



BREAKING FREE

A NEW BEGINNINGS STORY
NICOLA JANE



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

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FOREWORD

This story is part of The New Beginnings Anthology, raising awareness and money for the charity Living Without Abuse because everyone has the right to live without domestic abuse. The authors taking part in this anthology have agreed that all proceeds will be donated directly to the charity.

Living Without Abuse (LWA) believes that all people have the right to live safely and without fear of violence and abuse. On this site we offer information and advice to anyone experiencing domestic abuse and/or sexual violence. We can also provide support services to anyone living in Leicester, Leicestershire or Rutland. We are committed to raising awareness of domestic abuse and sexual violence, working towards its prevention and eradication, and assisting those affected by this crime to determine their own lives. <https://lwa.org.uk/>

Anyone experiencing any abuse please know that you are not alone and seek support.

Living in the UK? Find help here:

<https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/getting-help-for-domestic-violence/>

Living in the USA? Find help here:

<https://www.thehotline.org/get-help/>

Living in the AUS? Find help here:

1800RESPECT - 1800 737 732 (Available 24 hours, 7 days a week)
<https://www.whiteribbon.org.au/helplines/>

PLEASE be aware that these stories maybe a trigger for anyone experiencing or having experienced domestic violence so please proceed with caution.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to my readers who love whatever I write. I appreciate every comment, share, review, and TikTok.

X

This story holds a special place in my heart. To anyone that's survived domestic abuse, you're amazing. To anyone going through it, reach out, there is help available, I promise. There is life after abuse and it's not always an easy path with a hero waiting to rescue you, each story looks very different. But if you reach out for help, your story could have a happy ending.

SPELLING NOTE

Please note, this author resides in the United Kingdom and is using British English. Therefore, some words may be viewed as incorrect or spelled incorrectly, however, they are not.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Some people may find this story triggering. However, it's been written as part of an anthology to raise awareness for Domestic Violence and how easy it is for victims to be drawn in and held there through fear or mental abuse.

If you, or someone you know, might need help. Here are some useful websites:

<https://www.womensaid.org.uk/about-domestic-abuse/>

<https://www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk/>

The freephone, 24-hour National Domestic Abuse Helpline 0808 2000 247

PLAYLIST

When She Cries – Britt Nicole
i can't breathe – Bea Miller
Bad Thing – Jesy Nelson
Sociopath – Olivia O'Brien
Titanium – Madilyn Bailey
What He Didn't Do – Carly Pearce
lovely – Billie Eilish ft. Khalid
Narcissist – Lauren Spencer-Smith
One Day – Tate McRae
All I Want – Lauren Spencer-Smith
Fighter – Christina Aguilera
Both Sides Now – Luke Sital-Singh
Praying – Kesha
Beautiful – Christina Aguilera
Warrior – Demi Lovato
Bird Set Free – Sia

CHAPTER ONE

8 years earlier . . .

TESSA

I CHECK my outfit one last time in my full-length mirror. Callie rolls her eyes impatiently. “Can we just go, please?” She’s eager because her new boyfriend is waiting for us in the car outside.

“Are you sure he won’t mind me coming?” I ask.

“I told you already, he’s fine about it. We’re going to a house party, and there’s gonna be loads of people there.”

We rush down the stairs, and my care-worker pokes her head around the kitchen door. “Going somewhere nice?”

“Cinema. Mike cleared it,” I lie.

“Ten o’clock curfew,” she shouts after me as we head out. The care home where I’m currently living is nicer than most places I’ve stayed, but it’s strict on curfews and rules. I’ve spent my life in care, passed around several different foster homes, and now, at the age of sixteen, I’m here. They no longer call them children’s homes, but that’s what it is—a home for the kids no one wants. They say if you haven’t been adopted by eight years old, you’ve missed your chance, and for me, that’s the case.

I climb into the back of the black BMW. I can’t lie, I’m a little impressed. Callie gets in the front and leans over to kiss the guy in the driver’s seat. He then turns to me, smiling, and I catch a glimpse of a gold tooth. “I’m Jase,” he introduces, and I try not to look shocked. He’s a lot older than me and Callie. She never mentioned that part.

“Tessa,” I say warily. He winks, then turns back around and starts the

engine.

We drive around for a half-hour before he pulls up outside a house. It's huge, much better than the houses on the estate where we live, and there's music pumping from inside. As we get out the car, I see people hanging around in the garden. They all look older than me and Callie, and I hook my arm in hers and lean close so Jase doesn't hear me. "You never said you were dating Hugh Hefner," I hiss.

She laughs. "He's not that old."

"Yet he's not that young either."

She rolls her eyes. "Come on, Tess, lighten up. He's twenty-five, hardly a granddad, and he thinks I'm eighteen, so don't say a word."

"Where did you meet him?"

"A bar. Live a little and let your hair down. These parties are amazing."

I look around doubtfully as we head inside, trailing behind Jase. He stops occasionally, shaking hands and chatting with the other partygoers, but eventually leads us over to a couch. He waves down a passing girl carrying a tray of drinks and takes two glasses of wine, handing them to us. I hate wine, but Callie gives me a warning glare to keep quiet and smile gratefully. When he turns to chat with someone else, another woman places a tray on the table with lines of white powder neatly sectioned and some black straws.

"Is that what I think it is?" I hiss, and Callie nods. "You're not gonna do that, are you?"

Jase crouches at the table and takes a straw, sniffing as he guides it along the line of powder. He grins at us before offering the straw to Callie. She takes it, and I watch in horror as she does the same. She turns to me, but I'm already shaking my head. "Come on, Tess, don't be a bore."

"I'm not a fucking bore, Callie. If I go home out my face, they'll kick me out." I'm proud of the fact that I haven't gone down the route so many kids in my situation do. I've never done drugs or smoked, and I only have the occasional drink.

"They'll kick you out soon, anyway," she mutters, handing the straw back to Jase. She's right, I can only stay at the home until I turn seventeen, and then they'll point me in the direction of a hostel or a bedsit. The thought terrifies me because I've never lived alone. I've always been surrounded by other kids.

"You're an idiot," I mutter. She's only doing this crap to impress her new boyfriend. He's not even that nice-looking.

“If you’re going to nag, go away,” she snaps. Standing, she wraps her arms around Jase and kisses him. I shudder, watching as he leads her away towards the stairs. *Great, now what?*

The atmosphere in the room suddenly changes. People begin to shift uncomfortably and then they part, almost like they’re waiting for a storm to pass through. A group of men appear, all dressed in smart suits with gold watches on show and shades covering their eyes. I feel like I’m watching a movie scene, and I want to laugh at the ridiculousness. They stop in front of me, and one of the men lifts his shades, revealing his piercing blue eyes that stare hard into mine. “Move,” he says clearly.

I look behind me to make sure he’s speaking to me. When I see he is, I frown. “No.”

He stares a little longer, unsure of what to say. I don’t suppose many people tell him no. Another guy pushes to the front. “Who’s she?” he asks, also lifting his shades to eye me suspiciously.

“Who are you here with?”

“Jase,” I reply.

They both exchange a smirk. “Where is he?”

“With my friend.”

“What the fuck are you all doing?” Another man appears behind the two, and they both spin to face him.

“Sorry, boss, we got distracted.”

The man watches me with an intrigued look on his face. “Remove this shit,” he tells them, pointing to the tray of powder. “And get me a drink.” He loosens his tie slightly and takes a seat beside me. “Dante,” he says, holding out his hand.

“Tessa,” I reply, shaking it. My breath catches in my throat. He’s gorgeous, maybe the most handsome man I’ve ever set eyes on.

“Where’s your boyfriend?”

I feel myself blush. “I don’t have one.”

He smirks, leaning back and placing an arm over the back of the couch. I feel the heat from it like a red-hot fire, searing my back. “Lucky me.”

Present day . . .

I HEAR the lock click and dread fills my stomach. I try to steady my

breathing as I lay as still as possible on the floor. It's my usual trick, thinking maybe if he sees I'm sleeping, he'll leave me alone, though it very rarely works.

His footsteps move closer and it's almost impossible to stop myself from tensing. I feel him crouch behind me before running a finger down my spine. The sudden touch after three days of being in here startles me and I flinch. "Good morning, Tessa. How are you feeling?"

I don't know if this is a trick question. I don't understand what answer he wants, so I slowly turn onto my back, wincing from the pain that causes, and force a smile. "I've missed you, Dante," I whisper. My voice is hoarse from the lack of water.

He grins. "Good. We have guests arriving in one hour. I've promised them a traditional roast beef dinner." I push to sit and immediately feel dizzy, so I squeeze my eyes closed. "What are you waiting for?" he asks.

I look down at my naked body. "Can I wear clothes?" I whisper, almost ashamed to ask.

He laughs. "Hurry, Tessa, I don't want my guests waiting for food." And then he leaves.

It takes me five minutes to stand and be steady enough on my feet to get out the room. It's on the top floor, and as I slowly take the three flights of stairs down to the kitchen, I have to cling onto the wall and handrail for support.

The ingredients for dinner are laid out on the kitchen island. There's no way I can make a roast in one hour, and if I'm a minute late, I'll pay for it. So, I unwrap the beef, place it in the air fryer, and select roast cook. I've spent years learning ways in which to outsmart Dante. He sets me up to fail all the time, so if I can cheat my way out of it, I'll do it. I prep the rest of the food and set it all to cook.

Half an hour later, Dante enters the kitchen, looking around with that smug glint in his eye. "Everything going to plan?" he asks.

I smile. "Yes, of course. Can I get you a drink?"

He holds up his glass of bourbon to indicate he's already sorted it himself, and I curse myself for not making sure that was the first thing I did. "Sorry, I was distracted with dinner."

"Do you have anything to say to me, Tessa?" he asks, tipping his head to one side and eyeing me.

I move closer, my nerves on edge in case it's the wrong thing to do and I

set him off. “Dante, I’m so sorry for upsetting you,” I begin. He remains still, and I carefully reach up to his face and place my hand against his cheek. “I wasn’t thinking, and I hate that I upset you. I deserved longer in the room, but I’m glad you let me out to cook for you. It’s the least I can do.”

He inhales sharply, a sign he wasn’t expecting me to be so sincere. “I’ve left your clothes on our bed,” he says firmly.

“Thank you.” I’m relieved to gain this small victory.

“Shower and change.”

I nod, placing a gentle kiss against his mouth before rushing back upstairs to do as he’s asked. Once locked in our en-suite bathroom, I clench my fists and silently scream. *I hate him, I hate him, I hate him.* I repeat the chant while I shower.

NERO

I PACE THE ROOM, my stress levels off the chain today. When my handler finally walks in, I stop and give her a steely glare. “No contact. That’s the fucking rule, right?”

“They’re getting restless, Nero. Tell me you have something.”

“What I have is a fucking target on my head whenever you call me away like this. You know how this works, damn it. Don’t contact me again. I’ll tell you when I have something.”

I head for the exit, and as I pass her, she grabs my arm. “In case they’re watching,” she whispers.

I clench my jaw, unable to shake the anger. “I mean it, Callie, don’t call me like that again.” I place my hand behind her head and tug her to me, kissing her hard.

CHAPTER TWO

8 years earlier . . .

TESSA

“SO, what happened? Where did you go?” I ask Callie. She looks tired and pale. She disappeared at the party, and I didn’t see her again for the rest of the night. “In case you were worried about leaving me all alone, I was fine. I met some guy called Dante and he drove me home. Thanks for that, by the way, leaving me in a place with a bunch of strangers.”

“Stop acting like a kid,” she snaps. “It’s not always about you, Tess.”

I raise my brows in surprise. “What’s up with you?”

She scrubs her hands over her face. “Nothing,” she mutters. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Everything okay with Jase?”

At the mention of his name, she scowls. “Who’s Dante, anyway?” she asks, changing the subject, and I come to the conclusion she’s been dumped.

I shrug. “He came and sat with me after you left me. We only talked a bit. We were interrupted a million times by either his phone ringing or people stopping to talk to him.”

“Nothing happened between you?”

I scoff. “No, he was way too old for me.” I give a dreamy smile. “But he was so fit.” She smirks. “And he was surprisingly nice,” I add.

THE BARROW PUB is the only place we can drink without being asked for I.D. It's an old-fashioned place with dark carpets and a landlord who squints like he can't see a thing. Our friend, Emerson, got us some fake I.D.s a year ago when we turned fifteen. The women in the photographs look nothing like any of us, so we're wary of trying them out anywhere more upmarket, but it doesn't seem to matter in this place. "I think we should go down the road to the Duck and Partridge," says Callie.

Emerson almost spits her vodka and Coke out. "No way, that place is full of dodgy people."

"And drugs," I say pointedly, because I didn't raise the issue of her snorting coke at that party, but I need her to know I haven't forgotten and I won't let it go.

"But this place is dead, like the people in it."

I look around at the old men supping their Guinness. "We'll never get served in there," I point out. "This bar is safe. They never question us."

"We can try," mutters Callie, grabbing her jacket. "I'm sick of this place."

THE DOORMAN at the Duck and Partridge eyes us suspiciously and stares down at our I.D.s. "This isn't you," he says, glancing back and forth between the photograph and me. "What's your date of birth again?"

An arm snakes around my shoulder. "Leave it out, Jonny, they're with me." I glance up at Jase, and he grins back at me.

The doorman sighs heavily, handing us our I.D.s back. "I ain't taking the blame if Dante kicks off," he mutters, opening the door for us to enter.

