, I still find it hard to believe someone like Joshua could fall for me. It's even harder to believe Clay and Xander find me attractive too. Maybe Clay just sees me as a challenge. He might want to kiss me just because he thinks he can't have me. And Xander? He's different. How the fuck do I know what that guy is thinking? Is he just fascinated by the idea of the sad, abused girl?

I'm brushing my hair when there's a knock on the door, and Sophia pokes

her head in, snapping me out of my thoughts. “The Bay Plaza Mall has a special today. All the shops are open, even the nail salons. And since neither of us is working today, and the guys just left to start their shift...” she winks at me, “... you and I are having a girls’ day out!”

I can’t help but smile at her enthusiasm, though I have to tease her a bit and release a dramatic sigh. “Aren’t you hungover?”

She dismisses it with a wave. “Pff... forget it. No arguments. If we don’t go today, we’ll have to wait for weeks again. Also, we planned to swim tomorrow for family Sunday, and I bet you don’t even have a swimsuit.”

I shake my head, a hint of vulnerability in my voice as I admit, “I don’t swim.”

“You’re coming. Even if you’re not good at swimming, the swimming center has this huge hot tub where you can just relax. We can chill there while the guys do their laps,” she suggests, smiling.

I hesitate for a moment, then finally decide to open up, surprising myself with how honest I am with her. “Sophia, I... I’m not going to wear a swimsuit in public.”

“Because of your forearm? Honestly, I think it’s healed quite well. But if it bothers you, maybe we could look for a swimsuit with long sleeves?” she muses, her concern genuine.

I hadn’t even thought about the scars. “No, it’s not that,” I admit. “I just don’t have a bikini body.”

Sophia rolls her eyes and scolds me, “Oh, hush woman! I’d kill to have your curves. I can’t even fill an A-cup. I look like a little boy.”

I chuckle at her comment. “Sophia, you’re one of the most beautiful women I know.”

“Right back at you! And I’m certain the three guys who are head over heels for you would agree,” she says with a teasing glint in her eye.

I sigh, shaking my head. “Don’t you start with that shit too. That’s just not true.”

“You’re delusional. But okay. Let’s put the pause button on this conversation for now. Nail salon and shopping?”

“I just spent all my money on Chiara’s laptop,” I admit.

“I told you, it’s on me! Think of it as your Christmas bonus,” she insists.

“I don’t get a bonus from you,” I reply dryly. “I live in your house, Sophia, with my little sister. I think I take more than enough from you as it is.”

“Well, now you do.” She beams. “Come on, grab your jacket, and let’s go.”

“Where’s Chiara?” I ask as we head downstairs.

Sophia’s expression shifts, and her lips turn downward, her nose crinkling up. “I heard some noises from her room. Best we leave her be,” she suggests, and I can’t help but laugh in response.

As Sophia gets her purse, I take a moment to text to Chiara, ensuring she’s aware of our plans. This girl is getting way too independent lately.

I know I should be looking after her more closely, but it’s been challenging to keep up with everything that’s been happening.

We’re getting our nails done and tomorrow we’re going swimming. Wanna join?

No, thanks. Have fun.

Before I can put my phone away, another text from her lights up the screen.

Can Leo stay over this weekend?

I show the message to Sophia, who cackles. Taking my phone, she quickly types a response.

Use protection and crack a window now and then, please. XO  
Sophia

I huff a laugh as I read her reply, just in time to see a middle finger emoji pop up in our chat, followed by another text.

Thank you.

*Who is this girl lately?*

Just as we’re about to head out, the door swings open with a knock, and Xander stops in front of me, looming over me. I tilt my head to look up at him.

“Where are you headed?” he asks after seeing our jackets.

“We’re getting our nails done and shopping for a bathing suit for tomorrow,” Sophia responds.

“Sounds fun, I’m in,” he agrees, moving to let us through.

His response surprises me, but my feet stay where they are.

“You want to get your nails done?” I ask flatly, furrowing my brows at him.

“I want to spend some time with you,” he replies.

Though his words seem meant for both of us, his gaze intently focuses on me.

“Could we use your truck to get to the mall then? It’d be better than taking the sub,” Sophia asks.

“Sure, I’ll bring it around,” he agrees, heading to the driveway.

Sophia turns to me with a playful smirk. “I bet he’ll have plenty of opinions on the bathing suit.”

“I’m dating your brother, Sophia,” I remind her with a hint of annoyance.

“I bet Joshy will appreciate whatever Xander picks out,” she responds casually.

---

“What color, length, and shape do you want?” the nail technician asks as I sit down.

Sophia and Xander sit on either side of me, each at their own station. Xander’s tall form looks a bit funny squeezed into the all-pink interior.

“Shape?” I echo, puzzled. I didn’t know there were different options. *Who would have thought getting your nails done was so complicated?*

She rolls her eyes slightly. “Round, square, oval, almond, coffin...”

“She’ll have short, round ones like mine,” Sophia interrupts, coming to my rescue, and I shoot her a grateful look.

“What color are you getting?” I ask Sophia.

“Nude baby pink,” she replies, causing me to scrunch up my nose in distaste, making her chuckle. “There are plenty of other colors to choose from.”

Looking over the options, I quickly rule out all the pink ones. “I’m torn between the dark Bordeaux red and black.”

“How about you get the dark red, and I’ll get black. Then, we can paint a pinky finger in each other’s color?” Xander suggests, and I blink at him.

“That’s adorable! You should totally do that!” Sophia gushes excitedly.

I don’t know what to say, so I simply hold out my hands to the lady and

let her do her magic.

Xander and Sophia chat about which stores we should visit and where to eat. I've never been here before, and shopping isn't something I have ever enjoyed. It's hard to enjoy shopping without money.

Plus, I always struggle to find clothes I like in my size.

When we're done, Xander pays for all of us, and I give Sophia a questioning look.

She just shrugs. "If he wants to pamper us, we can use the coupon next time."

I am more than uncomfortable letting them pay for everything. Xander seems to sense this because he stops me as we walk through the mall toward the first store.

"You good?" he asks.

"Sure. Thanks for the nails," I answer curtly, not looking into his eyes.

He steps closer and tucks a strand of my hair behind my ear, prompting me to meet his searching gaze. It reminds me of New Year's Eve, and my heart flips.

*Stop that shit right now, stupid organ.*

"Do I need to remind you that you deserve to be spoiled?"

When he pulls his hand back, I notice his pinky finger isn't red but clear. I frown at it. He chuckles softly, bringing his left hand next to his right to show that the pinky finger on that hand is the same color as mine.

"Don't you think Clay would've made a fuss if one of my pinkies didn't match his too?"

I look up at him, a pang in my chest. This doesn't feel right. It's as if I've wedged into something I don't belong in.

"Hey," he urges, gently gripping my chin to make me meet his gaze again. "You are exactly where you're supposed to be." *Can this man read minds?* "Now be a good girl and enjoy the day out with me," he adds, offering his hand to me, red pinky finger extended.

I grab his pinky with my hand, still not over how large his hand is compared to mine. A vision of those hands grabbing my tits crosses my mind, and I quickly shake my head to dispel it.

Sophia waits at the entrance of a beauty store. "Come on, ladies, we don't have all day," she pushes, heading inside, so we follow her in. "Oh my, that smells so good! Xander, come here!" she calls out from the perfume section.

Xander walks over to her, and I venture further into the store.

Surprisingly, there's a candy section.

*What kind of store is this?*

A teenage girl stands there, offering candy samples. I pick up a sweet and thank her before returning to the front. The sour apple flavor makes me shudder as I pop the candy into my mouth, and I love it.

I stand next to Xander, watching Sophia as she tests eyeshadow shades on the back of her hand.

Xander turns and notices me sucking on the candy. "What do you have there?"

"A sweet," I shrug, contemplating if I should buy myself an eyeshadow too, but then I think I could just use one of Chiara's if I really wanted to try and wear some.

"That's not a sweet. It smells like sour apple."

"True," I agree, pushing half of the candy out of my lips to show him the green color.

He reaches out, pulls it from my mouth, and pops it into his own, causing my eyes to widen in surprise. "Hey! That was mine," I protest weakly. He smirks as he bites down on the hard shell of the sweet. "You're not supposed to chew it," I mumble.

He takes half of the sweet from his mouth and brings it to my lips, pushing it between them, his fingers lingering for a moment. "You need to learn to share, Carolina," he chides in a deep voice, then continues to suck on his half of the candy, drawing my gaze to his lips.

My pussy clenches involuntarily, and I have to squeeze my thighs together. It takes every bit of me not to groan at the sight.

*Fuck. This man is trying to kill me.*

"I think this soft lilac would look nice with my skin tone. What do you think, Lina?" Sophia turns and asks me.

"It would," I confirm, barely looking at her while trying to calm my racing heart.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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### **Carolina**

“Oh *Dio*,” I whisper, looking at myself in the changing room mirror.

Sophia convinced me to try on a black bikini with a high-waisted bottom. The top is so small that my tits seem to defy gravity, nearly spilling out of the cups.

My phone buzzes with a text from Joshua. It’s a selfie of him with a travel mug, his dimples showing as he smiles.

What are you up to? Miss you.

I pause for a moment. *Should I?* I’ve never taken a photo that was even slightly daring. I’m not comfortable with my body and avoid seeing it in photos. But this top does wonders for my boobs, and Joshua always tells me how beautiful he thinks I am.

“Fuck it,” I murmur, angling my phone slightly above me to capture both my face and chest, giving a small smile to the camera.

I don’t look at the photo too closely, not wanting to second-guess myself, and quickly send it with a reply.

I love your smile. Trying on swimsuits for tomorrow. Miss you more.

Just as I hit send, another message from him pops up.

Fuck, if I were there right now, my face would be buried in this beautiful pair of tits.

A shiver runs down my spine, and I press my thighs together. Joshua has always been sweet in his texts before, never this forward, but I love it.

Stop. I don't think the swimsuit is made to get wet from the inside.

Can't wait to see you tonight.

"How much longer?" Sophia calls from outside the curtain.

I glance at my reflection again, frowning. *I can't wear this out in public.*

"Nope, not happening," I announce, making sure Sophia hears me.

"Can I see?" Sophia asks from outside, nudging the curtain aside slightly to peek in. "Oh, wow," is all she manages.

"What?" Xander asks, leaning over Sophia to get a look. His eyes widen before they take on a more intense gaze as his focus shifts to my tits.

I quickly cross my arms over my chest. "Out!" I demand.

They both step back, and Sophia draws the curtain shut and giggles. "I mean, it looks incredibly sexy."

"No, it looks ridiculous," I retort.

"Ridiculously sexy," Xander murmurs.

"Try the one you picked out, then," Sophia suggests.

I change out of the bikini and into the black one-piece bathing suit I picked. It tucks in my belly, which I love. It has a deep V-neck that makes my tits look awesome, but it also covers enough that I don't feel like I'm spilling out if I bend over. There's lace detailing along the V-neck and waist, so it's not just a plain black suit. Plus, it's super affordable, which is a bonus.

"This one's okay," I admit.

Sophia sticks her head in and smiles. "That's the one."

Xander peeks in and gives me a quick once-over before he nods and shuts the curtain.

I change back into my clothes, and when I step out, Xander is leaning against the opposite wall, smiling at his phone.

Looking so damn fine.

*It would be a waste not to appreciate his good looks, right?*

He looks up from his phone and grins when he catches me staring.

"What has you smiling?" I ask, giving him a curious look.

“Clay asked how it’s going, and I told him we found the perfect bathing suit. Now he wants pictures.”

“Absolutely not,” I state just as I get a text from Clay.

Hey

No

Understandable

Xander also pays for my swimsuit, and next, Sophia wants to visit a classier store because she needs a dress for an upcoming business event. Luckily, I’m not invited, so I don’t need to dress up.

While she’s trying on dresses, I browse through the racks until I reach the plus-size section. I spot a stunning Bordeaux-red dress that glitters slightly. It has long sleeves, probably reaches mid-calf, and has a deep V-neck ending just above the belly button.

I run my fingers over the soft fabric, imagining how it would feel against my skin. *Must be nice to have the money or the occasion to wear dresses like this.*

“That’s your color,” Xander whispers in my ear from behind, causing me to jump.

“It’s certainly beautiful,” I agree, marveling at how it sparkles when I move the fabric.

“Want to try it on?” he asks, already looking through the rack to pull out one in my size.

*How does he know my size?* I had the same question when he bought me the winter jacket. “No, thanks. I’ve never worn a dress before. I don’t think stuff like that suits me.”

“Come on,” he urges, gently grabbing my wrist and leading me to the dressing room. “For me? I’d love to see you in it. And if it doesn’t look good, you can say, ‘I told you so,’” he promises with a grin.

I roll my eyes but relent. “Fine.”

If I’m honest, I’ve always wanted to try on a dress. So I slip into it. I get out of my bra first because of the plunging neckline, but I keep my panties on, even though they leave a faint line on the fabric.

Looking in the mirror, I’m taken aback. *I look... sexy?* There’s also a high slit on the thigh. The V-neck makes my breasts look good, and the dress

drapes beautifully over my round butt. I have never considered myself beautiful, but this dress makes me feel it, at least a little bit.

“Ready?” Xander interrupts my thoughts and parts the curtain before I can respond.

Our eyes meet, and he inhales sharply. His reaction sends a jolt of confidence through me. “Carolina,” he breathes out, his eyes romancing over my body, and his gaze leaves a tangible path as if it were his fingers.

I let my hands glide over the front of the dress, tracing the contours before raising my eyes to meet his again, a coy smile playing on my lips. “Do you like it?”

He steps closer, his hand cupping my cheek tenderly. His touch sends shivers down my spine, and I lean into it, savoring it.

“You make this dress look stunning,” he whispers, his eyes locked onto mine.

A soft laugh escapes me, breaking the tension between us. “If anything, it’s the dress that’s making me look good.”

“No,” he counters. “You can make leggings and a hoodie look classy. When you’re in a classy dress, you outshine everyone. You’re a fucking beauty.”

“Xander,” I mumble, looking down at my feet. “I’m not beautiful.”

But Xander refuses to let me dwell on my insecurities. He gently grasps my chin, his touch both tender and commanding, tilting my face toward him. His lips brush against my skin as he leans down to whisper in my ear, his words a sweet, intoxicating promise. “Don’t insult my taste in women.”

He kisses the spot just below my earlobe, sending a shiver down my spine at his proximity, and my heart races for what feels like the thousandth time today. Then abruptly, he releases me, taking a step back.

My eyes widen in shock when I glance at the price tag dangling from the dress—three hundred dollars.

“Well, that was a pretty dream,” I mutter, stepping back and drawing the curtain closed to change back into my clothes.

Coming out of the dressing room and placing the dress back on the rack, I spot Xander in the lingerie section. He’s looking at a beautiful, sexy black lace set.

“I don’t think they have that in your size,” I tease as I approach him.

“They don’t. But they do have it in yours,” he shares, looking down at me.

“Okay?” I say like a question, raising an eyebrow.

He leans in close, lowering his voice to a husky whisper. “Say, ‘Yes, Xander, I’ll let you buy me that set.’”

“What? I—” I start, but he silences me, pressing his thumb gently against my lips. When I shut up, he traces my bottom lip with his thumb.

“Say it,” he insists, his gaze locked onto my lips.

My breath catches in my throat. “Yes,” is all I manage to whisper, feeling dizzy.

I will do anything this man asks me to.

“Good girl,” he murmurs, placing a kiss on my temple. He then picks up the lingerie set in my size and heads to the register.

“Damn,” Sophia comments from behind me, making me jump.

I whirl around, my cheeks flaming, feeling like I’ve been caught doing something I shouldn’t. “I—”

“He’s really bringing his A-game today.” She chuckles, cutting me off with a smirk. “Let’s go... I’m hungry.”

---

Xander is in line for a burger place at the mall, getting fries for us.

We decided to eat something small here before going home to watch movies and cook since I want to make sure Chiara and Leo get something to eat too.

Sophia and I are sitting at a four-person table when two guys take the empty seats next to us. I can’t help but feel a sense of unease creeping over me.

“Is this seat taken?” one of them asks, his eyes fixed on Sophia.

They look to be in their mid-twenties.

“Actually, yes. Sorry,” she responds politely, her brow furrowing slightly.

“Come on, don’t be like that. Want a milkshake?” The other guy leans in a bit closer, a playful grin tugging at the corner of his lips.

“No thanks. Our friend will be back any minute,” she states, trying to politely put an end to this conversation.

“What’s your name? Wanna see a movie later?” The guy beside her doesn’t get the hint and persists, not taking no for an answer.

“Thanks, but I’m not interested,” she replies, leaning away to get some

space between them.

A cocky smile plays on the lips of the other guy as he joins in, trying to win her over with humor. "I'll be there too," he teases, punctuating his words with a sly wink.

They only have eyes for Sophia, and it doesn't surprise me, but the way they're acting makes me increasingly uncomfortable for her.

The one sitting next to her puts his arm around her.

*That's it.*

Unable to sit still and say nothing, I finally speak up, my voice carrying a steely edge. "She said no."

He doesn't budge an inch, his arm still draped over Sophia's shoulder, a smug grin on his face. "The pretty ones always play hard to get." Then, he reaches to grab the back of her neck, making her cringe.

"Take your hands off her," I snap, ready to punch the guy, my protective instincts flaring up.

"Or what?" He smirks at me when he sizes me up.

"I'll break them," Xander warns from behind him, setting down the tray of fries and crossing his arms over his broad chest.

The other guy quickly stands up and stutters, "S-sorry, man," before rushing off.

The one touching Sophia pulls his hands back and stands, raising them in a defensive gesture. "Didn't mean anything by it," he pleads, then follows his friend.

Xander takes the empty seat, looking at Sophia. "You okay?"

She nods, but her body language says otherwise. "Yeah, thanks."

"Why didn't you push him away, Sophia?" I ask, frowning.

She shrugs. "I froze. I thought that by telling him no, he would back off, avoiding a scene."

Xander gives me a pack of fries and places one in front of Sophia.

"What do you mean you froze?" I ask, still worried.

At work, she seems comfortable enough to speak up. But then again, it is only with her brother and Clay.

"I just... I'm not good with all the dating stuff," she admits.

"Sophia, that wasn't dating stuff. That was—"

She interrupts, taking a deep breath. "I know what you're getting at, Lina. But it's more than that. It's all part of a bigger issue."

I'm puzzled. "What do you mean?"

Sophia hesitates, playing with her fries before finally saying, “I’m asexual. I don’t experience sexual attraction to men, women... not to anyone. I’ve tried. Went on dates, kissed, even had sex. It just doesn’t do anything for me. So, in situations like this, I don’t know how to react, how to act *normal*, and the last thing I want is a scene.”

My eyes widen, “Oh, I just assumed because of what Clay said... the talk about the kissing...”

Sophia offers a weak smile. “I’m still figuring things out, and I haven’t really come out about it, so I just go along. It’s not a priority. I don’t think the others have realized, except for him.” She gestures to Xander, who just gives a small nod. “Everyone seems to expect and pressure me to find a lover or boyfriend. I understand love is wonderful for many, but it’s not the same for me, not in the way most people talk about it.”

“You should be yourself, Sophia. No one should make you feel like you have to be a certain way,” Xander consoles.

“That is what’s bothering me. I want to focus on my career, my family, and my friends without always being asked or hinted at about when I’ll settle down with a man or start a family. I wish people would get that I’m happy just the way I am and leave me in peace,” she shares.

I reach over and place my hand over hers. “I’m sorry for not realizing and just assuming. Just know from now on, I’ve got your back.”

Sophia smiles. “Thank you. That means a lot.”

Xander smirks and says teasingly, “As long as you don’t mind third-wheeling with Carolina and me, we’re all good.”

I give him a frown. “You’re the one who’s third-wheeling on our girls’ day.”

Sophia laughs, nearly choking on a fry, making me chuckle too.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

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### **Carolina**

*Fuck, I didn't think this through.*

Sophia has already ventured into the indoor pool area, and the inviting sounds of water and laughter reach my ears as I remain in the changing rooms, staring at my reflection in the harshly lit mirror. In this unforgiving light, all I can see are my big thighs, the stretch marks that adorn them, and the cellulite that has always made me self-conscious. Everything I typically keep hidden beneath layers of clothing is now exposed, laid bare for anyone to see. To make matters worse, the ceiling lights in this facility are far from flattering, casting every imperfection in stark relief.

Xander and Joshua wanted to do some laps, while Clay and Sophia talked about hanging out in the hot tub area where there are seats with jets and some rain showers that massage your back. It all sounds amazing, and I wouldn't be able to wait to join them if the problem with the nearly-no-clothes issue wasn't holding me back.

Standing here with a towel wrapped around my stomach, my hair coiled into a messy bun atop my head, and a makeup-free face, I inhale deeply. The knowledge that I must leave before someone, likely Sophia, comes back and discovers my stalling lingers in the back of my mind. But I'm struggling too much to keep myself together to care.

*Come on, Lina, get a fucking grip.*

Considering all I've faced in my life, wearing a bathing suit in public can't possibly be the end of the world, can it?

Leaving the changing room with the towel wrapped around my waist, I try to cover as much of my lower body as possible.

The rhythmic sound of water splashing and swimmers gliding through the pool fills the air. I approach the pool's edge, my steps hesitant, when I spot Xander and Joshua chatting a few feet away. I walk over and sit down, letting my feet and calves dangle in the water while clutching the towel to my chest.

Joshua turns his attention toward me, a welcoming smile stretching across his face, making my heart jump. His eyes wander appreciatively over me, and my self-consciousness ebbs away for a moment.

"Hey," Joshua greets, his voice carrying a hint of excitement. "We were about to swim some laps. Want to join us?"

"No, thank you," I reply, smiling to mask my insecurities. "I'm not the best swimmer."

"But you *can* swim, right?" he asks, looking concerned.

I shrug, suddenly feeling another pang of embarrassment. "I learned when I was a child, but I haven't been swimming since."

Joshua's concern is even more palpable now as he leans in a little closer to me. "Promise me you won't go to the deep end without me."

I chuckle. "Don't worry. I wasn't planning on it. I don't think I'll swim at all. I'm here to watch you. I want to see the talent behind all those medals."

As he glides his hands up my calves in the water, an involuntary shiver runs down my spine, his touch sending a tingling sensation through my whole body, leaving me momentarily breathless. "You wanna watch me?" he inquires, his mischievous grin making my heart skip a beat.

"Absolutely," I reply, my smile playful as I challenge him. "Show me what you've got."

His face lights up with excitement, and with a swift motion, he removes his wristwatch and hands it to me. "Can you time me?"

"Sure," I agree, quickly checking how the timer works. "Okay, ready?" I ask, and Joshua gets into position. "Go!" I shout, pressing the timer on the watch.

He launches forward, propelling himself through the water with powerful strokes, creating a whirlwind of splashes that douse me, making me laugh. I watch in awe as he moves effortlessly through the pool, each stroke showing me how good of a swimmer he is.

Those medals are certainly deserved, and a sense of pride for him surges in me.

“You’re good for him,” Xander comments from beside me, his tone sincere and thoughtful.

I tear my gaze away from Joshua just long enough to glance at Xander and ask curiously, “You think?”

“He needs someone genuinely interested in him and his passions. Someone who’ll show up for him. God knows he didn’t have enough of that.”

As Joshua reaches the opposite end of the pool, he does a flawless flip-turn, pushing off the wall. It’s a sight to behold, and I can’t help but marvel at his skill.

“His parents?” I ask, my voice hushed.

“All they ever had for him were expectations, never support,” Xander murmurs.

Joshua speeds back toward us, the water parting effortlessly in front of him. I stop the timer as he touches the wall underneath me.

“Wow, you’re incredibly fast,” I exclaim as he emerges from the water, shaking his head like a wet dog.

Glancing at the time on the watch, he notes, “I can be faster.”

“Really? That seemed super quick already,” I respond, genuinely impressed.

He grins, a hint of competitiveness dancing in his eyes. “Give me a few laps to warm up, then time me again.”

Joshua reclaims his wristwatch, then leans in, his damp lips meeting mine in a wet, playful kiss before he dives back in to do more laps. A hint of chlorine lingers on my lips as I watch him swim away, a smile gracing my face.

Still leaning against the pool’s edge beside me, Xander turns his attention to me again. “Why don’t you come into the water? Are you scared?”

I shrug, my gaze momentarily fixed on the ripples Joshua left in his wake. “Not exactly.”

“Come on,” Xander coaxes, his tone teasing as he moves closer and positions himself between my legs. “I promise I won’t let you go under.”

I hesitate, then confess, “I just don’t feel comfortable.”

“Why’s that?” Xander pries gently.

I look down at my hands in my lap, feeling a mix of vulnerability and frustration. “I already told you guys yesterday. I don’t like being in a swimsuit.”

He persists, a determined look in his eyes, “But why?”

I shoot him a pointed look.

*Does he not want to get it?*

“Look at me.”

He reaches for my towel, letting it slip away so I’m no longer shielded, leaving me feeling exposed. His hands trace their way up my thighs, the touch gentle yet electrifying.

He squeezes lightly, his voice a soft, reassuring murmur. “All I see is beauty.”

Casting a doubtful and somewhat startled glance in Xander’s direction, I’m caught off guard when he suddenly pulls me toward him into the water.

Instinctively, I wrap my legs around his waist and clutch his neck.

“Relax, I’ve got you,” he whispers in my ear, a soft laugh escaping his lips as he cradles me in the water. The coolness of the pool water surrounds us, reaching just up to my chest as Xander strokes my thigh gently. “See? It’s not so bad.”

I become acutely aware of our closeness, the water feeling like a buffer against the sudden rush of emotions. Xander’s bare chest presses against mine, his skin warm and wet, while my bare thighs are securely wrapped around his waist.

*Fuck.*

“What are you thinking about there, little tomato?” He smirks at me, knowing very well what’s going on.

I blush even more, my cheeks turning a shade of crimson. “Nothing,” I reply, perhaps a bit too quickly.

Xander’s fingers start to trace patterns along my thigh underwater, his touch both calming and exciting at the same time. He shifts the conversation, asking, “Have you thought about what kind of tattoo you want?”

My fingers absentmindedly trace the tattoo on his shoulder as I consider his question. “Not really,” I admit, my voice soft.

He leans closer, his breath tickling my ear as he continues to stroke my thigh. “You know, once a scar is properly healed, it’s relatively easy to cover it with a tattoo.”

I glance at the scars on my forearm, then back at him. “Really?”

He nods. “You saw my stomach.”

A playful smile tugs at the corner of my lips. “How many Christmases would it take to get a sleeve from the talented Xander?”

He doesn’t even hesitate when he tells me, “Fuck Christmas, I’d do

anything for you any day of the year.”

His intense gaze holds mine, and a warmth spreads through my chest. But our moment is interrupted when Joshua chimes in, breaking the spell.

“Ready to time me again?” Joshua asks, flashing me a smile when I turn my head to him.

I feel a pang of guilt for clinging to Xander like this, but Joshua doesn’t seem bothered. So, I take the watch from him and get ready to time his next lap.

---

## Clay

Carolina is totally ignoring me.

I find myself in the hot tub area of the swimming center, attempting to relax as the spa jets blow soothing bubbles up my back. Yet I can’t help but dwell on my recent life choices as the bubbles envelop me.

Since what happened in the kitchen, Carolina hasn’t said a word to me, apart from that single, dismissive “No” she texted yesterday. But that doesn’t count. She even avoids looking in my direction.

I can tell because I’m always watching her.

*I can’t be patient any longer.*

It’s driving me nuts.

I hear Sophia’s voice, and my attention shifts toward the entrance of the hot tub area. She’s leading Carolina by the hand, and my heart skips a beat. Xander was absolutely right.

That swimsuit is something else. The V-neck is super low, hugging her tits perfectly.

*Fuck.*

They wade into the water, moving to the opposite side of the pool where there are shower-like mounts designed for a back massage. I can’t help but watch them, observing their shared smiles and laughter.

*I love to hear her laugh.*

After a while, they come over to where I’m sitting. Carolina tries to walk past me in the water without even glancing in my direction. Frustration wells up inside me, and I decide I can’t take her ignoring me any longer. I reach out, grab her hips, and pull her into my lap.

The water's deep enough to cover us up to our chests, and Sophia winks at me, making her way out of the pool.

"Can you ignore me while sitting in my lap, please? I've missed you," I plead, resting my chin on her shoulder and wrapping my arms around her waist underwater.

"I'm not ignoring you," she replies softly.

"Lies," I accuse, placing a light kiss on her shoulder, and she turns to face me, bringing us nose to nose.

"What if this ends badly?" she whispers with uncertainty.

"What if it's meant to be?" I counter, my fingers tracing circles on her forearm beneath the water.

"Someone, probably me, will fuck up, and then I'll lose all of you," she says, looking away from me.

I reach down to gently grip her thighs. "I'll stay, even when it's time to go. I promise." She still looks sad, so I joke, "It's okay to be obsessed with me. It's a safe space. Ask Xander."

She turns again to look at me, now with a smirk. "You're so full of shit."

I give her a peck on the nose. "You have freckles. Fuck, can you get any more adorable?"

"Fuck you," she mutters.

"It's okay," I tease. "You keep pretending to be mean, and I'll keep pretending not to be in love with you."

"You are way out of line." She scowls, but I spy a hint of amusement in her eyes before she turns away.

"Am I?" I smirk, leaning back and pulling her with me.

She rests against my chest, and we sit silently for a while. After a moment, she speaks softly, "I don't know what to do, think, or feel."

"Just don't push me away, kitten," I tell her. *That's the one thing I truly need from her.* "We'll figure the rest out as we go."

"Promise," she murmurs reassuringly, and I finally feel at ease for the first time in two days.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

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### **Carolina**

It's Monday, and college is back from winter break, but I didn't go. I'm almost positive I am not missing much.

The first day back is always kind of a waste of time.

Instead, I'm heading to the shelter. I need to talk to someone who isn't involved in all this. Someone who's on my side.

It's too early for burgers, so I toss a bag of bagels to Howie, who's lounging on his bed.

"Happy New Year," I exclaim, breaking the tranquil stillness surrounding us.

He grins but doesn't miss the opportunity to tease me, "Aren't you supposed to be in class?"

I plop down beside him, rolling my eyes playfully. "Why? You keeping tabs on me?"

"Just saying..." he shrugs nonchalantly, "... it's not like you to skip, especially on the first day back."

I can't help but mockingly retort, "Yes, Daddy," as I reach into the bag to grab a bagel.

A shudder of distaste crosses Howie's face as he scowls, "Ugh... fuck no, don't call me that," he snaps, and I can't stop the laugh from bursting free.

"Sorry. But don't give me a hard time for skipping just once," I say, rolling my eyes.

He raises an eyebrow and leans in, his curiosity piqued. "So, why are you

here?” he asks, his voice laced with genuine concern.

“I need some advice,” I finally admit, feeling the weight of my dilemma pressing on me.

“All right, shoot,” Howie says, taking a casual bite of his bagel.

“I told you about my boyfriend,” I begin cautiously, my words laden with uncertainty.

“The cop, yeah,” he responds between bites.

“Yeah, him,” I confirm. “Well, he has two best friends, and they’re together.”

*Dio, am I really just going to tell Howie I am in love with three men at the same time?*

Howie raises an eyebrow, his interest growing. “Cops too?”

“One of them,” I confirm with a nod.

He leans in slightly, clearly intrigued. “And what about them?”

I hesitate for a moment before quietly admitting, “They seem to be... interested in me as well.”

“Guy and girl or two guys?” he asks.

“Two guys,” I admit.

He takes a moment to digest this information before shrugging casually. “Well, love is love.”

I can’t help but sigh, my worries still lingering. “It’s not about them being together. It’s about them wanting to date me too,” I clarify, not understanding how he can be so casual.

Howie offers a nonchalant response, “Again, love is love. Some people don’t even manage to find the one. What does the initial boyfriend think about his friends hitting on you?”

“He told me that he’d be open for me to explore my feelings. That I would not lose him over this,” I explain, still uncertain. I offer a hesitant shrug, my doubts surfacing. “Although, I’m not quite sure if he really means it.”

Howie leans in, his gaze probing deeper. “You don’t trust him on that?” he asks, searching my eyes.

“No, I do trust him,” I clarify. “It’s just...”

He interrupts with a straightforward question, “What’s the issue then?”

I shoot him a look, frustration simmering beneath the surface. “Do you realize what I just said? I might end up in a relationship with three guys, two who are already together. And all you can say is, ‘What’s the issue then?’”

Howie maintains his calm demeanor as he continues to dig deeper. “Do you want to be with them?” he asks, cutting through the confusion.

I pause, wrestling with my emotions, “I’m not sure. I don’t even feel worthy of Joshua. I can’t figure out why the other two would be interested in me.”

“So, you’re only doubting yourself,” he states.

“No, really, I can’t understand it. You should see them. They’re incredibly good-looking. Xander’s probably the most handsome guy I’ve ever seen. He’s tall, built like a Viking, covered in tattoos and piercings, has a face like a bearded angel, and he is kind and protective. Clay’s so funny, charming, and tall too. He is like everyone’s wet dream come true. And Joshua... he looks like he walked out of a fashion magazine, and he’s the sweetest guy I know. Why would men like them even look my way, let alone want to be with me?”

Howie fixes his gaze on me, his hand gently stroking his beard as if contemplating something profound. After a brief pause, he utters, “Did you know that butterflies can’t see their own wings?”

I scrunch up my face, slightly perplexed by the sudden shift in conversation. “Butterflies?” I question, unsure of where he’s leading with this analogy.

“They live their whole life without realizing how beautiful they are. But everyone else sees and admires that beauty.”

I let out a sigh. “I’m no beauty.”

He chuckles warmly. “*Butterfly.*”

---

Forgot to mention, you were on a secret police mission for the past few days and are not allowed to talk about it. Happy shift!

I stare down at Clay’s message, glad I decided to check my phone for a text from Joshua before starting my shift.

“What is wrong with this guy?” I mutter to myself and quickly stash my jacket and backpack in my locker, tying my apron around my waist.

Work with Sophia was slow today. I was looking forward to seeing Joshua and, okay, maybe Clay too, for dinner. But they didn’t show. A local gang that’s been quiet for a while is crawling out of their holes again, making

things busier for them.

Joshua told me Clay handled the situation with my job here, but I should have asked what this meant.

I head to the bar through the kitchen and quickly nod to Lennard and Matteo.

“Hey, are you all right? Where have you been?” Matteo asks, walking beside me.

“Top secret,” I reply as we reach the bar where Cindy is busy painting her nails.

“Carolina,” she exclaims, giving me a kind of air hug, careful not to smudge her freshly painted nails. “Finally! Could you help the police with their case?”

“I can’t talk about it,” I reply, trying to keep a straight face while mentally cursing Clay.

“Oh, right.” She giggles. “That handsome cop and your boyfriend mentioned something like that.”

“Boyfriend?” Matteo chimes in.

“Aren’t you supposed to be in the back?” I ask him, sounding uninterested.

“*Carina*, a cop?” He raises an eyebrow at me.

“This is the front.” I gesture toward the bar, and he gives me a sharp look before huffing and heading back to the kitchen.

Cindy laughs. “You’re such a cold bitch. I love it. Now tell me, did you spend some time with the handsome cop too? Honestly, he could handcuff me any day.” I huff a laugh. If she only knew. “And what happened? You go out of here, determined to lose your V-Card, and then you just vanish? Was the dick so good?” She grins at her joke. Then her face falls, and she whispers, “Or was it that bad?”

“The dick was perfect, thank you very much.” I laugh. “And like I said, top secret.”

“Okay, forget the working for a cop part. Tell me everything about the having sex with a cop part.” She grins from ear to ear.

I hesitate, but she did help me, so I have to give her at least something. “He was gentle and made sure I enjoyed it too. It was good,” I offer, thinking about Joshua and feeling tingles in my stomach.

“It was good? Oh my gosh, you’re blushing! I’m so happy for you,” she exclaims, clapping her hands together. “Do you think you could get his

partner's number for me? After the past few days without you, I'm so over Donny. He's such a jerk. And that other cop? He is fucking candy on a stick."

Jealousy flares inside me, and I can feel my hands balling into fists. "He's off-limits," I state sharply, surprised by the strength of my feelings.

She tilts her head, studying me. "Oh wow, you're into him too?"

"What? No, he has a boyfriend," I clarify, grabbing a cloth and heading to the tables to put the chairs down.

Cindy trails behind me. "Hold on. So, you're into both cops, but one is your boyfriend, and the other is taken? I would've never guessed he's gay."

"He's not," I snap. "And I'm not *into* him."

*Well, the urge to scratch her eyes out for calling him candy on a stick tells a different story.*

"Oh, you're in deep. You know, poly relationships are a thing now."

"Cindy..." I sigh, "... stop that shit."

"From innocent to wild, I'm here for it," she teases.

