
DARKEST
desires
romance café
PUBLISHING
A CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE CHARITY COLLECTION

DARKEST DESIRES

AN ANTHOLOGY FOR CHARITY FROM THE NEW ROMANCE CAFE




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PUBLISHING

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REVIEW

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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WARNING DISCLAIMER: This collection is suited for Adults 18+ only. Stories contain sexual situations and adult language. All characters depicted are of legal age.

INTRODUCTION

This anthology is brought to you by The Romance Café, a community of romance novel fans and writers, born out of the desire for a safe space to discuss our shared passion for romance, as well as empower and support authors of the genre. Join us every day for your dose of romance in the Café: https://www.facebook.com/groups/thenewromancecafe.

Our short stories are hot and dark, with a mafia and organised crime theme. They are penned by both emerging and established bestselling authors, for a shared goal: charity. Please be aware that this collection may contain situations and themes that may be distressing to some.

We are donating all the profits raised from this anthology to Alliance for Hope International, one of the leading systems and social change organizations focused on creating innovative, collaborative, trauma-informed, hope-centered approaches to meeting the needs of survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, child abuse, elder abuse, and human trafficking.

This project would not have got off the ground without the help and support of some very important people. Firstly I would like to thank the coordinators: Anna, Jenny, Sofia and Shanti. A huge thank you to all the authors for contributing their stories. Here's to many more books published!

Most of all, we'd like to thank you, our readers, for buying this book and supporting a great cause. Happy reading!

Andie Wood

EMPIRE OF LIES



A VALENTINO EMPIRE SHORT STORY

BY KYLIE KENT

Thirty years ago, I left Italy.
I left him behind to marry another man.
I thought I was leaving alone; I didn't know I was carrying a piece of him with me.
How do I face him now after all this time?
Now that he knows what I did?

PROLOGUE

Gloria

"Lo, you know you don't have to do this. Just tell Al. He'll figure something out. He'll know what to do." My best friend, always the optimist.

"I don't have a choice, Em, and you promised you wouldn't tell anyone. I have to do this for my family. My Papa needs me to. Promise, Emma. Promise you won't say anything. Just let me tell Al myself."

"You're leaving tomorrow, Lo. When do you think you're going to tell him? Huh? Who's going to be the one dealing with his fury when he finds out you're gone? *Me*. I will be. And you'll be off overseas playing happy families with God only knows who."

I know this isn't ideal. It's not like I asked my father to arrange a marriage for me. But he's in trouble, and the only way I can help him is to go along with his plan. I love my father, and I love my family. There is no sacrifice I won't make for them.

That includes letting go of *him*. Al Donatello. The only boy who has ever made my heart beat so fast that sometimes I'm afraid it's going to jump right out of my chest. The boy who claims to love me above all else. The boy who makes me feel safe, cherished, and desired.

Except he's not a boy. Not anymore. The once scrawny kid I knew is now a fully grown man. Over six-foot tall with a beautiful olive complexion, toned muscles, and a smile that could melt the panties off any girl in his vicinity. But that smile, it's always directed at me.

How do you tell the man you love you're leaving the country to marry someone else? You don't. That's the conclusion I've come to anyway. He's going to hate me. I know that. But that's a cross I must bear. It's for the best if I leave before he finds out. If he knew, there is no telling what he'd do. He would only end up getting us both killed in his feeble attempts to stop this wedding from happening.

Al has a ruthless side—a side he usually hides from me. But I know it's there, lurking under that calm persona he wears like a mask. I guess he's had to develop that ruthlessness, though. He's the heir to the throne of the whole Sicilian mafia.

I should have known our fantasy of a happily ever after was never in the cards for us. I was a fool to even consider that we could ever be anything more than friends. The problem is, I know what his lips feel like on mine. I know what his body feels like when it's pressed up against mine. I've felt the love he has for me pouring out of him with every touch, every whispered promise, every lingering

stare.

I'm going to miss my family when I'm gone. But Al? I'm not really sure how I'm going to live without him. I don't know how I'll manage. I just know I have to.

On impulse, I suddenly decide that I can't leave without seeing him one last time.

"Em, cover for me. I just need a few hours, okay? I'll be back," I rush out, throwing a pair of sandals on before I crack the window and jump to the ground. Emma smiles back at me.

It breaks my heart to do this to her. To do this to *him*. But I don't have a choice. It's the only way.

* * *

"LO, WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?" Al looks around, surprised by my presence in this bar so late at night.

"I needed to see you. Can we go somewhere? Anywhere?" As hard as I try, I can't keep the desperation out of my voice. I just can't.

Al's eyes screw into tiny slits as he looks me up and down. "What happened? What's wrong?" His tone is hard. Firm. Commanding.

"Nothing, I just… I wanted to see you. Can we go somewhere, please? Take me somewhere, Al." I'm practically begging him to take me away. Anywhere without an audience.

"Okay, let's go." He grabs hold of my arm as he drags me out of the bar. "You should never be in a fucking place like this, Lo. Do you have any idea how sick the bastards who frequent an establishment like this really are? What they'd all fucking love to do to a little innocent thing like you?" he growls into my ear as we walk towards his car.

"I… needed to see you."

"Get in," He grunts, holding the passenger door open.

I wait until he pulls into traffic. "Take me to your place, Al," I tell him.

He looks at me through his peripheral but doesn't say anything.

* * *

"ARE you sure you want to be here, Lo? I should take you home," Al says, as we ride the elevator to his penthouse.

"I'm sure. I want this, Al. I need this. I need you to love me tonight." I press up on my tiptoes and softly lay my lips on his.

We've done a lot of things, fooled around behind my father's back. But we've never taken it as far as I want to right now. I need to give this to him. My virginity was always meant to be his. It has to be him. I just need this one night to take with me.

Al picks me up, carrying me through the penthouse, before I feel him lower me onto the bed, my arms and legs still clinging to him. I'm terrified he's going to change his mind. He untangles my limbs, then steps back. "Fuck! you are the most fucking beautiful creature I've ever seen. And mine. You're all fucking mine, Gloria."

"Yours, I'm yours," I repeat.

Then, sitting up, I pull the dress I'm wearing over my head and unclasp my bra. I watch as Al unbuttons his shirt. He unzips his trousers, tugging them and his boxer briefs down in one swoop. Revealing what I can only believe to be one hell of a cock. It's not like I've seen any others, but

whenever I see *his*, my mouth waters and my stomach fills with butterflies. My hands itch to reach out and stroke him the way I know he likes it.

"You know there is no going back from this, Lo. We don't have to do this. We can wait. We have time," he says as he pulls my black lace panties down my legs.

"You and I both know time is a borrowed concept in our world, Al. None of us are guaranteed a tomorrow."

"You and I will have a thousand tomorrows, Lo." He settles between my legs. "Are you one hundred percent sure, baby?"

"I'm sure." I nod my head.

My breath catches, and I do my best to hide the pain on my face as he enters me, splitting me open in the process. Tears leak from my eyes, but not from the sharp burning sensation I'm feeling; it's from the knowledge that I have to break his heart.

* * *

Al

I wake up and reach out for her. But the bed's cold where she should be, and my heart stops. I know before I even open my eyes that she's no longer in the apartment. Rubbing a palm down my face, I prepare to confront the reality of the shitty fucking day I'm about to have.

Of the war I'm about to start when I march my ass into Gloria's parents' house and claim her as mine. Declare my intent to marry that girl, because there is no other option. I was prepared to wait, but no longer. Not after last night. I don't fucking want to ever have to wake up without her in my bed again.

I get up and stalk into the kitchen, my steps pausing when I see a note on the counter. I smile. She left me a note. Turning the coffee machine on, I lean against the butcher block edge and unfold the tiny piece of paper.

Al,

By the time you wake up and read this, I will be on a plane to face the future I must live out. Today, I'm to wed another man. My father arranged this marriage to save our family. I don't want this, but we don't always get what we want.

I love you. I want you to remember that I love you with all my soul. I have always loved you and will always love you. No matter what happens, I will never let another man have the part of my heart that you own.

It's breaking me that I have to do this. That I must do this. There is no alternative. Because if I don't, if I tried to fight this, we'd both end up dead. And you know I'm right.

I can't do that to you. I can't be the reason you leave this earth.

I have to do this for my family, Al. I have to do this to save them. And I have to do this to save you.

Last night was everything I ever dreamed it would be. I will forever treasure the memories you gave me.

I pray that in another lifetime we will finally get our happy ending. In another lifetime, we will meet again because you are my soulmate, Al.

Love,
Gloria

RED. I let the blood-tinted haze take over my vision. Crumbling the paper in my fist, I throw it across the room. I embrace the rage that's burning within my veins. Just like I'll embrace their screams and pleas for mercy when I tear her father and brothers limb from fucking limb. They think they can just send her away. Marry her off to some fucker overseas.

Fuck that, the son of a bitch will regret the day he ever signed his daughter over to another family.

CHAPTER 1



Gloria

THIRTY YEARS later

I look over to Holly floating in the pool. My sweet and *way too innocent* for this life daughter-in-law. How the hell my son managed to get her to marry into this life, I have no idea. But I will do anything to help keep her innocent for as long as I possibly can. I've always wanted a daughter. But my husband, well, he couldn't father children. Which was a blessing and a curse at the same time.

When I was sent to New York thirty years ago to marry Theo Valentino, I didn't know that I was taking something from Italy far more valuable than I ever was. I was taking the first-born Donatello son.

The next generation of the Donatello bloodline. The child who rightfully has a claim to the throne of all thrones. Well, in the mafia world anyway. I had no idea that my one night with Al would result in pregnancy. I didn't know until it was too late, and I was already married to Theo. We were three months into our *wedded bliss* before I discovered the secret that would change both of our lives forever.

Theo never forced me to share a bed with him. He never even tried to seduce me. So we both knew that the child I was carrying was not his. I expected his rage. His new wife was pregnant with another man's baby, after all. But he wasn't angry.

He never even asked whose child it was, and I never told him. Theo claimed the infant as his blood. Gave him his name, and raised T as if he were his own son.

Over time, we developed a mutual respect for each other. A friendship like no other. Our marriage grew into one that incited envy in those outsiders looking in. He was a good husband, despite his numerous affairs and the women he kept on the side. I didn't hate him for his extracurricular activities, though. We never had the kind of relationship that offered him the intimacy he deserved from a wife. He had every right to seek it elsewhere.

I mean, what could I possibly say? I entered into our union pregnant with someone else's child. Throughout our whole marriage, my heart belonged to another man. A fact I couldn't hide.

"What's wrong?" My nephew's voice draws me out of my memories, his question directed at Holly.

"You mean, besides the fact that my husband is on the other side of the world doing God only knows what, and I'm stuck here waiting and twiddling my thumbs with nothing more than a prayer that

I'll actually see him again?" She pulls herself out of the water, draping a towel around her waist. "I'm sorry, Gloria. I didn't mean that." She looks at me apologetically.

"Yes, you did. And it's okay, darling. It's a lot to deal with. Trust me, I know." I turn my glare on Neo. "Where exactly is my son, and who is he doing business with?"

"Ah, I'm not too sure, Aunt Gloria." My nephew squirms. He's hiding something.

"Neo? Who's he meeting with? Why do you look so nervous all of a sudden?" Holly asks.

"Look, T's fine. I just talked to him. He's meeting with Donatello as we speak."

I can't hide the gasp that escapes my throat. "Donatello? Are you sure?"

"Yeah, why? He's fine. He's smart and more than capable of taking care of himself. You two need to stop worrying so much."

"I'll stop worrying when I have no reason to worry," Holly replies.

I stand and reach for my glass of wine. "Holly, darling, I'm feeling drained. I'm going to go lie down for a while. I'll see you at dinner. I've been cooking my special sauce all afternoon—you'll love it. I'll teach you the recipe one of these days." I turn and walk inside, as calmly as I can manage when my heart feels as though it's going to jump out of my chest.

I need to make the one phone call I prayed I'd never have to make. But I can't let my son face the same fate as my father and brothers. I have to do whatever I can to protect my boy.

CHAPTER 2



Al

I'M STARING into a pair of very familiar eyes. Eyes of a person I once loved. A person I would have burned the whole fucking world down for. Eyes of the person who left me. Betrayed me. Broke me in ways no one else ever fucking could.

I heard he'd flown into town. To say I was surprised was an understatement. Mostly because I thought he fucking fried in a building. Though I'm also stunned that Gloria is letting her son into my territory. Alone.

I gesture towards the chair in front of my desk. "Have a seat. I was sorry to hear about your father. I apologize I couldn't get over there for the funeral. How's your mother doing?"

"Thanks. She's fine." He nods, not an ounce of emotion on his face.

"I'm sure she is. Always was a tough one, that Gloria."

"I wasn't aware you knew my mother that well."

"Oh, your mother and my sister went to school together. Anyway, what can I do for you? What brought you to my territory?"

"It's a sensitive matter."

I look directly at him. I'm a busy fucking man, and the sooner I get him out of my fucking office, the better. "Now that you have my attention, Theo, what the fuck are you doing in Italy?"

The fact that I see a nervous twitch in his eyes puts me on edge. Why the fuck is he here? Seeking revenge? Looking to right those sins of the past?

"Tell them to leave." He nods his head to the soldiers standing near the entrance. I give the slightest nod, and my men exit the room. T waits until the door shuts before he speaks. "You have a traitor in your inner circle. They're planning to take your granddaughter. I suggest you get her somewhere safe and don't let your second know the location."

I'm about to respond when my phone starts ringing. Needing a minute to compose myself after the bomb he just dropped, I excuse myself to take the call.

"Donatello," I answer.

"Al…" That voice. The one I used to think belonged to a goddamn angel. The one I fucking gave up on ever hearing again. *That* voice speaks. I'm speechless. And fucking on high alert. It's not a coincidence that I have Gloria's son sitting in my office and now she's calling me. After thirty fucking years. "Al, are you still there?" she asks.

"Am I still here? You mean still in the same fucking town. The same city you left me in thirty years ago? Yes. What do you want, Lo?" I shout into the receiver.

"I'm sorry." She's quiet, and I'm fucking pissed at myself for letting it get to me.

"It's been thirty fucking years, Lo. It's a bit fucking late for sorry," I growl.

"Please, Al, you have to believe me. I'm sorry. I did what I thought was the best thing at the time. I did what I needed to do to keep you alive."

"You left, Lo. You took the easy way out and left."

"And you killed my family. My father. My brothers."

"Because they fucking took you from me. What did you think I'd do, Lo? Roll over and let them fuck me up the ass?"

"Please, Al, you can't hurt T. Please, I'm begging you," she cries, and I fucking hate that my first thought is to try to comfort her.

"Why? Why the fuck shouldn't I march back into my office right the fuck now and put a bullet between his eyes?"

"Because he's your son."

Without replying, I hang up the phone, walk back into my office, and stare at the man sitting in front of my desk. I'm numb. On autopilot.

Because he's your son. The words roll around and around in my head. I should ask for a DNA test, but I know she's not lying. Somehow I just know. Fucking hell, I want to go and slaughter her fucking father all over again. They didn't just take Gloria away from me. They took my fucking son.

"I have business to attend to, T. I trust you can see your own way out."

I watch as he nods his head and stands. "Sure. For what it's worth, I'm sorry. But do what I suggested and get your granddaughter somewhere fucking safe."

I nod. I don't know what to think about the information that's been dropped on my lap… Any of it. And by my unknown son. What I need is fucking blood.

* * *

I LOOK AT MY PHONE. It's only been a few hours since he left my fucking office. Why the fuck is he calling me now?

"T, didn't expect to hear from you so soon,"

"Yeah, well, you wouldn't be if you didn't have fuckers following me. What the fuck are your guys tailing me for, Donatello?" he grunts into the phone.

"I don't have anyone tailing you. Where are you?"

"I'm on the Autostrada A91, southbound, about twenty minutes out from the airfield. You're sure they're not your guys? Good news: the glass really is bulletproof."

Thank fuck I talked him into taking one of my cars before he left my estate earlier. I wasn't about to let him out on the streets without fucking bulletproof glass.

"They're shooting at you?" I'm fucking fuming. I will not let some fucker come into my country and shoot at my fucking kid, whether they know it or not.

"Yeah, don't worry, not the first time I've been shot at. Probably won't be the last either."

"I have people close. You need to keep driving, T. Don't fucking stop." I yell out to my men, ordering a chopper to fly over and the driver to head to T's last known location.

"Yeah, wasn't planning on it. Ah, Donatello, might just want to send your cleaners out here. This

is gonna get messy." He hangs up.

"Fuck, hurry the fuck up and get us there now." I hit the back of the seat in front of me.

Ten minutes later, we pull up next to a fucking disaster zone. Cracking the back door, I yell through the opening. "Get in." After a minute of inspecting my son, I can see he's taken a bullet to the shoulder. "Who'd you manage to piss off already, T? You've been here all of what? Two days?"

"Fuck if I know? You should have more of an idea than I do."

"They won't come after you again. I'll make sure of it. Where are you headed?"

"Why? Don't get me wrong, I appreciate the help back there. But why do you care?"

"A favor to your mother. She called and told me some things I wasn't aware of. And let's just say I now have a vested interest in keeping you in one piece. How bad is it?" I nod towards the blood now seeping through his shirt.

"I've had worse."

"Again, where are you headed?"

"Airport. I'm making a quick trip to Sydney."

"Leaving already? I thought you had more fight in you than that." I laugh. I know for a fact he does. I've heard the rumors.

"I'll be back Friday morning. Like I said, it's a quick trip."

"What's in Sydney that has you runnin' there?"

"My wife."

How the fuck did I miss that tidbit of information? "I wasn't aware you were married. Congratulations. She must be special, for you to make a twenty-plus hour trip for what? One night, before you have to turn around?"

"She's worth it."

"Good, that's good. I'll have one of my doctors travel with you, so he can patch that up during the flight." Thank fuck the boy doesn't argue with me.

CHAPTER 3

Gloria

THREE DAYS later

I CAN'T BELIEVE I'm here. Back in Italy. My nerves are getting the best of me as I try to keep my hands from shaking. I didn't have a choice. I needed to come. I have to ensure my son makes it out of this country alive.

I haven't been able to reach Al since I told him about Theo's paternity. And I'm nervous, not knowing what he's going to do. As I exit the plane, I realize I won't have to wait long to find out. Standing in front of us is the man who still owns my heart. I watch as he greets my son. Our son. Then his dark gaze turns to me.

"Gloria, più bella che mai." Al leans in and kisses me on each cheek. My body ignites at the contact. The same butterflies that used to erupt in my stomach return with a fiery passion.

I look him up and down as he steps back again. I've seen him from afar once or twice over the years. But I've avoided more intimate interactions, for fear that my husband would discover the truth about our son's lineage.

He's aged; of course he has. His hair is peppered at the sides. But his body? It looks just as fit and toned as it always was. His suit is well fitted, with dress pants that hug around thick, muscular thighs. And when he turns to walk away, that ass of his I used to admire so much is still just as firm. He clearly looks after himself well. I can't help the rush of emotions and pent-up sexual energy that charge through me as I follow him to his helicopter. Apparently, T thinks it's a good idea to take Al up on his hospitality and stay at the Donatello compound.

I don't know what Al's up to. I need to get him alone, beg him, plead with him not to tell T the truth. I can't do that to my son... But I also know Al, and there is no way he's going to keep this information to himself.

I can feel Al's eyes burning into me the whole trip to his estate. An estate I've visited many times when I was younger. I know the walls of these grounds better than I should. Or at least I used to.

We land and Al exits first, extending a hand to me. I have no choice but to take his open palm as I step down out of the helicopter. My skin burns with the zap that runs through it. I then make the

mistake of looking up, my eyes meeting his. I recognize the confusion and mixed feelings staring back at me.

He hates me, as he should. He has every right to. But there's also still love… Or is it lust I see in his eyes? He turns his head, trying to hide his reaction. I saw it though. It's still there. After all this time, our connection is still there.

What the hell am I supposed to do about that?

"T, Holly, it was a long flight, I'm going to excuse myself and go lie down for a while." I turn and walk myself into the house. I know where the guest rooms are, but that's not where I'm going.

I pass at least a dozen guards who do nothing to stop me from entering this bedroom. Strange, but I don't question it. *His* bedroom. After thirty years, I'm finally back in his bedroom. Or at least it used to be his bedroom. Closing the door behind me, I flick the light on.

It's like stepping into a time capsule. Like he hasn't been in here in just as long. It's clean though, not a speck of dust in sight. He always was anal about the details. I guess that's how he's gotten to where he is today.

How he's stayed alive.

Being in this room gives me a strange comfort. Like returning home after being away for a really long time. Which is exactly what's happening here. I spent so many nights sneaking into this room. Lying in Al's arms on this very bed. Making plans for a future we never got to live out.

"It's been thirty years since I've stepped foot in this room. You're back for not even an hour. And suddenly, here I am." The deep voice comes out of nowhere. I didn't even hear the door open.

Spinning on my heels, my hands on my hips, I glare at him. "Jesus Christ, Al, are you trying to give me a damn heart attack?"

"You'd have to actually have a heart first. And you and I both know you don't."

"You're wrong. I have one. It's just been broken for a long damn time."

His stare pierces right through me. "Funny. Tell me, Lo. How exactly was your heart broken?"

"Don't." I turn around and walk to the window. It's huge and overlooks the gardens.

"Why'd you come in here, Gloria?" he asks after a while.

"I was tired."

"There are thirty rooms in this compound, and you know where all of them are. You could have had your pick of the litter. Why this one, Gloria?"

"Really, Al? I just wanted to lie down. I don't sleep on flights. I'm too tired for this. Please, can we just table this argument for a few hours?"

"Sure, I've waited thirty years. What's another few hours? Are you out of your goddamn mind, Gloria? You left. You fucking left me. But that's not even the biggest betrayal. No, it wasn't enough to break me. You kept my son from me. For thirty fucking years, Gloria. You let another fucking man raise my son." His voice gets louder and louder with each new accusation.

"I didn't have a choice, Al. What was I supposed to do? Tell my husband the man who knocked me up was the same one who slaughtered my family? You killed my father and my brothers, Al. What was I supposed to do?" I'm holding back the tears. I will not cry.

"You should have fucking stayed. That's what you should have done. You should have fought for us. You should have fucking stayed, Lo."

"I couldn't stay. My father needed me to marry Theo. He said…" I shut my mouth.

"He said what, Lo? That your family was in trouble? That they were broke? That he had men coming after him? He fucking lied to you, Gloria, and if you had trusted me… If you had come to me, you would have known that."

"No, he didn't… He wouldn't."

"He arranged your marriage for money. He sold you. Like a prized fucking pig. Your father wanted a merger deal to go through with the Valentinos. Your marriage guaranteed that deal happened."

"No, Theo would have told me." *Wrong thing to say.*

Al stalks towards me, his hand wrapping around my throat as he pins me against the wall. "DO. NOT. SAY. HIS. FUCKING. NAME. IN. MY. HOUSE," he grits out between clenched teeth.

"Al…" What do I even say? How do I process any of this? I can't believe my father and brothers would do that to me. I've spent the last few decades avoiding everything to do with Al Donatello, and now that he has me pinned against the wall, all I can think about is closing the gap further.

"No! you don't get to come in here and mess with my fucking head again, Gloria." He lets go and storms out of the room, without a second look back.

What the hell just happened?

CHAPTER 4



Al

FUCK! How the fuck did I allow her to get to me like that? I shouldn't have fucking touched her. The minute my hand snaked around her little throat, all I could think of was slamming my lips on hers. Showing her and every other fucker just who she fucking belongs to.

Except… she doesn't belong to me. Hasn't for a long fucking time.

She went and gave herself away to another fucking man. She kept my kid from me for a damn near lifetime. My heir. He should have been here learning the fucking ropes. The ins and outs of this lifestyle. *From me.*

Preparing to take over the Donatello throne. He's not a fucking Valentino. No, he's a Donatello, and he has more power than he knows.

Which is exactly why those fucking fools in New York sent him here on a goddamn suicide mission. I knew why he was in Italy before he landed. I know he's chasing down a child sex trafficking ring. Trying to put a stop to it before it enters his territory.

I also know the three men who sent him here. Alone. To do this job. Yeah, those fuckers will face the consequences. Somehow they found out T's birthright even before I fucking did. They got scared when they realized how much power that kid held. *Holds.*

They should be scared. But not of T. No, they should be scared because now they have me to worry about.

"What's wrong with you?" Giovani, my longest and soon-to-be dead friend, asks.

Why is he about to be dead? Because my son warned me this fucker is plotting against me. That he plans to kidnap my granddaughter and sell her off to that kiddie ring.

"Nothing," I grunt, glaring him down while wondering why the fuck I haven't shot him on the spot yet.

"Saw Gloria's back. She got you fucking rattled again so quickly?" he asks.

"You don't speak her fucking name. You don't go near her, don't look at her, and sure as fuck don't fucking speak to her. Got me?" I'm in his face. And fuck! I've just shown him my fucking weakness.

"Yeah, I thought you still held a torch for that one. She fucking betrayed you, Al. Don't let her back in."

"If I wanted your opinion, Gio, I'd fucking ask for it." I storm past him and into my office,

slamming the door behind me.

I've just managed to pour a glass of scotch when the door bursts open. I have my gun drawn and aimed at the fucker who thinks they can just barge into my office on a whim. Of course it's *her*. No one else would fucking dare. They'd already be on the floor in a pool of their own fucking blood.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing in here?" I throw the gun down on the table and pick up my glass, enjoying the burn as I down the contents before filling it back up.

"We need to talk." She comes and sits on the sofa, like she doesn't have a care in the world.

"The time for talking was thirty fucking years ago, Gloria, wouldn't you say?" I refill my glass, hating the fact that she doesn't even flinch at my scathing tone.

"You have every right to be angry, Al. I know what I did was wrong. But I also know what I did kept us both fucking alive. Kept our son alive…" she says the last part more quietly.

"You don't think I would have protected you? Protected him?" I can't hit her, so I do the next best thing to expel some of this rage. I throw the glass across the room. It doesn't make a big enough impact, though. I want to smash things. I want to fucking kill. Free the goddamn beast clawing inside me.

"I know you would have died trying, Al. Think about it. Do you seriously think your father would have been happy for us? For an unwed pregnancy?"

I know he wouldn't have been, but I also wouldn't have thought twice about ending him either. For her, I'd slaughter my way through the whole goddamn mafia. Would have…

I would have slaughtered my way through the mafia. Past tense.

"Please, I-I need you to keep this between us, Al. T… he can't know yet. He's not ready for this."

I spin around. "Get Out!" I yell, pointing at the door. That's why she's really here. To try to keep her dirty little secret safe. Fuck that. He has every right to know about his heritage. To know that all of this, everything I've built, everything my father and generations before him have built. It's all his.

"Tell me, Al, what happened to Angelica's mother? Is that the fate you'd have wanted for me?"

"Angelica's mother was nothing but a two-bit whore. Victoria got what she fucking deserved. You think I didn't know the cartel had her? Exactly where they held her?" I laugh. "I knew before they fucking took her. I let them. I let them rape her over and over again before they finally had enough and slit her wrists for her."

Gloria's face pales. I've never once seen this woman scared of me before. Maybe now she'll understand the monster I am. Afterall, what kind of person allows the mother of their child to be raped and murdered?

"W-Why would you do that?"

"Because she wasn't *you*, Gloria! She was a traitorous bitch who tried to sell me out. You think that's the kind of woman I'd let raise my daughter? Fuck that, Angelica was better off without her." I turn around and lean against my desk. "I never would have let that happen to you. Even now, when I fucking hate you for what you did, I'd still jump in front of a fucking bullet for you."

The next thing I know, Gloria is running towards me. I catch her as she launches at me, wrapping her arms around my neck and her legs around my waist. I don't have time to think about letting her go before her mouth attacks mine. The minute her tongue licks along the seam of my lips, I fucking lose all control. A growl escapes me as I spin her around and sit her ass on my desk.

My hand twists around her long dark ponytail, pulling her head back and angling it just how I fucking want it. She's mistaken if she thinks she's in control here. I slam my tongue into her mouth, taking ownership of this kiss. Ownership of her.

After a few minutes, my common sense comes creeping into my subconscious. I step back, leaving

her breathless. Her breasts catch my attention as they heave up and down. “You have five seconds to leave this room, Lo. You think you want this. But you don’t know me anymore. I won’t be gentle. If you want me to fuck you, I’ll fuck you. But don’t expect the exchange to be anything resembling respectful.”

Her whole body shivers as she brings her hands up and unbuttons her blouse. Fuck me. I could have any young twenty-year-old begging at my feet, but none of them have ever got my cock as hard as she has right now.

“Get on your knees,” I order as I unbuckle my belt and pull it through the loops. “Now!” I add when she doesn’t move.

She slowly gets down off the desk and kneels in front of me. There’s a sparkle of defiance in her eyes as she looks up, though.

“Arms out in front of you.” I wrap the belt around her wrists, securing them together. “Good girl.”

My palm runs along her cheek, my thumb trailing over her bottom lip. Her tongue slides out as she licks her mouth.

“There’s no way out now, Lo. No one is going to save you.” I unzip my pants and free my cock. It’s fucking raging, pleading to get to her. Any fucking hole would do right now. “Open,” I say, lining up my cock with her mouth. When she does, I let the tip slip inside. “Suck.”

And she does. Fuck me, does she fucking suck. Grabbing her face, I slam my cock right down her throat. I hold still until she gags, then slowly drag it back out before repeating the process. The tears streaming down her face only make my cock harder as I slam into her mouth.

“Fuck!” I’m going to fucking come if I don’t stop this now.

And when I come, it won’t be down her throat. It’ll be in her fucking pussy. My fucking pussy. The one I fucking claimed thirty years ago when I broke through its barricade.

“Get up.” I pull her to her feet and spin her around, pushing her face down onto the desk. Lifting her skirt over her hips, I reveal a perfectly toned ass. She’s not wearing panties? My hand comes down hard on her cheek. “Where the fuck are your panties? You’re seriously walking around this compound with nothing underneath this skirt?”

“I-I… you made them wet, Al. I had to take them off.”

“So it’s my fault you’re walking around my compound without panties?” I run my fingers up the middle of her wet slit.

“Ah, no. I don’t know. Oh God!” she moans, as I push one finger into her. Fuck, she’s tight; it’s an unexpected surprise.

“I’m going to bury my cock in this pussy, Lo. I’m going to fuck you until you’re screaming my name. Until you can’t remember anything but me. I’m going to fuck you until you’re mine again.”

For a second time, I line up my cock. And in one thrust, I’m fucking home. All these years I thought I’d made up how fucking good she felt wrapped around me. All these fucking years I’ve searched for this feeling, always coming up short.

“Fuck.” I thrust into her relentlessly. Partly taking my anger out on her, partly laying my fucking claim. “Tell me,” I grunt. I’m so fucking close I can feel my balls tighten.

“Tell you what—ahh!”

“That this pussy belongs to me. Tell me that you’re mine…” I don’t know why I’m making her admit it. It doesn’t matter if she does or not. There is no going back from this.

“I’m yours, Al. I’ve always been yours.”

My hand comes down and slaps her ass. If she was always mine, she wouldn’t have fucking left.

I fuck her harder. Bringing a hand underneath her, I pinch her clit. Her pussy convulses around my

cock as she falls apart, screaming my name.

"Fuck, yes!" I grunt as I follow her into the bliss.

My body falls on top of hers, my lungs panting in time with her heaving chest. I slip out of her, turn her around, undo her bindings, and pick her up. Settling on the couch, I let myself, for the first time in thirty fucking years, relax in her hold as her body melts into mine. My hands run through her sweaty locks, brushing the loose strands out of her face.

"What's going to happen now?" she asks.

"What should have happened thirty fucking years ago."

"What do you mean?"

"You are going to marry me and come clean. Tell our son what you did."

She shakes her head no.

"Either you tell him or I will, Lo. I won't live with this secret. And as much as I want to fucking punish you, I don't want to live without you either."

"Okay."

"Okay? If we're doing this, there is no running again. There are no more lies."

"No more lies. I promise. Even though this empire of yours is built on lies. And manipulation, and blood, and sweat... Should I go on?"

"This empire of lies just had its queen return home. I think everything is how it should have been. No matter how we got here."

ABOUT KYLIE KENT

Kylie made the leap from kindergarten teacher to romance author, living out her dream to deliver sexy, always and forever romances. She loves a happily ever after story with tons of built-in steam.

She currently resides in Perth, Australia and when she is not dreaming up the latest romance, she can be found spending time with her three children and her husband of twenty years, her very own real-life instant-love.

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FOREVER



BY CHELE MACCABE

Tragedy separated our high school sweethearts Ellie and Rhys when they were but seventeen.

All grown up Asheville PD Detective Rhys Campbell is investigating a bank robbery when the would-be-crook confesses that he has an untouchable order issued by the biggest crime family on the East Coast, the Marinelli family.

When he shows up to confront this mysterious protector—he never expected to find his long-lost Ellie, who now goes by Amarya Marinelli.

She's just as beautiful as ever. It's clear that their love is still alive even after these twelve years apart.

What now? Do they just go back to their regular lives—living without one another or is it time to fight for what they really want—each other?

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Look man, you're nothing, absolutely fucking nothing. But not to me." The officer's voice lowers and Rhys grins from his place out in the hallway, "Just tell me, who set you up. You can go free, and I'll get the big fish."

"Fine, but first, will you help me leave town? I don't want to hang around when the shit hits the fan, you know?" The would-be-bank robber pleads.

"A name is all I need—"

"Anything you want," the crook agrees. That's when his partner, Chase, gives the signal. He takes out his keys and shakes them out before he puts them on the table. They learned a long time ago that when questioning a suspect, Chase was much better at coaxing the answers they need out of the suspect while Rhys, well, sometimes he had to come in to clean up the mess.

He opens the door, with paper cups full of ice water since it's still the height of the summer heat. "I thought you might—" but he doesn't get to finish his sentence because the man who just told them as much as he could about the group who hired him to hold up the bank on Main, well to put it nicely, freaks out.

He tries to jump up, but he can't because he's handcuffed to the table which means his chair flips over leaving him standing there with his hands tethered to the center of the table. He then starts apologizing over and over as he says things like "If he'd known he never would have--" and "She's going to kill me if she finds out".

Finally, Rhys, at a near shout says, "What in the hell are you talking about?"

"I'm not—I can't—just put me in jail, please. I can't tell you who hired me."

"But you just said—" Chase says.

"No. Tell us who are you talking about?" Rhys demands.

"Damn it," the crook whimpers. "The Marinelli family hired me."

Both cops exchange glances. "Why you and why the bank?" Rhys asks.

"I'm not sure why, but I was supposed to hold the bank up while someone else snuck in," the crook confesses.

"What were they after?" Rhys asks.

"No idea. I was to hold up the tellers and get out of there. They called you guys instead. Look, Rhys Campbell, is it? Let me tell you a secret. You're untouchable."

The detective straightens. He's heard that term before, but not used in relation to him. "Why?"

"No idea. It's by orders of the family."

"What family?" Rhys asks just to be clear.

"The Marinelli family."

* * *

IT'S NOT until Rhys is on the way home that night that it hits him. One of the biggest and most powerful crime families on the East Coast has a no-touch order out on him.

He's not sure how to feel about that.

And why him? Sure he's a detective, but he's also a small-town country boy who still drives the same 1970-something truck his dad helped him to rebuild back in high school. And while he doesn't live in that same small town anymore, it's just the next bigger town an hour away.

But why would he be considered untouchable?

Still a small-town guy at heart, he bought his farmhouse because it reminded him of his parent's. He loves the several acres that came with it. Sure, he doesn't have time like he would like to spend here, being a cop is a very busy job after all, but it's his.

The summer sun is almost set, but still lends its light for him to find the front door. As soon as he stomps on the porch and hears a familiar chatter of his favorite critter. "I'm not late, you're just mad because your food bowl is empty," he says at a near shout as he turns the doorknob to let himself in.

Scratches behind him on the wooden porch announce the arrival of his roommate who runs in the door before Rhys can shut it. The critter runs through the house and all he can see is the grey and black of his striped tail.

"One day, you're going to let me take off my shoes when I first get home instead of worrying about what's in your food bowl." The sound of the food as it falls and hits the bowl makes his little friend dance with happiness before he settles down to eat.

Hank Junior the racoon was just a day old when Rhys found him abandoned on his front porch. After bottle feeding him every two hours, which is when the raccoon still thinks he needs to eat, Rhys set him free with the intentions of Hank never returning. But every night, as soon as Hank hears the truck, he comes running to chirp angrily at him for not feeding him every two hours like he deserves.

As Rhys slowly makes his way upstairs, he lets the day run through his head. While a bank robbery is not an everyday happening, the details the crook told them are even more unusual. He pauses in the hallway to pull his cell out of his pocket. Three swipes and he texts the chief—*did they find anything else missing from the bank?*

Even before he can walk into his room, his phone rings in his hand.

"Hello, Chief Roberts."

"Campbell," the man grunts. "Your would-be bank robber made bail today. He left about ten minutes ago."

"Figures."

"Have you figured out your connection to the Marinelli family yet?"

"I was getting ready to make some phone calls, Sir," Rhys says.

"Let me know if you turn up anything interesting," the chief says.

"Of course, Sir." Then, as usual, Chief Roberts hangs up without a goodbye. Rhys continues on into his room, and mindlessly, undresses. As he does, he starts to text an old—not friend but definitely an acquaintance from when he was first on patrol.

Several texts later, he finds out all he needs.

* * *

THE NEXT DAY finds him in North Atlanta.

He's not even sure why he's here, he just knew that when he got the address, he had to find out why. "Can I help you?" An unrecognizable voice echoes on the loudspeaker.

"This is—" suddenly he's not sure why he made the three hour trip, and he's half tempted to just go back home when he finds himself admitting, "This is Rhys Campbell."

The speaker is silent as the gate swings open.

And Rhys is glad that he has his pistol in his jacket and his shotgun under the seat.

Especially when he starts to see the armed guards, scattered down the drive like bad ideas on a

Saturday night. He drives almost a mile before he gets a glimpse of where he needs to end up. But when he takes the last curve— he's not sure if it's the mansion or the back-drop of the North Georgia mountains that takes his breath away.

But it's beautiful.

Even when he makes the final turn and pulls onto a brick-lined drive, the full impact of the castle hits him. Beautiful stonework under a tiled roof with iron scrolls elegantly line the huge windows.

It takes his breath away and intimidates him all at the same time.

Not sure where else to go, he pulls to a stop at the door that he sees. He slowly turns off the truck. That earns him that same door opening and a man dressed in khakis and a blue polo shirt files out. He's already seen him, so there's no turning back now.

Rhys goes ahead and rolls up his windows and locks the doors, leaving his guns inside. He's not sure what he's walking into and the cop deep inside him is screaming. "It will be alright—" he whispers to that voice deep inside.

When he reaches the top of the stairs that leads to the front door, the man in the polo shirt stops him. "And you are?"

"Rhys Campbell."

"Ah yes. Come with me." The man in the polo shirt walks back into the huge house, clearly expecting Rhys to follow him.

The man stops just inside the doorway and waits for Rhys to enter. Once in the mansion, the man in the polo shirt doesn't go far, just down a little hall with a door at the end to be exact. He looks back once to see if Rhys follows. As Rhys does, the man gently knocks on the door which swings open to show him the biggest surprise--

"Ellie? Is that you?" He whispers as disbelief rocks through him. It's been at least ten—no twelve years since he last saw her. Still the most beautiful thing he's ever seen: long blonde hair down to her waist with those big green eyes he could spend all night looking into—because he has plenty of times, spent all night at her side that is. Still curvy in all the right places she still takes his breath away—especially since she's wearing one of those sundresses she always wore in high school that drove him crazy.

* * *

"Rhys? Is that you?" Her voice cracks as she utters his name out loud for the first time in years. Like some kind of penance, she didn't allow herself the privilege of still knowing him—

Not after all that she's done.

"How?"

"I made a couple of calls—Ellie-Mae? Why are you here at the Marinelli house?" Her boy, well he's now a very handsome man. Even way back when he was still hers, she knew that he was going to be a version of who he is now.

Taller than the last time she saw him and definitely broader, she can tell that he's been working out to go along with being a cop. The waves of inky black that he used to wear long, at least to his ears, is cropped close. Dressed in jeans and button up with the sleeves rolled to his elbows—how did he know that was her kryptonite?

While everything about him has changed one thing that hasn't—those piercing Carolina blue eyes of his. And the way they are taking her in—she's not sure if she should run or beg for mercy.

Because no matter what, she needs to remember that Rhys Campbell, her high school sweetheart, is still a cop and detective.

"Thank you, Rocky," she dismisses the butler that grandfather hired to watch over her. Rocky lingers longer than she'd like but he finally leaves.

But it's her who has to shut the door behind him. A deep breath as she tries to steady herself before she turns to face Rhys. "Where are my manners, would you like something to drink? There are somethings here at the bar but I can call Rocky back—"

"Why are you here?"

It's amazing how after all this time he still sounds the same. But she knows she doesn't because grandfather insisted on it. He didn't like the cornbread in her voice, so he hired acting coaches to help get rid of her accent as he confessed over and over that while he loved the sound of a well-educated southern woman but hated the whiny one of a hillbilly bitch from the hills.

Just orphaned at seventeen, of course she wanted to please the only family she had left. Even if Rhys Campbell, the boy she gave her heart to when they were five on the first day of kindergarten, would have married her that day if she'd just said yes because he asked her with his mama behind him with tears in everyone's eyes when they got the news about the horrible wreck—their kiss was salty from their tears as she whispered, "One day—"

Then they never saw each other again until now—

"My grandfather is Caesar Marinelli. My mother was his disowned daughter. When they were killed, that's when he claimed me," she pauses, and her laugh is bitter from the broken heart she's nursed all these years. "He even changed my name. Legally I'm Amarya Marinelli. You're the first person who's called me Ellie in—well since I left Weaverville."

He crosses the carpet, she can just imagine how the cowboy boots that are well worn on his feet would sound on a wood floor—until he stops in front of her. He doesn't touch her even though she wants, no needs him to.

"Ellie—" he whispers and for once she allows herself to do something she wants instead of what's expected. As she lays her finger vertical across his lips, thus stopping what he was about to say, she shakes her head.

"The room has ears," she breathes. His eyes grow wide at her implications. She holds out her hand and thankfully he understands because he unlocks his phone and puts it in her hand. A couple of touches and she enters a number then presses send. A phone on the desk behind them buzzes but she quickly hangs up his phone.

He accepts it back as she walks away but only to get hers. When she turns and sees that he's still there, she has to smile. She returns but doesn't allow herself to get as close as he did a moment ago. But she does start typing—

He must have turned his ringer off because now his phone just buzzes. But when he looks at her with his brow furrowed in question—she types again: *Can you meet? I want to talk to you, but it's not safe here.*

Finally he types back as she gets the message: *Yes. Where?*

At the end of the drive is a stop sign. Wait for me there.

He nods but says, "well it was nice seeing you again, Miss Marinelli. I really must be going now."

"Let me walk you out?" She opens the double doors that lead to the rest of the house before they walk back to the door he entered through. Even as she closes them behind her, she knows that they're being watched.

She keeps her eyes down so she can watch where she's going until they reach the bottom of the stairs. That's when she looks up. "Is that—"

"It is," he says with a big goofy grin on his face.

"I can't believe that you still have it." She runs her hand along the rail of the truck bed.

"I take care of things and people that I love—" he murmurs. Her heart flutters wildly and she knows that he meant that for her.