"Stick with me, ladies," says Jase, waltzing inside like he owns the place. I catch Callie's expression. She looks worried, but when she catches me watching her, she forces a smile.

Inside, the place is heaving. Emerson hooks her arm in mine. "If my dad finds out I've been in here, he'll go mad."

There's space towards the back of the bar, but as we make our way there, I spot Dante and the men he was with at the party. I have no idea if he'll recognise me, so I stick with Jase and the girls. Jase passes us each a drink from the bar and then throws his arm around Callie. "You've been avoiding me, gorgeous," he says, kissing the side of her head.

“Jase.” We look to the source of the voice. It’s one of the men from Dante’s group.

“Enzo,” Jase mutters, removing his arm from Callie. “I didn’t know you’d be in here.”

“I bet you didn’t,” Enzo says, smirking. “The boss wants a word.” Jase swallows hard, nods, and follows Enzo over to where Dante is.

“What was that all about?” I whisper, glancing back at the group.

“Fuck knows. He’s weird,” says Callie, shuddering.

“I thought you liked him?”

Emerson gasps. “He’s way too old for you.”

“You don’t have to worry, I’m not with him anymore. I just haven’t told him yet.”

A commotion from behind me gets our attention and I turn in time to see one of the men laying into Jase. “Oh shit,” I mutter, stepping back with Callie and Emerson behind me. “We should go.”

A loud bang rings out and I drop my glass. The pub falls silent and one of the men stands on a stool. “Lock the doors,” he shouts, and the doors are suddenly bolted shut with everyone inside.

“Oh my god,” Callie whispers, grabbing onto my arm in a panic. “Jase is dead.”

We all stare at Jase’s unseeing wide eyes, a pool of blood surrounding his chest. “Holy shit,” whispers Emerson, squeezing my other arm tighter. “We need to go.”

I take a steadying breath. My heart is racing so hard, I don’t know how they can’t hear it. “Let’s stay calm,” I whisper back. “Just keep quiet. We don’t want to draw attention to ourselves.”

“He’s fucking dead,” hisses Callie. “Dead.”

“I know,” I say through gritted teeth. “But no one in here is bothered. Look around. This must be normal to them.”

Emerson suddenly lurches forward and vomits. I stare wide-eyed, hardly daring to look up because I know we now have the attention of the men standing around the dead body. “Way to stay fucking calm,” I hiss, then she begins to cry.

I look up in time to see Dante moving towards us. There’s concern in his eyes. “Get the lady some water,” he barks to no one in particular. “Are you okay?” he asks Emerson, gently rubbing her arm.

She nods, wiping her eyes on her sleeve. “Sorry, I must have drunk too

much.”

He smiles, taking a glass of water from the barmaid and handing it to her to sip. “Come sit down in my corner.” He takes her hand and leads her away from Jase to a corner the opposite side of the room. We follow, and I don’t think he recognises me at all.

He points for us to all sit down in the booth, and we do. “Sorry about that,” he says, also sitting. “Things get heated sometimes.”

“Is that how you sort all your problems?” mutters Callie, and I kick her under the table. She yells out and scowls at me.

Dante doesn’t seem to mind her question. He grins. “Sometimes.” He catches my eye and recognition hits him. “Jailbait,” he says, winking. “I thought I recognised you.” He then turns to Callie. “And your name is?”

“Callie Woods.”

“Woods,” he repeats. “Any relation to Bob Woods?”

Her eyes widen slightly. “My dad.”

He gives a knowing nod. “And you?” he asks Emerson.

“Emerson Grey.”

This time, Dante looks surprised. “Frank Grey’s daughter?” She nods. We’re not surprised—everyone knows Frank. “Does he know you’re in here?” She shakes her head, and he laughs. “Nah, I bet he doesn’t.”

He whistles to get the men’s attention, and one of them rushes over. “Boss?”

“Take these lovely ladies to my place. Stay with them until I get there.”

“No, thank you,” says Emerson. “We should get home.”

Dante looks at his watch. “You have less than two minutes to get out of here before your dad turns up, and I don’t think you want me to tell Frank you were here. So, go with my friend and do what I say.”

“You can’t tell us what to do,” snaps Callie, and I glare at her in disbelief. We just watched this guy end someone and she’s sassing him.

Dante suddenly leans over to her, pushing his face in hers. I squeeze my eyes closed in panic as I feel Callie tighten her grip on my hand. “You don’t know who I am, little girl, but you’re about to. I don’t get told no. Ever. People who tell me no, end up like your friend, Jase. So, I suggest you get a move on.”

I grab Callie by the hand and edge out of the booth with Emerson following. Something tells me it’s safer to do as he tells us.

Present day . . .

TESSA

I SLICE the beef as he likes it, sauté the vegetables just right, and cream the potatoes to perfection. I lay the hot dishes in the centre of the table just as Dante's guests begin to arrive.

I join them in the living room and stand beside him with my head slightly lowered so that later, he can't accuse me of eye-fucking his guests. The usual men are here. Kai is Dante's right-hand man. He's known him his whole life, and they're more like blood brothers than friends. Enzo is Dante's advisor and very good friend. And there's another man I've never met, so I make sure not to be anywhere near him and glue myself to Dante's side.

Eventually, he takes my hand and uses his other hand to tip my head up to look at him. "I want you to meet Nero. He's going to be around a lot more." I don't move my eyes from Dante, not until he tells me I can. He smiles, placing a gentle kiss on my nose. "Good girl," he whispers. "Nero, this is my wife, Tessa. Tessa, Nero is your new bodyguard."

NERO

BODYGUARD. *Bodyguard. Fucking bodyguard.* His wife looks just as surprised as me, but she shuts it down, giving me a neutral expression. "Boss?" I say like I'm asking the question, cos fuck knows he didn't speak to me about this.

"Problem?" asks Dante, tipping his head to one side like he's daring me to challenge him.

"No, Boss. Just wondering what my duties will entail."

"My wife has prepared a meal. Shall we go eat?" he asks, turning back to his wife and running his hand through her hair. She winces slightly, giving the impression he's tugging it. "Will you serve us, Tessa?"

She smiles politely. "Of course."

The tension in the room is almost unbearable. I've sat with gangland killers, Mafia bosses, and nutters who would kill their own mother. Yet sitting here in silence while Tessa serves us food is worse than any of it. She's nervous. Her entire body is stiff as she walks round to each of us to

place beef on our plates. Dante has his eyes fixed on her the entire time, not moving them for a second.

Once our plates are full, she begins a retreat to the kitchen. “Aren’t you joining us?” I ask. All eyes turn to me, including Dante’s. “It’s just, she cooked us this food, isn’t she going to have some?”

“Why are you concerned with whether my wife eats?” asks Dante.

“Just a question,” I mutter.

I get back to my shitty little temporary apartment and throw my car keys on the side. Fuck, that was heavy. Minutes later, the door opens and Callie comes in. “So, how did it go?”

I shrug out of my jacket. “What the hell is going on with him and his wife?”

She sits on the couch. “Domestic violence. I told you.”

“Nah, it was weirder than that. I mean, she’s scared to death, it’s obvious, but you feel the tension in every room. It’s like the violence is clinging to every wall and silently screaming. He didn’t take his eyes off her the whole time she was around us. It’s like he was watching for the smallest mistake.”

“He probably was. Men like him enjoy complete control. Anyway, we’re not there to deal with the wife. Are you in?”

I nod, unable to suppress my smile. She claps her hands together. “Yessss!”

“But . . .” She flops back into the couch, groaning. “It’s not exactly what we hoped for.”

“We can’t keep dragging this out, Nero.”

“Hear me out,” I say, taking a seat beside her. “I’m the wife’s bodyguard.”

She sits up straight. “What?”

“Yeah, surprised me too. No word of warning. He introduced me, then told her I was her new guard. I’ve got to go back tomorrow for a full briefing.”

“A year,” she snaps. “An entire year and all you get is babysitting duties?”

“Actually, this could work to our advantage. She could be our in. She hates him, you can see it in her face. I can try and get information out of her.”

“She’s not going to know anything, Nero. Come on, you know he plays his cards close to his chest. She’s a battered housewife and no fucking use to

us.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “Then what do you suggest I do, Cal? Tell him to fuck off, refuse to do as he’s ordered me? Then I’ll be out and it’ll all have been for nothing.” I sigh. “Look, I’ll be in the house, able to watch the comings and goings. I can listen in on conversations. Frankly, I don’t have another option.”

CHAPTER THREE

8 years earlier . . .

TESSA

“WHAT DO WE DO?” asks Callie, staring out over London from the apartment that apparently belongs to Dante.

“This is your fault,” I snap. “If you hadn’t arranged to meet Jase in the first place, we wouldn’t even know any of those men.”

“Are you fucking serious?” she yells. “I just watched him get shot, and you’re standing here blaming me?”

“Don’t play the victim. You didn’t seem too keen back there when he was pawing all over you.”

The door opens and we fall silent. Dante shrugs out of his jacket and throws it on the side, then he loosens his tie. “You,” he says, pointing to Callie, “come.” He crooks his finger, but Callie stays rooted to the spot. I can see the annoyance on his face and I don’t want to see him mad, so I give her a nudge and she goes to him. He gently runs his fingers through her hair, then suddenly grabs a handful and yanks her head back aggressively. “You breathe a fucking word to anyone about tonight, about Jase, about me, I’ll kill your entire family. I know your dad, I know where your mum works, and I even know your little sister goes to Clairemont Primary School. Do I make myself clear?”

She doesn’t speak, and he pulls out his mobile phone and opens it. He then shows her a picture, and she begins to cry. “That’s your sister’s bedroom, right?” She nods. “The man outside, the one who took this picture, will set that house alight if you don’t agree. So, Callie, are we on the same

page?” She nods again, desperately fighting back her tears. “Good.” He shoves her away and turns his attention to Emerson. “Your dad will go to prison if you breathe a word. I have so much shit on him, he doesn’t stand a chance.”

Emerson nods. “I won’t tell a soul.” Her dad isn’t exactly squeaky clean, so she’s used to keeping secrets.

I’m trembling so hard and fighting the urge to vomit when he turns his attention to me. “Now, jailbait,” he grins, “there’s no one in your life I can threaten you with.” I shake my head, wondering what that means for me. “Follow me.” I hesitate as he marches towards a door down the passageway. “Enzo, take the other two home.”

Present day . . .

I LAY in bed and count to ten. Breathe in, breathe out. It’s no good—my heart is racing, and it’s hard to ignore the way my stomach growls in hunger. “I know you’re awake,” Dante announces as he steps from the shower. “The beef was cooked to perfection,” he adds, wrapping a towel around himself. “How did you do it in that short space of time?”

I force a light smile. “I didn’t want your guests to wait,” I say. “I was thinking of them.”

He sits on the edge of the bed and tucks my hair behind my ear. I tense. “Did you use the air fryer?” I nod. “I asked for roast beef.”

I smile again. “I still roasted it. You said yourself, it was cooked to perfection.” His eyes darken in that way they always do when he’s working himself up. “You gave me an hour,” I add, trying to make him see reason, “and I didn’t want to let you down and cause embarrassment.”

He grabs my face, digging his fingers into my cheeks. “You were trying to be clever,” he hisses, and spittle lands on my face. “Always trying to be fucking clever, jailbait.”

I try to shake my head. “I wasn’t, I promise. I was doing as you asked.”

“Take yourself to the shed,” he orders.

I stare in disbelief. It’s cold out, frosty even, and as usual, I’m naked. I’m always naked when he’s home, unless he gives me permission to wear clothes, and even then, he chooses them. “No.” I don’t fight Dante, not anymore, as I always end up worse off, but I refuse to go outside in these

temperatures.

“Say it again,” he whispers, his voice menacing.

I try to smooth my hand over his cheek. “Please, Dante, be reasonable.”

“Unreasonable would be sending you to sit in the garden. I’m giving you shelter.”

“For cooking the beef to perfection?” I cry. “For doing as you asked?”

Dante stands, taking me by the arm and hauling me from the bed. I try to prise his hand from me, but it’s no good. He drags me from the room, pulling me angrily along the passageway and down the stairs.

I lose my footing as he pulls me through the kitchen, but it doesn’t slow him. He continues dragging me behind like a rag doll. Opening the back door, he pushes me out into the garden, slamming the door in my face. I bang my hands against it, yelling his name over and over. We don’t have neighbours, so no one will come to my rescue. I slide down the door and hug my knees to my chest.

NERO

DANTE ANDERSON SITS BACK in his office chair and stares at me. He does this a lot, mainly to show his authority and to intimidate, and on a normal man, I imagine it works. “I want you to have sex with my wife,” he says clearly.

I sit straighter, my mouth opening and closing like a goddamn fish. No one ever catches me off guard, but this has. “Sorry?”

“You heard correctly.” He clasps his hands in front of him and stares me dead in the eye. “I want a child, but it’s something I can’t give her.”

I frown, rubbing my forehead. “You want me to have sex with your wife and get her pregnant?” He nods. “And what does your wife think about this?”

“She doesn’t know.”

I almost laugh. “You haven’t asked her?”

“She can’t know.”

“Dante, with the greatest respect, I can’t fuck your wife, get her pregnant, and not tell her. Besides, she’s married . . . to you. I don’t think she’ll willingly sleep with me.”

“That’s why I hired you as her bodyguard. Get to know her. She’ll fall for anyone who’s nice to her.” He sounds bitter, and I wonder for a second if she’s ever cheated on him. *Of course, she hasn’t . . . she’d be dead.* “I realise I’m asking a lot and it’s an odd request.”