I whirl around and toss the cloth at her, hitting her square in the face. "I think we talked enough for tonight."

She pulls the cloth off, smirking. "Yes, ma'am. I can totally see you as their *Domina*," she jests, laughing as she moves to another table to clean it.

*This is going to be such a fun night.*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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### **Clay**

We're standing in front of the apartment building where the witness, Rebecca Stone, lives. It bothers me that we're only just getting back here now. Things have been so busy lately, with something new happening every day, especially in Harlem.

The Metro Milanesi gang is back in the neighborhood. I thought they had disappeared, but they seem to have just kept a low profile for the past few years.

The gang started in the Italian part of Harlem and was mainly known for robberies, assaults, and drug dealings in the area. They aren't a major gang, but they used to have a lot of members and caused a lot of trouble for the locals.

One of our first assignments as rookies was responding to one of their robberies. I still remember the blood on the floor, thick and dark, starting to dry. They had shot the cashier of a local store five times and probably only got a hundred dollars for the effort. They're brutal for the sake of being cruel. That scene haunted me for weeks, and even now, if I close my eyes and think about it, I swear I can still smell the nearly dried blood.

But today seems quiet, and we're going to use this time to learn more about Carolina's parents' case. I can't believe there's even a case to begin with. Everything about it is so suspicious.

I understand why Carolina wants to know the truth. I never met her parents, but I want to know the truth too. I need to understand why my girl

had to go through and what she's been through. And if someone's to blame for it, they need to be put behind bars.

We make our way up the stairs and stand in front of Rebecca's door. Just as Josh is about to knock, it swings open, and a redhead steps out, almost bumping into Josh because she's busy rummaging through the purse around her waist.

"Oh my God," she exclaims, startled.

"Ms. Stone?" Josh asks.

"Yes," she replies, standing up straight and smoothing her skirt with her hands. "How can I help you?"

"We're here to ask you about the car crash you witnessed and reported five years ago, right outside this building. Can you remember the accident?" he asks.

She lets out a short laugh. "Remember it? I still have nightmares about it."

I knit my brows together, puzzled. "Why?"

She glances down at her feet. "Because it was traumatic."

"What made it so?" Josh probes.

"Can we discuss this while walking? I have an appointment to get to," she says, moving past Josh.

"Absolutely, we can chat as we walk," I assure her with a smile, which she returns with a faint one of her own.

"What do you want to know?" she asks. "I told the detective everything I saw that night, but I felt he wasn't really listening."

"That's precisely why we're here, Ms. Stone," I share as we walk down the stairs. "We didn't pay enough attention back then, but we're listening now."

We reach the ground floor and walk out of the building. When we're standing outside, she turns to face us, taking a deep breath. "I was getting back from a Pilates class. It was already dark, and as I crossed the street to get to my building, searching for my keys in my purse, I heard honking. I looked up to see a car speeding toward me. They honked like crazy, but I froze. The streetlamp over there illuminated the car's inside, and I saw a man with sheer terror in his eyes. That sight somehow kickstarted my brain again, and I darted out of the way just as the car sped past, crashing into the building right behind me." She gestures toward a sharp corner in the road.

"The police report states that the driver was under the influence," Josh

states.

She shrugs. “I can’t say. I only caught a brief glimpse of him, but that image has burned itself into my memory.”

“The report also mentioned the car hit the wall at full speed,” I add. “Can you confirm this?”

“They were going fast, but it didn’t seem like he wanted to hit the wall,” she explains, starting to walk again.

“Why do you say that?” I ask.

“It looked like he tried to round the corner, but they were just too fast. They couldn’t have made it.”

“But the lack of skid marks or signs of braking supports the official report,” Josh points out.

“Look, that man didn’t want to crash or die. I’d bet the brakes failed. I told the officer that, but he brushed me off.”

“But the high speed. It doesn’t make sense for them to accelerate if they were trying to slow down,” Josh ponders.

She stops and faces us. “All I know is that man was fully aware that they were going to crash and likely die. And he didn’t want that. That’s all I can tell you. If we’re done, I really need to go.”

“Of course,” I say. “Thank you for your time, Ms. Stone.”

She gives me a brief, intense look before turning and walking away.

“This doesn’t add up. Even if the brakes were tampered with, why keep accelerating?” Josh muses.

“I have no idea,” I reply, frustrated.

---

Josh opens the door to Sophia’s lab, and we see her and Carolina standing at the lab bench wearing lab coats, gloves, and safety goggles.

“Hey, should we come back later?” Josh asks, and we both pause just inside the lab.

“No,” Sophia replies, taking samples from a machine and placing them in a refrigerator beside the bench. “We’re finished. And I’m starving.”

She walks over to her desk and removes her gloves while Carolina wipes down the machine. As Josh walks over to her, she turns to him, and he gently lifts the goggles from her eyes, placing them on her forehead and leaning in

to kiss her.

I'm close enough to hear her let out a happy hum, and a pang of jealousy hits me. It's not that I'm envious of Josh making her happy. I want him to do just that, but I want to know how those lips feel too. Even Xander got a little taste.

I will be the last guy she ever shares a first kiss with.

*Wait, that actually doesn't sound too bad.*

When they break the kiss, she looks up at him and whispers, "I missed you."

"Missed you more," he whispers back, leaning in to give her another quick kiss.

"And who missed me?" I chime in, crossing my arms over my chest.

Carolina releases Josh and steps in front of me. "I bet you miss yourself plenty when there's no mirror around," she teases, then grabs the front of my uniform and pulls me into a hug. "I never miss you," she whispers.

I laugh and hold her close. "I haven't missed you either. Not one bit." I lean down and kiss the top of her head.

She steps back to remove her coat and gloves. Meanwhile, Sophia and Josh head for the door. Once she's done, I take her hand, leading her to join the others.

In the hallway, Josh glances back at us holding hands, and Carolina tries to pull away, but I hold on tight. She gives me a stern look, then looks at Josh, who smiles at her and resumes his conversation with Sophia.

"You can't do shit like that," she warns. "People will talk. I can't be with Joshua and then stroll down the hallway holding hands with you."

"Watch me." I shrug. "Kitten, I've been bullied my whole life for being the bottom in a gay relationship. I don't give a flying fuck what people think. I thought you felt the same."

"True, fuck them," she declares, gripping my hand tighter, intertwining our fingers and making my heart race.



As we sit at our usual cafeteria table, I glance at her, impressed that she's eating what Josh got her without a fuss.

*She has come such a long way already.*

“We spoke to the witness today,” I begin, knowing this will capture her immediate attention.

Her eyes widen in surprise. “You did?” she asks, leaning in.

“Yes, but it got us more questions than answers,” I admit, furrowing my brows.

“How so? What did she say?” Sophia asks, sipping her water.

“They did crash into the wall at high speed, but she saw Carolina’s dad and...” I hesitate, searching for the right words.

“And?” Carolina frowns.

“And she believes he looked sober and was trying to avoid the crash,” Josh chimes in, his voice steady. “He even honked to warn her. If he hadn’t, he would’ve hit her. That’s not something someone high on heroin would do. So, at least we have an answer to that question.”

I lean back, and out of the corner of my eye, I spot Del Moro Jr. and his partner, Taylor, standing nearby, glancing our way. “Since the blood wasn’t really—” Josh starts, but I nudge him to stop. “What?” he asks.

“We should discuss this at home,” I suggest, not willing to let anything else be overheard.

Carolina tries to see what caught my attention and mutters a curse. “Do you think he heard us?”

I shrug. “I’m not sure, but he seems a tad too curious for my liking.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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### **Joshua**

After our dinner with Sophia and Carolina, we are back on the street, sitting in the police car. It's nearly midnight, and we just got ourselves tea and coffee.

"Attention all units, attention all units," the dispatcher's voice echoes through the car, clear and urgent. "We have a 10-31 in progress at 1423 Hamilton Place, West Harlem. Suspect is armed and dangerous. Proceed with caution."

My grip tightens on my teacup, spilling a few drops. I quickly set it down, starting the car. "That's just a few blocks from here," I say, flipping on the siren.

Clay grabs the radio, pressing the button to respond. "Unit 47 responding. ETA two minutes."

We speed out of the alley, sirens wailing, and as we approach Hamilton Corner Mart, the flashing blue and red lights illuminate the storefront. The glass door is ajar, and a faint alarm bell rings in the distance. I park the car at an angle, blocking off the entrance, while Clay jumps out, gun drawn, taking cover behind the car door.

"NYPD! Come out with your hands up!" he shouts, his voice echoing in the empty street.

A moment of silence follows, and then the sound of shuffling filters out from inside the store. A not-so-tall figure emerges, masked and holding a bag that presumably contains the stolen goods. In his other hand, he grips a gun.

“Stay back!” the guy warns, his words muffled by the mask. He has a sharp Italian accent, a quiver in his voice, and shaking hands.

“Look, just drop the gun and the bag. No one needs to get hurt.” Clay steps forward, trying to reason with him since he looks more scared than dangerous.

In a swift motion, the guy lunges at Clay and pistol-whips him across the face. Clay stumbles back, a sharp cry escaping him as he falls to the ground, clutching his eye.

The robber bolts, disappearing into the maze of alleys behind the store with Clay down and me too far away. I rush to Clay’s side, helping him sit up. He has a cut under his eye, bleeding down his cheek. “Dammit, Clay,” I mutter, checking him for other injuries.

He winces. “I’m okay,” he argues, his voice pressed. “We need to catch that guy.”

I nod, pulling out my radio. “Dispatch, this is Unit 47. Suspect has fled the scene on foot, heading east from Hamilton Corner Mart. Requesting backup.”

The dispatcher’s voice crackles back. “Backup is on the way. Stay safe, officers.”

---

Despite our best efforts and backup, the guy gets away. The maze of alleys and side streets in West Harlem gives too many escape routes, allowing him to vanish into the night.

With a lot of frustration, I steer the car back to headquarters. Every so often, I glance over at Clay, who’s trying to keep a brave face, but I can see the pain in his eyes—both from the physical injury and the sting of letting the robber get away.

As we pull into the headquarters’ parking lot, Captain Swanson comes over, having heard about the incident over the radio. “You guys all right?” he asks, his brow furrowed.

Clay nods, though his swollen eye makes it clear he’s seen better days. “I’ll live. Just a little souvenir from our friend.”

Swanson grimaces. “Let’s get that looked at,” he commands, guiding Clay inside and toward the medical room.

Inside, Officer Patel, trained in first aid, examines Clay. “It’s going to be a nasty shiner,” she comments, gently applying a cold compress. “You were lucky. A bit more force and he could’ve done some real damage. It will bruise, but I don’t think you need stitches.”

I watch from the doorway, guilt gnawing at me. “I can’t even tell you what he looked like. He wore a mask. But he was maybe a head shorter than me and had an Italian accent,” I mutter.

“Metro Milanese?” Swanson asks, and I shrug.

“Could be. Seems likely. But he was nervous, maybe even scared,” I recount.

“New recruit?” Swanson asks, tilting his head.

“Possibly,” I muse, looking over at Clay. “Would explain why there are so many of them again. They are all new members. Fuck, we should’ve had him.”

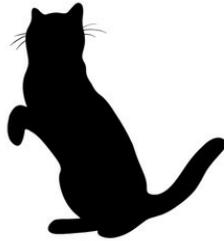
Swanson places a reassuring hand on my shoulder. “You did your best. Sometimes, they just slip through. The important thing is you’re both more or less okay.”

Clay manages a weak smile, his eye already darkening. “Thanks, Sarge. We’ll get him next time.”

Swanson nods. “We always do.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

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### **Carolina**

The lab door bursts open.

I'm lost in thought, sitting at my desk and not really doing anything. I glance at my phone when I hear Joshua's laugh and realize it's already past five.

I haven't seen either of them since dinner last night. They worked later than I did at the bar because of some robbery, and they had to do paperwork afterward.

Joshua texted me, saying he didn't want to wake me up because they got home late. So, he slept in his room, but I didn't like sleeping by myself.

I was up most of the night, tossing and turning. Being alone isn't good for me. It makes me overthink things, causing my brain to be too wound up to sleep.

I spent the whole day in college and now working, thinking about what could have upset him.

*Did I do something? Has he had enough of me? Or maybe he didn't want to share a bed with me because he's tired of how I behave around Clay and Xander?*

Just as I'm thinking this, Clay comes over to my desk. I look up and see a cut under his black eye, then quickly stand and round the desk to stand in front of him.

"What happened?" I ask, gripping his face and pulling it down to me.

"Ouch." He winces, and I think I might've grabbed him too hard. But

then he gives me a smirk. “It’s just a little scrape, but you might send me to the hospital at this rate.”

“Hospital?” I ask, panicking a bit as I turn his head to get a better look. “What happened, Clay?”

“That robber I texted you about? He hit Clay over the head with a gun because Clay’s a fucking idiot,” Joshua interjects from beside me.

I glance at Joshua, seeing clear frustration on his face. But my concern is focused on Clay, who looks terrible. “Does it hurt? Are you okay?” I ask, my pitch a little too high as I search his face.

“Hey, it’s just a bruise,” he reassures me, his gaze softening.

His hand reaches up to touch mine, gently stroking the back of it.

“He said gun. Why were you even close enough to get hit by someone with a fucking gun?” My concern quickly turns to anger.

“He tried to talk the guy into dropping it,” Josh explains, sounding exasperated.

“What the hell, Clay,” I exclaim, shoving him away. “You could’ve been shot! You could have died!” Tears form in my eyes, a mix of frustration and fear, and I punch his chest.

“Easy,” he soothes, but I can’t stop hitting him, and he lets me.

“No,” I murmur, the force behind my fists diminishing. “You promised.”

He gently grabs my wrists, holding them to his chest, and with his other hand, he lifts my chin so our eyes meet. “I’m okay. Nothing bad happened. I’m not going anywhere,” he whispers.

I take a deep breath, trying to regain my composure. As I relax, he releases me, and Joshua gives me a comforting side hug, kissing my temple. “Come on, let’s feed the idiot.”



Sophia is in another corner of the cafeteria, getting herself a sandwich. I stand in front of the salad bar while Clay and Joshua are in line at the hot meal section.

Joshua was craving something fried, and Clay decided to join him for some fries and nuggets with a murmured, “Fuck it.”

As I’m about to grab a plate, a shiver runs down my spine, and I sense someone behind me.

“I don’t think the salad can help you anymore.” Del Moro sneers from behind me.

“Fuck off,” I snap, taking a step forward to put some distance between us, but he shadows my movement.

“You were warned to stop digging,” he whispers in my ear. I sidestep, trying to escape, but he catches my upper arm, yanking me back toward him. “Fucking listen to me, Costa!”

“If I wanted to hear from an asshole, I would have farted.” I jerk my arm free.

“Just remember, accidents happen. Your parents had to learn that too,” he growls out, his eyes cold and threatening.

“Martin, dude, let’s just go,” Taylor begs nervously, standing behind Del Moro.

“Enjoy your salad, fatty,” Del Moro utters, walking away, Taylor in tow.

“What the hell was that?” Sophia asks, rushing over to me. “Sorry, I just saw him leave.”

“It’s fine, nothing happened. But they really want us to stop looking closer,” I whisper, my heart still racing.

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d say we’re onto something,” she whispers in response.

“We sure are,” I agree.

*But I don’t know if this is a good thing.*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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### Clay

I nearly trip when I mess up again.

“Fuck,” I murmur, frustrated.

Jumping rope in the basement should help clear my mind, but I can’t nail the routine to “Up” by Cardi B.

After we got home tonight, I headed down here to work out. We had an early night for the second day in a row. It seems Swanson wants me to take it slow for a bit.

Even though we were home early, Xander was already asleep. And without him as a buffer for my thoughts, I can only obsess about her.

My mind’s been racing.

*Carolina wants this.*

I saw it in her eyes a few times already, but two days ago, when she saw me hurt, it was so fucking obvious. She feels this too. She is just scared. I don’t care what she told Josh.

*It was a lie, a fucking lie.*

And she seems to be ignoring me again. Not as bad as last time, but she didn’t really talk to me yesterday. I think the gun incident got to her more than she wants to admit.

It’s driving me nuts. Seeing her every day and not being able to act on those feelings is torture. Every day, I have to see her and can’t tell her how much she means to me. I have to see her fine ass and can’t squeeze it before spanking it raw. I can’t kiss those luscious lips that would look so goddamn

good around my cock, especially if she looked up at me from it with those golden eyes.

I stumble again. “Fuck,” I huff out, looking down at the boner in my pants. “I know, buddy. I hate this too.”

I wonder if she’s given Josh her first blow job yet. I know it’s none of my damn business, but hell, I’ve never been so hard so fucking fast as when she asked if I could teach her to give head. I’ve lost count of the number of times I’ve imagined it. Her on her knees before me, me holding her head, fucking her mouth gently while telling her how to suck me.

“For fuck’s sake,” I whisper, pressing my palms against my eyes, trying to calm down. But it’s no use. The undeniable truth is that I need her. I fucking need her *now*.

Turning off the music, I dash up the stairs, throw on my parka, and grab Xander’s keys. Then, I head to the truck, the engine roaring to life as I speed toward the bar.

It’s already late, but my gut tells me she’s still working, and I can’t wait a second longer to find out. My mind races with questions all centered around her. *What is it about her that has me in such turmoil?* I can’t pinpoint it. Maybe it’s because I can’t have her, and she denies the magnetic pull between us.

But I don’t believe it.

I know it’s something deeper, something meant to be.

When I arrive, I spot her polishing glasses. It seems like a calm night, with only a few patrons lingering and sipping their beers.

“Kitten,” I call for her as I approach, and Carolina looks up at me, briefly scanning the area to see if I’m alone.

“Clay, what’s wrong? Did something happen?” she asks, setting down the cloth and the glass she was polishing.

“I need to talk to you,” I demand, urgency in my voice.

“Now?” she asks, glancing over at the clock on the wall.

“It can’t wait,” I insist, clenching my fists at my sides to keep myself from reaching for her.

She briefly studies my face, then nods and disappears into the back. When she returns, her blonde coworker is trailing behind her.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” she tells the blonde.

“Oh, don’t worry, take your time,” she teases, wiggling her eyebrows at Carolina, who simply rolls her eyes.

Carolina comes around the bar, taking my hand to lead me into the back. We navigate through the kitchen, and a guy who looks like the cook shoots me a disapproving glare. I simply offer him a strained smile in return. I have to remind myself that this is Carolina's place of work, no matter how much I wish it weren't. The other guy is quick to turn his back to me when I look at him.

I'm a nervous wreck when we finally reach a hallway where Carolina opens her locker. I don't want this to blow up in my face, but I can't keep things in anymore. She slips on her jacket and takes hold of my hand again, guiding me toward the back door.

The door is illuminated by a lone light that casts a dim glow in the alleyway behind the bar. Thankfully, there's no one in sight. Still, not wanting to risk it, I pull her by her wrist and lead her a few steps into the shadows. The light is just enough now for me to make out her face.

She gives me a critical look and asks, "Clay, what's going on? What happened? Are you okay?"

Gently, I press her against the wall, sandwiching her between me and the hard concrete. I'm sweaty and probably smell, but we both have to live with that right now. My hands reach up to cradle her face, my thumb stroking her cheek.

"Carolina." I exhale. The cold makes me see my breath, but my eyes don't leave hers, and her pupils dilate.

"What..." she breathes out, sounding unsure.

"Tell me this is real," I plead, but she simply looks up at me, biting her lip. "Tell me you feel it too," I continue, lowering my forehead to hers and closing my eyes. "Tell me... tell me I can have you because you already have me."

She hesitates, and my stomach sinks.

"Kitten, tell me you feel it too," I whisper more urgently as one of my hands wanders down to her throat, squeezing it gently.

"I do, but..."

"Fuck the 'buts,'" I almost growl and push her chin up with my thumb, leaning in to kiss her.

At first, she freezes, then she grabs my parka and kisses me back, so I tilt her head a bit more to deepen the kiss.

*Fuck, this is everything!*

I've never felt such a strong connection while kissing anyone except

Xander. Kissing him and kissing her feels the same, which makes me believe even more that we're meant to be.

*This is meant to be.*

She's so damn small, and I have to lean down to reach her soft lips. I let my hands wander down to her thighs and lift her, pressing her against the wall.

"Clay!" she hisses, gripping my shoulders.

"Wrap your legs around my waist," I murmur against her lips.

"No, I'm too heavy. Put me down," she protests.

"Shut up, wrap your legs around me like a good girl, and let me kiss those perfect lips," I order, and finally, she gives in.

I bite her bottom lip for making me ask twice, and she lets out a soft whimper. *Fuck, how I dreamed about this sound. And it is just for me this time.*

We kiss for a long moment, getting lost inside each other, and it feels as if my worries all left my body when she gave in to me.

She gives a quiet moan against my mouth, her chest heaving as much as mine is. Then she reaches down to firmly grasp my hard-on through my sweatpants. A deep groan escapes my lips, and I pull back slightly, nibbling along her neck. "Do you like what you're feeling, kitten?" I ask, biting down and making her gasp.

*The sounds she makes... and for me.*

"Feed your own ego. I'm busy," she breathes out, slipping her hand inside my pants.

I chuckle, trying to come up with a response, but as soon as her small hand touches me, my mind goes completely blank, and all I can manage to utter is a simple "Fuck."

Xander is a big guy, in every sense of the word, while she is small as fuck. The contrast is mind-blowing but in the best damn way.

My hand ventures from her thigh, sneaking under her hoodie. It slides up to her tits, pulling down the cup of her bra so I can play with her nipple between my fingers.

"Dio," she breathes out, and I swiftly dive back in to kiss her.

She's stroking my cock, and I'm already dripping with pre-cum.

*She drives me fucking wild.*

I need to know if I have the same effect on her, so my hand leaves her amazing tits and searches for the waistband of her jeans. I fumble with the

button for a bit too long, making her huff. She leans back to open it herself, and our eyes lock as my hand slips into her panties.

I lick my lips when my fingers find her slit. As I delve in, I feel her wetness, and I watch as her eyes, locked on mine, go wide on a gasp while her body starts to tremble.

“Fuck, you’re so wet for me,” I murmur, licking up her neck. “I’m dying to fuck you, but I’m a man of culture, and I won’t do it in this filthy alleyway.”

“The only culture you possess is bacteria,” she deadpans, and I lift my head to meet her gaze once again. “Fuck me, Clay.”

*Holy shit, you don’t have to tell me that twice.*

I bring Carolina back to her feet and turn her around. “Hands on the wall, kitten,” I command.

She complies, and I grab her hips, pulling her back slightly so she arches her back. Then I slip my foot between hers and nudge her right foot to the side, spreading her legs wide. In this position, her pants and panties get stuck around her calves when I tug them down.

Now she’s in front of me, bent over, hands against the wall, with that delicious ass in the air. My mouth waters, seeing her pussy glisten in the faint light.

I give her ass a spank, something I’ve wanted to do since she first opened that pretty mouth to mock me, and the sound resonates in the alleyway. I quickly glance around, but we’re still alone.

“This needs to be fast and dirty, kitten, before someone shows up looking for you,” I warn her, pushing a finger inside her, eliciting a moan from her. “But I promise, once I have you in my bed, I’ll make it up to you by eating you out so thoroughly that you’ll beg me to stop.”

“Clay,” she moans my name as I slide a second finger inside her, and after a few pumps, I can tell she’s ready for me.

I let my sweatpants and boxers drop down and position myself behind her. Since she’s smaller, I have to squat down a bit to match her height. It’s like a mini leg workout as I guide my cock to her pussy, teasing her by gliding it up and down a few times.

I close my eyes and release a groan, stilling for a second. Her pussy feels nearly hot compared to the cold outside, and I can’t wait to sink myself into her warmth.

“Quit playing around, Clay. You said we had to hurry,” she breathes out.

She's right, so I slowly push inside, relishing the tightness that surrounds me.

"Holy fuck, kitten," I breathe out, hearing her inhale sharply.

I give her ass another slap, leaving a red mark that I gently rub before pulling out and pushing back in slowly. I have to close my eyes. This feels like pure heaven, and I could do it all day long.

"Quick and... dirty, Clay," Carolina reminds me between pants, and I firmly grip her hips, starting to thrust harder and faster into her. "Fuck, yes," she moans.

My hand slips back under her hoodie, reaching up to her breasts. I squeeze them, one after the other, unable to resist.

"You're so damn sexy, these tits... god," I groan out. "I could spend hours just sucking on them." I give them a firmer squeeze, and she moans in response.

*What a beautiful sound.*

I withdraw my hand from under her hoodie and let it travel to her ponytail, wrapping her hair around my fist and pulling it while continuing to thrust into her. She arches her back even more, and her hands lose their grip on the wall.

Needing more, I pull her up by her hair, pulling her head back so I can lick her throat. My free hand moves from her hip to her swollen and plump pussy, finding her clit. I grit my teeth to keep from coming as my fingers start tracing circles around it.

"Are you going to be a good girl for me and come all over my cock in this dirty alleyway?" I whisper into her ear, my breath hot against her cold skin.

"Yes," she breathes out, but after another thrust, I still, my fingers pausing on her clit. "Clay!" she protests.

"Say, 'Clay, I'm your good girl,' and I'll let you come," I order, nibbling on her ear, teasing her.

She shakes her head, refusing, so I pull her hips back into mine, driving in deep, making her moan once more. "Say it," I demand.

She shakes her head again, and I give her ass a firm spank, harder this time. Finally, she blurts out, "I'm your good girl, Clay. Now make me fucking come, asshole."

I chuckle but continue my thrusts, my fingers finding her clit again and her walls spasm around me.

"Then come for me, kitten," I whisper in her ear, rubbing her clit a little

bit harder, and she shatters around me, gripping my cock so tightly I can't help but come along with her, grunting and moaning. Electricity shoots through me, and with a muttered "Fuck," I let my head fall back.

I pull her back against me, craving the deepest connection possible as I come inside her. Having this with her is more than I could have imagined. This alleyway is not what I fantasized for our first time, but in the end, the place doesn't matter.

When we come down from the high, and our breathing no longer echoes around us, I slip out and bend down to kiss the red mark on her ass cheek that I had left earlier. Tugging up her pants and panties, I tuck my cock back into my sweatpants. Then I turn her toward me, hugging her tightly.

Kissing the top of her head, I whisper, "You're absolutely perfect for me."

I feel her freeze in my arms and pull back slightly to look into her eyes. Her nose is red from the cold, and I can't resist giving it a quick, gentle kiss. When I straighten up, her eyes are wide.

"Dio, what have I done?" she questions, tears welling up.

Dread fills my stomach. "Carolina, I—"

"No, I need to go. I have to tell Joshua that I fucked up," she interrupts, turning to leave, but I quickly grab her wrist.

"That's the worst thing you can do right now. You're upset and not thinking clearly. I'm sorry. This is all my fault. I shouldn't have..." I begin.

"No, it's not about what you did. It's about the promises I made and what I did," she nearly cries, her voice trembling on the verge of panic.

"Carolina, I'll take you home. You can take a shower, get some sleep, and then we can talk to Josh together. Going to him like this will only make everything worse," I try to soothe, realizing the gravity of the situation.

This really could have been too much. I need to have a conversation with Xander too. I fucked up badly. *Again*. But still, I can't regret what just happened.

She nods, biting her lip and hugging herself tightly before whispering, "You're right. Okay. I need to go back inside and end my shift."

"Should I come with you? I can stay and bring you home after," I offer, reaching out to touch her cheek, but she takes a step back.

"No, thank you. Please go home. Good night," she quickly dismisses, turning and heading back inside.

"Kitten!" I call out, but the door closes behind her before I can say

anything more.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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### **Carolina**

After my shift, I take a hot shower, but it does nothing to wash away the guilt weighing on me. What's worse, I can't deny the connection I felt with Clay. It goes deeper than anything physical.

Since I was home so late, Joshua slept in his room. And I'm not sure if that's a good thing. I haven't slept a wink, overwhelmed with the gravity of what I've done and alone.

*I ruined everything.*

Just like I thought I would.

Joshua is going to hate me. I hate myself for what I did. I am not one to break promises. And here I am, betraying the one that was made for me. All because I can't control my feelings for his best friend.

It's early morning, and I can't take it anymore. Getting out of bed, I get somewhat ready to go over to their side of the house and tell Joshua what I did.

I pound on the door to their side of the duplex, tears of anger streaming down my face, my frustration directed mostly at myself. And maybe a bit toward Clay. As I think that, the door swings open, revealing the man himself, disheveled and sleepy-looking, wearing only sweatpants with his bare chest on display.

I'm proud of myself for not getting distracted by his sculpted abs—too furious to feel anything else.

His sleepy eyes widen as he takes in the sight of me. "Kitten, what are

you—” I push past him, storming into the house, determined to find Joshua. But as I reach the stairs, Clay grabs my wrist and pulls me back. “What are you doing? Are you okay?” he asks, genuine concern etched across his face.

“I’m going to do what I should have done hours ago and tell him what the hell I did,” I shout, tears streaming down my face.

“What we did, Carolina. We both played a part in it, and we can tell him together, maybe tonight at dinner? After we’ve all had some time to think,” Clay suggests, his voice pleading.

“No! You already convinced me to wait, but I’m not going to drag this out any longer,” I snap, forcefully pulling my wrist out of his grip.

“What’s going on?” Xander’s voice interrupts as he comes down the stairs, wearing nothing but black boxers.

His tattooed, muscular body is on full display, his shoulder-length hair framing his face.

I might have swooned if the situation wasn’t already so messed up.

I bite my lip, crossing my arms over my chest, and avert my gaze to the floor. I’m angry at Clay, but it’s ultimately his decision whether to tell Xander. I won’t betray Clay and ruin their relationship by telling Xander the truth.

“It’s okay. I already told him when I got home,” Clay reassures, reaching out for me.

I take a step back, meeting Xander’s gaze. “I’m so sorry,” I whisper before turning my attention back to Clay, anger boiling within me. “You told me not to rush into this, not to come here and spill everything, to sleep on it. But you went home and did exactly what I should have?” My voice escalates, and I yell at him in frustration.

“He’s my goddamn boyfriend, Carolina!” Clay shouts back at me.

“And Joshua is mine, but I fucking ruined it!” I yell back, voice breaking.

“Hey, hey, hey. Enough yelling, guys,” Xander scolds, positioning himself between us, attempting to diffuse the tension.

Just then, Joshua comes to the top of the stairs, chest bare, only in his navy sleep pants. He looks adorably sleepy, rubbing his eyes and yawning before he notices me. Instantly, he’s awake, rushing down the stairs to my side, placing a finger under my chin to lift my face, scanning it intently.

“What’s wrong? Are you hurt? Why are you crying?” he asks, reaching out with his other hand to wipe away a tear, but I take a step back.

“I messed up,” I admit, a sob escaping me. “I am so sorry.” I lower my

gaze, unable to meet his eyes.

“No, it’s all my fault. I couldn’t stay away. She didn’t even want to—” Clay begins, but Xander interrupts him, gripping him by the throat and turning his face to lock eyes with him.

“Did you just say she didn’t want to?” Xander’s tone is icy.

“No, fuck! Stop it, Clay. Of course, I wanted to. That’s the whole fucking problem!” I yell, my frustration peaking, and Xander releases Clay.

I turn my gaze to Joshua, who looks at me with furrowed brows. “Can we please talk? Alone?” I ask, my voice trembling.

His expression softens, and he motions toward the stairs. “Let’s go upstairs.”

In heavy silence, we head upstairs, and my heart sinks with each step. I don’t know if Joshua is too sleepy to understand the gravity of what is about to unfold because he simply holds my hand tenderly like he always does. It only makes this harder.

We enter his room, and he closes the door behind me before he returns to his bed, opening the covers and inviting me to join him.

“Joshua, we really need to talk. I fucked up,” I whisper, struggling to hold back my tears as they stream down my face.

“We can talk, but right now, what I need more than anything is to hold you,” he insists, his voice filled with warmth. “Come here.”

“But once you know what I’ve done, you won’t even want to be near me anymore,” I protest, wringing my hands.

“I highly doubt that. Come here,” Joshua repeats, his tone gentle yet firm.

“We’re going to argue, and it’s hard to argue while we’re cuddling,” I state.

“We’re not going to argue. We’re going to talk things out, and that works best while cuddling. Now bring your beautiful butt over here and let me hold you,” he insists with a hint of amusement.

A laugh escapes me, followed by a snuffle, and I comply, climbing onto the bed and slipping under the covers. He pulls me into his side, pressing a soft kiss to my temple. “My Carolina, what makes you hurt so much?” he whispers.

“That I hurt you, that I messed up. I promised you I wouldn’t do anything, and yet... I had sex with Clay last night,” I confess, my voice heavy with regret, my heart squeezing.

Joshua hums softly against my hair, pulling me even closer. “Are you

going to leave me for him?” he asks, his voice calm and gentle.

I lean back, my eyes widening in shock. “What? You should be the one leaving me!”

“That wasn’t the question,” he replies, pushing a strand of hair away from my face. “Are you going to leave me to be with him?”

“No, never. I love you,” I whisper, tears streaming down my face once more.

He strokes my cheek tenderly. “And do you love him in the same way you love me?”

I bite my lip, lowering my gaze, but after a moment, I nod. “I do,” I admit, the tears a river as my breath catches on a sob.

“And what about Xander? Do you love him the same way you love Clay and me?” he asks gently.

A sob escapes me. “I’m so sorry,” I manage to say through tears.

“Shh... shh... Carolina,” he murmurs, pulling me close and kissing my forehead. “That’s the right answer. I already told you I’m open to trying this with all of us. I told you I want you to explore what might be between you guys.”

“I promised you it would only be us, and I broke that promise,” I whisper, my voice filled with guilt.

He chuckles softly, his laughter filled with tenderness. “You never had a chance of keeping that promise. Clay is a persistent asshole, and Xander devours you with his gaze. I’m surprised it took this long.”

“How can you be so calm about this?” I ask him, bewildered.

He shrugs. “I wasn’t at first. I was goddamn furious when I found out while you were in the hospital. To be honest, our friendship nearly went to hell because we all fell for the same amazing woman, and I didn’t want to accept that,” he confesses, his voice tinged with regret.

As he strokes my cheek, his touch soothing, he continues, “But I had time to think about it, and we talked...” He trails off, a momentary pause as he gathers his thoughts. “I guess I was worried they would take you away from me. I was afraid of losing you. You’re the best thing that has ever happened to me, and I was scared that Clay and Xander would swoop in and steal you away. I know they are both much more fun and experienced than I am.”

“Joshua, *Dio*, no, that’s not true. I—” I begin, but he interrupts me with a peck on the lips.

“I can be insecure too, you know.” He smiles at me, and it isn’t forced.

It's genuine and full of love. "All I want is for you to be as happy as possible, Carolina. As long as I can be by your side while you're happy, I am happy too. Don't promise me it will be us only. Promise me that it will be us forever," he whispers against my lips, and I lean in to kiss him.

"Forever," I whisper.

"Always," he whispers back.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

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### Clay

“Sit down,” Xander tells me from the couch while I walk in circles behind him, pacing, my nerves getting the better of me.

“I am never going to forgive myself if I ruined this for her,” I declare, pulling at my hair.

“You didn’t, and you know it. Josh is in. He told us that,” he insists, his tone void of any hints of emotion.

“He said it had to come from her, and I am not quite sure he is a hundred percent good with it. He only promised to try. Who knows what he thinks now that I fucked up *again*.” I urge, very aware that I did anything other than let her come onto me.

“It would have happened. You just sped it up a bit because you are impatient. That fact is not news to any of us,” Xander grunts out.

“Hey,” I object, stopping midstep.

“Come here,” he beckons, patting the couch beside him, and I comply. He takes my hand, stroking the back of it. “I can’t take your pacing anymore. It is going to be okay.” I nod, not really reassured. “What?” he asks. “What did you not tell me?”

*Fuck, he knows me way too well.*

“I didn’t use protection.”

He stares at me for a second, not blinking, then he shoots to his feet and explodes. “Are you fucking kidding me, Clay? Not only did you not give a fuck about our agreement, about how I would feel when you came home and

told me, that you just took matters into your own hands, but you couldn't even keep your head straight long enough to grab one of the many condoms we stash in our drawer?" His voice rises with each accusation. "Oh no, you couldn't do that, right? Because then you would have needed to get into our bedroom, where I was sleeping. Because chances are you would have woken me up and wouldn't be able to go there on your own to fuck her behind my back."

His words hit me like a dagger in my chest. A mixture of desperation and remorse fills me, and I try to find the right words to explain myself.

"Babe, it wasn't like that. She's not part of our arrangement. You see that, right? She doesn't count because she should be an equal in our relationship. We both should have our own relationship with her outside of ours. I just... I couldn't stay away any longer. I didn't even think about how it might hurt you. I couldn't see that because I was so out of my mind."

Xander's expression remains stern, his hurt palpable as he replies, "Exactly, Clay. You didn't even think about me at all."