And his truck—

But mostly her. She makes herself look into those eyes that could always see the depths of her heart and soul and it takes everything she has not to jump into the truck with him and let him sweep her away—even if it's just to drop her off in a new town to start over.

"You always have. Thank you for coming by—" she tries to sound dismissive but even to her own ears she can hear that she doesn't at all.

"Thank you for seeing me on such short notice, Miss Marinelli." She can see him try not to cringe as he says that.

"Goodbye, Rhys," she whispers as he climbs into his truck. As she watches his taillights pull away down her driveway, she texts: *Wait for me. I'm leaving in a minute.*

Rhys: *Alright.*

Ellie doesn't have to look to know exactly where every guard is, she assigned them their places. But she also knows that it's all for show. The real threat, as always, is in New York where her grandfather is. Most of his enemies know of her existence, they just don't know where she is.

He only cares now because he realizes that he really is dying and unless something changes, she gets control of the family.

The door swings open as soon as she approaches it. Rocky starts to say something but she walks past him, hopefully like she doesn't have a care in the world. He also knows not to follow her down the hallway that leads to her bedroom. The last time he did—for once Grandfather agreed with her. And not for the first time she felt like an object and not like a loved one.

She grabs her purse but before she leaves her room, she checks herself in the mirror. Eyes bright with promise, cheeks pink with excitement, hair windswept to the side—she hasn't seen this version of herself in years.

Ellie's glad she's back.

A deep breath, she walks with confidence she hasn't felt in years as she heads for her Jeep. Rocky isn't anywhere around as she goes to the garage.

Miraculously, she sees no one, but doesn't allow herself to dwell on that as she climbs in. Out of everything handed to her over the years, this and her horse, Lady are the only things she has that no one else picked out for her.

Without another thought, she follows the path Rhys just took.

She doesn't have to go far to find him. Most two-lane roads in the south, when they come to a stop with a stop sign, there's usually a spot to pull off. And just there at the first stop sign past her house he sits with those stupid Carolina blue eyes and that truck where so many of her teenage-hood memories begin and end.

Not for the first time in her life, she's rendered him speechless as she pulls up beside him in her Jeep. A soft, genuine laugh slips past her lips for the first time in forever. "Follow me?" He nods and she drives.

Years of riding through these woods—she knows the perfect spot. And it even has a spot that hides their vehicles from the road so no one will see them. At first it seems that he's not following

her, but then his familiar headlights show up in her rearview mirror– and she can't stop the smile because he makes her heart happy.

Once she reaches the clearing, she stops and parks her Jeep so she can hop out. He pulls up beside her and gives her the same look he always did years ago, the one that says, is it alright if we do this?

She nods and she watches him shift the truck into park before he turns it off. As much as she wants to run and hug him, she crosses her arms in front of her even though she can't stand still because she's bouncing from the excitement of finally seeing him again.

But what she can't stop is her tears from escaping. His name is a whisper on her lips as he holds out his arms to her. Finally given permission, she closes the distance between them as they collide like two way-ward stars.

Her breath shudders as she finally exhales, finally feels like she can as her cheeks and his shirt grows wet from their tears. He guides them, all while never letting her go to the bed of his truck. He lowers the gate, then in one swift move, picks her up so she can sit. "Ellie-Mae my sweet," he sings to her what he did way-back when which just makes her cry all the harder, "Don't cry."

He cups her cheeks, and she grabs his wrists, not to make him let go-- but to keep his hands on her. It's been too long since anyone but her horse has willingly touched her. And his touch feels like jumping into cold water after walking in the desert for years.

She turns her head and kisses his palm before she raises her eyes to meet his. "You're here, you're really here."

"I would have come for you sooner if I'd known—"

"Grandfather never let me—that's why I told everyone that if they met you to just walk away."

"Why were you stealing stuff out of a bank in Asheville?"

"Mama's jewelry is in a safe deposit box in that bank. Grandfather won't let me go—"

"Ellie," he says as he steps closer. Her knees touch his stomach, and she can feel how firm those muscles are. "You're a grown woman—"

"Did you not see the men guarding the house as you drove in? They aren't there to pretend to be yard ornaments. They are security guards that Grandfather placed there." She waits for her words to sink in.

Rhys' eyes grow wide as they do. "Are you allowed to do anything or go anywhere?"

"To a point. I can go shopping or even to another city, but I can't get on the plane and go to Europe." She looks down as she admits this. She's not sure why she feels ashamed.

"You could come home—" his murmur does things to her that his deep baritone has no business doing.

Not to mention everything he makes her feel—feelings she hasn't felt since the last time she was in his arms.

"And do what? Doctor books for the small businesses in town? Make shady deals for the local hunters? Be an enforcer at the elementary school? You better do your homework—" she naturally slips into an Italian accent that most of the guards speak in. "Or you'll find yourself swimming with the fishes, you see—"

Thankfully he laughs with her.

"I'll figure something out, I always do," she mutters.

"You always do," he agrees. "But I can help."

"As nice as that sounds, I don't think you can," she says as she looks down to where her knees touch his chest. He must see where she looks because as he wiggles closer, she parts her legs to let

him closer all while he tilts her chin until she meets his eyes. “You always want to save everyone, that’s why you became a cop, isn’t it?”

“I just wanted to keep you safe.” She doesn’t miss how he glances at her lips before his eyes return to hers.

“Oh, Rhys,” she utters as his lips, with a touch so light she could have imagined his kiss, land on hers. But when she exhales under his touch, he takes it as permission as she gives it.

But instead of taking their kiss deeper, he stops moving. He still touches her and she just knows that she needs to open her eyes. His Carolina blue ones stare into hers. “We need to stop, because Lord knows that once we start, I won’t be able to stop. And if I know you now like I knew you then, you want me just as bad as I want you.”

“Please, Rhys.” She finally allows herself to touch his chest and pull him close. “I need you—I’ve never stopped needing or wanting you.”

“Oh, Ellie-Mae.” His lips land on hers again. Her fingers can't run through his waves that she loved so much, so instead she reaches up to scratch his peach fuzz as his hands land on her waist. “I’ve missed you so much,” he mutters against her skin as he kisses down her neck.

“You have no idea—” she mutters before his lips land on hers again. As their tongues mingle, his hands slide up her sides. He stops and she feels his thumbs brush the undersides of her breasts. “Somethings never change,” she breaks the kiss to mumble against his lips with a giggle.

His breath is loud as he exhales. “I want you Ellie-Mae.” Those eyes of his blink slowly into hers. “We can stop kissing now—”

She doesn't let him finish because she knows what she wants and it’s him. Her lips claim his in a reply and she knows that he feels the same because his hands squeeze—her hands move on their own accord it feels like when her fingers find the buttons of his dress shirt. She gets the first two undone when he pulls away.

In a move that country boys make effortless, he grabs the back of his shirt and without unbuttoning anymore, he pulls it over his head. No longer the skinny guy who she loved with all her heart and soul—now he’s the workout police detective that she still loves with all her heart and soul guy—err man.

Definitely, a man.

She starts to slide the strap of her sundress down when his deep baritone says, “Let me, please.”

When he says it like that and looks at her like she’s, well everything. Who is she to tell him no.

She nods and murmurs, “I have a blanket in the back of the Jeep.”

He turns and quickly finds it behind the back gate. A raised eyebrow with an unspoken question as he holds up the blanket with a well-known movie franchise that involves a single family in space she shrugs. “You know how much I love those movies. I just had to.”

“Can I tell you a secret?” He closes the distance between them as he looks down at the blanket in his hands.

“What?”

“Whenever I would miss you, which was a lot, I would watch these movies.” His admission sounds so sad.

She reaches out for him, and he lets her wrap her hands around his bicep and pull him close. He steps in between her knees and she asks, “So if I were to say, *I love you*—”

“*I know—”* he answers as he brings the blanket up to wrap around her shoulders.

“Kiss me—” she whispers.

“That’s not—” he begins, only for her to stop his words with a kiss. “Are you sure?” He stops to ask just one more time.

"More than anything."

That crooked country boy smile is back and her heart flips. In a good way. His hands settle on her arms as their lips find one another again. she flips the blanket behind her as she returns her hands to his torso. This time when he starts to kiss down her neck, then on to her shoulder, his hands slide down the straps that hold the dress in place. But before the dress slides down to her waist, he stops kissing her and meets her eyes with another crooked smile.

"I missed you," he whispers.

"You have no idea how much I missed you—" she admits. She wiggles just enough for the front of her dress to slide down even more. His eyes widen as she pulls her arms out of the straps and the dress falls to her waist.

"You're still the prettiest thing I've ever seen—" he breathes as he palms her breasts.

Her breath is shaky as she releases it. "You're the first one to touch me—well since you."

He blinks as if he's waking up. "You mean—"

"Shh—fuck me please, Rhys."

His hands slide from her chest and for a moment she's afraid that he's not but then his hands, which never leave her skin, sear a trail to her back. His forehead comes to rest against hers. "I wish we were in a house far, far away in a proper bed where I can give you everything you deserve—"

"One day." She cups his cheeks so he'll meet her eyes again. "Right now, all I need is you." Suddenly brave, she reaches down to cup him through his jeans. "And him," she teases with a smile on her lips.

"Damn Ellie, how can I say no to that?"

Her fingers find his belt buckle and muscle memory returns as she loosens it before he can. He stills and she takes it as encouragement to keep going. She lowers the waistband of his boxers and slips her hand in his underwear so she can take his length in her hand.

His breath escapes in a sudden hiss when she sweeps her thumb over his slit. A bite on his neck as she giggles. "Did you like that?"

"I have something you'll like—" his hands land on her knees and he's pushing her dress up until she can look down to see the lace panties she put on this morning after her shower. That crooked smile of his is back as he murmurs, "Lay back, Princess—"

"That's a new one—" she answers. She doesn't mind, there's no teasing in his voice when he says it. But almost reverently like a prayer or that she's really that precious to him.

He runs a finger along the hemmed edge of the lace. Even though it's the beginning of June, a shiver of desire runs through her like a shock of electricity. "Please—" she breathes.

"Please what, Princess?"

"Touch me—"

His finger continues on its course but stops when it gets to her entrance. He doesn't do anything but moves his finger ever-so-slightly so he can reach her slit. A light, teasing touch is all she feels as she can feel herself growing more and more wet.

"What do you need, Princess?"

"Everything—you—please—"

Finally, he touches her at her core as he dips his finger deep inside her. "How about here, Princess," he growls, "Has anyone touched you here since that last time with me?"

"Just toys, Rhys," she whispers as her eyes roll back because he starts to move.

"What kind of toys? My sweet Ellie-Mae has sex toys."

"You're teasing me," she accuses. "And yes I did, still do."

"I want to watch you one day. Until then–" he stops but only because he bends over and he doesn't even take her panties off but just pushes them aside. But when she feels his lips, that mouth that was made for sinning latch on to her clit—a moan echoes through the trees as her hips buck into his mouth.

His arm secures her hips to hold her in place as he continues to rush her to her pleasure. Suddenly, her orgasm washes over her like a freight train, and it leaves her shaking like the leaves in the oak trees above her.

Then Rhys is there blocking out the trees. His top lip is still wet from her but before she can wipe it, he says, "I don't have a condom."

"I don't either. I'm clean—well I've already told you that. Just pull out?"

"Pull out—" he says as he nods. "Alright, just pull out." He pulls down her panties before he lifts her legs, and with her favorite sundress gathered around her middle and her ex-high school sweetheart who she hasn't seen in over twelve years who is currently running the head of his dick through her folds and very naked—with a deep breath, he slowly enters her.

Her breath hitches in her throat as he fully seats himself deep inside her. One of her ankles is now on his shoulder while her other foot rests on his hip, spreading herself wide to welcome him.

"Fuck, Princess," he utters. Then slowly as if he's enjoying the feel of her just as much as she is him, he begins to move. Slowly at first, then it's like he can't help but to speed up as her eyes roll back as his thrusts speed up. Too soon he pulls out like he promised. She looks down at her stomach where his essence spills onto her.

"Don't move," his soft command makes her smile and not only because he is so soft and she just wants to wrap it around her like a blanket.

He hops down off the truck gate and walks towards the cab. The passenger door creaks as he opens it, then he hurries back to her. He hands her several paper towels as she sits up. She starts to wipe but then has to laugh.

That brow of his rises and she giggles, "You're so naked in my woods."

He chuckles too. "All for a very good reason, my love—" for some reason those words break the spell that's woven itself around them. He picks up his clothes, and she pulls up her dress. Before she can grab her panties, he has them in his hand and tucks them in his pocket.

"Those are mine—" more giggles.

"Now they're mine." He comes close as he pulls up his jeans to steal a kiss. "Come home with me. Just leave all this and come back with me."

She cups his cheeks and rests her forehead against his. "One day, soon," she promises.

"I'm going to hold you to that."

"I hope so." She leans back just enough so she can see those eyes of his again. "Let's do this again?"

"Soon," he promises right back.

* * *

SHE PULLS UP to the house about an hour later. They stood around talking about everything under the sun, just like Grandfather hates. Speaking of which—why is his car parked in front of the house and not in the garage?

A quick glance in the mirror tells her that she looks presentable, thankfully the marks Rhys left her with are under her sundress. She grabs her purse and slowly gets out. Rocky meets her at the front

door, and for a moment, she could swear that she saw a flash of sympathy or at least something close to it as he watches her walk through the door.

Before she can ask, he says, “He’s in the library.”

“Alright.” She changes her course and walks to the otherside of the house away from her rooms. The door is open and she’s not surprised that Grandfather isn’t alone. There are a couple of other men in there that she’s never seen before but when she starts to ask, he says instead, “Amarya, let me introduce you to your husband—”

“What? No, Grandfather—”

“You will do what I say—” are the last words she remembers before her grandfather, the only family she has left smacks her on the cheek. Her head twirls and she hits the floor but not before she hits her head on the corner of the desk.

* * *

WHEN SHE FINALLY WAKES UP, it's Rocky of all people who sits beside her bed. She’s still in the same dress Rhys fucked her in, but by the way the sun comes in the window she can tell that it’s early—“What day is it?” Her voice is harsh from disuse, and she wonders if one of those men tried to choke her and from the way she can’t open her eyes all the way—

“It's tomorrow.” She slowly tries to stand as she processes Rocky's words. “Did you—”

“They left you in the library, I brought you in here. I didn’t feel comfortable changing your clothes. But I did stay with you all night." She tries to get up– but Rocky is the one who catches her. “Let me help you.”

They make it to the bathroom, and she dreads looking at her reflection but she has to know—“Grab my purse, please, then I think I need a nice hot bath.”

“No one else is here. Let me leave the doors open, please? If you need me, call for me. I’ll come help.”

“Why are you helping me?” She asks after he hands her her purse.

He meets her eyes. “No one deserves what they did to you yesterday.” Is all he says before he leaves her bedroom. By now, she’s in front of the sink and a deep breath before she meets her own eyes in the mirror.

Tears from her swollen black eyes. Both of them black, she can see even more bruises from their hits.

And yes, someone did choke her.

Perfect fingers-bruises surround her neck like the collar of a turtleneck sweater. More dark places on her arms, on her chest. She slides the straps off her shoulders of her dress and just lets it fall. She’s more black and blue than her normal light olive-color.

She reaches for her purse and pulls out her phone. Three swipes and he answers, “Ellie-Mae I tried calling and texting—what—”

“Rhys?” He stops talking at the sound of his name. “How would you like to take down one of the largest crime families on the east coast?”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chele MacCabe has spent the last several years learning how to string words together to tell stories. After all that practice, and playing with her favorite fandoms, she's ready to share her imagination with the rest of the world. She lives in the mountains with her mister, the medium and tall ones, and the critters that have found their way into their hearts.

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Notes/thanks-
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And yes, I'm that Chele.

SULTAN'S BITE



BY SOFIA AVES

What happens when a good dog loses his bite?

Nico's life has revolved around the local mafia since he was a teen, but the longer he stays, the more he sees cracks beneath the gritty facade. His teeth still cut the same, but he no longer wants to be tied to a thug's life that's lost its attraction.

Mafia Princess Amy exists in an impenetrable gilded cage, and her father holds the key.

Until she decides to seduce Nico in a bid for her freedom…and his.

CHAPTER 1



NICO

MARCELLE STARED STRAIGHT THROUGH ME, letting my refusal linger in the stale air between us.

"No?" His fingers left creases in his pristine caramel suit pants.

My faithful dog has lost his bite. The well-oiled machine has finally failed me.

The room stood frozen under his command. Soldiers, capos…they all waited on his reaction, and mine.

Pity I didn't care about their expectations any longer. All I wanted was my door pass out of the compound. I got the feeling Marcelle wasn't in a giving mood.

I didn't take my eyes off him, but I saw everything.

The two thugs circling at my back hadn't been around long enough not to know where my blindspot sat, or that I didn't have one in a place I knew so well. The eager grin on Isaac's face flipped my stomach. Marcelle's pathetic son, keen to see another beating.

The laboured breathing of a man who knew he was already dead.

But it wouldn't be for the reason Marcelle had asked of me.

What Marcelle had demanded.

"Not for this," I gestured at the bound banker silent at the toe of my boots.

The stench of urine permeated the air.

Issac released a high pitched giggle. Everyone in the room winced, except for his father.

A soft smile curled the corners of the mafia boss' lips, one that might be mistaken for leniency, or maybe weakness.

It was neither, and that made it all the more terrifying.

"I have no use for a dog without his teeth, Sultan." Marcelle held my gaze with his lifeless one a moment longer. Not a breath flowed between us, giving clarity to our impasse. He turned his back to me, flicking one hand out to the side.

I blocked the coward's cheap shot, the side blow that supplied me with enough time to react. I tossed the kid over my shoulder before he realised his attempt had failed at the outset.

Kneeling as he sailed passed me, I drew his handgun from where it had been conspicuously stuffed down the front of his pants, the weapon's weight telling me the idiot had left it loaded. I flicked my thumb over the side and inhaled. He'd left the safety off.

I mentally shook my head; it was a miracle he still had a cock. He crumpled somewhere in the

background. A sickening crunch told me he wouldn't be getting up again.

His thug buddy stepped forward, apparently deciding his odds were better if I came armed, and muttered a one-liner that might have made him sound like a hero in a b-grade action flick.

His rookie mistake.

A loud report and a soft thud announced a second body hitting the tiled floor. The banker shit himself as the hero landed beside him.

At least they would be easy to clean up, though I wouldn't be the one tasked with it.

Issac leered at me, his mouth half opened in glee. His eyes glazed, addicted to the violence that followed his father everywhere. The kid had no leadership skills; just a sheep at best. Marcelle would be lucky if he still had an heir come Christmas. It took everything I had not to finish my jaunt off with him, but I wasn't on a suicide run.

I rose, pivoting to face Marcelle's back. The short, round man paused mid-step.

Without looking down, I unloaded the remaining bullets into the dead man at my feet, blood spraying my vision and everyone else in the vicinity.

A flicker of movement behind him caught my eye, a flash of red that darted across my vision. Pink lips formed a tiny 'o', the sort I wanted to kiss or see wrapped around my cock. Wide brown eyes framed by heavy lashes I could fall into locked my gaze and held, undeterred by the carnage that surrounded me. What would they look like when I sank balls-deep into her soft, tempting skin?

Amy.

The mafia princess Marcelle sold to each bidder that gave him the sweetest deal. What she wanted never came into the equation. My stomach turned on itself. That made it one more reason to walk away from the man in his tin castle surrounded by a cohort of fools.

By the time I blinked, the doorway behind Marcelle stood empty. I returned my attention to him and threw on the persona he expected though the wrath that should have ripped through my veins had vacated with Amy.

That tiny piece of info weighed heavy on my chest and brought a wave of irritation crashing over me.

"Satisfied I still have bite, *boss*?" I snapped, clenching my teeth.

I knew better than to speak to expose my anger. That confirmed a weakness that Marcelle would use against me in future.

The mafia boss raised one shoulder, not bothering to look at me. "Maybe. There's a job for you. You'll get details later."

He meandered through the doorway like he was on a Sunday stroll, his entourage scurrying in his wake.

I was surprised they didn't genuflect as he passed.

Finally, I stood alone with two bodies and a warm one that would soon be in the same condition as the remainder.

The kid I'd thrown over my shoulder whimpered, gargling on his bent throat from a position that made even me wince. I knelt behind him, cradling his head between my hands. Baby blue eyes begged at me from a rounded, school boy face that looked ridiculous on a twenty-something man.

His breath laboured, he gurgled at me, spittle coating too-thick lips.

I nodded, taking his weight in my hands and twisted his neck. It didn't take the full turn to snap his spine.

The gurgling stopped and I walked out of the room, nodding silently to the two men waiting at the door with their cleaning equipment.

CHAPTER 2



AMY

I STARED at the pink frilly thing in my father's arms and stomped my foot the way a princess should, even as my head rebelled against the action. "I'm not wearing that. Not a chance in this hell or any other. I'm nineteen, not nine. And even then, *that* would be…" I let the sentence hang, staring into my father's steel dark gaze.

His worker bees might flinch from the Utah mafia syndicate boss' glare, but I refused to play that game. If anyone gave an inch to my father he'd take it tenfold and bind his victim to a promise they hadn't made for life. I'd seen it happen, and I refused to let him do it to me.

"Can't you pretend to be one of us?" He gestured to my black denim skirt and bubblegum pink top that hung over it. Paired with a pair of dark purple combat boots, I'd chosen the outfit because I thought it might get me what I wanted fastest.

He wouldn't argue because I revealed too much but because I refused to dress up as bait and stand on my pedestal to be sold to the most influential bidder.

My aim was for daddy dearest to give up on finding me a man and leave me the hell alone so I could escape the state without bothering him upfront about it.

It was better to ask forgiveness than seek permission, or something like that.

"You don't think your capos would like seeing the real me?" I taunted him, yanking my hair out of its high ponytail. I could have gone with pigtails but that would piss him off, and it wouldn't coincide with my goals at all. "Get them married off to me before they know what sort of alternative child you fathered, give them a chance to be shocked before they flounce off to the mistresses they spoil."

Marcelle's face suffused to a pretty shade of magenta. For a small car, maybe. "It is a part of our life. Your mother had the grace to stay silent. It would do you good to follow her example."

I stared at him, my mouth falling open a fraction of a second before tears welled in my eyes. "My mother-your *wife*-committed suicide, you ungrated, arrogant bastard!" I shrieked. The desk behind me seemed empty but finally my searching hands grasped a brick shaped thing and launched it.

Marcelle dodged the tissue box, tight lines creasing his fat mouth. "You're such a disappointment."

I snorted over a hiccup. If he wanted an example of *disappointment*, he didn't need to look any further than his firstborn, which thankfully, wasn't me. I ranked second in that coveted arena.

"Then you'll be relieved when I leave." I snapped the brittle words off, and pressed my lips

together. *Dammit.* I hadn't meant to let that slip.

"Going somewhere?" Marcelle leaned forward to laugh in my face. "Defiant one. I have some wonderful manacles for you. I just have to pick which man will wield them."

He's talking metaphorical ones. Right?

"You- pick-" My mind blanked. I coughed into my hand, but I doubted it hid the horror reflected in my eyes. "No."

"You keep saying that, Amy. But it's not your choice." My father's cheeks pinked as he looked at me.

Another girl might mistake his expression with pride. I knew it for the gleam he got when he sealed a deal and screwed the recipient into the ground.

The door of my pink, fluffy bedroom clicked shut behind him, reminding me what one of his cages looked like from the inside. Fortunately, a lifetime of my father's personal brand of manacles birthed a master lockpick. And I had a plan.

CHAPTER 3



NICO

"YOU KNOW you can leave any time you like." I wiped my grease-covered hands on a rag and tossed it onto the bench.

It landed in the small gap between a pair of pale, slim knees that were made for temptation and sin. Amy's fists played with the material of her black skirt where she tugged it between her thighs to obscure my view. An over-filled duffle bag sat at her feet.

I hadn't asked what she'd shoved inside it. Having the boss' daughter around me was a bad idea at any time of the day. I'd battled that temptation for a damn long time.

My cock throbbed from the moment she waltzed into the chop shop and perched on my workbench amongst my tools. Her combat boots only made me want her more, knowing she was so much more than the fluffy bunny her father painted her to be. The corner of my mouth lifted. Whichever capo ended up with her, he'd have a beast to tame.

My smile died as she threw me a sultry look, though my cock objected to not doing her on the bench where she sat.

This can't happen.

Not today, not fucking ever.

"You're going to take me away from here."

I snorted. "Is that right?"

"Yup." She released some of the tension on the fabric twisted in one hand between her legs to draw her fingers along her inner thigh. "It is. Because my father's an asshole and he wants me tied to some man in his business who will cheat on me, and treat me like shit. And you're the machine, right? For my father? The one that never fails."

"Your eavesdropping screwed that one up." My cock bobbed in my jeans, or at least, it tried, but room in there was scarce. Marcelle's reaction to my refusal earlier reverberated inside my skull, the failure eating at me, what I'd been trained to become. I tilted my head back to stare up at the hoist above me, running my gaze over the job it held suspended, secure. The one machine I couldn't have fail on *me*. "That's the life."

"That's what he said." She watched me through those thick lashes. "But you're not like him are you, Sultan?"

Hearing my surname on her lips did bad things to my brain. I sighed and ran my hand through my

hair. “Princess, I can’t take you anywhere. I can’t fucking touch you.”

Her pretty little smile widened, all cat-got-the-cream. “I have no choice in what my father does, but I have a choice right now, Nico.” Her dark eyes turned to liquid. “Please.” Her thighs parted the slightest amount, and her hands dropped away.

I stared at the shadow between me and that soft little place I needed to sink into and gave into the dark desire brewing within me. “Don’t beg me for something that’s a really fucking bad idea, Princess.”

“I need to get out of here.” The broken tone of her voice drew my attention back to where it should have been all along.

“So go.”

“He won’t let me.”

“So you want to use me?” I gave her an incredulous laugh. “Let me lay this out for you, Princess. We leave, your father hunts us down. Two days, maybe three, we’re dead. Maybe he sends some boys to have fun with you first. Sounds peachy, right?”

She stared hard at me. “So we leave the state.”

“Yeah? Just like that.” I returned her stare with a hard one of my own, trying to push back the thought that her idea had merit. But running with a mafia girl had *bad idea* written all over it.

“Just like that.”

“And what do I get out of it?” The words rolled off my tongue too fast.

She shrugged. “Whatever you like. I’ve seen the way you look at me, Sultan. Everyone has. My father loves rubbing me in your face. Metaphorically, that is.” Her cheeks pinked, a flush that crept up her throat from beneath the hideous pink tee she wore.

I wondered if that same pink flush matched her nipples.

A growl ripped from my throat. I was up in her face before she could take her next breath. “How many fantasies have you had of fucking your dad’s dirty men, Amy?” I leaned forward, brushed my lips over the shell of her ear. My palm cupped her jaw, letting my fingers dent the soft flesh of her cheeks. “How many others have you given that offer, Princess?”

“N- no one, Sultan. I swear.” Her lips parted in an ‘o’ and for the second time in a few hours I imagined sliding my cock between them, fucking that pretty little mouth until she gasped for breath. “I want you.”

“A promise doesn’t mean much here.” I braced my filthy hands either side of her clean little body, crowding her space and savoured her words, using them to fuel my own desire. “But I will take you up on that offer.”

Not my finest moment, but it might get both of us what we wanted.

Amy’s brow creased. “Which one?”

I gave her a feral, terrifying smile before I crushed her pink mouth beneath mine. She was as soft as I’d expected, and she tasted like champagne and freedom. I ground my palms to the rough-hewn tool bench as my mouth plundered hers, taking everything from the sweet-as-sin offering planted in front of me.

I didn’t wait for her lips to part beneath mine, wedging her thighs apart with my hip as I drove my tongue between those lips, earning every moan.

Amy’s calves locked behind my hips, digging her heels into my ass as she drew me into her. She arched up, rubbing her pussy against me and broke the kiss with a soft gasp. “Please, Sultan. I- please.”

I smiled against her mouth, sliding my tongue across her bottom lip. “Wish granted, Princess.”

Her denim skirt lifted, and exposed soft thighs to my dirty hands. I left dark stripes of grease in my wake, marking her as I traced patterns along the inside of her thighs. She squiggled her ass forward on the workbench, a tiny squeak emitting from her as she clung to me.

The tips of my fingers stroked over her cotton-covered pussy, tracing her sensitive mound. Tiny noises slipped from her lips as she pressed her hips forward, seeking friction. But rough as my kisses were, I kept my caresses gentle, almost sweet. Her dark streaked thighs wrapped tight around me as I found the little bundle of nerves that hardened under my touch.

Amy shuddered, her head thrown back, her mouth open. I dipped my head to kiss her hard, tasting the pleasure in her cries. Her knees dug into my sides, a shiver starting deep within her. I drew my hand back, leaving her panting.

She stared at me, her eyes wild. "Why'd you stop?" she whimpered. Her hands wrapped in my shirt, tugging me forward.

"That's not going to work, Princess," I said, peeling her fingers away one by one. "I might have a filthy mind, but putting these dirty fingers in you isn't in my plan."

"I don't care," she whispered, edging forward on the bench.

I held her gaze and used the momentum to yank her panties down her legs. "I care. If I'm going to mark you, it'll be somewhere I can see it." I trailed my fingertips along the stripes inside her thighs, dragging my touch over her stomach to trace circles around her breasts.

Her chest heaved as she pressed her shoulders back, seeking the same contact as before. "Sultan, I offered-"

"And I'm taking you up on that offer, Princess." I kissed her slower, dragged my thumbs beneath the swell of her breasts, encountering no resistance beneath her tee. "Mmm. Planned this, Amy? Or slutting it up in general?"

My dirty talk tore a choked cry from her lips.

I rubbed my open palms over her pebbled nipples, still covered by her tee, teasing her with the rough touch, enough to ease the sensitive nubs but not enough to give her satisfaction. Tracing from the widest swell of her breasts to the tips, I watched dark stripes surround the dark circles that covered her nipples, highlighting her arousal.

Her face flushed pink as I continued to touch her, tease her. Tiny pearls of sweat dotted along her throat, her loose curls stuck there.

"Look at yourself, Amy," I murmured, leaning into her. "Look down. What do you see? Your legs are spread, wrapped around the waist of one of your father's most dangerous employees. I've marked your thighs, where you let me touch you. That little pair of white cotton panties is stained with grease and slick with your need. Your nipples are tight, and I've marked you there too." I caught her jaw between my fingers, smearing her cheek with grease and pussy juice.

CHAPTER 4



AMY

I STARED at the places Nico named, mesmerised. He'd marked me wherever he had touched, leaving me aching for him. I'd come into the shop with a plan, but never had I thought I would be laid out on his bench begging for his cock.

"What do you see, Amy? Do you see the boss' daughter? Or do you see my little slut?" He coated the filthy words in affection and I craved him all the more.

"I'm yours," I whispered, tears burning the corners of my eyes. They weren't from shame, but driven by my growing need. "I want-" I choked on the last word, rearranging it a few times in my head. "This. I need this. You."

Nico reared back. Whatever he'd expected me to say, I hadn't played his game.

Some part of me was proud of that. The part not currently dripping arousal all over his workbench.

"Fuck, Princess." Nico's lifted his fingers from my sweet breast torture to fist my hair, drawing my head back. His kisses, hard before, slammed against my mouth, brutal and claiming.

I gasped into his mouth, kissing him back. His chest was hard under my hands as I unbuttoned his shirt to pull it apart. A fine smattering of wiry hair scattered across his chest, and anywhere there wasn't hair, there was ink. I traced the patterns that curved perfectly over his muscles, a raw little sound tearing from my mouth.

Nico drew back. "I'm not a pretty man, and I'm not one of the boys you're used to dating."

"What boys?" I ran my fingers over the ridges of muscle that led into his jeans, and toyed with the button on his jeans. "My father never let me date anyone outside the organisation. You know the stories as well as anyone."

Nico's gaze darkened, his only indication that he understood.

Those stories were legendary. A capo's son, who thought a group date was the best way to proceed with deflowering me. An evening with an associate, a businessman who had a spanking fetish but with him as the impact toy, not me. I'd been bitterly disappointed on that occasion.

"Those weren't men, Amy. You deserve better. So much better than that. Than me."

"But I *want* you," I whined. *Please.* But I'd already begged him more than enough. If he denied me then…I'd be doing the walk of shame through my father's house, in front of his friends, and I couldn't imagine the humiliation he would subject me to for defying him.

Nico swore, apparently coming to his own conclusion.

He wound one arm around my back, drawing him closer. "Tell me this is what you want," he demanded. His mouth hovered over mine.

Tell me.

Choice.

Nico gave me a choice.

I slapped his chest with both open palms, pursing my lips to hide my smile. "I made my choice when I came down here," I said in a somewhat grumpy voice. "But…it is nice to be asked."

"Glad you approve." Nico kissed me again and pushed my hands down to cover his denim-encased cock.

He filled my hands as I fumbled the zip, finally freeing his hard length. "Oh," I breathed, my mouth watering. I made to slip down from the bench, but his hand gripped my hip.

"Not this time, Princess." His voice strained a little.

I smiled against his mouth, sliding my hand around his cock to learn its ridges and length, how tight he liked me to grip him, and filed it all away.

He yanked his wallet out from his back pocket and shoved a foil packet between my teeth.

I blinked, my eyes wide as I ran the tip of my tongue along the sharp edge, enough for him to see. He swore again as I tore the foil and fit the condom over him, running my thumb over his head.

Nico groaned as he slid his hands beneath my ass, pulling me to the edge of the bench. Sharp wood bit into my skin but I didn't argue. I tipped my hips back, clinging to his shoulders for purchase.

"Last chance, Princess," he rasped.

I shook my head, a small smile playing on my lips until he surged forward, seating himself to the hilt in a single thrust. His mouth claimed mine, swallowing the cry that would have betrayed us both as he throbbed within me. His chest grazed against mine, hard, hot muscle looming over me, pressing me back, though his arms held me up, kept me from falling.

Pleasure roared through me as he began to move, his hands pinning my hips to the bench. His denial from before, his teasing, those dirty words…his thrusts increased, his tongue in my mouth an echo of his cock driving me higher.

Nico's fingers bit into my ass as he seated himself deep. The pleasure, sensations drawn from too many places at once peaked, toppling me over the edge he had denied me before. I screamed into his mouth and swallowed his bellow as he emptied himself inside me. His pulsing cock inside me drew my orgasm on and on, endless, and though he held me tight in his arms, our hearts slamming into each other's chest, I fell.

CHAPTER 5



NICO

AMY CURLED IN MY ARMS, her eyes half-lidded as I slipped from her and began to clean both of us up with as clean clothes as I could find. A chop shop was *not* equipped for this sort of horseplay.

"Amy, I need you to help me," I murmured into her hair. My lips grazed the top of her head. "Someone is gonna come looking for one of us and neither of us should be here when they do."

An indignant squawk erupted at chest level. I looked down at that *just fucked* hair, the sheen of sweat on her skin and wanted to keep her like that forever.

Right now, that wasn't practical, but I could take her to a place where it might be. Where she'd be safe. Me…I had too many sins to my name to claim that, but I could get her out from her father's influence. That's what she'd asked for, and that's what I'd promised her, what she deserved.

The well-oiled machine.

Maybe I wasn't as broken as either her father or I thought.

"You're backing out on our deal?" The hands curled at my chest formed into fists that she pounded at my chest.

I raised an eyebrow. "No, I'm telling you to pack your shit and get out. With me."

That one took her a moment to process and after the session we'd had, I couldn't blame her.

"Oh." Amy looked down, her hair obscuring her face. She traced light fingertips over my ink, then lower.

My cock stirred again, though I could have sworn that the sex had shattered me. "We need to go," I reminded her in a soft voice. I crooked a knuckle beneath my chin. "Did you have somewhere you were aiming for? Somewhere safe?" It sounded like a long shot, even to me but…before I took her into my old playground, I figured I should ask. A gentleman did that, right? Not that I had any remote chance of claiming that status. There had to be a few crossover tendencies though, right?

"A galaxy a long way away, far something, something?"

"There's so many things wrong with that statement."

"I'm sorry." Amy raised her head to stare into my eyes with that liquid dark gaze.

For the first time, I read the uncertainty there. "I'll take you somewhere safe, Princess. To your very own castle."

"You have a castle?" Her eyes widened.

I choked back a laugh. "Of a sort." I hefted her duffle bag over my shoulder and headed for my

car. When I looked back, Amyhadn't moved from her perch on the bench behind me. I held out a hand, filthy palm up. "Coming?"

She froze for a second and I began to wonder how many men I'd have to kill to get her out. Then she slid down from the bench, a boneless little hot mess of my making, marked and flushed. Perfect.

Her smile lit my world as her fingers laced through mine. She let me lead her to my classic Mustang, ran her fingers along the high gloss panels. I trusted my life to the machine and now, I'd trust hers to it.

Breath hissed between my teeth as I wound my hands around her waist. I pulled her close and kissed her again, savouring the sweet taste of her satisfaction that mingled with mine.

The throaty roar of the engine heralded our escape from her father's world, pale, clean fingers wrapped around grease stains and denim.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today Bestselling author Sofia Aves writes fast-paced police romances, sizzling military units, steamy cowboys with a Montana backdrop and the occasional cheeky god. As Marketing & Events Manager for Romance Writers of Australia, she loves to see authors flourish in their careers while sending her budget broke buying their books. Sofia writes kidlit for charity and has over one hundred and forty publications across four not-so-super-secret pen names.

Sofia is a mum of three crazies in a returned veteran household and has an overly large fur baby who thinks she's a teacup puppy. After eighteen years of planning and dreaming, Sofia and her husband will put the finishing touches on their very own alpaca park this year. Sofia lives near Brisbane, Australia.

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STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN



BY TANYA NELLESTEIN

She wants to dance with the devil.

Becca has been trapped in a void created by grief and her aunt's religious zeal, until a chance meeting with an outlaw motorcycle biker. Following Zep into the dark and dangerous criminal underworld of The Devils MC frees her from a life of treading water, and unleashes a side of herself that's been hidden. But how long can Becca linger in the shadows before their darkest desires consume her?

CHAPTER 1



1 992 - Sydney, Australia

CHRIST, why can't this damn thing stay hidden?

Skipping down the steps of the cafe, I push the gold crucifix back inside my collar. I only wear it to please my aunt and uncle. The smooth links tangle against my finger. As I try to pull my finger free, I smash head first into what feels like a brick wall covered in hard leather. The milkshake I hold in my unchained hand erupts between me and the leather-clad wall while the sketch pad and pencils in my open backpack clatter to the ground.

"Shit, sorry," says the brick wall, who has arms and legs and is now squatting in unison with my own downward trajectory. My forehead collides with his leather-jacketed torso for the second time, sending me straight back on my ass.

The palms of my hands burn from the contact with the concrete pavement and I'm covered in chocolate milk, but the sun glinting off the crucifix around my neck grates the most. I stuff it back inside my shirt then touch my hand to the dull ache in my forehead. What a mess.

"Here, let me help you up." A hand appears in front of my face and I decide I'd do better with a guide to get back on my feet than attempting to navigate it myself.

"Thanks." I grimace as my grazed palm meets a firm grip.

"Fuck, are you hurt?" Brown eyes scan my face before dipping to below my chin, clearly eyeing the crucifix. "Um, sorry for swearing."

I push the crucifix inside my shirt again. Why can it not stay hidden today!

"It's fine." I examine my hands and find the skin unbroken, just reddened from the fall. I hold them up for the stranger to see. "No blood."

"Good." The man holds a handkerchief out to me. "It's clean, I promise."

A handkerchief? I lean back and look at him properly. He is shorter than my uncle, so less than six feet tall, and a leather vest covers his broad shoulders, accentuating his tapered torso. Black jeans are held in place by a belt with a big silver buckle shaped into a skull with wings and words I can't quite make out. He wears a Metallica t-shirt under the vest, and big black boots on his feet. And the man was offering me a clean handkerchief…

"Thanks?" It comes out as a question rather than a statement as I take the cotton square.

He smiles for the first time and his brown eyes turn into liquid chocolate. He ducks back to the ground and begins collecting my belongings, hopefully missing the sigh that rushes from my lips.

I blott the handkerchief on my t-shirt. Who is this guy? He looks like a biker with the leather vest and biker boots, but his short black hair and handkerchief don't really fit the profile. Tattoos peek out from beneath the sleeves of his t-shirt as his well-defined arms reach to pick up my scattered pencils. On the back of the vest is a patch with the same skull and wings design of his belt buckle, perched above the name, Devils MC.

Devils MC? Never heard of them. Maybe he's just wearing some expensive wannabe vest and playing at being tough?

"I think I got everything." He is back on his feet and holding up my backpack. He glances at my chest and then clears his throat. Is he actually blushing?

I look down and realize my lacy red bra is on full display beneath my drenched white t-shirt.

"Shit!" I cross my arms across my chest.

He chuckles. "Here, wear this." He places my backpack on the ground at his feet and slips the leather vest off. Before I can refuse, he drapes the vest around my shoulders, holding the sides out for me to push my arms through. "It's already got milkshake spilled on it."

The leather is heavy and smells warm and earthy and like a very bad idea.

"Where's your car?" he asks.

I restrain another sigh - this one laden with frustration - threatening to escape. "Don't have one." *Thanks to my aunt and uncle withholding my inheritance.* "I'm on the bus."

"When that milk dries, it's going to reek," he says. "Come on, I'll give you a ride." He picks up my backpack and starts walking in the direction he is facing.

What? I can't just get in a car with a stranger who may or may not be a member of an outlaw motorcycle gang. But he has my backpack, and I'm wearing his vest. I almost have to jog to catch up as he strides down the street and around the corner.

He stops in front of a big black and silver motorbike with really tall handlebars, pushing my backpack into the left-hand side saddle bag and holding out a helmet. My stomach flips and my bladder threatens to release. Guess I needn't have worried about getting into a car with a stranger.

Then he flashes me a smile that lights up his whole face and sets my heart fluttering like a bunch of butterflies. I haven't done anything this crazy in years, which suddenly feels like way too long.

CHAPTER 2

I recite my address and climb on. I haven't been on a motorbike since I was a kid, clinging to the back of my dad as we maneuvered through traffic in Ho Chi Minh City. Thankfully, my would-be savior has tightened the straps on the helmet he placed on my head. If he left it to me, I'd probably be wearing it backwards.

The bike roars to life beneath me and despite the ferocity of the engine starting, we glide into the traffic as serenely as a ballet dancer. The helmet is open-faced and the wind makes my eyes water. I close my eyes and tighten my grip around his waist, my body pushing firm against his. The bike throbs underneath me. It is both exciting and unnerving, and I can't hear anything except the ricocheting of my heart and the thundering engine.

This is surreal. I must have hit my head harder than I thought. How did I end up on the back of this motorbike with this guy, heading towards my aunt and uncle's house?

Oh fuck, Aunt Trudy will be home.

She'll insist on an exorcism when she sees me ride up on the back of a motorcycle with a wet t-shirt and the devil himself, according to the back of the leather vest I'm wearing. And she's not even Catholic. It will become one more reason to withhold my money.

I squeeze my eyes shut and tighten my arms around him. We come to a stop at a set of traffic lights and he runs his hand along my arm until his fingers meet mine. He laces our hands together, his thumb gently rubbing the top of my thumb.

The sudden throbbing need between my legs matches the idling engine and leaves me breathless. I imagine what it would be like to ride off into the sunset with this guy, let him ravish me on some distant beach, or in a cabin in the woods, or anywhere that isn't here.