“You’re not fucking kidding,” I mutter.

“The bottom line is, I want a child and I can’t have one. Tessa doesn’t know I can’t have children. No one knows.”

“Why me?” I ask.

“Kai tells me you’re loyal, hardworking, that you want to be someone.” I nod. “You’ve worked your arse off to get here, by my side.” I nod again. “This is your chance.”

“Hardly,” I mutter. “What happens if I agree to this? Once she’s pregnant, you won’t want me around.”

“I’ll make you head of another division.” I try to remain impassive, but this is huge. To get there, he’ll need to let me in more and show me how he runs things. “I’ll take you under my wing, show you the way and set you up

in an area of your choosing.”

“How will I know you’ll stick to your word?”

“If I don’t, you can tell Tessa everything.”

“You could kill me so I don’t get the chance.”

He smiles. “I guess you’ll have to trust me. Look,” he rubs his forehead, the only sign he’s letting his guard down, “Nero, I never go back on my word, ask anyone close to me. I’m giving you my word. I can’t use any of my other men—they’re too close, and I can’t send them away after. You, I don’t know, but I have my men backing you, telling me you’re keen and loyal. I can send you away.”

“ARE YOU FUCKING SHITTING ME?” Callie screeches.

“I’m just as spun out about this as you.”

“Surely, you’re not considering it?”

“If I don’t do this, I have to walk away. He’ll never let me hang around knowing what I know.”

“I’ll never get this approved. You’ve lost your mind.”

“So, don’t approve it.”

She glares at me. “Don’t act crazy. This is our career. I’m pulling this case.”

“No. Don’t you fucking dare. This can work. We’ve come so far, it has to work.”

“Listen to yourself, Nero. This is madness. You’re losing your mind. You’ve been in there too long.”

“Come on, we’ve been deeper than this, in more shit than this, and we never pulled out.”

“This is different. This is Dante fucking Anderson, and he’s asking you to get his wife pregnant. It’s too far. You’re bringing an innocent life into it.”

“What if I don’t get her pregnant?” I pause. “What if he thinks that’s what I’m doing, but I don’t. It’s not like he can ask her.”

Callie runs her hands over her face. “I don’t know. It’s too risky. This could end very badly.”

“We both know Dante gets what he wants. If it isn’t me, it’ll be someone else. I can string this out for as long as I need for him to take me under his

wing. It's an offer we'd be stupid to ignore."

CHAPTER FOUR

8 years earlier . . .

TESSA

MY MIND IS RACING and I'm struggling to breathe, like my lungs aren't fully taking in the air. The room feels hot, too hot, and I pull at my shirt to generate a slight breeze. I perch nervously on the edge of the huge bed inside Dante's bedroom. He stares at me for an uncomfortably long time, adding to the stress I already feel.

"You have no one," he repeats.

"I won't say anything," I mutter, and my voice sounds weak and so unlike me.

"I know." He takes my hand and pulls me to stand. He gently brushes some hair from my face and then he lowers his mouth to mine. My heart slams harder when I realise I can't pull away because his hand is gripping the back of my neck. His lips are rough against my own, and his stubble scratches against me. When he pulls back, his eyes are full of lust. "You're going to stay here, with me."

"Huh?"

"You're staying here, jailbait."

I laugh nervously, waiting for him to tell me he's joking. When he doesn't, my smile fades and I swallow the lump in my throat. "You're crazy."

"Have you had sex before?"

Panic replaces the nervousness, and I frown. "What's that got to do with anything?" I pull free and head for the door.

He snatches my hand in his, yanking me back to him. "Are you a virgin?"

I shake my head, suddenly scared to be here, trapped in this room with a man twice my age. A man I've seen do the unspeakable. "Shame." He slips my top from my shoulder, and I shrug him off. He narrows his eyes. "I always get what I want, Tessa, and I want you. We can do this the easy way or the hard way." I shove him, but he hardly moves. Instead, he grins. "The hard way is fine by me."

THE NEXT DAY, Dante slows the car outside the care home. "Hurry."

"They'll ask questions," I mutter, gently running my fingers over the bruise above my knee.

Dante catches my chin in his grasp and pulls my face to look at him. I wince. "Hurry, or I'll come in there and find you."

Josey rushes towards me the second I close the door. "Jesus, what happened?" She checks my black eye.

"I got into a fight," I mumble, turning my head away. "I'm fine."

"You didn't come home last night. You have a curfew."

"Curfews are for kids, and I'm almost seventeen. Another month and you'll be kicking me out anyway." I rush upstairs and slam the door. I fall onto my bed and cry hard, pushing my face into my pillow to muffle the sound. I want to tell Josey the truth and beg her to help me, but Dante said if I tell anyone, he'll kill Callie and Emerson. They're the only people I truly care about, and after what he did to me last night, I fully believe he'll kill anyone who stands in his way.

Taking a deep breath, I push to sit up and look around the room I've lived in for the last two years. I don't know what Dante has in store for me, but it's not anything good. Judging by last night, I'm heading to live in hell.

Present day . . .

I EXAMINE the packet of biscuits before placing them in my shopping trolley, then I glance at Nero, who follows a few steps behind. I've never been allowed out alone. I spend days either locked up in the house or following Dante around while he does business. This is the first time I've been allowed out of Dante's sight and away from the house, and I can't deny

I feel sick with nerves. When he announced Nero would be my bodyguard, I didn't realise it meant I'd get more freedom, and now, other questions are plaguing my mind, like why Dante would suddenly ease up on me. It makes no sense. All I can come up with is that it's a trick and, later, when I return home, he'll punish me.

Dante gave me a bank card this morning at breakfast and ordered me to do some food shopping. Usually, he takes care of that by ordering everything online. It's been a long time since I did anything like this. I'm already on the third aisle in the supermarket and I'm finding the whole thing overwhelming. Eventually, Nero steps closer. "Is everything okay, Mrs. Anderson?"

I nod, then shake my head and decide to come clean. "Actually, no."

He frowns. "You're not sure what to get for dinner?"

I look around. "I'm not sure how to do any of this," I admit. "At all."

"You usually have someone who does this for you?"

I nod. "The shopping always gets delivered to the house, and it's always the same things."

He almost smiles but then sees I'm serious and goes back to frowning. "When was the last time you did a supermarket shop?"

"Never," I mutter. "I mean, I've been into shops, but not for a long time, especially not on my own."

"Well, things haven't changed much in the last year or so," he says, smiling again.

I bite my lower lip and glance around. "Since I was maybe sixteen," I admit, and his mouth falls open in surprise. "And at that age, I mainly bought magazines and chocolate."

His frown deepens. "Right, okay. Well, firstly, you're not alone. I'm here, and I know how to navigate around a supermarket. Secondly, tell me what you like to cook and I'll show you where the things are."

"On Mondays, we have chicken."

"Every Monday?" I nod. "Why don't you change things up a bit and go for steak?"

I bite my lower lip. I don't want to give Dante an excuse to punish me. "I think Dante prefers chicken on a Monday."

He shrugs. "Right. Follow me."

Nero shows me where to find the chicken and then the vegetables. I want to try the different varieties, but I don't think Dante would approve, so I stick to the usual potatoes and green beans. "Maybe I could get some things for

baking,” I suggest quietly.

“If you want to, it’s your choice.”

Those words make me nervous. I’ve been so used to having my choices limited, it seems alien to me now. “I used to love baking.”

He stares for a moment. “So, why did you stop?”

I shrug. “I just did.” I can’t tell him I stopped doing all the things I loved when my life became Dante’s.

AFTER SHOPPING, we load up the car and Nero turns to me. “We should get coffee.” I shake my head and climb into the passenger side of the car, then he gets into the driver’s seat. “You don’t like coffee?”

“Dante didn’t say I could . . .” I trail off, wincing at my slip-up. “I mean, I didn’t tell him, and he’ll worry.”

“I’ll clear it with him, don’t stress.”

Panic rises in my chest. He might think it was my idea and he’ll accuse me of flirting. “No. I want to go home.”

Nero eyes me for a second before nodding. “Fine, your call.”

Dante isn’t home when we return. Nero carries the shopping into the kitchen, and I begin to put things away. He turns on the coffee machine. “Want one?” he asks. I guess now we’re home, it’s okay, so I nod.

I continue to put things away as Nero takes a seat at the kitchen island, watching me.

“What do you have to do once I’m home and safe?” I ask.

“Just hang out here.”

“All day?”

He nods. “Boss said to do whatever you want. I can take you wherever you want to go, and if you want to stay home, I should keep you company.”

I frown. Dante’s never bothered about me having company before, especially male company. “Are you gay?” I blurt out, and he laughs.

“No, I’m definitely not gay.”

“Married?” He shakes his head again. “I don’t understand why Dante would ask you to stick around. It’s not like him.”

“What is he like?”

I bite my lower lip. Dante would hate me talking about him. “I just don’t

understand,” I repeat.

“Maybe stop trying to,” he suggests. “Just relax, and we can get to know one another.”

“Why?”

He smirks. “Because that’s what people do? Besides, if we’re going to be spending time together, it’s only right we know each other.”

I must work out what Dante is playing at to stay ahead of the game. Something is off with this whole situation.

NERO

TESSA IS SUSPICIOUS. She’s also jumpy, like all the time. At the slightest noise, she looks around nervously, as if she’s expecting something bad to happen. Dante has a reputation for violence, but I can’t see any signs of bruises. I’m not stupid, I know not all domestic violence is physical, and even when it is, perpetrators can be very careful about the marks they leave and where they leave them.

“Do you have siblings?” I ask, trying to get her to relax. She shakes her head. “What about your parents, are they still together?” She shrugs, looking more uncomfortable by the second. Maybe I should get Callie to look into Tessa’s background. We didn’t bother because it’s Dante we want, and it’s obvious Tessa has no control in the relationship. I doubt she knows any of his business dealings, and my only hope is she’s one of those women who linger in the background, listening to everything that’s said. She looks the type to hold secrets. “You’re gonna have to help me out here, Tessa. I’m trying to get to know you.”

She places her hands on the worktop and stares at me with suspicious eyes. “I don’t know how much you know about my marriage, Nero, but it’s complicated. If Dante finds us chatting like besties, he’ll shut it down and I’ll pay the price.” She turns her back to me and begins washing dishes.

“What does that mean?” I ask, glancing at the dishwasher and wondering why she isn’t using it.

“I think it’s best we don’t talk.”

“What, ever?” I ask, smirking. “How will I know where you want to go? And can I ask why you’re handwashing the dishes when you have a

dishwasher right there?”

“Dante likes the dishes handwashed.”

“So, why have the dishwasher?”

“Because . . . I don’t know. Why do you ask so many questions?”

I try a different tactic, figuring she’ll never tell anyone anyway. “I have a sister. She lives in Ireland, so I don’t see her as much as I’d like. She’s a headteacher in a primary school. My parents are both dead.” I see her watching me from the corner of her eye. She’s intrigued. “I’m not married and I don’t have kids. Not that I know of.” I laugh to show I’m joking.

“Sorry about your parents.”

“Don’t be, you didn’t kill them.”

She gasps. “They were killed?”

I nod. “Drunk driver. He hit their car when they were travelling to the airport to see Luna. That’s my sister.”

“That’s awful. Did they find the driver?”

I nod. “Yeah, he’s in prison.”

“It must be hard. I don’t know my parents . . . not anymore, anyway. I was taken into care when I was younger. I grew up in foster care and, eventually, I went into a care home.”

I breathe a sigh of relief that she’s finally talking. “Wow. And look at you now, living in this huge house.”

A sadness passes over her face. “Yes, I’m very lucky.”

“Did you stay in contact with any of your foster carers or people you grew up with?” She shakes her head. “How did you meet Dante?”

She dries her hands. “My friend. She was dating someone he knew.”

I grin. “Love at first sight, was it?”

She frowns. “So, how come you’re single?”

“I’ve been away for a long time, so I never really got the chance.”

“Away?” she repeats.

“You know the life, Tessa,” I say, finishing my coffee.

“What did you go away for?”

I grin, standing. “I’ll tell you when we know each other better.”

“How did the first day of babysitting go?” Callie asks, handing me a beer.

“She’s hard work. Can we run some checks on her?”

“Already did. There’s nothing. She grew up in care. Never been in trouble with the police, not even a speeding ticket. She’s never held a job, and there

are no family on record.”

“Yeah, she said as much. Weird, though, that she’s not even worked. How long she been with Dante?”

Callie shrugs. “I have no idea. The marriage was registered eight years ago.”

“So, she was what, sixteen?”

Callie nods. “Young.”

“She’s a nervous wreck. She jumps at the slightest noise.”

“Just focus on the job, Nero. We’re not there to rescue little miss gangster wife. We’ve bigger fish to fry.”

CHAPTER FIVE

7 years earlier . . .

TESSA

I STILL REMEMBER the first time Dante hit me outside the bedroom. He accused me of flirting with a barman. I wasn't, I'd just smiled and thanked him for my drink, but it was all the excuse Dante needed to lose his mind. He punched me so hard, my ears rang for hours. Everyone around us in the bar turned the other way. They didn't want to call Dante Anderson out and get themselves into a bother. After that day, I was a little more cautious of how I spoke and the smiles I gave.