The weight of my actions hangs heavily in the air, and I'm left grappling with the consequences of my impulsive choices.

"You are right. We should have had this conversation before I did anything in the first place," is all I manage to say, my voice just above a whisper, my eyes brimming with tears.

*How come I can't seem to stop fucking up all the fucking time?*

Xander's anger doesn't dissipate entirely, but he relents a little, his expression becoming less accusatory. "Love, you need to understand how much this hurt me. We need to communicate better, especially when it involves someone we both care about. I need to know that you'll consider my feelings in the future."

Remorse weighs heavy on me as I absorb Xander's words. I need to stop hurting the person I love so deeply, just because I am not thinking.

"I'm so sorry," I whisper, my voice trembling with regret. "I messed up, big time, *again*. I should have thought about you, about us, before I acted so recklessly. I know I hurt you, and I hate myself for it." I gently touch Xander's arm, seeking some form of physical connection. Thankfully, he doesn't resist. "I promise you, from the bottom of my heart, that I'll do whatever it takes to make this right. I'll work on being more considerate, communicating better, and respecting your boundaries. You mean everything to me, and I never want to hurt you like this again."

After a tense moment of silence, Xander lets out a long sigh, his anger and resentment starting to wane. He finally speaks, his voice softer but still tinged with hurt. “Well, at least we know we are clean. Josh is too. And since she was a virgin—”

My mind is reeling from the sudden shift in the conversation, but I know Xander well enough to understand that he values actions over words, especially when we’re fighting. I will have to make it up to him by demonstrating how truly sorry I am and consistently considering his feelings in everything I do, which isn’t a hardship.

*I love this man more than life.*

Taking the out he gives me, I admit, “That’s not what bothers me.”

He nods, his now calm demeanor almost unsettling. “Seems like you need to talk about a lot with Carolina too. We take it as it comes. It is what it is.” He shoots me a look, and his words carry a mixture of exasperation and affection. “I learned to go with the punches since my boyfriend is not the smartest.”

“I am smart. I just do stupid shit,” I mumble, pulling my shoulders to my ears in the form of a defeated shrug.

“Honestly, love, I want to drape you over my lap and spank your perfect ass raw for that stupid-ass behavior. Next time, for the love of God, wake me up when you have such an amazing idea. At least then I could watch you continue to set our life on fire.”

I deserve the only half-joking teasing, but just as I am about to apologize to him once more, Josh and Carolina come into the living room, hand in hand.

“And? Are you guys okay? Could you talk it out?” I ask, unable to hold back.

Joshua smiles, kissing her temple. “More than okay.”

“Okay, that’s good,” I mutter, my stomach falls with disappointment.

I am really happy that I did not ruin their relationship, but losing her hurts. I squeeze Xander’s hand to keep myself from crying.

“Carolina, tell our boy that he hasn’t lost you. I can’t take this anymore,” Xander tells her.

She looks up at Joshua, who then leans down to gently peck her lips. “Always,” he reassures her, his words carrying a promise that soothes the tension in the room.

She makes her way over to me and pushes my shoulders back, and I sit

straight on the couch, anticipation coursing through me. My free hand instinctively grabs her waist when she moves to straddle my lap. Hope flares inside me as she takes my face in both hands, locking her gaze with mine.

In a soft whisper, she admits, “I am in love with a fucking idiot,” before leaning in to kiss me. The butterflies in my stomach erupt in a flutter of excitement and relief.

Xander lets go of my hand, so I take her face in my hands too. We break the kiss, and I can’t help but chuckle, pure joy coursing through me after the agony I felt just minutes ago.

Leaning my forehead against hers, I whisper, “I love you too, my little ray of pitch black,” bringing her lips back to mine.

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## **Xander**

Something clicks into place when I see them kissing. I can nearly feel the anxiety falling away from Clay—everything he has carried around with him for the past few weeks.

Everything that weighed heavily on me, too, since his struggles are mine.

I have to agree with Carolina. He is a fucking idiot, but he is *our* fucking idiot. I know he would never hurt me on purpose. He is not like that. He just doesn’t think too much before he acts. He is impulsive, and I love that about him. I would just have loved a warning beforehand this time.

I was well aware that it was going to happen, that they would have sex without me present. Clay is right. She is not part of this agreement. There is no agreement anymore. There is her, and there is him. I will not touch anybody else ever again.

Maybe some of the hurt comes from being jealous about how far their relationship has already developed while I am still firmly in the friend zone with her. I told him I wanted to start this slow, to enjoy the tension. But what if...

*... what if she doesn’t feel the same and just wants to be with Clay and Josh?*

I gaze over to Carolina and Clay, and I can’t help but smile. I look up at Josh, seeing him smile at them too.

A feeling of rightness settles in, and I know we will be okay.

This is going to work out, and it will be the best thing that ever happened to us. *She* is the best thing that ever happened to all of us.

They break the kiss, and Clay pulls her to him, hugging her tightly. He turns his head to me, insecurity in his eyes, but I smile at him, reaching out to squeeze his knee, and the worry evaporates from his face.

“I am going to get ready for work,” I declare, standing.

Carolina turns her head to look at me, quickly giving Clay a peck on the lips as she stands as well. “How much time do I have?”

“You can skip today. I bet you haven’t slept much,” I tell her.

“I am coming. Ten minutes, okay?” she asks, pecking Josh on the lips before she leaves our side of the house to get ready.

Clay stands and squeezes my shoulder. “You’ll get your goodbye kiss soon too, babe,” he tries to reassure me.

I grab his neck and pull him to me. “Oh, don’t be so smug now, brat. Five minutes ago, you were thinking the world was going to end.”

“That was five minutes ago,” he retorts, his eyes sparkling with joy. “And she told me she loves me.” He beams up at me, his happiness contagious and impossible to resist.

I let out an exaggerated huff, my lips curling into a smile. “And you call me a drama queen,” I quip before leaning in to kiss him. “I love seeing you happy, light of my life,” I murmur against his lips.

“And I love you, love of mine,” he whispers back.

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“This isn’t the way to the studio,” Carolina states when I pull onto the street she lived on with her abuser.

“I know,” is all I offer in response.

She begins to fidget, her growing nervousness apparent. When I stop in front of her apartment building and turn off the engine, I can almost hear her heart pounding in the quiet car.

“What’s going on?” she asks in a hushed tone.

I face her and gently place a hand on her knee. “You don’t need to come in. Just stay here,” I assure her, but she holds my wrist tightly.

“What are you going to do?” she asks, her eyes widening.

“I go up there every morning before work and leave a twenty on the

kitchen counter,” I admit, shrugging my shoulders. “It’s no big deal. I’ll be back in two minutes.”

She looks shocked, but I open the truck door and step out before she can say anything. And just as promised, I’m back in no time at all.

When I return, she is crying, tears rolling down her pretty face.

“I am so sorry. I should be the one doing this, I know, but just the thought of coming back here...”

I gently hold her chin between my thumb and forefinger, lifting it so I can look into her eyes. “I’ll take care of it. Just say ‘Thank you.’”

“Thank you,” she whispers.

“Good girl,” I praise, leaning in to lick a tear from her cheek.

Her expression is so stunned that I can’t help but smirk as I start the engine and drive away from that wretched place.

After a few minutes of silence, she asks softly, her voice filled with uncertainty, “Are you mad at me?”

“Why would I be?” I ask, shooting her a look.

“He’s your boyfriend,” she states like it should be obvious.

“Seems like he’s yours now too,” I remark, noticing her body tense up in my peripheral vision. So I add, “Do you want me to get you a morning-after pill, or are we going to wait and see what happens? It’s your body. You decide, but I just wanted to let you know that I can cover all expenses if this is a concern.”

“What?” She turns her head toward me swiftly, her eyebrows pinched in confusion, clearly taken aback by my offer.

“I know you don’t like me paying for your shit, but I think you have to take it relatively quickly after if you want to take it, and we can discuss you working to pay back half of it if you really insist. And I hope you agree that Clay has to at least pay the other half since he is the reason you are in this situation.”

“What are you even talking about?” She frowns at me as I park in front of the studio.

“Clay told me he was an irresponsible idiot and didn’t use protection. Just to ease any worries you may have, we get tested every time we have sex with a woman, which hasn’t happened for nearly half a year now.”

“I—” she starts, but I interject, feeling the need to clarify things further.

“And it won’t happen again. Believe me. We’re done playing around.”

“Xander!” she yells at me, clearly frustrated.

“What?” I turn to look at her.

“For once, you should shut up, yet you can’t stop talking.” She smiles at me. “I am on birth control. So, no need for a pill, but thank you.”

“Okay.” I nod, getting out of the truck and walking over to her side to lift her out so she doesn’t have to deal with the long drop.

---

A few hours later, I am cleaning the tattoo station after my last client for the day just left. Once I am done, I head back to the register, where Carolina is sketching something in the sketchbook Clay got her.

She is so engrossed in her work that she doesn’t notice me standing behind her, peeking over her shoulder at her sketch. It’s a drawing of a skeleton hand, forefinger outstretched, with a butterfly perched on it.

“That’s beautiful,” I compliment, startling her a little, and take the sketchbook from her to examine it more closely. “Have you ever thought about tattooing? You have a good eye for stuff that would transfer well onto skin. Not every good sketch makes a good tattoo, but this...” I glance down at her. “Do you want to design your own sleeve? I can tattoo it, making sure it’s still your style.” She looks ready to dismiss the idea, so I quickly add, “Just think about it.”

“Sure.” She shrugs, and I hand her back the sketchbook.

“You told Clay your mom was an artist?” I ask.

“Yeah, I mean, she wasn’t known or anything, but she did a lot of landscape paintings at home. Every wall in the apartment was covered with her paintings.” She smiles, but it fades quickly. “He didn’t even let me keep one, even though there were like fifty they just trashed.”

A surge of hatred for the man runs through my veins. Every morning, it takes all my self-control not to walk into his bedroom and strangle him. The only thing that stops me is the realization that that piece of shit is not worth going to prison for.

“There is an exhibition tomorrow that I would like to go to. Would you come with me?” I ask her, stepping closer and cupping her cheek, stroking it gently. “It’s more abstract art, not landscapes, but it is dark and twisted, and from seeing the stuff you draw, I think it could be something you enjoy.” I feel a smile tugging at my lips.

“I...” she starts, looking unsure.

“Say yes,” I whisper, leaning into her space a bit more.

“Yes,” she whispers back.

“Perfect,” I reply, letting go of her and stepping back. I smirk as I notice the dumbstruck look on her face. “Come on, I’ll drive you to the bar.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

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### **Carolina**

“I know, I am sorry...” I fake a cough, “... I can come in, though, since it really does not work without me,” I tell Donny over the phone while heading upstairs to my guest room at Sophia’s.

“As if I’d let you cough into the patrons’ drinks. Stay away, Costa,” he warns, hanging up.

I have never called in sick before. I’ve even worked with a fever. But Donny would never let me take a Sunday off just because I have plans. And since the internship pays so well, it is not the end of the world to miss a night’s worth of tips.

*Fuck, life must be so easy if you don’t have to fight for every damn penny.*

I open the door to my room and walk in, needing to get ready for the exhibition. I hope there is no dress code because I don’t think they’ll let me in wearing jeans and a hoodie if they do.

When I look down at my bed, I am left in disbelief. There it lies, the absolute dream dress I tried on while shopping with Xander and Sophia.

It is beautiful, Bordeaux-red, sparkling, soft, and way too expensive for me.

I pull my phone out and text Xander.

This is too much.

It was made for you.

It's still too much.

Just say thank you.

Doesn't have the same effect over text.

While I wait for his answer, I stand there, stroking the fabric and contemplating if I can be a little bit selfish this one time because, *fuck, the dress is so damn pretty*, when my door opens, and Xander walks in.

He is dressed in a black suit, his hair on top of his head in a man bun, looking sleek and bitable.

“Hey, ever heard of knock—” I start, but he stands in front of me and grips my chin, effectively cutting me off.

“Get that beautiful ass of yours in the dress so I can flaunt and spoil you tonight,” he orders, his voice deep.

That went straight to my pussy, which throbbed in response.

“Xander—” I begin again, but he pulls my bottom lip down with his thumb.

“For me?” he asks, his eyes fixed on my lips.

“Okay,” I whisper.

“Good girl,” he praises, stroking his thumb over my bottom lip again, hard, before quickly stepping back. “Half an hour enough for you? We have to drive over to Brooklyn.”

My eyes go wide. “Oh, okay, sure. Half an hour works.”

He nods and closes the door behind him when he leaves. I look back at the dress and see two boxes sitting on the bed beside it. I open one to reveal a pair of black high heels. I have never worn anything with a heel, but they fit perfectly when my feet slide in. Thankfully, they aren't too high, and walking in them is manageable.

In the other box is the beautiful lingerie set Xander bought me.

*The man is crazy.*

I take a super quick shower before getting into the underwear, looking at myself in the mirror, and feeling sexy for the very first time in my life. But when I slip on the dress, the bra shows and there's a very noticeable panty line. I do my hair and makeup, thinking about what I should do, but ultimately decide, *screw it*.

I take the lingerie off, leaving me in the dress and shoes, nothing else.

There is a knock on the door before it opens a slit. “You ready?” Xander

asks.

“Coming,” I holler, looking at my reflection in the mirror one last time, not believing I can look like this.

I open the door fully, and Xander stands in the doorway, a forearm leaning on the top of the doorframe, looking down at me. His eyes roam me from head to toe. He stands straight, reaching out for a strand of my hair, twirling it between his fingers.

“There are no words to describe how beautiful you are,” he whispers softly, and I huff, but he reaches out and pulls me into a hug, kissing the top of my head. “Let’s go. I can’t wait to have you all to myself.”

His words send a shiver down my back as he takes my hand, leading me down the stairs. I grab my backpack off the floor next to the entry and slip my wallet out of it when I notice I have nowhere to put it or my phone. I can’t bring the backpack.

“Leave it here, you don’t need them. I am going to take you to dinner after the exhibition, and next time we do this, I’ll make sure to get you a purse that matches the shoes.” Xander smirks at me, looking down at my feet.

I roll my eyes. “There will not be a next time if you don’t stop buying me stuff.”

“Oh, there will. I need to see you in that dress at least ten more times,” he mutters when I put my wallet back.

“I am going to put my phone in the living room real quick,” I declare, walking over there to find Clay and Joshua sitting around, talking.

“Holy shit,” Clay breathes out, standing from the couch as he sees Xander and me coming in.

“I bet you regret telling him you don’t want to go to any more exhibitions now.” Joshua chuckles and greets me with a peck on the lips.

“Could you please watch my phone while we’re gone? Chiara is with Leo tonight. Maybe she’ll text or call,” I ask him.

“Don’t worry, I got you. You go and just enjoy.” Joshua smiles, showing his dimples.

“Babe, give me your phone. I left mine next door, but I need a picture of you guys. That’s so going to be my new background.” Clay grins, making me shoot him a look. “Don’t scrunch up that pretty face, kitten. Stand next to Xander, please.” I do as he says, and Xander puts an arm around me. Then he pulls me into his side and leans down to kiss my temple, making me smile. “Oh my God, this is perfect. You guys are adorable,” Clay admires, taking

what seems like a hundred pictures.

“Okay, that’s enough,” I cut him off, stepping away from Xander.

Joshua takes my hand, tugging me to the side. “I need one for my phone too.” He smiles, “You look absolutely stunning. I am so proud to call you mine.” My heart melts, and he takes out his phone to snap some pictures of just me before he leans in to get a couple of selfies with me, kissing my cheek. “Have fun, my Carolina. I love you,” he whispers in my ear.

I kiss him, whispering back, “I love you too.”

“Come on.” Xander stretches his hand out for me. “Let’s go.”

---

## **Xander**

It’s a good thing the entry to the exhibition is just a few feet away because on the way here, it started snowing, and I hadn’t thought to buy her something to put on over the dress.

*I am an idiot.*

I round the truck to open the door for her, lifting her out of it.

It took us about half an hour to get there, and the drive was pleasant. As I told her about the artist, an old friend from art school, she listened intently, and I found that I liked talking to her about the subject. I already knew she was smart, but when talking with her about different art styles and epochs, I discovered this girl is interesting and educated. I had no idea I could fall for her even more.

We enter the gallery, and I grab her a glass of champagne from the server offering them. Since I’m driving, I select a glass of water.

“You don’t drink?” she asks, taking the glass from me.

“Not when I drive and have precious cargo.” I shrug, watching how her full lips form around the glass to take a sip before she scrunches up her pretty nose and purses her lips. “What?” I can’t help but smile at her in amusement.

“I don’t know what I’d expected, but not that.” She shudders. “Why do people drink that? It’s bitter.”

I take the glass from her and hand it to the next server with empty glasses on his tray. “Let’s have a look around,” I propose, placing a hand on the small of her back to guide her farther into the exhibition.

It is centered around dark canvases with white and gray portraits on them.

The people in the portraits are screaming, and the upper half of their faces are smudged. They're only recognizable from the nose down.

"Oh my God, those are stunning," Carolina admires, walking over to one where the man on the canvas looks especially pained.

"I knew you would be into that," I remark with a smile, loving that she seems to like them.

"Hayes, long time no see," a voice greets from behind me, and I have to rein in a huff before I turn.

"Bishop," I greet, looking over at the blond, conceited snob I haven't seen in a few years. He still looks exactly the same as he did in art school.

"What a surprise to see you here. I thought you gave up canvases for human skin," he comments with a sly smirk. I'm just about to answer when he turns to Carolina, stretching out his hand for her to shake. "Since Hayes seems to have forgotten his manners, I will introduce myself. Daniel Bishop, I recently bought this art museum."

*Well, shit, we sure as fuck wouldn't have come here if I had known that.*

Bishop's hand is still outstretched to Carolina, who shoots me a quick glance. She seems to sense that I don't like this guy because she slips her bored face on and only looks him up and down without taking his hand.

*God, how I love this woman.*

Bishop awkwardly takes his hand back, turning to me. "Well, Phillips outdid himself with this exhibition, don't you think? People really like the anger and despair in his work."

Carolina turns and walks farther into the room, looking at the paintings, so I do too, walking behind her while Bishop trails us from canvas to canvas, making me hate him even more.

I wanted to spend time with Carolina, not being chased by the ghosts of my past.

She comes to stand before a painting that is completely black, other than a mix of gray, with a hand outstretched to the viewer. If you look closely, you can make out a face in the shadows, eyes crying. The painting is titled *Save Me*.

Carolina tilts her head, examining it closely. As I take her in, I watch many emotions cross her face. If we were alone, I would ask her what the painting is moving inside her.

But we are not, and the asshole has to make another comment. "I remember your style was also pretty dark and twisted, right?" Carolina turns

to look at me, then at him. He smirks at her with a knowing look like he will divulge privy news. “This could be Hayes’ exhibition, but he decided to drop out of art school to open that silly little tattoo studio.”

She steps over, standing half in front of me and crosses her arms. “That tattoo studio is the best in New York.” She takes a look around. “And you staying in art school brought you what? A silly little art museum in Brooklyn? Or was that Daddy’s money?” He simply smirks at her, but I notice the slightest flash of irritation in his eyes. “I mean, we all start somewhere, right?” she asks him, then takes my hand, pulling me down the hallway.

I have to bite my tongue not to laugh.

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## **Carolina**

That guy is still following us when I stop to look at another painting. He stands on my left while Xander is on my right.

I realize I’m still holding Xander’s hand and take a step to the side, letting him go.

“Feisty, I like beautiful women who can speak their minds,” the guy leans down to say softly into my ear, making me lean away from him.

Xander fixes him over my head with a stare. But he simply smirks at Xander, obviously just wanting to use me to upset him, before he adds, “You have to give me this, though. This silly little art museum is a nice place to bring a date.”

“We’re not dating,” I state, turning to look at the painting again, wanting to get him off my back.

Xander grips my chin and turns my head to him. “Shut the fuck up, you’re mine,” he tells me. “She’s mine,” he nearly growls out to reaffirm the fact to the guy before he takes my hand and pulls me away.

“Xander, what—” I start.

“As if you didn’t know that already,” he huffs out, leading me back out of the exhibition and into a room that is empty except for a few tables standing around. He closes the door behind us before putting his hands under my arms and lifting me onto a table. “I am going to kiss you now,” he tells me, grabbing my throat possessively and crashing his lips down to mine.

It's not like the gentle kiss he gave me on New Year's. It's rough and possessive. He claims my mouth and leaves me breathless. Then he bites my bottom lip.

"Say it. Say you're mine," he commands.

"I'm yours," I whisper.

"Good girl," he praises, threading his hands through my hair and pulling my head to the side to suck on the delicate skin of my collarbone.

"Fuck," I gasp out before he swoops back in to deepen the kiss, our tongues tangling in a violent kiss that makes me feel like we share the same breath.

His hand wanders down to the V-neck of the dress, then dives beneath the fabric, finding my breast and squeezing it, making my breath catch.

"Mine," he murmurs in that deep voice against my lips. His hand shifts to my other breast, squeezing it too. "Mine," he repeats, his tone possessive, and a shudder runs through me.

The hand in my hair yanks my head back, allowing him to trail his tongue up my throat. His other hand ventures to the slit of the dress, gliding up my thigh. When his fingers discover my lack of underwear, he stiffens.

"Are you trying to kill me? Where are your panties?" he asks huskily against my skin.

"They left an imprint on the dress, so I left them at home," I explain, my breath heavier.

"Fuck this," he mutters, grasping my thighs, pulling me to the edge of the table and kneeling before me, parting my legs.

"Xander," I hiss out, feeling exposed with one of my tits out, knowing damn well that someone could come in this room at any time. Then he licks up my slit, making me moan.

"Mine," he growls out against my pussy, his beard tickling me.

"Yours," I declare on a breath.

He starts to lick me, his tongue finding my clit with shocking accuracy, circling it while his hand wanders up my thigh until one of his big fingers pushes inside me.

"Oh *Dio*," I whimper.

"I want to mark you, make you mine, let every fucker know that this pretty pussy belongs to me," he declares, his thumb circling my clit.

"Then do it," I challenge, the pleasure fogging my thinking.

"I can't do that here, Carolina. I need you in my bed, satisfied and

relaxed. Then maybe we can try just the tip,” he explains, making my head spin with what he means. “But what I can do right here and right now is make you come all over my face so I have your sweet scent on me for the rest of the night.”

He dives back in, licking me while his finger fucks me relentlessly. He brings more pressure on my clit at the same time as curling his finger a bit, finding the perfect spot.

“Yes!” I moan, one hand gripping the table, the other finding his hair, pulling on his man bun.

“Come for me,” he commands, and I fall apart, his tongue leaving me trembling on the cold table. When I look down at him, he pulls his finger out of me, licking it clean before he pulls me gently upright, kissing me and making me taste myself on his lips. “You’ve been so good for me tonight,” he praises against my lips. “My girl.”

My insides are all gooey from the orgasm and his words. He leans down, nipping at my nipple, then gently pulls my dress back into place. It’s then I see the enormous imprint of his cock in his dress pants and look at him with wide eyes.

“I need to get you home, Carolina. I really want to see how far you can take me.” My pussy clenches, and I nod like a bobblehead, incapable of words, making him chuckle. “Come on,” he beckons, lifting me off the table and taking my hand.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

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### **Carolina**

My mind is spinning with thoughts. Xander's hand is on my bare knee, squeezing gently while he tries to navigate through the increasing snowfall. The streets are nearly empty. It seems few people dare to drive in these conditions.

Xander is also driving slowly.

"Are you scared? You got so quiet over there. I am used to driving in the snow, so you don't have to worry. It just takes a little longer," he tries to reassure me.

"It's not that. I know you will keep me safe," I console him, fiddling with the hem of my dress.

"What is it then, Carolina?" he asks, his tone gentle.

"You said I was yours," I whisper.

"You are," he confirms, not leaving any room for misunderstandings.

"I just don't get it. Are you saying all three of you want to be with me? All I do is struggle. I am not worth it. I can't give anything in return. You will never be just happy with me," I confess.

"Being happy is easy. I can be happy with anyone. But I want to struggle with you. Have you ever seen the darkness in someone's eyes and loved them anyway?" he asks, shooting me a glance.

Before I can respond, the world shifts violently around us. The sound of metal colliding with metal echoes in my ears, and my body jerks forward against the seat belt as the truck is struck from behind with a horrifying,

bone-chilling crunch.

My heart races as Xander desperately clutches the steering wheel, his knuckles white from the sheer force of the impact. Panic surges through me as the vehicle skids across the icy road. Xander is trying hard to regain control, but it's too late.

The truck spins out of control.

I can't stop the scream that leaves me as I try to brace myself for what's next. My breaths come hard and fast, my gaze shifting to the world passing by my window as we turn.

Xander's instincts seem to kick in because he puts his arm out over my chest, trying to stop me from being thrown forward. The world outside blurs to a stop as we crash into a street lamp on the side of the road, the collision sending shockwaves of pain through my hips, where the seat belt digs into my body.

"Holy fuck, what happened?" I holler, but I'm met with an eerie silence.

I muster every ounce of strength I have left to turn and check on Xander. My heart sinks as I take in the sight before me.

He's slumped over the steering wheel, a trickle of blood visible on his forehead, his body still, and it's clear he's lost consciousness.

The shock of the situation grips me, leaving me feeling helpless and terrified.

"Xander," I yell, panic filling my voice, as I take off my seat belt to turn and take his face between my hands. He has a gash on his forehead, blood trickling down slowly, and he does not open his eyes. "Fuck," I whisper, my hands starting to tremble.

*Why the fuck didn't the airbag deploy?*

In a panic, I search for my phone, but as soon as my fingers touch my dress, I remember it's at home with Joshua. I swipe over Xander's pant pockets, only to remember that he hadn't gotten his phone back from Clay either.

"Cazzo!" I curse, eyes filling with tears.

Thankfully, the truck is still running. It's dark, and the headlights illuminate the flurrying snowflakes. The windshield wiper dragging across the glass is the only sound.

I turn to look out of the rear window, but there is no one else on the street, no sign of the car that bumped into us, and dread fills my stomach.

*Was this really an accident?*

Either way, I have to get us out of here.

I have to get Xander to a hospital. Make sure that if someone wanted to make us crash, they won't come back to check if they were successful in hurting us.

I take a deep breath, trying to calm myself, remembering that my dad taught me how to drive. I was in the middle of getting my driver's license when they had their car crash. After that, I was done with cars. It took me years to get into a car with someone else driving.

But I have to do this. I have to get him help. There is no time to waste.

I carefully unbuckle Xander's seat belt and try to push his shoulders back so he sits upright, but he is huge and heavy, and I can barely lift him from the steering wheel.

"Xander," I whisper, pulling at him, but he doesn't move. "Come on, big guy, you have to help me a bit here."

I twist myself and turn him as far as possible so I can shift my arms under his, pressing my feet against the center console to drag him over the bench seat a few inches, and it seems to work. I do it again, pulling with all my strength and sliding him over and away from the driver's seat, but pain explodes in my left shoulder.

Over the years, I have dislocated my shoulder so many times from all the falls to the floor or getting pushed around, and the more it happened, the more easily it would happen again. It is not a new pain, but it is fucking unfortunate timing.

I breathe through my teeth and grip my arm, trying to push it up and outward to get it to relocate again, but I am too panicked, and after three tries, I give up.

"Fuck it," I say to myself and climb over Xander, sitting on the driver's side.

The thought of navigating the snow-covered streets fills me with even more dread, but I have no choice. With trembling hands, I grip the steering wheel. I think about taking off the high heels, but I can barely reach the gas pedal as it is, and I am already perched on the edge of the bench seat.

I have to breathe a few more times to think around the panic and pain before I remember how to shift it into reverse to pull back from the streetlamp and onto the road.

*Thank God the truck is still drivable.*

I shoot a "Grazie, Papa," to the ceiling for him having insisted on

teaching me how to drive a stick, but the Ford makes horrible sounds while I try to shift gears. Let's hope Xander won't hate me for treating his ride like this.

The snow is coming down harder now. The flakes swirling in the headlights create a disorienting maze, making it increasingly difficult to see the road ahead. But we were already driving for a while, and I think we were close to the Bronx.

The only hospital I know how to get to is the one in Harlem, so I change direction, hoping like fuck I am not prolonging shit for nothing.

I grip the steering wheel with a vice-like hold, my knuckles turning white with tension. Anxiety courses through me like an electric current, threatening to send me over the edge. I fight to stay in control, not just of the truck but myself. I can't afford to lose my composure now. Xander's life might depend on it.

Xander groans beside me, a sound that both relieves and terrifies me. I steal a quick glance in his direction. He is still lying on his side on the bench seat, exactly as I'd positioned him. There is no movement, but the sight of his chest rising and falling with each breath is a small reassurance in this nightmare.

My shoulder screams with pain, and my heart beats relentlessly, nearly out of my chest, as I navigate the slippery roads and push through the blinding snow.

"Come on, Xander, you can't just log out like this. Clay will never let us hear the end of it. The one time he lets us go out alone, you get knocked out?" I ask him.

If he does not make it, I will kill them. I can't say why, but I am sure this was not an accident. Somehow, the Del Moros want to make sure I would stop my digging.

I shake my head, dismissing the thought. Now is not the time for speculation. I need to focus on getting Xander to the hospital. The drive seems to take an eternity, but finally, I see the familiar lights and logo of the Harlem Hospital Center in the distance.

Relief washes over me as I pull into the emergency entrance and nearly run over a paramedic standing there because I can't seem to press the brake pedal down far enough. I quickly press the emergency brake pedal, jerking us to an abrupt stop.

I open the driver's door and yell to the paramedic. "He needs help,

please!”

The paramedic runs to the hospital’s glass doors, yells something inside, and comes rushing over to open the passenger door.

He looks down at Xander and curses. “Fuck, X?”

My eyes shoot from Xander up to the paramedic. When he turns to yell over his shoulder, I see the side of his neck, where there is a tattoo that Xander unmistakably inked. Another paramedic comes running with a bed with two nurses behind him.

They carefully drag Xander out of the cab and onto the bed while I hop out of the truck, nearly breaking my ankle from the height and the heels. I pull the shoes off, throwing them into the cab before I close the door.

They rush Xander inside, and I try to keep up with them on bare feet, clutching my left arm to my chest.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

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### **Carolina**

Clay and Joshua come rushing in, looking around frantically while I sit in the waiting room, my body still trembling from the adrenaline rush.

“Fuck, kitten.” Clay comes over to me, eyes brimming with tears when he tugs on my right arm to pull me to my feet and into a hug.

“Ah...” I whimper, pressing my eyes closed, and Clay lets go of me immediately.

“Are you hurt?” Joshua asks, nearly pushing Clay out of the way to look at me. “Haven’t they checked you?”

I was so lost in my thoughts about Xander and the accident, holding my arm still, that I had not thought about my shoulder.

“I’m fine. I just dislocated my shoulder,” I grunt out.

“What? And why has no one treated you yet?” Joshua looks at me with disbelief. “Wait, I am going to find a doctor,” he announces, but I halt him.

“No, it’s fine,” I argue.

“It’s not fucking fine, you’re hurt, you—” he starts, but I just take my arm by my elbow and push it up at an angle.

Now I am no longer panicking, the move works on the first try, but the pain makes me whimper slightly.

“Fucking badass,” Clay mumbles.

“How did you...” Joshua looks at me with wide eyes.

I shrug and explain, “Not the first time,” making him grimace.

“Here,” Clay says softly, taking off his parka and putting it around my

shoulders. It's still warm from his body, and I finally realize how cold I am without shoes and wearing only the dress.

"Thank you," I whisper.

"Come on, let's get to Xander. He is out of his mind with worry. He woke up, and you were gone, and nobody could tell him where you were."

"He's awake?" I ask, tears starting to form in my eyes.

"Yes, he is fine. It is just a little concussion," Joshua reassures me, putting a hand on the small of my back to lead me before he stops abruptly.

"Where are your shoes?"

"Ditched them." I shrug.

Clay gets in front of me and bends down to grab me under my thighs.

"What are you doing? No!" I protest when I realize he wants to carry me bridal style.

"I won't let you walk barefoot in a hospital, kitten. Come on, Xander is waiting." he urges.

I hate it, but I am just too tired to argue, and I need to see Xander, so I put my arms around Clay's neck as he bends down again. He puts one arm under my thighs and the other around my back, then stands, making me cling to him even more.

He looks at me and says softly, "Let's go get our man."

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We enter a hospital room, and Clay gently sets me down. With a deep breath, I glance at the bed on the right, where Xander sits upright.

He is wearing a hospital gown, his temple is patched up, and he gives me a grumpy look.

*Fuck, is he mad at me?*

"You!" he growls out. "Come here."

I freeze in place, unsure of what to do, when Clay wraps his arms around my waist and carries me the few steps to the side of the bed.

"Don't make him ask twice," he whispers in my ear, and I can hear the smirk in his voice.

I'm trembling, but Xander reaches out and grabs my wrist, pulling me toward him. As soon as I am close enough, he places his hands on my hips and lifts me onto the bed and in his lap, hugging me tightly from behind.

Relief washes over me as he holds me close, and I have to bite my lips to keep them from trembling, tears brimming in my eyes, making the room blurry. I close my eyes for a brief moment, savoring the feeling of his breath against my neck.

We made it.

*He's okay.*

"Babe, they told you not to overdo it," Clay reminds him from beside us, but Xander is just breathing in my hair, holding me close.

"I am so sorry," he whispers, and when I turn my head to look up at him, there are tears in his eyes. "I lost control. I shouldn't have—" I lean in to silence him with a kiss, and he grabs the back of my head to deepen it.

"Oh, that's new," Clay snickers from beside us. "At least that whole ordeal brought something good."

I break the kiss, looking into his eyes. "It wasn't your fault. Someone wanted us to crash."

"Why do you think that?" Joshua asks, coming up on the other side of the bed and looking at me with a frown.

"Del Moro warned me to be careful because accidents happen. And two days later, another car that miraculously disappeared right afterward pushes us off the road?"

"What happened anyway? I remember we spun on the ice before we crashed into something," Xander asks.

"We hit a streetlamp. It wasn't that bad. You just hit your head pretty hard." I grimace.

"You didn't get hurt?" he asks me, scanning my face.

"I am fi—" I start.

"She dislocated her shoulder," Joshua interrupts, crossing his arms over his chest.

"That wasn't because of the crash," I brush him off, regretting it the moment it leaves my mouth.

"What was it then?" Joshua raises an eyebrow at me.

"Wait, the towing company I called is calling back. Do you know where you crashed so they can go get the truck?" Clay asks me.

"It should be right outside the emergency entrance if they haven't moved it yet."

They all fix their eyes on me.

"Wait, you didn't call an ambulance? Why did Tom call me then?" Clay

asks, confused.

“You drove him here? In the snow? Do you even have a driver’s license?” Joshua asks at the same time.

“I don’t know if I should answer that question while two cops are present,” I half joke. “But in my defense, you guys had our phones, and there was no way to reach anyone.”

Clay steps to the side, answering the call, and Joshua steps closer to the bed.

“How did you dislocate your shoulder?” he asks, not letting it go.

I turn to look at Xander, who is also looking at me intently before I try to scoot off the bed. But he doesn’t let me go. He only pulls me even closer to him.

“I needed to move something heavy.” I shrug. “But honestly, I dislocate it all the time. It’s no big deal.”

“Fuck, you had to get me out of the driver’s seat,” Xander breathes out, his eyes wide as realization sinks in.

“So, you drove here, in the snow, with a dislocated shoulder and no driver’s license?” Joshua summarizes, searching my face.

“Please don’t arrest me.” I wince.

Xander huffs a laugh against my hair before he kisses the top of my head.

“We’re off duty and not going to tell anyone, right, Josh?” Clay confirms when he comes back to the side of the bed.

“Did you see the Del Moros in the car that hit you?” Joshua asks, reaching out to push a strand of hair behind my ear.

“No, I didn’t see anything. It’s just a feeling,” I admit, but I feel in my gut that I am right.

“We’re going to look into that,” he promises with a nod.

Xander turns my head, holding my chin and pecking my lips. “My heroine.”

“I am never going to let you two go out by yourself again, that’s for sure,” Clay chimes in.

I lean my forehead against Xander’s, huffing a laugh. “Called it.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY

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### **Carolina**

“You have to stop being such a goddamn mother hen, or I am going to kick your fine ass right out of this room.” Xander’s voice echoes through the hallway as I ascend the stairs on the guys’ side of the house.

I can’t help but smile to myself at his grumpy tone.

*His bossy side is so damn hot.*

They wanted to keep Xander in the hospital overnight to ensure the concussion was mild, a decision he vehemently protested but had no choice but to follow.

We stayed as long as the hospital staff allowed but got kicked out in the evening. That didn’t stop Clay from sneaking back in during the night to stay with him, though.

Even though they released him this morning, they wanted him to be under constant watch today so he can be taken back to the hospital if anything changes.