Leave Aunt Trudy and Uncle Bob and their cult-like religious beliefs behind.

Except they would still have my money. Damn it.

The bike rides over a speed hump and I open my eyes. Who was I kidding? I don't even have the guts to take this crucifix off, let alone openly rebel against my family and ride off with some guy on a motorbike. I don't even know his name, but for some unknown reason, I am on the back of his motorbike - trying hard not to grind against him. You'd think I was sixteen years old, not two months from turning twenty-one. My life is such a mess.

The bike slows and he turns his head and yells, "Number forty-three?"

We're already home?

"Yeah," I shout back.

The bike shudders to a stop right in front of the house. I unlatch my arms from his waist and ease my way over the side of the bike until my foot touches the ground. With the grace of a new-born

giraffe, I swing my other leg off and totter about, trying to find my balance.

"Whoa there." Strong hands grip my forearms. Our eyes lock as I clutch at his arms. His hair is windblown from riding without a helmet, his fringe falling forward instead of swept back. His nose is a little too big and his lips a little too thin. But his jawline is strong and those eyes… When he smiles, as he is now, his whole face transforms, lit up by those chocolate eyes.

What am I thinking? My imagination has gotten the better of me and I need to get inside the house before Aunt Trudy discovers me with this guy and reigns hell down on earth. I reach for the helmet buckle but somehow manage to pull it tighter.

"Here, let me." His tongue touches his top lip as his fingers brush against my neck and he focuses on undoing the latch. Electricity ripples across my skin sending a lightning strike to my groin.

"Rebecca, what is the meaning of this?" A voice shrills from above. Aunt Trudy stands on the front balcony, glaring down at us.

"Rebecca," he repeats softly, as if tasting my name.

"I prefer Becca," I mutter, turning to face my aunt. "Hi, Aunt Trudy."

"What are you wearing?"

I glance down at the leather vest. "Oh, I spilled a milkshake all over me and my t-shirt was a bit too see-through so…" I turn back to the man standing beside me. I guess I hope his name might appear or something.

"Zep," he says.

"What?" Is he actually reading my mind?

"My name is Zep."

"That's not a name," says Trudy, leaning over the railing and clutching her own crucifix around her neck.

Zep shrugs. "It's what I answer to."

Trudy rolls her eyes. "Take that ridiculous vest off and get inside this house immediately, Rebecca."

Indignant heat spreads up my neck and over my cheeks. I'm not a child, and I'm certainly not her child. I hate how she has this power over me.

"Don't just stand there." Her voice is like a drill boring into my brain. Hot tears prick the back of my eyes.

"Becca? *Now* please."

My nails dig into sore, red palms. *I am not a child!* I cringe at Zep witnessing my humiliation. I squeeze my eyes closed, hoping it might erase this nightmare.

"Come with me."

The air seems to still. Did Zep really say that? Surely, it's my cowardly imagination running away with itself again - I mean, it's not as if I'd actually leave with a relative stranger.

I open my eyes just as Zep lowers the helmet back onto my head.

I gasp. "No, I—"

"This is bullshit," he says. "That woman is off her tree."

I can't argue with that. I look back at Trudy, who is still issuing demands and threats from the balcony. My arms and legs feel made of iron, too heavy and clumsy to lift. I can taste the sour stench of my aunt's vitriol entwining with the rapidly drying milkshake and I just want the ground to open up and swallow me whole.

Instead, I find myself being led back to the motorbike. Zep swings onto the seat and kick starts the engine, drowning out Trudy's protests. He looks at me and nods for me to get on.

Fuck it.

CHAPTER 3



My mind is a hurricane of noise and thoughts without anchors, as the bike roars away from my aunt's house in the inner suburbs. What have I done? What am I getting myself into, and who the hell is Zep? My aunt and uncle are sure to make good on their threat to keep me from my inheritance now.

Maybe I'm in shock at my quest for freedom. Maybe I'm frightened that I've just made the biggest mistake of my life. But by the time I begin to take notice of our surroundings, we appear to be in the middle of nowhere. The occasional tree breaks up the barren looking paddocks on either side of the dirt road we are on. There are no houses and it certainly isn't farming country. I have no clue where we were.

The bike slows as an enormous corrugated iron fence comes into view. The skull with wings is crudely painted on the front of the red gate that is being dragged open from the inside. I look up and notice two men standing in some kind of look-out post overhead. What the hell is this place?

Zep rides through the gate and at least one of my earlier questions is answered. He is clearly part of an outlaw motorcycle gang.

Motorbikes and pick-up trucks are parked around what looks like a warehouse. A couple of guys are working on their bikes, beers at the ready. Zep pulls up and cuts the engine. I quickly scurry off the bike, grabbing the back of the seat to steady myself. I start to shrug out of the heavy vest. Somehow, I don't think the other bikers would appreciate me wearing this.

"Leave it," says Zep, coming to stand beside me. "If you're wearing my cut, no one will mess with you."

I open my mouth to speak but all my questions collide into each other, leaving me gasping like a fish out of water. He unbuckles the strap and removes the helmet from my head.

"Come on." He takes my hand and pulls me into step beside him. "This is The Devils clubhouse. It's where I live."

"Oh," is all I can muster by way of response.

A few heads nod as we stride towards a narrow doorway. As soon as we step inside, I'm plunged into darkness and trip over my own feet. Zep pulls me against him to stop me crashing onto the floor.

"Jesus, you two smell like a dead cow's tit." The booming voice comes from somewhere in front of us.

My eyes adjust as a ridiculously tall and well-built man with long, dirty blonde hair, crazy eyes and plenty of tattoos looms before us.

"Settle down, Luci," says Zep, his shoulders straightening. "We're just on our way to get cleaned up."

We are? I don't have anything to get changed into. Because I rode off into the sunset with a complete stranger!

The tall man looks me up and down while pushing his tongue across his teeth as though he has stored food in them. "Is this one for sharing?"

Zep drops my hand and steps into the tall man's space. "No, she's not."

The man chuckles. "Two months ago, you wouldn't have had any say in the matter." He pushes Zep aside, holding out his hand to me. "Name's Shane Riley, but you can call me Lucifer."

Is he for real? Then again, I can see why they call him Lucifer. He does look like the devil, or the grim reaper or something just as evil.

"Um, Becca," I mumble, shaking his hand with my fingertips as my heart tries to hack its way out of my chest. My legs threaten to give out from under me.

"She doesn't need to call you anything, *Luci*." Zep places his hands on my shoulders and guides me away from the giant of a man.

Catcalls and laughter follow us as we walk through what looks like a bar towards a hallway. I don't see any other women around. I lick my lips, suddenly desperate for water.

Zep leads me down a hallway with closed doors on either side. He stops about halfway down and opens the door. A kid - no more than six or seven - springs up from the double bed that takes up most of the space in the room.

"Alex! What are you doing in here?" hisses Zep.

"Nothin', just hanging out." The kid is skinny with dark hair and big round eyes.

"Go and find your mother"—Zep stands aside to let him out the door—"and stay out of your father's way."

Zep closes the door as the kid escapes, locking it behind him. My face must mirror the question in my head. "It's to keep others out," he explains.

"Oh." I collapse my hands together and look around the room. The bed is neatly made except for the imprint of where the kid has been sitting. Next to a built-in cupboard is a chest of drawers that holds a collection of books on top. A bar fridge hums beside it.

"Bathroom's through there." Zep is pointing to a second doorway. "Towels are clean."

"Okay." What else can I say? Everything about this day is surreal. I shrug out of the leather vest, or cut as he called it before, and lay it on the bed. "Thanks for letting me wear this."

He nods, then turns his back and opens a drawer.

Not much is making sense to me right now but one thing I know is I need to get these clothes off and wash away the smell of milk gone bad. I walk into the bathroom and shut the door behind me. I collapse against it and take a long, slow breath in. What the hell am I going to do?

A knock sounds on the bathroom door and I jump, shrieking like a baby.

"Sorry, I found you a shirt you can wear after you shower."

I suck in another breath, hoping it will settle my hammering heart, and open the door. Zep holds a neatly folded shirt out.

"Thanks. Um, sorry about the screaming."

He shrugs. "It's not uncommon around here."

I shut the door. What the hell is that supposed to mean? Exactly what kind of hell have I walked into? I take another deep breath and decide to get cleaned up and then talk to Zep about taking me home. This was a crazy idea.

The bathroom is just as clean and tidy as the bedroom. And just as sparse. The shower has only one tap and on a hunch, I pull it straight up without adjusting the temperature. Holding my hand under

the spray of water, I wait as it changes from cold to lukewarm to absolutely perfect.

"Huh," I murmur to myself. I strip off my clothes and step under the shower. Milk has dried in patches across my skin and in my hair. A three-in-one hair and body wash sits in the rack hanging from the shower head. That will do.

I lather up and soon the smell of sour milk is replaced with a fresh, citrusy, if somewhat chemically produced, fragrance. Being unsure of the hot water situation, and what I might be keeping Zep from, I wash and rinse as fast and as thoroughly as I can.

I shut the water off and reach for a towel. It smells of sunlight and soap, with an undertone of Zep. I take an extra sniff and bite my bottom lip to keep from sighing out loud. I might have escaped one hell for another, but at least this one has some benefits. The last time I had sex was months ago and the earth did *not* move.

I shake my head. I need to go home, regardless of what's waiting for me, which means I need to stop having these lust-filled thoughts about Zep and ask him to take me back.

As soon as I'm dry, I reach for the t-shirt. It's faded and black with tour dates for Faith No More on the back, and the logo from *The Real Thing* album on the front. My t-shirt, bra and jeans are filthy, but my underwear has not copped any of the milkshake - thank God. I slip them on and pull the t-shirt over my head. It covers my backside - just.

I comb my long blonde hair out with my fingertips and then fold my soiled clothes into a neat pile. Grabbing my sandals, I open the door to find Zep stripped down to his jeans, lounging on the bed. Tattoos adorn his upper biceps and a smattering of dark hair trails from his belly button to beneath his jeans. He isn't built like Luci, but he is toned and his stomach is washboard flat. My mind goes blank and I cannot remember what it is I want to ask Zep.

"Here, give me your clothes and I'll throw them in the wash." He scoots up from the bed with an agility that makes me wonder what else he could do with that energy.

"Okay." I hand them over, suddenly very aware that I am staring at the man while wearing nothing but a t-shirt and knickers. Zep seems along the same line and I catch the flash of a smirk before he heads for the door, shutting it behind him.

Who is this guy? Now he's washing my clothes. The memory of his handkerchief pops into my mind and I wonder what I did with it? On the chest of drawers sits his cut, a soft cloth and a bottle of leather cleaner. If I hadn't walked through an actual biker gang's clubhouse and shaken hands with a dude called Lucifer, I'd be starting to doubt that Zep is a member of this gang. He really is an oddity.

The door opens and Zep steps back inside the room.

"I'm gonna shower."

I nod, moving out of his way. He goes into the bathroom and I hear the shower start. Steam begins billowing out of the open door. *Oh my god, he didn't close the door.* Naked Zep is on the other side of this wall, and the door is wide open. Heat immediately pools between my thighs. I sit on the bed and cross my legs.

Shit, where's all my stuff? The thought is a somewhat welcome distraction. The last time I saw my backpack with my purse and my sketchpad and pencils was when Zep put them in the saddle bag on his bike. I deliberately don't have a cell phone; one less way for my aunt and uncle to keep track of me. I really hope today is not the day I have a reason to regret that decision.

The water stops and my mind goes straight back to my groin. Great. A moment later Zep appears, a towel wrapped around his waist. Oh. My. God. My mouth falls open as those butterflies go to town in my belly again. My heart beats between my ears, blocking any other noise.

My eyes focus on his chest, the drop to the towel again. When I look up, Zep's eyes are

smoldering and he steps toward me. I'm breathing hard, my own desire going into overdrive. He runs a finger along my jaw and over my collarbone until he reaches the gold crucifix I forgot is hanging around my neck.

"Is this important to you?"

I shake my head, unable to make words form.

With one hard yank, the chain breaks and he pulls the crucifix from my body. "Then you shouldn't wear it."

CHAPTER 4

As the chain breaks, something inside of me jolts back to life. For the past three years I've existed in a void; going through the motions of living but barely cognizant to it. Aunt Trudy gave me the crucifix the morning of my parents' funeral and I'd accepted it as a token of support rather than the prison it would come to represent. Zep has opened that cage in one decisive moment. And I am ready to break free.

I rise to my feet and place my hand on his. He is still holding the chain and the look on his face is one of curiosity and a certain watchfulness. In this moment I know Zep will never hurt me. In this compound I am completely at his mercy and yet he has only been a gentleman. I wonder if he is like that all the time. I hope not.

I keep my eyes on his and smile, my fingers working the chain and crucifix free from his hand. He lets it go without any resistance. We stand so close that only a breath separates our bodies. With my eyes locked on his, I toss the chain to the side.

Every nerve ending is on fire and I'm aching to feel his hands on my body. I want to stretch onto my toes and brush my lips against his, but Zep still has that curious expression on his face. Am I the only one feeling this intense need? My core clenches and I know my knickers are growing wetter by the second.

Just as I'm about to take matters into my own hands, Zep tangles his fingers into my hair, holding the nape of my neck. My breath catches and he smirks. I become aware of the bulge beneath his towel and instinctively my hips push forward and our bodies connect. Now I stretch up to capture his lips with mine; a groan escapes as our mouths meld and I don't know if it came from me or him.

His hand slips from the back of my neck to my throat; his grip is gentle. Molten lust explodes inside me and I push against his hand, willing him to tighten his hold. His tongue runs along his bottom lip as he tilts his head; a question in his eyes.

"Felix," he growls.

I shake my head, not understanding.

"The safe word," he explains. "Do you know what that is?"

Comprehension brings a fresh wave of desire. I nod.

"If this is what you want, say Felix."

I've never wanted anything more. "Felix."

"Good." He lets go of my throat and steps back. "Take your clothes off."

I swear I can see the flames of hell dancing in his eyes as I do as I'm told, wanting this dance with him. Zep looks me up and down as though I'm his next meal and I respond by pulling my shoulders back, and pushing my chest out. He pushes me back so I fall onto the bed and drops the towel. His

cock stands at attention, looking dangerous. My legs fall open with an invitation to plunder and destroy.

"Not so fast, little girl." He kneels before me on the bed and I thrust my hips forward, desperate to feel him inside me. "You're playing in my world now, by my rules."

His words awaken a fire inside and I swear I'm ready to come here and now.

He runs his hands down my inner thighs, his thumbs pressing hard enough to make me gasp. I watch him as he holds my legs far apart, assessing my pussy. I can't move my hips because his grip is so firm. He leans in and inhales my scent. I whimper, feeling manic for his touch.

Finally, he looks up again, our eyes locking. He begins to descend between my legs, his head moving towards my pussy. My breathing is raw and shallow. I've never wanted anything as much as I want to fuck this man right now.

His eyes are still trained on mine as he hovers just above my soft curls; his breath is warm against my open folds.

"Please," I beg. Right now, I would sell my soul to the devil to feel Zep's mouth working my clit.

A chuckle echoes through my body and I can't be sure it isn't the devil answering my plea as Zep's tongue runs the length of my wet and wanting slit. The sound I make is strangled, primal. He licks me up and down, his tongue working from my ass to my pussy, over and over. I grasp the sheets, trying to anchor myself.

His tongue plunges inside me with fast, hot jabs and I cry out in rapture. My hips are still locked in place, rendering me incapable of helping bring about the climax I'm craving. I clench my inner walls, trying to drag Zep's tongue in deeper. He responds by withdrawing and I want to sob in protest.

He raises his head and slowly licks his lips. *Fuck.* I can't take this anymore. I reach between my legs but he grabs me before I can touch myself.

"I don't think so, little girl." He straddles me across my tummy and reaches across to the small bedside table and opens the drawer. A second later he reveals a long length of fabric. Holding my wrists together, he wraps them up tight and then ties the fabric to the iron bedhead.

"No touching unless I say so."

Before I can respond, Zep's mouth covers mine and I taste my own juices. My tongue devours his mouth and face while his hands move to my breasts. An exquisite pain thrums through me as he squeezes each of my nipples. I try to buck against him but his weight keeps me in place. I've been circling this abyss for what feels like an eternity and I'm ready to swear homage to any deity if it means I can come.

His mouth leaves mine and Zep works his way down my body with licks and bites that make me gasp and moan. His hands spread me wide once more and I am rewarded with his tongue against my clit.

"Yes," I hiss, grinding against his face. When he begins to alternate between sucking and licking me, I just about lose my mind.

One hand creeps up to my breast, tugging on my engorged nipple and making me shout with ecstasy. My body writhes and contorts as I edge closer and closer to coming. One finger slides inside me, followed by a second and I'm pretty sure the whole clubhouse can hear me screaming. He pushes a third finger inside and pumps me, his mouth working my clit. As the orgasm takes hold, I arch back against the pillow and call his name over and over. My entire body convulses with wave after wave of pleasure. He removes his fingers and licks my opening as I squirt into his mouth.

Eventually, my body goes limp as the orgasm continues to reverberate through me. My heart is

hammering against my ribs as though it would burst. I've never come like that in my life. Zep rises onto his knees between my legs, his lips swollen and glistening from my cum.

He watches as I catch my breath, stroking the length of his cock. When my breathing evens out, he moves up until he is straddling my chest, his cock bouncing on my face. I stretch my tongue and lick the salty cream from its tip.

"Open wide."

He holds his cock at my lips and I comply. He pushes himself inside, coming up on his knees so he can angle himself into my mouth until his cock touches the back of my throat. I gag but he doesn't withdraw.

"Relax."

I close my eyes and concentrate on breathing through my nose as his cock moves in and out of my mouth. My tongue licks as he thrusts, spit sliding down my chin. As he speeds up, I start to suck and Zep grunts his approval. I can't help but gag and choke as he fucks my mouth but I also kinda like it. I feel his cock thicken even more and I know he's close. He pulls free, panting hard.

I open my eyes, wanting to taste him as he explodes in my mouth. Instead, he's reaching back to the drawer, pulling a condom out. He rips the packet and quickly sheathes himself. Anticipation lances my core.

He shuffles down, once again kneeling between my open legs. He lifts my hips onto his thighs, his cock hovering at my entrance. He leans forward and the tip nudges my folds. His thumb rubs across my mouth before his hand snakes down and grabs my throat again. As his grip tightens, he thrusts inside me.

All at once my body is on fire with need. I can barely force the air in and out of my throat as his cock drives into me, building in speed and depth. My hands are still bound above me and I grasp the length tying me to the bed. My orgasm tips over the edge and I can't even scream. I'm coming harder than I've ever come before and feel like I might just slip into a black chasm of pleasure.

Zep starts to moan and swear, his thrusts becoming more desperate. I can no longer breathe and it crosses my mind to use the safe word, but I don't want to stop coming. Zep throws his head back and yells incoherently. His hand releases my throat. I cough and struggle to drag in oxygen as my body bucks beneath him. He withdraws and drops to his back beside me, leaving me to grieve the loss of his touch and wonder if I'll ever be the same again.

CHAPTER 5



Over the next two weeks, I stay with Zep at the clubhouse. During the day, we go out on his bike. He says he wants to show me his favorite places around Sydney and beyond, but I'm pretty sure he wants to keep me away from the clubhouse when his brothers - as he refers to the other men in The Devils - are going about their business. I don't know what The Devils are into exactly, but I know it isn't anything legal.

I was also keen to avoid any more interactions with Luci. That guy makes my blood freeze. Sometimes I hear him yelling and a woman crying. Zep told me that Luci and his wife have problems but it seems to me the problem is Luci and his temper. They don't actually live at the clubhouse; however, something happened and they have been staying there, along with the little boy I met on the first day. I tried not to think about it too much. For the first time in a long time, I feel free and I want to make the feeling last.

When Zep and I aren't riding or fucking, we talk. He told me about his mum. She loved to drink and get high. And she loved Led Zeppelin, which is how he came to be named Jimmy Page. Everyone calls him Zep for obvious reasons. He never knew his dad and has no idea if his mother is alive or dead. He said he lost track of her when he was about seventeen but he'd already started hanging out with The Devils by then, so she knew where to find him if she wanted to.

"Does that make you sad?" I ask as we lay on the grass overlooking the waves at Kiama. I just finished sketching Zep with the ocean behind him. Drawing is my passion and I indulge every chance I get.

Zep shrugs and takes a swig of his beer. "Dunno. I never really think about her."

"I think about my parents every day."

He brushes some hair from my forehead, watching me. I like how he always gives me time and space to speak. It's a luxury I've not had while living with my aunt and uncle.

"My parents were very different from most people, I guess. Mum was a journalist working for a local paper when she met my dad. He was a photographer." I smile and let the memories wash over me. "Neither enjoyed the nine-to-five grind, so they took their trades on the road and made a living traveling."

"Like travel writers?"

"Exactly." I lean across and kiss him, because I can.

"Did you travel with them?" he asks when I settle back beside him.

"Yes. I was born in Tennant Creek in the Northern Territory."

"Isn't that like, the middle of the outback?" Zep cocks his head, his dark hair lifting in the breeze.

"I was actually born in an Aboriginal camp. The local women helped my mum through the birth."

"Seriously? That's kinda cool." He shakes his head.

"Hard to believe compared to where you found me?"

"Shit, yeah." He chuckles. "Does that make you part Aboriginal or something?"

I pick at the grass as I answer. "No, but it does give me an appreciation for their culture and customs. I mean, they are the longest continuing culture on the planet and they are partly responsible for my safe arrival."

We talk about my life on the road. My parents and I traveled around Australia and the world until I was sixteen. I guess you could say I was homeschooled. But my parents decided I should probably experience some kind of formal education - not to mention socialization with peers for more than a few weeks.

"So, we came home to Sydney." I return to picking at the grass, pulling the shoots from the ground. "I was supposed to go to a public high school but my aunt and uncle intervened and insisted I go to a private school. They thought it would give me more credibility once I graduated, after spending so long gallivanting around the world like gypsies." I channel Aunt Trudy when speaking that last part.

"Why did your parents listen to your aunt and uncle? Did they need their help paying for school?"

I laugh. "Not at all. Travel writing and photography was a very lucrative career for Mum and Dad; plus they made good investments. They definitely didn't need anyone else's money." My heart aches as I think about my parents. "Trudy and my mother are sisters, and Mum wanted to try and have a relationship with her because we had no other family."

"Sisters? They sound like polar opposites," says Zep.

I nod. "They were. And Dad and Bob, Trudy's husband, never got on either. They wanted to save us and we were pretty clear, we didn't need saving."

Zep takes my hand in his and laces our fingers together. "What happened to them?"

I swallow back the bile that rises whenever I think about the day they died. "Car accident."

He squeezes my hand and for the first time I feel a sense of comfort. I squeeze back. "Of course, Trudy declared it was an Act of God. I didn't know which way was up and Trudy and Bob took me in and immediately surrounded me with others from their church, insisting I would find solace there."

"Did you?" His tone is gentle and without judgment.

"I was numb. I found nothing but heartache."

His thumb gently rubs my hand. I take a shuddering breath in.

"When I started to surface from the fog, I was eighteen and thought I'd take the money Mum and Dad left me and hit the road again." I stop speaking; the memory carving my heart into pieces.

Zep's curiosity clearly gets the better of him. "Why didn't you?"

I shake my head. "I couldn't. They took it."

His eyes widen and his tone is menacing. "What? Your aunt and uncle took your money?"

I bite my lip to keep the tears at bay. "They said they put it into trust or something until I was mature enough to manage that kind of money."

"How much money are we talking about?"

"When the will was read, the sum was $3.8 million."

Zep whistles. "That's a decent chunk."

"God knows how much is left. I know they paid off their mortgage. Probably donated a ton to the church." I know I sound bitter but I can't help it.

"Fuckers," spits Zep. "Explains why they haven't come looking for you."

"Yeah." I take a deep breath. "I don't want to talk about this anymore. It makes me sad and I don't want to feel sad when I'm with you."

He smiles and pulls me closer, his lips claiming mine in a slow, passionate kiss that chases my memories and melancholy back into the shadows.

CHAPTER 6



The banging on the door vibrates through the gray light of early morning.

"What the fuck?" Zep throws back the bed covers and reaches for his jeans.

"Club meeting. Get out here now," someone yells from the hallway.

My heart is hammering. "What's going on?"

Zep pulls a shirt over his head and shrugs into his cut. He grabs his boots, leaning across the bed to plant a kiss on my mouth. "Stay put. I'll be back as soon as I can."

The door closes behind him as he steps into the chaos outside.

A minute later, the hallway falls silent. Fear needles my spine, forcing me from the bed. I grab some clothes and head into the bathroom. I quickly dress and wash my face and teeth. Whatever is happening, I know I don't want to be sitting in bed naked.

I pace the narrow path between the door and the wall, waiting for Zep to return. I've been a guest of The Devils MC for nearly six weeks. The president took it to the club to vote and it was agreed I could stay if I kept out of everyone's way. That suits me just fine. But now I feel trapped in this room. I can't go into the common area; I wouldn't be welcome. *Hurry up, Zep.*

Shouting erupts in the distance and footsteps make their way up the hall. A moment later, Zep appears.

"Pack your stuff, we gotta go." He pulls out my backpack and the few clothes and toiletries I've accumulated in the time I've lived here.

I reach for my sketchpad and pencils. "What's going on?"

Zep spins around and faces me. "Do you trust me?"

"I…"

"Becca?"

"Yes," I gasp. "I trust you."

He nods. "We need to leave. I'll explain everything once I get you somewhere safe, I promise."

"Okay," I stammer. The familiar sense of numb settles around me. *What is happening?*

I move as if underwater out to Zep's bike. We ride through the predawn streets for about forty minutes until we reach Parramatta. We pull into the driveway of a fancy hotel and Zep parks his bike at the front doors. As he raises his fist to knock on the glass, a harried staff member appears and swipes a card to open the doors. It seems we are expected.

"Thanks Harry," says Zep.

"Room 926," says Harry, handing over two keycards.

Zep grabs my hand and pulls me across the lobby to a bank of elevators. The doors open immediately and Zep waves a key card and pushes a button. We don't speak, but he holds my hand

tighter. It takes all of my self-control not to ask again what is going on. I know he'll tell me when he can.

Room 926 is more like a suite than a hotel room. Zep places my backpack on the coffee table before pulling me into his arms.

"I have to leave again but I won't be long." His lips move against my hair. "Order room service but stay put until I get back, okay?"

My arms are wrapped around his waist and I want to beg him to stay with me. But I say nothing, only squeeze him harder. I know how fierce Zep's loyalty is to the club. I lift my eyes to meet his gaze.

"I'll be back as soon as I can."

I nod and accept his kiss.

Once he leaves, I explore the suite and take a shower. Wrapped in a thick white robe, I order room service, sinking into the sofa and flicking the television on. There is a rerun of the season finale of Murphy Brown playing. I have watched the show off and on over the last few years, when Trudy and Bob were out, and decide it has a chance of occupying my mind for half an hour. Murphy decided to keep her baby - the result of a brief liaison with her ex-husband - at the beginning of the season and now she is giving birth.

A thought niggles at the back of my mind. I pick at my banana bread and sip my coffee. The thought takes hold as I think back over the last few weeks, counting them out on my fingers. My stomach begins to churn and my chest feels tight. No matter which way I add it up, the truth remains the same. It has been two months since my last period.

The door clicks open, admitting Zep into the suite. Panic seizes me and I spill the coffee over my robe.

"Hey, did I startle you?" Zep moves through the room and sits on the coffee table in front of me. "I'm sorry."

I shake my head, unable to speak.

"Becca, what's wrong?" Zep's eyes are wide with concern.

"I think I'm pregnant."

Zep stares at me, and I stare back. *Shit*.

He takes my face in his hands, kneeling before me. "Are you sure?"

"I don't know." My mind is a blur. "I think so."

A smile forms and he presses his lips to mine. "I gotta take care of one more thing."

I start to protest, I don't want to be alone, but he shushes me with another kiss. He gets to his feet and leaves once more.

My robe is wet from the coffee and I strip it off then move to the bed. I pull back the covers and slip between the cool, crisp sheets, curling into a ball and start to cry. What the hell am I going to do? An outlaw motorcycle club is no place for a baby. Could Zep leave it all behind to be a family? I cradle my tummy and let my tears carry me to sleep.

* * *

I DON'T KNOW how long I've been sleeping when gentle hands rouse me. I wake to Zep's warm gaze.

"Hey," he smiles. "Come on, get dressed and I'll tell you everything."

I find the clothes I discarded earlier and throw them on. I don't want to risk Zep disappearing

again before we talk. Spread across the coffee table is what looks to be one of everything from the room service menu, along with fresh coffee.

"It's after lunch and you didn't look like you'd eaten," explains Zep, gesturing at the food.

I smile and wonder if I am the only person in the world who sees this side of him. I sit beside him and dip a crispy potato wedge into aioli sauce. As soon as I take a bite, I realize I'm ravenous. We dig into the food, speaking only to recommend the other tastes something.

With a full belly, I lean back against the sofa to better see his face. Zep wipes his mouth with a serviette and takes a deep breath.

"The sonofabitch killed her."

My stomach drops. "What? Who are you talking about?"

"Luci. He killed his old lady. Beat her then strangled her." Zep stares straight ahead, his jaw tensing. "That's why I needed to get you out of there. The cops were on their way to question everyone and I didn't want you caught in the middle of it."

I think of the little boy Zep chased from his room. "What about their son?" I whisper.

"Alex? Social services have him."

The kid's alive. My hand drops to my tummy.

Zep glances at me and sighs again. "The Devils is no place for a kid, no place to raise a family." Heat pricks my skin and a wave of nausea washes over me. Where is this going?

Zep turns his body to face me, taking my hands in his. "Becca, I don't want this life for you or our baby. You're finally free from your aunt and uncle, I can't let you walk straight back into another cage."

I shake my head. "Of course, I can't stay at the clubhouse but we could get a place of our own. I'll get a job and pay my share—"

"Becca, shhh…" He smooths his hand over my hair. "You don't need to get a job."

My heart feels like it's ground to a stop. "What are you saying?"

"I love you, Becca."

"You love me?" Joy floods my body.

"You can go anywhere, do anything," Zep says. "Just like you planned." His voice wobbles ever so slightly. "Check your bank account. Your money is all there."

"What? How?"

His smile is sad. "I paid your aunt and uncle a visit with one of the brothers. You won't have any more trouble from them."

My heart kickstarts painfully and my alarm must be obvious.

"They're okay - alive and breathing."

I nod, not sure I want to know any more than that. Another thought strikes me. "Come with me! We have enough money to disappear. We can be together, raise our baby together."

He leans forward and captures my lips with his. His kiss is soft and tender.

"Let's not talk about this now," he whispers as he breaks from the kiss. "Let's just be."

I snuggle against him, pushing away my lingering fears. Zep loves me. He got my money back and he'll do anything to protect me and our baby. I'll worry about what that means tomorrow. Today, I just want to enjoy feeling safe, and loved, and wanted for the first time since I was a child. I love this man. We can figure out the rest.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tanya Nellestein writes page-turning, gut-churning historical Viking romance and bikie thrillers with a romantic angle that always includes good sex and a happily ever after - eventually. She loves manifesting her inner fantasies inspired by *Vikings* and *Sons of Anarchy*, by creating her own bad boys and feisty heroines.Tanya lives on the outskirts of Sydney, Australia with her two little Vikings.

Stairway to Heaven is a prequel novella in **The Devils MC series**. Zep and Becca's story continues in ***Where Angels Hide***, coming late 2022. Read ***The Devil Within*** and its prequel novella, ***Once Betrayed*** on Amazon. https://books2read.com/u/b6RBqE

Find out more at https://www.tanyanellestein.com

TRAPPING HIS DARLING: THE PETROV LEGACY



BY SELENA MICHAELS

Viktor Petrov is the persona non grata of the family. While living in the treacherous shadow of his older brother, Alexie, Viktor has never been able to live up to his father's expectations within a far-reaching criminal organization known for their absolute power and sheer brutality in the Russian underworld. But Alexie holds the powerful Pakhan birthright as heir to the family throne, and Viktor will never be anything more than an armed errand boy.

When the brothers are forced to attend a formal luncheon to honor a new business deal, Viktor sets his sights on Tiffany Perez, a naive and down-on-her-luck temp server whose innocent demeanor and coy glances call to Viktor the way prey calls a predator to hunt. Beautiful. Breakable. Breedable. Viktor vows she will be his, even if he must trap her in his dangerous world where their safety will never be a guarantee.

Editor: Mom Loves Books Editing and Proofreading

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CHAPTER 1



Viktor Petrov

"GET OUT OF MY SIGHT," my father, the Pahkan, spat at me.

I crawled away from him, feeling lower than I'd ever felt before. A shiny black shoe was in front of my face. I briefly glanced up and saw my brother, Alexie Petrov, standing in front of me, grinning.

"Lick." He wagged his foot in front of my swollen eyes. *Like I was a dog.*

I ignored it and tried to crawl around him to no avail. Alexie stepped back into my line of sight and pressed his foot against my lips.

Was that dog shit on the bottom soles? Gagging, I tried to suppress the vomit bubbling up in my throat. When I threw up, the men all laughed and made fun of me.

"Smells horrible, *da?"* Alexie's friend and our top enforcer, Roger, chuckled.

This was the worst humiliation my father had set before me. Wouldn't be too much longer before they got bored and left me lying in my own sick.

Relieved, I made my way slowly to my room. I didn't want to live like this any longer. The Bratva wasn't mine. *They never would be.* They had always belonged to Alexie, the One True King–or so he likes to call himself.

One of the maids walked into my room and gasped at the sight of me. I knew it wasn't pretty. I couldn't even look into her eyes because mine were so swollen.

"Your father asked me to bring you this, sir." Her arms stretched in front of her with an envelope.

The embossed symbol on the back let me know that it was from the older generational men in the syndicate. They had monthly meetings that my father had me sit in on. Alexie also got to go, but he sat on my father's right hand, while I had to sit at the other end of the table.

Always last, never first.

That's how my father viewed me.

I don't thank the maid. I shooed her away while I ripped open the letter.

It was an invitation. Only the made men were going. That included me.

Barely.

Set in an auction-style bidding war, the men would talk about different alliances, business takeovers, and who was grossing the most profit.

Father would have Alexie regale them with all of his business savvy. He just took over another company to wash money through.

But it was *my* acquisition. *I* laid all the groundwork. *I* made sure they didn't suspect a thing. And it was *me*—not Alexie—who fired the staff that couldn't be trusted.

But *he* would get all the glory from it. I got my ass kicked while Alexie got whatever he wanted.

It's not fair. I'm sick of sitting on the sidelines. Lucky for me, our grandfather, who loved my mother before she was murdered, will be in attendance tonight.

All I had to do was be on my best behavior. Control my temper, and my grandfather would make sure I was rewarded handsomely.

Easier said than done.

CHAPTER 2



Tiffany Perez

"I HAVE A JOB FOR YOU. Do you want it?" The secretary at the temp agency flagged me down as soon as I walked through the doors.

"Yeah, of course. What do you have?" I needed money badly. Bills were stacking up, and if something didn't change soon, I'd be living on the streets. Well, in my car, but *still*.

"It's a benefit. Very exclusive. They need servers with good backgrounds who will sign an NDA." Sheryl shuffled the paperwork on her desk.

"An NDA? For what?" I didn't honestly care, it just wasn't something I'd heard of before.

"I don't know. I'm just telling you that they want everyone to have a clean background check and sign an NDA. Is that you?"

"Well, I have a clean background, but what's the pay?" *Why did they need to know this on an easy job?*

Sheryl looked through some more papers before she read off a figure. My jaw almost dropped to the floor. *Who paid that much for servers?*

"They are super-elite. I've sent some girls their way before and didn't have too many issues. One broke her NDA and that wasn't pretty in the legal sense, but other than that, you should be fine."

She handed me a stack of papers and I took them over to a chair in her waiting room, along with a clipboard.

The NDA seemed pretty self-explanatory. That didn't mean I liked the hoops they made me jump through. But I didn't see anything predatory within the lines, so I signed it.

I hoped this would help me out of my situation. With what they paid for the night, I could put a down payment on a house. It was staggering, knowing that for such a small price, I could afford better. *That small price being silence, of course.* Rich people boggled my mind. I wish I could benefit off the backs of this nation's poor like they did.

I headed out of the temp agency and dialed my friend Brittany. She answered on the first ring.

"What's up? Did you find a new job?"

"Yeah; do you want to do it with me?" I couldn't stop the excitement from coming out in my voice.

"Hell no. They're probably going to take a kidney. Girl, don't you do that."

I sighed. She wasn't wrong. "I don't have a choice. Tommy stole every last dime I had, remember?"

"I also remember telling you that Tommy wasn't shit, and you still stayed with him."

Damn, the shade was real. "You did, and I did. Now, we are here."

"No, now *you're* here. I'm over at the Save and Shop with my kidneys intact." I didn't have to see her to tell she was shaking her head at me.

"Fine, be that way. When I find a rich, handsome man from the Caribbean, don't try and get on my flight."

"More like you're going to find a man who rips your heart out and sacrifices your body parts to his one true god."

"You watch far too much television, B."

"Well, just remember, if you go missing, I'll be the first person to tell the police."

"Bitch," I joked affectionately.

"Also, I'm going to steal all your clothes if you go missing. So, in case you do, don't come back."

"You can't even fit them!" I screech, outraged.

"Doesn't matter. They are mine now." Brittany hung up.

She always liked to have the last word. I headed into my apartment after walking ten blocks.

One of the reasons I called my girl was to make sure I got home safe. Now that I was, I started getting ready for the gala. I hoped to god Brittany wasn't right, and I'd keep my kidneys–along with any other body parts–inside my person.

I swiped my mace and placed it in my bag, *just in case*.

CHAPTER 3



Viktor

THE CROWD WAS full of men and half-naked women. There wasn't a soul here that wasn't fully vetted. The only women dressed were the servers, who were pushed back into the kitchens after each lap, and Svetlana. The only Russian spy we had was a woman.

Alexie brushed past and made sure he shoulder-checked me in the process. "Watch where you're going, *brother,"* he spat in Russian.

I couldn't make a scene in front of this unsuspecting crowd.

"*Mudok." Asshole,* I mumbled under my breath.

I caught my balance on a server's shoulder, then promptly caught my breath. Maybe it was the drinks, but she smelled *so good.*

"What's your name?" I growl in her ear.

She shrugged me off. Her long, dark hair was braided down her shoulder, and she flipped it back in a huff. *Sassy; she needed spanking.* "Excuse me, sir, but I don't speak that language. Did you need another drink?"

Fuck, I hadn't realized I was still speaking Russian. I shook my head and took the tray out of her hands, passing it to a random party-goer. I stepped closer, inhaling her strawberry scent with an audible groan.

Who was going to stop me? *No one.*

"Dance with me," I demanded as I pressed my lips against her ear. I nipped it lightly when she shuddered in response—*what a good girl.*

She turned bright red before plastering a fake smile on her face. "I'm working, sir. I can't dance with you."

"You do whatever the fuck I tell you to do, or I'll have you removed and barred from ever working another party like this again." I knew it made me sound like an asshole, but I couldn't help myself.

Her big doe eyes widened, and those glossy pink lips made me want to wrap her hair around my hand and watch as they sucked me deeply into the back of her throat.

With a groan of pent-up frustration, I dragged her out onto the dance floor, propriety be damned. A sensual, slow American song plays, and I wish to Christ we were *anywhere* but here.

The woman in my arms wasn't making eye contact. It bothered me.

"What's wrong, *milaya?" Darling* slipped out before I could stop it. I wished I could take the words back. Women got *ideas* whenever I gave them a nickname.

She shook her head and stepped away from me. I placed my hand on her waist and drew her in closer. Her gasp was music to my ears.

"What do I have to do to get you to leave here willingly, so I don't have to throw you in my trunk?"

The siren, whose name I didn't know, threw her head back and let out a deep, sensual laugh. I frowned down at her. *I wasn't kidding.*

When I didn't join in, she blushed and looked around. "A-are you joking right now?"

"Do I look like a man who spends his time joking?" I growled into her ear.

"N-no," she stutters.

I pressed onward. "So?"

"It's been a long while since I've been able to afford ice cream." Her hopeful tone crushed my soul.

If my little *milaya* wanted ice cream, then I'd shut down the entire parlor so we could have it to ourselves. I grabbed her hand and forced her to the exit. Not quite kidnapping, but if anyone asked, I would tell them I had to inspect her.

Deeply. Privately.

Preferably without any panties on.

CHAPTER 4



Tiffany

As the strangely handsome man dragged me through the rest of the party, I briefly worried for my safety. His entire aura screamed danger, and I was a silly woman for following him blindly. Every day, hundreds of women were thrown into a trunk before being brutally murdered or disappearing altogether. None of that seemed to matter to me at this moment, though.

Why?

Because he was also taking me for ice cream. No man had ever done that for me before. It was new and different. In my mind, I went back and forth over the pros and cons. I should be screaming my head off, because, *hello*, he's a *stranger*, but I couldn't bring myself to.

"You don't actually have to take me for ice cream, sir," I mumbled as soon as we got away from the crowd. What if the temp agency never hired me back? Or worse, what if they blackballed me, and I couldn't find work anywhere else? My situation was already dire enough with my bills piling up, I didn't need to add not being able to work to my long list of shortcomings.

"If I don't, you'll be tied up in my trunk, headed to places unknown." His gruff bark sent shivers tingling down my spine.

Until his words penetrated my mind.

"What does that even mean?" I hissed, stumbling over a rock. I blushed as people looked away from us. It was embarrassing, not being able to walk in a straight line. No one here cared about that. In fact, eyes shied away from us as we walked past. I looked at this man in a new light. *Who was he that held so much power at this party?*

"It means that if you don't get in the car *willingly*, I'll force you into it." He leaned forward, his hot breath caressing my ear. *"Unwillingly."*

I gulped and stepped forward. He opened the door for me like he was a gentleman. It hadn't even occurred to me to run until after the door had closed behind me and locked.

Fuck. I'm a total idiot.

He got into the car, and the tires squealed as he pulled away.

"Tell me about yourself," he demanded.

I couldn't even catch my breath; how could I tell him anything about me?

One minute he was looking at the road, and the next, he took his eyes off it. *That's dangerous, right?* He grabbed the back of my neck and yanked my face closer to his.

"Now."

His demands made my pussy throb. I felt myself growing wet and cleared my throat, wondering if I should take orders from a stranger like this.

His crazy blue eyes were intense. It felt like I had no choice but to obey. "I'm an Aquarius, a temp, and I love long walks on the beach," I harp sarcastically.

Mama always said that hiding my fear behind a quip would get my ass beat on the streets. I used to laugh it off and wave her away. Fearfully, I looked over at him, but he didn't react as I thought he would.

He let go of me and chuckled. "You have fire. *Good*. You'll need that."

Fear raced through my veins. "For what?"

He looked away from the road and stared deep into my eyes. "Don't worry your pretty little head about it. All you have to do is be a good girl, and I'll give you everything your heart desires."

That sounded like a load of bull shit. Another chuckle escaped his crooked lips, and I gasped, realizing I'd said that aloud. *Was he going to hurt me?*

I clenched my eyes shut, but he just wrapped a hand around my knee and gave it a slight squeeze. His touch made me shiver. It was warm out, and he didn't have the AC on, but my nipples could cut glass. *I'd never been touched by a man.*

"You want me, don't you?" Mutely, I shook my head. "Don't lie to me, or I'll cut your tongue out for the insolence." His threat was said so lightly that I knew it was true.