So, now, as I cover a black eye with makeup, I fight tears from falling. I hate myself a little more every time this happens. And it isn't every day—some days, he's the sweetest man. But then there're days like today, where whatever I do or say is going to get me hurt because he's just in that sort of mood. I know the signs now. The look in his eyes, which darken in anger and narrow slightly. And the way he questions me, asking for every single detail, warns me that things are going to go badly for me. And no matter how much I try to defuse the situation, I somehow only make it worse.

The bedroom door opens and Dante lingers there, watching me. "Wear the black dress." I nod. "And lose the makeup." I stare at his reflection in the mirror. No makeup means people will see my eye. "What?" he asks, daring me to speak what's on my mind. I shake my head and force a smile before taking a makeup wipe to remove what little I'd already applied.

HOOKING my arm into Dante's, he leads me into the bar. We spend most Saturday nights in here. Most of his business associates are here too, and they play poker and drink whiskey.

Some of the other men's wives sit together, but I've never been invited to join them, and Dante wouldn't let me even if I was. He always takes my hand and keeps me close.

Dante is speaking with Kai, and I have an urgent need to use the bathroom. He releases me, but as I move towards the bathroom, I feel myself being tugged back by the hair. I fully expect it to be Dante having changed his mind, but as I turn, it's Emerson glaring at me. "I thought that was you," she snaps. I haven't seen her or Callie since that day in Dante's apartment. He'd taken my mobile phone from me, and I hadn't been allowed to leave his side, so it's been impossible to contact either of them.

"Emerson," I gasp. "I . . . I . . ." My eyes fill with tears because there's so much I want to say but can't. I have no doubt Dante will come searching for me if I don't hurry.

"You look a mess," she spits, and I frown. I'm confused by her anger. "Don't you have anything to say to me?"

"I'm so sorry," I begin. This angers her more, and this time, she reels back and slaps me hard across the face. I cry out, gripping my cheek.

"I thought we were friends, but the second he comes along, you dump us for him. You know he's a monster, don't you, Tessa? But then you always did love the danger."

I'm crying into my hands as I feel Dante touch my back. "Emerson, it's been a while."

"A whole year. I can't say I've missed you . . . either of you."

"Emerson, what the fuck are you doing?" Her dad rushes towards us. "Mr. Anderson," he adds, holding out his hand for Dante to shake, but he stares at it coldly until it's retracted.

"Your daughter just hit my wife," Dante says through gritted teeth.

"Jesus, I am so sorry," Emerson's dad rushes out. "Shit, Emerson, apologise."

"It's fine," I mutter feebly, wanting to get away from it all.

"It's not fine. Hit her back," Dante orders.

I glance up at him. "Huh?"

“You heard me. Hit her back.”

I shake my head. “No.”

“Hit her, or I will.”

I swallow, glancing at Emerson, who looks outraged. “I don’t want to.”

Dante grabs a handful of my hair. “You’re fucking weak,” he hisses.

“Please, Mr. Anderson, I can’t apologise enough. I’ll have strong words with Emerson,” her dad pleads.

Dante releases me, shoving me to Kai, who takes my arms and begins to pull me away. “Please, Dante,” I yell. “Please don’t hurt her.”

I’m almost out the door when I see Dante backhand Emerson across the face.

Present day . . .

DANTE STANDS in the kitchen doorway, watching as I finish off scrubbing the kitchen floor. My hands are sore and my knees ache. Drying my hands on my top, I push to stand. “I lost track of time,” I say, standing on my tiptoes and kissing him on the cheek. “Did you have a good day?”

“Leave dinner tonight. I’m taking you out.”

“I’ve cooked chicken,” I say, glancing back at the oven. “It’ll be just a minute.”

“I’m taking you out. Go and get dressed.” He hands me a bag containing a dress before he saunters off to his office, and I sigh. I’m shattered from the housework, and the last thing I want to do is spend the evening watching my every word in case I upset him. I turn off the oven and rush upstairs to do as asked. He doesn’t like to be kept waiting.

By the time I’m ready, he’s at the door, and he watches as I descend the stairs. “Beautiful,” he mutters. Dante rarely compliments me these days, so I smile politely.

He drives us to his favourite Greek restaurant. We’re seated in his usual spot by the window, and he orders our meals without checking the menu—soutzoukakia for him and a Greek salad for me.

“How was your day?” he asks, pouring some water into my glass. Dante never asks about my day, so it only adds to my suspicion.

“It was fine,” I reply carefully. “I got dinner like you asked.”

“Good. Did you go anywhere else?” I shake my head. “Why?”

“You didn’t say I could.”

He smiles, satisfied. “Good girl.” I relax slightly, knowing I did the right thing in coming straight home. “And what do you think of Nero?”

I nervously tap my fingers on my knee under the table. I don’t know how to answer him without setting him off. “He’s very professional.”

“Do you feel safe with him?” I nod. “I’ve asked him to take you more places. I’m sure you’d like to go somewhere other than the supermarket.”

Sickness bubbles in my stomach. “There’s nowhere I need to go.”

“Tessa, you’ve been by my side or locked up in that house for years. Don’t you want more freedom?”

I think over my answer carefully. “I want whatever you want.”

“And I want you to have some freedom.”

“Why?” The word is out my mouth before I can stop it, and I try to calm the panic I feel at such a stupid mistake.

But Dante just smiles, relaxing back in his chair and watching me with amusement. “Maybe I’m getting bored of you,” he muses. I stare at him, not daring to speak. “Maybe I’ve met someone else.” I don’t react. “Or maybe, my darling wife, I just want to see you smile for once. It’s not fun staring at your miserable face.” And there it is, the cruel look in his eye.

“Have you met someone?” I ask. I’m not sure how I feel about this potential new information. I’ve never really thought about what would happen if Dante met someone else. Would it mean I’d get freedom? Probably not, as he’s not the type to let me walk away. That thought sits in my mind while I wait patiently for him to answer.

“You used to smile,” he continues like I haven’t spoken. “Even in the early days when you hated me.” I don’t point out that I’ve always hated him. “There were times when you’d almost look happy.” I grit my teeth together until they ache. He’s fucking delusional. I’ve been in survival mode since the day he forced me to pack my things and live with him, and any smile I may have sent his way was purely to keep him from hurting me. “When I showed you the new house, that was a happy moment.” He’s talking like he’s lost in thought and I’m not really sitting here wanting to scream. “I want to see you smile again.” *He just needs to stop torturing me with his sick games.* “I think we should have a child.”

“No!” I yell, almost jumping out my seat. Dante arches a brow, and I bite my lower lip, glancing round nervously at the few people who look over at my outburst. I take a breath and lower back down. “I mean, I don’t think it’s

the right time.”

“You talk like I need your permission.”

The food arrives and he takes my plate, scraping half the salad from it before placing it back in front of me. Controlling my food is one of his favourite things to do. He doesn't care if we're in a restaurant, entertaining friends, or alone, he always removes something from my plate. I stare down at the green leaves I'm left with, most of the olives and feta now on a napkin. My stomach growls in protest and I fight back my tears.

“If you want a child, I'd need to eat properly,” I mutter, unable to stop myself.

“You also need to be a healthy weight,” he snipes, and I bite my lip. Answering him a second time will result in a painful night. The truth is, if I lose any more weight, I'll be bones.

“I'd also have to see medical professionals,” I add. He'd hate that. Not only because they might see the bruises he leaves on my skin, but also because they might reach out a hand to help, and fuck knows I'd take it. I haven't seen a doctor or nurse since before I met him eight years ago.

“I'd never deny you medical treatment, Tessa. What are you trying to say?” He's daring me to call him out. When I don't reply, he smirks. “You're clumsy, and you bruise far too easily, right?” I nod begrudgingly. He's drilled it into me so many times that it would always be my word against his, and who would believe me? A messed-up kid who grew up in a care home. The police could never fully protect me, and he'd kill me, I have no doubt about that, but then he'd find Callie and end her too. My mind wanders back to Emerson and that same feeling of sickness and pain swirls around in my stomach.

I push the plate of leaves away. “I'm tired. Can we go home?”

He smiles. “When I've finished eating.”

NERO

“YOU'RE VERY QUIET TODAY,” I say, watching Tessa as she scrubs the spotlessly clean kitchen cupboards. “Have you eaten breakfast?” She shakes her head but continues scrubbing. “Didn't you clean those just the other day?”

“I don’t need to go out today. Feel free to go and keep busy,” she mutters.
“Dante insisted I take you out today.”

She stops, and her hands fall to her knees. I hear her silently sobbing and rush over. “Tessa, what’s wrong?” I gently touch her arm, and when she jumps in fright, I hold my hands up. “Sorry, I was just checking you were okay.” She jumps down off the kitchen worktop and sways, grabbing hold of the side to steady herself. I catch her, and she has no choice but to lean on me as I guide her over to a stool. “You haven’t eaten properly in days, have you?” I ask, and she shakes her head. “Let me get you something.”

“I’m fine.”

I ignore her and open the kitchen cupboard. It’s empty. I frown and go to the next, then the next, but they’re all bare. She watches with terror in her eyes. I go to the fridge, but again, it’s empty apart from a small amount of milk and butter. “Where’s the food?”

“I . . . I, erm . . .” She puts her head in her hands, and I go back to her, crouching down and tugging her hands away.

“Tessa, what’s going on?” Her tears fall silently with a look of hopelessness on her face. “Why isn’t there any food in the house?”

“I need to go shopping.”

“Why didn’t you say? I can take you shopping.”

“Dante didn’t . . . he didn’t . . . I don’t have any money.”

“What about the card he left you yesterday?” She shakes her head but offers no explanation. “Okay, I have an idea.” I stand, pulling her with me. “Let’s go and feed you.”

“I don’t think I should—”

“Eat?” I finish, and she nods. “I don’t care what’s going on with you and Dante, Tessa, but you’re eating today. As your bodyguard, I’m forcing you.”

“He’ll be mad,” she whispers.

I gently swipe her tears away with the pads of my thumbs. “He doesn’t have to know.”

I HAND the menu to Tessa, and she stares at it in a panic. “Choose anything, my treat,” I reassure her.

“What’s good?”

I frown. "Most of it. I like the Angus steak burger personally."

"I'll take that," she says, closing the menu.

I re-open it. "Tessa, look at the menu. Choose what you want."

She stares at it and a tear escapes down her cheek again. She slams the menu down and wipes her cheek angrily. "I bet you think I'm pathetic," she mutters, but I shake my head. "I wasn't always like this. I used to make decisions and choose food."

I like that she's opening up. "What changed?"

She thinks for a moment. "Dante."

"Well, he isn't here now," I remind her, nodding at the menu. She smiles sadly and goes back to looking. When the waitress arrives, I patiently wait for her to say what she wants, smiling when she orders salmon and potatoes.

Once the waitress leaves with our order, I put my full attention back on her. "Tell me about your life before Dante." When she hesitates, I place my hand over hers. "You can trust me, Tessa. I won't tell him anything you say."

"He pays your wage."

I nod. "He does, but I still have my own opinions and, honestly, I don't like what I see between the two of you."

"There's not much to tell," she says. "I grew up in care, then I met Dante and he saved me."

"Saved you?" I repeat.

"I was about to be sent out into the big bad world. I was almost seventeen, and they encourage you to leave the care home and be more independent. I'd have gotten a bedsit, but I would have been alone."

"You didn't have friends? You mentioned before that you did."

"I had friends, but everyone moves on as you grow up."

I shrug. "I don't know about that, I'm still in touch with friends I grew up with."

"Lucky you."

"Did you choose to lose contact, Tessa, or did Dante prefer it that way?"

The food arrives and she takes the chance to change the subject.

CALLIE ISN'T IMPRESSED when I give her the rundown of my day. The phone line on her end goes silent for some time before she inhales sharply.

“Have you forgotten the reason you’re there?”

“Of course not, but I can’t ignore this.”

“You can, Nero. You have to because it’s distracting you. While you were playing babysitter and feeding her, where was Dante?”

“I don’t know.”

“Exactly, and you should know because he’s our target. You need to push your way in there.”

“Tessa is the way in,” I remind her.

“No, Nero. No, she isn’t. She doesn’t know anything. She’s his bitch. There’s no secret there—you already know he beats the shit out of her. We can’t get him on domestic violence or starving his wife because it’s not big enough.”

“Maybe we can get her out of there, put her in a safe house.”

She sighs heavily. “Listen to yourself. So, we get her out, then what? What do you tell Dante, that you lost his wife? What do you think he’ll do then? He’s paying you to watch her, fuck her, get her up the duff. If you lose her, he’s going to kill you, and then whole operation fails. No, you have to keep her in there and begin worming your way into Dante’s good books. If I were you, I’d tell him she’s confiding in you. He’ll soon shut her up, then you can concentrate on the important stuff.”

“Christ, were you always this harsh?” I ask.

“Yes. It’s why I’m at the top. Now, sort your head out and get me something on Dante Anderson before the whole thing collapses.”

I disconnect. She’s right, until I get something on him, Tessa is stuck there.

CHAPTER SIX

7 years earlier . . .

TESSA

I'M in bed when I hear the front door slam. Holding my breath, I wait for his angry footsteps to hunt me down. There's a commotion downstairs, but I don't move. It's best not to see whatever is going on. I learned that very quickly.

Almost twenty minutes later, I hear his footsteps. I can't control the panic taking over my body. The bedroom door opens, flooding the room in light. I squeeze my eyes closed and try to slow my breathing. "There's a guest downstairs." I don't respond, hoping he'll think I'm sleeping and leave me alone, but he rips the sheets away. "Get up, Tessa," he says through gritted teeth. I get out of bed, and he grabs my wrist, dragging me like a toy doll behind him. "You embarrassed me tonight," he snaps.