I knock on the door that is slightly ajar, opening it wider. “Sounds like you guys are having fun,” I comment, my voice lighthearted.

Clay, already dressed in his cop uniform and looking fucking bitable, turns toward me with a mock expression of exhaustion. “Thank God.”

He walks up to me with a mischievous glint in his eyes that makes my heart race. His gaze rakes over me in a way that sends shivers down my spine. He closes the distance between us, his gentle fingers gripping my head as he leans in to capture my lips in a kiss that still feels as electrifying as the

first time.

My stomach does a flip, and I get all jittery inside.

A soft, genuine smile graces his handsome face when he finally breaks the kiss. “Hey,” he murmurs, his voice filled with affection.

“Hey,” I whisper, my smile mirroring his.

“I like it when you smile,” he admits, his eyes twinkling with adoration. “But I love it when I am the reason you do.”

That went straight to my heart.

*And my pussy.*

He leans in again, planting another sweet peck on my lips before reluctantly releasing me. “He’s yours now too, so sorry-not-sorry,” he adds with a smirk.

As Clay makes his way toward the door, ready to head out, he pauses for a moment. “Bye, babe, and remember, you should not move too much!”

He closes the door just in time to avoid the missile in the form of a pillow that whizzes through the air, striking the solid wood of the door with a thud before falling to the floor.

Clay only snickers as he walks away.

“Someone is in a good mood,” I comment, smiling at Xander, who looks so fucking grumpy, sitting on the bed with his arms crossed stubbornly over his chest. Standing next to him, I place my backpack beside the bed, determined to change his mood. “Lean back.”

“Carolina, I swear if you start now, too, with telling me what to do—” he starts to protest, but I press my hand against his chest, effectively silencing him.

“Lean back,” I repeat, and this time, he gives in.

Climbing up the bed, I sit in his lap, straddling him. I reach into my hoodie pocket, taking out a piece of chocolate. After tearing open the packet, I hold it out in front of his lips. “Open,” I order, a playful smile dancing on my lips as I gaze at him.

Xander returns my smile with his own, making my heart race and my shoulders feel lighter. He obediently parts his lips for me, and I place the chocolate on his tongue. He grips my thighs, squeezing them while he sucks on the chocolate. His grip on my thighs tightens, making my pussy throb, then his entire demeanor shifts, and the tension in his body seems to melt away with the chocolate in his mouth.

“Better?” I whisper, leaning in to gently push a few loose strands of hair

behind his ear, my eyes locked onto his.

Instead of answering, he gently grabs the back of my neck and brings my lips to his. The unexpected move brings tingles to my stomach. He kisses me, unhurried and slow, tasting like chocolate. My heart nearly leaps out of my chest. He gives me a few more soft kisses before he leans back, smiling slightly, and I am reminded of what a beautiful man he is.

*And he is mine.*

Xander's hand gently cups my cheek, his thumb caressing my skin softly as he speaks, "I am sorry they made you skip work to be here, but I am glad you are."

I can't help but smile, feeling a rush of warmth at his words. "Oh, don't worry. Sophia said she has everything under control, and when she comes back home, I can go to my bar shift in time. It's no big deal." I shrug, genuinely appreciating how this family works, watching out for each other. I adore them all for letting me be part of it.

Xander doesn't seem entirely convinced, so I lean in once more to give him a sweet, brief kiss. "There is nowhere I would rather be right now," I whisper, my voice filled with sincerity before leaning back. "And I brought my college stuff. I have a test tomorrow, so it will be the perfect opportunity to go over the material a bit when you nap later."

"Oh, I am going to nap?" He smirks at me.

"Yep," I reply nonchalantly, shrugging my shoulders.

He chuckles softly, his eyes filled with affection. "How come I got myself two overbearing hens?"

I grin and retort, "Because you have good taste."

"Fair enough," he concedes, his smirk turning into a fond smile. "But I need to work on some sketches first. I am going back to work tomorrow no matter what you guys say because the doctor said I could, and the sketch is nowhere near ready."

"That should be fine," I agree, leaning over to grab his sketchbook from the nightstand with a pencil and hand it to him.

"Did Josh talk to you? Could they find anything?" he asks me.

I shake my head. "They looked at the location on the street where we crashed, but there was nothing. And your truck has a big dent in it, but nothing is left from the other car. No paint, nothing. They are going over the security cameras in the area today. Maybe they'll see something, but he is not optimistic since it was snowing heavily."

“Okay, but you still think it was them?” he asks.

“Wouldn’t someone who rammed into another car stop and check if they hurt anyone? I don’t know. It’s just... it fits. My gut tells me it was them.” I shrug.

He nods, taking the sketchbook from me and opening it. He browses through it to get to the back, and I catch a glimpse of a drawing of my eyes, so I put a hand over the book to stop him.

“Can I see that one?” I ask, curiosity getting the better of me.

He turns the book and holds it out for me, and I go back to the sketch, marveling at it. Again, it is so good and realistic. It’s mind-blowing. But somehow, he depicted a shadow and pain in my eyes that I thought only I saw when letting my mask fall and looking at myself in the mirror.

I look up at him, my nose scrunched, feeling unreasonably hurt.

*Is this really how he sees me?*

He lets his thumb glide over my nose in an attempt to smooth out my expression, a small grin on his face. “Stop scowling at me.”

“Why, though?” I ask, my voice tinged with hurt.

He lifts my chin with a finger, his gaze locked onto mine. “Why what, Carolina?”

I struggle to find the right words to express my feelings. “Why do you have to draw me so... so...” my voice trails off.

“Real?” he asks, his eyes fixed on me as I scowl even more, earning a chuckle from him. “Because I can see the real you. Does that scare you?”

“You think the real me is just that? A broken girl?” My hurt is palpable in my voice as I respond.

Xander gently takes the sketchbook from my hands and places it beside us, drawing me close to him, his gaze unwaveringly locked on mine. “I think the real you is the mirror to the real me. Two broken souls, survivors battling with the demons of their past, playing a dangerous game of love and hope.”

I can’t help but emit a dry laugh at his cryptic words. *And here I thought Howie liked to talk in riddles.*

“I don’t know if this is a good thing or not,” I admit, uncertainty lingering in my voice.

“It is... the wavelength you talked about. That’s it. That’s us,” he explains, a soft smile gracing his lips. “And not to mention, your face is just super pretty, and I like to draw it.” He playfully pinches my cheek.

“There are way prettier things that you could draw.” I roll my eyes.

“Art is not supposed to be just pretty. It is supposed to make you feel things. And you make me feel so many things that there aren’t enough colors in the world to capture them.”

My heart makes another flip, and his eyes bore into mine, flicking down to my lips. “Kissing isn’t moving around too much, right?” he asks, his eyes hooded and his voice gravelly.

I feel my heart racing in response to his question, my own desire building as I whisper, “It’s not.”

“Good, so Clay can’t say anything against this,” he murmurs, pulling me to him and pressing his lips to mine.

His big hands wander to my ass, and he squeezes it possessively, groaning into my mouth. I moan softly as he sucks my bottom lip into his mouth, nibbling on it. One of his hands wanders up to my neck, his fingers threading into my hair, pulling ever so slightly, making me whimper.

“The things I want to do to you,” he whispers against my lips, his voice dripping with desire as he pushes my hips down, creating a delicious friction between us.

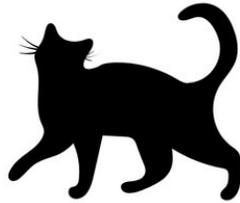
My body responds eagerly to his touch, every nerve ending alive with sensation.

“We can’t. You’re hurt,” I whisper, but it doesn’t sound convincing even to myself, and my hips rock like they have a mind of their own.

“Anticipation is a beautiful thing,” he murmurs before he pecks my lips again and leans back. “Come on, let’s do what we have to so we can take a nap together.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

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### **Carolina**

The next day, I stand in front of my apartment door, taking deep breaths. Getting inside the building and walking up these stairs was so fucking hard.

My whole body is shaking. Xander's truck is still in the shop, so he went to work early today on the subway since he needed to do some work before his first client arrived. He was in such a hurry, and his head was filled with so much he needed to do. It seems he just forgot about getting the money to Roberto.

And that's fine. It is my job anyway. It was nice to rely on him for a while and not to have to come here again so soon after what Roberto did. But now, it's time for me to look after myself again and get my shit together. I can't just let them swoop in and take care of everything forever. I won't be a burden they've picked up.

I take another deep breath and unlock the door, pushing it open just a bit and peeking in. The apartment is quiet, and the door to Roberto's room is closed, so it seems like he is sleeping.

It is still early since I am here before my college classes start, and I make my way into the kitchen to place the twenty dollars I got in tips yesterday on the counter.

I'm already heading back to the door to get out of there as fast as possible when I hear Roberto's voice coming from the hallway. I turn and nearly run into my room, hoping he won't notice that the apartment door isn't locked.

*"Cretino! Come puoi essere così stupido? <Jerk! How can you be so*

stupid?> I told you to make it look like an accident, not to make an accident. Of course, that did not get rid of the problem!” he yells, entering the apartment and walking over to his room.

My heart sinks. *What the fuck is he talking about?*

“He won’t be pleased, and neither am I. Do you think this will get you any points?” he huffs out, sounding muffled, before he closes the door to his room, effectively making it so I can’t hear him anymore.

Unwilling to take any chances, I make it out of there so fast the dust in the apartment stirs into flurries behind me. When I close the door, I make sure I leave it unlocked since he did too.

When I am outside of the apartment building, I call Xander.

“What’s wrong?” he asks without a hello after the first ring.

“It was Roberto,” I whisper-shout into the phone.

“Fuck, I forgot about that asshole. I’m sorry, I’m going to bring the money on my lunch break—”

“No! I just brought it here, and I heard—”

“You did what? You went there alone? Carolina, I—”

“Can we stop interrupting each other? I need to fucking tell you something!” I hiss. He stays silent, so I start again. “I heard him talking on the phone. He said something about the other person messed up, and it should have looked like an accident and that someone wasn’t going to like that.”

“You lost me,” Xander states, sounding puzzled.

“He wanted to have me dead, Xander,” I admit, my voice trembling slightly.

“Did he say that in those words?” he asks, his concern evident.

“No, but I just know this was about us,” I tell him, rushing down the street, panting slightly.

“So, not the Del Moros anymore?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. I need to find out,” I ponder, uncertainty creeping into my voice.

“What would Roberto get from having you dead? You are his source of income.”

His point makes sense, logically, but I know what I heard.

“I don’t know,” I admit, frustrated.

“Don’t do shit alone, Carolina, or I will spank your ass until you can’t sit anymore,” he grunts out.

“Don’t threaten me with a good time,” I tease and hang up the phone

when I hear him take a deep breath to seemingly berate me some more.

---

Classes went by quickly because of the test we had to do, but it was pretty easy since I studied all afternoon yesterday on Xander's bed.

Now, I'm in the lab with Sophia, surrounded by the sterile smell of chemicals I love and the hum of machines. Sophia is sitting at her desk while I stand behind her, looking over her shoulder.

We're staring at the notes she made with all the details we know and what she remembered from the file on my parents. Or at least everything that's officially known.

"I still can't believe Roberto wants me dead," I mutter, shaking my head in disbelief. "I mean, I get that he hates me, but I am still the one who pays for his rent, food, and most importantly, his vodka."

Sophia nods, her expression serious. "It's definitely concerning. But we don't know that for sure yet. We don't know if he was really talking about you. Don't dismiss the Del Moros just yet. I think ruling them out would be a mistake. They are acting way too suspicious."

I feel a surge of anger. My parents deserve better than this—better than me struggling to find out what happened. "We need to gather more information. There has to be something we're missing."

Sophia taps her finger on the table, thinking. "We could try to track down the first responders. See if they remember anything unusual about the scene."

I nod, considering the suggestion. "That's a good idea. And we should also try to find out more about the car. If the witness thought the brakes failed, then maybe there's something there."

Sophia's eyes light up. "Yes, exactly. We need to get the records for the car or speak to someone who checked the car after the accident. It's obvious that it had been tampered with."

I feel a flicker of hope. "Okay, let's do it. Let's find out everything we can about that car. But how do we even get that information? It's been five years. Do you think the records still exist?"

Sophia leans back in her chair, crossing her arms. "They should. Car records are usually kept for a long time, especially for legal and warranty stuff. We can start by contacting the insurance company and the repair shop

that dealt with the car after the accident. They might have records from when they disposed of the car.”

I take a deep breath, steeling myself. “All right. Let’s get started.”

Sophia smiles. “We’re going to figure this out, Carolina. One step at a time.”

We spent the next few hours making a list of people to contact and questions to ask. I feel like we’re finally getting somewhere. *And I won’t stop until I have the truth.*

The door opens, and Clay and Joshua come in, laughing at each other. But when both their gazes turn to me, my heart double flips, and I take in a sharp breath of air.

Sophia giggles beside me.

“Hey,” Joshua greets, standing next to my desk, grabbing my hand, and pulling me to my feet before he leans in to kiss me.

His lips are so soft, and he presses them slightly to mine, then leans back, grinning at me. Apparently unsatisfied, Joshua grabs the back of my head, pulling me to him again and kissing me deeply, unhurried, and slow.

He tastes like sweets, and I have to smile into the kiss. “Hey, Mr. Candyman,” I whisper when he breaks it.

“I like that.” He grins, pecking my nose.

“My turn,” Clay declares, pulling on my wrist to release me from Joshua’s arms and pull me into his. He takes my head in both hands and strokes my cheeks. “Fuck, I missed you.” His right hand wanders to the side of my neck, and he pushes my chin up with his thumb to lean in and kiss me too.

His kiss is much rougher, but I love it.

My head spins when he lets go of me, and I have to press my thighs together. Kissing them like this has made me way too wet for the place and company.

Clay sees the movement and grins at me before he looks over at Joshua, who smirks back at him. “You just filled my head with ideas, kitten.”

“Can you discuss your three or foursomes at home, please? I’m hungry,” Sophia chimes in, pulling on her cardigan before she walks over to the door.

“Someone is jealous.” Clay snickers. I push my elbow into his ribs, and he lets out an “*Oomph*,” shooting me a glare.

“Who has time for jealousy when there’s so much pizza to be eaten?” Sophia replies over her shoulder.

We're walking down the hallway to the cafeteria, and I'm flanked by Joshua on one side and Clay on the other, with Sophia leading the way. They're talking about what they want to eat while I am all deep in thought, still mulling over the information we've gathered so far and planning our next moves.

As we round a corner, Taylor and Del Moro walk past us in the opposite direction. I can't help but stiffen at the sight of them, my heart rate picking up.

Del Moro smirks slyly as he passes me, a malicious glint in his eye. "Surprised to see you still alive, Costa."

Before I can react, Joshua sees red. He pins Del Moro to the wall behind him. "What did you just say, you piece of shit?" He snarls.

Del Moro struggles to get Joshua off him, and as he does so, the sleeve of his cop uniform slides up his arm a bit. My eyes widen as I catch a glimpse of a cross tattooed on his skin, identical to the one on the back of Roberto's hand.

Clay steps in, pulling Joshua back with a firm grip. "Easy, man. It's not worth it."

Taylor guides Del Moro away, the second man shooting us a warning glance as they disappear down the hallway. Joshua is still seething, his chest heaving.

I reach out and touch his arm, trying to calm him down. "It's okay. I'm fine."

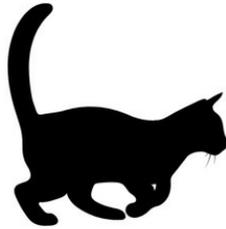
He shakes his head, his jaw clenched. "It's not okay, Carolina. Didn't you hear him? He knows about the accident."

I nod, my mind racing.

The tattoo on Del Moro's wrist is a connection to my uncle that I can't ignore. I need to find out what it means and how deep this rabbit hole goes.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

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### **Carolina**

Xander got his truck back and insisted on bringing Roberto the money again. So, over the last few days, I've headed straight to the bar after my internship, where Sophia and I have brainstormed over my parents' case, then returned to Sophia's to sleep, which always ends with Joshua cuddling me in the morning.

It seems impossible to find out which paramedics were on the scene or where the car went. Somebody did a thorough job. And my gut tells me that somebody is connected to the Del Moros.

Today is Friday, and I am so happy to spend the day with Xander, or at least near him, tomorrow. And family Sunday should bring some hours with all of them. The three of them consume my thoughts, and I hate the current status quo since I have too little time to spend with them. We text a lot, but it is not the same.

Today, Sophia had a meeting to attend and told me I could leave an hour earlier than usual when she left, so I thought I would use the time to get to Howie and update him on everything. Besides, I haven't seen him for way too long.

When I get there, I quickly find that he is not, so I walk over to the 7-Eleven, where I grab our usual burgers and Coke before rounding the corner to find him in our spot.

"It is freezing. What are you doing here?" I ask, tossing Howie his burger and sitting down. Then I hand him the Coke.

“Those people in there are driving me nuts. Someone always wants to talk,” he grunts out, his frustration evident. He glances over at me and adds, “Thank you.”

I chuckle, realizing the irony of our conversation. “Should I shut up, and we eat in silence?” I tease, opening my package too.

*Fuck, I missed these cheap-as-fuck burgers.*

His response, however, catches me off guard. “You are the only one who fills my battery and does not drain it.” He shrugs, taking a bite of his burger.

My gaze softens when I look over at him. “Right back at you, Howie.”

“Where were you anyway?” he asks. “Haven’t seen you in nearly two weeks again. You have to update me more often, kid. This worry isn’t good for my heart.”

I take a deep breath. “I am sorry, there is a lot that happened.”

“Well, I’ve got time.” He raises an eyebrow at me, waiting for me to continue.

I take another bite, trying to gather my confidence. “You remember how I told you that my boyfriend’s best friends seem to have a thing for me too?”

Howie’s frown deepens, but he answers with a hint of sarcasm, “How many times do I have to tell you that I am not senile yet?”

“Okay, well, it looks like I am with all of them now.” I cringe, avoiding his eyes.

“That’s nice, Lina. I am happy for you,” he states casually before sipping his Coke.

I furrow my brow, feeling a bit underwhelmed by this response. “That’s all?”

I thought he would have at least asked some more questions.

“What did you expect? Should I go get a confetti bomb?” he retorts, frowning right back at me.

I snort at his dry humor. “No, but maybe a little more than ‘that’s nice.’ ”

“Are you happy, Lina?” he asks me, his expression softening.

“More than happy,” I admit, a genuine smile creeping onto my face as I look down at my lap.

“That’s all I need to know,” Howie consoles warmly. “You’re a strong woman, but you never had the choice not to be. I hope they give you the luxury of letting yourself be weak for once.”

As I mull over his words, we eat the rest of our burgers in silence. And I realize this is something I miss. Howie has always been there for me. I really

need to make it a point to visit more often like I should.

After a few minutes, I change the subject. “There is some other stuff that happened.” He perks an eyebrow at me, and I fall into a monologue of how Clay and Joshua went to talk to the witness, how the Del Moros kept threatening me about the accident, and what I overheard Roberto say on the phone. Finally, I close with, “Two days ago, Del Moro made a comment about me still being alive, and I saw a black cross tattooed on his wrist, the same one Roberto has tattooed on the back of his hand.”

Howie’s eyebrows shoot to his hairline, “A black cross? Are you sure?” I nod. “Haven’t you just told me he is a cop?”

“He is,” I confirm.

Howie takes a deep breath before he speaks again, “Kiddo, the black cross is the sign of the Metro Milanese.”

I shake my head in disbelief. “No, that makes no sense. Why would Roberto have a Metro Milanese tattoo?” I huff, dismissing it.

Howie sucks in a breath. “You really don’t know?”

I feel a knot forming in my stomach and a sense of foreboding creeping over me. “What?” I ask, my voice trembling slightly as I search his face.

“Fuck, Lina, I thought you knew!” His rising panic mirrors my own growing anxiety. “Everyone in the neighborhood knows. Even I heard about it, and before you came along, I never talked to anyone.”

“What should I have known?” I ask, reaching over to grip his hand.

The world seems to spin as I wait for him to respond.

“Roberto was the enforcer for the Metro Milanese before they scattered,” Howie reveals, his words hitting me like a ton of bricks.

My heart sinks as I process the gravity of that statement.

“Although, they don’t seem to be gone since I heard a lot of shit is going on again in the streets,” Howie continues, his tone somber. “And I haven’t heard anything new about him, but a few years ago, everyone was scared of him. He was more feared than the boogie man.”

My head is spinning, and a sense of dread settles in the pit of my stomach.

*No wonder he knows all the ways to hurt someone properly, even when dead drunk.*

“And you think that cross on Del Moro’s wrist means that he is a Milanese too?” I ask.

It would make sense. Del Moro Sr. was friends with my uncle, after all.

But they are cops, for fuck's sake.

Howie shrugs, his expression troubled as he bites his lip. "I don't know, maybe it's just a cross. But this all seems way too close not to be related."

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Shortly after midnight, I'm cleaning up the bar as I still mull over what Howie said. The evening was slow for a Friday, and Cindy and Donny have already left.

Lennard puts his head through the door to the kitchen. "Carolina, we're leaving. You good?"

"Sure. Night," I answer, having already closed up the front.

I just need to finish the cleanup real quick, and then I am out of here too.

*Fucking finally, I need a shower.*

A few minutes later, I pull on my jacket and backpack and head out the back door, turning to lock it up.

"You didn't even look around," Clay accuses from behind me, his voice stern, and I nearly jump out of my skin at his sudden appearance.

"What the hell, Clay?" I turn and scowl at him, my heart still pounding from the surprise.

"No, what the hell, kitten? I could have been a fucking serial killer, and you didn't even check the dark alleyway before you stepped out and turned your back to the threat," he practically yells, his concern evident.

"Easy, love," I hear Xander's soft voice from my right, and now I have to give Clay some credit because I hadn't seen him there either.

"Okay, fine. I will check from now on," I concede, understanding that he might have a point.

"Yes, you will, but we will get you from now on every fucking night. The thought of you closing that godforsaken bar alone doesn't sit well with me," Clay declares firmly.

"I've done it for years," I huff out, putting the key back into my backpack and starting to walk.

Xander and Clay fall into step with me, and Xander puts an arm around me, pulling me close to him and making my heart flutter.

"I don't give a fuck. Now you have us, and you don't do that shit anymore. A resting bitch face is not a means of defense. Maybe I should get

you a gun,” he grumbles.

“Fuck you, Clay. I don’t want a gun, and I was fine before you came along,” I argue, my independence flaring up in response to his protectiveness.

But Xander halts me in my tracks, his grip on my chin firm yet gentle.

“Someone is threatening you. And we still don’t know if they are empty threats. You’re not going to argue with us on this. You can be independent as fuck again when this shit is over, but right now, you’re going to do what you’re told for once,” he says, eyes fixed on mine. I cross my arms over my chest, biting my lip. His thumb wanders up to my bottom lip, pulling it out from between my teeth. “Say it.”

“Fucking fine,” I mumble, and he leans down to kiss me hard.

I grip his jacket with both hands, pulling myself up to him, but suddenly, he eases the kiss down to a soft caress before he pulls away from me.

I see his breath fog in the cold when he praises, “That’s my girl.”

My pussy throbs in response. The power this man has over my body with just his words is not healthy.

Clay comes over and steals me out of Xander’s grasp, putting an arm around me. “I told Joshua we wanted to have you to ourselves for tonight, so you’re going to sleep in our bed.”

“And he is okay with that?” I ask, feeling my stomach turn.

“Oh, he is. He needed some more sleep for once anyway,” Clay assures me, but I just nod, unconvinced. “And before you fall off the cliff of conclusions, I think he even texted you that it’s fine.”

I pull my phone out of my backpack, and a text from Joshua is waiting for me.

Enjoy your night, my Carolina. I love you—Always.

“Okay,” I concede on an exhale. “I would love to sleep in your room tonight.”

Finally, Clay’s grumpy face transforms into a big smile. “Come on, let’s get you home.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

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### **Carolina**

The warm water runs over my body, making my stiff muscles from another long day ache a little less.

I am in their en suite, using Clay's ginger eucalyptus shampoo. I could just eat it, it smells so goddamn good.

When I am done, I take one of the plush towels and dry myself, letting my hair out of the messy bun again. Xander said I could wear one of his shirts and boxers to bed tonight, but I accidentally left them in their bedroom.

I curse myself and walk back into the room, where they are talking on their bed. Clay is only wearing gray sweatpants, chest bare, leaning back on his hands, and Xander is just in boxer shorts with his forearms on his knees.

I have to remind myself to keep breathing.

*Holy hotness.*

I am about to grab the folded shirt on the bed next to them and return to the bathroom when Clay grips my wrist and pulls me to him. Sitting on the edge of the bed, we are at eye level, and I can see how his eyes are hooded.

"Fuck the clothes. We can sleep naked, right, babe?" he asks Xander, his eyes not leaving mine.

"It's much more comfortable anyway." There is a smirk in Xander's voice.

"Can I have a peek, please?" Clay asks, voice husky. "I had the honor of touching them, but I still need to see them," he pleads, grabbing my hips and pulling me closer before he hooks his finger into the towel over my chest,

slowly pulling it down. I panic and put my hand over his, stopping him. His eyes lose the heat when they come up to mine again, concerned. “What? Something wrong?”

“I... no, I just...” I start, trying to find words. “Can we maybe turn off the lights first?” I ask, looking up at the too-bright ceiling light.

“What?” Clay laughs. “No, that seems awfully counterproductive.” I bite my lip, looking down at my feet. “What is it, kitten?” Clay asks, tone much gentler now.

I huff. “You guys look like this.” I sigh, pointing to their muscular chests.

“And you look like...” Clay whispers, licking up my collarbone, “... something so delicious I need to taste.”

His hot tongue on my skin makes me squirm, and my nipples rise into peaks.

“I am not. I am—” I start, but Xander pulls me over to him, rips down my towel, and throws it in the corner of the room before he grabs my ass with both of his big hands, his fingers digging into me, his grip nearly bruising. My breath catches, stealing my voice.

“This is mine, and I am not going to let you talk shit about what is mine.” He nearly growls in my ear before leaning in and kissing me roughly. His hands are kneading my ass cheeks, making me moan into the kiss. Too soon, he breaks the kiss, biting my bottom lip and slapping my ass. “Show him your perfect tits,” he commands.

I turn to look at Clay, who is already scanning my body. My stomach falls at his expression, but after a few seconds, he mumbles, “How did I get this fucking lucky,” before he pulls me to him again, and his mouth descends on my left nipple, his warm mouth sucking on me while his hand wanders to my other tit, squeezing it. “Fuck,” he mumbles against my breast, sucking on the nipple again and letting it pop out of his mouth. “Xander, take the lead, babe, or I am going to spend the rest of my night between my new two best friends,” he announces, leaning back in and pushing my tits together. Then he starts to suck on and lick my chest, making me squirm and press my thighs together.

Xander stands and loses his boxer shorts, making me gasp. I already gathered that he is more than well-equipped, but his huge cock is tattooed *and* pierced. A moan escapes me, and I grip Clay’s hair while he’s still sucking on my nipple, making him groan. I give it a sharp tug, pulling his face back enough that I can meet his eyes before leaning in for a kiss.

“I believe we still wanted to try something.” Xander’s deep voice comes from beside me as he steps over to me, one hand on his cock, stroking himself. With his other hand, he lifts my chin so my gaze goes from his cock to his eyes. “What do you think, Carolina? Are you still up for it?”

“I want to give it a try,” I say, nibbling nervously on my bottom lip.

“All right.” He nods, easing back and getting on the bed, laying on his back. “But first, we need to get you ready. Come here,” he instructs, his deep voice a bit raspy.

His muscular, tattoo-covered body lies before me like a masterpiece. Not a single spot on his skin is left untattooed, except for his face. I have to keep myself from outright gawking.

“He means you should sit on his face, kitten,” Clay adds, gently pushing my hair behind my shoulder as I turn to look at him.

It is like all my insecurities bubble to the surface, dousing my desire.

“But I might crush him,” I blurt out, my voice filled with uncertainty.

Clay draws his thumb firmly across my bottom lip, his gaze following the movement before returning to meet my eyes. His head tilts to the side. “Do you trust us?” he asks, and I instinctively nod.

He stands, pulling his sweatpants down, his cock springing free, and my gaze automatically shifts to take it in. I knew how it felt but not how it looked.

*His cock is fucking beautiful.*

When my eyes return to his, he smirks, ushering me onto the bed and forward until I carefully straddle Xander’s face. I sense Clay settling in behind me, on Xander’s chest. He wraps one arm around my shoulder, and his other arm pulls me closer to him, his hand resting on my breast so I am now leaning back into him.

“I’ve got you. You’re not going to crush him. Just relax, knowing I’m right here, and I have you both. Let go, kitten. Let our man eat your pretty pussy,” he whispers in my ear, then nibbles lightly on my neck.

I shudder, feeling a rush of wetness leak from me, landing on Xander’s face.

“Holy fucking shit, come here,” he commands again, pulling my hips toward him.

His tongue traces a slow line along my slit, making me draw in a sharp breath. He begins gently, as though he’s trying not to overwhelm me, but the moment I start moaning his name, he unleashes, and it feels like he’s

devouring me.

His hands, still on my hips, guide me in a rhythmic motion, so I grind against his face while he licks, sucks, and nibbles on my lips and clit before his tongue dives deep inside me.

“Fuck,” I manage to gasp out, letting my head drop back onto Clay’s shoulder. All the while, Clay alternates between kneading my breast and rolling my nipple.

Xander slips a finger inside me while his tongue swirls around my clit, making me tremble.

“See, kitten, you love riding his face,” Clay murmurs into my ear, giving my nipple a slightly harder pinch. The sharp twinge quickly transforms into pure pleasure, making my core squeeze tightly around Xander’s fingers.

“Carolina,” Xander’s voice resonates against me, his words muffled.

“And he seems to be quite enjoying you riding him.” Clay chuckles, his hands now fully focused on my breasts, playing with them.

Just as Clay gives both my nipples a firm pinch, Xander nips at my clit, and I’m sent spiraling over the edge. Moaning and shaking, I instinctively tighten my thighs around Xander’s head, nearly crushing him after all.

As I come down from the high, I feel Clay’s breath on my sweaty shoulder and his tongue tracing a path over my skin.

“Hearing you come is my new favorite sound, right up there with Xander’s moans,” he tells me, giving my nipples one last roll.

Laughing softly, I exhale. “*Oh Dio... incredibile.*”

“God, I love it when you go all Italian on me,” Clay murmurs, his teeth gently grazing my shoulder.

I whimper in response as Xander runs his hands along my calves. “Are you ready to give it a try?” he asks.

“Yes,” I breathe, nodding my head eagerly.

Clay chuckles and moves off Xander, giving me space to shift until I’m straddling Xander’s hips, his hard, throbbing cock directly beneath me.

“You’re in control now,” Xander assures me, his hand coming up to cup my face, his thumb caressing my cheek. “If it becomes too much, we stop. If you’re uncomfortable, we stop. We won’t do anything you’re not comfortable with or doesn’t feel good for you.”

“Okay,” I mumble, my voice barely above a whisper. “I’ve never been on top before,” I confess, feeling my cheeks heat up with embarrassment. “What do I do?”

“God, I thought you were sexy when you’re being a bad bitch, but this...” Clay groans, turning my head toward him and capturing my lips in a quick kiss, “... this is killing me.” His hand wraps around Xander’s cock to keep it upright. “Just try to sit down on him and see how far you can take him,” he encourages.

I position myself above him and start to lower myself. The moment his head pushes past my entrance, a gasp escapes my lips. I glance up at Xander and see his face twisted in restrained pleasure, a strained “Fuck” slips past his lips. His hands grip my thighs, fingers digging into the soft flesh.

Closing my eyes, I focus on the sensation, taking him in deeper. His size is so overwhelming. He barely fits, yet it feels amazing. I sink further, feeling the unique sensation of his piercings entering me, rubbing against my inner walls. It makes the stretch even more intense yet somehow more exquisite.

A moan slips from my lips as I lean forward, resting my hands on Xander’s firm chest. My hair cascades around my face, and my eyes shut. The shift in position alters the angle, allowing me to relax a bit and making it easier for me to take him in fully.

I pause, enjoying the feeling of being filled and stretched completely. When I open my eyes to meet Xander’s gaze, I’m taken aback by the shocked expression on his face.

His reaction jerks me out of the state of bliss I was basking in.

“Did I do something wrong?” I ask, a wave of panic beginning to bubble up inside me.

“Damn, Xander, you’re balls deep inside her,” Clay’s voice comes from behind us.

I turn my head to see him standing at the foot of the bed, his eyes focused on where Xander and I are joined, his gaze intense.

Turning back to Xander, he suddenly reaches out, his hand wrapping around my throat as he pulls me toward him for a deep kiss. The action prompts a reflexive clench in my pussy, which makes him groan.

“Fuck,” he murmurs against my lips, giving my throat a final squeeze before releasing me. “You’re going to be the death of me.”

Clay’s hand slides up my back, stopping on my neck, gripping my hair firmly, and pulling my head back. Looking up into his eyes, he stands beside the bed, his gaze intense.

“You’re the first besides me who’s ever taken him fully,” he praises, his tongue darting out to lick over my lips, his grip on my hair unyielding. “Does

it feel good? Do you enjoy his big, thick cock stretching your tight, perfect pussy?”

I try to nod, but the movement is restricted by his hold. “Use your words, kitten. Tell me you love his fat cock,” he insists, his voice laced with desire.

“I love his fat cock stretching me,” I moan out, closing my eyes and feeling my cheeks flush with embarrassment.

“Jesus,” Xander mutters from beneath me, his cock twitching inside me, causing me to moan once more. “Fuck,” Xander grits out again before his large hands find my thighs once more, gripping them tightly.

Clay licks my neck, releasing me and taking a step back. I am unsure what to do now and glance between them, seeking guidance while Clay suppresses a smirk.

“Absolutely adorable,” he mutters, then looks to Xander, who is lying with closed eyes, looking pained. Clay huffs a laugh before climbing onto the bed, positioning himself behind me again, straddling Xander’s legs.

“Now, my sweet kitty cat, you’re going to grind on Xander,” Clay whispers in my ear, his voice filled with mischief. “Do whatever feels good for you. Move back and forth, up and down. It’ll be so much fun watching him struggle not to lose it.” He chuckles, and I can feel the hardness of his cock pressed against my back.

I begin to move my hips tentatively, unsure of the correct technique, and the fact that Xander appears to be in pain adds to my unease.

*Am I too heavy? Am I doing something wrong?*

“Let me show you,” Clay offers, his hands resting firmly on my hips.

He squeezes them gently, guiding me forward and pulling me back, setting a rhythm for our movements.

Oh, *oh!*

Xander mutters a curse, his head falling back even farther, his eyes squeezed shut, and his fist coming to his mouth as he bites down on it.

“Am I hurting you?” I ask, stopping my movements and feeling a pang of hurt in my chest.

Clay chuckles softly behind me as Xander’s eyes snap open, and he sits up, propping himself on one elbow while his other hand cups the back of my head.

“Fuck, I’m doing this all wrong,” he mutters, pulling me closer to him. He kisses me deeply, then rests his forehead against mine. “You’re so damn sexy, and you’re driving me insane. I’m struggling to keep it together

because your tight pussy feels like heaven, and I've never experienced anything quite like this. I'm trying so damn hard not to come already like some schoolboy when I should be the one teaching you stuff." He kisses me again, gently biting my bottom lip.

I let out a breath, relief washing over me. *Okay, that sounds much better than what I was thinking.*

"Keep grinding on me, Carolina," he instructs, placing his hands over Clay's to guide my hips in their movements once more.

The pressure on my clit intensifies with each movement, and it feels so damn good that I have to close my eyes, letting out a moan of pleasure.

"Does it feel good?" Xander asks, his voice strained, and I feel one of his hands slipping between us, his thumb rubbing my clit.

"Oh *Dio*." I gasp, letting my head fall back.

"Let's try an up and down, kitten. Do you like that?" Clay encourages, urging me to lift my hips and slowly sink them back down.

"*Cazzo*," I breathe out, quickening my movements.

Xander matches the pace with his thumb circling faster around my clit. "Good, Carolina," he grunts out, his voice filled with pleasure. "You're doing so good for me. Such a good girl. Are you our good girl?"

My entire body is consumed by the sensations radiating between my legs, and I can't think straight anymore. "*Si*," I breathe out.

"You've fucked the English right out of her. Impressive, babe," Clay teases with a snicker, but his words barely register as Xander pinches my clit, sending waves of pleasure rippling through my body. I'm shaking and panting, unable to control my moans, a simple "Fuck" escaping my lips. My pussy tightens around Xander's cock, everything becoming even tighter as pleasure consumes me.

"Holy—" Xander grunts out, and I feel him come inside me, his groans filling the air.