Who was this man? "A little, but you frighten me too much to take that risk."

"Who said you had a choice?"

I sank back into my seat, trying to get away from him, but he wouldn't let me go.

This was just like before.

When I was a kid, I was tricked into a van, lured inside with the promise of puppies and ice cream. I can't believe I fell for this shit as an adult. This man would probably chop me up into pieces after desecrating my corpse.

I had to get away from him, *now,* before it was too late.

CHAPTER 5



Viktor

My little *milaya* was contemplating jumping out of the vehicle; I knew it was time for me to act. Taking one hand off the steering wheel, I pushed my other hand up her shirt and started pinching her nipples softly.

She squirmed and tried to get away from me, but I clicked my tongue at her and twisted until she settled down.

"Good girl," I praised. As long as she obeyed, she wouldn't get hurt. It wasn't like I was hard up for sex. No, this little morsel *screamed* innocence.

I wanted to rip it away from her until she bled.

She moaned, her thick thighs rubbing together in anticipation. I moved lower, slipping my hand into her trousers. *She was wet.* Not soaked, but I would get her there.

Without taking my eyes off the road, I dipped into her damp cunt, swirling my fingers around until she gasped. *That's the spot.* I worked it slowly. I wanted her to come hard, but not fast. The more pleasure-drunk she was, the easier it would be to keep her complacent.

"Please, sir. I've been good," she whimpered.

Fuck, those words did something to me. I slipped one finger inside of her and started pumping it in and out like it was my cock. I couldn't wait to take her back to my compound and fuck her, but this would have to do.

"Spread your legs," I commanded. I still hadn't taken my eyes off the road.

The ice cream shop was a block away. I worked faster and started talking to her to get her where I needed her to be.

"You like my filthy hands inside your cunt?" My voice was harsh and warbled, my cock so hard I could barely think.

"Yes! Yes!" she cried, spasming against me.

I pulled in front of the shop just in time. I flung open the side of my door and rushed out. I grabbed her handle and reached inside to grip her throat.

"Get in the backseat." I was too far gone to wait until we got back.

"B-but you promised me ice cream." Her wide doe eyes filled with unshed tears.

Fuck, she looked so sad at the thought that I lied to her.

At the sight of those tears, I stopped. The beast inside of me died a cool death; I couldn't bring

myself to hurt her. I smiled down at her. My face stretched, not used to my lips pulling upward.

"Of course." I grabbed her hand in mine, uncaring that her pussy juices still leaked from them.

I was going to keep my promise. I'd get her all the goddamn ice cream she wanted. I'd watch in silence as she lapped at the cone, wishing it was my cock in her mouth.

And when she was finally done, I'd throw her down in the back seat and fuck her until the sun came out.

CHAPTER 6

Tiffany

"Hi, what would you guys like to order?" A young-ish cashier smiled at us like we were the greatest couple she'd ever seen.

I looked to the stranger holding my hand, hoping he'd let me order for myself. He nodded, and I leaned away from him to whisper.

"Can I have a fat-free vanilla ice cream, with no cone, and only half a scoop? I'm on a diet." My face felt hot, and I knew I was blushing from the embarrassment.

The man yanked me towards him and pulled his wallet out. He yanked out a wad of cash and tossed it onto the counter.

"I need to borrow your freezer for an undetermined amount of time. We don't want to be disturbed."

The kid blinked at him owlishly before my sexy stranger flashed the side piece he was wearing at her. She gulped and pointed to the back. The stranger leaned forward and whispered something in her ear that made her face pale.

When he was done, he directed me towards the back.

"Why are we going to the freezer, sir?" *It didn't make sense.* I'd already ordered my ice cream; we didn't need to eat it in the back.

"You'll find out, *milaya."* His voice sent ice racing through my veins.

What was he going to do to me back there? I tried to walk the other way, but he grabbed my hair and forced me behind the double doors.

"Take off your clothes." He demanded. *Didn't he know we were still in public? People could hear us.*

I stood my ground. "I don't even know your name."

"Viktor Petrov, and yours?"

I didn't want to give it to him. He took off his suit jacket, reminding me that he was armed *and* dangerous.

"Tiffany Perez," I whispered.

He didn't say anything else, just looked at me pointedly. Slowly, *painfully so*, I took off all my clothes. Shivering, I folded each piece neatly, hoping to buy myself more time.

Viktor stood tall and proud, gripping his cock that had grown hard and thick in his pants, tenting

them. I gasped. I'd never seen a cock so large. I'd never seen a cock at all before, actually. I didn't have time. I was too busy working and slaving away for *the man, l*iving with a dream in my heart.

"Cold?" He smirked, looking down at my pointed nipples. "I'll warm you up, *milaya."* He stalked towards me, and I backed away until I was against the wall. The coolness against the heat of my skin caused my teeth to chatter. I was probably going to catch a cold.

"W-what are y-you going to-to do to me?" I chattered.

He turned me around to face the wall. "Fuck you until you cream all over my cock." I heard the zipper of his slacks and wanted to melt. *How could this be happening?* "But first, I'm going to punish you."

I clenched up, worried about what he was going to do to me. "F-for what?" I shivered violently.

"You think you can go out with me and order some bland ass ice cream meant for bitches who don't know the beauty of their own skin? We don't do vanilla here, my good girl. Let me show you."

With that, pain lanced my ass cheeks as Viktor spanked me like he hated me.

I cried.

I begged.

I pleaded.

He spun me around, a snarl on his devilishly handsome face. "This isn't for you, *milaya.* This is for me. All mine." Glaring intently into my eyes, he thrust himself inside of me, tearing my hymen.

I screamed the walls down. The pain was unbearable. He stopped and pulled away slightly, his glare turning into a stunned wonderment.

"What. The. Fuck. Is. This?"

CHAPTER 7



Viktor

A VIRGIN. A goddamn virgin in this day and age. I knew my luck was good, but I didn't think it could be *this* great. I was shocked. *Elated*.

Then I was disgusted.

She'd never been touched by another man before, and I had the audacity to take her against the wall like a barbarian. Someone should shoot me. I wished the doors would open and I'd get gunned down right here, right now.

But no one came. My little *milaya* was sobbing. Huge heart-wrenching sounds that made my cock want to wither. It didn't, because I was a sadistic bastard. I'd sooner lick those tears than die.

Comfort her, you asshole. I started whispering in her ear how sorry I was. How I hadn't meant to hurt her, how I would make it all better.

Her sobs subsided to hiccups, and then she pressed herself closer to me. Her pussy throbbed over the top of my cock, and I couldn't help thrusting slightly. Then I winced. *She was probably in pain.*

But instead of crying again, she panted. "Do that again," she demanded.

I watched her face as I thrust a little deeper. Her eyes grew wide, her mouth opened, and she let out a primal moan that almost unmanned me.

"Fuck, you're beautiful." I flipped her around so I could see the marks on her ass cheeks as I sank back inside of her.

Her sweet moans echoed in the freezer. I'd never been one for public places, only having done this a few times in a bathroom or a car. I guess Tiffany was the exception, because this had quickly my number one place to fuck her. Shit, was I giving in to my Pahkan and claiming this woman?

Claim her. Breed her. Make sure she can never leave you, my subconscious purred.

"You've given me something precious; let me reward you," I whispered.

She just moaned and leaned her head against me as I fucked her deeper. We went faster and faster. There was only so much time we could spend inside here before we both got hyperthermia.

"Come for me, my little *milaya.* Come for me, now!"

She clamped down on me and creamed all over me.

I had to tell her. I couldn't keep it inside any longer.

"Good girl; I love you." *What a pussy! Why would I say that?*

Tiffany reached behind herself and wrapped a hand around my hip, keeping me thrusting inside of

her.

"I got to pull out, baby," I panted, even though I didn't want to.

It was the right thing to do. She didn't need to be saddled down with a rough man like me. I would only make her miserable.

Fuck that! Come deep inside her pussy and keep her chained to you for life.

I tried to shake off these dark tendencies, but Tiffany was of the same mindset. Instead of agreeing, she sank her pussy deeper onto my cock and squeezed me tight, like a damn vise.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" The flutters of her walls against my cock did me in. I cried out as my orgasm rushed through me and I came deep inside her. It felt amazing to come inside of her without anything between us: no drugs, no condoms, *nothing*.

I prayed to my heavenly father that she wasn't on birth control. She was a virgin, after all. Chances were she never thought she'd need them. Panting, I pulled away from her and grabbed her clothes. I helped her get dressed.

"Let's get you that ice cream now."

On unsteady legs, we walked back out into the ice cream parlor. I knew I had a smile on my face, and Tiffany looked like she held the biggest secret on the planet.

I hoped this day would be the day I got her pregnant. That way she could never leave. Even if she tried to run, she wouldn't get far.

Tiffany Perez was mine. She better get used to it.

CHAPTER 8



Tiffany

Wow.

I felt sore between my legs as Viktor sauntered up to the counter and ordered me the biggest banana split they had on the menu. From the looks we were getting from people in the ice cream parlor, my cries of pleasure had been overheard, but Viktor just bared his teeth at anyone who dared frown at us.

"Let's eat quickly, so we can warm back up at *our* place. You will *love* your new home." Viktor whispered in my ear.

I nodded in agreement. My tongue was tied from his use of *our* and the deep dicking that had just taken place mere minutes before. I didn't even think of the implications of his words.

He escorted me to a booth and helped me sit down. "Rest here until the ice cream is ready."

I dropped my head back on the booth with a groan of relief. My legs were shaking, my ass throbbing from what he'd done to me.

Viktor went back to the counter and got our ice cream. I was so astonished that he kept his word. I truly thought he was going to fuck me in his car and leave me on the side of the road.

His hardness was still there, radiating off him like the largest warning. But there was a new softness to him. Something bright, deep inside his gaze that made me feel hopeful. *Maybe this wasn't so bad.* I could date him, see where it took us. It wasn't like he was going to keep me with him forever. We were just beginning. *What did I have to lose?*

An apartment I couldn't afford. A car that was a hunk of junk. A loneliness that left me sobbing in the middle of my cold sheets late at night.

He sat the ice cream in front of me. I tried to pick up my spoon, but my arms felt like soggy noodles. The kind you make in the microwave, leave out for too long, and just taste disgusting.

"What do you do for a living?" I asked, hoping he'd give me more insight into his life.

"I am an enforcer." He shoveled a bite into his mouth, then looked over at me. "Why aren't you eating? Do you not like bananas? I can get you something else."

I shook my head. "No; I can't feel my arms."

"Baby." He stood and moved to my side of the booth. Viktor grabbed my spoon and dipped it into the sundae. "Open," he commanded.

My mouth fell open wide at his demand and the pleasure shown in his gaze. It soothed my soul,

thinking that I'd done something to make him happy with me.

I must be broken.

"What's an enforcer?"

"It's someone who does a lot of bad things for an organization they are a part of."

He didn't even flinch as he met my gaze.

A monster lurked beneath the surface, but I got the sense he wasn't going to hurt me.

"You're a bad guy?" It made sense. He did, essentially, kidnap me. It was to get ice cream, but he could've asked me on a date, like a normal person.

"Does that bother you?"

I couldn't gauge his feelings at the moment. I closed my eyes and thought about what he'd revealed as I licked the ice cream off my spoon.

"Do you hurt women and children?" I held my breath in anticipation of his answer.

"Never," he said venomously.

"Then I don't need to know."

Maybe someone else would be shocked. Perhaps a tougher woman would run away while she still could. But I'd been a good girl all my life, and it hadn't gotten me anywhere until now. Maybe it was time for me to get a little *dirty*.

Viktor's hot gaze met mine. "Finish your ice cream so I can take you home and show you *exactly* what I would've done had I known I was your first."

I take another bite. "Yes, sir."

"Are you happy?" He asks when I take my last bite.

"For now."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Selena Michaels is a local romance author in Virginia. Selen writes adult dark romance with adult themes and loads of triggers. Her books stem from real life around her and from her history living in a small town in rural Pennsylvania. Selena also draws inspiration from her closest family and friends. She does her own research and her books are living proof. Some of her favorite authors are Laurell K Hamilton, Christine Feehan, Nora Roberts, Steven King, Daniel Steel, TL Swan, and many many more.

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BRATVA DARLING BONUS GREEK HONEYMOON



BY SABINE BARCLAY

I wasn't prepared for her…

She got me to pay three times as much as I wanted for a company I'll buy and destroy.

She knows who I am. The bratva doesn't scare her.

Intelligent, brave, and unstoppable.

She's already mine, my soulmate.

Laura and I are finally on our Greek honeymoon. We may be a bratva couple, but my bride deserves an escape from the perils of Mafia life in New York City.

My *malyshka* will have everything she deserves. Passion, adventure, and even more passion.

I'll take her to her limits. Then give her all her heart desires.

Bratva Darling is an interconnecting, standalone Dark Mafia Romance with a HEA and no cliffhanger. It contains extra-steamy scenes that will make your toes curl and your granny blush. This is book one in *The Ivankov Brotherhood*, a six-book series that'll keep you warm at night.

LAURA

I've been Mrs. Kutsenko for a couple of weeks, but it's still taking some getting used to when I hear the name and know that someone is speaking to me, not Galina or Maks's aunt, Alina. I love it. I love the title missus. I love the last name. And more than anything, I love that it's Maks's and now mine. We share this too.

"*Malyshka*?"

It will never get old hearing Maks call me baby girl. It's always been special. On our honeymoon, it feels even more so.

"Yes?"

"Where are you?"

"I'm in the bedroom. I'm trying to figure out what will hide this ridiculous bikini you bought me. I swear. Why do you bother spending money on these when I could just use dental floss and call it a bathing suit?"

Maks pinches my ass before wrapping his arms around my waist as he comes to stand behind me. I'm standing in front of the closet with only five things hanging in it. One pair of shorts, two shirts, and two cocktail dresses. He's the one who packed for our two-week honeymoon. No panties, which is not surprising. The dresser has two bras, three tank tops, and four other bikinis that are barely better than the one he asked me to wear.

"Because you look gorgeous in them, and I enjoy looking."

"But you know I hate other people seeing me in them, even if they are your relatives. These are as bad as the two you gave me in Turks and Caicos."

"And you looked just as hot in those as you do this one. And my cousins know better than to look. They don't need to watch you. They need to watch for anyone who might come near you."

"I'd tell you to walk around naked to see how it feels, but you'd be a fucking nudist if you could. You don't care if they see you."

"*Malyshka,* when have I not had my brothers and cousins around? We've seen each other naked since we were babies."

He shrugs, winks, and pinches me again. I stick my hips back and rub my ass against his cock. I feel it hardening as we stand here.

"Put your hands on the wall, baby girl."

Finally.

I can't see him, but I know he's pulling down his boardshorts. Then he tugs the ties on each of my hips. The floss falls to the floor. Then he's there. The place we both crave. As he thrusts into me, everything is right in the world.

"I love you, Laura."

"I love you, Daddy."

He kisses along my neck, nipping where it meets my shoulder. I use the wall to brace myself as we move together. He has one arm back around my waist. His free hand lands across my ass, the ringing sound filling the bedroom. He does it again and again. This isn't a punishment. This is for pure pleasure.

"Daddy, may I come?"

"Yes, *malyshka*. You know I can't last."

"You did last night. Damn Energizer Bunny. And you call me little rabbit."

"*Zaychek,* you are both my strength and my kryptonite. You can bring me to my knees or make me feel like the greatest man in the world."

"You are the greatest man."

I press one hand against the wall, keeping myself from ramming into it, while the other holds onto Maks's arm. His fingers are working my clit, and I'm trembling.

"I'm so close, Daddy."

"Me too, baby girl."

And then I'm there. I lean my head back against his shoulder as I shudder. I feel him stiffen behind me as he comes too. This time, as he moves along my neck, the kisses are affectionate and gentle. We stand, joined for a moment, before he pulls away. I grumble my protest. He gives me a playful swat on my ass. I retie my bikini bottoms, shooting his back a dirty look.

"I can see you in the mirror, you know. Do you really hate them that much?"

It's my turn to slide my arms around his waist. I'm way too short to see over his shoulder and into the mirror, so I rest my cheek against his back. There are times having a husband who's a foot taller than you is marvelous. It's shielded me from the world, both physically and emotionally.

"I'd prefer to keep them for the rooftop pool. I don't love them here or at the house in Queens. The guards can see me there."

"I definitely don't want you wearing them at home. These are for special occasions or the penthouse."

"Did you pack a backup bathing suit, Maks? You had to know I would complain."

"Maybe."

I laugh.

"I love hearing that, *malyshka.* There were days since our engagement when I thought I might not hear it again."

"Because I was ready to murder you?"

"Yes. And not in my sleep. You would have looked me in the eye."

"Things aren't perfect at home, and we still have a lot of work to do. But I wouldn't change being married to you, Maks. I don't love how you proposed—at least, not the first time—but I've loved you from the start."

"You know I feel the same. I hate that you'll always have that memory from the car and the jeweler's."

"Let it go, Maks. I'm not sad anymore. I always understood what was happening. I was just disappointed. You've more than made up for it."

"I've had a lot to make up for. Our reception, the—"

"Would you like your first spanking, Daddy?"

"Is that what you think is going to happen?"

"You do have the finest ass I've ever seen. I've wondered what it would be like to slap it a few times."

Maks turns and looks down at me. I struggle to keep a straight face at his surprise. But we're both soon laughing. He goes to the dresser and opens one of his drawers, which is nearly as empty as mine. He pulls out my favorite fluorescent 1980s Miami Beach spring break style bikini. It was the one he got me once we were in Turks and Caicos, and I refused to wear the ones he got me. He dangles it on his finger.

"You planned this all along."

"Maybe. Doesn't change the fact that I love seeing you in the one you're wearing."

I whip off the one I have on, which takes a second considering there is barely a strip of cloth to cover my vage and only string up my ass. They're barely triangles on the top, and they only just cover my nipples. I pull on my preferred bikini, grab the coverup from the end of the bed, and dash through the door. Maks is on my heels. I run toward the open French doors and out to the sand.

Maks's arm encircles me like a steel band. He lifts me off my feet and swings me into his arms. He carries me to the lounge chair and sits. There was a second one, but I don't know where it went. Maybe the patio for one of the guys. We've been here a week, and we've only sat together on this one.

"What do you want to do today, baby girl?"

"Could we go snorkeling in that grotto we spotted yesterday?"

"If that's what you want, sure."

"Maybe we could take a picnic and have lunch on the island next to it. The brochure that was on the counter when we arrived said there are some ruins there. We could explore those after we eat."

"That sounds wonderful. When do you want to head out?"

"Maybe like an hour. I'm really comfy here."

I'm seated between Maks's legs and am reclining against him. His hands rest on my thighs, and mine are on top of his. I think I'm still jetlagged because I have these waves of tiredness that hit me every so often. Or maybe I just love lying in Maks's arms.

I don't fall asleep, but we enjoy the breeze as we watch the waves. He knows I love being on or near the water. I learned he likes the mountains. I'm planning our next vacation. I'm picking somewhere he'll enjoy. He's already spoiled me twice.

"What're you thinking about?"

"Nothing much, Daddy. Just that I'm enjoying this. It's so peaceful. With everything going on at home, the threats and uncertainty, it's nice to be somewhere so peaceful. I wish we could just stay. Could we buy an island somewhere big enough for your family and mine, and we could live there? You could fish, and I could gather coconuts, and we could spend most of our days making love. No one would have to know who we are on our own island."

"I wish it were that simple. If it were, I would have whisked you away the day I met you."

"You didn't look like you wanted to be anywhere near me by the time that meeting ended."

"But you know I did. Fuck. You know I get hard remembering how you stood toe-to-toe with me. I have never met someone as smart as you. It's fucking sexy as hell."

"And I thought you loved me for my tits and ass."

"I'm partial to both, but you running circles around Dimitry was way too arousing. Thank God for the damn table to hide my hard on."

"And I still wish I'd had time to get myself off before I had to leave."

"We should get going, though. If we're going to have time for the chef to pack the picnic, we need to let him know now. I want Stefan, Michail, and Sergei to head over before us. Sergei will let us

know if he thinks it's safe."

I swallow my sigh. Having eight bodyguards on your honeymoon isn't the best way to kindle a romance. It's a good thing I already love Maks. But I get it. After the photos, I know people might watch us. It makes me feel better having them with us.

We head into the house, and Maks talks to Sergei about scouting the grotto and beach area. I text the chef, who only appears long enough to prepare our meals. The rest of the time, we see no one who didn't travel with us. Maids visit while we're away from the villa, and the house is immaculate when we return. By the time the chef's confirmed bringing a picnic and Maks feels like Sergei understands his million and one rules, I have our beach and snorkeling gear packed. God bless my husband's cousin. Sergei nods at everything Maks says, and I grin at Maks's back. I know he just wants things to be perfect.

The chef meets us on the beach with our lunch, then we're on our way, the tender taking us straight from the villa to the grotto. The scenery is breathtaking. The water is clearer than the Caribbean, and the sky is bluer than even Big Sky Country. A few scattered puffy clouds make it absolutely idyllic. I slip into the water and tread as I slide on my flippers and adjust my mask. Sergei, Ilya, and three men I met at the beginning of this trip join us in the water. The men spread out and encircle Maks and me. I know they don't have guns with them, but I suspect they probably have knives in their boardshorts' pockets. But they keep a respectful distance, and Maks and I enjoy the sea life. We swim throughout the grotto, pointing to various things. I freak Maks out with how deep I dive, but it was worth it to see the loggerhead turtle.

"Are you ready to eat, *malyshka*?"

"Yeah. I'm starving. What about you?"

"I'm starving too, but I'll settle for our lunch."

"I have never met anyone as horny as you."

"Yes, you have. You."

I laugh as we swim back to the tender. It's been bobbing in the water as the captain waits for us. We're all soon on board and on our way to the sandy beach on the nearby island. I spot the place Sergei must have set up. There're two guards standing in suits. I told Maks the men stand out too much in suits. He assured me he told the men they could dress more casually, but I guess old habits die hard. It also hides their guns better.

Maks unpacks the picnic except for the dessert, saying it should stay in the shade. He rolls his eyes when I make sure the men have their lunch, too. He might pretend that I should let them fend for themselves, but I know he loves that I care so much. We eat half our lunch in silence, merely enjoying the company and the vista. When we talk, we chat about the changes I'd like to make to the house in Queens. There aren't many, but there are a few things I'd like to personalize.

"Are you hungry enough for dessert?"

"Are you offering, baby girl?"

"You're like a hobbit. I'm your second dessert. First dessert is in the basket."

I reach in, but there's nothing there. I glance at Maks. He's watching me and nudges his chin toward the basket. I lift an envelope from it and open it.

Love's path is rarely straight. Follow the one that leads to the heart. There, you will find your next clue.

I look at Maks, who's trying to appear nonchalant. He reaches into the bag he brought ashore that I didn't see him take to the boat. He pulls out a pair of athletic shorts, a tank top, socks, and my tennis shoes. He pulls out socks and tennis shoes for himself.

"A scavenger hunt?"

"Maybe."

"The path that leads to the heart."

I look around and spot a break in the rocks to our left. My eyes follow the smooth dirt behind the boulders and notice a narrow but worn path. I hurry to dress. Maks tells me to leave everything and to lead the way. That surprises me. We always have guards go ahead of us. I noticed him tucking a gun in the back of his shorts' waistband. Some things never change. I finish getting dressed and hurry toward the path.

As we follow it, the view improves. I can see out to smaller, uninhabited islands in three directions and further inland in one.

"Does the heart mean the center of the island? How big is it?"

Maks shrugs.

"Some help you are."

He shrugs again.

We follow the path for ten minutes until I'm certain we're in the middle of the island. I look around and spy another envelope tucked in a small bush near the path.

The heart knows what the heart wants. So does the mind. Locate the home of this island's great mind. There, you will find your next clue.

Great mind? A philosopher? I don't know which one lived on this island.

"Am I allowed to use my phone?"

"No."

Maks smirks at me. I survey the area around me and notice there's a hill to the north that appears to have a couple of stone markers or tiny structures. I can't tell from here. But I find the path that will lead us there. The hunt allows me to explore the island like I'd hoped we would, but there's the excitement of the unknown.

"How did you arrange this?"

"That's like asking Santa how he gets to everyone's house in one night."

"Magic, Daddy?"

Maks is one of the most serious people I have ever met in my entire life. One of the most serious anyone could meet in their entire life. The idea of magic and Maks together almost makes me giggle. I stand on my toes and kiss his cheek. He appears so much more relaxed than he ever does at home. I can tell he's enjoying watching me enjoy this adventure he arranged. I slide my hand in his as we continue walking. I have to search a little for the next clue, but I find it behind what appears to be a cairn at the foot of the larger ruins I hadn't seen from our last stop.

This was once the home of a great Sophist philosopher who spoke of Hercules's great choice. Which path do you choose? To the left lies vice and to the right lies virtue. Somewhere the paths converge. There, you will find your next clue.

The path to the left heads to a citrus grove, the scent of the lemons and oranges wafting to us. I can see several miles down it. The one to the right disappears into a bend. Do I take the one that's easy to see with the low hanging fruit tempting me to enjoy an orange? Do I take the one that appears harder but might have something just as beautiful but hidden? Either way, the paths meet.

"This one."

I point to the right. I can tell Maks already knew which one I would take. Not because it's the righteous path, and I'm a good Catholic girl. He knew I would pick this because my curiosity is too strong. I want to know what I can't see. He takes my hand once more, and we make our way to the

bend. When we round in, I freeze.

"Is that Turkey in the distance?"

"Across the strait on the other side of the island in front of us. That island belongs to Turkey."

We can see a scattering of other Aegean islands, and it's as though we're at the top of the world. There's no one else in sight. I don't know where the men disappeared to. It feels like Maks and I are the only people in existence as we look out over the water and islands. I doubt many people have enjoyed this view.

"I love you so damn much, Maks. You truly would do anything to make me happy."

"Always, *malyshka*. You're everything to me."

I cup his cheeks and wait for him to lean toward me, but he doesn't move. I go up on my toes and press a soft kiss to his lips. He slides his arms around me, but he does nothing to deepen the kiss. He's letting me lead. I flick my tongue against his lips, and he opens to me. Mine tangles with his as I draw it into my mouth. I suck lightly, and Maks's hold on me tightens. I know he's struggling not to take over. If I didn't know the men must still see us, I would drop to my knees and make good on my teasing.

"I don't even know what we're going to find at the end of this hunt, but this is already beyond wonderful. I know that's your handwriting. I know you wrote these clues, and you planned and organized all of this. You set it all up and made it happen just to make me happy. Thank you, Maksim. You're everything to me, too."

I never call him by his full name, but I want him to understand how serious I am. I kiss him once more. Then I convince him to take a selfie with me. I snap a few more photos before we continue along the path. I can see where the two will meet. A metaphor for our lives, maybe. Before that spot, there's another envelope resting on a rock.

"Were you certain I would come this way? Or is there an envelope on the other path too?"

"It's like how many licks it takes to get to the center of a Tootsie Pop. The world may never know."

I close my eyes and try not to laugh, but I can't help it. I giggle. It's not often Maks cracks jokes. He bears the weight of the world most days. But he's truly enjoying himself, and I want to make him laugh more. His face is so relaxed, and he's unguarded, letting me see his emotions without reservation.

You picked the path of virtue even though you picked a man full of vices.

"Maks, you do not have vices. You may be lusty toward me, but you aren't licentious. You control your anger, and you have what you have from hard work, not laziness or greed. You don't do anything to excess, except for having sex with me. And I'll never complain about that. You share everything with the other guys in your family, so you're hardly greedy. Do you really see yourself as having vices?"

"Laura, you know what I am, who I am. I'm the walking definition of a vice."

"No, you are not."

My adamance surprises even me.

"I don't like that you see yourself that way. You couldn't be more wrong. I know exactly what and who you are. You're the man I love to distraction who's loyal, driven by duty, kind and gentle with me when I need it, and unrelenting and unbending when the world demands it. You put everyone ahead of yourself. You are a good man, Maks. It pains me to think that you really don't see that."

"I'm better for having you as my wife and the woman I love."

"The woman who loves you."

It's easy to imagine Maks as coldhearted and unremorseful, but he's not. He's the man this life made him into, but he's also still the boy who would do anything for his family, trying to balance demands made on him and the person he wishes he could be. I don't know what else to do but hug him. I hold on as though I'm afraid he might float away. He strokes my head and kisses my forehead. He's comforting me when I wish to make him feel better about himself.

"Maks, I love you just as you are."

"Thank you, *meelaya*."

Darling. I like it nearly as much as when he calls me baby girl.

This is your final clue. Follow the path less traveled.

We continue to walk until we reach the intersection. One path is wider and clearly used more often. The other becomes narrow and uneven quickly. We move to that one, and Maks holds my hand more to help me keep my balance than for affection. We enter an olive grove, the shade a reprieve from the warm sun. Even in late fall, the sun has strength. When we reach the end of the path, we're at a private beach. There's a house that's more like a large cottage than a villa. I look at Maks, wondering if we're trespassing.

"Go on."

He lifts our joined hands and encourages me to lead. We cross the sand until we get to the front door. There's a large manila envelope pinned to the door. I pull the pin and open it. Papers slide into my hand along with a key. I glance at Maks, but his expression is neutral. He's hiding from me. I look back at the papers, which are written in Greek and English. I skim them, my eyes widening with each word.

"Maks?"

"Yes, Laura."

"My name is on this deed."

"I know."

"Laura Kutsenko."

"Yes, baby girl. I know that's your name."

"It says I own this with you."

"You do."

I look up at him in wonder.

"This is our first property that's truly ours."

"Do you mind that I bought it without you?"

"No." My answer is immediate. "You know I've always wanted a home on a beach. I trust that it's exactly what I would want. You wouldn't get anything less. It's really *ours*."

"Do you want to go inside?"

I unlock the door and step into the living room. It's filled with lavender in vases on the floor since there's no furniture. My favorite scent fills the air I inhale. The sense of calm doesn't negate my excitement. There's a trail of buds to follow that leads to the kitchen. I discover a bucket with ice, a bottle of vodka and a bottle of sour in it. The whiskey is beside it. It's what we drank the night we met for a second time. The night we fell in love. I told him then that I don't like champagne. He knew I would drink it here, but I wouldn't enjoy it. We're going to celebrate without trying to be anyone we're not. We are who we are, and we love each other for it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sabine Barclay, a nom de plume also writing Historical Romance as Celeste Barclay, lives near the Southern California coast with her husband and sons. Growing up in the Midwest, Sabine enjoyed spending as much time in and on the water as she could. Now she lives near the beach. She's an avid swimmer, a hopeful future surfer, and a former rower. Before becoming a full-time author, Sabine was a Social Studies and English teacher. She holds degrees in International Affairs (BA), Secondary Social Science (MAT), and Political Management (MPS). She channels that knowledge into creating engrossing contemporary romances that will make your toes curl and your granny blush.

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SEDUCING SAN FRANCISCO



BY J.F. LOWE

For Alexis Mansfield, San Francisco was supposed to hold a fresh start and a dream job at one of the world's largest tech companies. Never in her right mind did she think it would also bring a billionaire, a BDSM club, and the mafia as a perk in her employment.

CHAPTER 1



Alexis Mansfield had flown before, but she'd never been so thankful to have her feet firmly on the ground. She carefully made my way through the corridor, walking more steadily than some of my fellow passengers, most of whom looked just as green as she felt. Despite the anxiety and nausea caused by our turbulent sixteen-hour flight, she also saw smiles on many of the faces as they stepped into the San Francisco international terminal.

She stopped as she stepped into a patch of sunlight peeking through the thick fog. Alexis tilted her head back and closed her eyes, letting herself soak it in. She'd left a rainy Sydney day behind at seven-thirty in the morning and arrived in fog-covered San Francisco in the afternoon, thanks to the time zone changes. With only an hour before her final interview at one of the largest tech companies in the world, Rappel, Alexis cursed the short time frame but couldn't help but smile as to why. Her older brother Declan married the love of his life and submissive Madison only twenty-four hours prior.

Racing for the bathrooms first to freshen up only hoped that her dress bag hadn't gotten crumpled in the plane overhead locker. Sliding the dress over her curvy figure now, she was ready. Not just ready. Alexis was excited.

A short drive from the airport in the town car she'd ordered, Alexis arrived in the financial district of San Francisco, The large glass building that stretched almost to the sky. Rappel.

Alexis's breath caught in her chest.

She shook in her heels for a moment.

And then she went inside.

The lobby was enormous, with immense marble floors and a fountain. Men and women in suits with perfect hair were filing through the doors and waiting for elevators. At the large security desk in the center of the room, three black men were checking in guests.

Alexis approached them with a smile. None of them smiled back.

"Name please?" One bald man asked. He glared at her like she might be a potential terrorist. Her voice came out so low that she needed to start over. Alexis cleared her throat.

"I'm Alexis Mansfield? Here for an interview at four-thirty?" The man nodded and turned to his computer. He typed quickly. Nodded.

"Sign in, please." He tapped a clipboard next to her on the desk, and she quickly wrote her name, time, and date. "Look over here, please," he said, and when she looked at him, there was a sudden flash in her eyes. "Just a moment."

Seconds later, he'd printed out a picture of her and made a laminated badge, which he handed her. "Please wear this at all times while you're in the building, Ms. Mansfield." She glanced at the badge

and groaned. In the picture, she looked cross-eyed.

"I wish you'd at least told me to smile," she joked. He reacted as if she'd never spoken.

"Take the elevators on your left up to the fifteenth floor. You'll be meeting with Mark Felds."

"Thanks," she whispered. Her stomach was churning, anxious. She dug in her purse, grabbed a couple of Tums she'd picked up at the airport, and chewed them as she crammed into the elevator with the perfect employees of Rappel. She disembarked on the fifteenth floor as instructed, into a wide hallway with black marble floors. To the right was a closed oak door. To the left were a set of glass double doors and a waiting room of sorts behind them. Alexis stood facing glass doors, steeling herself with a few deep breaths.

The oak door creaked behind her, turning to look, her ankle giving way, sending her sprawling flat on her ass. Her elbows throbbing from the violent contact with the marble floor, but she scarcely registered the pain.

"Fuck"

Looking up, Alexis found herself staring into a pair of deep, chocolate brown eyes. They flicked down to her as he sank into an elegant crouch directly in front of her.

"Are you ok?"

Damn, that was some voice, smooth and velvety. And some man, she realized, as he stood. Over six feet tall, and every inch of it lean muscle – stretching across his chess before tapering down to his waist and the dress shirt neatly tucked into his tailored black pants that screamed business executive. His hair was dark, the color of cocoa, and vine tattoos wound their way up his arms, disappearing under his shirt.

She could see the desire in his eyes as her eyes returned to his. It wasn't the soft admiration or even inappropriate lechery she'd seen in men before. This was a soul-shattering desire that made her mouth go dry and her heart race. She'd never had anyone look at her that way before, and it completely threw her.

A shuffle behind her pulled her from his gaze. "Ms. Mansfield?"

Turning her head, Alexis pushed to her feet and nearly lost her balance one more. The blonde smiled as if embarrassed for her.

"I'll bring you to your interview with Mr. Felds now."

Alexis nodded and followed the blonde through the glass doors, feeling the heat of the gaze that followed her.

CHAPTER 2



The thick fog swathed the streetlight preventing the dim yellow glow from reaching the ground. On the dark San Francisco street, Quinn Sciortino ran his hand through his hair in frustration as he stepped out into the mist to meet his town car. It wasn't the lateness of the town car that sourced his frustration, but the once again demand from his father to join the family business. Not that he would actually call it a business, not a legal one anyway. The family business involved money laundering and weapons to the kind of people that Quinn despised. A family business that all started with his grandfather, known as the La Cosa Nostra crime boss of San Jose, until his death when Quinn's father took over. One that his father wanted him to head. Quinn stepped out and slid onto the rear seat of the town car. No words needed to be exchanged with his driver, he knew where to take him. Highclere.

Quinn sat back, reflecting on the day's events. One fucking hell from day, first the demanding call and then the colossal mess when he'd accidentally sent a woman sprawling across the marble floors on the fifteenth floor. Ms. Mansfield. Fuck, just the memory of her made his cock hard.

The way her lips parted and her breathing became shallow when he was close to her had been ample evidence of how deeply he affected her. He hated to admit it, but her effect on him wasn't far off. The red dress she'd been wearing was professional yet molded to every curve of her beautiful body like the glossy coating on a candy apple. He wanted to peel back that layer and see the sweet flesh underneath—she promised to be delicious. There were no noticeable panty lines. The image of her wearing nothing underneath had his dick swelling so hard that he felt like he was a thirteen-year-old kid again seeing his first dirty magazine.

A vision of her thick, dark hair had been pulled up loosely on top of her head. The style drew his eyes to the delicate column of her neck, not helping the situation in his pants. Her eyes were dark brown and unusually expressive—he could see each and every thought and emotion as it crossed behind those wide, intelligent eyes.

The way she ran her tongue over her plump lower lip. He had a momentary image of her kneeling in front of him, her lips around his cock and that small tongue swirling the head.

Fuck! He would make a mess of his pants if he didn't shake off the thoughts of her.

* * *

Quinn stood in the upstairs dungeon, watching a middle-aged man releasing his sobbing sub. Kyle's session had gone badly, badly was an understatement. It was a right royal fuck up. Thankfully one of

the dungeon monitors stepped in to help.

Turning away, Quinn surveyed the rest of his large dungeon. At almost midnight, all the equipment was in use, from the spanking benches to the Saint Andrews cross that sits nestled in the lush wall of Hoya. Highclere was turning out to be the greatest investment and risk he'd ever taken. This was saying something considering he was the owner of one of the world's largest tech companies, Rappel.

The BDSM club hadn't been his idea, but after his business trip to Australia, it had certainly become one of his biggest passions. The journey to Sydney had been fruitful business-wise and personally after a chance meeting introduction Rhys Morgan and Declan Mansfield, the owners of the original Highclere. They had wanted to expand their club, and with four new clubs throughout the United States, Quinn wanted nothing more than to be part of the new venture. Sure he could have opened one on his own, but there was a sense of comfort in knowing that he'd partnered with people that lived the lifestyle every day and lived by the rules of safe, sane, and consensual.

Mansfield, her name, filtered through his head once more. Surely it was merely a coincidence that her last name and Declan's were the same. Quinn laughed at himself. One fleeting moment with this woman, and she was already driving him crazy. He need to get her off his mind. No, he needed a release. Quinn scanned the room, looking for a sub he could sink into for the night.

Quinn's attention was on the tall, leggy redhead kneeling in front of him. She had her head up, eyes down. Her hands were clasped behind her back, shoulders squared, small breasts jutting out. Her nipples were already pebbled and would've been clearly visible under her bra even if it hadn't been sheer. The skirt she wore was tiny, barely covering her ass. A hand between her legs a quarter of an hour earlier had told me that she wasn't wearing anything under it.

"Pull up your skirt."

The command was firm but not harsh. Some Doms got off on humiliation and verbal cruelty, but he wasn't one of them. A little dirty talk, but if a Sub wanted me to call her foul names or degrade her in any way, he always sent them in the direction of a suitable dom.

The sub kept her head down as she pulled her skirt up around her waist and revealed a smoothly waxed pussy and the gleam of gold. "Take off your bra." She did as she was told, and he walked closer, examining the tattoo on the side of her left breast.

A Lilly. That's what she'd said her name was Lilly. He didn't know if it was her real name, but he didn't care. This wouldn't go beyond tonight. He had something to call her, and she would call him Sir. They'd fuck, get what they needed from each other and then go their separate ways.

He reached down, and she was tall enough that he didn't have to go far to take one of her nipple rings between his finger and thumb. Her breathing hitched as he tugged on the piercing, but she didn't whimper or speak. She'd given him her safe word, and he didn't plan on gagging her, so if he went too far, she could easily say it.

Until then... he reached into his pocket and pulled out the only toy he planned on using tonight. One of the clips went to the ring he'd just been playing with, the second to the matching one on the other side. The third clip was on the end of a slightly longer chain, though not quite long enough for the links to be slack once everything was in place.

"Up."

She stood, a flush spreading across her chest as she automatically spread her legs wider. Quinn pulled the chain tight, and she gasped as her piercings moved. He attached the third clip into place before stepping back to admire his handy work. Clamps had their own restrictions since they could only be left on for a certain amount of time before the blood restriction became a problem. Piercings didn't have a time issue, but they were a little more delicate. Pulling too hard could tear flesh. This

sort of thing was more of a balancing act than most people realized.

"Hands behind your back and stay straight," he warned her as he circled around her. She had a small, tight ass that his hand itched to spank.

"If I see you slouching, you'll be punished." She'd want to obey. Most subs always did. Even if a part of them craved a punishment, they'd still want to please their Dom. Even if it was just a temporary one. But a good Dom could read their sub and know just how much punishment they wanted and adapted their demands. Like he knew Lilly would attempt to stand straight, and she'd enjoy the initial pain that came with it, but at some point, she'd slouch. It might be a conscious movement or maybe in response to something he did, but whatever it was, the result would be the same.

Quinn's handprint on her ass and her need for punishment being satisfied. He stopped in front of her and reached down, sliding his finger beneath the piercing. She was already slick with arousal, and a shiver ran through her as he stroked her sensitive flesh.

"You can come whenever you like," he said, pitching his voice low. "But you will stay straight, or you will be punished." The sound she made told him everything he needed to know, and it went straight to his cock. She'd come, and she'd move, and he'd spank her. And he was fairly certain that she'd come again from that.

Quinn moved his hand further back, letting the heel brush against her clit even as he slid a finger inside her. He couldn't see her face, but there was no mistaking the way her muscles stiffened. Half a dozen strokes later, he inserted a second one. Her hips started to move, and he used my free hand to adjust himself.

"Come. Come for me sweetheart," he coaxed.

He bent his fingers, slid the tips across the front wall, then smiled as her entire body jerked. A sharp cry came from her as the sudden movement pulled at her nipples and clit simultaneously, but there was pleasure in the sound. Rubbing her g-spot, watching as her hands fell to her sides, fists clenching and unclenching as the pressure inside her built.

She let out a wail, body shaking as she came. She bent forward, choking out a half-sob as she realized she'd failed to do as told. He didn't let up though, keeping pressure on both pleasure points until her knees buckled, and the only thing keeping her from falling to the floor was my hand.

Quinn wrapped his arm around her waist, holding her as she shook. She was tall, but he didn't have a problem moving her over to the bench a few feet away in the private room he had selected. There was a bed in here too, but he didn't intend to use that. They'd both get off, but this wasn't love-making. A bed was simply too intimate.

He bent her over the bench, letting her go only when he was sure she could stay on her feet. The sound of her breathing was harsh as she dragged in deep breaths, but he barely registered it. He put his hands on her ass and felt the firm muscles under his palms. Damn, this was going to be good.

"You disobeyed." He squeezed.

"Yes, Sir."

"And what does that mean?"

"I deserved to be punished."

The breathlessness of her answer was unmistakably anticipatory, and he wasn't about to disappoint. After the first crack had Lilly mewling and pushing back against him, he wasn't a sadist, but he didn't hold back. One after the other until her skin was bright red and the palm of his hand burned. She'd come at least once from it, and by the time he knew she'd reached her limit, he was more than ready to go.

Her forehead dropped down on the bench as he reached into his pocket and made short work of getting his cock out and the condom on. After that, it was one thrust into her pussy. Quinn moved hard and fast toward the release they both craved.