"I didn't mean to. Emerson is my friend. I couldn't hit her."

"Do you let all your friends hit you?"

He shoves me into the living room, and I freeze. Naked on the couch is Emerson. Sitting on the end of the couch, topless and with his jeans unfastened, is Enzo. "She's good, Tessa, but she isn't you," Dante hisses in my ear, and a sob escapes me. "Now, hit her." I shake my head. She's passed out cold, but I can see bruises beginning to form on her body.

"You've hurt her enough," I whisper.

He grabs my hair and pushes me closer. "She disrespected you, which means she disrespected me. Hit her or you'll face the same punishment."

"I don't care," I whisper, letting tears flow freely down my cheeks. "I

won't hit her. I'm not you."

He laughs, turning me to face him and slapping me hard. I fall to the floor, right beside Emerson. Scrambling to my knees, I move the hair from her face. "Em, wake up. Em," I whisper urgently. She stirs, groaning when she tries to move.

Dante slaps her arse, and she cries out, her eyes springing open. And then, as if the memories rush back to her, she sits up wide-eyed and begins to scream. Dante places his hand over her mouth, pulling her against him. "Now, now, gorgeous, let's not cause a scene again."

"Please, Dante. Do whatever you want to me, just don't hurt her anymore," I plead with him.

Emerson's eyes find me, and we share a pained look. "Are you sure you won't hit her?" he asks, and I shake my head. "Okay, then everything that happens next is because of you." He places his hand on Emerson's forehead and the other wraps around her chest, and then he pulls, yanking her head to one side fast and hard. There's a sharp cracking sound and her eyes widen before she drops to the floor, her gaze still fully on me but now lifeless.

I stare open-mouthed. "All you had to do was hit her back," he continues as if nothing happened.

"What did you do?" I whisper, crawling over to Emerson. I hold a shaky hand over her, hesitating before I touch her. When I do, she's still and completely lifeless. I begin sobbing and shaking her. "Wake up," I beg. "Wake up, Emerson."

Dante drags me up off the floor. "She's fucking dead, Tessa. That's your fault."

I shake my head frantically. "No, no, no."

He gives a satisfied smile. "I want you to sit here," he orders, pushing me to my knees beside Emerson, "all night. Don't fucking move and don't go to sleep. You should think about what you've done tonight, the heartbreak you have caused to her family."

"But . . . I don't . . . I can't . . . please, Dante."

He slaps me hard, so hard it feels like my brain is bouncing around in my skull. "Don't move or I will find Callie and she'll join her."

I watch as Dante and Enzo leave, closing the door behind them.

I gently move Emerson's hair from her face before closing her eyes. Then I curl up behind her and wrap my arm around her waist, just like we used to when we were younger. I remind her of the times when we were carefree and

how we'd laugh at stupid things. I tell her how sorry I am, and how I only lost contact with her to save her. But in the end, I couldn't.

And then I beg God to hear me and free me from this hell.

Present day . . .

I STARE at myself in the full-length mirror. The bruises littering my body are colourful, if nothing else. Dante has been true to his word over the last month. He's trying hard to get me pregnant, and whenever he's home, we have sex. Cold, hard, forceful sex, and each time, I wonder why the hell he would want to bring a child into this mess. He can't even try to conceive it with love and kindness. These bruises aren't from his fists, for once, yet somehow, it feels worse because I'd rather his fists beat me than him force himself on me to get me pregnant.

I'm thankful for one thing—Nero. He's kept me sane these last few weeks. He's kept his word and hasn't told Dante anything. He feeds me secretly every day. He's kind and funny, and he finds places to take me so I'm not stuck in the house. I'm even noticing a slight tan on my skin from our days spent sightseeing.

Today is my birthday. I'm excited because Nero has plans for our day, and he's been teasing me all week, giving me clues. I can't dress in anything that doesn't cover me up, so I choose jeans and a shirt, and when I glance back in the mirror, I decide to unfasten the top two buttons. It's hardly revealing anything, but I smile as I bounce downstairs. Today, I feel beautiful, and I haven't felt like that in such a long time.

Nero is waiting in the kitchen. He picks me up and spins me around until I laugh. "Happy birthday." He puts me back on my feet and produces a small box. I take it, biting my lip to hide my smile. "It's just something small."

"You shouldn't have," I whisper, carefully removing the wrapping paper. I haven't celebrated my birthday since I met Dante, so getting a gift feels alien. I open the box to reveal a delicate silver bracelet with a tiny diamond. "It's your birthstone . . . April," he explains.

I throw my arms around him. "Thank you so much. I love it."

He wraps me in his strong arms and something shifts between us. As I pull back, we stare into each other's eyes, and for a second, I contemplate

kissing him. *Fuck, I really want to kiss him.* But then the front door slams and we pull apart. I shove my gift into the nearest drawer and turn just as Dante walks in. “Happy birthday, my gorgeous wife,” he says, smiling bright. I frown as he pushes a bunch of flowers into my hands and kisses me on the head.

“Thank you,” I mutter, feeling confused. Nero smiles awkwardly.

“And here’s a special gift,” Dante adds, placing a long, thin, wrapped box in my hand. “Nero, we won’t be needing you today,” he adds, and I feel my heart crush in my chest. I was so excited about today. “I have plans that involve my wife and our bed,” he says, winking.

Nero nods once and steps towards the exit. “Okay, Boss.” We lock eyes before he turns and leaves.

Dante pulls my face up to look at him. “Why do you look so sad? It’s your birthday.”

“I didn’t think you knew,” I mutter.

He laughs again. “Of course, I know your birthday. I know everything about you. Now, open your gift.”

I rip the paper and my heart stops. “It’s a pregnancy test,” I mutter.

“What better gift? If this is positive, we can celebrate.” *And if it’s not . . .*

He leads me to the bathroom, taking the test from me and unboxing it. “Pee in this,” he says, handing me a small plastic pot.

“I don’t know if I can pee on demand,” I admit.

“Don’t talk crap, Tessa, just piss in the damn pot.”

I do as asked, and he takes the pot, placing it on the side. I watch as he dips the stick and lays it flat beside it. Then he turns to me and wraps his arms around me. “This could change our lives,” he says, kissing me. “I can’t wait to be a dad,” he adds, tugging my hair and kissing me harder. “I’ve always wanted a son I can teach. He can take over from me when I get too old.” He laughs as I cross my fingers behind my back and pray to God it’s negative. Damn the consequences.

NERO

“CAN you come back to the house?” Dante asks when I answer his call.

“Of course. Everything okay?”

“Just get here,” he mutters, disconnecting.

“Dante?” asks Callie, and I nod. “You think he’s got some work for you?”

I shrug. “I only left them a couple of hours ago, but maybe.”

DANTE IS in his home office when I arrive. There’s no sign of Tessa. “Everything good, Boss?” I ask, closing the door and stepping closer to his desk. He throws a white plastic stick on the top and glares at me. I take the stick, turning it to see the word ‘negative’ in the window. “Is this a pregnancy test?”

“It’s been six weeks,” he snaps. “Why the fuck is it negative?”

I place it back. “These things take time, Boss. She took a while to open up to me.”

“Every day, you’re with her and you tell me you’re fucking her. You tell me things are going well, and yet here we are with no fucking pregnancy.”

“I was supposed to be spending the day with her today, remember,” I ask, “but you surprised us by coming back.” I sigh. “I’ll keep trying, Boss. Relax.”

“Relax?” he yells, slamming his hands on the table. “I’ll relax when she’s pregnant. Work harder. I’m going out of town today for two nights. I suggest you spend them in the bedroom.”

IT’S BEEN two hours since Dante left for his trip and Tessa still hasn’t appeared. I go upstairs and gently tap on her bedroom door. “Tessa, it’s Nero,” I tell her. “Are you okay?”

The door opens and Tessa stands before me in her underwear. I gasp, not because she’s practically naked but because her body is covered in bruises. She’s been crying, her cheeks are red, and her eyes swollen. “Jesus,” I whisper. She falls into my arms and breaks out into fresh sobs. I walk her backwards into the bedroom, kicking the door closed. “Tessa, what the fuck happened?”

“We’re trying for a baby,” she sniffles. “Every morning, every night . . . I

hate it. I hate him,” she cries. It’s the first time she’s told me how she feels about Dante. Usually, she makes excuses, and she’s never told me about the abuse, not really. “And today, my birthday gift was a pregnancy test. He wasn’t happy it was negative.”

“Fuck,” I mutter, stroking a hand down her back. “Tessa, I’m so sorry, I didn’t realise.” And I mean that in a different way to how she’s taking it. Because what I really mean is I didn’t think about him taking this shit out on her.

“Ask me,” she says, sitting up and looking me in the eye.

“Ask you what?”

“What everyone wants to ask. Why am I still here? Why haven’t I left him?”

“I’m sure you have your reasons.”

“If I left right now . . . if I packed my bags and just walked away, what would happen?”

I think about her question. “I guess he’d kill me.”

“Exactly. There’s always someone he can hurt, someone he can hold over me. I can never leave because he’ll kill people I love, then he’ll come for me. He’ll track me down and end my life in the worst possible way imaginable.”

I choose not to go into the details of that last statement. “I thought there were no friends or family, so who could he hurt apart from me?”

“I had two friends before. We went to school together and were inseparable. We witnessed something, Dante threatened them and their families, and then he told me I had to move in with him or he’d kill my friends.”

“So, what happened to them?”

“I’m not sure.” She looks away, and I sense that she’s lying. “But I have a feeling Dante would still find them or their families and he’d make sure I knew what he’d done.”

“You ever witness him hurting people before, Tessa?”

She scoffs. “You’d be surprised at the things I pick up while hiding in the background.”

“Like?”

“I wanted to kiss you before,” she blurts out. “After you gave me my gift.”

“But Dante walked in,” I say. I know the exact moment because I wanted to kiss her too.

“Would you have let me?” she asks.

I turn to her, brushing the hair from her face. “Tessa, you’re in enough danger. Kissing me would make everything so complicated.”

She blushes. “You’re right. Sorry, I’m a mess.” She stands. “Oh god, I’m so embarrassed.”

I rise to my feet, pulling her to look at me. “Don’t be. I’m not saying I don’t want to. I do. It’s just—”

“You do?” she asks, her eyes hopeful. I nod. We stare at each other for a moment, and then I move closer, unable to stop myself. She moves too, until our lips are a breath apart.

“I do,” I confirm. I gently brush her lips with my own, and she inhales sharply. Cupping her face in my hands, I do it again, this time letting my lips linger. She opens, giving me access, and I close my mouth over hers in a gentle, slow kiss.

TESSA

WE’RE KISSING. We’re actually kissing, and it feels so good, like I’m alive again. My entire body tingles, and when he swipes his tongue against mine, I curl my toes. I’ve never felt like this, and I don’t want the moment to end, so I push my hands under his T-shirt, feeling his warm, smooth skin. I run them over his hard chest, desperate to feel his body against my own. As if he’s read my mind, he reaches for the hem of his shirt and tugs it over his head, briefly breaking our kiss. He skims my shoulders with his hands and my bra straps fall. He stops kissing me and rests his forehead against mine, looking down at my breasts. I pull the bra down completely, then I take his hands and guide them there. He cups them, rubbing his thumbs over my nipples, and I want to cry out in pleasure. His hands feel so good, so gentle.

I walk backwards until my legs hit the edge of the bed. I tug the button on his jeans, popping it open, and then I slide back onto the bed. He stands before me, and I rest on my elbows, watching as he removes his jeans, then his boxers. His body is perfect, from his muscled chest to his tight abs. My eyes trail down to his erection as he swoops down and grabs his wallet from

his jeans. He pulls out a condom and rips open the packet. He rolls it down over his shaft before crawling between my legs and settling there.

“You sure about this?” he asks, kissing me, and I nod. I’ve never been surer of anything. I’m going to make the most of my two nights of freedom, and then I’m going to free myself forever. I’m going to join Emerson.

CHAPTER SEVEN

NERO

I WAKE AND STRETCH OUT. Tessa is naked beside me, lying on her stomach. We spent the entire night worshipping each other, and now, reality is setting in. Because despite all my training and experience, I don't know how to handle falling for someone while I'm on the job. They don't tell you what to do. They just tell you how to avoid it and then say that if you can't, go with it, because once the job is complete, you'll pack your shit and move on to the next. But as I count the bruises on her perfect skin—*eighteen just on her back*—I find myself trying to work out a way I get to keep her.

I go downstairs and call Callie. She's my handler, so she'll know what to do. "You didn't call in last night," she says. "I was getting worried."

"Sorry. Dante flipped out. He made Tessa do a pregnancy test and, of course, she was negative. It didn't go down well."

"Shit. What'd he say?"

"He left town for a couple nights so I could work harder." I give a humourless laugh. "Prick."

"Where did he go? Is he doing business?"

"I don't know. He beat the shit out of Tess and left."

"So, what did you do?"

"That's why I'm calling . . ."

"Oh, dear God, tell me you didn't do what he asked."

"Not completely. Well, as in, I used protection."

"FUCK!" Callie yells. "Are you joking? You had sex with his wife?"

"I had permission," I remind her.

“Not funny, Nero. So, now what?”

“I need to get her out of here.”

“No, no, you don’t. You leave like you were never there, and we find another way to get Dante.”