"Fuck, that was the hottest thing I've ever seen," Clay murmurs, his voice rough with arousal.

I roll off Xander, laying on my back beside him, bending my knees. He leans over me, capturing my lips in a deep kiss.

"Babe, look at that."

Xander breaks the kiss, and I watch how he kneels next to Clay by my feet. He opens my knees wider, and they gaze at my pussy with a mix of fascination and desire.

I try to close my legs, feeling self-conscious. “Stop staring at me.”

Xander pushes my knees back open. “No, this is so fucking hot,” he breathes out, his gaze fixated on me, and he groans, his eyes drifting to the ceiling.

“Stop staring,” I repeat, but Clay nudges Xander aside, leaning toward my pussy.

He looks up at me and says, “Okay, I’ll stop staring,” before he starts to lick me.

“Clay!” I shout in disbelief, but my protest is quickly replaced by moans as he finds the perfect spot.

“You need to come for our good boy, too, Carolina. He deserves it. He coached you way better than I did,” Xander commands, now standing beside the bed.

His hand runs down Clay’s back before he grabs Clay’s cock, starting to stroke it. The sight is incredibly hot.

When Clay moans against my pussy, I let my head fall back onto the pillow and moan too.

“Be a good girl for us, Carolina, and come all over his face while he licks my cum out of you,” Xander commands in his deep, seductive voice, and I can’t resist.

I spiral into another orgasm, my body trembling as Clay continues to lick me until I come down from the high. Then suddenly, Clay jerks back, pulling me closer by the back of my knees.

He’s moaning and kissing Xander, who is still pumping his cock. My eyes are transfixed when, moments later, Clay comes, releasing his load all over Xander’s hand and my stomach.

I watch in awe as Xander brings his hand to his mouth, licking it clean. Clay pulls him into a passionate kiss, their bodies pressed together.

They are incredibly attractive men individually, but together, they are so fucking hot. I still can’t comprehend how men like them could want someone like me, but I decide to stop questioning it.

Instead, I will just enjoy the ride until they return to their senses.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

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### **Carolina**

Sophia asked me to help her with the groceries, so Xander went to work without me this morning.

Having to take the subway, I arrive an hour later.

As I step into the tattoo studio, I see that Xander is still alone, and he is standing behind the register before he comes over to pull me into a hug. “Hey, pumpkin,” he greets, kissing the top of my head.

I push my palms against his chest, slightly loosening his grip. Looking up at him, I can’t help but frown. “Pumpkin? Because I’m round?” I ask, my voice laced with a hint of insecurity.

Xander bends down and meets my eyes, pulling me closer by my ass and gently squeezing it. He whispers in my ear, “I love every inch of you and the way you take every inch of me,” before he sucks in my earlobe, lightly nibbling on it.

It sends shivers down my spine, raising goose bumps on my skin.

“Then why, pumpkin?” My voice comes out as a hushed exhale.

He leans back again, his hand on my chin, guiding my gaze to meet his intense gray eyes. “Because you’re my favorite cream pie,” he says, voice gravelly, causing my eyes to widen in surprise. Before I can react, he pulls me into a passionate kiss, making my heart flutter. His other hand slips between my legs, cupping me. The sensation leaves me feeling lightheaded. “I can’t wait to fill this up again,” he murmurs against my lips. I gulp, and he smirks at my reaction. After a quick peck on my lips, he releases me and

takes a step back. “My next client should be here in a few. I am going to get the stencils ready.”

He walks to the back and leaves me standing there, dumbfounded. “O-okay,” I whisper with a stutter, hearing him snicker softly.

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It’s late afternoon when Joshua and Clay enter the studio, both in their police uniforms. Cindy was right. They look like candy on a stick.

“Hey.” I smile at them from behind the register, where I am doodling in my sketchbook to kill some time while Xander is tattooing.

“Hey, kitten,” Clay greets, reaching over the register to grip my hoodie and pull me as far as he can, stealing a quick kiss.

Joshua, meanwhile, has rounded the register and is standing beside me, turning me so he can lean down and kiss me much longer.

“Did you have fun last night?” he asks, and I blush.

“Oh, so much fun.” Clay snickers.

“I missed you,” Joshua whispers, ignoring Clay and pecking my nose.

“I missed you too,” I say breathily, slipping my hand into his and squeezing.

“You know, there would be no reason to miss anybody if we all got on the same page,” Clay suggests.

“Clay,” Joshua hisses out between clenched teeth.

“What? I’m just saying the bed is big enough, and as long as you keep your hands on her, I can’t see any problem with spending some time with all four of us.” Clay shrugs.

“Can we discuss this at home, please,” Joshua suggests, pulling me into a side hug and kissing my temple. “It’s not that I am against it, I just... I don’t know.”

“You don’t know because you haven’t tried it. I won’t touch your dick, man.” Clay snickers.

“Love, shut it.” Xander’s voice comes from the back.

“Sorry, babe,” he shouts to the back, his eyes wide when they look at me.

“Oh, I am going to regret that,” he whispers to me, making me huff a laugh.

“What are you doing here?” I ask them. “Not that I am complaining.”

“We brought you guys something to eat,” Clay explains, pulling out subs

from a plastic bag. “And we need to talk.”

I freeze.

*What did I do?*

“Fuck you, Clay,” Joshua scolds, pulling me into a real hug now, stroking my hair. “You know how her pretty head works.”

“Shit, I’m sorry.” Clay winces when I turn to look at him, cheek still pressed to Joshua’s chest. “I wanted to ask you if you would like to spend some time with me tomorrow.”

I look up at Joshua, then back at Clay, letting out a breath. “Just you and me?”

“Yes, just two best friends visiting the gun range to learn how to shoot.” He smiles at me, and I scrunch up my nose. “Nope, kitten, there is no way around this. You need to know how to handle a gun.”

“I am not going to carry one around,” I argue, stepping back from Joshua and crossing my arms over my chest.

“That’s fine, but I still want you to know how they work. Like you know there are guns in Sophia’s and our sides of the house, and they are worth nothing in a dangerous situation if you don’t know how to use them. You are more likely to hurt yourself than the target.”

“I wasn’t planning on using them ever.” I huff.

“Oh, so when one of the Del Moros would visit you at night, you won’t take out the gun in the drawer next to the door?” he challenges, raising an eyebrow at me.

“About that. Yesterday, I discovered some clues that Del Moro could be part of the Metro Milanesi,” I say, feeling guilty for only mentioning this now, but hey, they were the ones distracting me.

“What does that mean? You discovered clues? Why would a cop be part of a gang?” Joshua frowns at me.

“He has a gang tattoo,” I state.

“What kind of gang tattoo?” Clay questions me, his brow furrowing.

“He has a cross on his wrist, the sign of the Metro Milanesi,” I relay, pointing to my wrist.

“Not everyone with a cross tattoo is a gangster, kitten. Some are just religious. Ask Xander how many crosses he tattoos every year.” Clay shrugs, dismissing me.

“Too fucking many,” Xander grumbles from the back.

“I mean, yes, that could be true, but I don’t think we should dismiss it.”

“True, we will look into that. Maybe we’ll find out something about the gang tattoo and find a reference to compare,” Joshua reassures me.

“Just another reason to know how to handle a gun if the guy who threatens you is a cop with gang connections.” Clay looks at me intently, and by the glint in his eyes, he knows he’s won.

“Fine,” I relent, turning to Joshua. “Can’t you show me how?” I pout at him.

“Hey!” Clay pouts now too, seemingly offended.

Joshua snickers. “I would, but he is the better choice. I don’t like to say it, but he is very good with a gun and self-defense.”

“Are we talking about the same guy who still has some of the shiner left that a robber gave him with a gun from only feet away?” I raise my eyebrows and hear Xander chuckle.

“I never said he was smart on top of it.” Joshua smiles.

“You two are fucking awful best friends,” Clay mutters, crossing his arms over his chest.

I round the register and stand before Clay, pulling him down to me by the collar of his uniform. “I would love for you to teach me how to handle a big weapon,” I whisper.

“Fuck,” he breathes out, closing the distance between us and kissing me.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

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### **Carolina**

The air inside the range is heavy with the smell of gunpowder and the muffled sounds of gunfire surrounding us.

Because it's Sunday, there are maybe only two other people around. The range is an NYPD training facility, but Clay reassured me it's okay for me to be here with him. He has also brought Sophia and Xander here to show them the basics since he believes knowing how to handle a gun is important if you have one at home.

We get to a line at the range, and a mix of excitement and nervousness courses through my veins as I stand beside Clay, my heart pounding. He hands me a pair of safety glasses and ear protection, his eyes warm and reassuring.

"First things first," he starts. "Safety is the most important thing. Always keep the gun pointed downrange, keep your finger off the trigger until you're ready to shoot, and always wear eye and ear protection."

I nod, slipping on the glasses and earmuffs.

Clay picks up the gun and holds it out to me, grip first. "This is a Beretta 92," he explains. "It's a nine-millimeter, semi-automatic pistol and an Italian beauty like you." I can't help but roll my eyes, causing him to smirk. "Police work with the Glock 19, but to engage the safety, you have to pull the trigger. I wanted us to have guns at home that have a distinct safety lock, so it's easier to handle for everyone without needing a lot of experience." I nod, and so far, it makes sense to me.

“So, the first rule in gun safety is to always treat the gun as if it’s loaded.” I take the gun from him, feeling its weight in my hand. It’s heavier than I expected, solid, and cold. Clay steps behind me, his hands gently resting on my shoulders. “See up here...” he points to a lever on the upper side of the gun, “... this is the safety. If you flip it up, the gun is ready to shoot. You only push it when there is imminent danger. If the danger is over or you don’t want to shoot, the first thing you do is lock the safety back down. Got it?” I nod. “Now, let’s work on your stance,” he directs. “You want to stand with your feet shoulder-width apart, knees slightly bent. Lean forward a little and hold the gun with both hands.”

I do as he says, feeling a little awkward. Clay’s hands move down to my waist, adjusting my stance. His touch is firm but gentle, and I feel a flutter in my stomach. I try to focus on what he’s saying, but it’s hard with him so close. Then he positions my feet, nudges my hips, and adjusts the angle of my torso. His hands are warm, and I have to remind myself to breathe.

“Good,” he praises. “Such a good girl, kitten,” he adds.

“Don’t call me *kitten* when I am holding a weapon. It feels wrong,”

“Fair enough.” He shrugs, stepping back. “Now, when you aim, you want to focus on the center of your target... the heart. It’s a larger target, and hitting it will cause the most damage.” I nod, lifting the gun, and try to aim at the heart of the silhouette target as he instructed. “And always shoot at least twice,” he adds. “It’s called a double tap. It ensures that you do enough damage to stop the threat.”

I take a deep breath, feeling the weight of his words. This is not a game. It’s a matter of life and death. I squeeze the trigger, and the recoil jolts my arm. The sound is deafening, even with ear protection, and my eyes automatically close as I wince. I fire again, the shell casings flying out of the gun.

With the gun still outstretched before me, I turn my head to look at Clay, who nods approvingly.

“Good job,” he praises. “Now, let’s work on your aim.”

For the next hour of practice, Clay gives me tips and encouragement. Despite the seriousness of the situation, I can’t help but feel a thrill every time he praises me.

As the last shell casing clatters to the ground, I lower the gun, my hands trembling slightly from the adrenaline. Clay steps closer, reaching out to click the safety in place.

“Always put the safety on when you’re done shooting. Even when it’s not loaded.” He takes the gun from my hands and sets it down on the table before he reaches up and gently removes my earmuffs. I turn to him, searching his face for any sign of approval. He smiles warmly at me, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “You did really well,” he compliments, his voice soft. Then he leans in closer, his lips brushing against my ear as he whispers, “I’m proud of you, my kitty cat.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

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### Clay

Now that we are done with the gun training, I want to show Carolina some more self-defense techniques, so we move to the specialized training area at the back of the facility.

She scowls at me. “Clay, I am done for today. Can we do this another time?”

“Do you say that to an attacker too? ‘No, please, mister boogie man, I had a long night getting railed by my boyfriends. Can you please kidnap me another time?’” I do a poor job imitating her in a high voice.

She glares at me. “I don’t sound like that, dickhead.”

“Good, there is the fire. Come on, let’s use it.” I smirk at her. I have the Beretta in my hand and double-checked to make sure it is empty and the safety is on. “Look, I won’t even make you break out of holds today. What I want is for you to learn how to disarm me.”

“Oh yeah, that sounds so much easier,” she snarks, rolling her eyes.

“Listen, the guys we think are out to hurt you are police officers or ex-gangsters. They know how to use a gun, and they would use a gun against you. Knowing how to get me to lose the gun could give you seconds that will decide if you die or live.”

*I know this sounds dramatic, but fuck, it is.*

“Fine, what do I do?” she asks, relaxing her stance.

“I’m going to point the gun at you,” I warn, and her breath hitches, but she nods, so I raise the gun, pointing it directly at her chest. My heart pounds

in my chest, hating the feeling of this scenario. “First, you want to move out of the line of fire,” I direct. “Step to the side like this.” I demonstrate, stepping to my left. She mimics the movement, stepping to my right. “Good,” I encourage. “Now, you want to control the weapon. Grab the gun’s barrel with one hand and the back of my hand with the other.” I hold out my arm, and she follows my instructions, grabbing the gun and my hand. “Now, twist the gun out of my hand like this.” I show her the movement, and she copies me, twisting the gun out of my hand and stepping back. I smile at her, pleased. “Perfect,” I praise her. “Now, let’s try it again, a little faster this time.”

We repeat the exercise several times, each time getting a little faster and more fluid. I sense her gaining confidence with each repetition. After a few more tries, I nod approvingly. “Great job. Remember, the most important thing is to stay calm and focused. And always, always, move out of the line of fire first.”

We make our way to the lockers where we left our jackets, and I notice it is already late afternoon. No one seems to be left at the range.

When I grab my bag from the locker and set it before me to get the gun in, Carolina surprises me by saying, “You know, you were really good at showing me that stuff. Thank you for today.”

I stand and walk over to her, cupping her face. “Wait, did you just compliment me?” I grin.

“Maybe.” She smirks. “But you really are a good teacher.”

I stroke her cheek, looking at those golden eyes, and think about what I really dreamed of teaching her. My eyes flick to the locker room door and notice a lock on the inside.

“Did you give your first blow job yet? I’ve wondered that so many times,” I murmur, looking at her intently, letting my thumb swipe over her bottom lip.

“No, I still need you to teach me how,” she breathes out, looking at me with a challenge in her eyes.

*Holy fucking shit.*

Letting go of her, I walk quickly over to the door, lock it, and come back to stand before her, giving her a peck on the lips.

“Get on your knees,” I order.

She obliges without arguing, and this alone makes me hard. I put a finger under her chin when she kneels in front of me, pushing my thumb into her

mouth.

“What does that pretty mouth do?” I ask her, relishing the feeling of her full lips.

She sucks on my thumb before I pull it out and answers, “Argue.”

I huff a laugh. “You’re so frustrating, it makes me fucking hard. Take me out of my pants,” I tell Carolina.

She opens the button and zipper and pulls down my boxer shorts until my cock springs free. Her eyes fix on it, making me leak pre-cum already.

“Open that bratty mouth and push your tongue out for me,” I command, stroking her cheek.

She does, and I slowly push my cock into her mouth, the sight nearly killing me. Finally, I have this beautiful girl kneeling before me, her golden eyes looking up at me, her perfect lips around my cock.

She’s not able to give me any sass as I thrust into her mouth gently. “Relax your throat so you can take me a bit deeper,” I tell her softly, not stopping my thrusting. When she does, I push in a bit further, careful not to gag her. “This is how it feels when one of us fucks your mouth. Do you like that?” All she can do is nod, so I pull back, slipping from her mouth. “Now, I want that perfect mouth to suck me off until I come in it, and you swallow every last drop I give you.”

“Okay,” she agrees, eyes wide and so fucking adorable.

“Take me in your hand,” I direct, and she grips me a little too gently. “Harder, kitten,” I correct, and she tightens her grip. “Just like that,” I praise with a shuddered breath. “Can I call you kitten again, even if you have another weapon in your hand?” I ask with a smirk on my face.

“Oh my fucking God, Clay,” she groans out, pushing back from my grip to glare at me, exasperated but laughing.

“Lick me from the base where you grip me to my head before you suck me into your mouth. Fuck, yes, just like that. Now bob your head up and down,” I instruct, my hand cradling the back of her head, carefully guiding her on my cock. “Fuck, you’re doing amazing, kitten. Now stroke me with your hand while your tongue rolls circles around my head.” I groan, her grip on me just hard enough and her small tongue circling me. “Now, I am going to teach you the holy grail of blow jobs. So be ready to swallow because that shit gets everyone to come in seconds. I call it the lollipop.”

She lets my cock out of her mouth with a pop. “The lollipop? Seriously?” She scowls at me.

“Do you want to know how to give good head or not?” I ask, smirking down at her.

“Fuck, okay, how does the lollipop work?” she huffs out with a bit of irritation.

“You grip the base of my cock hard and make small up and down motions while you take the head of my cock in your mouth, hollowing your cheeks before sucking hard, creating a vacuum of sorts.”

“You’re fucking with me,” she accuses, looking at me critically.

“Not right now, kitten, but I can fuck you later if you give me an energy drink and a few minutes after this.” I wink at her.

“Clay,” she groans out.

“Do as I tell you, kitten. Make me come in your mouth,” I instruct. She grips my base, hollows her cheeks, and sucks on me hard, making me whimper. “Okay, a little less hard, please.” I wince but see the mischief in her eyes and know that was not an innocent mistake. So I grip the base of her hair and pull, making her moan with my cock still in her mouth. “Suck me off and swallow my cum like a good girl,” I tell her, eyes fixed on hers. She starts to suck me again, this time just as hard as I need it. “Fuck yes, just like that,” I praise, letting my head fall back on a groan. “Just a bit more, yes, a little bit tighter,” I encourage, my gaze finding her again.

The sight of her looking up at me with those golden eyes through her lashes, her lips around my cock, it’s all too much. “I am going to come... fuck, just relax your throat and swallow—” I start, but she sucks again, and I can’t do anything else but grip her hair harder and spill myself in her mouth. “Holy fuck,” I breathe out, watching how she struggles to swallow all I give her, a bit of my cum running down to her chin from the side of her lips. I pull my cock out of her mouth and swipe the cum with my thumb, slipping it back inside. “Swallow all of me, kitten,” I tell her, and she licks the cum before she opens her mouth for me, showing me there is nothing left. “Good fucking girl,” I praise, pulling her up to her feet and leaning in to kiss her deeply.

“Did you like that?” she asks when I break the kiss, a vulnerability in her eyes.

“Are you kidding me?” I ask back, stroking her cheek. “You’re a fucking pro, and I can’t wait for you to suck off Xander or Josh and show them what you learned.” I smile at her.

“Maybe I have to practice some more on you first,” she suggests, looking at me with hooded eyes.

“Fuck yes, let’s go home. I miss your hugs,” I say, putting my dick back in my pants.

“Hugs?” She frowns at me.

“Yes, hugs, specifically your vagina hugging my penis.” I grin.

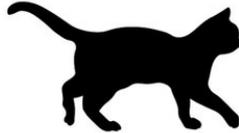
“You’re such a fucking child,” she huffs, grabbing our stuff.

“And you love it,” I tease, smiling.

“I do,” she admits softly, smiling back.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

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### **Carolina**

Thankfully, Monday passed quickly without any incidents. I have had enough run-ins with dickheads lately.

Today is payday, so Sophia told me to leave work early to deposit my paycheck, which is perfect because I need to visit Bernie to settle Roberto's tab.

I had promised to repay him as soon as I could, but with all the year-end expenses, I haven't been able to yet. But now that I can, I am determined to settle the debt as soon as possible.

It's still late afternoon, but the bar is already open. I walk in and head over to the counter where Bernie is busy cleaning.

"Hey, Bernie. I am sorry it took me so long to come back here. But I had to pay some bills first. I just received my paycheck, and I don't want to delay this any longer. How much do I owe you?" I ask him, and he frowns at me. "I'm sorry. I should have made this a priority. I—"

"No, Carolina, that's not it. I was just... Roberto hasn't been coming here anymore."

I stare at him, surprised. "He hasn't?"

He shakes his head. "No, maybe he came another week or two after you asked if he could have a tab, but since then, he just disappeared."

*What the hell?*

"Okay, well, that's unfortunate. How much do I owe you for the times he did come in?" I ask.

“Forget it, Carolina. Good riddance. I really hope he’s lying in a ditch somewhere.” He shrugs, continuing to clean the counter.

“Are you sure? And no, I don’t think the universe is that kind to us,” I mutter.

He laughs. “I am sure. Karma always finds a way. Sometimes, it just needs to ask for directions first.”

“True,” I agree, turning to leave but stopping at the door. “Thank you, Bernie.”

Since this took much less time and money than I anticipated, I decided to grab some burgers from a real fast-food place and surprise Howie with them.

As I head through the bustling city streets to the subway station, my thoughts can’t seem to stop. Why would Roberto just stop drinking out of nowhere? I remember the night he carved my arm, how he was sober then, so much more precise with his anger. I never really thought about why that was, but the timeline with what Bernie just told me seems to fit.

*What is happening?*

*What am I missing?*

I ponder for a while longer, but nothing I come up with makes remotely any sense, so I try to clear my head the last few steps to the shelter.

Howie is sitting on one of the three steps leading up to the door.

“Hey, grumpy,” I greet, noticing the expression on his face, and sit down next to him. “Fix your face, or I won’t give you this,” I tease, holding out the burger to him.

His eyes light up at the sight of the package, and a smile spreads across his face. “Oh, we being fancy today?”

“Yes, yes, we are.” I sigh, smiling as I open the package and take a bite.

“What’s the occasion?” he asks, taking a bite of his burger. “Damn, these are just so much better.”

“I know, right?” I agree, my mouth full. “It’s payday, and since Roberto apparently doesn’t drink at his local bar anymore, I had some money left over.”

“And you decided to spend it on me?” he asks, looking at me skeptically.

“No better way to do it.” I shrug, taking another bite. Once we’re done, I take the packaging and walk over to a trash can before returning to sit next to him. “Now, why the grumpy mood?” I ask.

“I am not grumpy,” he grunts out, his voice carrying a hint of irritation.

“Wow, you totally convinced me there.” I smirk teasingly.

“I just can’t stay inside there anymore, Lina. It feels suffocating, like a cage. I know I should be grateful for a place to sleep and food, and I feel awful saying this, but I can’t do it anymore. It’s dragging me down. And I thought the only thing that could drag me deeper than this life was being six feet under.”

“Howie,” I say, my heart aching for him. “I didn’t know it was that bad. I am sure I could figure out something.”

“I didn’t mean it like that. You don’t have to do anything. Let’s talk about something else.”

“Howie—” I start, but he cuts me off, redirecting the conversation.

“No, I mean it. How are the boyfriends?”

I smile down at my hands. “Good.”

“That’s good, kid. That’s good.” He nods but then suddenly starts to frown.

“Hey, don’t tell me you think it’s a bad thing after all,” I tease, a hint of concern in my voice.

He turns his head toward me, his eyes wide and a questioning look on his face.

His expression contorts with pain, and he clutches his chest. “Lina,” he wheezes, his voice strangled, his eyes bulging wide with fear.

My heart leaps into my throat, a violent surge of panic coursing through my veins. “Howie? Howie, what’s wrong?” I plead desperately. He crumples to the ground, and I collapse to my knees beside him, the raw terror within me intensifying. “Howie!”

He’s gasping for breath, his face turning a dark shade of red. Desperation fills me as I rack my brain for what to do, my whole body trembling with dread. I have no idea how to do CPR or if this is a heart attack, but I push his hands away from his chest and start compressions, pushing hard and fast in the center of his chest.

“Help! Someone, help!” I scream. Howie’s eyes have fallen shut, and even more panic grips me. “Don’t you fucking dare leave me here alone, Howard! Mary can wait a few more years for you. I need you more!” Tears cascade uncontrollably down my cheeks, my arms screaming in protest at me, and still, no one seems to have heard me. “Help! I need help! Please!” My scream breaks into a sob.

Gloria comes rushing out of the shelter, her face pale with concern when she sees us on the ground. “What happened?”

“He’s having a heart attack.” I sob, continuing the compressions. “Call 9-1-1!”

I maintain the relentless rhythm of compressions, my arms aching and trembling under the strain, but I don’t give a fuck. I will do this forever if I have to.

*But I am terrified it won’t be enough.*

After minutes that seem like hours, the ambulance arrives, and the paramedics rush over to us. One of them nudges me to the side to take over from me, and I let myself fall on my ass, hugging my knees to my chest and letting my head dip, panting hard. Exhaustion, panic, and despair hit me all at once. It feels like there is a hole in my chest, and my heart is ready to stop too.

*I can’t do this without him.*

The paramedics work quickly and efficiently to stabilize Howie and prepare to transport him to the hospital. Two of them lift him onto the stretcher while my gaze follows them.

The third paramedic crouches beside me, tilting his head to look at me, his expression kind. “Hey, you okay? You did well. You—” He stops when my eyes meet his. “Fuck, you’re X’s girl.” I look at him and find it’s the paramedic I nearly ran over with Xander’s truck. My throat seems closed up, and all I can do is whimper at the pain in my chest. “Come on,” he beckons, standing and pulling me to my feet. “You should come with me. X would kill me if I just let you sit on the street like that.”

I nod, feeling numb as I climb into the ambulance. As we speed toward the hospital, I can’t help but feel shattered.

Howie is more than just a friend to me.

He’s my family.

*And I can’t lose him too.*

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

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### **Joshua**

“I am just saying, I saw your dick at least a hundred times over the years,” Clay relates, not letting go of the topic he is annoying me with.

I roll my eyes. “I bet it wasn’t a hundred times. And it was in the locker room or something, not like this.”

We are sitting in the police car in front of Donny’s, waiting for Carolina to finish her shift. I haven’t heard from her since she sent a text to the group chat in the early afternoon, so it must have been a busy shift, even though it’s a Tuesday, and it doesn’t look like there are many people inside.

We are already done for the day, so Clay is nagging me to give in and sleep in their room tonight as we wait for her.

“Listen, bro, I am very good at sharing, you know that. And I absolutely agree that once in a while, everyone should have some alone time with her. But I cannot see why I should only have her every other night just because you are dick shy.”

“I am not dick shy,” I grumble, my agitation rising.

“It doesn’t have to be sex all the time either. I just want her sleeping next to me. I somehow need her there to know she is safe,” Clay admits softly.

“I get that. Even though I knew she was with you two, I was still somehow worried about her safety,” I agree, recalling how miserably I slept without Carolina. I am already used to sleeping with her in my arms.

“See? You get it. And if we all just slept in the same bed, there wouldn’t be a problem. You know our bed is made for Xander’s big ass, and we have

some space left for you guys,” he responds, pulling out his phone to check for texts.

“Fuck, Clay, I don’t know. I never slept with more than one person, had sex while someone else was in the room, or watched someone else having sex besides in porn.” I huff. “Maybe I am just insecure? I mean, you guys have fucked so many girls and know exactly how to make her enjoy being shared by you. What would I do there? I would freeze or fuck up, and she would inevitably compare us to one another—” I feel a sharp pang on the back of my head. “Ow, what the fuck, dickhead?”

“Stop that shit right now. Wow, you and Carolina are a pair.” He shakes his head. “Josh, I will only say this once. I heard how you made her whimper and moan. I know you are good in bed. Now shut up.” I smirk at him. “Fuck, now stop it! You and Carolina are going to sleep in our bed tonight. And we are just going to sleep. Nothing will happen. And tomorrow you can tell me if it was as bad as you thought it would be. We had sleepovers as kids all the time, and you loved them.”

“Fine,” I relent, tapping my phone to check the time. “Why is it taking her so long?”

We look over and see her boss locking up the front, making me frown. *She usually does that, right?*

“I am going to wait for her in the back,” I announce, opening the car door, but Clay comes with me. When we round the corner, her boss is closing the back door too. “Hey,” I greet, and he nearly jumps out of his skin.

“Officers, don’t tell me she had to go to help with a special police case. I am not doing this shit again and will call my lawyer.”

“Wait, what?” Clay asks, looking at me.

“Why do you say that?” I ask Donny. “She didn’t come in today?”

“Nope, she didn’t even call in sick. Her motivation is seriously lacking lately,” he mutters, but I’ve already turned around, pressing the phone to my ear, calling her.

It rings and rings, but no one picks up. “Clay!” I shout over my shoulder, and he jogs to catch up with me at the police car.

“Where the fuck could she be?” he asks as we get in the car.

“Call Xander,” I tell him. “And Sophia. Fuck, call Chiara.”

“You don’t think—” he starts, phone to his ear.

“I have no fucking clue, but if she is hurt, I am going on a fucking rampage,” I seethe, driving way too fast back to our place.

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## **Xander**

It's early morning, but none of us slept.

Clay and Joshua drove through the streets all night, with no clue where to even look for her after they checked her old apartment, which was empty. Sophia and I stayed awake in the hopes she would come home, but she didn't. We called all the hospitals in the area, but she wasn't brought in either. Chiara spent the night at Leo's and hasn't heard from Carolina, and I was glad to have her out of the way.

Sophia was so exhausted she fell asleep on the couch. Meanwhile, I am grumpy as fuck.

If I weren't so anxious about not seeing her come in or missing one of her calls, I would have been down in our gym, hitting the sandbag for a few hours.

*Where the fuck are you, Carolina?*

The guys bought breakfast bagels for us all when they got home, and now we are sitting at the kitchen island, the bagels in front of us, but no one is eating.

"I won't be able to live with myself if something has happened to her," Josh murmurs, pulling at his hair.

"Hey, stop thinking like that. She is okay," Clay presses, but his voice lacks conviction.

"Someone wants her dead." Josh looks up at him, eyes brimming with tears.

My phone chimes, and we all look at the screen, but it is not Carolina. I already want to dismiss it when I see it's Tom calling me.

"Hello?" I answer, finally picking up.

"Hey, X," he greets, and I can barely hear him because the background noises are so loud on his end. "Listen, man, I picked up your girl yesterday from the street. She was helping some guy and was in a pretty rough shape, so I took her in too. I thought she would have left already, but I just walked down the hallway and saw her still sitting by his bedside. I thought maybe you wanted to know."

"Which hospital?" I ask, shooting to my feet.

"Harlem. X, man, I am so sorry. If I'd known, I would have called earlier."

Josh and Clay are standing now too, and I walk over to the entry, putting my jacket and shoes on. “Don’t worry, bro. The rest of your sleeve is on the house,” I tell him. “Which room number?”

“All good. Room 302, third floor.”

“Thanks,” I say, hanging up, and we all pile into the Ford.

---

Twenty minutes later, we rush into the room Tom said she was in, finding her fast asleep. She’s slouched over the hospital bed, her head resting on her arms.

The old man in the bed must be in his sixties, his long gray beard matching the unkempt hair on his head. He looks worn out and a bit dirty, and his hands, which rest on the bed cover, are no different. One of them is held tightly by Carolina’s. He is just as out of it as her.

“Thank fuck.” I sigh, a wave of relief washing over me at the sight of her being okay.

“Who is this guy?” Clay’s brow furrows with curiosity.

“No idea, you recognize him?” Josh asks, turning to me, and I shake my head. He grabs the medical chart from the foot of the bed. “Howard Dough, seventy-three. Heart attack.”

“Is he related to her? Maybe her granddad?” Clay asks, rubbing his neck.

“I doubt she’d be in the mess she is if she had any family other than that scum,” I mutter.

Josh gestures to Clay, who moves closer to examine the file now too. “Should we get more info?” Clay nods, and Josh steps outside, presumably to make a call.

“What do we do?” Clay asks me.

“You guys do whatever. I’m getting her home,” I declare.

“You’ll wake her up,” Clay cautions, a hint of worry in his voice.

I move closer, gently straightening her out before bending down and wrapping her arms around my neck. I scoop my hands under her thighs, right under her beautiful butt, and lift her, cradling her against me.

She stirs briefly, taking a deep breath against my neck before settling back into sleep.

“Time to head home, pumpkin,” I murmur, nuzzling her hair.

Clay leads the way, holding the doors open for us.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

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### **Xander**

*My girl is fierce.*

Gently, I run my fingers through her sleek, black hair. She might be small, but she's anything but fragile.

I'm sitting on our bed, propped against the headboard, with her head nestled in my lap. The guys ran a background check on Howard, and what they found sounds like a sad joke.

Howard Dough was a well-known and loved philosophy professor. He and his wife, Mary, worked at the same university, she being a chemistry professor. Eight years ago, there was an explosion in the lab Mary worked in. She was hurt badly and passed away a few days later in the hospital. Howard made it onto the local news because he was furious at the university. He believed that the university's greed and disregard for safety were directly responsible for the accident that cost Mary her life. He wanted justice for his wife and filed a lawsuit against the university. The court ruled in favor of the university, and Howard lost the case. He resigned from his position and eventually ended up living on the streets.

I really need to understand how he fits into her life. It's clear he means a lot to her. That's why Clay and Josh went back to the hospital—to get answers and make sure we know everything about his health for when Carolina wakes up.

A few moments pass with me just stroking her head, memorizing her pretty features and freckles, when she suddenly moves, sitting up swiftly, her

gaze darting around until our eyes lock. “Is he dead? Did he die?” Her voice trembles, her eyes fill with tears, and her breathing becomes erratic.

I cup her face in my hands. “No, pumpkin, he’s all right. He’s still in the hospital, and Clay and Josh are finding out more. But he’s alive, and he’s being taken care of, okay?”

“He just... he just collapsed right in front of me. I tried to help him, tried to do CPR, but I didn’t know how, and I...”

*Was he just a stranger who collapsed in front of her? But that wouldn’t shake her up this much, would it?*

“It’s okay. Breathe with me,” I coax, taking exaggerated breaths, hoping she’ll mimic me. But she seems to be spiraling further into panic.

“I can’t handle this without him. I need him.” She gasps, her wide eyes locked onto mine.

*Nope, definitely not just a stranger.*

I pull her close, positioning her so she’s seated between my legs, leaning back against my chest. “Breathe, Carolina.”

“I... I can’t...” She wheezes.

Glancing over, I spot some markers and a notepad on my nightstand. I grab the markers, laying them on her lap. Then, I pull up the sleeve of my hoodie, exposing my tattooed forearm. “Color in my tattoos.”

She just stares, so I pick up a green marker, remove the cap, and hand it to her. “Come on, color them in, pumpkin.”

She takes her first deep breath and grabs the top of the green marker to close it. I am ready to tell her she should do as I say when she takes the orange marker from her lap. I huff a laugh against her hair.

*Of course, she doesn’t just obey, not even while having a panic attack.*

She pulls my left arm closer, and the marker glides over the bear tattooed on my inner forearm. It’s a big brown bear standing on his hind feet, growling, looking grumpy as fuck. But she colors the fucker orange, so he doesn’t look so intimidating anymore.

I chuckle, planting a kiss on her head. “Orange, really?”

“There was no brown,” she shrugs, seemingly concentrating on coloring and breathing.

“But orange?” My laugh stirs some of her hair.

“You keep calling me ‘pumpkin.’ Pumpkins are orange. Shut it, or I’ll think you don’t like me either,” she states, and I am glad the sass is back in her tone.

“I don’t,” I reply, causing her to stop her coloring and gaze up at me, a hint of hurt in her eyes, her brows pinching. “I don’t just like you, Carolina...” I clarify, gently cradling her face, “... I love you.”

Her breath hitches, and I lean in to kiss her slightly parted lips. Admitting that to her so abruptly wasn’t the plan, but today made me realize that losing her would be just as devastating as the thought of losing Clay—the standard for love in my life since childhood.

I pull back slightly, a smirk playing on my lips as I see her surprised face. I grab her chin with my thumb and forefinger, tilting her head to me, and tell her, “Now say, ‘I love you too, Xander.’ ”

“I love you too, Xander,” she murmurs, adjusting herself to straddle me and pulling me down for another kiss.

Our lips meet, the kiss unhurried and tender. It’s fascinating how different it feels kissing her compared to Clay. With Clay, it’s like a raging bonfire, fiery and intense with unpredictable sparks. But with her, it’s a different kind of warmth, like the gentle flame of a candle—soft, but there is no doubt that it could burn a house down.

I pull back to kiss her forehead, whispering against her skin. “Mine.” I hug her tighter. “I need your soul pressed against mine.”

Her hand drifts up my chest between us, settling over my right pec. “I’m right here,” she murmurs.

I tuck a stray strand of hair behind her ear. She catches sight of the arm she just colored, tugging it closer to her. With her fingers, she traces the newly orange bear.

“Why a bear?” she asks, curiosity lacing her voice. “I mean, I can see why Clay’s got lions. Fits him. He is a Leo for sure,” she adds with an eye roll.

I laugh. “True, August eighteenth.”