Because that's what it was. A release. He pushed the thought aside and focused on the wet heat gripping him, the friction of two bodies coming together.

CHAPTER 3



"Wait!"

Alexis thrust her hand between the doors and scurried inside as soon as they reopened. When she turned to press the button for the thirteenth floor, she froze.

It was him—the stunning man from the day before. He was even more striking than she remembered. The eyes she'd been too mesmerized to see that when he looked at her, his eyes turned so dark, they were almost black. And now they were boring into her as she openly gawked at him.

How could she not?

He was the most beautiful man she'd ever seen.

He wore a dark grey suit, similar to what he'd worn the day before, and still had a dusting of hair along his strong jawline. Towering over her, despite her four-inch heels, he owned every square inch of the small elevator car. While he was only a few years older than Alexis, he had the powerful presence of a much older man.

When the doors closed behind her, they jarred her from her trance, reminding her she'd been unabashedly devouring him with her eyes. Her lungs released a whoosh of air, and her heart began to jackhammer in her chest as she turned and pushed the button for the eighteenth floor. Stepping over to the wall opposite him, Alexis kept her eyes cast down to the floor and his shiny black dress shoes. As if her hormones weren't already running amok, the scent of his musky cologne wrapped itself around her, making her hungry for something far more delectable than any food.

What the hell is wrong with her? Her eyes darted around with embarrassment, looking anywhere but at the gorgeous man directly across from her until she realized she could feel the penetrating touch of his eyes.

Alexis didn't have to look up to know he was staring at her, daring her to meet his gaze. Unable to ignore his unspoken command, she lifted her head. Her eyes peered at him through my lashes. When her gaze reached his face, one corner of his lips quirked up just a fraction. Had she not been so keenly aware of the man, she would have missed the fleeting movement. Leaning back against the wall, hands clasped casually in front of him, he was perfectly at ease, amused by her flustered reaction if his smirk had been any indication. Alexis, on the other hand, was coming apart under his scrutiny.

Why was she so affected by a man she'd never even met? He was nobody to her. What did she care what he thought of her? She was sure there would be loads of attractive men in the city, but this one was different. His commanding stare stripped her defenses and left her raw and vulnerable.

He stepped toward her, his long legs eating up the distance between them. Electricity crackled around her as if his closeness changed the elevator's atmosphere. She was torn between wanting to step put on the next floor, to run away, and wanting to know what it was like to be touched by him.

Since she had no clue what the best thing to do was, Alexis stayed in place and waited to see what he would do next.

"Quinn Sciortino." The words were soft, as was the slight smile curving his beautifully formed lips. He held out a hand to hers.

Alexis placed her palm against his and felt the energy surge she'd anticipated and feared. His hand was warm and strong as it closed around hers. His smile faded, and for a moment, he looked as surprised as she felt before he stepped back.

Alexis watched as he reached into his jacket, pulled a card from the inner pocket, and handed it to her. A glance at the card showed it held only a single letter H embossed on the front and an address on the back.

"An apology for yesterday."

The elevator dinged, and he stepped out.

CHAPTER 4



Alexis stepped inside, the opulence of the club hit her hard enough to make her jaw drop. The card given to her by Quinn had been for a club, H. Who would have thought the irony in Highclere, better known in San Francisco as H. Alexis, wanted to laugh. Did Quinn know that her brother was one of the founders of Highclere in Australia?

H was like nothing she'd ever seen before. Even when she had walked through her brother's club during closed hours, it looked nothing like this. Needing a moment to absorb everything. Elegant booths lined one wall, and across was an elevated upper area that appeared to have an exclusive members section, all very expensive-looking.

Before taking a step further, a woman clad in a short leather mini and almost see-through net top stretched across her ample bust approached.

"Ms. Mansfield?"

"Umm, yes"

"Ma'am, please come with me. Mr. Sciortino is waiting for you" Without an answer, the woman turned and started for the stairs. How did he know that she would actually come to H. Alexis hurried to catch up and ascended the stairs, gasping at the scene before her.

She wasn't a prude. Hell, her own brother co-owned a BDSM club back in Sydney, but it wasn't something she'd previously engaged in personally. Not that she wasn't curious. It had mostly come down to the fact that her brother had been so overprotective that he had all but banned her from being at Highclere during operating hours.

The moans and smell of sex hung in the air. Alexis wasn't sure where to look first. It was only when an arm circled her waist that she was brought back to the present.

"Ms. Mansfield, you made it."

"Alexis"

"Well, Alexis, how do you like the club?" Quinn's hand slowly drifted up from her waist, lightly brushing the side of her breast before settling on the pulse of her delicate neck.

"I umm, it's fascinating," she whispered loud enough for Quinn to hear.

"Fascinating, that's a different word for it." Quinn moved in front of Alexis. "Do you know what I think is fascinating, Ms. Mansfield? You." Alexis' breath hitched. "That too is fascinating, the way your lips part, the little gasp of air, and the way those beautiful chocolate eyes widen. I bet your pussy is wet with arousal too." Before she could refute it, he kissed her.

His firm lips moved over hers, then teased her mouth open. His tongue swept in, stroking hers. Gripping her hair, he pulled her head back, giving him a better angle to take her mouth. His growl of approval whispered down her spine even as his hand curved around her jaw, securing her more fully.

Aggressive—too aggressive—yet heat smoldered under her skin as if she stood in front of a wall heater. Fuck, the man could kiss. Don't get swept away, she scorns herself mentally. Regaining her self-possession, she tried to experiment, teasing with her tongue. He lifted his head.

"Come, let's watch the scene about to start on stage" On the stage, the man was securing the woman's wrists with a pair of leather restraints as a pair of chains descended from the ceiling. A moment later, the cuffs and chains were attached, and her arms were being pulled over her head.

"Some people think of BDSM as being one specific thing," Quinn said quietly. "Usually based on whatever movie or book they've seen. But it's not. There are so many different aspects of it." The man untied two ties on either of the woman's shoulders, and her dress fell to her feet. He stood behind her and slid his hands over her hips, up her ribcage, and then forward to cover her breasts. His thumbs moved across her nipples, and she arched her back. "Do you do that?" Her question was so soft he almost missed it. "Do what?" He cupped a breast through her dress, but she didn't protest.

"Perform." He circled her nipple with his thumb as he answered, "No. I'm not an exhibitionist. Not exactly, anyway." He dropped his hand to her lap and began inching up her skirt. She stiffened.

"What are you doing?" Even though her voice was low, Quinn could hear its faint tremble. He stilled my hand and leaned down to press his lips against her neck. Her breath caught even as he felt her pulse pick up.

"Relax, sweetheart. I'll stop if you want me to, but I just want to make you feel good." The man on the stage now had his hand between the woman's legs. Even from where they were sitting, Quinn could see the tension in the woman's body as the man's fingers worked over her flesh. When he stopped, her body sagged, and he knew what he was doing.

"That's called orgasm denial," Quinn explained. "Where one partner is taken to the brink but not allowed to finish. A good Dom can keep a sub on edge all night." Alexis squirmed, and he wondered how much of it was her being uncomfortable due to what she was seeing...or how aroused she was.

"Don't worry. I will give you the relief you need," Quinn assured her. When his fingers brushed the inside of her thigh, she tensed again. "You can tell me to stop at any time, and I'll take you home," he promised. "But if you want me to take care of that ache inside you, spread your legs and let me in."

He no longer cared about the couple on the stage or what anyone else in the club was doing. Every bit of his attention was focused on the woman in his arms as he waited for her response. Either the night would be over, and they would walk away with no remorse, or he'd find out what it felt like to have his fingers buried in her tight pussy.

Her legs slowly moved apart as she turned her face toward the back of the seat. A red flush crept up her neck, but she didn't try to stop him as his hand moved under her skirt. Quinn made a sound in the back of his throat as he found her panties wet.

"Fuck, sweetheart," he murmured. "You're soaked." She sucked in a shuddering breath as he slipped his fingers beneath the elastic. His cock pressed against his zipper, but he ignored it. Right now, it was all about getting her off. The second he touched her clit, her body jerked, and he smiled. He would've loved to take it to one of the rooms and drag out every last drop of ecstasy he could give her, but he wasn't sure she had that sort of trust yet.

"Don't think about anything other than what you feel," he spoke the words into her ear as he moved his fingers over her clit. He dipped a finger into her and swallowed hard at the wet pussy. Quinn could only imagine what she would feel like wrapped around his cock. He rubbed the heel of his palm against her clit even as his finger circled her entrance. Felling her tension and knew she was close. She just needed to let go.

"If you want to come, sweetheart, you need to do it now." He lightly bit down on her earlobe. "If

you don't come when I tell you, I'll stop, and you'll be left wet and aching." She whimpered, her hips moving up against his hand.

"Come," Quinn ordered her. Her pussy clamped down on his hand, and she made the hottest sound he'd ever heard.

Fuck. He wanted to hear that sound again.

Alexis wasn't entirely sure what the hell she had just done. She'd been watching the couple onstage before she'd let a virtual stranger stick his hand under her dress and finger her to orgasm. Fuck! How the hell had she gone from sprawled out on her ass on the marble floor of his building to going to a BDSM club with her billionaire boss and then letting him...

Fuck! She sat up, yanking down her skirt. Her face was burning with the humiliation that flooded her. She couldn't even look at Quinn. Mr. Quinn Sciortino. Her boss.

Not only had she done something completely out of character, but She'd also probably just ruined her career.

"I need to go."

Alexis stood up, smoothing down her dress with shaking hands. She didn't look back, not wanting to see the smug triumph she was sure Quinn had on his face. She didn't slut shame, so if a woman wanted to have sex with a man on a first date or hook up with some random guy, that was her business. But she could never be that woman. The only man she had ever been with before tonight was one she'd had with her Highschool sweetheart that had lasted five years. Even then, it ended because she wanted the job at Rappel, and the only way to have it was to move to San Francisco.

"Alexis."

She ignored him as she hurried back the way she'd come into the club. She needed to get out of here. This was a huge mistake. She thought she could handle things, but she was wrong. She was so far over my head that she was drowning.

Alexis stepped out into the mist of the San Francisco street and took a gulping breath as she closed her eyes and willed back her tears. She couldn't take the chance that he'd see her crying and think he'd done something wrong. She didn't even think that I'd done something wrong. It wasn't like she was intentionally saving sex for after marriage or anything like that. If I'd met Quinn under different circumstances and we'd come here on an actual date, I wouldn't have been so upset.

"Alexis, are you okay?" She plastered a fake smile on her face before turning.

"I just needed some air." The concerned look on Quinn's face didn't change. He reached out and took her hand, giving it a light squeeze.

"I didn't read you wrong in there, did I? Because I thought–" She shook my head. She couldn't let him think he had done anything she hadn't consented to. She wanted his hands on her, in her, and she only wished it had been more, but she, of all people, knew it was stupid to fuck the boss.

"Nothing like that. I enjoyed...I mean...it just caught me off guard, that's all." "All right." He didn't sound like he quite believed her, but he didn't push the subject either.

"It's been a long week," she said. "And I need to be in the office first thing on Monday with for my – fuck! Do I still have my job?" He smiled, whether at her language or because he was relieved that she wasn't making a big deal out of what happened.

"Yes, Alexis. You can be assured you still have your job on Monday."

"Oh, okay then." She half-turned toward the street.

"I'll catch a cab, so you can go back inside."

"You're not taking a cab." He pulled his phone out of his pocket, tapped the screen a couple times, and then put it away.

"My driver will be here in a few minutes." His driver. Right. As if I needed anything else to remind me of how far apart our worlds were.

"You didn't need to do that," she said, wrapping her arms around her middle. She wasn't cold, but she was suddenly aware that she was standing on a sidewalk in wet panties that weren't quite back in place.

"It's my job to take care of you," he said, brushing aside my comment.

He slid his hand up my arm, leaving a burning path on my skin.

"And regarding your job, believe me, Alexis, I can separate business from pleasure." Before she could figure out the appropriate response, a car pulled up to the curb, and Quinn stepped away from her to open the door.

"I'm sorry." He took her hand and helped her into the back seat. It wasn't until he closed the door and the car pulled back into traffic that she realized he wasn't coming with her. She pressed my lips together, fingers twisting together hard enough for her knuckles to turn white.

It didn't mean anything, she told herself. He said she still had her job. She'd had fun. She didn't need to make it into something it wasn't. Whatever had prompted him to do what he did, it was out of his system now. She could focus on work, and that would be fine. Better than fine. Because it'd just been a moment between consenting adults. Nothing more. And there was no way in hell that she would be doing it again.

CHAPTER 5

As Quinn stalks into the Alexis office the next morning to apologise, he's taken by surprise at the sight before him. Alexis pinned against the wall by the companies head of technology. One of his fathers men

"Get off me" she begs.

Rage floods his body as the little prick smiles.

"But we all know your only here because your fucking your way to the top, so I thought I'd have a little taste for myself," he snides before lowering his hand to the front of her dress.

"Don't" she turns her head and squeezes her eyes shut. I run towards them pushing the prick off her.

"Whoa, back off, Quinn. She asked for it. Your father said she's one of those that are always happy to put out for a pretty penny." the man steps back hold his hands up in defence before turning and storming out of the office.

"Quinn?" she gasps, her eyes wide. Maybe she's pissed that I ruined her private moment. Tough luck. "You let him touch you? What if he hadn't stopped when you wanted him to, Alexis? There's no one around."

"Then I'm sure you would have broken his nose," she says. I would have broken more than that. I'm still considering it.

"This is all because he say us at Highclere, he saw you stick your figures in my puss and as you fucked my with them" She pushes away from the wall and stalks towards the office door.

"Fuck,"Quinn rand his fingers through his hair not realising the gravity of what he'd interrupted.

"I don't care what he saw but you sure as fuck didn't get your job by doing that" I step forward hand outstretched to pull her towards me.

"You have no idea do you, you're the CEO of the fucking company. I'm just a whore to them, one that apparently will fuck her way to the top " she snaps, shifting further away.

"That's not true, that's what I love about you, you don't give a shit who I am, you are here to do your job and the rest well that..."

Oh, fuck. He hadn't meant to say, love. I hadn't realised I even loved her before the words came flying out of my mouth. Fuck, he didn't even know her and he loved her. She brings out the wild animal in him, the beast that protects what's his.

"I hate this" she huffed.

"Why, Alexis?" He asks, almost soundlessly. He step forward his arms tighten around her, his fingers digging into the soft skin of her back. When she doesn't reply, her expression darkens further.

* * *

ALEXIS COULDN'T bare herself to Quinn like that. She just couldn't. He'd already taken far too much from her; she couldn't let him have this too. He couldn't say those words and then want her to say them back when he doesn't mean them.

"Tell me," he orders, one hand sliding up to twist in her hair, forcing her neck to bend backwards. "Tell me now."

"I hate you," she croak, gathering the last shreds of her defiance. Her voice is like sandpaper, hoarse from all the screaming.

"I hate you— I hate that the colour of my skin determines what people think of me" His eyes flash with amber fire.

"Is that right?" he whispers, leaning over me, still holding me arched helplessly against him. "You hate me, sweetheart?"

I hold his gaze, refusing to blink. In for a penny, in for a pound.

"Yes," I hiss, "I hate you!"

I need to convince him of my hatred because the alternative is unthinkable. He can't know the truth. He just can't. Quinn's face hardens, turning to ice. In one swift motion, he sweeps me up, caring me across to the grand piano and pushes me onto the lid, forcing me to bend over, my face sliding on the smooth wooden surface. I try to kick back with my legs, but it's useless.

He's gripping the back of my neck with one strong hand, and then I hear the menacing sound of a belt being unbuckled. I kick back harder, and actually manage to make contact with his leg. Of course, it gains me nothing. I can't escape from Quinn. I will never be able to escape from Andrew. He leans over me, pressing me into the table, his hard fingers tightening around the back of my neck.

"You're mine, Alexis," he says harshly, his large body dominating me, arousing me.

"You belong to me, do you understand? Each and every single part of you is mine." His erection presses against my buttocks, its uncompromising hardness both a threat and a promise.

"I don't give a fuck what others think, you're fucking mine."

"Quinn, please. Please don't." She begged.

CHAPTER 6



Even though it wasn't her fault, he still wanted to punish her for having another man's hands on her. She was his and his alone.

"Turn around." She stayed where she was for a moment, holding his gaze, and then she did as she was told. Spreading her legs shoulder-width apart but stayed straight, not knowing how else he wanted her positioned.

"Hands on the desk."

The first blow was across both cheeks, barely enough to sting. The second was harder, heat spreading across her skin. Three and four came quick together, and she gasped. The fifth made her cry out as it caught her across the lower part of her ass, his hand almost, but not quite, brushing against her pussy.

"Move to your elbows." Alexis hesitated, and his hand cracked against my skin again. She did as she was told, suddenly aware of how much this position exposed her pussy as well as her ass.

His hand came down again, this time curling around her hips, the center of it lightly connecting with her lower lips. Her entire body jerked. It hadn't hurt. Not exactly. It was a sharp sensation, unlike anything she'd felt there before. When he repeated the same strike, she made a strangled sound that she wasn't sure was a protest, but she didn't know if it was a plea to continue, either. Her brain scrambled to make sense of everything she was feeling.

Only when her legs were trembling, and her body was torn between pain and pleasure, he finally stopped. Her ass felt like it was on fire. He hadn't quite taken her to the bruising point but sitting tomorrow was going to be a real bitch.

"That's my girl."

He leaned over me and pressed his lips against her spine. She sighed as his mouth began to make its way down my back, his tongue tracing patterns across her skin. When his hands slid over her ass, Alexis whimpered, a shudder running through her entire body. His touch was gentle, but her skin was so sensitive that even the slightest touch was felt. Then his tongue was soothing her pussy.

A strangled sound came out as his tongue explored. It was a cross between his name and a moan. He'd used his fingers on her the first time, but not his mouth. She'd had friends who talked about having to convince their boyfriends to go down on them, and even then, they claimed it hadn't been very good.

Quinn was good. Beyond good.

His hands were on her hips, holding them in place as he found her clit. Alexis cried out, a jolt of pleasure going through her. There was no teasing, no gentle easing into things. His tongue and lips were relentless, driving her towards another orgasm. His fingers dug into her with bruising force, but

it wasn't too much. It was like he knew exactly where the line was between what he could handle and what she couldn't.

Alexis remembered how Jenna and her friends had said that what most people didn't get about the whole BDSM lifestyle was how much trust was an essential part. Now, as she gave herself over to Quinn, she understood what they meant. Only when she completely let go and trusted him not to take things too far did she have the freedom to fully enjoy what he was doing. She could only imagine what it would be like to trust him enough to venture into any other areas of the lifestyle.

Alexis called out his name as she came again, wave after wave of white-hot pleasure washing over her, his mouth coaxing out every last bit until her knees buckled and he caught her in his arms.

A little voice in the back of her head was starting to protest at how much control she'd given up, but she told it to shut the hell up and looked over her shoulder at Quinn. He was standing behind her, naked. She took a moment to admire him. She followed the deep v-grooves at his hips and saw the corded muscles in his thighs. Every tattoo and piercing, every inch of his gorgeous body.

"I shouldn't, but I want you too fucking bad," he groaned as he drove into her filling her.

CHAPTER 7



It had been three days since the incident in the Rappel office. The bags under her eyes perfectly complement her swollen, bloodshot eyes from crying herself to sleep each night. As she looked in the mirror, she sighed. Forget foundation, she was going to need a makeup miracle to have any chance of looking quasi-normal. Unfortunately, she didn't keep anything stronger than concealer on hand, so she did her best with what she had.

She may have looked like hell, but she felt better equipped to handle her problems than the days before. She had come to the conclusion she needed to start addressing her issues head-on instead of actively avoiding them.

She already knew something was wrong when the head of tech was physically removed from the building and had his career completely ruined without a word of gossip or speculation. Something about Quinn's father, but she'd have to put that on the back burner while she dealt with the main issue.

Quinn.

If she examined the facts logically, a relationship with him didn't make sense. He wasn't good for her, no matter how much that hurt. It would be best if she broke things off with Quinn now rather than letting it linger.

More than likely, she was blowing things out of proportion anyway. She would tell him it was over, and he would move on. Men didn't get attached quickly like women did. He'd said he loved her, but she very much doubted it and was sure it was only said in the heat of the moment.

It might be a blow to his pride, but he wasn't going to chase after a woman who rejected him for long. He surely had far too many willing options to spend much time pursuing her. As for Alexis, the loss would hurt, but she would survive. It was hard to cause herself pain, but in the long run, she would be saving herself a world of heartache and ruining her own career.

Burying herself in work, she pushed aside all thoughts of Quinn. She'd even brought her lunch to avoid a chance encounter with him in the lobby or in any other part of the building. It may have been cowardice, but she didn't want to tell him in person—having him close to her would make the words that much more difficult. She waited to get out her phone until lunch, when the office cleared, and only a few administrative personnel remained. Closing her office door, she began typing her text to Quinn.

I've thought about this a lot and decided this isn't going to work between us. This isn't a good time for me; we are just too different. Please don't fight me on this.

Her finger hovered over the send button for long minutes while her inner voices warred over sending the message. It was the right thing to do, but her stupid heart didn't agree.

When she finally amassed the fortitude to hit send, it felt like a monumental event, yet there was nothing to show for it. Alexis sat alone in an empty office, engulfed in silence.

Her phone began to ring. She dismissed the call, knowing it would be a mistake to speak to Quinn. Instead, she texted him again.

Please, don't argue. I told you it's over.

She watched in breathless anticipation as the three conversation dots indicated he was typing a response.

Alexis, you need to answer the fucking phone.

I'm not going to—there's nothing to say.

What happened in the time since I was in your office three days ago?

He wasn't going to stop. He would keep arguing until she gave in and saw him or talked to him, then he'd have her. She wasn't strong enough to withstand him in person. She hated upsetting him, and breaking up over text was a shitty thing to do, but she didn't know how else to get the job done. Alexis closed her eyes, her bottom lip trembling, and took a shaky breath. When she opened my eyes, she clicked on Quinn in her contacts and blocked his number.

CHAPTER 8



Dammit!

The man's mafia. Why hadn't she seen it.

With a sigh, she decided to close down the laptop. She should get some sleep, or she won't be able to function as she moves into her new apartment tomorrow.

Standing, Alexis padded across the hotel room, flopping herself onto the soft bed. Adjusting the pillow under her head and closes her eyes. Sleep should come easily now. If she waited any longer, she'd hear the birds herald the dawn. In fact, some of them are already chirping. Or are they?

She frowned as something prickled along her nerve endings. No way, that's a bird. The hotel door clicks, and her eyes snap open. There's a rustling sound, and then it goes silent.

What the fuck? She sits up and strains to hear. Not bothering to put on the hotel robe, she steps quietly to the door, listening again. Still nothing.

She turns the lock and takes a deep breath as she pushes open the door and steps into the hall.

The prickle down her spine, feeling something was not right. Too quiet. A shadow shifts in the corner of the hall.

Before she could turn to look that way, a thick arm snapped around her waist, and she'd jerked off her feet.

Oh my God!

She opens her mouth to scream, but a hand clamps over it, silencing her.

Alexis thinks frantically, terrified to see someone entering my hotel room. But whoever has gotten hold of her has other plans. Alexis is flung over a shoulder. The rough move leaves her winded. For a moment, she's dangles down a burly back and struggles for breath. He was carrying her down the emergency stairs and out through the parking lot.

Oh my God, Oh my God!

Alexis desperately kicked and flailed, letting out muffled screams, but to no avail.

She lashed out a fist at her kidnapper's broad back and kicked out her feet. He latches his arm even more tightly, cursing under his breath. She feels her knee connect with his gut, and the air hisses from his lungs. A swirl of satisfaction rolls through her as he loosens his grip around her thighs for a moment.

"Help!" is all she manages to get out before he swings her abruptly and her head cracks against a wall.

The world spins, and there's no doubt in her mind that the move was deliberate. She's left reeling with the shock of it, hanging limply as she battle to get her bearings. The blow leaves her seeing stars. By the time the pain radiates out, the man's stuffed something smelly and wet into her mouth. The sour

texture leaves a bitter taste in her mouth, making her slightly dazed and unable to scream for help.

Her muffled cries are mingling with sobs. Despite the blinding pain behind her eyes, she finds the strength to struggle again. She was being swung upright, so suddenly she staggers when she lands on her feet. A shape moves from the shadows.

"Mmmmph—" Alexis struggle between tears, trying to address her attackers, but something even more pungent is clamped over her, covering her whole face.

Alexis chokes, struggling not to inhale it, but it's no use. Her mouth and nose are covered roughly, and the stinking rag is held in place until her lungs feel like they're on fire.

When she can no longer hold her breath, she inhales. She cough. Then inhales again. In a matter of seconds, everything goes dark.

* * *

WHEN THE DOOR OPENED, the dim light was enough to blind her. Alexis blinked hard and squinted up at the looming person in the doorway. He was beefy and terrifyingly strong. His face was unrecognizable, and the room was too dark for her to make out any details other than sheer size.

"Heard you screaming away in here." His voice was raspy, like he had smoked his entire life. "You could do it until your throat cracks, and no one will hear you. Still, it's getting on my nerves." He slapped duct tape across her mouth. Alexis tried to struggle away. He untied her ankles and dragged her to her feet.

Escape was impossible as she involuntarily sagged against him with exhaustion. Being tied up had numbed her legs, and she could barely stand, much less run for her life.

Alexis swallowed her panic and tried to focus.

"In here," the man said and shoved me into a side room. The concrete room was empty except for a narrow basement window. Weak sunlight filtered through the dirty glass, but it was still bright enough to hurt her eyes. He dumped her onto the concrete floor.

"Don't think I didn't see what you were doing out there. Trying to find the way out. Think you're pretty tricky. Good luck with that." He sneered the last part. He yanked a black blindfold over my eyes, and she heard him walk away. Her only chance now was to convince the man to let her go. Alexis tried talking through the duct tape, making sounds as pleading as possible against the tight adhesive. She wasn't sure how much time had passed when she heard the footsteps coming closer.

"Ah, hell, we have a while to wait. Might as well let you entertain me." Without warning, pain shocked through her as the duct tape was ripped off her mouth. She could taste blood and wondered how much skin she'd lost on her lips. Tears stung her eyes and dampened the black blindfold, but she didn't linger on any of it.

"Maybe I'll take some entertainment of another kind. We both know you're a whore. Maybe I'll shove my cock in that pretty little cunt and make you scream." the voice asked. Bile rose in her throat, but she choked it back and forced her breath to stay even. Her captor walked around her, toying with the top of her lace pajamas. She could practically hear him licking his lips at the thought.

"Out," another voice said, quiet enough that she couldn't tell if they were male or female. She heard footsteps, then the door closing.

"Alexis, you don't mind that I call you Alexis do you, as Ms. Mansfield sounds too formal for the relationship we are going to have."

How did this person know so much about her?

“Do I know you?” She asked. “What did I do to you? Whatever it was, I’m sorry...”

“Oh, Alexis. Stupid little bitch, did you not know I’m Joseph Sciortino, Quinn’s father. As for what did you do…. well, let’s start off with you getting one of my men fired. All you had to do was open your legs for him just like you did for my son.”

Quinn’s father takes a step toward her. “If you had done that, then none of this would be happening. My man would be laundering money through the Rappel, and my son would be none the wiser.” He slaps her and brushes his hand off on his suit as if the whole idea of touching her was somehow dirty. “Since my son won’t do as he’s told, I’m going to use his little whore to get my son to take over the family business.”

Joseph backhands her. The sting was enough to take her off guard, stumbling as she slammed against the concrete wall behind her, recoiling and falling to the floor with her back spasming.

She felt the first punch fall, splitting open her lip. Blood flowed, instantly filling her mouth. Just as she tasted it, thick and coppery on her tongue, he planted a knee in her stomach. The wind went rushing out of her.

Joseph had Alexis pinned to the floor, a knee in on stomach and both of his hands on her shoulders. “Maybe I’ll whore you out like I did his mother. She was such a sappy little bitch that wouldn’t push Quinn to his greatest potential and to take his rightful place in the family business. I fucked and beat her right into submission, sharing her to any willing bidder.”

He smiled, and a chuckle escaped from his lips. The cocky action gave her the opening she needed. As his right hand relaxed with his laughter, she pushed forward, sitting up and using her right shoulder to force the weight of the movement.

She threw her elbow up and out, catching him in the chin. She heard the sharp click of his teeth smashing together. He tottered back, shocked, and nearly fell off of her. Enraged, he threw another punch downward. Alexis caught him by the wrist, twisted hard to the left, and his entire body followed suit. Had he not struck the concrete, thankfully, her brother had taught her to fight. The benefit to being the sister of a navy coxswain.

Alexis scrambled to her feet, trying to beat Joseph to the open door. She didn’t see the metal bar until it was too late. She swayed backward, but the end of it still clipped her on the side of the head. Alexis spun around as little black stars swirled across her field of vision.

He came at her again, the metal bar raised like a club. He swung the pin again, straight across this time. She managed to block it with her left forearm. A bolt of pain rocketed up her arm, and she cried out in pain.

A shout came out of nowhere. Both Joseph and Alexis turned toward the direction of the voice. Through blurred vision, she saw Quinn standing at the door, pointing a gun towards his father.

“Alexis”

The black stars were still in her vision, and she was pretty sure the side of her head that had caught the metal bar was swelling. She leant against the wall, watching Quinn as he moved towards Joseph.

Joseph swung the bar at his son. She could only watch as Quinn buckled the gun, sliding from his grip and his father scrambled towards the weapon.

“No!” Quinn screamed as his fingers grappled with his father’s. The defining sound of the gun going off and the thud of Quinn’s father as he fell face down on the floor, blood began to pool around him.

Darkness began to fall on Alexis once more, Quinn’s voice sounding distant.

“Baby, stay with me?”

“Please baby, I love you.”

EPILOGUE



Twelve months later

"TAKE IT, baby. You take my cock." Quinn slammed into her over and over. "Fuck, yes." Gripping her hips tight, she mewls and presses back into him.

"Quinn." The sound comes out soft, sweet, and the way he likes it. Her head falls down in front of her as he powers into her juicy pussy. The thick mass of her hair skims the white sheets every time he thrusts. Leaning forward, over her back, he rolled her hair around his wrist, gripped the roots, and lifted her up, and on his cock, her knees planted to the mattress.

"Alexis, baby, you like it when I fuck you hard?" He asks her, and then pulls his cock out and slams home.

She cries out. "Oh, fuck, I'm gonna come again," she pants into our large room.

"Yes, you are. Over and over. Didn't I promise you that?"

Stirring his hips, he can feel the moment when her pussy locks down on his cock. It takes all Quinn's effort not to come into her sweet cleft. She's so wet, her skin flushed from two orgasms. Once her body is a boneless heap, he pulls her off my cock, turns her around, and takes her mouth, pushing her down flat on her back. She opens her legs willingly, allowing him to fit in between. She thinks he's going to enter her again, and he will after he'd had a taste. Quinn slips his hands down and cups her sex. She's so wet, he growls into her mouth.

"You're dripping down your thighs, baby," he says as he spins two fingers around her sensitive clit.

"I can't," slips out of her lips, but he knows better. Quinn's wife can come over and over.

Kissing her long and deep, he keeps playing with the hard little button until she squirms beneath him. There it is. His wife is back and ready, ready to go for a third orgasm. It takes strength, but he pulls away from her succulent mouth and kisses his way down her body, making sure to stop at her fucking perfect tits. Quinn sucks, bites, and nibbles on the plump tissue until her hips are fucking air. Oh, yeah, Alexis was ready.

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TRUMP CARD



BY EMMA BRAY

Christopher Gage is determined to take back the territory Gerard Smith stole from him, but he doesn't want to go to war to do it. Mafia wars are dirty and bloody, but Chris can't let this theft slide.
He's got a trump card up his sleeve, though.
Gerard's daughter, Marissa.
The only problem? The little brunette gets under his skin like no one else, and when the time comes, he doesn't know if he'll be able to play her.

CHAPTER 1



Christopher

My lip curls in disgust as I watch Gerard Smith from my surveillance point.

The slimy motherfucker.

There's nothing I hate more than a fucking thief. The cocky son of a bitch is strutting around his villa.

I'm still seething with rage at the territories he stole from me. Well, technically, he stole them from my father, but now that my father's dead and I'm the new head of the Italian mafia, it goes to say that he stole from me.

What Gerard doesn't understand about me is that nobody gets away with disrespecting me in any shape or form. He's strutting around like a peacock because he's confident I won't start a war.

Mafia Wars are dirty, bloody affairs, and nobody wants that unless it's the last resort. Sure, my men would follow my orders, but it would definitely cause discontent to start a war over a few pieces of territory.

No, war has to be reserved for something way bigger.

That doesn't mean I'm going to let this go, though. If Gerard thinks he's going to skate out of this squeaky clean and smelling like a rose, he's got another thing coming.

I watch as the tiny brunette with hair that flows down to her waist dances up to him. She's a beauty to be sure with her tight, young body. He places a fatherly kiss upon her forehead as he smiles down at her indulgently.

Every man has a weakness. My mouth tips up into a wicked grin. Little does Gerard know I have a trump card up my sleeve.

I'll have my territory back one way or the other, and I'm not above kidnapping to do it.

CHAPTER 2



Marissa

I AWAKEN WITH A START.

"Make a sound and I'll break that pretty little neck." A pair of blazing blue eyes are burning down at me like twin flames.

My heart hammers against my ribcage as I take in the fearsome form hovering over me. The man is huge. The hand around my neck is enormous. A lock of dark hair falls onto a strong forehead. Shadows dance upon a chiseled jaw.

I open my mouth, but before I can utter a sound, his hand squeezes on my windpipe.

"What did I say?" he grits out between clenched teeth.

I stare up at him with wide eyes.

"We can do this the easy way or the hard way," he tells me, his voice as rough as sandpaper. "Blink once if you understand."

I blink without hesitation.

"You can come with me willingly without making a sound, or you can scream and struggle and I'll sedate you." He produces a syringe from out of nowhere. "Understand?"

I blink once to let him know I got the message loud and clear.

"Good girl," he murmurs.

I glare up at him.

He removes his hand slowly from my neck and watches me cautiously, as if he thinks I'm going to scream at any moment.

I just stare at him defiantly. That must amuse him because his lips tip up into a smirk.

Once he's satisfied I'm going to cooperate, he yanks the covers off of me and grabs my arm to pull me up. His eyes flicker down my body, and he frowns. "What the fuck are you wearing?" If possible, his voice is even harder and grittier than before.

When I don't answer, his eyes snap up. "Answer me," he demands angrily.

I raise an eyebrow at him. "Oh, I'm allowed to speak now?"

His nostrils flare, and I can practically see steam coming from his ears.

Yeah, it's probably not a good idea to poke the bear, but I've never been able to control my mouth.

He just stares at me incredulously, his big barrel chest heaving up and down like a bull getting ready to charge.

I roll my eyes and answer, “It's a negligee.”

“A negli-what?” His brow furrows.

“A negligee. It’s a garment woman sleep in,” I enunciate each word slowly as if he’s slow on the uptake.

His eyes rake over me once again before his frown deepens, and he mumbles something to himself. “Come on,” he finally barks at me.

I huff at the way he yanks me to my feet. “Where are you taking me?”

He shoots a glare at me. “I thought I told you not to speak.”

“But then you gave me permission to speak,” I point out.

He grinds his molars together.

“I'm revoking it. Go back to not speaking.”

“Okay, just so we're clear,” I can't help adding.

He shoots me a warning glare, and I hold up a hand. “Okay, okay. I'm done.”

He mumbles something under his breath again, and while I can’t make out what he’s saying, it sounds like Italian. As a Sicilian, I only know a bit of Italian.

I have a feeling I don't want to know what he’s saying anyway.

I'm surprised when he leads me over to the entrance to the tunnels below our house. They're supposed to be our escape route in case people ever breach our security, but I see that this man—whoever he is—got in through the very tunnels that are supposed to keep us safe.

Ironic, isn’t it?

I'm seething with anger as he pulls me along beside him with a tight grip on my upper arm. I'm sure I'll have bruises there from how tightly he's gripping me.

I'm not stupid enough to try to fight him, though. Hell, I think I've always been expecting this day. My father is greedy. He’s always looking for more power and expanding his reach. He’s always kept security tight around me in fear of someone taking me to get back at him. I always knew there was a very real possibility someone could kidnap me and hold me for ransom one day.

I guess that's why I'm not freaking out more than I am. I don't know who this man is or why he's taking me, but I am one hundred percent sure it has something to do with my father.

Maybe I don't have good sense because instead of being scared, I'm pissed more than anything else. Why should I be taken for something my father has done?

Maybe this is just about money, though. If the guy is taking me for ransom, that's probably the best-case scenario because my father will promptly pay it, and then I'll be returned and all will be good as new. Even so, it's an annoyance either way.

I trip as the man pulls me along beside him. His steps are so long. They make up three of my tiny ones. I'm struggling to keep up with him.

“Can you slow down, please?” I ask him.

He glares at me, those blue flames burning me as he scowls.

“Oh, sorry. I forgot I'm not supposed to be talking, but not all of us have steps the size of giraffes.”

He stops for a moment and looks heavenward as if he's praying for strength before he exhales a deep breath and then tugs me along again. He doesn't slow up at all.

I continue to stumble in the darkness until my foot falls into a hole and twists. I can't help the cry of pain that leaves my lips.

“Fuck!” He swears under his breath as he turns and catches me before I fall down.

I whimper at the pain shooting up from my foot, surprised whenever the big man kneels at my feet and inspects my injury. I wince whenever he touches my ankle.

“Sprained,” he murmurs as he looks up at me as if this is all my fault.

Before I can say a word, he's swooping me up into his arms and cradling me against his chest as he continues on his dogged path.

I clutch my hands into his shirt instinctively. The scent of his spicy cologne wraps around me.

Neither of us speaks. I'm internally cursing myself because now that my ankle is sprained, it's definitely going to slow me down if I ever see a chance to escape.

I stare up at my captor, studying his strong jawline and the fullness of his lips. His face is all hard lines. He looks like he's permanently grumpy—like a big grizzly bear.

His eyes flicker down to me when he feels my gaze on him. When I don’t look away, his mouth presses into a thin line. “Not a word,” he warns me before we emerge out of the tunnels, and he carries me swiftly over to a black SUV that's idling off the side of the road.

He slides us into the backseat before he barks at the driver, “Drive!”

He doesn't lay me on the seat beside him. Instead, he keeps me cradled in his arms.

He looks down at me, and I stare up at him. His eyes glow an even more vibrant blue in the dim lighting of the car.

“Can I talk now?” I ask him.

He closes his eyes and takes in a measured breath before he lets it out incredulously. “Unbelievable,” he murmurs.

I ignore him and ask him the question that's burning in my mind. “What's your name?”

His eyes darken, and his lips press into that thin line again. “Christopher Gage.”

My heart palpitates so hard I'm surprised it doesn't burst out of my chest. *Oh shit.*

CHAPTER 3



Christopher

HER FACE PALES when she hears my name, and I can't stop the wicked grin that tips the corner of my lips.

"I see you've heard of me, Marissa." She doesn't seem surprised at all that I know her name.

This is first time she hasn't been itching to talk all night. "If I knew all I had to do to silence you was tell you my name, I'd have told you a long time ago," I comment dryly.

Her eyes flash fire before she states defiantly, "If I had known who you were, I never would have spoken to you at all."

I arch an eyebrow down at her. "Is that so?" I feign hurt. "Why? I've done nothing to you."

"You're kidnapping me right now," she grits out.

"Oh yeah, that's right." I smile down at her.

"What do you want with me?" she asks as she turns her little nose in the air.

I study her. She's like this fierce little kitten. Amazingly, she doesn't seem to be afraid of me. She's not exhibiting any of the normal reactions people usually do when they're kidnapped. Not that I make a habit of kidnapping women or anything. In fact, this is my first time, but I digress.

Since she knows my name, she likely already knows what I want. My territory back from her father.

Instead of answering her, I tell her, "No harm will come to you if you just do what I say."

"This is about my father, isn't it?" she presses.

I don't answer. The SUV comes to a stop, and when I open the door, she tries to scramble down out of my arms, but her body crumbles as soon as she puts weight on her ankle.

I swoop her back up against my chest, anger pulsing hotly through me. "What the hell was that?" I seethe.

She glares up at me and presses her lips together.

I shake my head incredulously. "*Now* you try to run? You realize you're in the middle of nowhere on *my* compound with hundreds of guards around. You wouldn't get too far even if your ankle wasn't fucked up."

"Thanks for that, by the way," she hisses at me, and I blink, a rare stab of remorse pricking at my conscience. I never intended to hurt her.

I start to apologize to her but catch myself just in time. What the fuck is wrong with me? She's my

enemy's daughter, a trump card, a pawn. Nothing more.

My eyes flick down over her body in that tiny scrap of fabric she calls a negligee. The silky fabric is held up by little straps no thicker than a strand of angel hair pasta. Lace lines the top of it where it dips down over her breasts. The hem stops mid-thigh, and I'm suddenly very aware of how large my hand is on her thigh and where it is.

All I would have to do is move my fingers up an inch, and I'd be right at her little panties.

I'm suddenly dying to know what color they are.

Her face flushes as I stare down at her. She licks her lips, and I feel my cock stiffening in my pants.

I tear my gaze away from her puffy pink lips and stalk through my front door that's already being held open for me by one of my guards. I take her to my bedroom, where I drop her onto the bed gently so as not to jostle her ankle.

"Stay," I order her.

Her eyes flash at the command.

I smirk at her, enjoying the way her anger makes her brown eyes glow. Her long brown hair is falling all around her shoulders in beautiful waves, and the lamplight picks up the hints of gold in it. My chest tightens at the sight of her.

I scowl at my reaction and stomp off to the bathroom to get the supplies to bandage her foot.

Her toenails are painted a bright pink, and her foot is so small my hand can completely circle her ankle. Her legs are smooth and creamy and poreless, and I have to concentrate to keep my hand from traveling up over their softness. I focus on keeping my attention on stabilizing her ankle.

"Thank you," she whispers when I'm done.

I look up to see her brown eyes melting down at me and clear my throat before I tell her gruffly. "Don't try to escape. Just be good, and if your father cooperates, you'll be home in no time. There's no reason this has to be unpleasant for you."

I turn and begin walking toward the door, needing to get some fresh air and clear my head.

This girl's sweet berry scent and pretty brown eyes are fucking with my head. My cock hasn't gone down from the moment I saw her in that little negligee, and I'm finding it harder and harder to breathe in her presence.

"Don't put any pressure on that ankle either," I call back over my shoulder.

I curse underneath my breath and slam the door firmly shut behind me before I do anything else ridiculous—like offer to take care of her and feed her soup in bed.

CHAPTER 4



Marissa

THIS HAS GOT to be the most bizarre kidnapping in the history of kidnappings. Christopher is not mean to me at all. Oh, he tries to be all growly and gruff, but I sense that deep down he wouldn't ever really harm a hair on my head. If that was the case, he would have already done it. And he wouldn't look so apologetic every time he glances at my ankle or checks it for me.

I don't know what negotiations he's got going on with my father, but I've been here three days already. My ankle must have been a pretty light sprain because I'm already able to put a bit of weight on it. Even so, Christopher glares daggers at me when he sees me. He tells me it needs more rest to fully heal.

And I've never been kidnapped before, but even I know it's strange for the kidnapper to put you in his room. I know this is his room because this is where he comes when needs to take a shower and get dressed in another one of his expensive Armani suits.