“I can’t, Callie. I can’t just walk away and leave her here knowing what he’s doing.”

“If she hates it so much, why doesn’t she leave? Ask yourself that.”

“I asked her, but he’s threatened her and her friends. She had no choice.”

“There’s always a choice. Get out of there and we’ll pass it on to the local beat for DV. They can pick it up.”

“He’s got the police in his back pocket. She’ll never talk to them.”

“I don’t care. Nero, she’s not our problem. Get out of there. I’m pulling you.”

I disconnect as Tessa wanders into the kitchen. “Good morning,” she says, smiling shyly. I pull her to me, grabbing her arse in my hands and kissing her.

“Don’t act all coy with me. I’ve seen you naked,” I tease. She giggles, and it warms my heart. “Get dressed. I’m taking you to breakfast, and then we’re celebrating your birthday just like we planned yesterday.”

WE HAVE breakfast in a small deli in central London. It’s good to see Tessa eating so well. She’s slowly gaining weight and she looks amazing for it. I pay the bill while she goes to the bathroom, then I step outside to wait for her. “You ignored me,” snaps Callie, marching over.

I glare at her. “What the hell are you doing?” I hiss, glancing inside the deli to make sure Tessa isn’t coming out. “You’re breaking every fucking rule by being here.”

“I’ve pulled the plug on this, you have to step away.”

“I told you, I can’t just walk away.”

“You don’t have a choice, Nero. I’ve spoken to the chief, and he’s in agreement with me. You’ve gotten in too deep. This is a direct order.”

“Bullshit. I’ve done this a thousand times and walked away. I’m the inside, I know when the right time is, and it’s not now.”

The door opens, and I groan. Callie turns her back, but it’s too late,

Tessa's spotted us. Then she does something unexpected—she throws her arms around Callie and begins to sob. “Oh my god, Callie, it's really you.” Callie avoids eye contact with me. “I didn't know if you were dead or alive or—”

“You know each other?” I ask.

“She was one of my friends that I told you about,” Tessa says through her tears. “How do you know each other?”

I arch a brow for Callie to explain, and she turns to face Tessa, unhooking her arms from around her. “Tessa, long time,” she mutters, smiling tightly.

Tessa wipes her eyes, nodding. “I've thought about you so much.”

“I'm in a rush to get to work. Great to bump into you, Nero. Nice to see you again, Tessa.” And then she rushes away.

Tessa stares after her, frowning. “How do you know each other?”

“I used to work with her. Come on, on to the next surprise,” I say, grabbing her hand and pulling her in the opposite direction.

TESSA

I'VE NEVER BEEN clothes shopping. Dante always bought my clothes, usually a size too big. I stare at myself in my bedroom mirror and take in the outfit that Nero insisted on buying for me. The jumpsuit fits well, hugging in at the waist to give me a figure I didn't know existed. I smile as I lightly run my fingers over the delicate necklace he gave me while we sat in the park and enjoyed a picnic. I wish I'd met Nero all those years ago, because now, it's too late. Dante will be home tomorrow, and I have a plan that I need to carry out before he returns. I take a deep breath and release it slowly. I have tonight, and that's all I'm going to think about right now.

As I descend the stairs, Nero is standing by the door, staring down at his mobile phone. He looks up and smiles wide. "Wow, you look hot."

I blush at his compliment as his appraising eyes take me in. "Thank you. You don't look too bad yourself."

He does a slow spin to show off his shirt and jeans. "Thank you." He hooks out his arm for me to take. "Let's get you wasted on tequila and beer."

THE ONLY BARS I've ever been in are the ones run by Dante or his friends. They're the kind where dangerous men hang out and everyone knows everyone else.

So, when we enter a bar in central London with twinkling fairy lights and bright décor, I gasp out loud. It's beautiful, and there's not one dangerous-looking gangster in sight. I relax instantly, and Nero leads me to the bar. "I want to open up a tab," he tells the bartender, handing over a bank card. "We've booked a booth, number ten," he adds. The bartender nods, handing him an electronic device, and then he leads me over to a booth.

"What's that?" I ask as he places the device on the table.

"You tap it when you want service."

"Wow." I glance at the menu, looking at the different types of drinks. "I've never heard of any of this."

"Didn't you go to these sorts of bars when you were younger?"

I shake my head. “We were too young, and the doormen would never have believed our fake I.D.s. We stuck to local bars. Emerson, my friend, her dad was well known, so we could drink in our area and it didn’t bother anyone.”

“Oh yeah, what’s his name? I might know him.”

I shrug, not wanting to tell him in case he knows what happened to Emerson. Her dad is still in the area, and I see him when I go out with Dante, but he doesn’t speak or even look in our direction. There’s been so many times I’ve wanted to go over and tell him how sorry I am and that I laid with her all night until Dante ripped me away kicking and screaming. “Do you know Callie well?” His jaw tightens, and it’s clear he doesn’t want to talk about her. “Were you two a thing?” I ask, smirking.

He nods. “Yes, and I really don’t want to ruin our night talking about exes. I haven’t seen her in a long time before today. I don’t know her anymore.”

“You’re right, it’s not important. Let’s have fun tonight and worry about everything else tomorrow. But I would like to speak to her again. Maybe you could get me her number?”

I DRINK shots like I’m sixteen again and it feels good. I like the buzz alcohol gives me, and I like how brave I feel. Maybe that’s why Dante hardly lets me drink—he knows I’ll speak my mind. I lean closer to Nero. “Before Dante, I was happy,” I say, my words slurring. “Everyone assumes kids in care are sad and angry. I wasn’t. I loved being surrounded by people. I was always supposed to be surrounded.”

“What was the bad thing?” asks Nero. “You said before, he threatened you and your friends because you witnessed a bad thing.”

I smile, tapping his lips with my finger. “I can’t tell you his secrets, Nero. He’ll kill me.”

“I won’t tell him.”

“You might.” Emerson’s face flashes through my mind. “Yah know, it’s kind of all Callie’s fault,” I add. “She met a guy and dragged us all down with her.”

“Oh yeah?”

I frown, thinking back to his earlier words. “How did you work with her when you’ve been in prison? Is that how you met her, through work? How did you end up together?”

“I thought we weren’t talking about Callie?” He kisses me and thoughts of Callie leave my mind.

NERO

TESSA IS WASTED. I feel terrible, she’s slurring her words and lounging all over me, but I’m desperate for any information that’ll get Callie off my back, and the more she drinks, the more she talks. I top up her glass and encourage her to drink it in one.

“Why were you in prison?” she asks.

“I’ll tell you my secrets if you tell me yours,” I say.

She sighs heavily. “I can’t have children,” she confesses.

I lean closer. “What?”

“I’ve known since I was fourteen. I had something wrong with my ovaries and had to have an operation. It left scarring, so the chances of me conceiving are extremely low.”

“Fuck, Tessa, but Dante doesn’t know?”

She shakes her head. “He doesn’t deserve to know. That’s why I can’t stick around.”

“You’re leaving?” She nods. “Do you want money or a place to stay?” I’m reeling from so much information. She’s not set up to just leave. She has no access to anything and doesn’t have anyone she could go to. Fuck, she doesn’t even know how to shop without me telling her.

She smiles. “No, I’ve got it covered.”

“Well, if you’re leaving, you can tell me what you and your friends witnessed that caused all this in the first place,” I push.

She thinks for a moment. “He killed someone.”

I arch my brows, trying to act indifferent. “Fuck. I heard he was brutal. Someone you knew?”

She shrugs. “Not really. Callie had just met him.”

I frown. “So, Callie knows all this?”

“Yes. Me, her, and Emerson, we all saw it.”

“Let me get this straight. All three of you were there when Dante killed someone, you all saw it?” She nods. “Where was this? When?”

She thinks again. “It was in the Duck and Partridge, on Porchester Road. I was sixteen. I didn’t know his full name, but we called him Jase.” I let that information sink in. What the fuck is Callie playing at?

“Christ, Tessa, no wonder you feel so trapped and alone. And you never saw your friends after?”

A sad look passes over her face. “I saw Emerson,” she almost whispers. “Just once.”

“I bet they were scared. What did they think of you moving in with Dante?”

She bites her lower lip and tears balance on her lower lash line. “I didn’t get a chance to explain the deal.”

“Deal?”

“Dante said if I moved in with him and stayed, they’d never come to any harm. I thought if I did that, then eventually, I’d escape. Then I could tell the police and they’d keep us safe.”

“So, what happened?”

“I was sixteen and stupid. I soon realised that the police were in his pocket, and even if I did make it out somehow, Dante would find me again. Then he’d kill Emerson and Callie and probably make me watch. But in the end, it didn’t matter, not for Emerson.”

“Did something bad happen to Emerson?” I push.

A tear rolls down her cheek and she nods. “When I saw her, she was mad. She slapped me, and Dante saw. He sent me home, and I thought he’d probably teach her lesson, maybe hit her, but he did so much worse.”

“He killed her?”

She nods. “Him and Enzo, they,” she sniffles, “they raped her. She was a mess when they brought her to the house. And Dante demanded I hit her, but I wouldn’t, so he . . . he . . .” She breaks down, and I pull her to me. “I need the bathroom,” she whispers, pulling away.

I watch her go and take out my mobile phone, angry that I’ve been kept in the dark. I make my way out to the smokers’ terrace and call Callie. She answers right away. “I’ve been trying to call you,” she snaps.

“When were you going to tell me?”

“Tell you what?”

“About Jase?” The line goes quiet. “In case you’re interested, I got her to

open up. Once she started, she couldn't fucking stop. She's witnessed shit. But then apparently, so have you."

"We should meet to talk," she mutters.

"You're a fucking copper, Callie, and you held out on something huge. And now I know too, what the fuck am I supposed to do?"

"Let me explain."

"Explain that you could've brought Dante down all alone? But instead, you kept your mouth shut and let me go undercover for fucking months?" I turn and find Tessa right behind me. She's staring open-mouthed. "Fuck. I gotta go." Tessa turns and runs, pushing her way through the crowd. "She heard me," I tell Callie. "Tessa knows."

CHAPTER EIGHT

TESSA

I DON'T REMEMBER the last time I felt so drunk. I stumble through the crowd and break out onto London's busy streets. It's easy to get lost in the crowds. I hear Nero calling my name, but I don't stop until I feel him right behind me and realise I can't outrun him. He wraps his arms around my waist, lifting me off the ground and holding me against him. I kick and scream, but we're in London and no one bothers to stop and check if I'm okay. "Let me explain, please," he whispers.

"Explain that you lied," I cry. "That you're not who you fucking said." My heart feels like it's shattered into a million pieces and my throat feels tight.

"I am. What I've told you is true . . . everything but my job."

I suddenly feel exhausted. "Take me home."

NERO FORCES me to drink lots of water before guiding me upstairs to bed. I can't bear to look at him let alone speak to him, so when he turns the light out and leaves, I'm relieved. I cry into my pillow. I've been such an idiot . . . again.

I drift off into a restless sleep, tossing and turning, and dreaming of Callie and Emerson. I wake with a start when the light floods the room. Dante leers over me, and the fear I'd left behind for a couple days soon returns. "Dante,"

I whisper.

“Get up.” I sit and the room spins. I hold my head. Fuck, I forgot what a hangover feels like, and it’s not good. “Are you sick?”

“No.”

“Where’s Nero?”

I frown. “I don’t know.” Last night comes flooding back, and I suddenly feel worse. I should tell Dante. If he finds out that I knew and didn’t say anything, he’ll be so angry.

“I have breakfast downstairs. Let’s go.” I follow him down, smelling the bacon as I get closer. The last thing I want to do is eat. “I had someone come in and cook for us,” Dante says as we enter the dining room. I stare at the table full of food.

Minutes later, Nero appears with Kai. He gives me a strange look, and I think he’s silently pleading with me to stay quiet. “Everything okay, Boss?” he asks.

Dante points to the seat on his right, and Nero sits while I sit to the left. “I thought we could have breakfast and a catch-up.” He begins to pile food on my plate. There’s no way I can eat, but if I tell him that, he’ll punish me, so I pick at the bacon.

“Do you wanna talk in private?” Nero asks.

“No. Let’s get it all out in the open.” Nero glares at me. He thinks I’ve told Dante. “Shall we start by talking about this?” he asks, holding up a condom wrapper. It’s the condom wrapper Nero used.

I begin to panic, my body shaking as I try to think of an answer quickly. I open my mouth to speak, but nothing comes out. “It’s mine,” says Nero.

“Clearly,” snaps Dante. “What I want to know, Nero, is why the fuck there is a used condom in the bathroom?”

“I’m so sorry,” I cry. “I’m sorry.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Dante growls as he turns back to Nero. “I gave you a simple instruction. Fuck my wife, get her pregnant. You fucked my wife using a condom. Do you not understand basic sex education, or should I show you?” The words hit my brain and confusion follows. Dante gives a cruel laugh. “Oh, wifey, you didn’t think he actually wanted to fuck you?”

“Tess, ignore him. Listen to me,” shouts Nero, standing. Kai rushes forward, grabbing Nero’s arms and pulling them behind his back. “It was real. It was all real,” he continues to yell.

I stare, open-mouthed. His words sound distant as Dante laughs harder. “I

hired him to get you pregnant, Tessa. He doesn't give a shit about you. All he wants is to work his way up in my firm." My heart breaks, shattering into a thousand pieces. "All the dinners, the little dates, the picnic in the park," Dante hisses, "I cleared it all."

"That's not true," yells Nero. "He's lying."