“Fuck, I should know that.” Searching for words, she asks, “When is...”

I cut in. “Sophia’s birthday is December fifth, but you knew that. Josh’s is September twenty-first. And mine? July sixteenth.”

She cocks her head. “So, a cancer, not a bear?”

I laugh softly. “Not a bear.” I gently shift her so she’s resting against my chest with her back again. “I haven’t shared this in ages,” I admit softly.

My hands wander down to the back of her thighs, squeezing them.

*I need my emotional support thighs for this.*

“You don’t have to,” she murmurs, stroking my upper arm.

“You’d understand better than anyone. It’s one of the reasons I love you,” I whisper into her hair, and she tightens her grip on my arm.

Taking a deep breath, I begin, “Life seemed pretty okay till I was about six, then my mom left us. I have a few good memories of her, but they’re blurry.” She traces shapes on my arm as I speak, keeping me grounded. “My father... he was messed up. I didn’t get it as a kid, but looking back, my mom always seemed to be hurt, always covered in bruises.” My jaw tightens, remembering days when we’d stay inside because of her visible injuries. “After she was gone, he turned on me. Said a real man needs to handle pain and would beat me down. Said it would make me strong.”

Her breath catches. “But you were just a little boy.”

“He’d take a blade to my skin, warning me not to scream, saying it would teach me to bear pain. Every time I couldn’t help it, every time I let out a cry, he’d make another cut.” Carolina’s nails dig into my arm, and I know she’s trying hard not to interrupt, letting me share at my own pace. “He worked construction, we barely scraped by, and most of what he earned, he drowned in booze. As the years went by, he just got more brutal. When I was twelve, I had a growth spurt and outgrew my old clothes. Instead of getting new ones, he said I should make do. It was around that time that Clay’s mom noticed.

“I remember I was hanging out at Clay’s. It was my refuge. I got up from the couch, my too-small shirt lifted, revealing all the scars on my stomach, both fresh and old.” The memory makes my heart hurt. “Clay’s mom pulled me aside and made it clear she wasn’t gonna let me go back there. God, I miss her,” I say, feeling the weight of gratitude for that incredible woman. “She marched right over to my father’s place and, not long after, came out carrying my stuff. Told me I was living with them from then on. Their place was small, just two bedrooms, but Clay and I never minded sharing. It felt safe. It felt right. I’d see my father across the street every so often, but after that, I never said another word to him again.”

Pulling my arms out from under her, she snuggles close. “And what about the bear?”

I huff against the back of her head. “Didn’t let that one go, did you?” She simply shakes her head in response. “When I was little, my mom gave me a brown teddy bear. After she left, it became my best friend, my security blanket, my protector. I’d talk to it every night and share with it all the terrible things my father did since I couldn’t tell anyone else. But by then, my father decided a man shouldn’t cling to a stuffed toy. So, he tore it apart right

in front of me.” I feel wetness drop on my arm and gently turn her face to see tears streaming down. Wiping them away with my thumb, I continue, “I rushed over to Clay’s, completely shattered. He just hugged me and told me I no longer needed the bear, and he’d be my lion, my best friend, my protector, and I could tell him anything.”

She bites her lip, trying to hold back her sobs. Gently, I tug her lip free with my thumb. “Clay was, and always will be, the light of my life.”

“And you’re the love of mine,” Clay says from the doorway.

We both glance over to see him and Josh standing at the doorway.

Striding over with that familiar smirk, Clay settles beside us on the bed. “Sounds like we’re spilling our guts. Why wasn’t I invited?”

“You can still spill if you want to,” I tease back, reaching out to push his hair away from his eyes.

“I am perfect, thank you. Although I think I may have some daddy issues,” he ponders with a faux pensive look.

Carolina’s gaze flits between the two of us, her voice dripping with sarcasm, “*Shocker.*”

Josh’s laughter echoes from the doorway, where he’s been watching the exchange. “Got everything sorted out?” I ask him, and he nods in response.

Carolina asks pensively, “Howie?”

“He’s stable. It’s gonna take him a while, but things are looking up,” Josh assures her.

She visibly deflates, “*Dio, okay. Good.*” She exhales, getting off my lap and on the other side of me so I am sandwiched between Clay and her. *Best place to be.*

“Who is he to you?” Clay asks, reaching out to hold her hand.

“The only friend I’ve ever had,” she whispers.

“Not true,” Clay protests, pulling on her hand so he can hug her over me. “You know what I promised. I am never leaving you, and I will always come for you,” he whispers in her hair.

“Promise he is going to be okay?” she asks when he lets go of her, tears back in her eyes.

“Promise,” he says.

Seeing her defeated expression, I gently lift her chin, urging her, “Tell him you believe him.”

“I believe you,” she murmurs, though her words lack any conviction.

After giving her a peck on the lips, I urge her once more, “Say it again

and mean it.”

This time, her voice carries a hint of assurance. “I believe you.”

With that settled, I lean back down onto the bed, letting Clay rest his head on the left side of my chest and Carolina on the right.

Josh shuffles in the doorway, so I beckon, “Come on, Joshy. There’s room for one more.”

He hesitates. “No, I think I’ll—”

“Please?” Carolina’s plea stops him in his tracks, the change in him evident as he gives in.

Moving over to her side, he snuggles in close, burying his face in her hair and breathing in deeply.

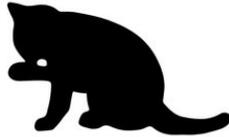
She sighs. “I’ve missed you, Joshua.”

He gently kisses the back of her head, murmuring, “My Carolina.”

With everyone settled and the room filled with quiet comfort, I brush my fingers across Clay’s forehead, and before I know it, sleep claims me.

## CHAPTER FORTY

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### **Carolina**

I couldn't bring myself to go to college today.

The idea of sitting through a lecture and trying to focus seems utterly impossible. My mind is consumed by restless thoughts, and my sleep has been fitful at best. Nightmares plague me, vividly replaying Howie's shocked expression as he clutched his chest.

I need reassurance and to see with my own eyes that he is okay or at least going to be okay. Xander is the only one awake when I get up and am ready to leave, and since he does not want me to go alone, he decides to join me.

When we enter Howie's room, he's propped up, gazing out the window.

"Howie," I whisper, my voice choked with emotion as I rush over to him. It feels like a whole mountain is falling off my chest when I see him up and awake.

I hesitate, my arms reaching out for a hug, unsure if it's safe given his state.

Noticing my hesitation, he gives me a tearful smile and gently pulls me into a tight embrace. "Kiddo," he whispers back.

Overwhelmed, I hold onto him even tighter. "I was so fucking scared. Don't pull shit like that on me."

He winces slightly. "Not so hard." I loosen my grip but stay close. "You always come through for me," he murmurs, patting my head.

Pulling back slightly, I ask, "How are you feeling? What did the doctor say?"

He gives me a weak smile. “The doctor said I was lucky. I say it was you.”

As I lean in for another hug, he flinches, his face contorting in pain, and I immediately let go of him, panic setting in. “Did I hurt you? D-do you need a nurse?” I stammer, voice quivering.

“Just a broken rib. I’m okay,” he reassures me, his eyes filled with gratitude and a hint of amusement.

I look at him in shock, my mind racing with guilt. “Did I do that to you?” My stomach sinks at the possibility.

In my desperation to save him, I had been pretty rough while doing the compressions, wanting to make absolutely sure they worked.

*Fuck, did I make things worse?*

He reaches out and gently takes my hand, guiding it to his chest, right over his heart. His heartbeat is steady and reassuring beneath my trembling fingers.

“This is what you did to me.”

My heart swells, I am at a loss for words, so instead of answering, I introduce Xander to him.

Howie sizes him up with a playful glint in his eyes before turning to me and asking, “So, that’s the bearded angel, right?”

Xander nearly chokes on a laugh, and I’m blushing hard, muttering curses at Howie under my breath. Howie simply grins, his eyes filled with mischief, and I am so relieved that he feels well enough to embarrass me.

The doctor comes in shortly after and informs us that Howie is indeed very lucky and will be able to go home in a few days. But there is a shadow in Howie’s eyes when he hears that, making me pause.

He told me how he despised the shelter. Imagining him in there, trying to heal from a heart attack while hating every minute of it hurt.

*Not going to happen.*

After a while of chatting, Howie’s eyes droop with exhaustion, so we decide to say our goodbyes, letting him sleep with the promise to be back.

We’re in Xander’s truck as he drives with one hand on the wheel and the other on my knee. My gaze is fixed out the window, the weight of what could have happened with Howie heavy on my heart.

Xander breaks the silence, asking, “What’s on your mind?”

I glance over at him. “What do you mean?”

“I can tell something’s bothering you. You saw it yourself. He’ll be okay.

So, what's the issue?" he asks gently, stroking my knee through my jeans.

"It's just that, right before he collapsed, Howie told me he hated the shelter, that it made him feel suffocated. And now he has to go back there to recover? It doesn't sit right with me. I told him he could live with me in two years, but that's a long time when you're in a place that feels like hell. Believe me, I know. Maybe I should pick up a job on Sundays before the bar shift. There has to be a cheap room somewhere I could rent for him. He doesn't need much, just something warm with a bed..."

As we pull up near the NYPD headquarters, Xander turns off the car, places a finger on my lips to silence me, and assures me, "I'll figure something out."

I grab his wrist, pulling his finger from my lips. "No, Xander, you can't always swoop in and handle my shit or pay for everything. It's not—"

He leans in and kisses me. His hand moves from my neck to my throat, squeezing gently, making me hum, the move and his bossy attitude going straight to my pussy. As he pulls back, he inquires, "I take care of what is mine. You're mine, right?"

"I am..." I agree, then argue, "... but we're not talking about me."

"If he matters to you, he's my responsibility too, just like your delightful sister," he grumbles with a mock scowl, and I can't help but laugh. "This is what family does, pumpkin. We're in this together. Your bratty sister is now my bratty sister too. Ask me how I got Sophia." I laugh again, my eyes watering slightly. "If he's important to you, he's important to me. Plus, I love the way you talk about me with him." He grins. "Bearded angel? Fuck, I should get that as a tattoo or add it to my bio."

I'm about to retort when he leans in for another kiss. "I love you. Now, get to work and let me handle things."

"Thank you," I murmur against his lips. "I love you too."

He gets out and comes around to open the door for me, lifting me out of the truck. "Be good," he whispers, slapping my ass, causing me to turn and scowl at him, but he just smirks at me.

I head into headquarters, glancing back to see him leaning against his truck with his arms crossed over his chest, watching until I'm safely inside.

---

Sophia is perched on her desk as I walk into the lab. Before I can say anything, she holds up a finger, signaling for me to be quiet. Only then do I see she's on the phone.

As I get closer, she switches the call to speaker, and an unfamiliar male voice echoes down the line. "... a problem. I'm sorry, ma'am. I can't just give out information about cars that have been brought in, especially from a closed police case. You'd need an official police request."

I'm shocked and glance at Sophia. *Did she find out where the car went?*

"I get it, Jeff," Sophia says in her grumpy whisperer voice. "Thanks for being professional. Not many are like that these days," she praises, rolling her eyes at me, and I cover my mouth to stifle a laugh. "But without delving into specifics, could you hint at whether it'd be worth our while to have the police request the file? I'm sure we'd both like to avoid unnecessary paperwork if there's nothing amiss."

There is a tense silence on the other end, and my heart beats faster. I give Sophia an anxious look.

Jeff lets out a sigh, then says in a hushed tone, "Look, I can't say anything specific. And if anyone asks, I will deny ever having told you this. But if my memory serves me right, there were some... irregularities. It might not hurt to take a second look."

I grip Sophia's arm, waiting as she simply states, "Thanks, Jeff. That's all we needed."

A few minutes later, I find myself in the office of Captain Swanson with Sophia. I've never really been anywhere except the lab and the cafeteria, and I must say, the police side of this building is quite intimidating.

The office is filled with stacks of paperwork, and the walls are adorned with plaques and awards. Captain Swanson listens as Sophia explains we requested the file on my parents to verify the results and discovered some irregularities we'd like to understand. She doesn't mention Del Moro or our suspicions that he might have tampered with the file. She states she simply wants to ensure the case was handled correctly.

Swanson is an older man with a stern face. As Sophia speaks, he frowns at her. Eventually, he rises from his desk to stand before us. "The case is closed," he states dryly.

"Sir, we have good reasons to believe there might have been issues with the car that led to the crash. We have a lead suggesting the car might have had some irregularities," Sophia insists, causing the Captain to let out a

dismissive laugh.

“You have a lead? Lee, you’re a toxicologist. I know you do your job well, but leave the police work to us,” he retorts, and Sophia crosses her arms defensively. “Look, we’re understaffed as it is. I can’t assign detectives to old cases based on a hunch.” Sophia is about to respond when he interrupts, “Unless you bring me solid evidence, I can’t help.” He walks with us to the door and opens it, then leads us back to the hallway.

My eyes widen when I see Detective Del Moro leaning against the hallway wall, arms crossed, smiling at me. “Del Moro, you’re early,” Captain Swanson greets.

“Still waiting on Anderson. We’ll be in shortly,” he replies, his voice calm and composed.

Captain Swanson turns to me, his expression sympathetic. “I’m sorry, Ms. Costa. I understand this is personal for you, but Detective Del Moro is one of our best. I trust that he was thorough with your parents’ case, and you should too.” He offers a gentle, reassuring smile and nods at Del Moro before retreating to his office.

My eyes narrow, zeroing in on Del Moro Sr., not wanting to leave him out of sight for a second now that we’re alone with him in the hallway. I can feel my heart beat in my throat just from his intent gaze on me.

“You heard him, Costa. You should trust me,” Del Moro taunts, just as Clay and Joshua round the corner, looking surprised to see us there.

“What’s going on here?” Clay asks, and I can see his protective instinct flare to the surface.

Del Moro leans in, his tone irrational as he whispers, “You know, your mother trusted me too. She made me promise to ensure you and your sister wouldn’t end up with your uncle if anything ever happened to them.” He straightens up, a sly smirk forming on his face. “Oops.”

My temper flares, and without thinking, I lunge at him, fueled by anger and frustration. But Clay reacts quickly, his strong arms wrapping around my waist and pulling me away. “Kitten, nothing good comes from attacking a detective in public,” Clay murmurs.

“Listen to him, Costa. Know your place,” Del Moro warns, unaffected.

As Clay releases me, I shoot Del Moro a furious glare. He nonchalantly brushes lint off his shoulder, then turns and strolls away, whistling.

“What did he say?” Sophia asks, her eyes wide.

I’m too angry to speak, fists clenched and breathing hard to keep myself

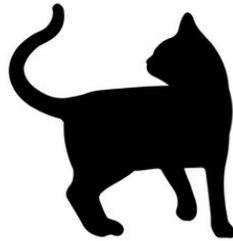
from running after him and scratching his eyes out. Even if he's not involved in my parents' car crash, he just admitted that he is responsible for my life being a living hell for the last five years.

"Whatever it was, we'll make sure he pays for it," Clay reassures, pulling me into a hug.

"We will," Josh agrees, taking my hand and intertwining our fingers.

## CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

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### **Carolina**

“Fuck,” I curse, pinching my finger on a lab instrument.

The sharp edge punctured my glove, and my finger is bleeding when I slip it off.

*Fucking perfect.*

“Stay away from the samples,” Sophia warns, and I quickly step back. “Are you okay?” she asks, glancing over her shoulder.

“Just a pinch, but it’s bleeding. Do we have a first-aid kit with a Band-Aid?” I ask.

“I believe there’s one in the supply closet,” she tells me, looking back down on her work.

I grab the kit from the closet and open it. The lab door swings open just then, and my guys come in.

*My guys. I still can’t believe it.*

Joshua’s face lights up when he spots me, but his grin fades as he notices the first-aid kit. He rushes over to me. “What happened?”

“It’s nothing. I’m fine. Just a small pinch, but I can’t risk contaminating the samples,” I explain with a shrug.

“You sure it won’t turn you into Spider-Woman or something?” Clay teases from beside me, leaning in to plant a kiss on my temple.

I roll my eyes at his teasing. “Have you even seen the movie? It was a spider bite, not a lab instrument.” I huff, giving him a frown.

“Maybe you’ll transform into a microscope,” he jokes, grinning. My

eyebrows rise nearly to my hairline. “Okay, okay, that was a bad one.”

Meanwhile, Joshua takes care of my finger, cleaning it gently and placing a Band-Aid over the wound. He lifts it to his lips and kisses the bandaged fingertip. “There, all better.”

My heart skips a beat at the sweet gesture, and he leans in to kiss me softly. “Thank you,” I murmur against his lips.

“Anything for you, my Carolina,” he whispers in return, making my stomach flip.

Clay turns to Sophia and asks, “Ready to go, sis? Xander just texted he’s waiting outside.”

“In a minute,” she mutters, carefully storing the samples in the refrigerator.

“Ready for what?” I ask, confused.

*What did I miss?*

Clay puts an arm around my shoulders and explains, “Last night, after you fell asleep in front of the TV after your shift, we all realized we were craving hotdogs. We’re going to grab some from the stand down the street for dinner. You like hotdogs, right?”

“I do,” I say, smiling at Clay’s enthusiasm.

Sophia and I quickly shed our lab coats, gloves, and goggles, and I slip into my jacket, slinging my backpack over my shoulder.

As we step out of the building, I spot Xander waiting for us. He stands there with his arms crossed, wearing a black beanie, looking grumpy and gorgeous at the same time. His face brightens when Clay rushes over and nearly jumps into his arms, laughing.

“Hotdogs, babe,” Clay exclaims, “The second-best sausage there is,” making Xander chuckle as he sets him down.

“You little brat.” Xander growls, pulling him into a kiss and holding the back of his head.

I watch them, admiring their cuteness, but a pang of sadness hits me. I feel a hand grip mine, so I turn to see Joshua smiling down at me before leading me forward.

“Are you a ketchup or mustard girl?” he asks, stroking the back of my hand with his thumb.

“Who likes mustard?” Sophia chimes in from my other side, having caught up with us. “That’s just gross,” she adds, scrunching up her nose.

“What she said,” I agree, pointing my thumb to her.

“Mustard is superior,” Xander comments from behind us.

I glance over my shoulder to see him and Clay walking hand in hand.

“Oh, right. Xander is a mustard girl,” Sophia teases, making me chuckle.

“You should get that tattooed or put it in your bio,” I tease, smirking at him over my shoulder as we reach the hotdog stand.

He turns me by the shoulder and leans into my space. “Another brat with a big mouth, but this one hasn’t even said hello to me,” he growls out, then he pulls me closer, kissing me roughly, his hand finding my hair at the roots, pulling lightly, before biting my lower lip, making my breath catch in a sharp gasp and my pussy clench.

He lets go of me and gives me a knowing grin.

“Ouch,” I mutter, touching my lip and scowling.

“Don’t ignore me. I won’t let it slide. I’m not Clay,” he warns, then lightly kisses the spot he just bit before straightening.

“Hey,” Clay chimes in, looking up at him with a frown. But then he glances at me and shrugs. “He’s right, though.”

We all grab a hotdog, mine with ketchup and, of course, no relish, and stand off to the side to eat.

*They’re fucking delicious.*

Xander and Sophia start discussing which movie to watch on Sunday for family night while Clay leans back against Xander’s chest, who holds him close, kissing the top of his head and caressing his side.

Longing fills me, and some kind of guilt that I can’t quite place.

Suddenly, my chin is lifted, and I find myself looking up into Joshua’s dark brown eyes. He leans in to give me a quick peck. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I shrug nonchalantly, avoiding his gaze.

He gently tilts my chin up again, his eyes filled with warmth. “It’s not ‘nothing.’ I’d like to think I already know my girl pretty well,” he says with a playful grin, which in turn makes me smile.

I confess with a hint of embarrassment, “Okay, not nothing, it’s... silly.”

Just then, Xander lets out a laugh, catching my attention.

Joshua leans closer, his hand still caressing my cheek, making my gaze wander back to his unwavering one. “Tell me.”

I hesitate, biting my lip, then glance back at the others, who are engrossed in their conversation, paying us no mind. “Am I the third wheel and only realizing it now?”

Joshua frowns, clearly surprised by the question. “What? Why would you

think that?”

I shake my head, feeling somewhat foolish. “I don’t know. It’s dumb.”

“Carolina,” he begins, his voice soft and reassuring. “I’ve been the third wheel with them my whole life. You’re not. Maybe you just need to learn to share a bit too,” he teases.

“No, it’s not that. I shouldn’t have brought it up. I’m sorry,”

I am genuinely not bothered by their bond or their closeness. Maybe It’s just my insecurities again making me question my place.

“For the record, you’re my favorite person, my top priority, my number one. I know and love that your heart is big enough for three people, but mine? It belongs only to you. Always,” he promises softly, leaning in for a kiss.

His words banish all the insecure, sad feelings in my mind, and my whole body flushes with warmth.

The kiss is tender, almost languid, and I savor every moment. Joshua cradles my face, and when we part, I whisper against his lips, “Forever.”

## CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

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### **Carolina**

Xander went to work early today because he said he needed to finish a sketch he didn't complete yesterday. As I make my way over to Darkened Dermis at nine a.m. with a coffee in hand for both of us, I see the space is dark, but the door is unlocked.

I frown as I enter, noticing a light in the back. Setting the coffees on the register counter, I walk toward it. Xander is sitting on the small tattoo stool with his back to me. His chest is bare, and he's in front of a large mirror. The tattoo needle in his hand is buzzing, and as I step closer, I can see in the mirror that he's tattooing himself.

His eyes lift from his work, and our gazes lock in the reflection.

"Hey," I greet, feeling like I've walked in on something private. "It's already nine. But I can step back outside if you need quiet to finish that."

"It's fine," he grumbles. "I'll be done in a sec. Could you please lock the front?"

I frown but say, "Sure," before walking to the front door to lock it.

I wonder if he's concerned about a client walking in on him while he tattoos himself.

*Is that even allowed? I've never seen someone tattooing themselves before.*

When I return, Xander has set the tattoo gun on the table and is wiping his chest with a cloth. "Would you mind applying some cream to it for me?"

"Of course," I say, slipping on a black glove from his stack.

Squeezing a dollop of cream onto my finger, I step in front of him. He

parts his knees, allowing me to stand closer, and his hands naturally find the back of my thighs. I grin at him, and he smirks right back.

I reach out to spread the cream to his chest and freeze. There, on his right pec, amidst the dark that represents the abyss of his soul, is my name. In a delicate and beautiful font, written in a shade of gray that almost blends into the black, yet you can clearly read *Carolina*. It's not as boldly highlighted as *Clay* on his left pectoral.

It's more... *shadowy*?

"Xander," I whisper, lifting my gaze to meet his.

He leans forward, kissing my lips softly, his hands gripping my thighs. "He is the light of my heart, forever illuminating my life. But you, you are the shadow of my soul. With you beside me, our souls intertwined in the abyss, the darkness doesn't seem so daunting anymore."

Tears fill my eyes, and I reach up, pulling him closer for a deep kiss. When we part, tears stream down my cheeks. "Xander," I murmur. "You didn't have to do this."

He takes my hand, the one with the cream on my gloved finger, and guides it to his chest, effectively applying the cream himself using my hand.

"You mean as much to me as he does, just in a different, unique way. I wanted you to know that. To be sure of it," he explains, releasing my hand.

"Xander, I—" I start again, but he holds my chin gently between his thumb and forefinger.

"Just say, 'Thank you,' " he commands.

Looking into his eyes, I whisper, "I love you."

His lips curve into a smile. "I'll take that," he relents, drawing me in for another kiss. "I love you too," he murmurs against my lips.

He pulls the glove off my hand and stands, emphasizing the height difference between us once more. "Let me clean this up quickly, and then we can start on yours."

I blink up at him in surprise. "Mine?"

"I still owe you one, remember?" he questions, lifting an eyebrow at me.

"Well, yeah, but I haven't decided on what to put on the sleeve yet. I'm not sure—" I begin.

He interrupts with amusement in his voice, "Oh, not the sleeve. The sleeve is another matter. I'm talking about the Christmas present, and I have something in mind."

"Xander, I can't just tattoo your name on me. If I did, I'd have to add

Clay's and Joshua's right beside it," I state, folding my arms across my chest.

He grins. "I mean, I could do that. My name would just be the largest and first in line." Seeing my skeptical expression, his gaze softens. "Trust me?" he asks.

I nod. "I do."

I trust all of them with my very being.

He steps closer, letting his fingers weave into my hair. "You're up for a little fun, right?"

"I'm not typically the fun type," I counter.

He tightens his grip on my hair, causing my head to tilt back. The initial sting rapidly transforms into pleasure, and I suppress a gasp, my thighs pressing together.

Tilting my head to the side, he trails his tongue up my neck before whispering, "You're a lot of fun. Fun-size, in fact." Drawing back slightly, he meets my gaze. "This will be the best gift for all three of us. But only if you are good with being marked for us."

I narrow my eyes. "Where?" His hand travels down to my backside, giving it a firm squeeze. There's a challenging gleam in his eyes. It's not as if anyone else would ever see it there, and it also turns me the fuck on. Like a little secret I'll wear on me for them forever. "Okay." I shrug.

He leans in, pecking my lips lightly. "Good girl," he murmurs, sending a flutter through my stomach. "Now, take off your clothes."

I open my jeans and wriggle out of them, neatly folding them over a nearby stool. The tattoo chair beside it is prepped with a fresh paper cover and sanitized. Just as I'm about to get on the chair, which Xander has adjusted for me to lay on more like a table, his deep voice halts me. "All of them."

I turn to look at him, and his eyes roam my body, heat in them. I glance over to the front, but we are covered by a divider wall, and I locked the front door myself.

"Really?" I ask.

"I dreamed about you sitting naked on this chair the first time I tattooed you." He steps in front of me, hooking his finger in my panties. "Take. Them. Off."

I do as he says, and when I come up again, he puts his finger under my hoodie and pulls it over my head, leaving me in just my black bra. Then he reaches behind me and unhooks the clasp with one smooth motion, hooking

his finger in the front between the cups and pulling it off me. His pupils dilate when my breasts wiggle softly from the motion, and he kneels in front of me, pulling me to him with a hand on my back. He licks a swipe up between my breasts before switching to my left breast and biting my nipple, making me gasp.

“*Dio*,” I breathe out, squeezing my thighs together again.

“I want you on that table, glistening for me while I tattoo your perfect ass before I fuck you on it.”

*Holy Jesus.*

“Okay,” I whisper.

He grins and stands, putting his hands under my arms, and lifts me to sit on the papered surface. “Lay on your stomach,” he directs, sitting on his tattoo stool, still only wearing his black jeans.

He puts on new gloves, and as I look over, I see he already prepared another tattoo gun, needle, and black ink beside the metal table for me. He takes the razor and starts to shave the top of my right ass cheek before sanitizing it. It’s a bit cold laying here naked, but it only heightens my arousal, making my nipples even harder.

He lets his hand swipe up my thigh, and my pussy clenches. It’s all I can do not to squirm.

“Ready, pumpkin?” he asks.

“I swear, if you’re going to put a pumpkin there, I am going to another artist to let him cover it,” I warn, glaring over my shoulder at him.

He slaps my left ass cheek hard, making me twitch before he rubs the sting. “No one besides us is going to see this fine ass, say it.”

“If you’re going to put a pumpkin there—” I start again, but he lifts, grabbing the back of my neck, squeezing it, and making me gasp.

“Say, ‘No one is going to see my fine ass besides my men.’ ” He nearly growls.

“No one is going to see my ass besides my men,” I breathe out, and I’m getting so wet the dampness is starting to coat my thighs.

He lets go of me, and I hear him take a deep breath before murmuring, “Fuck.” He takes the tattoo gun and commands, “Now, stay still like a good girl.”

It stings a bit, but it’s even less than the tattoo on my forearm. The sting, his hands on my ass and thighs, me laying there naked—all of it makes me so fucking horny and wet, I bet I’m dripping on the table.

It takes half an hour before he finally finishes, saying, “Done.”

He wipes my ass with a cloth, applies cream, then removes his gloves before standing.

“Can I see?” I ask, but he pulls me down the surface by my ankles until only my upper body is lying on it. He unbuckles his jeans, and when I look back, he has pulled his huge cock out, already hard for me.

“You can look at it later. I need to fuck this pretty pussy now, or I’ll lose it,” he grunts out. “Let’s see if you can take me like this,” he says before his head nudges my entrance.

He pushes in slowly, and I moan, gripping the table as he fills me, pushing in inch by inch, stretching me so fucking good. Each of his piercings entering me and me being on my stomach makes them rub against my G-spot.

“Fuck,” he grits out.

“Xander,” I say on a whimper, and he stops immediately.

“Is it too much? Am I hurting you?” he asks, his voice filled with gentleness as he strokes my thigh.

I press back against him, “No, please, I need all of you.” I pant, craving the absolute stretch.

“Oh, I’m going to give you all of me,” he promises, pushing in again until I feel his pelvis press against me. “Fuck, you have no idea how incredible you feel, so tight, wet, and warm.” He leans down to kiss my spine, squeezing my thighs as he starts thrusting slowly before slamming into me.

I let out a small yelp, and he hisses through his teeth at the way my pussy clenches around him.

“Oh *Dio*,” I breathe out, feeling utterly filled, but it’s indescribably good.

“My good girl, taking me so well,” he grunts out, grabbing my ass cheek under the new tattoo and squeezing it, causing a mix of pain and pleasure. I hiss, my whole body quaking.

“Fuck.” He groans, and his hand travels to where we’re connected, gathering some of my wetness before circling my asshole with his thumb, never halting his rhythm. “I’d love to fuck you here, but I might be too much for your first time. Maybe Clay could take that honor.” The thought of Clay fucking my ass causes me to clench down on him again. “You like that idea?” he teases, pushing a finger gently into me, making me grip the table tighter, gasping. He pushes in further, and initially, it’s a sharp pain, but it soon morphs into an intense pleasure. I can’t help but moan. “Mm... taking my

cock and my finger, look at you,” he admires before pushing a second finger into my ass.

“Holy,” I shout, feeling stretched to the limit with him in both my holes.

He leans down, whispering next to my ear. “This could be Josh and Clay, fucking both of your holes at the same time while you suck my cock.” Overwhelmed, I can only whimper, lost in the sensation of being completely full. “I am sorry, pumpkin, but I need to fuck you hard and fast now. I can’t take this torture any longer,” he murmurs, placing a gentle kiss on my shoulder blade.

He pulls his fingers out of my ass and tugs me even farther down the table until I’m positioned perfectly against it. He pulls both of my wrists behind my back, holding them there with one hand, starting to thrust again. He pounds into me, taking me hard and fast as he told me he would, and I am lost in the sensations.

The paper rubs against my nipples every time he slams into me, pushing me forward, the edge of the table pressing into my thighs. The pleasure overrides any pain or discomfort.

I’m desperate to touch him, but with my arms bound, I am at his mercy.

“Such a pretty little pussy,” he praises.

It’s intense, and all I can do is surrender to the pleasure.

Xander’s left hand finds my clit, circling it. “I’m so fucking close, but I need you to come first, Car…” he grunts out, but he hasn’t even finished saying my name, and I am already shaking with my release.

I am so fucking worked up that just a few swipes from his finger have pushed me over the edge. He slips his fingers from my wetness, my legs shaking. Then, with a few more short, deep pumps, he grips my hips back against him, driving in so far there is no space between us, his hips grinding against me as he fills me with his warm cum.

He moans contentedly, showering my back with affectionate kisses. “Stay still,” he instructs as he pulls out of me.

I try to catch my breath, but after a minute of him being silent, I glance back to see him taking a photo. “Xander!” I shout.

“You’re absolutely stunning, pumpkin,” he praises, walking over to show me the picture.

My pussy is on full display, his cum is dripping out of me, and there, on the top of my right ass cheek, is my new tattoo. It reads *Good Girl* in a delicate script.

“You—” I start, wanting to cuss him out, but he hushes me with a kiss.

“You don’t want to be a good girl, but you certainly want to be fucked like one,” he growls out in a rough voice.

*Well, I can’t really argue with that.*

His phone chimes, and since it’s still in my line of sight, I catch the messages from Clay and Josh.

“You shared it in the group chat?” I ask, eyes widening in surprise.

“You’re *our* good girl...” he grins, “... and I sure can share.”

Josh: Lucky bastard.

Clay: Dreams really do come true.

## CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

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### **Carolina**

Chiara and I are sitting on my bed, studying. She has a test on Monday, and I'm trying to catch up on what I missed last week.

It's relatively early in the morning, and I assume the guys are still asleep. Well, except Joshua, who snuggled up to me in the middle of the night but was gone by morning. Chiara has just returned from Leo's place.

Suddenly, there's a knock on the door. "Come in," I call out.

Sophia slightly opens the door, peeking in. Seeing both of us dressed and on the bed, she fully opens the door. "It's only nine. Why are you guys up so early on a Sunday?" she asks, frowning.

"Good morning to you too," I sing-song. "Chiara has a test to study for," I explain, shrugging.

"Well, you need to pack your things and get out," Sophia declares, emotionless.

"Funny," I dismiss her, refocusing on my laptop.

"I'm serious, Carolina. Pack your shit, you're moving out," she repeats, this time with a hint of seriousness.

Chiara and I snap our heads up, shock evident on our faces. "You want me to move out?" I ask, my voice laced with hurt.

*I knew this was too good to be true.*

"Can you give us a few days? Maybe I can find a room, or perhaps I can talk with Barbara to see if Chiara can stay with Monica," I plead, my mind racing. *I can't let Chiara go back there, and I won't either.*

“She’s staying here. You’re the one moving out. And stop that shit, Lina, as if we would ever let you live anywhere else,” Sophia retorts.

“What are you even saying?” I ask, my heart pounding with hurt and confusion. I can’t seem to follow what she wants from me.

“You’re moving into the guest room on the guys’ side,” she states, arms crossed.

“Why?” I ask, genuinely confused.

“Because Xander and I talked, and we think it’s silly for you to sleep here and Howie over there. So, this will be his room, and yours will be with your boyfriends,” she clarifies, finally smiling at me.

My heart skips a beat. “He can live here with you?” I ask, my voice quivering.

“Of course, he can! If you love him as much as Xander says you do, I’m sure I’ll adore him too. Now, pack up. The guys are already on their way to pick him up from the hospital,” Sophia orders.

Overwhelmed, I set my laptop aside and jump off the bed to hug Sophia tightly. “You have no idea what this means to me. I love you,” I whisper through tears.

“I love you too, Lina. You are family now,” she soothes, rubbing my back. She then beckons Chiara, who hesitates but eventually joins our hug. “And I love you too, missy,” Sophia murmurs.

We pull apart after a moment, and Sophia grins at Chiara. “I bet we’ll have a blast with Howie here. The guys went shopping for his clothes. Wouldn’t it be fun to give him a makeover? Maybe cut his hair and such?”

Chiara’s eyes light up. “Oh my God, can I? Maybe even do a before-and-after video?”

I chuckle. “If he’s okay with it. But let’s wait until he’s recovered a bit more,” I offer, knowing Howie might not be thrilled but would never say no to Chiara.

*That is just karma for telling Xander about the bearded angel.*

“All right, girls, we have packing to do and fresh sheets to lay out,” Sophia commands, clapping her hands.

I still can’t believe they arranged all of this. To give Howie a home on top of everything they have done for Chiara and me. I simply will never be able to pay them back or show them enough gratitude, as words won’t cut it.

We stand in front of the house, waiting for them, having just put new sheets on the bed and finished moving my stuff into the guest room on the

guys' side.

The Ford pulls up in front of the house with Clay driving. The doors open, and all the guys step out, leaving Howie struggling with the big step. Xander stands in front of him, places his hands under his arms, and effortlessly lifts him down, setting him on his feet in front of me.

"Holy crap," Howie mutters, looking at me, eyebrows raised so high they almost touch his hairline.

"I know, right?" I whisper back, chuckling and pulling him into a hug. I'm careful not to squeeze too tight, but he pulls me closer anyway.

"Kiddo, are you sure you want me here?" he asks, his voice shaky. "I don't want to taint your new life. I can go back to the shelter to recover. They have a bed, and soon, it'll be warm enough to stay outside again."

"Stop that shit," I whisper in his ear. "There's no new life without you. I've told you this." I release him and step back, wiping away a tear with my hoodie sleeve. "Besides, this wasn't my idea. Xander and Sophia planned this for us."

Sophia steps forward, smiling at Howie. "Hey, Howard, I'm Sophia, and I'm thrilled to have you as my new roomie," she greets, hugging him gently.

"How do I like her already?" Howie mock-whispers to me over her shoulder.

"She tends to grow on grumpy people." I shrug, making the guys chuckle.

Joshua approaches me, giving me a side hug and a kiss on the temple. "I'm looking forward to my new roomie too." He grins.

"No way, back off. You had her last night. Tonight, she's with us," Clay states, pulling me from Joshua's embrace.