Plus, he sleeps in here every night, though he doesn't sleep in the bed with me. There's a chair in the corner of the room where he sits and leans his head back, his hands clasped over his chest. I don't know how in the world he can sleep like that.

There's no TV in here, and I already know better than to ask for something stupid like a cell phone or a laptop. But there is a collection of books on a bookshelf in the corner, and I'm surprised by the classics I see there.

I'm reading a copy of Dante's Inferno whenever Christopher walks back in and glances at the hardback in my hands. "One of my favorites," he comments with a rare smile.

"It's one of mine too," I tell him.

He pauses as he studies me. "You're not exactly what I was expecting," he finally comments.

"I'm not sure if that's a compliment or not," I comment back dryly.

He doesn't enlighten me either. Instead, he comes over and sits on the bed, his weight dipping me closer to him. He frowns as he regards me. "You haven't once begged me to take you home."

I shrug. "You told me I would be home soon enough once you and my father worked out whatever you have to work out. How's that going, by the way?"

His frown only deepens. "How do you know you can trust me?"

I shrug again. "You're not as bad as you make yourself out to be."

His blue eyes flash, and he scowls.

I grin at the pissed-off look on his face and can't resist goading him further.

"You're all bark and no bite."

He's on me in a flash, his hand wrapped around my throat as he covers me with his body and presses me into the bed. "You know nothing about me," he growls, his mouth mere inches from mine.

My pulse flutters wildly in my throat, but not in fear. His spicy, masculine scent is smothering me, and his blue eyes are so close to me I can see every individual fleck in them.

"You won't hurt me," I whisper up at him stubbornly, holding his gaze.

I can't even describe what happens then. A flood of emotions roll over his face. Disbelief, amazement, anger, and then something else I can't identify. Something that burns hotly and causes moisture to pool between my thighs.

"Fuck," he finally grits out, and then his mouth is on mine.

He kisses me harshly, his tongue sweeping into my mouth. I surrender under his assault, my body going pliant underneath his. I know it's pitiful that at eighteen I've never been kissed before, but my father always kept such a tight rein on me. I wasn't allowed to date or anything for in case someone meant me harm. I've read about kisses in romance novels, but nothing could have prepared me for Christopher.

He growls into my mouth. It's a sound of pure, masculine satisfaction, and I feel it rumble down to my own chest.

His hands fist in my hair as he angles my head up to him and drinks from me thirstily, like a man who hasn't tasted water in a year. "Marissa," he whispers my name hotly in my ear as he pulls my negligee up over my head. It's not the same one I came here wearing either. He bought me a few new ones, and that's bizarre too, right? What kidnapper goes out and buys their captive clothing?

His lips are all over me, trailing down my jaw and along my neck, over my shoulders and collarbone, until they reach my breasts where he suckles my nipples.

I gasp at the sensation and fist my fingers in the silky strands of his dark hair.

I don't know what the hell's going on. I can't think. I'm just one big ball of nerves. All I can do is feel the sensations coursing through me. It barely registers in the back of my mind that this man is my kidnapper and my father's enemy. By all rights, he should be my enemy too, yet he's kissing me and caressing me like I'm the most precious thing in the world.

The next thing I know, I hear him unzipping his pants, and then I feel his cock, hot and heavy, falling upon my naked stomach.

I look down, my eyes widening when I take in the long girth of him. Of course, he's huge everywhere, so I don't know why it surprises me to see how big he is down there.

I can't help trembling. It certainly doesn't look like what he's packing between his legs will fit inside my tiny body, but my cunt is weeping and throbbing, crying out that she wants to try. She doesn't realize something like that is going to kill us.

"Christopher," I whisper his name, my voice coming out shaky.

His eyes blaze into mine. He groans. "Say it again."

I shake my head in confusion. "What?"

"My name," he growls at me. "Say my name." My heart beats erratically at the look of pure hunger on his face. Good Lord. He looks like he wants to devour me.

"Christopher," I whisper his name again. He lets out a croak, and then I feel that steely column of flesh probing at my entrance.

Christopher holds me steady with one hand on my hip. He threads his fingers through my other hand in a move that seems painfully intimate as he looks deep into my eyes and pushes inside me.

I feel my body stretching underneath his invasion, and my eyes go wide. I whimper, but he groans and shushes me. “Let me in, sweet girl. Fuck, *cara mia*.” He whispers endearments in Italian, and I feel my entire body melting underneath him. The sound of his deep voice washes over me in soothing words of praise when he pushes past the barrier of my innocence and seats himself completely inside me.

He lets out a long, guttural groan as I cling to him. “*Cara mia*, so sweet.” He continues to praise me as he moves in and out of me, gently at first and then picking up pace.

Something is building deep within me and I can't stop myself. I cant my hips up to meet him thrust for thrust.

He stutters out a breath before he snarls, “Look at you, throwing that little virgin pussy up on me. Fuck, Marissa, fuck!” He angles his hips and hits this place deep inside me that causes my vision to go white.

His eyes bore down into mine as he stabs at it again and again until I feel myself breaking into a thousand little pieces. “Fuck yes!” He grunts out before he roars. “Give it to me, baby. Let me feel that pussy shattering all over me.”

I couldn't deny him if I tried. It's beyond my control now. I'm suddenly engulfed in a hot, white heat that sends my back arching and my toes curling.

Christopher grabs my face between his hands and kisses me deeply, devouring my screams. I feel his hot heat spilling into me as he growls into my mouth and kisses me like he wants to eat me whole.

When I finally come back to earth, Christopher's laying on his back with me draped across his chest. I don’t remember how I got here. He must have rolled us so that I'm on top of him.

I feel his big fingers running through my hair, petting me.

Neither of us speaks. There are no words to describe what we just shared. This is wrong on so many levels. He and my father are enemies. He’s my captor, and I’m his captive. We hardly know one another. In no universe do we make sense. Yet nothing in my life has ever felt righter than this moment.

Christopher presses a kiss to my forehead. It's so gentle that it causes tears to swim in my eyes.

This is so fucked up.

CHAPTER 5



Christopher

I LET Gerard sweat it for days before I tell him I have his daughter. As luck would have it, I sent the message to him right before I took her virginity, though claiming her like that certainly was not in the plan. None of this was in the plan.

He was supposed to sweat it out, wondering where his missing daughter was, and then I was supposed to pop up with her as my trump card, the ace up my sleeve I could play to for sure get my way. Because despite everything else about Gerard Smith, he really loves his daughter. He's had his entire team crawling the city looking for her.

My cold heart clenches at the thought of giving her back. My soul screams at me, *she's mine!* I ache at the thought of letting her go, but what kind of relationship can we really have? I kidnapped her. I took advantage of her.

I've been pacing in my study all day, running my hands through my hair repeatedly. I can still taste her sweetness on my lips. Her pussy juices and virgin blood still stain my cock.

Fuck!

I could change the terms of our negotiation. I could let him keep the territories he stole if he lets me keep her.

I already know as soon as I think it that won't fly, though. I can already see Marissa's little brown eyes flashing fire if she finds out I bought her like she's nothing more than a possession.

She's so much more than that, though. I know it's fast, and I know it doesn't make any sense, but I've never wanted anything in my life like I want this little woman. This fierce little kitten who thinks she's a lioness.

I'm still no closer to deciding what to do whenever my scheduled meeting with Gerard rolls around.

The man comes walking stiffly into my office, his eyes flashing murder at me. "Where is my daughter, Gage?"

I look at him evenly.

"If you've harmed a hair on her head—"

"She has not been harmed, I assure you." My voice is liquid steel.

"I want to see her," he demands.

I expected no less. I make him wait a beat before I nod my head at one of my men.

Then Gerard and I wait in tense silence as he goes to collect Marissa.

Finally, Gerard speaks. “I knew you were an underhanded snake,” he seethes slowly, “but to kidnap my daughter…”

I clench my jaw together. “The only underhanded snake here is you for stealing territory from my father.” My voice shakes with the rage I still feel at the thought.

“You're a fool,” Gerard spits at me. “I stole nothing from Giovanni. He gave it to me as payment for a favor.”

I scoff, “You're lying.”

“I'm not. I have the documents to prove it.”

I appraise him stoically as he pulls a flash drive out of his pocket and throws it to me.

I catch it, but before I can say anything, Marissa comes into the room. She spots her father and races over to him, flinging herself into his arms with barely a limp.

Her sprain is almost completely gone, but I still frown when I see her running on it. She knows what I told her about that.

It also hurts me to see her flinging herself into another man's arms—even if that man is her father.

“It's okay, baby girl. I'm here.” Gerard soothes her.

The movement happens so fast. I barely see it. Gerard wraps his arms around his daughter and then somehow pulls a gun from the inside flap of his suit.

He holds it up to fire at me, but Marissa sees it and flings herself in front of me, holding her arms out. “Papa, no!” she screams just as the gun goes off.

“Marissa!” Her name tears from my throat just like my heart tears from my body when I see the bullet make contact with her flesh.

I catch her in my arms and lower her to the ground. Gerard is standing there, his face ashen as blood oozes from Marissa’s arm.

“Marissa, *cara mia*,” I call to her brokenly, panic squeezing my chest. “Look at me.” My eyes search her body, relieved to see that the bullet only seems to have grazed her arm. Still, she’s losing a lot of blood.

Her eyes flutter open, and I nearly pass out in relief. “*Cara mia*, you stupid, stupid girl. Why the fuck did you do that?”

“I couldn’t let him kill you.” She blinks up at me.

I shake my head mournfully. “I kidnapped you, you little fool.”

She raises her hand up to my cheek and smiles at me weakly. “You're not as bad as you pretend to be,” she insists before her eyes flutter closed.

EPILOGUE

Marissa

CHRISTOPHER SQUEEZES MY HAND, and I smile up at my fiancé.

After I took a bullet for him, and he and my father almost lost me, they were able to put aside their differences and come to an agreement. Come to find out their feud was based on false pretenses anyway. Christopher had thought my father stole territory from him, but come to find out, Christopher's father had bartered it away to cover some of his debts, but he'd lied to Christopher and told him my father had stolen it. He was likely too ashamed of his failure, but his actions could have caused a war.

Fortunately, my father was willing to forgive Christopher for operating on false information, especially when he and Christopher agreed I would marry Christopher and strengthen our family's ties. Of course, Christopher and I want to marry for more than political reasons.

And, of course, we never told my father that Christopher took my virginity. I think of what my papa would do if he knew Christopher took my virginity when he kidnapped me.

"What are you thinking of that has you smiling like that, *cara mia*?' Christopher asks me as he softly kisses my knuckles.

"What my papa would do if we told him you took my virginity."

Christopher's eyebrows shoot up into his hairline as he comments dryly, "I'm glad to hear that thoughts of your father castrating your fiancé make you so happy."

"Well, you did kidnap me," I point out.

Christopher wraps his arms around me and pulls me close. "You love being my captive."

"You say that like I still am."

"You are," he growls. "I'm going to chain you to me for life, so you'll never get away from me." "That doesn't really sound fair," I pout playfully.

"Make no mistake, *cara mia*," his voice drops a note, "I am completely enslaved to you as well. You have my heart in chains. I still can't believe you took a bullet for me." His eyes take on a look of wonder, and his voice becomes gruff with emotion. "And after I kidnapped you, no less, and caused you to sprain your ankle." He shoots me a look filled with remorse. "I still don't understand how you don't hate me, *mi amor*."

I shrug. "You're obviously not marrying me for my brains."

He laughs a deep, throaty laugh before he sobers and says right into my ear. "I'm marrying you for

so much more than that. Your mind, your heart, your body, and your soul. It's all mine."

I melt at the look in his eyes. He's right. I am still his captive, but I'm a willing one.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emma Bray writes intense, steamy romances with possessive alpha males who'll stop at nothing to claim the women they want. Emma's insta-love stories are filled with heat, passion and happily ever afters. Sign up for Emma's mailing list to get a FREE book: www.authoremmabray.com.

THE LIONESS



BY LINDSAY MURRAY

When Carlotta went to Italy for a semester abroad, being kidnapped by the Mafia was the last thing she expected. Unfortunately, once you're in, you're in for life.

CHAPTER 1 - CARLOTTA



Study abroad, they said. It will be fun, they said. Now I'm tied up in a basement with three scary men glaring at me and shouting in Italian.

I don't speak Italian!

I knew I shouldn't have had that much to drink, but I got carried away. I got back to my dorm around three in the morning and set my alarm so I could wake up, take some painkillers, and get my butt on the bus for whatever tourist crap they had planned for us that day.

Naturally, I missed my alarm. At two o'clock I went down to the local café for a coffee and something to eat, trying to shake the cobwebs from my brain. The next thing I knew, everyone was shouting and screaming and two big burly guys threw a bag over my head and dragged me out of the café.

Since those things only happened in movies, I was sure I was still drunk.

Movement drew my attention back to the present. One of the men unbuttoned his shirt cuffs and rolled up his sleeves, glaring at me menacingly. He said something else in Italian that I didn't understand, and another one of the men scoffed, looking excited.

Whatever he's about to do, I should get him to delay it as long as possible. "Can I have some water?" I asked.

The man stopped rolling up his sleeves, cocking his head and looking at me with disdain.

"Please? I'm pretty sure I'm still drunk from last night."

One of the other men got up in my face and spat something at me, pointing a finger in my face. His dark eyes flashed and spit landed on my cheeks. I winced and tried to turn my face away.

"Dude, I don't speak Italian, I have no idea what you're saying!"

"You don't want to play this game with us, *belladonna*. We are very impatient men."

"Please don't spit on me," I said, turning my head away again. He fisted my hair and tugged, jerking my head so I faced him. "Hey!"

"Where is your father!"

"What, *why?*"

"So we can… *talk*," the sleeve roller said. He was thin and lanky and wore a white button-down shirt that set off his dark tanned skin. His hair was cut short and his face clean shaven, he looked like a frickin' model for jeans or expensive watches. "We have been looking for him for months since he killed Papa and Cassio." His eyes darkened.

One of the other men crossed himself and muttered something under his breath. He was the tallest of the three, with wide muscular shoulders and a head of tight dark curls cut short. "We know you had something to do with it."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said, my voice breaking. "My dad is a construction worker in Utah."

The third man approached me. He looked tired and hadn't participated in any of the shouting, but he did hold a gun in both hands. His slow, steady steps felt ominous, and my eyes darted between his face and the guns in his hands. Unable to hold back anymore, my eyes started to water and I began to shake.

This wasn't supposed to be my life. None of this was supposed to happen. All I wanted was to graduate college, get out of my stupid small-town and live in a big city with a real job, and get married and have lots of kids to love with a man that I loved. Now I was going to die in a basement with a bunch of crazy Italians.

Hopefully they'd kill me and wouldn't… do *anything else*.

One of the guns appeared under my chin, tilting my face up.

"We will be merciful to you if you tell us the truth, Felicia."

I opened and closed my mouth a few times, trying to form a sentence. "Who is Felicia?"

"Don't be stupid," the burly one said.

"Get her in the chair, I'll get her talking," the lanky one said.

Gun guy said nothing, only studied me carefully. His grip didn't falter, but I could sense a hesitation in his gaze.

"My name is Carlotta. Carlotta Stewart. I'm a college student from America, I got drunk last night and missed the tour bus. And I have no clue who you guys are!" My tears started again and I caved to the fear I couldn't hide anymore. I started to cry.

The guns under my chin disappeared and I let my head drop in relief, squeezing my eyes closed. The men huddled and spoke in hushed tones, and then the one with the guns called out.

I watched as two other men entered the basement. *Those are the assholes who had kidnapped me!* One of them had my purse. Gun guy dug through it and extracted my wallet and passport, glared up at the other two guys–

And then shot them both in the head.

I screamed and turned my face away, squeezing my eyes shut.

"Please," I found myself saying. My teeth chattered and my hands shook, despite being tied down to the chair I sat on. "Please let me go! I don't know where I am… I won't say anything to anyone!"

The men stared at me and then spoke again between themselves. They appeared to come to an agreement.

The burly one approached me, withdrawing a knife from his pocket as he did. Before I had a chance to scream, he'd cut the ropes tying me to the chair and pulled me to my feet.

"Thank you," I whispered over and over. He didn't respond. He led me past the two dead men and up the stairs out of the basement, and down a hall of what seemed to be an elaborate mansion. I was turned around, but after a few hallways and a flight of stairs, I began to realize… this wasn't the way *out* of the house.

"No, please," I said again.

"Shut up."

"I don't know who you are! I can't say anything! Just blindfold me and drive me back to the dorm, please!"

He didn't even respond, he just kept dragging me up another flight of stairs.

I have to get out of here.

I kicked and screamed, squirmed, fought, did everything I could, but he was tall and muscular and

very strong, and I was five foot three and couldn't even get my butt to the gym twice a week. He threw me over his shoulder and continued my abduction, eventually taking me to the last room in the hall. Opening the door, he all but tossed me in, pointed at me and said, "Stay," then shut the door. I heard it lock shut.

* * *

MY PRISON, though decadent, was still a prison. I searched the room for a weapon, dug through the linens to see if there was enough fabric to tie to the balcony and climb down… But there was nothing. No extra sheets or blankets. Nothing that could be used as a weapon, not even a pencil or a heavy lamp. And outside my balcony, every ten minutes, a man walked past and looked up at me to make sure I wasn't about to jump down.

Tired of pacing, I sat in a chair by the fireplace and stared at the collection of books, trying not to panic.

The click of the door startled me, and I jumped to my feet. A woman entered with a cart with several plates of food, a pitcher of water, and a bottle of wine.

"Please," I said, trying to speak to her. "You have to help me. I don't belong here, I've been kidnapped–"

"She doesn't understand you, *leonessa*." I froze at the sound of a man's voice. Looking up, I recognized gun guy. The woman finished setting up and scurried out, leaving me alone with the man.

He was a foot taller than me, toned but not huge like the burly one, with a stylish haircut. A five o'clock shadow set off his sharp cheekbones, and a straight nose descended into full, chiseled lips.

He'd be sexy if he wasn't staring at me like he was going to eat me. Or maybe kill me for the fun of it.

"Please, sir, I just want to go home."

"Sir… I like that. You can keep calling me that." He took a few steps forward, his arms crossed over his chest. He paused directly in front of me and I held my breath.

"You must be hungry," he said, lifting the lids to the covered dishes. He presented me with a spoon.

Another platter contained fresh bread and a little plate of olive oil and spices. He broke some off for himself, dipped it in the oil, and ate it. Then he poured us both a glass of wine and began to eat his own bowl of soup.

It smelled phenomenal, and he was right. I was starving. If they were going to kill me, I reasoned, they wouldn't do it with poison. So I ate the soup greedily, finishing too fast, and then started on the bread.

The man across from me watched, eating slowly, studying me. I didn't care. I had nothing to say to him.

"My name is Raul." I froze as he spoke, the dread settling over me. If he was telling me his name, there was no chance in hell I was getting out of here. "You met my brothers, Alessandro and Marco."

"Which is which," I mumbled, swallowing the last of the delicious bread and drinking some wine. It was incredible. Or maybe I was just starving and dead set on enjoying my last meal.

"Alessandro is the big one. Marco is the one who likes to play with knives."

"Sexy," I said with as much sarcasm as I could muster. I downed the rest of the wine in one gulp.

Raul looked offended, but poured me some more.

"You look like Felicia Giovani. We heard she would be at the same café you visited this morning, and my idiot enforcers picked you up instead of her."

Shouldn't have partied so hard. Shouldn't have missed my alarm. Shouldn't have missed the damn bus.

"Look," I said, "You can stop telling me all this, I just want to go home, okay? Hell, you can take me to the airport and I'll go back to the USA and we'll forget this semester ever happened."

"I can't do that, Carlotta." He stood and adjusted his shirt, brushed a few crumbs off his slacks, and headed for the door. "Unfortunately, you're here to stay."

I jumped from the chair and ran after him. "Come on, Raul! Please, I'm just a girl! I'm nothing to you!"

He hesitated, and then turned around, tilting his head to the side. "Nothing?"

"I'm nothing. You don't care about me, right? Just let me go home."

"Okay."

I froze, my breath catching, not sure I heard him right. "Really?" I whispered.

He stalked towards me and I backed up as he approached. "Sure. You can go home. Go ahead. Go." He gestured to the door but still came steadily closer. I backed up until I hit a wall and pressed myself closer against it.

He stood directly in front of me, toe to toe. Close enough that I could feel his breath on my face as he spoke.

He raised one hand and, very slowly, like he was petting a wild animal, caught a lock of my hair and tucked it behind my ear. "But you should know… a lot of people saw us take you today, little lioness. Your school has already reported you missing. The police know we have you, and so do several other powerful families in the country. You are now known as someone of interest to us. But that should not matter… because you are nobody to us.

"Go out that door, catch a cab, go back to your school. And I guarantee by this time tomorrow… you will have wished you stayed."

"Why," I asked, my voice shaking.

"You are clearly important to us because my enforcers took you. If you leave, you'll be taken by someone else. And they won't just tie you to a chair and scare you, lioness. No," he clicked his tongue menacingly, his voice dropping to something darker. "No, they have their own ways of torture. They will take you, use you… break you. Then they will photograph you and send it to us, perhaps with a lock of your hair, or a few of your fingers, and offer a ransom to get you back.

"But we won't pay it, and we won't come to your rescue… because you are nothing to us. Aren't you? You're a nobody. You don't matter. So go ahead… *go*."

I stayed rooted in place, barely able to breathe.

"Your captivity is a mercy, lioness. I'm sorry… but my brothers and I have agreed it is for the best. We will protect you, keep you safe, and let you live out the rest of your life in luxury. You can have whatever you want… within the confines of this house. You may leave at any time… but we will not come for you if you leave."

I didn't notice I was crying until his finger brushed a tear from my cheek. He tilted his face towards mine and I squeezed my eyes shut, turning my face away.

He brushed the hair away from my ear and whispered, "Sleep well, little lioness." Then he pulled briskly away and left me alone in my prison.

CHAPTER 2 - RAUL



Our captive was a fierce, brave soul. She was a foot shorter than me and shook in her tennis shoes when I'd faced her down, but there was fire in her eyes.

She was curvy, with olive skin and a head of tight dark curls. Warm brown eyes with flecks of green framed by long thick lashes, and wide, plump lips. She was stunning. She really did look like Felicia Giovani. At least, at a glance. From a distance.

We hadn't seen Felicia in years, and didn't have much to go off other than memory and the photos we had from her childhood. Her father kept her hidden away, which was wise considering how badly we wanted to get our hands on her. But looking closely at Carlotta, there were little things that stuck out that signaled she wasn't part of the Giovani family. The shape of her chin and her cheekbones didn't match, and the tip of her nose turned up just a little. She was also a head shorter than me, and last I'd heard, Felicia had grown tall for a woman.

I hoped, for Carlotta's sake, she could learn to be happy with us here. Or maybe she would leave as I'd told her she could. Maybe she'd run to the embassy and escape, go into hiding, change her name and her face like a smart little girl, and we'd never see her again.

* * *

"THIS IS AN ABSOLUTE FUCKING DISASTER," Marco growled. He cursed and tossed the papers down on the desk, rubbing his face with disgust. "Papa wasn't this careless. There has to be an explanation."

The four of us sat around a table in the library. Marco, Alessandro, myself, and our cousin Rafael. We were trying to sort through the mess left for us after Papa and Cassio's murder.

"Cassio was the only one who helped Papa with the books. Why didn't he involve the rest of us," I murmured.

Alessandro grunted, staring at the ledgers. "He must have been hiding something."

"Doubtful," I said. "Papa wasn't a *good* man, but he was honest in his business."

Rafael flipped a few more pages, made a note, added something up on a calculator, and then checked a different ledger. "Here," he said. "This is what they did."

As Rafael explained, the numbers clarified. Papa and Cassio had been taking some of the income generated from the better businesses and funneling them into the ones that weren't doing so well, the ones that had more loss, in an effort to keep them alive. It wasn't the best tactic, but it was working.

* * *

OVER THE NEXT FEW MONTHS, we continued to hash and rehash the details of the businesses. With Rafael's help, the weight began to lift and things started to feel almost normal.

Carlotta was quiet at first. She seemed subdued for about four days after her kidnapping. She hardly left her room, and spent most of her time on the balcony looking out at the villa with a heavy sadness that made her shoulders curl forward and her eyes glass over. But then something settled in her, and she stood tall with a firm expression on her face as she explored the house.

Most of the time she took her meals in her room since the four of us tended to talk business over dinner, but we always had a spot at the table for her. She joined us occasionally. We tried to talk in English so she could converse, but then we'd end up slipping naturally into our first language and leave her confused and ignored.

Carlotta spent a lot of time in the library. She read faster than anyone I'd ever met, tearing through a book a day, sometimes faster. At first I took no notice of the books she read, but then one afternoon I noticed she was reading two books at once, side by side, and scribbling something in a notebook.

Peeking over at her through the corner of my eye, I realized she was reading the same book: *Crime and Punishment* translated into English and Italian.

She's trying to learn the language. She looked frustrated, staring at her notes in dismay.

"That won't get you far," I said softly. She jumped at my voice. "Translations like that are not word for word."

"I'm beginning to see that," she muttered, closing the Italian copy and glaring at it.

"There is a better way to learn a language."

"Oh?"

"Join us for dinner."

From that night on, she took all of her meals with us. After a few months, she could understand some of what we were saying.

As she began to converse with us, I learned things about her. She was a Junior in college when she was snatched by our idiot brawn. She was studying Business Administration and had several scholarships that paid for most of her tuition, though that was moot now. She told us stories of her childhood, and jokes that made Alessandro laugh, and she welcomed Marco's love of debate and argument.

She was pleasant to have around. I thought of her as a little pet that we got to spoil. My brothers brought her tokens of affection while they were out, like a piece of jewelry or a silk scarf, or a new pair of shoes. Once I bought her a silk dress, and she wore it often in the evenings. It was… extremely flattering on her figure.

In the evenings, I sometimes went on a walk around the property to clear my head. I often saw her on her balcony, sipping a glass of wine. Occasionally I would come up to her room with a bottle and tell her about it. She seemed to enjoy that.

But she was still very closed off. I asked her one time if she hated us for keeping her locked away. She faced me, clenching her jaw and lifting her chin and said, "No. You aren't keeping me here… I am. And I refuse not to make the most of it."

It was that moment I found myself irrevocably attracted to Carlotta Stewart. She was strong, independent, determined, and full of a raging hot fire that she refused to let control her. Her fury burned under her skin, and she let it, refusing to be manipulated by her own emotions.

Once I'd opened that door, it consumed me. In my time spent alone, I imagined Carlotta bearing my children, drinking my wine, and sleeping in my bed. But every time I saw her, spoke to her, or dined with her, she paid me the same level of attention and respect she did my brothers, though she was slightly more closed off with me than she was with them.

To her, I was just Raul. I was just the monster that forced her to stay in the castle, refusing to let her go.

She would never want me.

* * *

THE FOUR OF us had a meeting every Friday in the library to go back over the books and make sure everything was reconciled. Carlotta was with us that day, attempting to read another piece of classic literature in our language instead of hers, but we paid her no mind. Ledgers and notes were scattered around the table and Rafael answered our questions as they came up. Eventually we decided to break for lunch, and we retired to the patio. Carlotta promised she would follow as soon as she finished her chapter.

Over our meal, we attempted to distance ourselves from the weight of business. When Carlotta joined us, she walked out on the patio slowly, her eyes trailing over the four of us with a hint of suspicion that hadn't been there before.

She sat beside me and served herself, sighing as she savored the wine. I felt a hint of pride as she sipped at it, closing her eyes and allowing the flavors to dance in her beautiful mouth.

"What a fantastic year this was," Rafael smiled as he took another sip of his own. I tore my eyes from Carlotta's lips and looked at my cousin. "Realy, Raul, you've outdone yourself."

"It gets better every year. I only hope that trend will continue."

"You know," he said softly, leaning forward to address me directly. "I can spend the next few years moving your weaponry contacts over to someone else, and eventually transition you into wine management full time, if that's what you want." He said it as if he had the authority to do so, as if it were his decision, not mine.

Rafael really was the right man to lead this family, I knew that. Although we were cousins, we considered each other brothers, since our fathers were brothers.

"That is what I want, Rafe," I smiled. "But not until we get some of this organized and under control." That meant for now, I had to stay in charge.

Carlotta sipped her wine silently. She'd painted her nails a pretty pink color. It was lovely against her skin.

I wonder what those nails would feel like trailing down my back.

I tore my eyes away from Carlotta's hand. It was unlike her to sit beside me. She tended to sit beside Marco who enjoyed riling her up and getting her to argue with him. But today, she sat by me, her shoulders tense.

Lunch ended early due to a phone call from Uncle Alberto, and we got back to work to settle the bullshit he'd managed to get himself wrapped up in. Rafael returned to the library, I went to my office, and none of us rested for a moment until nearly nine o'clock when we finally managed to have dinner.

Carlotta didn't join us.

CHAPTER 3 - CARLOTTA



There was only one logical explanation for what I was seeing, and I didn't like it. I needed to talk to Raul, and there was no way to do that with his current situation. I hoped that by skipping dinner, he would come up to see me. But as I paced and my dinner grew cold, I realized he wasn't going to come. Whatever phone call he'd received had clearly taken priority in his mind.

Well, his life was a priority of mine, so I was going to have to be brave and go to him.

Raul scared me. His face was a handsome, stoic mask that never showed any emotion. But sometimes, the way he looked at me… There was something dark in his soul.

I shivered, pulling my bathrobe tighter against me as I crept down the hall. It was nearly eleven o'clock and I hoped I wouldn't be interrupting anything as I approached his door. I knocked but heard no answer, so I cracked the door open. I could hear the shower running so I snuck in and waited for him to be finished, sitting on the foot of the bed and trying not to wring my hands from stress.

I liked Raul, despite how much he frightened me. He was kind, and he was passionate about the art and craft of his wine. It was the only time I saw some kind of emotion on his face, and our moments of him sharing knowledge about his wine with me and only me made it feel like we had a little secret between us. Sometimes I skipped dinner just so he would come upstairs to see me, so I could have my moment with him.

The door to the bathroom was cracked open, so I heard when he grunted. He sounded like he was in pain, and for a moment, I panicked, hoping to hell I wasn't too late to warn him. My mind conjured an image of Rafael standing over Raul, a knife in his gut as blood poured down the drain. I jumped to my feet and hurried to the bathroom, peeking through the door.

Raul was more than fine. He was facing the shower head, water cascading over toned muscles and dark skin. One fist was pressed against the wall of the shower, and the other gripped his cock. His eyes were closed and his teeth clenched, jerking himself roughly. I watched as his breathing picked up, and then he came in his hand, gasping and hanging his head in relief.

He sighed and whispered, just soft enough for me to hear. "Leonessa."

My hand flew over my mouth and I crept back hurrying back to the foot of the bed and folding my hands in my lap, looking towards the door and attempting to regain composure.

Leonessa. Lioness.

He was thinking about me.

Another wave of heat went through my body. I imagined Raul pinning me down to this massive, luxurious bed, grunting and groaning as he thrust into me. My cheeks burned. *No, Carlotta. We are not crushing on the Mafia Boss.*

Too late. *Ugh.*

I heard the water cut off and I took the chance to warn him I was here. I don't think I could have survived him walking out naked, no matter how much I wanted another look at him.

"Raul, it's Carlotta, I'm in here," I called out, not wanting to be too loud, but needing him to hear me.

He didn't answer, but came out a moment later, a towel wrapped around his hips, droplets of water still running down his chest. I blinked and tore my eyes away, hoping my cheeks weren't as pink as they felt.

"Lioness," he said as he slowly approached me. "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"I need to talk to you about something," I said, bracing myself. "I know I shouldn't have, but I found something. In your books. They were all spread out on the table, and I couldn't help but listen when you guys were talking…"

Raul listened as I outlined my findings, studying me as he used a second towel to dry his hair and chest. It took all of my focus not to sit there and drool over him, but I finally got through my explanation.

"I was looking at the ledgers you guys left out, about how Rafael has been using the extra funds from some businesses and putting them in the ones not doing as well. The things he's recorded those funds going to are all things you should get tax breaks on. New equipment, cost of payroll software, that kind of thing.

"So then I looked at the tax information from the past few years, and it's all in there, all the tax breaks and the refunds. Only it's not recorded that way in the ledger."

He paused, staring at me with concern.

"The tax break money isn't recorded anywhere. The tax documents show the write-off, but the ledgers don't. Where's the difference?"

Raul studied me a moment longer, then turned his back and walked to his dresser. He let his towel fall from his hips.

His back was turned, so I'll admit. I stared at his toned legs and firm ass that made my mouth water.

He pulled on a t-shirt and a pair of flannel pants, then threw his towel into the bathroom. He returned to where I sat and climbed onto the bed beside me, sitting a little closer than necessary.

He cocked his head, catching a lock of my hair and twirling it between his fingers.

I expected him to be angry, to ask me what right I had to look through their books, to punish me for inferring that his cousin might be hiding something. But instead he asked, "Do you despise me, lioness?"

"No," I mumbled, my voice thick.

"Do I scare you?"

"Is there anyone who isn't scared of you?"

He dropped my curl. "Rafael, apparently. Thank you for bringing this to my attention, Carlotta."

"I heard what he said to you today at lunch. Do you think he'll try to…"

"To hurt me?" he shrugged. "I wouldn't put it past him. I consider him my brother… but for as long as I can remember, he has been conniving and manipulative. He knows how to get what he wants. And he wants to be in charge. I'll need to talk to my brothers about this before we confront him. I'd like you to stay in your room tomorrow. I know it will be boring, but I don't want you around if…" he trailed off.

If it came down to a fight.

I nodded and stood to my feet. "Okay. Thanks, Raul."

“No, lioness. Thank *you*. I’m beginning to believe you are the smartest person in this whole house.”

I resisted a smirk and took the compliment. “Thank you, sir.”

His eyes darkened and dropped to my lips, then my breasts. He licked his lips and met my eyes.

My breath caught and jumped to my feet, and then hurried from the room.

CHAPTER 4 - RAUL



There was absolutely no doubt in my mind that Carlotta had seen or heard the evidence of my desire for her. Her reaction when I glanced at her mouth was enough to tell. And in a way, it was a load off my chest. Carlotta had come to mind more and more over the past few months, and was the only woman I could stand to be around for any length of time. I realized I had grown quite attached to her.

It wouldn't be too bad of a hardship for her, based on the blush that had spread across her cheeks. And she claimed she didn't despise me…

The next morning over breakfast, I spoke with my brothers to prepare them for the upcoming conversation. When Rafael arrived, he could tell something was up. Without attempting to blame him, I brought up the discrepancy in the ledgers.

His response was to fire a bullet into my shoulder.

As I fell to the floor, the room spun into chaos. I recognized Marco shooting a gun and Alessandro running after a fleeing Rafael. One of my enforcers was dead. Someone was screaming.

I was in pain, and losing a lot of blood. My eyesight began to narrow, darkness creeping in around the edges. The last thing I remembered was one of the women from the kitchen rolling me onto my back and sponging my face with cold water. Then I was out.

* * *

I WOKE up in the hospital some time later. Both of my brothers were beside me, anxious and concerned, whispering in hushed tones. They noticed when I woke up and came immediately to my side.

"You lost a lot of blood," Marco said. "We had to take you in."

"We need to get back to the house."

"We have all of Alessandro's team guarding it," Marco argued.

Alessandro nodded, tapping his earpiece to indicate he was getting an update. "Everyone is fine and safe. You were the only one injured."

A day later, I was released from the hospital with a warning to keep my arm securely in a sling at all times and not to even consider using it. At least it was my left.

We had a light dinner that night; minestrone, wine, and fresh bread with some cheese on top. It was one of Carlotta's favorites. She hadn't come down to join us, and I remembered I'd told her to stay upstairs during the confrontation. I was so thankful that I had. If anything had happened to her…

I sent Alessandro upstairs to collect her, pouring us both a glass of wine and looking forward to seeing her face. I imagined what she would say when she saw my arm, glaring at it and asking questions, warning me to be careful, a threat in her eye that I knew she'd never follow through with.

I missed her presence.

Alessandro reappeared, nearly falling down the stairs in an effort to get to us as fast as possible.

"Raul," he stammered. "She's gone!"

* * *

WE LOOKED through her room carefully, searching for any sign of upheaval or chaos and found nothing. But we did find many of her favorite dresses and shoes packed, and a suitcase gone from under the bed. She hadn't left a note, but she had left the room in pristine condition. No running and throwing things, no struggle. Just vanished with her favorite dresses.

My brothers argued about how it didn't make sense. "She seemed happy," Marco said. "I mean, she wasn't thrilled to be here, but we got along, and she didn't seem miserable!"

"And she liked our jokes," Alessandro said softly, almost sounding depressed. "Why would she leave?"

I knew it was my fault. The way I'd looked at her, slipped up and let her know of my attraction to her, had scared her and made her uncomfortable. My brothers finally got the truth out of me, and they quieted, leaving me alone in her room.

Hesitantly, I climbed onto her bed, pressing my face into her pillow. A few long, curly strands of her dark hair remained, and I resisted the urge to gather them up.

Be safe, little lioness.

* * *

MY RECOVERY WAS slow going and my mood was low. Over the next two weeks my brothers attempted to cheer me up, but to no avail. The house was quiet and empty without Carlotta and her brightness and her strength. Once she was gone, I realized how attached I'd grown to her. I tried not to think about her moving on, finding a future without us. Without me.

Rafael and his father had fled and were nowhere to be found. I had no doubt he had gone to the Giovani family for protection, offering them information. The whole family was tense, waiting for the ball to drop.

It dropped one Monday afternoon when I received a small package on the doorstep, with no postmarks and no label. Tentatively, I opened the box.

Inside, was a lock of dark curls, and a bloody ear.

CHAPTER 5 - CARLOTTA



Darkness had this strange way of becoming solid, like a blanket, or a heavy weight you could hold in your hand. This darkness suffocated me, pressing in on all sides. No matter what I did, it was just darker, darker, darker.

Blinding light erupted in front of me and burned my eyes. I squinted and cowered away from the light. Someone shouted, and it took me a moment to process the words. "Shut the fuck up, you whore!"

Slam. Then darkness again. Only once it was gone did I sob at the loss of the brightness.

It went on like this forever. Time lost all meaning. I was thrown food like a wild dog. Covered in filth and defecation, I was hosed off with cold water when I stank too badly. I felt dizzy all the time. Hot, and cold, and lost.

Raul's words ran on repeat in my mind. *We won't come to your rescue… because you are nothing to us. You're a nobody. You don't matter.*

My mind flashed back to when I'd been taken. One of the men I recognized from around the house, one of Alessandro's guys, told me to pack a bag. He said he was taking me to a safehouse. I'd heard the gunshot and the shouting, and had done as I'd been told without thought.

Then once we were outside and into the car, he'd stuck a needle in my neck and I'd passed out.

Sudden brightness brought me back to the present, and I was dragged by my hair from my prison. I collapsed on the ground, covering my eyes from the searing light.

"You horrible, stupid woman." I recognized Rafael's voice. "You tell me how you figured it out."

"I don't–"

Snap. A loud cracking sound broke through the air, and then a searing pain bit into my back. I screamed.

Rafael fisted my hair and dragged me to my knees. He slapped my face and I squinted my eyes shut even harder.

"How. Did. You. Know." He spoke in English.

"I've been… learning Italian," I started. "And I just heard… while you guys were talking about the numbers… I didn't mean it, I just overheard!"

"I'll teach you to listen into conversations you shouldn't," he spat, and in the next moment, a sharp searing pain overwhelmed me. I couldn't even scream. I just gasped and panted, and collapsed on the ground, clutching at my head. My hand felt hot and sticky. When I pulled my hand away from my head, it was soaked with blood.

I heard Rafael say something to someone else in the room. "Leave a note with them. Tell them to hand over everything and leave the country, and I'll have her delivered to the United States back to where she belongs."

"Is that what we'll do, sir?"

"Of course not. I plan to keep her until I tire of her. Then I'll sell her off as a whore."

My head was bandaged, and I was thrown back into my pit of despair. I didn't cry or scream anymore. The darkness no longer suffocated me. Instead, it was a balm to the throbbing pain where my ear should have been. I knew what would happen to me when I was extracted from this pit. I knew, and I refused to let it be my destiny.

I would not be Rafael's toy, nor would I allow myself to be sold off like a piece of livestock. No, I was going to find a way to kill him. Even if he killed me first.

Eventually I was removed from the pit. Someone checked my wound, gave me some cream to apply, and handed me over to some women. I was bathed and dressed, and then they bound my hands behind my back. Half naked and trussed up like a slut, I was escorted out on a fucking leash to where my fate would await me.

Rafael was in his room, reclining on his bed eating olives and drinking Raul's wine. He smirked when he saw me.

"Such a pity about that ear," he said, popping another olive. I ignored him, instead looking around the room for something to use as a weapon. I'd use the wine bottle if I had to. Though I don't know how I would if my hands were bound.

"Look at me, you bitch," he spat. "Where's that brave, feisty exterior the boys love about you now? Hm?" He spat a pit out on the floor beside him, not caring if he made a mess on the floor.

"Let my hands out and I'll show it to you," I muttered back.

He laughed, then stood, abruptly, stalking towards me and grabbing my neck with his hands. I kicked out and struggled, trying to wrestle myself out of his grip, but he had two hands around my neck and was squeezing tight enough that my vision was starting to go.

"Maybe you're not worth the effort," he grinned as he watched me flounder and flail. "Maybe I'll just kill you and be done with the trouble."

No. I will not die like this. Of all the ways I could die, I will not die like this!

With every bit of strength I had, I thrust my knee into his crotch. Doubling over, his hands fell from my neck and he wretched on the floor. I regained my balance and my breath and tried to kick him in the face, but he caught my ankle and pulled, tripping me. I fell to the ground and felt a sharp searing pain shoot up my ankle.

Moments later there was a shout, a bang, and what sounded like an explosion. I was face down on the ground, unable to turn around or get up.

Hands grabbed at me and I shouted and squirmed, attempting to get away, but it was no use. They grabbed at my hands, and then–

They were free. I was rolled over onto my back, and Raul's face came into focus. Immediately I stopped wriggling, the weight of the darkness and the pain from the past few weeks lifting from me at the sight of his angry, hardened face.

"My lioness," he purred, stroking my cheek and brushing my hair away from my face. He was straddling me, his strong legs holding me firmly in place.

"You… you came." Against my will, my eyes welled with tears. I blinked them away.

"Of course I did." He stroked my cheek again.

"But I'm–"

"Nothing?" He clicked his tongue. "No, lioness. You're not nothing. *You're mine."* His hand went behind my neck and pulled me closer to him, and then his mouth was on mine.

His kiss was raw and desperate, like he was begging me with the suckling of his lips and the

stealing of my breath. His other hand came up to the side of my face and I winced in pain as he brushed the bandage of my damaged ear.

I glanced over to where Rafael had been attempting to choke me moments ago. He was on his back, three bullets in his chest and two in his head. The blood seeped out of him and was steadily oozing its way towards us.

Raul kissed my cheek and turned my head so he could press his forehead against mine. He looked into my eyes as he caught his breath. He looked furious. "I wish he was alive so I could kill him again for what he did to you." He tilted his face and kissed my cheek near my wound. "I would torture him for days," he whispered, the scruff of his beard scratching my cheek and neck. "Then I'd kill him, bring him back to life, and kill him again."

I couldn't help but giggle at the absurdity of his desire. "I don't think he's getting up, Raul."

"Do you want his head mounted on a fucking plaque, lioness? I'll have it done." He looked deadly serious.