"So, now you have a choice—fuck my wife, or I'll find someone who will." Dante grabs my hair and pulls me to my feet. He shoves me over the table, pinning me face down. "What do you say, Nero? You or Kai? Who wants to go first?"

I rest my face against the hard wood and stare at Nero. He looks devastated, and somehow, that hurts me too. He deserves to hurt. I should blurt out some of my own truths, but I don't want him to feel pain. I don't want him to feel the same as I do because it's too much. No one deserves to feel like this. Dante pulls my shirt up over my arse, and I hear him laughing over the whooshing sound in my ears. This must be how Emerson felt. *Poor Emerson*. My heart twists painfully.

My hand slides slowly across the table to the fruit knife. Nero is struggling to free himself as Kai shouts for Enzo to come and help. In all the commotion, they don't notice me take the knife, and I smile because, for once, Dante's dropped the ball. For once, I'm going to win.

I don't feel the blade go in. I thought I would. In fact, this feels nothing like I'd imagined. Maybe Emerson is helping from the other side. She knows I'm ready, so she's making the pain feel less. I pull my hand up to my face to check and, sure enough, it's coated in sticky, red blood. I smile wider, relief flooding me. I'm going to be free. *Finally*.

"Tessa?" Dante yells, pulling me up and turning me onto my back. He assesses me with his eyes, freezing on my now bloody inner thigh. "What the fuck have you done?"

"Jesus, if she's hit the femoral artery, she'll die in minutes," shouts Nero. Those words bring me comfort and I close my eyes, waiting patiently for death to come.

NERO

KAI RELEASES ME, and I take off my shirt, ripping it down the middle and

wrapping it around Tessa's wound. "Call an ambulance," I demand.

Dante shakes his head. "It's what she wants," he mutters.

"You fucking piece of shit." He's got no intention of saving her.

There's a loud bang at the front door. No one has time to react before the house is full of police officers yelling to us all to get on our knees and place our hands behind our heads. Callie smiles at Dante. "Dante Anderson, I'm arresting you on suspicion of the murders of Jason Collins and Emerson Grey."

Another officer grabs my hands and cuffs them. "She's bleeding out," I shout. Paramedics rush in and begin to tend to Tessa as I'm dragged out the house along with the others.

CHAPTER NINE

TESSA

I OPEN my eyes and blink a few times. A nurse comes into view, smiling. “You’re awake,” she whispers. Glancing around the room, I take in the bright lights and realise I’m in hospital. There’s a crushing feeling in my chest and I realise it’s disappointment. “Let me get the doctor,” she adds. I want to scream. This isn’t part of my plan. I shouldn’t be here. I ball my fists angrily at my sides and glare at the ceiling.

The doctor checks all my vitals, occasionally making notes. “You’re very lucky, Tessa. A little deeper and it would have severed the femoral artery. I hear the man who did this to you is in police custody.” I frown. “There’s an officer waiting to see you. Shall I send him in?” I don’t bother to reply. Sadness claws at me so hard, I have no energy to find words.

Nero appears minutes later, and I almost gasp. The memories flood me with everything that’s happened, and the pain is suddenly overwhelming.

I turn my head away, squeezing my eyes closed tightly. “You scared the shit out of me,” he mutters, taking my hand, but I pull it free. “I thought I’d lost you.”

“Are you here on official business?” I ask coldly.

“Tessa, look at me, please.” I don’t. “I know you’re upset, and you have every right to be, but I couldn’t tell you who I was. I couldn’t risk it.”

“Get out,” I whisper.

He grabs my hand a second time, desperately holding on to it. “My name is Tristan Neroli. I’ve been an undercover police officer for ten years.” I begin to cry, keeping my face away from him. “Everything else was true.

What we have, that's real."

"Just leave, Nero," I whisper through my tears. It hurts too much.

"Tessa, please. Don't be like this. The dates we went on and getting to know each other, it was all real."

I finally turn to look at him. "It wasn't real, and if you think it was, you're a bigger dick than I thought. Now, get out."

THEY KEEP me in the hospital for a week. Various professionals come to see me, including the officer now in charge of my case. Nero told the police that Dante stabbed me in the leg, so on top of his existing charges that are stacking up, attempted murder has been added.

I've also given a statement about everything—the murders, the abuse, and everything in between. It felt freeing but scary. I had a support worker with me every step of the way, which made it a little easier, but I know the scariest moments are yet to come.

My support worker, Cath, arrives just as I'm finished dressing and packing my hospital bag. She's holding a set of keys which she hands to me. "Are you ready to go and see your new place?" Through the help of the local women's centre, they've found me a flat in a different part of the city. One not controlled by Dante or his men. Eventually, I'll move out of the area completely, but while there's a court case pending, I've agreed to stick around.

The drive takes us an hour, and when we stop outside a tall building, I feel a sense of calm. "I know it's not much," Cath begins.

I stop her because anywhere is better than being with Dante. "It's fine."

We head to the first floor, and I unlock the door to my new place, smiling as I step inside. "Other women in similar situations to you stay here." I run my hand over the green couch. It's ugly, but I love it already. "There's a microwave and a kettle. The laundry room is across the way in block two," she continues. "Here's some money to get you started," she adds, handing me twenty pounds. "You'll get your benefits within the next couple weeks. It's all going through." I nod, grateful that she's helped me this far because I wouldn't have had a clue. The paperwork for the benefits agency was long and painful. I couldn't answer half the questions, and without Cath, I'd have

given up. “I’ll let you settle in. I’ll call in a few days to check in on you, and you have my number if you need me. The public phone is at the end of the street.”

Once she’s gone, I explore the one-bedroom flat. It’s small and basic, but I’m grateful for anything right now. There’s a set of new sheets on the bed that I unwrap and make up.

A knock on the door distracts me from the half jar of coffee I found in the kitchen. I answer it to find Callie, smiling awkwardly. She’s the last person I expected, but a part of me needs to hear what she has to say. “Can I come in?” I open the door wider, and she steps inside. I follow her, wondering why she’s here. I’ve had a lot of time to think things over while in hospital, and every time, I come back to the same conclusion. She was a police officer and knew what shit I was in, and she let it happen.

“How are you?” she asks.

“Sore. Tired,” I mutter.

I point to the couch, and she takes a seat. “Green,” she mutters, running a hand over it. “Who the hell made this and thought it looked good?” She attempts a laugh, but I don’t join her. “Yah know, we thought you’d left us behind and you were living a great life with that murdering scumbag,” she begins. “We were so angry you’d choose him over us.” She scoffs. “And then Nero told me the truth, that you did it to keep me and Em safe.” I lower onto the couch. “I don’t know what to say,” she whispers, and I see the vulnerable teenager I used to know. “I read the case file. Your statement. I read about all the things he did. All the things you had to put up with.” Her eyes water. “You did that for us.”

My heart melts a little at the sight of her tears. “I wanted to tell you. That was my plan, to do as he said and then run away and find you both, but once I agreed, I wasn’t allowed out of his sight. Not for a minute. He took my phone, and the only people I saw were him and his men. They were too loyal to him to help me.”

“We didn’t bother to find you. We talked about it, but we were mad so . . . anyway, my dad moved us to Australia for a few years, and I lost contact with Em over time. We grew apart.”

“You moved away?” The news surprises me.

She nods. “Dante sent men to warn my dad. They smashed the house up and put the windows in. The next day, we drove to the ferry and went to France. From there, we moved around until we eventually went to stay with

family in Australia. My parents were worried one of us would end up dead.”

“It was a mess,” I mutter.

“And I keep thinking, if I’d never met Jase, if I’d have not tried to be the cool kid and snort that shit he kept giving me, none of this would’ve happened.”

Part of me wants to agree, but we were teenagers. “We were kids. We didn’t know what we were doing. And he was older, old enough to know better. It wasn’t your fault. It wasn’t any of our faults.” The words leave my mouth and I feel like a huge weight is lifted.

“Dante killed him because he owed him money for the drugs. I didn’t know. If I had, I would’ve ran a mile in the other direction. And then Emerson . . . poor Em,” she whispers, her eyes filling with tears again.

“I still see her when I close my eyes,” I admit. “She was broken.”

“So were you,” says Callie, taking my hand. “Yah know, I joined the police to help stop men like Dante Anderson. I didn’t want other kids to go through what we did.”

“Do you think he’ll get out of this?”

She shakes her head. “Not if Nero and I have anything to do with it.” At the mention of Nero, I look away. “He’s not the bad guy, Tessa.”

“Isn’t he? He lied, just the same as Dante lied. I thought maybe I’d found someone who understood me, and all along he was playing me.”

“His feelings weren’t a lie. I tried to pull him when I realised he was falling for you, but he wouldn’t leave.”

I shake my head in disgust. “He could’ve saved me way before. He’s a police officer and he knew what hell I was in. How long would it have gone on if I hadn’t found out the truth? If you hadn’t burst in when you did, would he have raped me to keep up his lie with Dante?”

“No,” she says firmly. “He’d never have done that.” She takes a shaky breath. “This job is hard, and Nero is good at it. You have to think on your feet, be alert all the time, and when Dante asked him to get you pregnant, he was never going to do it. He told Dante he was sleeping with you even though he wasn’t. He was buying time.”

“Who for?” I snap. “Did you see the photographs, Callie? The ones of my bruises? And they’re just the marks he left on my skin. Everything else is under the surface. I was already trying to survive while drowning, and Nero gave me hope. Turns out it was bullshit, and now, I feel like a fool.”

“You’re not a fool, and if he made you smile, even for a few weeks, then

surely, he's not so bad. And look, you're free. You're out of there, and Dante is locked away."

"For how long?" I mutter.

NERO

I TAP the steering wheel impatiently. Callie walks towards me, getting in the car. "She's not going to see you, sorry."

"Did you ask?"

"Sort of. She's not in a good way."

"What's it like inside?" I ask, looking at the tall building.

"Not great. Basic. Social gave her a bit of money until her benefits come in."

"It's shit. How the fuck can she live off the pittance they hand out? And why should she when her husband is fucking loaded?"

"There's a hold on all his money," Callie says. "It's police procedure to hold everything we suspect is the profit of criminal activity."

"Do me one last favour," I ask, and she groans. "You lied to me, Cal, it's the least you owe me. I'm gonna do some food shopping for her. Take it to the flat?"

JUST AS I pay for the shopping, Callie gets a call from the Chief to get back to the station. She pats me on the shoulder before rushing off. I can't wait for Callie to come back, she could be hours, and the supermarket is a short walk from Tessa's new flat.

I place the bags on the doorstep and knock loud. Then I turn to walk away quickly, but the door opens before I round the corner. "Nero?" I turn back and give her a guilty smile. "What's this?"

I head back to her. "Just a few things for the cupboard."

"No. I don't need anything. Take them back."

I smile. "I know Social only gives you twenty quid to last you until your benefit payments start. That could be a couple weeks yet. And I know how

bad you are at shopping.” I add a grin, which she doesn’t return.

“You shouldn’t be buying me things. Actually, that reminds me.” She reaches up, unclasping the necklace from her neck, followed by the bracelet I brought for her birthday. She holds them out to me, but I make no move to take them. “Please,” she whispers.

I shake my head. “They were presents.”

“To keep me from finding the truth,” she says. “I don’t want them.”

“They were presents because I wanted to make you smile. I wanted to do something nice because you deserved it—”

“So, it was guilt?”

I sigh. “No, Tessa. I lied because I had to. I didn’t know you when I made that agreement. If I did, maybe I wouldn’t have. Either way, I can’t take it back now. I’m sorry . . . so fucking sorry.” She looks torn, so I move closer, picking up the bags. “At least let me carry these in for you.” I don’t wait for her reply. Instead, I go inside.

I take in the chipped paint on the walls and the worn-looking couch. “It’s through there,” Tessa says, pointing to her kitchen. I place the bags on the side. The kitchen is outdated like the rest of this shit pit.

“Jesus, this place isn’t liveable,” I mutter.

“It’s just fine.”

I begin to take the shopping from the bag before stopping and turning to her. “I don’t want to leave you here. Come home with me. Or I can get you a hotel if you’re not ready to forgive me.”

“I’ve spent my adult life with a man controlling my every move. I’m happy here with my freedom.”

“Tessa, I’m not like him. I’d never control you.”

“Can I be honest with you, Nero . . . or Tristan . . . whatever your name is?”

“People call me Nero,” I tell her.

“Meeting you was like a breath of fresh air. I’d spent so long being invisible, and you made me feel seen. The reason I slept with you was because I’d made my mind up—I was planning on taking my own life.” I brace myself on the worktop at her confession. “And I wanted to have one last good memory because I don’t have many of those. But then I found out the truth and I don’t know if you’ll ever understand what that did to me. With Dante, I knew he was bad, so I expected each nasty remark or punch. I didn’t see that coming with you and it hurt so much more. You lied to me. Even

after you supposedly liked me, you didn't come clean. Not only that, but you used me to get to him. Every punch and every kick after you walked into my life was one you could have prevented." I lower my head, unable to look her in the eye. "So, I can't forgive you, and I can't let you back in, because I've made a promise to myself not to ever let a man treat me badly again, especially a man I can't trust. And I can't trust you, Tristan."

There's a lump in my throat that I swallow down before looking her in the eye. "It was real, Tessa. Every kiss, every touch. That was real."

"The night you took me out to celebrate my birthday, did you drink alcohol?" she asks. I look away, and she smiles sadly. "You plied me with drinks so I'd talk. Do you see why I can't trust you?"