"We'll figure that out later," Xander intervenes. "For now, let's get the stuff from the bed."

They do, and Sophia leads the way to her side of the house. I hold Howie's hand, guiding him gently inside and up the stairs. He's still not fully recovered and obviously needs rest.

Once inside his new room, he looks around in awe. Turning to Sophia, he bites his cheek.

She apologizes, "I know it's a bit feminine with the pastel colors, but maybe we can repaint it when you're feeling better? Get some things to make it more your style? I bet Chiara would help. I'd love to redecorate."

"Nonsense, I love pink. There's a bathroom," he points out, glancing at the en suite.

“It’s just a shower. If you ever want a bath, just ask, and you can use mine in the master bedroom,” Sophia offers.

He chuckles sadly. “This feels like a five-star vacation I don’t deserve.”

I guide him to the bed and pull back the covers. He looks cleaner than I’ve ever seen him, dressed in dark gray sweatpants and a black hoodie. They seem comfy, so I gesture for him to get in. He sits, propped against the headboard, caressing the sheets.

“It’s not a vacation, but I’d love for us all to take one soon. We haven’t been anywhere other than Korea in ages,” Sophia suggests, smiling at me. “What do you think, Carolina? Maybe somewhere on the beach? Get a tan and relax?”

“Sure,” I say, covering Howie with the blanket and smirking at him. “Let me know when I’ve won the lottery.”

“I’ve already won,” Howie mutters, squeezing my hand. “I don’t need a vacation.” He smiles at Sophia. “This is more than enough.”

## CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

---



### **Carolina**

Once Howie is settled and taking a nap, Sophia starts preparing an early dinner for all of us. She tells us to leave her alone for the next two hours, so we head over to the guys' side of the house.

Xander walks to the truck and soon jogs back to catch up with us, with me holding the door open for him.

He's carrying four large plastic bags. "Did you buy something for yourself too?" I ask with a smile, slowly getting that this guy is into shopping. "It was really nice of you to buy Howie stuff. Thank you."

"Nope, not for me," he just retorts, heading upstairs, piquing my curiosity.

I glance at Clay, who is already grinning at me. So, I follow Xander, with Clay and Joshua trailing behind. The door to the guest room is open, and Xander is inside, emptying the contents of the bags onto my bed.

"What are you doing?" I ask as I enter the room.

"You need some girly shit," he comments, taking the last bag into the ensuite bathroom.

I watch as he places shampoos in the shower and arranges pads, tampons, razors, and other stuff in the drawer beneath the sink.

"Because I'm such a girly girl?" I quip, folding my arms.

Joshua comes up behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist. "No, because you deserve to feel at home with us, and we wanted to pamper you."

Clay takes the plush, soft-looking black blanket from the pile and drapes

it over the bed's end. I reach down to touch it, and it's as soft as it looks.

"Pretty, right?" Clay asks, smiling.

I bite my lips but nod.

*It is very pretty.*

"What else did you guys get?" I ask, leaning in to get a better look.

I notice Xander and Clay exchanging a knowing smirk.

"We got warm plush socks in dark red and black, one of those oversized hoodies that's as fluffy as a blanket with black cats on it, a black tumbler for your water, and some caramel and apple-scented candles," Clay lists, sitting down on my bed, pulling Karen onto his lap.

"You shouldn't have—" I start, but Xander comes over and grabs my chin while Joshua is still holding me.

"We'll buy more for you soon. I wanted to get makeup, but we were completely lost in that aisle. We'll bring Chiara next time. And we thought about clothes, but Josh suggested we take you shopping to make sure you like what we pick. We compromised and bought you stuff to make you feel at home and cozy. Because that is what it should feel like. This is your home now, pumpkin."

Tears form in my eyes. "Thank you," I whisper, and Xander leans down, giving me a quick peck on the lips.

"So, the only thing left to settle for living together is the having-fun part," Clay clarifies, setting Karen gently on the bed again before standing.

"What fun part?" I ask, looking from one to the other, and Joshua sighs behind me.

"You slept in our bed the other night. Was it bad, Josh?" Xander asks.

"No," he states, kissing my head.

"I heard Clay taught Carolina some interesting things a week ago," Xander says with a knowing smile. "How about we start with that? We take our cocks out, Clay can suck mine, Carolina gets you off, and if you hate it, we don't even have to talk about going any further. We can settle this now. Try it once so we know everyone's boundaries and limits, then go from there."

"You down, Joshy?" Clay smirks, and I widen my eyes in anticipation.

Joshua lets go of me and comes to stand beside Xander, looking from him to Clay and then me. "Fuck it. Yes, I'm down."

Clay stands beside me and pulls me into a kiss before whispering, "Just like I showed you. Follow my lead." He kneels in front of Xander, and I

kneel in front of Joshua. He unzips Xander's pants, so I pull down Joshua's sweatpants with a little help from him. Both are already hard. "Lick your palm," Clay says, and I do as I'm told. "Stroke him. Start off soft and then gradually increase," he instructs, and we both begin stroking their cocks. Joshua looks down at me intently, his gaze piercing. "Now, lick up his cock from the base to the tip," Clay directs, and I do just that, keeping my gaze locked with Joshua's. "Take him in your mouth and bob your head up and down like I showed you."

"Fuck," Joshua breathes out, letting his head fall back as I start to suck him.

"Yes, roll your tongue, kitten," Clay encourages.

"Holy..." Joshua grunts, his hands coming up to hold the back of my head.

"Don't forget the lollipop," Clay smirks before he returns to suck Xander, drawing a moan from him.

I hollow my cheeks, but before I can suck, Joshua's grip on my hair tightens. He starts to thrust gently, so I push out my tongue, trying not to choke, letting him fuck my mouth like Clay showed me.

"You're such a good girl for him, Carolina," Xander praises. "And you're my good boy..." he growls out to Clay, "... sucking my cock so well."

Joshua's hand drifts down to my chin, tilting it upward while continuing his gentle rhythm. "You really are a good girl for me," he murmurs, and I whimper in response. "Oh, you like being a good girl for me?" he asks, thrusting deeper. I try to relax my throat as he does. "Fuck, Carolina," he moans out, and I grip the back of his thighs, tears forming in my eyes, but I love it.

"Now, let him finish in your mouth and swallow every drop. I know how well you can swallow, kitten," Clay instructs from beside me, stroking Xander's cock.

"Carolina..." Joshua pants, "... can I finish in your mouth?"

I nod, squeezing his thighs.

His hand returns to the back of my head, guiding me as he thrusts a few more times before he grunts, and his warm cum coats my throat before I swallow.

I lean back, my lips sliding along his length until I let him out with a *pop*. Joshua drops to his knees, cradling my face in his hands, and kisses me deeply.

“That was the best damn blow job I’ve ever had,” he whispers against my lips.

“You’re welcome.” Clay chuckles.

Joshua doesn’t look away from me. He only lifts his right hand to give Clay the finger. Then he bites my bottom lip. “I get the ‘good girl’ stuff now. It’s fucking hot,” he murmurs.

*It most definitely is.*

“Josh, sit in the desk chair and watch or leave,” Xander directs through gritted teeth.

Joshua shoots him a look but pecks my lips again before rising to his feet and settling into the chair.

“Come here,” Xander beckons, extending a hand. I stand and step over to him. “Nice shirt,” he says, glancing down at my usual black Henley, and I quirk an eyebrow.

“Thanks?”

“Take it off,” he commands, his voice rough and gravelly.

Behind me, Clay chuckles.

Xander pulls the shirt over my head, swiftly unhooks my bra, and tosses it at Joshua. Next, he rolls down my leggings and panties and sends them flying in Joshua’s direction too. Then he reaches out to tease my nipples with his fingers while Clay gets undressed. The sight of these stunning men surrounding me, all mine, piques my arousal, and I have to squeeze my thighs together.

Xander takes a step back. “Crawl to me,” he orders.

I glance at Clay, who gets on all fours and crawls toward Xander. As Xander raises an eyebrow at me, I lower myself and crawl forward, feeling far less ridiculous than I expected.

Xander strokes my cheek. “Now suck my cock, both of you.”

Clay smirks and leans in, grasping Xander’s cock, then glances at me. I lean forward, and together, we glide our tongues up the underside of his shaft, circling each piercing and making Xander groan. “Fuck, yes.”

This is so fucking dirty, and I can feel myself dripping down my thighs.

Reaching the tip, Clay grips my head and pulls me into a kiss. He releases me and commands, “Take him in your mouth,” while he lowers his mouth to suck on Xander’s balls.

Taking Xander’s cock in my hand, I wrap my lips around him, but he’s massive. I can barely get a third of him in my mouth. “Holy shit, you’re

doing so well for me, both of you,” Xander praises, panting.

His face is strained with his effort to keep it together, and there is a sense of empowerment knowing I can affect such a big, handsome man like this.

Focusing on the head of his cock, I swirl my tongue around it, maintaining eye contact, causing him to hiss in response.

“Holy shit,” I hear Joshua curse softly out of the corner of the room, his voice laced with desire, easing my worries about him.

Clay comes up again, licking the side of Xander’s cock, and when he does it again, I lick up the other side of him. Xander reaches out and grabs both our heads, groaning. “God, you’re perfect. I can’t tell you how many times I dreamed about this.”

Clay strokes Xander’s cock again, the tip pointing at me, and I lean in to lick it as Clay does the same, our tongues tangling and playing with it at the same time.

“Fuuuck. Stop. Kneel before me and open your mouths,” he demands, and we comply. “Tongues out,” he commands, working himself with his hand. Using his other hand, he grasps my chin between his thumb and forefinger, tilting my face upward. “I’m going to fill your mouth with my cum. Be a good girl and swallow.” I nod eagerly.

Clay scoots over to me, and with mouths open and tongues out, we wait, cheek on cheek.

Xander’s voice is husky, “Jesus, what a sight.”

He strokes himself a few more times before he moans and shoots into Clay’s mouth, then he turns slightly and shoots some of it into mine. A bit lands on my cheek, but I eagerly swallow what’s in my mouth. With a hand on my chin, Clay turns my face toward him and licks Xander’s cum from my face.

“Our girl did so well, Clay. Give her her reward and fuck her,” Xander tells him.

Clay rises, pulling me to my feet. Bending down, he wraps his arms around my thighs, hoisting me over his shoulder. He carries me a few steps to the bed and sets me down gently, prompting me to scoot up a bit. Taking one of my ankles, he places my foot over his shoulder.

He pauses, glancing at Joshua in the desk chair, stroking himself, watching us intently.

“You good with watching me fuck our girl, bro?”

“Hell yes,” Joshua says, making him chuckle.

Clay's finger teases my entrance, pushing inside. "So wet and ready for me," he murmurs, leaning in for a kiss. He pulls his finger out, licking me off him, and seconds later, pushes his cock inside my pussy.

"Oh *Dio*." I exhale as Clay plunges deep, leaning down to me.

He sucks and nips a trail from my throat to my chest, then to my nipple, where he bites hard. It's not painful, but I scream out in surprise, followed by a shaky breath.

My fingers grab his hair, pulling sharply, and he hisses in response. "I didn't ask for attitude," he growls out.

"It comes for free," I retort.

He laughs. "Why can't you be a good girl for me too?" he asks, leaning in for a kiss and biting my bottom lip.

Holding onto his shoulders, my nails dig into his skin. "Why aren't you a good boy for me?" I shoot back.

"You're so fucking hot," he praises, pressing his thumb into my mouth. "I want to ruin you and spank you until you beg for me to stop."

His thrusts become harder, faster.

"You sure talk a lot." I pant.

He turns his head, licking the ankle that's still over his shoulder, then he puts it down, pulling out. I don't have time to cry out or object before he's turning me onto my stomach. He hoists my hips up, thrusting inside me and spanking my ass hard, just under my new tattoo.

"You're right. Shut up and take my cock like a good girl," he demands, amusement evident in his voice.

"Fuck..." I whimper, gripping the sheets and losing myself in the pleasure.

"Jesus, what a fucking sight," Joshua growls out.

I wish I could see him to ensure he's okay with this. From the sound of his voice, he's more than fine with it, and I have to trust he would speak up if he weren't. Knowing he's watching me and possibly enjoying what he sees does something to my low belly, and I'm clenching around Clay's cock.

Clay's thrusts are punishing, and the sound of skin clapping on skin fills the room, accompanied by me moaning his name. He slides his fingers into my hair, gripping it close to the scalp and pulling me up so I have to arch my back uncomfortably.

"Yes, take what I give you, kitten," he demands, picking up intensity.

But suddenly, he stops and lets go of my hair. Glancing over my

shoulder, I see Xander behind Clay on the bed, a hand on his throat, whispering something in his ear. When he releases him, the sound of a bottle being squeezed echoes, and Clay lets out a whimper. He leans over me, pulling me close and moaning in my ear. “Fuck, please.”

“My boy is so fucking tight,” Xander groans out, and Clay moans in my ear, pushing even deeper into me.

“Holy shit,” he gasps out, leaning over me and biting my shoulder.

“What do you think, Carolina? Want me to fuck our boy’s ass and thrust him into you? Fuck both of you at the same time?” Xander asks, his fingers caressing my thigh.

*Holy Jesus.*

“Yes,” I moan out from beneath Clay, who bites even harder into my shoulder when Xander enters him.

Xander starts to pound into him, effectively driving Clay into me with each movement.

“Fuck, I-I can’t... it feels too good,” Clay stammers, putting his palms over the back of my hands and interlacing his fingers with mine on the bed. “You’re so wet and tight, and he’s so damn big.”

With Xander joining us, I wonder if Joshua has left the room for this part, but I’m pleasantly surprised to see him standing beside the bed, gently pushing a strand of hair behind my ear.

“Do you like this, Carolina?” he asks, his voice husky.

With his other hand, he’s stroking his cock, which is hard again.

“I’d like it even more if I could have you too,” I pant out just as Clay finds the perfect spot inside me, making me gasp.

Clay pulls me upright, hands firmly gripping my breasts from behind. Joshua uses the opening and sits on the bed.

He positions himself beneath me when Clay releases me, allowing me to move back down on my hands. “Then have me,” is all he says.

I lean down and take his cock into my mouth, gripping it with one hand and feeling his hands guiding me by my hair. Clay’s hands are on my hips, and one of Xander’s is on my thigh. I’ve never felt so complete and fucking aroused.

I am moaning around Joshua’s cock, probably gripping him a bit too tightly, when Xander starts to thrust into Clay with fervor. Clay shifts a hand from my hip to the back of my head, gently but firmly holding my head in place.

With Clay's help to keep me steady, I hollow my cheeks and do the lollipop, making Joshua shudder. He rocks his hips up to try and push himself further in my mouth. "Fuck, you're gonna make me come again," Joshua whispers, thrusting up into my mouth again, and I take him as deep as possible when he comes for the second time.

Clay releases his hold on my head, gripping my breast and squeezing. My breath catches, a shudder of pleasure racing down my spine.

When Joshua slips out of my mouth, and I swallow, Xander's hand finds my clit and rubs firm yet slow circles with Clay still deep inside me. I can't help but cry out.

Joshua grabs my throat and kisses me deeply, muffling the sounds of ecstasy I can no longer contain. My whole body trembles with a sensation overload from the three of them touching me, having me. And when Clay moans in my ear and pinches my nipple, I fall over the edge. I squeeze him so hard I feel him get stuck and spill inside me.

"Fuck," Xander grunts, halting his thrusts, and his grip on my thigh becomes bruising.

When he lets go of me, I collapse onto Joshua, who hugs me to him. Then Clay pulls out and shifts to lie next to Joshua and me on the bed.

Shortly after, I hear running water before Xander comes back, handing a warm, damp washcloth to Joshua.

"You have her?" he asks, and Joshua nods, so Xander starts to clean up Clay.

"You guys are fucking dirty... holy shit," Joshua remarks, a hint of disbelief in his tone.

Clay chuckles. "And you loved every second of it."

"Fuck, yes," he agrees, gently turning us so I lay on my back on the bed. He spreads my legs and kisses my mound before he wipes away Clay's cum.

"Such a good boy... light of my life," Xander praises, leaning in to kiss Clay.

"Love of mine," Clay replies, reaching for my hand.

Joshua gives the cloth to Xander, who walks to the bathroom naked, his eyes following him, and I get a bad feeling. Maybe this has been too much for Joshua. It was a fucking lot for me too. But he lies back on the bed, pulls me half on top of him, and whispers in my ear, "Always."

I smile, relief washing over me, and whisper, "Forever."

## CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

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### **Carolina**

Xander parks in front of my old apartment building, glancing over at me. It's Monday morning. We have just taken Chiara to school, and next, Xander will drive me to college, but first, we have to do this.

Afterward, Xander wants to go and get a desk for me so I have something to do my studies on. I told him I'd done fine the last few years, studying on my bed, but he insisted and plans to use his day off today to assemble it for me.

"You don't have to go up there. I can go," he offers in the quiet of the car. Letting him do it would be so easy and a relief, but I just can't.

"No, I want to... this is my shit. I love you, Xander, but you have to let me do stuff on my own occasionally. I can do things alone."

"I know you can do shit on your own, Carolina. But I won't let you because you don't have to anymore." I want to retort something, but he is already opening the door, getting out, and coming around the truck to help me hop out.

We walk up the stairs to the third floor, and my heart pounds in my chest. Fear courses through my veins as I stand before the apartment door. Gripping the doorknob with a trembling hand, I glance at him. "Please wait here, at least. I'll hurry."

Xander lets out a frustrated grunt, crossing his arms over his chest in irritation. "Fine."

Quietly, I unlock the apartment door, my every move deliberate to avoid

any noise. This is supposed to be simple—go inside, leave the money on the kitchen counter, and leave as quietly as I entered.

Each step toward the kitchen feels like an eternity, and the floorboards seem to creak loudly beneath my feet.

“Calm down, he is not even here,” I whisper to myself as I walk by his room, the door standing open and no one inside.

But when I near the kitchen counter, an icy, vice-like grip suddenly yanks me backward. I gasp as the cold surface of the refrigerator presses against my back, and I find myself staring into Roberto’s furious gaze.

“Where the fuck have you been?” he hisses out between his teeth, seething with anger.

His fingers tighten painfully around my neck, making it hard to breathe. I claw at his wrists, nails digging into his skin, trying desperately to release his hold. My voice comes out as a rasp, my fear palpable. “I’m... here, as always.”

But he doesn’t let go. His grip getting even tighter. My vision starts to blur, darkness closing in on the edges as the lack of air takes its toll. Panic grips me, and I feel my strength fading away when, suddenly, with a deafening crash, the apartment door bursts open.

Xander stands there, framed in the doorway, a silhouette of raw fury. He charges forward and, within seconds, pries Roberto’s hand from my throat. Air floods back into my lungs, and I cough violently, desperately trying to catch my breath. Tears fill my eyes as I struggle to regain my composure.

Xander’s punch lands with a resounding thud, connecting with Roberto’s face and sending him reeling onto the floor. I watch in a mixture of horror and relief as Xander pins him down, his muscles taut with anger. The veins on Xander’s arm stand out in stark relief even as he leans over my uncle.

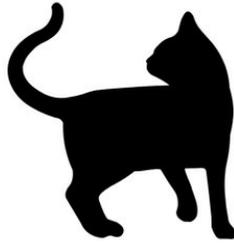
“You ever touch her again...” Xander warns, his voice a low growl, “... and it’ll be the last thing you do.”

I touch my sore throat, tears brimming in my eyes. “Let’s go,” I whisper.

Xander stands, casting one last threatening look at my uncle. Then he wraps an arm around me, leading me away from the dark shadows that have haunted my past.

## CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

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### **Carolina**

It's shortly before one a.m., and I'm sucking on an ice cube as I finish cleaning the last few tables.

Yesterday was slow at the internship. Sophia and I were feeling down because we couldn't find the evidence that the captain wanted to reopen the case without the file. My mind was reeling all day, pondering over what angle we hadn't tried yet, all while my throat ached badly.

*I fucking hate Roberto.*

Xander made it abundantly clear that I would never, under any circumstances, step foot in that building again. Honestly, I'm ready to let him take charge. He was right.

*That was the last fucking time he'll touch me.*

"Heading out," Donny announces as he opens the kitchen door.

"Night," I say tersely.

"Bye, babe!" Cindy giggles from behind Donny, and I roll my eyes.

*Didn't she tell me she was done with him?*

Taking my key from my pocket, I walk to the front door to lock it. Through the glass, I spot a police car parked a short distance away, and I smile, waving through the glass before locking the door and heading over to the bar.

I can't wait to get out of here and home with them.

Home.

*Dio.*

I really found one. I have to bite my lip at the warm feeling that spreads through me.

After switching off the lights, I move through the empty kitchen to the lockers at the back. As I reach for my backpack and jacket, something cold and hard suddenly presses against my temple, sending a shiver of dread down my spine.

“Shhh, *carina*. Stay calm. Keep quiet, and I won’t hurt you,” a familiar voice murmurs in my ear, thick with an Italian accent.

“Matteo, what the fuck?” I accuse, my voice trembling, but I don’t dare to move a muscle.

“You’re coming with me, and you’re going to be quiet,” he commands, pressing the gun tighter against my temple, forcing me to tilt my head slightly.

“Or else?” I challenge, gritting my teeth in defiance.

Pulling my back to him, he leans down and whispers, his words chilling to the core, “Or else, I’ll shoot your cop boyfriend who’s waiting outside for you.”

A wave of chilling dread washes over me as I realize the gravity of the situation. “Where are you taking me?” I ask, trying to sound indifferent, though my heart is pounding.

“To the boss. You’re my last chance to get in. *Ora sii una brava ragazza e cammina*, <Now be a good girl and walk,>” he hisses, prodding me forward.

As Matteo and I reach the back door, I steal a glimpse through the window next to it, and my heart lurches at the sight of Joshua. He stands there, looking down at his phone, unaware of what’s happening inside.

“*Bastardo*. Looks like he’ll have to die after all,” Matteo mutters, releasing me and moving toward the door.

Fear courses through me, and I move forward and grip his forearm, “Please, Matteo, I am not going to do anything. I will go with you and won’t make a sound. But please, let him live. *Ti prego*,” I plead, my eyes welling up with tears.

The desperation in my voice is palpable, and I hate myself for it, but I don’t care. All that matters right now is Joshua.

He searches my face, his eyes scanning every inch of my expression as if he’s trying to determine whether or not I’m telling the truth. I hold his gaze, willing him to see the sincerity in my eyes. After what feels like an eternity,

he closes his eyes and takes a deep, reluctant breath.

“*Vaffanculo,*” he curses under his breath. The tension in the room is almost suffocating. “You stay right here, you hear me? One wrong move, and I shoot him,” he warns.

“Okay,” I whisper and push down my fear, forcing myself to stay strong.

I will walk to my death with my head held high as long as I know Joshua will not die for me tonight.

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## **Joshua**

The screen’s glow illuminates my face in the dark of the night as I look at my phone. The light above the bar’s back door is so dim it does precisely nothing to light up the alley.

It’s been nearly ten minutes since I saw her close up the front, and her boss has already walked past me with a scowl, so I am considering going inside to get her when the back door creaks open and the last of her coworkers steps out. He has his hands shoved deep into his jacket pockets, his gaze fixed on the ground.

“*Buonasera,*” he mumbles, barely glancing up as he goes to walk past me.

“Wait, is Carolina still inside?” I ask, stretching my hand out to halt him.

He nods, not meeting my eyes. “She is closing the front. She is coming in a minute.” He starts to walk again, brushing past me.

I frown at his retreating back before turning to the closed door again. Carolina had already locked the front. I saw her do it.

That is suspicious as fuck. I am about to walk over and go inside when I feel a sharp pain on the back of my head, and everything goes black.

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## **Clay**

“What the fuck is taking them so long?” I sigh to Xander, who is on the phone with me over speaker.

“It’s been a few minutes,” he confirms.

“The bar is dark. Fuck it, I’ll go look. I’ll call you later, babe,” I tell him, just wanting to hang up.

“No, you don’t. Go over, but keep me on the line,” Xander commands in his no-argument voice.

“Yes, sir,” I say, getting out of the car with my phone and keys in hand.

I put the keys into my pocket so my hand is free and can rest on the gun on my belt. As I round the corner to the back, I see Josh lying on his stomach on the ground.

“Holy fucking shit, Josh!” I yell, running over to him and crouching beside him.

“What?” Xander asks in a slightly panicked voice after my outburst.

“Someone knocked him out,” I explain after checking his pulse and noticing a bleeding wound on the back of his head. I turn him over so he is lying on his back, and he seems to come to. “He’s waking up,” I relay to Xander.

“Carolina?” Xander asks, and I take a look around, but no one is there.

“Hang in there, bro,” I tell Josh, who starts to moan and blink.

I head to the bar. The back door is closed but not locked, so I draw my gun and go inside, swiftly checking each room. Finding no one, I announce, “Clear,” although I’m not sure who I’m saying it to.

“So, she’s not there?” Xander asks as I head back to Josh, who is now sitting upright, holding his head.

“Josh, what happened?” I ask, crouching down next to him.

“Fuck, I don’t know. I think her coworker knocked me out,” he mumbles. But in the next second, his eyes go wide, and he struggles to his feet, swaying slightly.

“Easy there,” I soothe, steadying him.

“He has her,” Josh exclaims, eyes wide when he grips my upper arms.

## CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

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### **Joshua**

The office is only dimly lit, and Captain Swanson sits behind his heavy oak desk, eyes scrutinizing as Clay and I enter. He looks tired. But oh well, we don't have time for that shit.

*I fucked up, and my girl is in danger.*

"Carolina's missing, Captain. We suspect her uncle," I relay, my voice strained.

My head is still hurting like hell, and my vision is blurry, but that can wait.

Captain Swanson raises an eyebrow. "Carolina? Ms. Costa?"

Clay chimes in. "Yes. And we need backup immediately. We don't even know where to start looking, but we know she is in danger."

Just as the captain is about to reply, the door bursts open. Taylor, Del Moro's partner, face pale and eyes darting nervously, steps inside. He looks at me, then Clay, and finally at Captain Swanson.

"I need to come clean," he says hurriedly, gulping. "I just helped Martin kidnap Costa's sister from Lee's house. I knew he was with the Metro Milanesi gang, and I thought it was just some side hustle, but this shit is too much."

The room falls silent. The weight of Taylor's words hangs heavily, and the atmosphere grows tense.

Clay takes a step closer, eyes flaring, fists clenched. "You did *what*?"

I hold Clay back with a hand on his chest, trying to keep my emotions in

check. “Let him talk. We need answers.”

Taylor looks on the verge of tears. “I’m so sorry. I thought I was just helping a friend, but I realized I was way out of my depth when he wanted me to do that. I don’t want this, not like this.”

Swanson leans forward, his voice firm. “Where did you take her?”

Taylor shakes his head, desperation clear in his eyes. “That’s the thing. I don’t know. I just helped get her out of the house without waking anyone up. After that, I bolted.”

My heart is racing. Every second counts, and we’re running out of time. If I just hadn’t turned my back on that guy.

*A fucking rookie mistake.*

“Captain, we need that backup *now*. We have to find her.”

Captain Swanson nods, picking up his phone to bark orders. “Taylor, you’re going to cooperate fully. If we’re going to save those girls, we need everything you’ve got.”

Taylor nods, relief evident on his face. “I’ll tell you everything I know and help where I can.”

---

## **Carolina**

When Matteo pulls up in front of Roberto’s apartment complex and shoots me a look, I am surprised.

*Fuck, it seems I was not done with this building after all.*

He gets out of the car, his shabby Fiat door creaking open before he opens my door for me. Feeling a growing sense of dread, I step out and walk ahead of him to the entrance, wanting to get this over with. But just when I want to go up the stairs to meet Roberto, Matteo puts a firm hand on my shoulder, halting me in my tracks.

“We go down, *carina*,” he tells me, his voice cold, motioning with the gun to the stairs that lead down to the basement.

*Well, fuck. It just gets better and better.*

I walk down the stairs, my heart pounding with every step until I stand in front of a door, and he motions for me to open it. It is heavy, and no matter how hard I try, I can’t open it. He scowls, ramming his shoulder against it, making it pop open. Then he ushers me inside, and a moldy scent fills my

nostrils, making breathing even harder through the panic rising inside me.

As I look around, I realize it's just a big empty space. Some tables and stools are pushed against the walls, and boxes are scattered around. But in the middle of the room stand two chairs, with some distance between them.

*Wait, two?*

"Where is Chiara?" I ask him, nearly spitting in his face. He whirls me around in an instant, his grip on my arms like a vice, pinning me to him. My heart races even faster as I feel the world closing in around me.

The door swings open with a creak, and Del Moro comes in, gripping Chiara's upper arm. She's in her pajamas, her tear-streaked face making her look even younger. The sight of her sends a fresh wave of fear coursing through my veins.

*No, please, she can't be here.*

"Let her go, you piece of shit," I spit out, trying to fuel my anger with my fear for her and pull myself out of Matteo's grasp.

"Oh look, we have a family reunion. Isn't that a beautiful thing?" Del Moro smirks cruelly, pushing Chiara down to sit on the chair on the left and tying her arms to the seat behind her back, rendering her helpless.

"Lina," Chiara whimpers, her voice trembling with fear, tears streaming down her cheeks, and I see that her lip is swollen.

"You dared to touch her?" I scream at him, my anger and terror boiling over.

He stands straight again, walking over to us. Matteo holds my hands behind my back while Del Moro pulls his arm back, ready to unleash a punch square in my face, hard. I nearly see stars but manage to hiss out, "I would tell you that real men don't beat women, but we already established that you're a pussy."

A sinister grin stretches across Del Moro's face, his eyes void of any humanity. "Oh, you can say whatever you want to, Costa. You're not getting out of it today. And I am going to enjoy every fucking second of it," he taunts, his words hanging in the air like a chilling promise.

"Tie her down," he orders Matteo, who pushes me to sit on the chair.

I shoot him a death glare when he crouches beside me to tie my wrists, and he pulls his shoulders up in a shrug.

The door opens again, and Del Moro Sr. enters the room, smiling at me. "What a beautiful sight," he remarks, his voice dripping with malice as he steps closer, pushing a stray strand of hair behind my ear. I recoil from his

touch, but he huffs a laugh and leans in to whisper in my ear, his breath sending a cold shiver down my spine. “Poor, poor girl. I told you to stop digging. So, you can’t say I didn’t warn you about what will happen. Telling the captain about it?” He tsks, shaking his head in mock disappointment. “What a bad idea.” He steps back, looking over to Chiara. “Such a pity. Seems like you are going to end up as collateral, just like your mother.”

“Don’t you dare touch her,” I seethe.

“At least I am going to make sure she isn’t going to suffer too much. You should be grateful for that. I can keep my head unlike your dumb-as-fuck uncle.”

“What are we going to do with him?” Martin asks his father, sadistic curiosity in his tone.

“We’re going to keep him for a while longer,” Del Moro Sr. answers indifferently. “Make sure this doesn’t blow up in our face like when he fucked up last time, so we still have him to frame if shit hits the fan.”

Martin steps in front of me, a cruel smile dancing on his lips. “You heard that? You’re going to be the downfall of your uncle too.”

I scoff. “Funny if you think I give a fuck.”

He scowls at me. “Can I kill her already?” He turns to his father, but at that moment, his phone chimes, and he steps back to answer it, putting the call on speaker with his father hovering nearby.

“Taylor?” he asks, his tone betraying a hint of irritation.

“Fuck, Del Moro, I changed my mind. I’m in,” Taylor’s voice crackles through the phone.

Martin laughs, his amusement laced with mockery. “You’re such a fucking pussy, Taylor.”

“Fuck, I know, man, I needed to think about it, but I wanna be on the right side,” Taylor concedes.

“You fucking are now, brother.” He smirks.

“Where are you?” Taylor asks.

Martin looks at his father, who nods at him. “The Costa apartment building. Call when you are out front. I’ll come get you.”

“Thank you, man,” Taylor says, hanging up.

“You think this is a trap?” Del Moro Sr. asks.

“I trust him with my life. He just got cold feet there for a second, but I knew he would come crawling back,” he states confidently.

“Fine, but we’re going to make him shoot one of them, so we are sure he

is in, and we have leverage if he changes his mind again.” Del Moro Sr. shrugs.

“I don’t give a fuck as long as I get to shoot *her*,” he points at me, his smirk menacing.

Chiara sobs, and I clench my teeth.

*Fuck. How do I get her out of here?*

I bet Clay and Joshua are already looking for us, but would they really think about looking here? It’s way too easy.

*I need to buy us some time.*

“So what? You guys are like Metro Milanesi idiots?” I ask, trying to keep my tone carefree, even though I’m anything but.

Detective Del Moro laughs at his son. “You told me she was big-mouthed, but you did not tell me she was stupid.” He walks over to me and grabs my hair, pulling my head back and making pain shoot through my scalp. “I *am* the Metro Milanesi, girl. And if you have heard of us, you know that I don’t have any qualms or morals to keep me from killing you in the most painful way possible. You should shut that mouth really quick if you know what’s good for you.”

He releases me, and I turn my head away, gulping.

*Holy shit, this guy is fucking terrifying.*

My heart is nearly beating out of my chest, and I have to make sure my bored face doesn’t fall in front of them with my panic.

Martin’s phone chimes with a text, and he looks down at it. “Taylor is outside.”

“I am going to come with you. I wanna feel him out myself first before I let him down here. Gabrielli, make sure they don’t move. Shoot them if they try anything,” Del Moro orders Matteo, who nods as they both leave the room.

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## **Joshua**

The night air is cool and crisp. I stand with Clay behind the police car next to Captain Swanson and keep my composure on the outside, but inside, I am shaking with nerves, and my head injury radiates pain through my entire body.

Detective Del Moro opens the door to the building and is the first to step out. Shock crosses his face for a second when he sees all the flashing blue and red lights. The whole perimeter of the building is surrounded by squad cars and heavily-armed police officers taking strategic positions behind vehicles and corners.

Captain Swanson steps forward from behind the car we are standing. “Detective Del Moro, you and your son are both under arrest for kidnapping as well as ties to the Metro Milanese gang. Lay down your weapons and put your hands on your heads.”

Detective Del Moro, taken aback but maintaining his composure, looks around, then smiles innocently. “This is quite the reception, Swanson. But surely you must be mistaken. I’ve been on the force for years. I’ve devoted my life to protecting this city.”

“Where is she!” Clay barks, struggling to keep his temper in check. I put a hand on his shoulder, reminding him to keep his focus.

Visibly more anxious, Martin whispers harshly to his father, “We need to get out of here. They have us cornered.”

Ignoring his son, Detective Del Moro steps forward, his voice dripping with feigned sincerity. “Captain, there’s been a misunderstanding. We were here trying to save the girls. Taylor called us, concerned about their safety.”

Captain Swanson’s face remains hard. “Taylor confessed everything, Del Moro. He’s cooperating with us. We know you were the one behind all this.”

Del Moro’s confident façade falters for a moment. His eyes dart around, likely searching for an escape route, but it’s clear they’re cornered.

Seeing the change in his father, Martin, in a desperate move, reaches for his gun. Yet, before his fingers can even graze the weapon, sharpshooters swiftly align their sights, their laser dots converging on his chest. He freezes, realizing any further movements might be his last.

“Enough of this!” Swanson shouts. “Both of you, on the ground, *now!*”

After a tense moment, they slowly lower themselves to the ground and place their hands on their heads.

As the officers move in to handcuff the two, Detective Del Moro’s eyes meet Captain Swanson’s. “You’re a disgrace to the badge,” Swanson remarks, his voice filled with disgust.

## CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

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### **Carolina**

Matteo springs into action, crouching behind me as soon as the Del Moros are out of the room. “I’m sorry, *carina*. I didn’t know they were going to kill you, I swear,” he whispers, undoing the ties on my hands behind my back.

“What did you think they were going to do, bake me a cake?” I hiss back at him when I feel the ties go limp around my wrists, but I grip them and keep my hands behind my back just as the door opens.

Matteo steps quickly to the side so he is standing back against the wall when Roberto comes in.

*Of course, that bastardo has to be here too.*

“Well, look at that,” he laments, coming over and grinning at me. He has a black eye from where Xander pummeled his face into the ground, and it gives me a little bit of satisfaction. “All alone today? No big guy to rescue you?” He huffs a laugh.

I just give him a bored look, although I have started sweating.

*This is not going to end well for me.*

“Martin told me on his way out that I could have some fun with you until they get back,” he shares, standing before me and taking out his butterfly knife. A shudder runs down my back when I see it’s the same knife he used to carve up my arm. “What do you think, *pig*? Are you going to scream for me?” he taunts as he thrusts the knife into the side of my right thigh, and I clench my teeth and breathe deep through my nose.

The blade sends waves of agony coursing through me, but I force myself to remain silent, my entire being trembling with the effort to hold back the scream that threatens to escape.