I chuckled. "No, Raul."

"Don't laugh at me."

I leaned forward to kiss him again, lightly brushing my lips against his. "This is what I want."

He took my mouth like a dying man. Holding the back of my head in place and fusing our mouths together, his tongue slithered between my lips. He groaned into my mouth.

"I'm going to take you," he murmured against my lips. "I'm going to take you right here, in his fucking house, in his fucking bed, with his bloody corpse on the floor." Raul staggered to his feet and pulled me up with him, kissing me roughly and pushing me back against the bed. I fell back onto it and he positioned my hips at the edge of the bed.

"Lioness," he groaned as he spread my thighs wide. "Are you wet for me already?" I blushed and pressed myself up on my elbows. I was wet, embarrassingly so, just from the kiss and the way he was manhandling me. I watched as he extracted his cock and jerked himself a few times, precum swelling at the tip.

"Raul," I whispered. "I'm not… I don't…"

"What?" He leaned forward and kissed the inside of my thigh. "Are you frightened of me?"

"No… Yes… I'm not on birth control," I spat out.

"Good." I could swear his eyes flashed. I gasped as I felt the head of his cock press into my wetness. He gripped my hips and then met my eyes. "I told you, you're mine." With one hard, smooth thrust, he pushed inside.

I fell back on the bed as I felt him fill me and stretch me. Raul's eyes flashed and he grabbed my hips, pulling me into him as he thrust forward, sending a powerful shock of pleasure through me. He smirked and did it again.

"You are beautiful, lioness," he purred as he fucked me hard, and slow. "And you're mine. All mine. I'm never letting you out of my sight again. Understand?"

Before I could answer, he leaned forward and buried his face in my breasts, kissing and biting at them, the speed of his hips increasing. The angle he was hitting me changed, and I cried out as I lost myself in pleasure.

He pushed himself up on one arm, holding my face with his other hand. He was whispering to me, and I couldn't process what he was saying, only the smooth, sweet cadence of his voice and the warmth of his body on mine, and the way his thumb brushed over my lips. He kissed my neck, murmuring quietly.

"Raul… I… oh–"

He pressed his mouth into mine and swallowed my cries of pleasure as I came, groaning as I squeezed him. I threw my arms around him and hugged him close as I rode out my orgasm, breathing in his scent and enjoying the feeling of his hard body pressing into mine. A moment later, I felt him pulsing inside me and he dropped his face into my neck, breathing hard.

I squeezed him tighter and he lifted his head, looking down at me. "Let me get you home, lioness," he whispered. "I'll give you a bath and some dinner, and we can share some wine, and then I can bed you properly."

I almost laughed. "That wasn't properly?"

"Not even close." He kissed me again and helped me up. "Can you walk?"

"Uh…" I tested the weight on my ankle. It hurt and I winced as I tried to stand on it.

"I've got her," Alessandro said from the hallway. "Don't make her walk."

"How long were you there," Raul scowled and tucked himself away, attempting to straighten himself.

"Long enough to know that Marco lost our bet. Let's get you home, little thing." Alessandro scooped me up like I weighed nothing, tucking me against his chest and carrying me bride-style out of the blood-and-sex-filled bedroom.

"I don't like you holding her like that," Raul muttered as he followed us.

"Well, you're the idiot who got himself shot in the shoulder, so next time, don't get shot, and you can carry her."

"You got shot?" I cried.

"Weeks ago. It's fine now," Raul dismissed my concern.

"It's not fine," Alessandro argued. "Don't let him do anything stupid, little one."

"You think I can tell him what to do?" I laughed.

"You're probably the only one who can. When we received that package this afternoon, he orchestrated this raid in less than an hour. I think he likes you."

I blushed and looked over at Raul who was glaring at his shoes and adjusting his cufflinks, not looking at me.

Yeah, I thought. *I think he likes me quite a bit. And I could be very happy as the object of his affection.*

"Oh thank God," Marco jogged up to both of us. He helped me out of Alessandro's arms and into the car, kissing the top of my head as he tucked me into the seat. "Don't you ever do that again."

"What, get kidnapped by the mafia? Don't worry," I laughed. "Twice was enough."

Raul climbed into the car beside me and pulled the door shut, cutting off my conversations with his brothers.

"You don't hate me, lioness, do you? For stealing you away? For keeping me all for myself?" He kissed my cheek and stroked my hair as he asked. "I'll make it up to you, I promise."

"Oh?" I raised an eyebrow. "And how will you make it up to me?"

"How about… a family who loves you?" He whispered against my lips and my heart squeezed at the thought. "My brothers and I adore you, and I… I need you, Carlotta. I need you and I want you, and I want you to have my children. And they'll love you too, because they'll be yours, and they'll be like you. I know they will. I'll give you the whole fucking world, how about that?"

I kissed him back with everything I had in me. We didn't speak again. Raul had just offered me the only thing I'd ever wanted, the only thing I had set out to find.

"Yes," I whispered against his lips as I kissed him. "Yes sir, that will work."

-The End-

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lindsay is a graduate of Western Carolina University. When she isn't caught up living in the world in her head, you can find her at one of her favorite bottle shops, a local craft store, or planning her next vacation to the mountains. She lives in Raleigh, North Carolina, with her husband and cat. (And her twenty-seven imaginary friends.)

Lindsay is the author of How to Tame a Brat, Let's Play a Game, and A Second Chance at Beautiful. She loves kinky romances with happy endings and characters that make you feel things. See her other work and sign up for her newsletter at tinyurl.com/lindsaymurray.

THEIR TWISTED OATHS: A PREQUEL



BY ARABELLA BLACK

Víctor was born to rule his father's illicit kingdom.
I was made to crush it.
On the first night at my new job, I stumble across a man on the verge of death. He draws me in like no other, and my broken heart urges me to save him.
But I'm the one who needs saving.
Because the villain owns me now.
This story contains a feisty heroine with a questionable moral compass and (short) graphic descriptions of violence.

CHAPTER 1



TARA

COMING HOME HAS NEVER FELT this wretched.

My chest tightens when my mother's nurse joins me in the kitchen of the home where I grew up in. Gone is the glow, the livelihood of this place. "I'm sorry I don't have better news for you."

"Thank you for everything you've done for them," I say. My gaze drifts away from the nurse and her lavender scrubs. Anywhere but her. I can't look at her.

Dad's favorite coffee mug rests in the glass kitchen cabinet. His strange reptile fascination followed him when he filled his mug with black coffee in the mornings. No milk. No sugar.

When he turned seventy, I bought him this mug with the money I'd made from a lemonade stand outside the family's shop. It meant a lot to him, this mug of mine. It hasn't felt his warm touch in five months. That's how long it's been since he passed.

"Will you be needing my services from now on?" Nurse Polina's voice dips, and a lash of guilt scars me. She's got her family at home. Her daughter and her baby, Polina's little grandchild. Taking care of my parents while I was in L.A. paid the nurse well.

"Of course!" I respond. "I'd never do that to you. I know how much you meant to my father… Besides, she needs you. My mother… You're all she knows right now."

Once upon a time, I ran away to L.A., a couple of hours north of the town I was raised in. I ran, and I never looked back.

Home's a dusty small town, too close to the border and to the bloody monstrosities occurring every night.

I'd hear their screams in my nightmares. I could always smell the desperation in the grimy heat of our everyday life.

I was desperate to leave this hell I used to call San Ricardo.

When I left, everything went to shit.

* * *

THE SAN RICARDO Police Department is a shithole.

Loudly, I chew on bubblegum as I anticipate my fate in the empty waiting room. The Chief is busy,

I was told. I rock back and forth on a chair about the same age as I am. It would break in two if I were to plunk down on it.

In my absence from this town, it hasn't changed. The station reeks of cigarettes and sweat. The whiff of rotten eggs is surely an afterthought, a complementary note.

I could've walked in here without anyone to block my entrance. Their tech seems to be stuck in the Gold Rush era.

Each time Bobby Carmelo goes to the bathroom, I hear the door's whines. His squeaky chair announces when he comes back from his bathroom break. It's the same chair he sat on eight years ago when I was brought to the station for protesting in front of the San Ricardo City Hall.

"Ms. Levina, he's ready for you now," the Chief's assistant announces from her desk.

I stretch my limbs, tempting that chair below my ass to break. It doesn't. Good for the chair. With heavy steps, I make my way to the Chief's office.

I'm here to get a job to continue supporting my family.

The leftovers of my L.A. salary and bonuses will get me through this year. So. *Fix your posture, kid*.

The Chief clears his throat with a guttural sound as I open the door, and I prepare myself for an old man with a beer belly and a mean mustache. Most things haven't changed here but one. The old Chief has been replaced with Charles Dane, son of… Who the fuck cares?

I don't.

All I want is a job.

To my surprise, Charles Dane is closer to my age than I would've expected. No beer belly, but that cig between his fingers reveals that he's the reason behind the awful smoke stench in this station.

"You're hired," the Chief says before I can sit my ass down.

"Excuse me?" I take a seat, and I almost swallow my gum. I need to get rid of it.

"You're hired." He looks me in the eye as he says it. Something's smug about this man, something I can't quite figure out. "I talked with your former supervisors, and they want you back. They don't understand why you left, but I do. This is your town, your family. Your dad left behind a great legacy with his shop, keeping good men off the streets. I'm not about to send L.A. their treasure back. You stay with us. You work with us."

"In here?" I ask, incapable of holding back how unimpressed I am.

"Not fancy enough for your high standards?" the Chief asks, tilting his head to the side. He scans me like I scan him. Who is this man? I have never seen him before in this town.

"Not really."

"Guess what, Tara Levina. I don't give a shit. Our probationary period lasts for a year. The higher-ups kiss your ass, so you get a month to convince me that you're not going to blow up my town," the Chief explains.

I cross my arms in front of my chest. This is the part where I don't know what I'm doing. "Are you sure you want me here, boss?"

"I'm the Chief. Charles Dane, if you stick around." He takes a pull from his cig. My name rolls off his tongue like he's fascinated with it. "Of course, I want you here. If you play your cards right, you get the Investigative Services Division. Play them right. I beg you. I don't want the feds breathing down our necks."

"I work well with them," I add, and he cringes.

"This is my town. We do things my way. The suited-up fuckers can crawl right back out of the hole they came out of," the Chief says, killing his cig. He pushes back his moving chair but doesn't

stand yet.

"Sign your contracts. Your first task is El Maestro," the Chief reveals, and I pale. A grin of amusement crosses my new boss's face. Leave it to the man in charge to shove a young kid up my ass that's raging chaos to show it to El Director, El Maestro's father. He's already a headache, and I haven't even properly agreed to work for him. "Yeah, I heard how you busted his daddy's Downtown L.A. operations. You almost lost your life pursuing him, making you their force's youngest to ever get her own crew."

"What's El Maestro doing around here?" I ask, hiding my twitchy fingers below the desk. The Chief knows. He fucking knows I'm nervous. I built my career on the demise of Maestro's Daddy in Los Angeles, which opened the floodgates.

El Director has retreated, but he's sent his deplorable son back up here. His son was born and raised here. El Maestro leaves bodies behind everywhere that motherfucker goes. To show us he can.

To underscore how many among us his daddy pays to keep their mouth shut.

"Maestro wants an in, and this little town that you despise returning to… I won't let him buy us out. Are you up for it? We won't go down without a fight."

I pop my bubblegum. "Red is my favorite color, Charles Dane. Don't tell on me, will you? I'm back because of my parents. I… I don't plan on sticking around beyond that. Once my mother… Once she passes, I'll sell their home and move on. The shop's already done with. Dad gave it away. Nothing is tying me to this place. You should know that about me. I'll provide my expertise to keep San Ricardo safe for as long as I'm caged in this town. I promise you that."

The Chief mumbles a phrase of words under his breath that sound like a string of curses. When our eyes meet, he freezes like he's been caught.

I catch the tense movement of his forehead, his widened eyes.

His mask is back up before I can comment on it.

"You're tailing El Maestro and his little group's sexcapades in the Fetiche club. Rumors are going around that his daddy wants to sell his freshly imported girls in that club to grab a piece of the club's pie," the Chief explains.

"Fetiche? That old thing? It was a ruin last time I was around," I say.

"Not anymore. It's become a hub for those bastards now. They push product. They come and go as they please, hosting their little conferences while they get their dicks sucked," the Chief enlightens me. He rises to full height, and I join him. We shake hands with a knowing look in our eyes.

In our job, trust is expensive.

It's a pity I don't have a lot of it.

CHAPTER 2



TARA

FETICHE IS San Ricardo's Little Las Vegas, the BDSM edition.

I'd smuggled myself inside the club once upon a time, with a fake ID and all. It's not a pleasant memory, and I suppress it with all my might. That day I realized I would never find an answer to my needs.

Years have passed, and I'm struggling with the decision not to pursue relationships inside the community.

But I digress.

I hide in a rusty car with my seat adjusted. I shouldn't hug my pulled-up knees. It's not an advantageous position for a quick escape, isn't it?

Being armed and ready to go is the brightest solution when dealing with El Director and his lot.

Here I am, outside a sex club that once haunted my dreams. Now, it's a renewed version of itself.

Unlike all those years ago, no lines are outside waiting for a cheap ticket to enter. In the three hours I've spent out here, I've seen more lavish cars than a pool party in Bel Air. They pull up to the entrance with their drivers, and the guests stroll out in fitted gowns and suits.

It's quite a sight to see in my town. SoCal bursts with wealthier towns than the one I grew up in.

I don't recognize any of these folks, but it's not like I was ever fully entrenched in San Ricardo's affluent crowd.

Five more hours of this shit, and I can go home. Charles told me to surveil the club for the entire weekend. I'm not supposed to engage. It's not a test of my skills. It's more of a test of patience.

Am I capable of obeying the stick-smoking prick?

I may not be able to trust the man yet, but I can obey if it means I get a good job that helps me stay here while my mom needs me.

Speaking of. I flip my phone and find the picture Nurse Polina captured of my mom earlier today when I came home with a bouquet of her favorite fluffy Peonies.

"Adrian? Did my Adrian get these for me? Where is he?"

My mom doesn't eat because she misses my father. Every day, she comes up with a new story of why he's absent, driving Polina crazy. Not that Polina minds. She wants to provide the best care for my mom while she's still with us.

A carbon copy of her husband, I stood there as I handed her the flowers, but she didn't recognize

me.

We've scheduled an appointment with her doctor. In two weeks, we're headed to her office so that I can get a better understanding of the illness that's consuming my mom. Perhaps I can get help to deal with how I feel about this situation before it starts affecting my behavior toward my mom and my work.

Four hours pass, and I'm desperate to stretch my limbs. I skipped the gym today while I looked for my mom's Peonies, and I can feel it in my bones.

My phone rings, and I pick it up. It's Charles. "Go home. I'll send one of the boys to end the night."

"No, it's okay. I'm going to finish what I started," I tell him. I sit up in the car as if my new boss is nearby, ready to scrutinize my posture.

"It's an order. Go home. I'll tell you why tomorrow, but… He won't be there tonight. Neither will his friends," the Chief explains. He lets out a long sigh, followed by a sharp inhale. That damn cigarette of his.

"They're having a masked ball over here," I tell him. "I can't detect any gangbangers."

"It ain't the clothes that make a man. Remember that," the Chief says like I'm the type of bitch that doesn't know. He's mistaken. "Go home and come to the station tomorrow. They had a leak on their end, and we need to strategize. The feds may come snooping soon. Fuck!"

The Chief eventually hangs up on me, and I take him up on his offer. With the key in the ignition, I turn it and slip away past the other nightclubs in the area. Numbed melodies fill my ears, but I ignore them.

I'm alone riding around at this hour on a Friday night, and it's peculiar to me. San Ricardo never used to be this… dead.

Morbid.

Not eager to go home yet, I head for Leipzig Street. If you're looking for a high-end night out, that sketchy place is not it, but it's in the city center, close to my dad's shop. Perhaps I could visit it and see what the new owners have done with it. Dad was friends with them, and in his will, he urged me to sell the shop to them at a discounted price.

The other day, my new boss mentioned that the shop was continuing my dad's legacy. I… I appreciate that a lot. Corruption in these towns, the ones close to the border, is easy to come across.

At the intersection that leads to the nearest national park, I notice a parked car by the side of the road, its hazard lights blinding me from afar.

Procedures are in place. Things I must do in case of an emergency.

But something's off in this scene. The side of the car is smashed along with most windows, but the back of the vehicle remains unharmed. I can't detect any glass shards or remains of destroyed car parts. Nothing in the area indicates that a collision this severe could occur here. No tracks on the asphalt that my car's lights detect.

It almost seems like this car was abandoned here with a purpose. I've heard of this type of fraud. Its popularity has been increasing lately, but I didn't think San Ricardo's people had it in them to stage a car crash.

Careful not to disturb the scene, I park my car and approach with my phone in hand.

I should call an ambulance. The cops. You know. Do the right thing.

As I approach the car from behind, I can't detect a body in its ruins.

A groan fills my ears, and I eagerly trail where it came from.

It's not from inside the car, no. Whoever staged this must have thought we're stupid around here. I

squeeze the phone in my hands. This is an insult to our intelligence.

Our? I'm adapting the local team mentality already. Yay me!

The car is wrecked in the middle of nowhere with no bodies inside. Fine. But I find a body next to the vehicle, unceremoniously dumped with the rest of the road debris. Scarce plastic bottles, empty bags of chips, and crumpled-up beer cans.

And…

A breathing body.

Botched but alive.

This mess's architect constructed a scene of nonsense. Any expert would smell the absurdity from miles away.

I should call an ambulance. The breathing body? Well, he doesn't look like he'll breathe for much longer if I don't help him out.

Flipping my phone, I dial the number.

"No."

The words come out like they're final. It's not a demand but an urgent plea. Whoever this is, he is passing away right in front of me. I'm awfully familiar with death on the job. In my department in L.A., we considered ourselves lucky when a month passed without a casualty.

"Sir…" The man is tall and drenched in blood. Is it his? Is he trying to play me? Should I have taken my gun with me? Probably.

Do I have a death wish?

Sometimes I act like I do.

"Sir, I must call an ambulance for you," I inform him, but his groans make a terrifying return. He's dying on me. His clothes are partly torn, his white button-up unrecognizable after whatever has happened to the man. His black slacks are unbuttoned and hanging low, making me wonder what type of car crash this was.

I don't ride around with my pants unbuttoned, nor does anybody that I know. Unless he had a broad with him. I'd have smelt her. He doesn't look like the type to entertain boring devout bitches.

"Please, I have to do it," I say, but he struggles, voicing his concern with mumbled words. I don't understand why I'm arguing with a man who's about to die. His entire face is smashed in, both of his eyes bulging red. The blood on his swollen lips must be from his nose. It's darker than the rest of the blood he's coated in.

I should call someone.

But I don't.

"I need to call for help. You're injured, sir," I tell him, but that doesn't faze him. He knows. He's aware of his predicament, and he doesn't want the attention.

"Please."

"Are you going to die tonight?" I ask him as I consider my options here. By my standards, I've already broken dozens of rules. Before I waltzed over here, I should've called somebody to come and check this scene out.

That's what a sane woman should do.

"No…" He coughs, spitting blood across a row of empty beer cans next to him. "Not… if you… help. Me."

"It's going to hurt if I help you," I tell him, eying him suspiciously. Through his swollen lids, I can't detect whether he's looking at my pretty self or the beautiful stars above. "I'll demand answers."

"F-fine…"

In my head, I bring him to the station. The hospital. In reality? He ends up in the backseat of my car while I tussle to recall where the closest convenience store is. One without surveillance. Close to a sketchy motel.

Oh, I know which one.

The area around Leipzig Street is rough, but it'll do for this nightly excursion. It's my first week back home, and I'm already causing trouble for the force.

Something's wrong with me, and it's been this way for weeks. If I were in my right mind, I'd ship this man off to the ER.

Fuck Seth and his bloodsucking cockblocking aspirations!

No. I won't waste another thought on Seth. Power couple, my ass. He dropped me at the first sign of trouble. He broke up with me when I told him I was going back home to assist my mom in any way I could.

My broken heart drives me today, sending me into an abyss.

"What's your name?" I blurt out, and the man in the back seat barely stirs. I must entertain him. He can't fall asleep before I get him to… Where the fuck am I taking him? "Please, stay awake. I'm handling it. You'll be up and running in no time. I promise you that, sir. I'm no expert, but you volunteered to let me kidnap you from a possible crime scene, didn't you?"

I park two blocks from the convenience store and pull my hoodie over my head, hiding half of my face. The man mumbles as I shut the door behind me, but I decide not to pay him any attention.

Nonchalantly, I make my way to the convenience store and make a mental list of what I need to treat a patient that's about to die.

I'm in and out of the store in no time, carrying two plastic bags of goodies in one hand and, on the other, a heavy bag of ice cubes, courtesy of Mr. Johnson, my former PE teacher, who's started his own little local packaged ice business. I cram everything I carry in the trunk once I reach the car and sneak back inside.

The stranger greets me with another one of his grunts. I turn the engine on, and we proceed on our illicit journey.

Our destination is as cheerful as I remember it from my days of nightly teen adventures. Usually, I was accompanied by my high school's token emo kid. Eventually, he grew tired of me asking for some roughness in bed. He was swiftly replaced by jocks on rotation.

I wasn't committed to anything but rebellion in my teens, you see.

With the injured man in the backseat of my car, I doubt anything has changed. Now, this stunt could cost me my new job.

Something tells me that it won't.

Charles Dane is peculiar, to say the least. He's too eager not to play with our higher-ups. I know of men in the force who despise working with federal authorities. I used to be one of them, that pathetic little boy's club of men who thought they knew better. But the federal authorities have saved my ass more than once in my short term in L.A.

I'm not going to bite a gift horse in the mouth.

Not this girl.

I'm sorry.

I'm a woman now.

A woman that's too curious for her own good.

"Sir, you owe me two hundred bucks. That shopping spree and our romantic getaway is making a

dent in my savings," I say, and the man twitches violently.

"No… Money, I… I have… money. I h-have it…."

I park the car and make my way to the grimy reception to get a room for a couple of days. It's the same receptionist as always, and I wonder what the fuck's wrong with San Ricardo. It's been nine years since I left after graduating early. They should move the fuck on.

With a much lighter pocket, I return to my car.

It's a caked ordeal dragging the injured man to our room's bathtub, but I do it without a complaint. Gym or no gym today, these arms can lift.

Even a two-hundred-twenty-something-pound fucker who's been beaten up by god knows who.

Once my guest is settled in the bathtub, I quickly run to the car and grab the goodies.

When I return, he's fast asleep.

CHAPTER 3



VÍCTOR

THEY'LL PAY FOR THIS.

I'm going to kill whoever decided to show me this mercy.

They didn't let me live out of the goodness of their heart. *Mierda, no*. They did it to show me and to send a message to my father.

"Sir?" I'm too young to be a sir, her sir. Her silky sigh fucks me up. She hasn't even told me her name, but I've let a stranger take me on. She kneels by the tub that she single-handedly helped me in. "Are you awake?"

"What's…" Oh, fuck, that hurts. It pains me to move, not because these fuckers hurt me. Many have done so before. I may be the oldest and the one who'll inherit my father's merciless kingdom, but that never meant I was protected from violence.

My sisters are safe. Nobody touches them. But Rafa and I? We get it the worst, and Rafa's only nine years old, mind you.

No, it doesn't hurt to speak because my skull was smashed in.

They… Fuck. I can't wrap my head around it. "What's your name, doll?"

Her large eyes widen at my nickname for her like she's never had a man use one on her. The sad thing about this is that I don't mean the name. A woman like her who picks up a half-dead man like me from the side of the road… She's either altruistic or crazy as fuck. I wouldn't mind either.

"I'd prefer if you didn't know," she says at her own pace like it's her world, her kingdom. She's not in a hurry that one. If I weren't as persistent to live and avenge… Fuck. I'd have died by now. This woman took her sweet time to bring me to this revolting motel room. "Besides, I ask the questions."

"Ask."

Her bright white teeth appear as she takes a bite of her lower lip. It's a puffy and sultry lip that I stare at as best as I can. She hesitates. Then, she hesitates some more. No words leave her beautiful mouth.

In another world, I'd charm her to taste her thick lips.

She rises, and my world tumbles. Fuck, she's a woman with pride, a pristine posture. She's gorgeous. She moves her ass to the sink, and I catch myself staring for too fucking long once again.

Despite feeling dead inside, my body stirs for her.

She washes her hands meticulously, taking eons to get back to me with her plastic bags. Her eyes sparkle as she digs up what she needs. I don't observe the movements of her hands. Instead, I study the contorting of her face, how she winces at the sight of what's been done to me.

Scratch that.

I did this to myself.

My father's team houses a rat, one that knows all too well which buttons to push. They didn't want me dead for this exact reason. I'll drive myself crazy trying to find who ruined us.

Our family.

I don't want to believe it. It can't be true. But it is. I lived through it. I was having a blast at my private Fetiche party, and they took me.

They forced me to see things I'll never forget.

I must learn to deal with it. My father will unleash his inner devil once he finds out. Whenever he does, he slips up. He's a calm man, my father. He must be, being in his business.

But he has his limits.

And this time, a line has been crossed.

Big time.

"This isn't your blood, is it," she asks, and her husky voice cracks. She knows the answer already. She scrubs at me, her fingers no longer squeaky clean but a crimson red. She's used cloth after cloth on me, disinfecting whatever open wound she can detect.

"No." It's not my blood. I wish it were. I wish they'd taken it beyond slow torture. I shouldn't be here. I may be next in line. I may have what it takes to enrage my father and cause another riot amid the countless wars we already find ourselves in.

But I didn't deserve to live through what happened today.

They raped her in front of me, taking turns abusing her, demeaning her. She's always been a quiet woman, the perfect partner for my father. Opposites may attract, but my parents are…They *coincided* with one another.

It takes a lot to break my father, and this may be it.

My mother… She didn't give them the satisfaction. She didn't say a word. Not a single noise erupted from her as they took from her.

They cut off her limbs while she was still breathing and bathed me in her blood as she passed.

No, this isn't *my* blood, but it's hers. The woman I'd have given my life for. She was innocent. She didn't deserve to go like this.

Whoever granted me the mercy of a second chance will pay for it.

"Okay, now, it's time for some icing," she says. I'm numb. I can't feel whatever she does to me. She could kill me, and I wouldn't mind.

When I wake up tomorrow, it'll be a different story. But for now, I want to die in the arms of a woman filled with pride.

And a hint of insanity.

Those are fun.

"You can have this room for a couple of days until you recover. I've stitched you up, stopped your bleeding. I did quite well, you know. You've lost a lot of blood. I've brought you some food and a little OJ. In the bag, you'll find the best over-the-counter pain meds I could come up with. It's not a lot, considering you look like you've been through hell and back. Now, you need to rest," she says as her fingers trail the ridges of my stomach. Earlier, she snipped off my dirty clothes, and she's been trying her best not to have a look *further*. "How do you feel?"

Anything I could put into words right now would be a lie.

And a woman like the one who gazes at me with her big eyes after unknowingly washing away my mother's blood from my body… She doesn't deserve a lie.

She deserves a hundred truths that I can never deliver her.

CHAPTER 4



TARA

THE GRIEF in his eyes torments me.

But I bite back my feelings about it. He won't tell me his name or how he feels. He gives me one-worded replies—if I'm lucky enough. Do I want to dig deeper? Yes, indeed. I can't bear leaving this man without answers.

After the blood was gone, he felt lighter, if only for a bit. He's younger now. With the caked blood all over him, he seemed twice my age. Now, I see him for what he is. He's closer to my age, younger even, perhaps.

Another boy that went off the rails. A tortured boy that packs the body of a grown man. Fuck, I can't look, and I won't. I'm a little confused, frustrated, and most of all, horny after spending hours outside Fetiche.

It's not this sketchy stranger's fault. He doesn't deserve to be ogled while he's in pain.

I can't ignore my instincts, the thought of this being something that I should definitely look into. Staged car accidents in San Ricardo. I'll ask Charles about it when I head to the station tomorrow.

"Stop looking at me like I'm an angel, sir," I tell him to lighten the mood. I gently press more ice on his swollen face, eager to uncover more of his dark eyes. "I'm no angel. In fact, I know that ***this*** is wrong. I'm breaking millions of rules by breathing the same air as you in this little bathroom. Something about you seems awfully familiar. I can't shake it. You don't need to tell me who you are, you know. I'll find out, and you'll have to give me my answers. Understood?"

"Very much so," he grumbles, but I detect a slight grin. It's a little far-fetched, but I see it. A slight curve of his mouth.

"I must go now. Will you manage on your own?" I ask, and I pray. I never pray. I don't *believe*. I don't. Not at all. But this man, I wish that he'd ask me to stay. I would do anything to dig up the answers I need from ***him***. I don't want to return to the station and report what happened.

"Just fine."

Our eyes meet, mine curious and his cold, exhausted. He needs his space.

"You need to rest," I remind him.

"Won't do."

"But you… Please, rest," I beg him.

"No."

"You'll leave once I'm out of here, won't you?" I ask, my shoulders dropping. I swallow hard because I recognize the pattern. It's a pattern I have learned to detect in my sleep.

"Yeah."

"Don't get caught, will ya?" Without a second glance, I make my departure. I hope he'll take my shopping bags with him wherever he goes for his sake and mine.

Once I'm on the road, I take out my phone. I shouldn't drive and dial, but I've done much worse tonight, haven't I? Finally, I make the call I should've made two hours ago. I call the station and report what I saw, minus the stranger. I leave that part out, knowing that the area's footage is non-existent. I made damn sure that nobody else captured me on their security cams, either.

See, that's a San Ricardo benefit.

It's a compact town, without any surprises.

Shit's been the same for decades.

* * *

FOR TWO WEEKS, the blood-stained man has taunted me. I didn't share my name. He never gave me his. Yet, somehow, he's around, mocking me. I feel watched. For the love of god, I've been trained against this, but he slithers under my skin like he belongs there.

I can't let him ruin my day.

Again.

Tugging at my black leather tube dress, I'm careful not to suffer a nip slip. It's a mini dress, reaching below my crotch area. That's what the cashier described it. In soft and loose curls, my chestnut hair falls over my shoulders. Since my father passed earlier this year, I haven't dared to cut it off. He called it my princess hair, and as much as I used to despise it, I think of him when I wake up in the morning and look in the mirror.

Fuck.

I can't do this.

Charles has taken it up a notch. On this heated Saturday night, he's sent me inside Fetiche. Without a mask and all. It's another cop that would never be caught dead in a dress this short with cheap heels this high.

Never in a million years would Seth have allowed me to wear this while being his. His nosy friends at the British Consulate would sneer at me, looking slutty like this. Fuck. Them. I never felt like I was *his* anyway. He can have his fancy city job.

After almost a month back in San Ricardo, I've found a routine that suits me, and I don't even miss L.A. Seeing my mom and Polina go through their morning routines gives me peace. My mom doesn't know I'm her daughter, but she remembers that I bring her flowers daily. Our house overflows with my bouquets, but it's worth it.

Charles… He's fun to work with. We go back and forth daily, and it doesn't tire me. He's gradually beginning to trust me, and I appreciate it. He lets me come in late, accommodating to my family's needs.

Another part of my daily life are my late-night thoughts about a man drenched in blood.

Not on the job, Tara. You may be dressed like a fucktoy, but you won't let a man ruin your night out on the job. I never signed up to be an undercover cop, but in San Ricardo, we're a little short-staffed. Charles and I slip into numerous roles every day.

With a pink band on my wrist, I strut through the club to the bar. I need a drink. I asked Charles, and he gave me the green light. I can have three drinks. Max. The other night, Charles took me to a worn-down biker's bar on Leipzig Street, and he pumped me full of gin to see how much I could take.

I order my first drink and wait, scouring the club from where I lean against the bar.

The masks have been left behind today, and I can see the club member's faces. With the pink band, I indicate that I'm a virgin.

A curious club virgin that's not here to watch. I want to participate. I don't know what came over me at the entrance and why I went against Charles's advice of grabbing a blue voyeur wristband.

"Tara Levina."

Where's my fucking drink? I turn to face whoever that deep voice belongs to. I don't want to have a chitchat with another kid I went to school with. Yeah, I know. I suck. I'm back in town after quitting my big-city job. *Screw you, too, asshole*.

Unfortunately, it's not who I think it is. It's somebody much worse.

It's him.

Him.

"Víctor Álvarez-Garcia. El Maestro. How are you today?" I ask, and when my drink finally arrives, I gulp it down like it's water. Because this, whatever it is, is precisely what I feared. It's him.

He's the guy I stitched up and rented a motel room for.

"I'm just fine. I didn't get caught," Víctor says. While he briefly chats with the bartender about the billing of my drinks, I can't resist checking him out.

His face has returned to its glorious shape. Sharp edges and corners, defined like a sculptor worked years on them. His eyes are a warm brown color that was pitch black the last time I saw him.

And his hair? It's short on the sides, swept back to showcase the lush top of his black hair. One strand of hair hangs over his forehead, the one that got away.

"I can pay for my own drinks," I tell him, but he grins at the bartender, finished with him. He flicks his attention back on me, and I burn where I stand. I know everything about this man, yet I don't understand why he affects me this much.

How he managed to be this lucky that day, with me finding him.

Not that his predicament had anything to do with luck. I heard about what happened with his mom, and as the thought crosses my mind, his face darkens. He says, "Don't. I don't need your pity."

"How are you doing?" I ask, clutching my tumbler.

"You almost killed me that day," he says, and I swallow my tongue. Polina was kind enough to ask one of her daughters to come over and give me a good powdering, covering my face in tons of foundation and other glittery ornaments I know nothing about. I doubt he can see how embarrassed I am that I couldn't help him more that day, but with my luck, you never know. "My doc had to redo all your progress, and it wasn't quite as entertaining as you standing over me, worried that I'd die in your arms."

"I… I'm sorry. Sincerely," I say, waving at the bartender to make me another drink. With Víctor next to me, my drink becomes a priority. I'm served what I ordered in an instant, and as I go to take a sip, Víctor places his hand on my wrist.

I stare.

He's recovered. The remnants of his bruises are barely visible, but to a knowing eye, my fucking eye, I can see what was there once before. I can't forget washing that blood off his body, his tormented face while I was doing it.

"Can't be drunk on the job, now, can you?" he asks with a bite to his tone. Of course, there is. I

may be a hot piece of ass tonight, but I messed with his dad's money in Downtown L.A.

Make no mistake. I'm the enemy.

"You'd be surprised what I can and cannot do on the job," I tell him. I want to take a sip, and his sizzling hand around my wrist won't deter me from doing so. I push at his hand to move, realizing it's much harder to stir him when he's in top form.

We match tonight. My black leather tube dress compliments his black long-sleeved button-up, leather belt, and slacks.

Fuck, his shoes are delicious. Pristine Cap Toe Oxfords in a shiny, pitch-black tone. I don't make a habit of knowing this type of shit, and it usually doesn't impress me. Seth has a closet of real leather shoes back in L.A. He had them imported from home, which was a major headache to deal with back when we moved in together.

But this isn't Seth, and suddenly, these stuck-up shoes make me salivate.

"I need to have a word with you," he says, letting my wrist go. I pick my drink up and throw it back before he can stop me. It's not working. I'm fully aware of the man beside me, rousing me to break one promise after the other. "In private."

Víctor doesn't wait for me to reply. He grabs my hand and escorts me to the back of the club like he owns it, confirming what Charles has feared all along. I shouldn't be aroused with so much at stake.

Los Equis can't take over Fetiche. If the cartel buys out Fetiche, the rest of the nightclubs will fall in line. El Director won't leave it at that. He'll venture further into the town and erase any ounce of pride we have.

San Ricardo will become their playground for smuggling drugs and humans across the border.

"I won't keep your secrets," I tell him once the door shuts behind us. Before I can enter the room, he presses me against the door. He locks it, making sure that we remain undisturbed. I can't see beyond his strong chest and arms.

"You don't know my secrets," he says, and his words reach me at my core.

"What do you want from me?" I ask. I'm not wearing much, but I still sweat like I do. I can't control what I've been taught to control for years. I passed each class, graduated with honors, and broke records at my first job.

I'm not meant to be corrupt.

But this man bends me to his will.

"I own you now. It's not my secret that you'll keep. It's yours."

And with that, he swings forward, capturing my mouth with his. I'd have slipped to the floor if he weren't grasping my face with both hands. I can't feel my legs. I can't ***breathe*** with his lips on mine.

"You can't do this," I say as he grabs the back of my head. His fingers massage my skull, stroking me silly, and I purr in his arms. "I… I didn't know who you were. If I'd known, I wouldn't have saved you."

"Stop insulting your intelligence."

"I didn't know. I swear."

"A corrupt cop fucked us up in L.A. How come we didn't have you in our pocket, huh? Was it a financial issue?" he scoffs at me while he grabs a handful of my hair, tugging on it. "If it's money that you want, I'll give it to you."

If only I needed money.

I should slap him for insinuating that I'm corrupt, but the truth is more delicate than that. He blocks me when I attempt to kick him in the groin to force him to let me go. Like a doll, he flips me

around. I face the wall with a growl while he sneers behind me. He's amused by how easy it is for him to overpower me.

But I'm not amused.

Not at all.

"Even if I asked for money, you insolent dick, you'd never be able to give it to me. You know why? I do. You don't have that power in your daddy's organization yet." I stab him where it hurts, and he tugs at my hair, forcing me to look back at him. But I don't care. I can say it in his face. I've worked hard to be where I am.

I sacrificed a lot, missed my dad's final years. I've been gone so much that my mom's forgotten me. Okay. Dial back. She did not forget me because I was gone. That's what the therapist said. No. She forgot because of her illness. She didn't choose it to be this way…

"What's wrong?" Víctor asks, and I scowl at him.

"Don't bother charming me," I tell him, but I know he doesn't have to. He's charmed me in his absence enough to mess with my professionalism. "If you need me gone, remove me from the equation."

"I don't think so," Víctor replies, and his smirk is deadly. Devious. "You made my day. Keep talking, mi maravilla. You're giving up your delicious little secrets. Couldn't resist, could you? You had to look me up."

"It's part of my job," I hiss, squirming to free myself. He cages me between his body and the wall, pressing on me from behind. I've trained with men twice his size. I've lost, but I've had my wins, too. If only I could remember my training while Víctor chokes me from behind.

I can't help the heat he rouses out of me.

"Don't you touch me!" I thrust and shove against him, but he takes it as an invitation to cage me some more.

"I owe you, don't I? For keeping your pretty mouth shut," he says. Shivers bolt down my spine as he trails the length of it with his fingers. The leather tube dress exposes more of me than I'd prefer.

I'm not wearing anything underneath, and once his fingers reach my folds, he'll find out.

And he'll think I did it for him.

I'm ashamed to admit that I may have.

"Who says I kept it shut?" I taunt him, and his fingers find my treacherous pussy. He touches me, cupping me like he owns me, and I close my eyes. Inhale him. I yield to his touch, his fingers brushing my folds. He parts my folds, flicking my clit.

Seth… He never touched me like this, not even when we were getting to know each other years ago. Sex with Seth was like going to the grocery store. It happened every week, but it was sopping in routine and boredom.

"Don't make me do this," he says. He doesn't convince me. His length presses against me, a warning sign of what he can and will do to me.

If I let him.

I'm a lot, but I'm not a pushover.

This is wrong. It goes against everything I vowed to do when I began this job. I shouldn't let him feel me up, but I do. I want it, and so does he. At this moment, we're not who we always are. A cop. The heir apparent to a filthy kingdom carved in blood.

I'm a grieving, broken-hearted girl. He's my rebound, a hot fuck to satisfy me for the night. It's nothing more. "You don't have to. I'll do it for you."

"Don't."

Being free of his touch doesn't feel as good as it sounded in my head. The ghost of his fingers on my clit tests me, teasing me in its absence. I get down on my knees, and I peer up at him. I discover that this is the type of sight I need in my life.

An overwhelmed Víctor towering above me, staring down at me like I'm a treasure he can't let go of. *But he will. This is a one-time thing, isn't it?* His eyes are darker than the night, and he's tense all over, rubbing the back of his neck and cursing under his breath.

I want him to relax.

The world won't end because we did this. More so, it'll make what's ahead more entertaining. Our delicious little secret.

With my hand on his zipper, I ask, "If you want my mouth on you, ask for it."

His mouth eases into a smirk I won't manage to forget. It's contagious. "Part your lips and give me that filthy mouth of yours. You'll swallow every drop. Understood?"

"Don't treat me like one of your whores!" I push back, erupting with jealousy. He doesn't belong to me. He's a man I saved on a bad day.

"Trust me, baby. You don't want to be treated like my woman," he says, unzipping himself. I trail his every move, the ridge of his palm as it finds his cock. He strokes himself while he's still clothed, and when he takes himself out, I can't hide my gasp.

I don't know what comes over me, and I want to slap myself for the reaction. Why should I hold back? If it's one night… We can have our fun, no pretenses.

Licking my lips, I anticipate for him to fuck my mouth. He takes it slow as he strokes himself to the sight of me on my knees. I don't know what it does to his brain, having his father's ballbuster in such a delicate position, but he's hard in an instant. His twenty years of age show, and although I've been with older men all my life, I can't deny that I don't want to be an agist for one night. I'm only five years older than him, after all. We're not worlds apart.

"If you were my woman, you wouldn't be here. You'd be holed up in our home, Tara. With nothing on your mind but my pleasure. You wouldn't have to worry about a thing, baby," he says, and the soreness in his eyes makes me long for something I could never want. He doesn't want to diminish my fire as much as I don't. I could never let a man consume my entire life.

Never.

Never fucking say never, prissy bitch!

"You'd wait for me on your knees, baby. Just like this," he says, and his fingers trace my lips. I part them for him, and he slips inside with three digits. I suck like I know how to do it, eagerly and with all the passion I can draw up. "Anticipating. Aching. You'd crave your next fill."

"Yes," I hiss once he removes his now-wet fingers to line up his cock.

"If you were mine, you'd be in constant danger." *Like I'm not already risking my life on a daily.* He drives his cock inside of my mouth without warning. He doesn't hold back. He shoves himself inside, expecting me to take every inch he gives me. I try my best, but I salivate and gag on him more than I'd like to admit.

I was in a long-term relationship before this, but Seth never wanted blowjobs, so I'm out of practice.

"They'd want you dead, baby. You'd be the key to my kingdom, you know that? You and that bleeding heart of yours. They'd take you to get to me, and it would work." The tears in my eyes result from his thrusts, but I can't hide that his words reach a part of me that I keep hidden. "I'd burn the world down to keep you safe, and I'd do it knowing that you gave up your precious pride for me, doll. You'd *let* me keep you safe. I'd be the luckiest man on earth, calling your spirit mine."

I don’t know what’s worse. The fact that he said what he said or that I believe it.

Envision it, almost.

Like the crook that he is, he steals my sanity, and he makes it his.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Expect the unexpected. I write romance for those that like it twisted and kinky. My characters are shameless, fun, and somewhat psychotic. I do NOT confine myself to the walls of my genre, the tropes, or readers' expectations. I write dark, contemporary, and reverse harem/menage.

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SONGBIRD



BY MOLLY LACHAUSSEE

On the night before her first tour, popera sensation Nitraa learns the title sponsor of her tour has backed out, leaving a gaping hole in their finances. How will it be paid for? Her manager secretly makes a perverse deal with powerful and dangerous businessman, Kazimir Vadim Tarasovich. Desperate to renegotiate, Nitraa agrees to meet with him.