I nod. "I was desperate. They were gonna pull the plug on the operation, and that meant I had to walk away from you, ghost you."

"Is that what happens with these things?" she asks. "How many women have you done this to then ghosted?"

"Tessa, I lo—"

"Don't," she cuts in. "Don't you dare say it."

"Just because you won't let me say it, doesn't mean it isn't true. I've never felt like this before."

She folds her arms over her chest. "You should go now. Please, don't come back."

"You don't mean that."

She nods. "I do. We're over. I don't want to ever see you again." She follows me to the door. "Do you know the worst thing, Nero?"

I stand on the doorstep. "What?"

"I would've told you everything if you'd have asked. Do you know how long I'd waited to find someone who could help me get out of there? I'd have told you whatever you needed to get him put away."

CHAPTER TEN

6 months later . . .

TESSA

LIFE FEELS BETTER. I can't say it's great just yet, but I'm heading in the right direction. I have therapy once a week, group therapy twice a week, and the support of some wonderful warriors I've met in group, some of whom live here in the building I've been housed in. This will be my permanent home now, and although I was glad to have the small flat before, this is much better.

Jess passes me a cuppa, and I smile gratefully, placing my paintbrush in the pot and standing back to admire our handiwork. If someone asked me ten months ago how I thought my future would pan out, I'd have laughed and told them I didn't have one. Because back then, I could only see one day at a time. It was the only way to survive. But now, as I look around my flat at my new friends, Jess, Jo, and Amanda, I realise I'm not holding that ball of anxiety in the pit of my stomach anymore. I'm healing.

The doorbell rings, and I rush to answer it, excited at my first unexpected visitor. A man stands there holding a bunch of flowers bigger than half his body. "Tessa?" he asks, holding them out to me. I take them and thank him.

"Lucky lady," says Jo, downing tools to watch me open the card.

What we had was real. Congratulations on your new place. Love always, Nero.

Jess looks over my shoulder and reads the card aloud. "Wow, the copper?" I nod. "After all this time, he's still thinking about you."

I stuff the card in the flowers and place them on the table. "You're not

going to say anything?” asks Amanda, smirking.

“There’s nothing to say,” I reply, shrugging. “He’s in the past.”

“I think we should raise this in group therapy tomorrow,” Jo teases, and I throw a cushion at her. “Cath will want to talk about this,” she continues.

“Maybe it’s something to raise in your session,” says Jess seriously.

“Come on, ladies. We talk all the time about moving forward, not looking back. Nero was during a bad time for me, and I don’t need the trigger. He’s in my past and he has to stay there. I’ve got the court case coming up, I don’t need distracting.”

But distracted is what I am when, for the next five days, I receive flowers every day. Each card reads the same thing: ***It was real.***

NERO

I GIVE my evidence in court. I stick to facts and brush over half-truths, like Tessa stabbing herself. I didn’t see her stick the knife in, and all I have is her confession that she’d planned to kill herself. But I know for a fact she wouldn’t have done that if Dante hadn’t abused her for all those years, so I don’t feel bad for telling the court he stabbed her when he realised she wasn’t pregnant. Tessa gave her evidence this morning, and as I step out into the corridor, I see her with her army of support, wiping her eyes with a tissue. I head over, and the women step aside, eyeing me suspiciously.

“I hear you did well in there,” I say, and she looks up through glassy eyes.

“Who are you?” asks one of her friends.

“Commander Neroli of London’s Metropolitan Police.”

“Give us a minute,” Tessa mutters, and the army of women disperse.

I sit down beside her. “I’ve dealt with some criminals in my time, but that lot, they scare the shit out of me,” I say, and she smiles a watery smile. “Why the tears, Tessa?”

“It’s the end,” she whispers, “and it feels good but scary.”

“Understandable. But he’s going down for this. You get that, right?”

She nods, wiping her eyes again. “You climbed the ranks?”

“They needed my experience to organise other officers,” I say, smirking. And then I add with more seriousness, “It was time for a change.”

“Congratulations.”

“I understand if you want to say no, but would you go for a coffee with me?” I stare straight ahead, bracing myself for another brush-off.

“Will you stop sending flowers if I agree?” she asks, and I glance back at her. She smiles. “My flat looks like a damn florist.”

TESSA

I WATCH as Nero orders the coffees. He’s still as handsome as the day I first laid eyes on him, maybe more so in a suit. He places the coffees on the table and sits opposite me. “Callie said you did well in court this morning.”

I shrug. “I told the truth.”

“It took balls to stand up and tell a bunch of strangers everything.”

“Well, I was behind a screen. At least I didn’t have to look at him. But do yah know what pisses me off the most? He’s not facing charges for what he did to me, the years of abuse or forcing me to live with him when I was still a kid really.”

Nero smiles sadly. “It’s a pile of shit. He should get life for that alone, but at least he’s going to prison.”

I nod, even though I don’t agree. I want Dante to face up to what he did to me and be punished for ruining my life. I was close to taking my own life, yet he’ll never spend a second inside for that.

“How’s life going?” he asks. “You look great.”

I smile. I have a hard time taking compliments, something we’re working on in therapy at the moment. “Thanks,” I force myself to say. “I’m doing good. As you know, I have my new place and we’re decorating it to make it my own.”

“We?” he queries. “You’ve met someone?”

I laugh. “No. And it’s a good job seeing as you keep sending me flowers.”

He gives a coy smile. “I was hoping to wear you down. How’s therapy going?”

“By we, I mean me and my friends. I met them in therapy, which is going amazing. I love my sessions and look forward to them. I feel like they’re helping me rebuild my life.”

“That’s amazing. So, you’re in a better place?”

I nod, confident that, for once, I’m not faking. “I don’t think I would’ve got through it all without the girls. They’ve been a massive support.”

He grins. “Was that the motley crew back there?”

“Yeah, Jess, Jo, and Amanda. They’ve all been where I am at some point. They’re warriors like me.”

“I’m glad things are going good for you, Tessa. You deserve it.”

I fiddle with a napkin. “And you?” I ask. “How’s life treating you?”

“Good. I just bought my first place after spending years renting. It’s hard to put down roots in my line of work, I was always moving around. Now I’m settled, it feels good.”

“You said before that you have a sister, was that true?”

Guilt passes over his expression at the mention of our past. “Yes, it’s true. Luna lives in Ireland. I have a little nephew on the way, actually. She told me last week.”

“Don’t you miss her?”

He nods. “All the time, but we call regularly and we video chat. I didn’t want her here, so when she decided to move to Ireland, I encouraged it. My line of work was dangerous, and I didn’t want her getting dragged into anything. She’s safer there than here.”

“Even now you’ve changed your job?”

“She’s settled now. Maybe one day she’ll decide to come home, but right now, she’s happy, which means I’m happy.” He checks his watch. “We should get back to the court. Lunch is over, and they might recall witnesses.”

AS IT HAPPENED, they didn’t call up any more witnesses. After three weeks, I was glad the jury retired. They’re expected to be out for a couple days, which means I can breathe a little. The legal team seems pretty confident that Dante will go down for many years. My therapist and support worker have broached the subject of what I’ll do if he gets off, but I can’t even think about that. Callie said I have the option to go into witness protection, that they’ll relocate me and do everything they can to protect me from him, but deep down, I know he’ll come for me. Besides, I’m making a life for myself here, and the thought of leaving that behind again because of

Dante makes me more determined to be strong.

Jo groans when the doorbell rings, disturbing our cosy slumber party. It's something we do every Friday. All us girls get together and we watch films, chat, and chill. I think we've all lost friends in the past due to our abusers, so having this time is important to us all. Amanda gets up to answer, returning a second later with Nero.

I sit up quickly, brushing a hand over my crazy hair that I decided to let dry naturally after my shower. I'm regretting that decision now. "Hey," I say, "do you have news?"

"No, shit, sorry. I didn't know you had company. I can come back," he says, turning.

"Don't you dare," says Jo, also pushing to sit up. "If you run every time we're here, it'll make us suspicious."

He smiles. "You're right, sorry. I'm Nero."

"Um, the flower guy," says Amanda, flopping down on the couch.

"The liar," adds Jess. I kick her under the blanket, giving her a warning glare.

Nero winces. "She told you about that, huh?"

"She tells us everything. You should take a seat, let's talk," says Jo, pointing to the chair.

Nero stares at me warily, but I'm enjoying this way too much to help him out, so I sit back, folding my arms over my chest. He sighs, lowering into the chair. "Why are you here?" asks Amanda.

"I wanted to check Tessa was okay after everything lately."

"Didn't you do that over coffee today?" asks Jo, arching a suspicious brow.

"We did," says Nero uncomfortably, "but I . . . shit, I don't have a reason other than I needed to see her because I had this uncontrollable urge to just be near her."

I see Amanda almost swoon and I nudge her. She needs to be stronger than falling at the first hurdle. "Quite the charmer," Amanda says, recovering quickly.

"What's with the lorry load of flowers this week?" asks Jo.

"I wanted her to know I was thinking of her because I knew it would be hard to stand in court and talk about everything."

"What are your intentions?" asks Jess, and we all turn to look at her. "What? I saw it in a film."

“Usually asked by a father figure,” Jo points out, laughing.

“Don’t pretend we’re not curious. We want to know why he’s hanging around,” says Jess.

“Honestly—” Nero begins.

“You don’t have to answer that,” I cut in, feeling uncomfortable.

“I messed up before. I let a wonderful woman go and I hate myself for it.”

I stare down at my hands, unable to look at him and take the compliment.

“So, you want another chance?” Jo questions.

“Why should she ever give you another chance?” asks Jess.

“She shouldn’t,” says Nero simply. “I don’t deserve it after what I did. But I’d like the chance to start over, as me. No lies, no secrets.”

“Can you give us a minute?” I ask. The girls go into the kitchen to replenish snacks and drinks.

Nero looks nervous as I turn back to him. “I know you’re probably about to give me the reasons you can’t give me a chance, and I get it, I know why you’d be wary. But let me just say this.” He takes a breath. “I spent the last six months working on myself. To be better. I changed my job, got a house, put down roots. That’s huge for me. But most of all, I did it because I wanted to be a better man for you. That’s what you deserve. I did courses on domestic violence, so I could understand it better. I don’t ever want to be that police officer who doesn’t get it. I’ve thought about you every day, driving myself mad because I’ve forced myself to stay away until I’m good enough for you. And now I think I’m there, I can’t bear to think you’ll send me away without at least giving me one chance.” My heart aches at his words. “But it is your choice. Completely. So, if you tell me that I have no chance and you want me to leave and never come back, this time I’ll go. Because I understand it must be your choice, just like I get this all needs to be at your pace.”

I stand, and he does the same, hurt filling his expression. He hangs his head and takes a few deep breaths, bracing himself for my rejection.

I hold out my hand, and he glances up in confusion. “Hi, I’m Tessa Cole.”

Relief floods his face as he takes my hand. “I’m Tristan Neroli, but people call me Nero.”

“I like Tristan,” I tell him.

He grins. “Tristan it is.”

The girls rush in and throw themselves around us so we’re all in one big

hug. “Something tells me you were listening in,” I accuse.

“We were ready to bust in here and make you forgive him after that speech,” says Jo.

“Tristan, these are my friends, Jo, Jess, and Amanda. They’re part of my package,” I explain, because I’ll never choose a man over my friends again.

He laughs. “I kind of figured that out.” We break apart, and he takes my hand. “So, what are you girls watching?”

We all sit together on the couch, me and Tristan crushed in the middle. Jo throws the blankets over us all. “Disney’s *Cinderella*,” she tells him, pressing play on the remote control.

He looks at me quizzically. “It’s tradition,” I tell him. “We only ever watch films with happy endings.”

He smiles, placing a gentle kiss on the end of my nose. “I love a happy ending.”

His words warm my heart. I’ve dreamt so long for a happy ending, and I find myself hoping I’ve finally found it in Tristan.

The End

AFTERWORD

Breaking Free is a story of hope. I know many stories out there, real life stories, aren't as simple. I encountered an abusive relationship when I was just thirteen. Not myself, but a couple who I babysat for. I witnessed very small snippets of a terrified woman, scared to say the wrong thing in case she set off her partner, and he'd fly into a rage. We'd often leave in the middle of the night, grabbing the baby and whisking her to her grandparents. It was a sad situation, one she eventually found the courage to leave.

When I was sixteen, I found myself in a similar situation. A man much older than me pressured me into a relationship by using threats against my family. I thought I was old enough to deal with it, and it's only now, when I look back, that I realise I was just a kid, and the grown ups around me that should have helped, didn't. Instead, I was blamed, not the man who was twenty years older than me. But hey, that's another story.

So although I'm no expert, I, like so many others, have either witnessed domestic abuse in some shape or form. I have been exposed to it. And I understand that it's not easy to just walk away. And it comes in many forms.

I decided to take part in the anthology to help support a small charity that helps victims of domestic abuse. These small charities are often overlooked, but they do many great things.

To see more about Living without Abuse, head here: <https://lwa.org.uk/>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I'm a UK author, based in Nottinghamshire. I live with my husband of many years, our two teenage boys and our four little dogs. I write MC and Mafia romance with plenty of drama and chaos. I also love to read similar books. Before I became a full-time author, I was a teaching assistant working in a primary school.

If you'd like to follow my writing journey head here:

<https://linktr.ee/NicolaJaneUK>

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THE NEW BEGINNINGS ANTHOLOGY

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