*It hurts like a motherfucker.*

The ironic thing is, if he hadn't tortured me for the past five years, he would have gotten the screams he wanted. But he was the one who made me build those walls and taught me to endure, so now, instead, I laugh in his face.

"Come on, you're losing your edge," I taunt, panting. "Remember that time you broke my collarbone with the shower head? Well, that was at least original."

He sneers at me. "Now we have a big mouth? Where is that backbone coming from?"

"It's what happens when you have nothing left to lose," I press out.

He huffs a laugh. "Your sweet little sister not worth it anymore? You know you're going to die, and in the end, she isn't as important anymore?"

"Oh, I am going to die, but so are you." I smile at him with gritted teeth, trying to keep my cool while my thigh screams in pain.

"Did you hear that?" Roberto turns to Matteo. "What is she going to do, tied up to a chair? Scowl me to death?" he taunts.

"I am not the one going to do it. Either the Del Moros are going to get rid of you first, or my guys are going to kill you for killing me. My bet is on Daddy Del Moro, though, and you should be thankful for that since he will make it quick."

"You have no fucking clue. I am back in. I am the fucking third in command. Why the fuck would they want to get rid of me? I did everything they wanted, and now I am going to get rid of you for them too," he promises, stepping closer.

*Fuck, I need more time.*

Every second counts for Chiara.

"I heard them talk. You are nothing more than the one to blame when this shit blows up," I say in a bored tone, but inside, my heart is racing out of my chest in fear.

"Liar!" he screams at me, raising the gun to my forehead.

"Lina," Chiara cries out, whimpering.

"No, no! She's telling the truth! I heard it too!" Matteo chimes in, standing next to me, holding out his hands in a surrender motion to Roberto.

“Did you now?” he asks him, tilting his head.

“*Si*, you should let them both go, or they will just use you as *specora nera* <black sheep>, and you are going to be the one who goes to jail,” Matteo offers, his eyes flicking down to mine, his guilt-filled gaze locking with mine before shifting back to Roberto.

“*Idiota*,” I mutter to myself, lowering my gaze and closing my eyes, not surprised when the next thing I hear is a gunshot before my face is splattered with blood, and the sound of a body falling to the floor fills the room.

“I told you to keep an eye on her, not to fucking fall for her, *cretino!*” Roberto shouts, and when I open my eyes again, I look down at Matteo on the floor. His eyes are locked on the ceiling, and there is a gunshot wound on his forehead.

Chiara is sobbing again, and Roberto swings the gun in her direction. “Shut the fuck up, whore!”

Panic surges through me once more, seeing him pointing the gun at her chest.

*Not over my dead fucking body.*

“Hey!” I shout, making him turn to me. “We weren’t done with our conversation.”

He laughs. “Oh, you just want to fuck with me today.” He steps in front of me and crouches down so we are nearly at eye level. “So, talk, have that conversation. It will be your last.”

“Tell me *why*. Why did they have to die?” I ask, partly hoping to give her more time and partly because I genuinely need to know before I die.

“Because your father didn’t know what was good for him and couldn’t keep his nose out of our business. The boss wanted him gone,” he explains matter-of-factly, tilting his head to look at me.

I bite my cheek. My father was a good man. It makes sense that he would’ve acted out after noticing that Roberto was involved in shady shit.

“But why her?” I ask, a hint of desperation in my voice.

“She shouldn’t have even been there!” he yells at me, straightening up and waving the gun. “He should’ve driven that car to work the next morning. How the hell was I to know they’d go out again that night? They always stayed home, and that one fucking night...” he stops, then turns to crouch in front of me again, “... she was just collateral, but the boss made sure I paid for it,” he seethes. “He really didn’t like her dying that night too.”

“Why did he even care?” I frown at him.

“He wanted her for himself. Everyone did. But she acted like she was too good for anyone other than your father,” he spits out, jealousy evident in his voice.

“What did you do?” I ask, my voice breaking.

My hand is slowly moving up my side from behind my back. Maybe, if I’m quick enough, I can knock the gun out of his hand, just like Clay showed me.

“I cut the brakes and jammed the accelerator.” He shrugs as if it were the most natural thing in the world. “It wasn’t certain they would die. They might’ve made it. She might’ve jumped out, or perhaps, if your father had been a better driver...”

My stomach churns. “That makes no fucking sense. Why not just shoot him?” I ask, my voice rising.

“But where would be the fun in that?” He smiles wickedly at me, his eyes gleaming with sadistic delight. “He deserved it for betraying his own blood.” The room seems to spin around me, my world crumbling as I grapple with the horrifying truth. My parents, the people who raised and loved me, were gone because of him. Because of his jealousy, his anger, and because my dad had morals, and that fucking asshole Del Moro has none. “Don’t you think it’s funny how she and the way she died were the reason I got kicked out, and now, you and your death are my ticket back in. Nearly poetic.” He smirks cruelly at me, caressing the side of my face with the muzzle of the gun. “It’s such a pity. Your mother was a beautiful woman. Those eyes,” he says, his voice turning sinister as he lowers the gun to my heart. “I think I’ll keep your sister alive, so I have my own little version of her. Oh, the things I am going to do to her,” he muses.

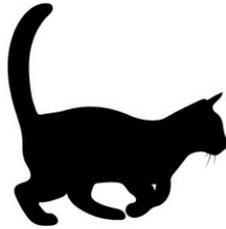
A surge of white-hot rage courses through me, and *I. See. Red.*

I yank his knife from my thigh and shoot my arm up so fast he has no time to react when I ram it full force into the side of his throat. Time seems to slow when the knife buries itself inside him, and I witness the shock and terror in his eyes mixed with a flicker of disbelief.

But then, a searing, excruciating pain shoots through me, pain like I never felt before. The sound of a gunshot shatters the air, echoing through the room, followed by Chiara’s terrified scream, calling my name in a desperate plea.

## CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

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### Clay

“Where is she?” I shout, getting in Martin Del Moro’s face.

He laughs. As I lean back, he spits on my shoes. “Oh, you’ll find her all right, but will she be breathing?”

I pull my arm back and punch him in the face. “You bastard,” I hiss out.

Josh grabs my elbow. “Clay, keep it together. We need to find her first.”

I turn to him, feeling completely lost. “But where? They checked the apartment, but she was not there. She’s just—” A gunshot interrupts me, and our eyes widen. “Where did that come from?” I ask, rushing over to the open door of the building and frantically looking around the hallway.

“Basement,” Josh answers, heading inside and to the stairway. I’m right next to him in no time, with some of our colleagues following close.

“Call an ambulance,” I tell the one behind me as we reach the basement. Josh starts to open the heavy door, but I stop him. “I got it. You’re injured.” He clenches his teeth but steps aside. The door isn’t locked, but it’s stuck. I have to ram it with my shoulder before it gives way, causing a loud crash. Gun raised, I step into the room, shouting, “NYPD!”

The scene that meets my eyes is straight out of a nightmare. I quickly scan the room. To the left stands Carolina, gun aimed at the entrance and now directly at me.

*Fuck, she’s hurt.*

She’s covered in blood, her face sprinkled with it, and a large wound gapes from her left shoulder, with blood streaming down. Her stance is

perfect, just as I'd taught her, but as I scan her from head to toe, I see that there is also a wound on her leg, her black jeans even darker on her outer thigh. Her face is determined. She stands protectively in front of a chair where Chiara is tied, muffled sobs coming from her. On her right is another chair, and in front of it is Carolina's coworker, a bullet hole cleanly marking his forehead as he stares blankly at the ceiling. Beside him, Carolina's uncle lies motionless, a knife buried deep in his neck. The floor is pooling with blood, and the stench in the room is moldy and coppery.

*Holy fucking shit.*

"Carolina," I call out, locking eyes with her. She tightens her grip on the gun, her fingers covered in blood. "That's my girl," I soothe. "Look at you with that flawless stance. You did so good. Now, turn the safety on, just like I showed you, and put the gun to the floor." Demonstrating, I lower my gun.

*Come on, remember what I taught you.*

"Do as I'm doing. Turn the safety on, Carolina." Slowly, I extend a hand and step toward her, but she doesn't move. "I'll come and get you now, okay?" I question, starting to take a step, but Josh's hand on my shoulder stops me.

"Don't. She's in shock and will shoot you," he cautions.

I try to focus on her eyes, looking for some sign of recognition. She's panting while her wound continues to pour out blood with every beat of her heart. Behind her, Chiara is whimpering.

"You took them out. You did amazing. We've got the Del Moros. There's no one left to harm you or Chiara. But you're hurt, and you need help. Let Josh and me take care of you, Carolina." I take another step in her direction, and her finger trembles on the trigger, the gun still aimed at my heart—exactly where I'd told her to.

"Carolina," Josh consoles from beside me. "You're safe. We've got you."

The entire gun trembles in her grasp now, the shaking traveling up her arms, tears forming in her eyes.

"The danger is over, turn the safety on. I'll come to you, but you need to turn the safety on," I urge, taking another step toward her. Seeing her entire body starting to shake, I shout, "Turn the fucking safety on, kitten!"

Her trembling finger moves to the safety, clicking it into place. I rush forward, catching her just as her knees buckle and give out.

"Medic! We need a fucking paramedic here!" I bellow over my shoulder, laying Carolina down gently and pressing onto her bleeding shoulder.

“I... I think it h-hit an artery,” Josh stammers, voice shaking as he crouches on her other side. “She’s losing a lot of blood.”

“I’m so sorry,” Carolina whispers, her eyelids fluttering.

“Don’t you fucking dare give up on me. You promised,” I shout at her. “You’re not getting out of this that easy, kitten!”

*She can’t leave now, not after everything.*

It seems someone has managed to get Chiara free, as she’s now kneeling beside me, clutching Carolina’s hand and desperately pleading, “*No, no, no, non lasciarmi.* <No, no, no, don’t leave me.>”

Paramedics arrive, pushing us aside to get to Carolina. One quickly applies pressure to the wound on her shoulder with a cloth while another gets a stretcher ready beside her. I help them move her onto the stretcher, but her eyes are closed when I look at her face again.

“Kitten!” I shout, and her eyes jolt back open. “Fucking stay with me, or Xander will whoop both our asses,” I tell her and see a faint smile form on her lips just before the paramedics whisk her away.

I look at the trembling Chiara, then at Josh.

He nods. “Bring her. I’ve got our girl,” he tells me before he rushes after them.

“Are you okay?” A paramedic who remained behind approaches Chiara, assessing her.

She nods, and I take a closer look. Other than a bruised lip, she seems physically all right, but her eyes tell a different story.

“Come on,” I mutter, wrapping an arm around her. “We’ll head to the hospital and get you checked out too.”

It’s not until we are out of the basement that she starts to shake. “She stabbed him, and he shot her,” she murmurs, and I glance down at her, realizing this will haunt her for a long time. As we exit the building, her eyes fill with tears again as she whispers, “She was ready to die for me.”

I stop her next to our police car, with my hands on her shoulders, turning her to me and bending down to look into her eyes. “After all that’s happened, *that’s* what surprises you?” I ask. “I could have told you that Carolina would die for you the day I picked your underage-drinking ass up from that house party. Now get in. I need to get to my girl,” I command, letting go of her and noticing that I left bloody handprints on her.

*Oh well.*

I open the car door for her. “And call Xander, will you?”

## CHAPTER FIFTY

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### **Howie**

We are all sitting around Lina's hospital bed. Her men are beside her, clutching her hands and feet, while Sophia, Chiara, and I are on stools against the wall. Both of them are holding one of my hands too.

I don't know who is giving strength to whom right now because I try to give as much as I get. But it is hard.

My Mary died just like that. Hurt in a hospital room, surrounded by her loved ones. All of them were there to hold her hands and pray for her, me, front and center. But it did nothing for her. She still left me. Left me alone in this godforsaken world.

*In this numbness.*

First, there was grief and anger, all-consuming anger. But after those feelings left me, the only thing I was and could be was numb. It felt like an endless void, consuming every inch of happiness left.

*Until she found me.*

I smile to myself, thinking back to the day nearly five years ago when I sat in my usual space, eyes closed and head leaning against the brick wall, waiting for another night to finally end.

I don't like the nights.

*They are cold.*

Each one darker than the last.

She came out of nowhere, sat next to me, and opened a burger package, starting to eat. I hadn't eaten anything for days, not seeing the point in it

anymore, hoping to get too weak to take this life any longer. But the smell of the burger made my stomach growl, and somehow, I got hungry for the first time in a while.

*It was almost as if my senses remembered how to feel.*

She didn't even look my way when she pulled out a second burger from her backpack and extended it to me. I looked down at the burger packet in her hand and back at her, hesitating.

"Take it," she said around a mouthful.

I did, and she went back to eating hers. When I opened the package, I let the smell drift in my nose and nearly drooled.

"Thank you," I said, but she ignored me.

When we both finished eating, she sat there for a while and took deep breaths, neither of us saying a word. I looked at her more closely and saw that the kid was maybe sixteen or seventeen, and her eyes were rimmed red. She radiated the same despair I was feeling a long while ago.

"Howard," I said, letting my head fall back to the concrete wall again.

"Carolina," she replied softly before she stood up and took her backpack. "See you tomorrow."

*And with those three words, she gave me my life back.*

Something to look forward to.

*Hope.*

She kept me alive for years with her sass, her kindness, and her burgers, without asking for anything in return besides a place to breathe for a few minutes.

*The unexpected savior of my lost soul.*

I look around once more at the faces of the people sitting here. They are her people now. I know she finally found a place for herself—more than just those few moments a day she spent with me.

*Wake up, Lina. You deserve to have this home you made for yourself.*

*The one you made for us.*

Chiara leans her head against my shoulder, a tear rolling down her cheek, and I squeeze her hand.

"Everything will be all right," I whisper to her, hoping like hell that the universe doesn't make a liar out of me.

"Kitten," Clay breathes, making us all look at Lina, who seems to open her eyes and blink heavily.

"Fuck," Xander grunts out, his voice sounding watery while Joshua

releases something between a laugh and a sob.

“That girl is so fucking tough.” Sophia sobs from my other side, tears streaming down her face, and she strokes them away with the back of her hand.

“A vacation doesn’t sound so bad anymore,” I remark, making her laugh.

## EPILOGUE



**Five years later**

### **Carolina**

“Four bottles of water and a Coke, please,” I order from the guy behind the pool bar.

He smiles at me and places a tray on the counter, setting the water bottles on it and filling a glass with ice and Coke. “Radio” by Lana Del Rey is playing, and I smile to myself.

There are some cute little umbrellas in a tray behind the bar. I point to them and ask, “Could I please have one of the pink ones for the Coke?” The guy smiles at me again as he grabs one and opens it, placing it in the Coke. “Thank you.” I give him a smile before pulling the tray toward me.

This resort is all-inclusive, so I simply walk away with the tray in my hands. I wobble slightly and halt my steps, adjusting the Coke glass to sit more securely in the center of the tray. As I look down, my gaze lingers on my new tattoo.

I’ve had it for six months now, but it still surprises me every time I see it.

We did it the way Xander suggested. I designed my sleeve, and he tattooed it for me, replicating it exactly as I had drawn it. The sleeve covers my entire forearm, and the scars aren’t visible anymore. You can feel them if you run your finger over my skin, but it’s a good thing they aren’t completely

gone. I don't want to see them every day, but I appreciate the reminder.

Whenever I have a tough day, doubts, or feel insecure, I look at the tattoo and trace the scars.

*I survived him, and what remains is pure beauty.*

The most prominent part of the tattoo is a black cat with golden eyes. Behind her is an orange pumpkin, twenty-two flowers surround her, and three blue butterflies ascend my arm. It took me years to perfect this piece, to translate my ideas into a cohesive tattoo, but I finally made it, and I fucking love it.

Xander teases me about how often I've applied sunscreen to it already while we've been here. Here, as in a vacation resort in the Bahamas.

It's been five years since everything happened, and we've been on a few little getaways since then, but we saved a long time for this vacation. Fortunately, the NYPD really does pay its full-time workers very well.

After that horrific night, it took me a few weeks to recover. The bullet hit an artery, and I lost way too much blood. It's safe to say Donny had had enough, replacing me immediately when Clay informed him I would miss a few weeks of work. Honestly, I really didn't care.

I smirk as I think about Donny. I haven't in a long time. I saw a picture of him and Cindy on social media two years ago after they eloped in Vegas. I really hope for Cindy's sake that he is a better husband than a fling.

The guys had Chiara and me covered, providing everything we needed until I graduated from college cum laude. After that, I wanted to repay them in installments with my newly earned money, but they suggested I put it into their shared savings account instead. That way, we could use it for fun stuff, like the vacation we're on now.

My bikini strap slips off my shoulder as I walk, brushing against my ugly bullet scar, which brings back memories of that night. The Del Moros are still in jail. After their arrest, the police investigated further and discovered evidence that Detective Del Moro was the leader of the Metro Milanese, with Martin as his right-hand man. All the crimes the gang had boasted about were pinned on them, resulting in lengthy prison sentences. Anderson also got a sentence, while Taylor was released on probation and now works as a security guard at a supermarket.

This meant Swanson had openings for detective positions, leading to promotions for Clay and Joshua. But they weren't the only ones who did awesomely. Xander and I began drawing together in the evenings, and he

rediscovered his passion for oil painting. Last year, he held his first exhibition at a prestigious art museum in Manhattan.

I made sure to send Bishop an invitation, but strangely, he didn't come.

Chiara finished high school and made it into cosmetology school, which she will finish this summer.

And me? I'm happy to work alongside Sophia, doing what I've always wanted. Loving the free time I have for myself and my guys every evening after work and enjoying the fuck out of the simplicity of having a regular day, a consistent sleep schedule, and weekends off.

The sun blazes down, making the pool shimmer invitingly. I stroll alongside it, feeling the warmth on my skin. As I walk, I spot Howie floating on a pink flamingo floatie. "Your Coke, sir," I announce, crouching beside the pool.

Sophia swims over on her blue pool noodle, takes the Coke from me, and holds it aloft as she swims back to Howie to hand it to him. He lifts the glass adorned with the tiny umbrella, toasting me.

"To vacations!" he cheers, and I can't help but smirk at his pastel pink swim shorts and the sunglasses adorning his face.

"When you're done with that, we're swapping again, Howard. I want my flamingo back," Sophia chimes in.

The two of them have become the best of friends. If I weren't so happy for them, I might get jealous. They now do everything together, from visiting jazz clubs, baking cakes, and having movie marathons to shopping. I even heard that Howie got a pedicure with her before the vacation. It's a good thing I have my own three best friends, but I make sure that he and I still have our burger dates from time to time.

After all, he is, and always will be, *my* Howie.

Across the pool, Chiara and Leo are deep in a water fight, laughter filling the air as water splashes everywhere. Suddenly, Leo lunges at Chiara, wrapping his arms around her. "Got you, doll!" He cackles, and I chuckle at their antics. It's cute that they are still together and so in love. They even plan to move into a new apartment together after Chiara has finished school.

My gaze shifts to the sun loungers lining the pool's edge. Four loungers are there. One is empty—mine. On the other three, my men relax.

Joshua, with his pale skin, lies shielded under an umbrella. Beside him, Clay basks in the sun, his skin glistening. Xander lounges on the last chair, his fingers brushing against Clay's upper arm.

As I get to my chair next to Xander's, I bend down to place the tray of water bottles on the ground. Seizing the opportunity, Xander slaps my ass, and I jump, shooting him a mock scowl. "Really?"

His eyes twinkle with mischief. "How about we head to our bungalow? Take a little break from this sun?"

Clay immediately chimes in, "Hell yes!" and I hear Joshua snicker.

I grin. "All right. Let's go." I start walking away, adding an exaggerated sway to my hips.

The sound of Joshua's appreciative groan follows me, and I smile even wider.

The last five years of our relationship have done wonders for my self-esteem and confidence. Having three hot men dotting on you all the time and doing dirty, dirty things to you will have that effect.

Clay once told me that he can't silence the mean voice in my head, but they will make sure to tell me every day about how fucking crazy I drive them. I must say, it's helped.

As I sway my hips on the way to our fancy-ass beach bungalow, I feel the butt plug rubbing against me, and I have to take a deep breath to suppress a moan.

*"Come here, pumpkin," Xander says as he sits on the closed toilet, patting his knee in invitation. I am standing in front of the bathroom mirror, fastening my bikini top.*

*"What are you..." I start, furrowing my brow.*

*The tiny curve to his lips is pure mischief while he holds out a purple butt plug to me.*

*Xander loves preparing me for Clay so he can fuck my ass later. Xander says his love language is gift-giving, and what better gift for his boyfriend than their stretched-out and prepped girlfriend?*

*"We're on vacation with the family and in the pool the whole day," I tell him, not believing that he wants me to wear a plug while wearing next to nothing.*

*"Exactly." He grins at me, the glint in his eyes hungry.*

*"You know what, you wear one too, and I'll think about it." I stand in front of him and tilt my chin back, my eyes meeting his with clear challenge.*

*Xander gives me a slow shake of his head, dragging his thumb slowly*

*over my lower lip like he is allowing me to dial back the sass.*

*He should have known better, though. I just take it as a challenge and double down. “You know I could help you with that. Purple is your color.”*

*Xander’s eyes narrow at me, and in a fast move, he spins me and pulls me over his lap, his hand coming up to grip me around my throat.*

*“You little brat,” he growls out, and I feel his hard-on pressing through his Bermuda shorts into my stomach while he pulls my bikini briefs down to my knees. “You’re dripping, Carolina. Acting like you don’t want to get plugged, but the thought of it makes you so fucking wet.”*

*His long fingers slide inside my pussy, stroking as I shudder in his arms.*

*“Dio,” I hiss out when my pussy throbs in response to his touch.*

*“Be a good girl for me today, and I will make you come so hard tonight, you’ll see stars,” he whispers while his fingers slide in and out of me, slow and unhurried.*

*Yes, fucking please.*

*Moaning, I relax into his hold and let him have his fun with me. His fingers retreat, and for a second, I feel empty before they’re back on me. He is doing it with such care, covering both me and his fingers with lube, circling my tight hole, and pushing in just one finger, making me squirm before the second one follows.*

*Then he slowly scissors me, drawing moans of pleasure from my lips. “Shh, be a good girl and stay quiet. We want this to be a surprise for Clay later, remember?” he whispers, sliding the butt plug into place.*

We reach the bungalow and step inside. It’s breathtakingly beautiful, decorated entirely in white, and the front facing the private beach is all windows.

We asked for two queen beds to push together so we can all sleep in the same bed, which we’ve done for years now. The guys ordered an even bigger bed than the one Xander and Clay had for my room, and since then, we have all slept only in there.

“Good thing we’re only in swim shorts,” Clay says as he closes the door behind us. “Makes this much faster,” he adds with a grin, pulling down his shorts and standing naked before us. “Fuck, seeing you in that bikini the whole day is torture. Come here,” he commands, reaching out to me, but Joshua intervenes.

“Nope, my turn. You guys can watch how I make our girl come first,” he tells him.

Clay grins at him and pulls Xander over to a small couch next to the bed, pulling down his Bermuda shorts, revealing his already glistening cock. He pushes Xander to sit, then sits on one of his knees, grabbing Xander’s cock, stroking it. “Well, please go ahead and show us how it’s done.” He smirks at Joshua.

Joshua stands in front of me, grabbing my face between his hands. “Hey.” He smiles at me.

His dimples are showing, and they still make my stomach flutter.

“Hey.” I smile back, my hands coming up to grab his wrists.

“I love you. Always,” he whispers with so much love in his gaze.

“I love you too. Forever,” I whisper back before he seals his lips to mine.

Joshua starts out slow and languid, but soon, he tilts my head back and deepens the kiss. One of his hands wanders into my hair, pulling at the roots, making me moan into his mouth. Then he walks me backward until my thighs hit the end of the bed. His mouth moves from mine to my neck, kissing and nibbling while he unties the strings of my bikini top, letting it fall away. He then unties the strings on each side of my hip, pulling the bottom away and tossing it into a corner of the room.

“Fuck, I love bikinis,” he murmurs against my skin, his mouth moving to my nipple. He sucks it in, his mouth hot around it, his other hand pinching my other nipple, making me gasp. With a finger on my shoulder, he leans back and orders, “Lay down.”

I do as I’m told, laying down with my back on the bed, my ass on the edge. I want to scoot higher, but Joshua kneels in front of me, grabbing my hips and holding me in place.

“Do you guys have a good view?” Joshua asks, and I lean up to see Xander and Clay stroking each other’s cocks, with Xander nibbling on Clay’s neck.

“The best fucking view,” Clay states, his eyes fixed on my breasts.

“Moan for me, my Carolina,” Joshua commands before diving in, licking up my slit. He opens me up with two fingers, then licks from my entrance to my clit, sucking it into his mouth, making me grip the covers and moan his name. “Just like that,” he murmurs against me, and one of his fingers slides inside, stroking my inner walls.

“Fuck,” I whimper when he circles my clit with his tongue, then nibbles,

making me squirm and buck against his face.

“Tastes like candy,” he groans out, curling his fingers. His other hand moves up my belly to my breast, kneading it while continuing to finger and lick me, driving me wild.

“*Dio*, I think I—” I start to say, but Joshua pinches my nipple hard and sucks my clit in again, making me come hard, whimpering from the intensity.

Clay gives a slow clap before coming over to join Joshua, who’s now standing again.

“That man knows how to eat.” Clay grins at me, and I can only nod in agreement.

*Shit, that was mind-blowing.*

“I think I found a present for you.” Joshua snickers to Clay, his hand moving from my pussy to my belly, caressing me.

Clay bends down to inspect me. “All for me?” He looks over at Xander, smirking. “Aww... you didn’t have to, babe, but I fucking love it.”

“Clay, would you mind fucking our girl’s pussy for a bit first?” Joshua asks, his hand moving back to my core. “I want to prove that my fingers are just as talented as my mouth, but I think I need some help.”

“Like you even have to ask.” Clay hums, and in the next second, he’s filling me. The plug in my ass heightens the sensation, and I gasp for breath.

He gives me a low, sexy chuckle as he fucks me carefully, his thick cock pumping in and out of me at a maddening pace.

“Fuck, kitten. So tight and wet. The perfect pussy,” he praises, pulling out and pushing in again, slow and shallow, his gaze fixed on where we’re joined.

Joshua’s fingers start to circle my clit, and I’m still sensitive, so I squirm and twitch. “No, my Carolina, you’re going to come at least four times today. You can’t start being oversensitive already. Or do you want me to edge you again?”

I think about the last time he edged me for nearly an hour during our date night, and I shudder. It was electric, but I can’t handle that right now. “I need to come, please,” I whisper.

“Only good girls are allowed to come, kitten,” Clay assures, never stopping his thrusts.

I look over at Xander, who’s stroking himself, watching us intently. Joshua increases the pressure slightly while leaning down to kiss me. His other hand finds my breast, squeezing it.

He pulls away slightly to look into my eyes. "Do you like that?"

"Yes," I moan out.

"How about this?" he asks, using his thumb to circle me while pressing one of his fingers inside me alongside Clay's cock.

"Holy fucking shit," Clay grunts, and his thrusts falter.

"You're slacking, Clay," Joshua teases as I close my eyes, overwhelmed by the intense stretch. But Joshua stops everything he's doing. "If you want me to keep going, fucking look at me, Carolina." My eyes snap open, finding his, and he smirks at me, resuming his circles. "There are those beautiful eyes." He moves his finger inside me in tandem with Clay's thrusts, and I can't help but fall over the edge. Clay whispers curses as I come, my pussy clenching hard around him and Joshua's finger. Moaning, my hands gripping the sheets, my eyes locked onto Joshua's. "Such a good girl," he praises.

"Only for the three of you," I promise, still panting.

They both pull out, and Joshua sheds his Bermuda shorts.

"Done with your demonstration, Josh?" Xander asks as he stands from the couch, cock in hand.

He looks so fucking fine, and my pussy is already clenching again, thinking about his promise from earlier.

Josh chuckles. "I am. Please, take over if you'd like."

"Good. Then lay on the bed, and Carolina... straddle him. My boy needs to unwrap his present."

A shiver of anticipation runs down my spine at his words, and I bite my lip while I hold his gaze for a moment.

Joshua does as he's told, lying on the bed. I turn and crawl up his body, kissing him deeply before breaking the kiss and sitting down on his cock. His hands go to my hips, and he grunts as he slips inside my wet, throbbing pussy. The sensation of him makes me gasp.

"You feel so fucking good," Joshua breathes out, pulling me down to his chest and kissing me once more.

A hand runs down my back. "Aww... in my favorite color. Thank you, babe, I love it," Clay admires, pulling the plug from me.

I break the kiss and gasp for air, a "Fuck" escaping me. I hear a tube squeeze as cold lube is spread onto my ass.

Xander comes to stand beside me and grabs my throat, squeezing it. "He's going to fuck your little ass hard, and you're going to take it. Because you're our good girl, aren't you?"

I want to answer, but all I can do is nod before I feel Clay's cock entering me. "Fuck, you are so ready for this," he moans, then grabs my shoulder.

The sudden intrusion makes me moan loudly, but I arch back, pushing onto him, silently demanding more.

"Fuck her good, love," Xander commands, his eyes never leaving mine. Clay starts to thrust into me hard. My hands are on Joshua's shoulders, who is doing nothing but playing with my tits while the momentum of Clay's thrusts moves me up and down on his cock. Xander continues to hold my throat, pushing a finger into my mouth. "I want all your pretty little holes filled by us," he mutters. "Open."

I'm panting as Clay thrusts relentlessly, the stretch nearly too much but oh so fucking good at the same time. I open my mouth for Xander, and he gently slides his cock into it.

He releases my throat, and his hand finds its way into my hair, tilting my head slightly upward, changing the angle so I can take more of him in. I'm breathing through my nose, trying not to choke, but like every time I suck his cock, tears stream down my face.

"Fuck, look at you, pumpkin. So, fucking beautiful choking on me," Xander admires.

Clay slaps my ass over my '*good girl*' tattoo, then rubs the heated spot. "It's too tight, too fucking good. Fuck, babe, I think I'm going to come," he grunts out.

"Fill her ass, love," Xander states, thrusting into my mouth slowly, stroking my cheek with the hand that isn't gripping my hair.

"Fuuuck," Clay breathes out, warmth filling me.

He doesn't pull out but stays inside me. His hand moves to my clit, and Joshua starts to thrust up into me from beneath.

I moan around Xander's cock, the stretch so delicious, making it easy for me to come again. My pussy squeezes Joshua, and he moans beneath me before I feel him filling me too.

Xander pulls his cock out of my mouth at the same time Clay pulls out of my ass, the loss of them making me whimper. Then Joshua pulls me down to lick my nipple before Xander reaches out a hand and pulls me off him.

I stand beside the bed, and Clay comes up behind me, kissing my neck. "Your pretty little ass is everything," he murmurs, one of his hands sliding down my side to my asshole, pushing a finger inside. "I could live in there."

Xander leans in and kisses me deeply, pulling me to him by the small of

my back, his cock pressing against my belly.

“Did you have enough, pumpkin?” he whispers against my lips.

I’m spent, but I crave him, so I whisper, “I need you too.”

He bends down and grabs me by the back of my thighs, lifting me to him. I wrap my legs around his waist and my arms around his neck as he lowers me onto him.

“*Dio*,” I murmur into his ear, clinging to him. His piercings and girth drive me crazy.

He starts to gently thrust while lifting me up and down on his cock, his hands on my thighs.

“So fucking tight,” he grunts, moaning into my ear. “Fuck, Carolina.”

As I look over his shoulder, I see Clay and Joshua lounging on the bed watching as Xander fills me.

I cling to him, letting my head fall back, savoring every second of how he nearly pulls out and pushes back inside me. Suddenly, he pulls out completely and sets me back on my feet before turning me and pulling me back to his chest.

He whispers in my ear, “I need to have been in all of your holes today,” before I feel his dick pushing inside my ass.

Still stretched from the plug and Clay and lubed up with Clay’s cum, it’s easier than usual, but his cock, the piercings, and the stretch make me whimper. I grab the windowsill to hold myself up, leaning my upper body forward to make the angle easier for him.

“Fuck, this won’t last long,” he utters, his hand moving to the back of my head, grabbing my hair, and pulling me to him, making me arch my back. “You’re being such a good girl for me, for all of us. Now come one last time with my cock in your ass,” he commands, his other hand finding my clit while he slams into me.

“I can’t,” I whisper, being completely overstimulated and just hanging on, enjoying the feeling of him. But he seems to go deeper every time he pulls out and pushes back in.

I brace my hands even harder against the windowsill and hang on for dear life as he works me over into a panting, shuddering mess.

“Come,” he demands, pinching my clit, and my body seems to want to comply.

I come in long, drawn-out waves. My ass clenches around Xander, leaving him cursing and moaning. He waits until I am nearly done before

finishing himself in several bone-rattling thrusts that bury his dick so far inside me I can practically taste it.

Both of us are breathing hard, and I seriously question my ability to stand up straight if Xander were to let go of me.

His hands find my hips, pulling me closer, the grip nearly bruising. Then he pulls out and lifts my upper body to hold me close to his chest. "You're absolutely perfect for me," he whispers in my ear.

My knees nearly give out, and he lifts me bridal style, carrying me to the bed and laying me next to Joshua.

He leans in to give me a peck on the lips. "I'm going to get something to clean you up," he whispers.

"No," I protest, eyes closed. "Stay for a minute?"

He slides in beside me, and Clay lies on top of my legs, hugging them. Needing more contact, I reach down to stroke his hair.

"She's going to be asleep in a minute." Joshua snickers, caressing my cheek.

I don't care if I am. I know I'm safe and loved. I never have to be afraid again because they have me.

Howie is living his best life. Chiara is safe and has a promising future. And damn, it seems like I have a pretty great one too.

"I love you," I mumble.

"We love you more," Joshua soothes, kissing my temple.

THE END



Please take a few moments to leave a rating, and if you can a review.

Thank you for taking the time to read my book baby. 🐾



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## ON A MORE SERIOUS NOTE:

This book is a work of fiction, but some situations discussed are of a sensitive nature and include the mention of knives and guns. Please visit my [website](#) for a more detailed list of trigger warnings.

If you or anyone you know is in emotional distress or has been a victim of physical or psychological abuse, homophobic actions, fatphobic actions, binge eating, or bullying in general, please seek help or assist them in obtaining help. Reporting the crime could possibly prevent another incident.

Crisis hotlines exist everywhere, so please don't hesitate.

If you live in:

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Australia call Lifeline Australia 13 11 14

# PLAYLIST

- “In the End (Mellen Gi Remix)” by Tommee Profitt
- “The Funeral” by Band of Horses
- “With Me” by Sum 41
- “Bad Blood” by Taylor Swift
- “MI FAI IMPAZZIRE” by BLANCO & Sfera Ebbasta
- “While You’re At It” by Jessie Murph
- “Aerials” by System Of A Down
- “Chiasso” Random
- “THE LONELIEST” by Måneskin
- “Run to You” by Lea Michele
- “Snowman” by Sia
- “Blooming Story (feat Jo Hae Jin)” by Tearliner
- “What If I Told You That I Love You” by Ali Gatie
- “Us” by James Bay
- “Collide (feat. Tyga)” by Justine Skye
- “CHICKEN TENDIES” by Clinton Kane
- “Blood Sport” by Sleep Token
- “Pretty Girl Rock” by Keri Hilson
- “No Right To Love You” by Rhys Lewis
- “What Ifs (feat. Lauren Alaina)” by Kane Brown
- “Up” by Cardi B
- “The Weakness In Me” by Joan Armatrading
- “My Body” by Justin Jesso
- “Attraction” by Tearliner
- “Forever and Ever and Always” by Ryan Mack

“You And Me” by Lifehouse  
“Cosmic Love” by Florence + The Machine  
“The Big Bang” by Rock Mafia  
“The Quest” by Bryn Christopher  
“Look After You” by The Fray  
“PAURA MAI” by Ultimo  
“Get You the Moon (feat Snøw)” by Kina  
“Good Girl” by Kiyashqo  
“Torna a casa “ by Måneskin  
“Broken (feat. Amy Lee)” by Seether  
“...Baby One More Time” by Bowling for Soup  
“Little Girl Gone” by CHINCHILLA  
“Cold” by Crossfade  
“Leave Out All the Rest” by LINKIN PARK  
“Radio” by Lana Del Rey

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The Memento Vivere Duet  
Contemporary Why Choose Romance

#1 [Brittle Heart](#)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Blake Black is a reverse harem author with a passion for the hurt/comfort trope and sugary, sweet romance. When she is not crafting her next spicy scene, Blake loves to drive her convertible and soak in the beauty of nature. Powered by her favorite energy drinks, she often writes deep into the night, creating stories filled with trauma, healing, and love that illuminates even the darkest corners.



BLAKE BLACK  
*Lost in the Darkness. Drawn to the Lights.*