The Cobalt Club is the world's most exclusive BDSM club, and Nitraa has no idea what waits for her inside. Can she survive the meeting with Tarasovich without being harmed—and with her secrets intact?

The pitch-coloured door screamed at Nitraa to turn around and her mind echoed the sentiment. Techno pounded under her feet and her heart raved in time with the music. Nitraa swallowed thickly and took a deep breath. The Cobalt Club looked like an abandoned apartment building with four grimy steps, darkened windows, and black doors. The only way to tell it wasn't abandoned was a single exterior light in the alcove, a white-and-blue neon sign that read "Cobalt Club", and a bouncer stationed outside. But there was no line of eager, half-dressed girls in their best clubbing clothes and six-inch heels.

Her jeans, t-shirt, and ballet flats were not clubbing clothes, and if her makeup artist Diane was right, she was spectacularly overdressed for a BDSM club.

Nitraa crossed her arms, tightened the sleeves of her shirt in her fist, and climbed the steps, her fear a large lump in her throat. What was she doing? She didn't belong here.

The bouncer lifted his head to acknowledge her. "You a guest?"

"Yes," she said quickly and dug into her jeans' pocket to pull out the card Tarasovich gave her at intermission. It trembled in her hands. "Someone gave me this and said to meet him here after the Nitraa concert."

The bouncer took the card and held a blacklight to it. Lettering and a logo glowed purple. He gave it back to her and raked a disbelieving gaze from her head to her feet.

Jesus, did he think she was a hooker?

Nitraa Stephensen was no hooker. She was the Songbird of the Internet. Her videos had almost two billion views and she had eight million subscribers. She studied with Julliard-trained vocal coaches since she was six, and understood several languages, ranging from Arabic to Russian. She sang arias, pop, folk, metal—songs in any genre—since she was eight and had honed her craft in the fifteen years since.

"I'm a big fan of yours. Wish I could've gone." He pressed a button on his earpiece without giving her time to reply. "Guest coming in."

He knew who she was? Was he going to say anything about her being here? She didn't need this shit. She'd attract more weirdos if they knew she was here!

"Go straight a hundred feet and you'll see the front desk. Give them your card."

"Thanks. And please don't say anything about—"

He shook his head. "More than my job's worth to say you're here."

He pulled and the door swung outward. Near-silence greeted her ears, rather than the heart-pumping techno. Was this place soundproofed? The downlights lit the entirely black hallway like little spotlights.

Each light exposed and highlighted her fear and shame the closer she got to the desk. Tarasovich said he'd hear her out with the renegotiation, but did it have to be here? She was barely comfortable with porn, and BDSM made her squirm. It was hot but wanting to be hurt and sore wasn't normal. Liking pain wasn't normal. Guilt and shame gnawed at her when she fantasised about it. It felt dirty, which made her feel worse and more guilty.

If Tarasovich was here, did that mean he liked it too?

Butterflies floated in her stomach and her steps faltered.

Two people sat behind a metal and glass desk. The man with a purple mesh shirt and pink-and-blue frosted tips on his hair gave Nitraa a wink. The woman's nipples strained against her top's

hemline. Dark black eyeliner and fuck-me red lipstick stained her face. A pretty smile ticked upward.

"You must be our guest! Can I get your card please," she asked, hand out.

Nitraa handed over her card, eyes on the desk. Did they recognise her?

The woman picked up a blacklight and shone it over the card, then pursed her lips and looked down. Disappointment creased her eyes. She picked up the phone, pressed a couple of buttons, and sighed deeply.

What had Nitraa done to upset her?

"Kazimir Sir? Your… guest is here," she spat. A pause while she lifted her gaze again, then a wince. "Sorry, Sir. It won't happen again." Another pause. She raised one snooty eyebrow. A strained smile suggested she'd rather be doing anything other than what he asked her to do. "Yes, Sir."

She placed the phone back in the cradle, picked up a keycard, then rose.

"Follow me," she said, her voice taut. Her thigh-high, spiked heels clacked on the glossy marble tiles leading around the corner to the elevators. "Room eight-oh-six. I'm sure you can find it."

Nitraa opened her mouth to retort, but the elevator dinged. She stepped in. The woman reached in and swiped the keycard, then pressed the button for the eighth floor.

"I didn't realise Kazimir Sir did vanilla," she scoffed as the door closed. "I'm sure I'll see you on your way out in a few minutes."

Anger chased away her fatigue, and a fire of righteous indignation flared deep in her belly. Several names sat on the tip of her tongue. She wasn't sure what she was, but vanilla wasn't it!

Nitraa paced the elevator. Wasn't this just fucking fabulous? She was supposed to be in her hotel room, taking an overdue bubble bath, sipping champagne, and looking at the dozens of bouquets of flowers and cards her fans had sent. Instead, she was at a BDSM club on the other side of town attempting to renegotiate the terms of the loan her manager Scott made on her behalf and without her knowledge with a skeezy businessman.

The numbers moved from five to six to seven. She fluffed and lifted her hair, pulled it into a ponytail, and let it fall down her back again.

The elevator settled, then dinged open. A sign for rooms one to three were to the left with four to six to the right. Erotic prints lined both sides of the plushly-carpeted hallway. A woman's half-muffled, half-sobbed "please" rippled from underneath a door.

She bit and chewed at her bottom lip, and a fine tremor ran under her skin. This wasn't the useful excitement she had on-stage. This was nerves. First-concert-ever nerves. Failing-grades-at-school nerves. Virginity-losing nerves. Loan-renegotiation-with-a-sleazy-businessman nerves.

Eight-oh-six loomed at the end of the corridor.

Each knock on the door echoed and pulsed in her chest. She had to be out of her mind. What if someone saw her come in here?

Tarasovich opened the door. "Hello, Nitraa."

Her heart pounded like a tympani when he said her name. Dark eyes, hard and gentle, spoke of scorching nights and intelligent conversation. Trimmed stubble softened his jawline.

"Come in."

If she inspired people with her voice, he commanded them with his. Dark, deep, and rich, the sensuality of it flowed over her skin. Was that a Russian accent?

The room was hardly the BDSM club she had built up in her mind. Brightly lit with chocolate-brown and black furniture, a kitchen behind the lounge, and several doors, it had the feel of a luxury apartment or hotel room. Not a whip or leather outfit to be seen. A strange calm slowed her hammering heart.

Maybe this was just a renegotiation of the loan and he was borrowing one of the rooms?

Her fatigue dissipated when Tarasovich directed her to a leather chair, then sat across the coffee table from her. His decadent, smouldering gaze and shirt sleeves rolled up over tattooed forearms sent blood pooling in places it hadn't pooled in months. Four Cyrillic letters tattooed on his hand claxoned the word ‘dangerous’.

“You look tired,” he said.

Without meaning to, she raised one eyebrow and crossed her arms.

“It’s midnight. I've barely slept in the last two days and finished the first of forty-nine planned concerts a couple of hours ago. The sooner we can renegotiate this loan, the sooner I can get back to my hotel and go to sleep. And so you know,” she said, dropping her head back, staring at the ceiling. “The woman behind the reception desk is the rudest bitch. She gave me the filthiest look, said you didn’t do ‘vanilla’, and said she’d see me in a few minutes.”

She lifted her head. Tarasovich's expression had darkened. That couldn’t be good.

“What was her name?”

“I—I don’t know.”

He unlocked his phone and scrolled to a number. It rang twice. A man’s voice filled the space between them.

“Wells here.”

“Greyson, it's Kazimir. Who's on the desk?”

“Chloe and Hanying. Why?”

“Chloe made several rude and inappropriate comments to me and my guest. I expected better out of Omar’s submissive; he’s a senior member.”

The man let out a frustrated sigh. “You’re not the only one. Nikrad mentioned her bratty behaviour earlier. I’ll take her off the front desk and call Cassien. He’ll enjoy punishing her; he’s in a mood. Chloe still has a thing for you; she’s probably not impressed with your guest.”

“I’m not interested in dealing with her shit.” Tarasovich stared at Nitraa. “I have my own submissive to take care of.”

His voice slipped under her shirt and caressed her breasts.

Submissive? Her? She was renegotiating a loan, not sleeping with him!

“The woman with the long, blonde hair? Is it who I think it is?”

A hot blush shot up her face. Did everyone know she was here?

“It is. I’ve caught my very own songbird. *Spasiba*, Greyson. *Dasvidaniya*.” He hung up. “Chloe will be severely punished for that breech of protocol. I doubt she’ll do it again when Cassien is finished with her.”

“Thanks,” she said. Guilt twisted her consciousness; Chloe didn’t deserve to get punished.

“You owe me a favour, my songbird.”

A sardonic grin spread across her face. “You asked if I would sing for you tonight at the concert. I did, so we’re even.”

He laughed. What in the hell was so goddamn funny? She had looked him dead in the eye when she sang that final lament.

“No, my songbird. I told you to sing for me, and you're very good at following instructions. You've done everything I've told you to do, which is why you'll do exactly what I tell you to do after this so-called renegotiation is over.”

Presumptuous jerk!

She stood. “I don't think this is going to—”

“Sit down, Nitraa.”

Her body obeyed automatically. With that tone of voice, she'd do anything he told her to and thank him for the privilege. It held the authority of a man in complete control of himself and his surroundings; one who would take charge and make everything okay, and the only thing he’d ask for in return was her soul.

“I'm not usually so generous with my terms, so pay attention,” he said, much deeper and darker than before. “One: you belong in my bed every night, from tonight, until your debt is paid. Please me, and you'll pay it off faster. Displease me, and an extra night will be tacked on to the payments, even after the tour is finished.”

Nitraa’s mouth dropped open.

“Excuse me?”

He continued. “Two: you will say nothing about our agreement. Not your family, friends, or anyone else.”

Her hand curled into a fist. When this was over, she was going to punch Scott in the face, kick him in the dick, then fire him.

“Three: I have particular preferences which I expect will be catered to.”

And what preferences were those? The image of him tying her down and hitting her, whispering in her ear, commanding her stroked the nub between her legs, and she squirmed out of disgust with herself.

“In return, I will cap the amount of total interest on the loan, which means you owe me over four million dollars. If you decline, I’ll get my money another way, which will be wholly unpleasant for both you and Mr Fletcher. I suggest you take it; it's all I am prepared to offer. You have ten minutes to decide.”

The math gave her mind something to hold onto other than looking at the powerful, sensual man in front of her. A rough estimation of four million over sixty nights was roughly sixty-six thousand a night, give or take a few hundred.

She wasn’t going to fire Scott; she was going to kill him. What in the hell had he gotten her into? This wasn’t a renegotiation; it was extortion!

Questions spun in her head, and trying to grasp onto one was like catching fog. Saying no wasn’t an option, and she didn’t want to know what he meant by ‘wholly unpleasant’. Beatings? Death? Being sold into slavery?

She stared at the corner of the sofa so Tarasovich didn’t distract her.

“Every night?”

“Every night. Your periods won't bother me. On the contrary, I find blood very erotic.”

A dark shiver trickled down her spine and rushed up again. Shame hit her hard.

“And from that reaction, you do too. Blood play and masochism often overlap.”

She gasped.

He narrowed his eyes and studied her the same way a predator studied his prey before pouncing. “You’re a masochist, aren’t you?” He broke eye contact and rubbed his stubble. “That’s something I am more than happy to cater to.”

Blood and pain were inextricably linked. Pain was her way of knowing she was alive, but blood made it real. Enjoying pain was her deepest, darkest secret, and there was something abnormal about wanting it. Every boyfriend she had flirted with causing her pain, but never crossed the line she wanted them to cross. Tarasovich seemed to be promising it.

She should’ve been revolted at wanting that itch scratched. What would it finally feel like to have

someone hurt her the way she wanted to be hurt and know how to do it without injuring her?

"What about protection? Diseases, and all that?"

"Both of us will be tested in the morning. If I'm not wearing a condom, I have no intention of being inside you. That is a hard rule."

At least he was thinking of protection.

Tarasovich looked at his watch. "Seven minutes. I assume you have more questions?"

"Am I staying the night, or can I go back to my hotel room?"

He regarded her with more annoying amusement. That smirk made him impossibly sexy, but absolutely infuriating. It held all the answers and none.

"You'll stay with me for the duration of the tour. It's been arranged with Mr Fletcher."

Anger knotted into a ball. Scott knew what Tarasovich had in mind for tonight? That bastard! Death was too good for him.

"What about fans?"

"You will be given opportunities to meet with the media and your fans. Outside of anything tour-related, you're with me."

All of her free time with him? That wasn't what she needed. Clickbait headlines, social media, and gossip sites would have a field day asking why she was dating him.

"You're not going to beat me, are you, or turn me into your punching bag?"

Tarasovich got up and stood over her. The back of his hand came so close to her face she flinched. Instead, his knuckles caressed her cheek, and he took her chin between his thumb and forefinger. Dominance glittered in his black eyes. Behind that, a ghostly softness lingered.

"I'll never intentionally hurt you, but it will be my greatest pleasure to torment this luscious body until you beg me to."

Nitraa gripped the arm of her chair while her body melted.

"Three minutes, Nitraa."

This was so far outside her comfort zone, she might as well have been in a different country. But, where was she going to get the money to pay Tarasovich back? It was a Catch-22: she needed his money for the concerts, but she needed the concerts to pay him back.

Shit. It was between this devil who robbed her of her common sense, and one who was angrier and less pleasant. He left her with nowhere to go, except to his bed.

"The word of a businessman with ties to the Russian mafia doesn't inspire me with confidence that you'll keep your promises," she said with a bravado she didn't feel.

He chuckled again. Was everything she said amusing to him?

"Ties? Oh, songbird." The smile dropped and danger surrounded her like a cloak. "I am the Russian mafia for the Eastern seaboard, Cuba, and Central America."

Her breath stuttered out. Every thought she had disappeared. In its place was cold, deep, dark terror, but not of him. Of what he would do to her, how he would peel back her layers and expose her secrets. She had sung for the head of the Russian mafia. Gazed into his eyes while doing it. Agreed to see him at this club.

The head of the Russian mafia wanted her as a submissive.

The thought was as terrifying as it was intoxicating.

"Does that scare you, my pretty songbird?"

She nodded. Mafia. Cement shoes and sleeping with the fishes and offers she couldn't refuse. Leave the gun, take the pierogi.

"Good. You should be scared. I'm going to find and exploit every fucking kink you have. I'm

going to watch your body betray you. You're going to fucking beg for me to hurt you. You'll crawl on your hands and knees to suck my cock and spread your legs when I tell you to. You'll have my cock so far up your cunt you'll feel me in your throat."

Nitraa sat back in her chair. Holy. Shit.

He paused. "Time's up. Do we have a deal?"

Her heart shot up to her throat and she swallowed. There was no escape.

She nodded.

Tarasovich leaned over the chair and caged her in. A smoky tendril of his cologne drifted down, as leathery as the chairs she was in, as smooth and rich as his voice, and as expensive as his suit. It wrapped around her like a steel band, inspiring fear and lust, whispering to her, promising her.

He lifted her chin. "Let's seal the deal with a kiss, my songbird."

Her jaw quivered. "I don't like—"

He pressed his lips against hers, cutting off her protest. She stiffened, then relaxed when he encouraged her mouth to open for him. There was kissing, kissing, and what Tarasovich was doing. Sensuality didn't begin to cover it.

Tears traced a track down her cheeks. She hadn't expected him to make her cry. Beautiful, carnal, and dark, but gloriously seductive. The nerves in her body flicked on at the same time.

He kissed the tear from one side, and wiped the other with his thumb. He stared at it, as though it was a diamond, and licked it off.

"Your tears are beautiful, Nitraa. I hope to see many more of them."

She wanted to hate him. She wanted to find a modicum of anger to hold onto. There was nothing. Tarasovich hadn't just stolen her tears; he stole her good sense.

Was sixty nights of being kissed like that worth four million dollars?

He straightened, crossed his arms, and looked down at her. "I have three rules," he said. "First, you will call me 'Sir' or 'Kazimir Sir'. Second, you will speak only when spoken to. Third, do everything I tell you to do immediately. Non-compliance means consequences. It seems easy, but I assure you, it isn't. Now, kneel next to me."

The command was simple enough.

He stepped away. She stood, took a step, then knelt.

She could do this.

His hand went to her head and stroked her long blonde hair. "A good start, my songbird."

The words 'thank you' sat on her tongue, but she said nothing.

"A good listener, too. What do you say when someone pays you a compliment?"

Nitraa swallowed. "Thank you, Kazimir Sir."

He sat in her vacated chair.

"You are in the most exclusive BDSM club in the world. Like me, the club has rules. Concern yourself with this one: you say nothing about the club to anyone outside the club, even those you meet here. The members pay a premium to have their privacy maintained, and they have no issue with reporting those who talk too much. It works the same for you. No one will mention they ever saw you here. Now, stand and face me, and strip down to your lingerie."

She stood in front of him, but her confidence drained away. What if he didn't like what he saw? What if he mocked her?

Nitraa toed off her shoes and pulled her shirt over her head.

"No. Put it back on," he said.

She dropped the shirt back into place and kept her gaze on the floor while tears stung her eyes.

Did he find her that repulsive?

He stood, walked to the back of the room, and pulled down a huge mirror, then propped it against the window. Tarasovich spun her around and stood behind her.

"Arms up."

Goosebumps popped up while smooth fingertips skimmed and skated upward from her waist. He lifted the shirt until her vision was clouded in green cotton, slowed down to glide over her hardened nipples, then guided the shirt up and over her arms.

Desire erupted between her legs. She'd never been on the receiving end of seduction before.

From behind her, he read every one of her secrets in her eyes. "You're making me want you more than I already do, Nitraa."

He pulled the bra straps down and planted a kiss on her shoulder, then unhooked her bra.

Nitraa gasped. Her nipples puckered in the cool room.

"Have you had a man strip you before?"

She shook her head. For the first time ever, she didn't trust her voice.

"More's the pity. They missed this reaction."

He fingered each button on her jeans before he snapped them open, then hooked his thumbs into the waistband and slowly pulled them down, taking her underwear with them. He bent down and lifted each foot to remove her clothing completely.

She was exposed, naked to his heated gaze. Hands stroked her curves from her shoulders to her hips to her ass and up to her breasts.

"Perfect. Curves where there should be curves," he murmured. He lifted her hair into a crude ponytail and let it fall. The ends caressed her ass. "Is that your real hair, or is it a wig?"

"It's my hair, Sir. No extensions, no wigs."

"We need to do something with it."

Nitraa backed away as she spun around, her heart in her throat. She gathered her hair into a ponytail and held it against her chest.

"You can't cut my hair. It's taken me fifteen years to grow it out."

The scrutiny of her body dropped off his face, and a quiet storm raged behind his eyes.

"I didn't give you permission to speak."

Her breath stuttered several times. Oh, no. Not five minutes into this and she was already messing up, but Tarasovich threatening her hair made her want to cry. Her hair was a part of her act, a part of her. It was unique. Special.

Tarasovich sat in a vacant chair near the window and pointed next to him. "Come here."

Her feet moved when he commanded. Nitraa stopped at the spot he told her to and folded her hands in front of her. Did he want to see contrition?

Tarasovich grabbed both wrists with one hand, guiding her to bend over his lap. With his free hand, he rubbed the smooth skin of her ass, dipping between her cheeks and further, toward her sex, but stopped short.

"Non-compliance means consequences. Your starting point will be twenty-five. Every outburst will add an extra five."

Nitraa swallowed hard. She hadn't been told to apologise, but she wanted to beg his forgiveness for speaking out of turn. Anticipation crackled and her body stiffened when his hand moved away.

"If you want me to stop, say 'red'. If you're hurting beyond simple discomfort, say 'yellow'. I'll stop."

It didn't make sense to hurt her, but did she trust him enough to stop?

Five soft spanks landed on her ass. Tiny electric shocks zinged to her nipples, but no pain or discomfort.

The next five were harder, and all of them fell on the same spot. Nitraa took several frantic breaths in through her nose and winced. A full tingle erupted between her legs. She shouldn't have enjoyed it this much, but Tarasovich played her like a well-tuned instrument, plucking her strings, searching for the right note.

To make her sing, he'd need to hit harder. The thought bounced around and shame scorched her face. She was sick in the head.

The next five strikes were loud and penetrated deep. Heat radiated off her skin and wrapped around her lower half, from her waist to her ass. It filled every crack and crevice. A switch flipped on, overloading her nerves, caressing every one of her fantasies, awakening them, pushing them to the surface.

Tarasovich's finger dipped between her cheeks again and stroked the bare lips of her sex. He parted the seam and circled her clit.

Nitraa shuddered. Incandescent ecstasy struck a series of clear, resonant notes in the back of her mind.

"That's a surprise. I wasn't expecting you to be this wet. I don't think I need to ask if you're enjoying it."

Five rapturous jolts exploded over her skin, and Nitraa bit down on her bottom lip to keep from crying out. The strikes created pure euphoria and an intense craving to be hurt more, for him to fill her, invade every part of her. The force and depth of her need climbed and she pushed her hips into his thighs, trying to find friction against her clit. His hand holding her wrists closed gripped tighter, squeezing the bones together.

Sublime pain.

"Five more."

He rubbed the skin again, building her anticipation, and then raked his fingernails over her ass. Another five deep blows penetrated deep, striking euphonic notes between need and want. Every one of her cells was on fire.

Nitraa writhed against his thighs, ecstasy flowing through her. The dam containing her feelings and inhibitions burst. The pain, the submission, the vulnerability couldn't be contained within her twisted, darkest fantasies. Tarasovich was sixty nights of fantasy-made-reality and she'd do anything to hold on to it, even give him her soul.

"Fuck yes," she hissed out.

"You deserve another five for that outburst, but you'd like that, wouldn't you? You're more masochistic than I expected, but it's certainly far from unpleasant. Your punishments need to be creative." He chuckled. "They're not punishments if you enjoy them."

Want clawed at her insides. She wanted those strikes, to feel them sinking deep into her body. She begged and pleaded with her body, flexing against him, doing everything short of speaking to entice him to continue. Shamelessness meant nothing.

Her hair spilled across the floor, golden threads laid at his feet. He wrapped it around his hand and stood on the trailing ends.

"Stand up."

Nitraa left her hands on the floor and lifted her hips so she was bent double.

Tarasovich pushed his thumb between her legs and onto the tight ring of muscle surrounding her anus. "Has anyone ever been in here," he asked.

“No, Kazimir Sir.”

“But I'm correct in assuming you've had someone in here,” he said, pushing his fingers into her wet channel.

She bit back a moan. “Yes, Sir.”

“How many?”

He pulled his fingers out and stroked her clit. It was difficult to think straight with her body screaming at him to spank her harder.

“Six, Kazimir Sir.”

Tarasovich's finger moved faster and faster, overwhelming her. The pressure behind it raw pleasure and she pushed her hips back. She wanted to kiss him and slap him in equal measure.

White pain flashed down her scalp when she lifted up slightly. Another irritating chuckle.

He had turned her into a quivering, masochistic mess.

“I want you to tell me when you're close to coming.”

His finger was unrelenting. Was this going to happen every night? Nitraa's stomach fluttered. Tarasovich was completely subsuming her, turning her into a hot mess, and he hadn't even been inside her yet. The mindgames. The questions. The commands. They shone a spotlight on kinks she didn’t know she had.

“Are you close, Nitraa?”

“Yes, Sir,” she whispered.

His fingers disappeared.

A moan slid through the air at the absence.

“The only sounds I want to hear out of your mouth is ‘yes, Sir’, ‘no, Sir’, ‘red’ or ‘yellow’. Anything other than that, even a moan, will bring more punishment. I want to know you will do what I tell you to do and when I tell you to do it.”

A tremor ran under her skin. Not say anything? No noises?

The finger returned, assaulting her clit, throwing razor-sharp awareness of every single nerve in her body, every centre of pleasure and pain. Her thighs and butt tightened; if he kept this up, she’d come, whether he told her to or not.

He delved deep with his finger, bringing her tantalisingly close, only to withdraw again and again. A scream built inside and keeping it in made her body tremble in desperation.

“You’re impressing and infuriating me at every turn, my songbird.”

Tarasovich lifted his foot off her hair and pulled her upright. Blood rushed to her head. Black and white spots popped in front of her eyes.

Was that it? Pleasure had raced through her veins, picking up speed at every curve, and then… nothing, leaving her with a void that needed filling. What was she turning into?

“Are you at red?”

She shook her head, determined to not go through that particular punishment ever again. Not using her voice, not finishing, not moving.

“Crawl to the bedroom and sit on your knees next to the mirror.”

A dark shudder trilled through her body into a crescendo of anticipation of what he was going to do. Make her watch what he did to her? Each command freed her to focus on the sensation it created in her. Humiliation. Pain. Guilt. Pleasure. Agony.

On the bed lay a set of chains in the shape of a Y with a clamp at each end complete with screw, several lengths of thick black rope, a spool of thinner black rope, a knife, a couple pairs of padded cuffs, and several carabiner hooks.

He was going to tie her up?

"I mentioned I had particular preferences. Masochism leads perfectly into bondage. You're new to this, so I'll be kind tonight, but I will push your pain tolerances as much as possible. We'll discuss limits tomorrow."

She sat high on her knees when he instructed her. He wrapped long lengths of thinner rope around her arms, feeding the rope underneath itself and pulling hard and fast against her skin.

The friction and abrasion caused her to jump and pull away.

"Yellow, Sir."

He stopped immediately. The stillness in the room rocked her as the burn dissipated.

"You may speak."

"I have bare arms for my concerts, Kazimir Sir. The rope burn will give me marks."

He made a few more passes with the rope, but slower.

"Good girl. That's what I want you to do if you have any problems with what we're doing."

Not with what he was doing, but with what they were doing. This was not how she envisioned spending the first night of her tour. At first, her fatigue faded with the adrenaline rushing through her, then lust and need kept her wired. Now, it was anticipation. But the way he said "good girl", low and dark with the promise of a thousand hard caresses, spun the anticipation hotter.

Tarasovich gathered her hair into two ponytails and wove the thinner rope through each. Eventually, he pulled her hair and a carabinier hook clicked into place. The padded cuffs went around her ankles. He shifted her weight back and clipped her into place with two hooks. Her neck craned backward at a forty-five degree angle. The tips of her fingers skimmed the ankle cuffs.

Pulling her chin down was impossible. Her heart sped up and her vision focussed on the man in front of her, who held the Y-chain up like a perverted shirt.

The clamps on the end of the chains pinched her nipples tighter and tighter. Arousal thrummed at the edges of her breasts, radiating outward. Nitraa squeezed her eyes tight against it, praying it wouldn't get worse at the same time she prayed for it to be tighter. His fingers reached between her legs, enough to make her tremble with need, and then… pressure. Pinching. Tight and jagged.

Nitraa tried to turn her head toward her reflection. Another woman stared back. Bound with her hair and arms tied and clipped on to her ankle cuffs. The chain on the nipple clamps brushed her sensitised skin. She looked like a BDSM porn star.

Tarasovich tugged the nipple clamps and a jolt of electricity shot through to her clitoris. She clenched her jaw shut, swallowing her gasp and moan.

"Good girl," Tarasovich murmured. "Total silence becomes you. Eyes on me."

Dark eyes locked on hers and never left, daring her to make a single sound. Manicured, elegant fingers tugged the chain between slipping the buttons of his short loose.

Nitraa's gaze brushed up the flat plains of his hips and stomach to his chest. Two tattooed stars sat on his shoulders, each topped with a crown, and an intricate and detailed pair of tattooed eyes stared out from over his heart. Didn't Russian tattoos have meanings?

The nerves in her breasts and clit were on fire. The exquisite pain tore holes in her willpower. She clamped her jaw shut, shaking with the effort to hold her tears and sighs back.

He slid the trouser button through its hole. Another tug.

She gasped and tightened her body.

His zipper purred down. Another tug.

"Open that pretty mouth, my songbird."

She'd do whatever he wanted if he let her finish. This constant playing at the edge of her control

had to stop or she'd start begging and damn the consequences.

His hard cock slid into her mouth. Lust built on top of fatigue built on top of anticipation on top of need and want and desire with shamelessness at the top. Her feelings were a house of cards, and it wouldn't take much to make it fall.

Her tongue and mouth worshipped him. One hand sat on top of her head, steadying it, while his hips pumped back and forth. The other held the chain to her clit, tugging, pulling. It took every ounce of concentration not to moan, to suppress her climax.

Tears leaked out the corner of her eyes. Nitraa opened her mouth wide, tongue flat, and he slipped for several seconds into her throat. It was easy to abandon herself to him, his commands, and his dominance. Tarasovich fisted her hair and an excruciating pleasure echoed from her scalp to her nipples, a euphonic, clear note.

"Nitraa," he growled.

She stiffened. He said her name. An unguarded moment, as sinful as it was vulnerable and exposed. She craved him, and every brutal pull on the chains and every thrust of his cock into her mouth was turning her into an addict.

Tension from a series of hard tugs scrambled up from her clit to her breasts and back down again. She closed her eyes and breathed through her nose. His laughter filled her ears.

"Do you want to finish, my songbird?"

She nodded.

Tarasovich pulled out of her mouth and held his cock against his pelvis.

"Tell me how much you want to come for me."

"I need to finish, Sir. Please. Pozhaluista," she managed in Russian, choking on her tears.

His hard, cold stare filled her vision. "Beg for it, Nitraa. Say *pozhaluista, Kazimir gospodin*."

Kazimir *Master*?

"*Pozhaluista, Kazimir gospodin.*"

"Again."

"*Pozhaluista, Kazimir gospodin.*"

He reached between her legs and pulled on the chain with one hand and yanked her hair with the other.

"Fucking beg, Nitraa!"

He had unlocked sensations she had no words for. Pain led to anticipation, to pleasure, to both at the same time, two paths converging through her soul. Pain fascinated her, but what he did to her transcended it all. She belonged here in this haze between pain and pleasure.

Nitraa shook and sobbed, then screamed. "*Pozhaluista, Kazimir gospodin!*"

"Good girl."

The carabiniers in her hair were the first to be unclipped, then the ones on her arms. Her body came loose and she fell forward onto her hands. Hot, fat tears fell out of her eyes and hit the carpet, beading on top before sinking into the fibres.

Tarasovich hauled her onto the bed and knelt over her. The tip of his cock nudged at her entrance as he unscrewed the clamps on her nipples and her clit. Sheer, blissful pain burst between her legs when it came off.

He speared her in one swift motion. Instead of relief, it fanned the flames. His movements were brutal. He ground his pelvis against her clit while his head dipped to pull one of her tortured nipples into his mouth.

Her hands found his ass and urged him forward. She found the most delicious friction when she

tightened her body against his. Flame. Fire. Heat. All of it twisted around her body and spun down onto the nub between her legs. She was so close.

"Nitraa."

The deep rasp of her name threw gasoline on her burning need. She tightened her grip on his backside and lifted her hips to meet his. The world went bright white, her mind fragmented, and her orgasm exploded in a blind surge of euphoria. Her core squeezed his arousal at the same time tears of relief and utter devastation slipped out of her eyes.

His name came out as tender and needy as the last note of her aria for him.

"Good girl," Tarasovich whispered into her ear. "Such a beautiful songbird."

He touched his lips to hers, then pushed his tongue into her mouth, just as hard and rough as his cock. The fingers of one hand tangled in his short hair, and the other grabbed at his back. Muscles moved and bunched underneath her fingertips. A series of scars left glossy, smooth, raised skin she wanted to explore.

His cock swelled inside her, plunged into her harder and faster. He grunted once, twice. A litany of Russian spilled out of his mouth at the same time his release surged into her. The space between her legs flooded in warmth.

A long, lingering, sensual kiss made her body curl in delight.

Nitraa wasn't going to survive him. Her body zinged and crackled with exhaustion overlaid with… Jesus, there wasn't even a word. Arousal wasn't strong enough. Gratification made her feel like a slut. Whatever the word was for what she was feeling, that kind of bliss came along once in a lifetime.

Tarasovich was on his side, hand propping up his head. He wore a curious mixture of awe and pride… and concern on his face.

"Nitraa?"

She acknowledged him with a drunken-like raise of her eyebrows.

"Did you need something to eat or drink?"

"So tired, Sir."

Tarasovich left the bed and went into the bathroom. She fought to keep her eyes open for the few brief moments he was gone. Nebulous thoughts swirled in the thick blackness of her mind. How amazing he made her feel. How not-normal it was to want that kind of pain. How good it felt to let go and have one of her fantasies come to life.

When he returned, he had a wet washcloth. He wiped his release from her thighs. The motions were gentle, soft, caring, the total opposite of earlier.

"I broke a hard rule with you tonight, Nitraa. It won't happen again."

Getting punished again after they had finished wasn't appealing, so she said nothing. Her body was on a blissful high she didn't want to leave.

He placed the folded wet washcloth on the nightstand. "You may speak."

A hard blush rose up her cheeks. "I—I didn't mind, Kazimir Sir, and—"

She paused. Did he want to hear more than that, or did he want yes or no answers? Those would be easier to give. Anything else required thinking, and thinking was hard.

"Don't be afraid of giving me longer answers. Your voice is as addictive as your body."

A sleepy smile pushed upward.

"I enjoyed what we did. It felt nice to..." her brain struggled to find the words, "... lose myself for a little while, to embrace a fantasy, and explore this part of me, Sir."

His dark eyes searched her face. Untruth, perhaps? She was too tired to tell him anything other

than the truth. Nitraa never considered herself a submissive, even though she liked dominant men. Maybe she was. If she was, was Tarasovich the man to dominate her?

"And, I think I want—"

She paused. What did she want? Acceptance from him? Acceptance of her own kinks? Of herself? She was able to lose herself in him, his touches, his cologne, his experience, and his dark, masculine dominance.

Tarasovich's fingers skimmed up her thighs to her stomach, circled her tight, pink nipples, and gently tugged them. Her muscles bunched and jumped from those feather-light strokes. He leaned over, his lips centimetres above hers.

"What do you want, my songbird," he whispered.

Nitraa swallowed hard. "More."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Molly Lachaussee is a proud Cajun with a Kiwi twist. When she's not working full-time, spoiling her husband, dreaming about winning the lottery, or chasing around after animals on her lifestyle block in New Zealand, she's in front of the computer, making all of her fantasies come to life (to her husband's horror). You can follow her on Instagram or Facebook. You can also sign up for her newsletter.

DOUBLE DARE



BY MAGGIE ALABASTER AND JO BRADLEY

A new arrival at Brutham Academy creates a stir. And a competition.

CHAPTER 1



Hunter

"LOOK, FRESH MEAT." Parker rubbed his hands together and grinned.

I followed his line of sight and groaned. Sure, she was cute, but cute wasn't everything. It was a lot, sure, but not *everything*.

"Dude, I don't know who would kill us more if we went there, our family or hers. Do you know who she is?"

"Of course I do," Parker said lightly.

I knew that tone. That came right before Parker did something really fucking stupid. One of these days, my twin was gonna get us killed. If that was going to happen, I hoped it came before my next exam. It would suck if all that studying was for nothing.

"Then you know we should stay away from her. And her sister.

Parker rolled his eyes. "Hunter Brantley, since when were you such a wuss? It's not like one of us is going to marry her. Just fuck her. Look at that mouth."

I scrubbed a hand over my face. Just because he had a point didn't mean this wasn't a bad idea.

Everyone at Brutham Academy had ties to infamous families. Including ours. Okay, especially ours. The Brantley family, currently led by our older brother Reuben, was involved in countless illegal activities, from running guns to prostitution to extortion. We also had a long running history of hostility with the Bell family. We were considered notorious, but they were the worst of the worst. If it was violent and illegal, the Bell family were involved in it.

And Parker was talking about fucking Lila Bell. Messing with her would be a really quick way to end up in a shallow grave. Or in the foundation of a new building. Or at the bottom of Sydney Harbour. Or…

On the other hand, getting in with her could change things for both of our families. I wouldn't object if we stopped killing each other.

Parker did have a point about her mouth as well.

"What are you proposing?" I wondered. I knew him. He wouldn’t walk up and introduce us to her. There always had to be a game involved. A bet or a dare, or a double dare.

"A little bet," he said. "A hundred bucks to whoever nails her first."

"Is that all?" I asked. "No humiliation for the loser?"

The last time we made a bet, the loser had to run around the academy building in their underwear.

I wouldn't have minded, but it was winter. Thank fuck I hadn't agreed to run around naked. The cold would have shrunk my cock into oblivion. That would have ensured a life of celibacy for the foreseeable future. Or at least humiliation.

Parker looked thoughtful. I could almost see the wicked little cogs and wheels turning in his nefarious brain.

"Loser has to be Mr D's servant for a week."

The grimace I gave him was bigger than the one at his idea of trying to seduce Lila Bell.

"Be a servant to a DiMarco? Hard pass." Once, the DiMarco family were heavyweights amongst families like ours. These days, they were scattered and disgraced, lurking on the fringes, trying to gain favour with either our family or the Bells. It was no secret that if Dane DiMarco could find an in, he would take it. He was as ruthless as the rest of us. It was very likely he would kill us if our brother told him to, just to drag his family's name out of the dirt.

Of course, he pretended he was just a teacher here, but no one was fooled. Especially Parker and I, whom he treated with guarded respect.

"I'd rather have him as my servant," I said. He'd probably do it too, if it would help him in some way. I'd thought about it, just for shits and giggles, but he was still a teacher here and could fail me if he wanted to. I would get no sympathy from any of my brothers if that happened, including Reuben. Especially Reuben.

If I wanted a decent job with the family, I had to get my degree first. In network engineering, of all things. More and more, the family business was run online.

Of course someone needed to set that up and maintain it in a way the authorities couldn't trace. For the same reason, Parker was studying cybersecurity. No doubt at some point we would tap into banks and private accounts to funnel funds into our own.

That suited me more than pulling a gun on people. Not that I minded doing that either. It was hard not to get off on the look of fear in people's eyes. Feeling powerful was the most potent drug of all, as far as I was concerned. Better than the kind that comes in a pill or a powder.

Parker chuckled. "Fine. Loser has to work in the kitchen for a week."

"You're on," I said. That would be easy enough. I would just break plates or burn something until they kicked me out. I would last an hour, tops. If I lost, which I wasn't going to.

"One stipulation, the winner has to actually put their cock into her pussy, with her consent. Not just a first kiss or a blow job, and no rape."

I raised an eyebrow at him.

"Of course. It's not winning if you have to force the girl," he said lightly. He smiled like he wouldn't even consider doing such a thing.

I knew how close he walked to that line in the past. It usually involved a little too much alcohol and a lot of persuasion. I make no claim to be a saint either.

"Rock, paper, scissors to see who talks to her first." He held out a hand.

I held mine out and shook it up and down in the air. On the silent count of three, I held out my hand, palm outstretched.

His was curled into a fist.

I grinned. "Paper beats rock."

He scowled, but bowed and stretched his arm out toward her. "Go and warm her up for me then. Let her know I'm coming. In every sense of the word."

"Dream on," I said. We'd shared enough women in the past that I'd seen him come plenty of times, but I still didn't need to hear about it.

"I don't need to dream, I just need to be patient." A smug smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. I left my laughter to echo in his ears as I walked away.

CHAPTER 2



Lila

In the corner of my eye, I watched him approach. I pretended to ignore him when he slipped into the chair next to me and placed his elbows on the desk. He rested his head on his hands and watched me. And waited.

After about five minutes, I closed my laptop and turned to him. He was so ridiculously good-looking I had to suppress my breath when it wanted to hitch. He had short dark hair and the kind of piercing blue eyes that looked right into your soul. Or instantly made your panties wet.

Judging by the expression on his face, he knew all of this and how to use it to his advantage.

"Can I help you?" I asked.

His eyes didn't leave my face but my heart did a little skip when he smiled. A dimple appeared in his right cheek.

"I wanted to welcome you to Brutal Academy," he said in a slow, sexy drawl.

I raised my perfectly shaped eyebrows at him. "Unless I'm mistaken about where I'm going to university…"

He chuckled. "That's what we call the place. You know, because of our families."

"Right." He didn't need to elaborate. I knew what we were and what we were expected to become. I just never heard it called that before. How brutal was it? My twin, Chloe, and I were competitive enough. If the next three years here were worse than that, we'd be lucky to survive.

"Hunter." He stuck out his hand.

I eyed it. "Does that make me prey?"

"Absolutely," he agreed. "But my name is Hunter."

I didn't move.

"Brantley," he added.

"Ahhh." I shook his hand lightly. "I thought I sensed something wicked in the air."

He grinned. "Guilty. Of a lot of things. Including the inability to keep my hands, and my tongue, to myself. I'd like to invite you to find out."

Okay, I wasn't totally against that, in spite of his last name. Unlike him, I didn't have an older brother to keep me in check. Chloe was older by about two minutes and one of us would run the family someday. In the meantime, I needed allies to make sure that job fell to me. I hadn't thought about enlisting a Brantley, but I wouldn't rule it out either.

Besides, he was hot.

"I'm sure you would," I said. "I'm Lila Bell. But I have a feeling you knew that already."

He was completely unapologetic. "This is my second year here. It's my job to scope out the new students. Especially the adorable ones."

I interpreted that to mean he zeroed in on whomever he wanted to sleep with as soon as he could. Typical Brantley. They were as arrogant as they came. Almost as bad as the Bell family.

"By adorable, do you mean a risk?" I asked. "There must be dozens of women in the intake whose families work for yours, or for the DiMarcos." They might be on the outs, but they still had some influence.

He made a face. Even like that he was hot.

"I have high standards," he said. His expression slowly became a panty melting smile. "And I like a risk. The higher the risk, the higher the reward. It keeps life interesting. Wouldn't you say?"

"Actually, I would." I thought back to what I knew about the Brantley family. Reuben was the oldest, the son of the late Frederico and his first wife. Caleb was their second son. Ezequiel, or Zeke, was a rock star or something like that. He was the son of Frederico's second wife. There were a couple of other brothers and then twins, Hunter and… What was his name? Parker.

There was at least twenty years' difference in age between Reuben and the Brantley twins. From what I could tell, Reuben tried to keep them all on a tight leash.

As I understood it, he wasn't as successful as he might like.

My father was hoping that would be their downfall and he could take advantage of it. It might be worth keeping a couple of them on side for that eventuality. They might need us if it came to that. And they would pay dearly for any help they got.

"How about it then?" He rested his head on one hand and placed his other hand on my thigh. He certainly liked living dangerously.

"Are you always so forward?" I asked.

"When there's something I want, I go for it," he said. "I found there's no point in sitting around waiting for good things to come to you. You just have to reach out and take it."

His hand snuck up my skirt. "Maybe we should go somewhere more private."

Maybe we should. I would bet anything he knew how to make a woman feel good. I wasn't just here at university to study and compete with my sister. I was here to have fun.

"What would your twin think?" I asked. "Will he be jealous?"

His hand grazed across the front of my panties. If I wasn't wet before, and I certainly was now.

"Absolutely," he agreed. "He'll be very jealous. But I'm not looking for a commitment. If you want to fuck me and then fuck him, then I'm all for it." He leaned in closer. "If you want to fuck both of us, we're in."

The meat in a Brantley twins sandwich. That sounded pretty good to me, especially if Parker was as hot as Hunter.

"Are you identical?" I asked.

"Yeah, but I'm hotter." He grinned. "And I'm the evil twin, before you ask." His grin widened.

I snorted. "Funny, me too." It might be more accurate to say Chloe and I were both the evil twin, but close enough.

"Maybe we could have a twin foursome?" he suggested.

"Fuck no," I snapped. "I don't share with my sister."

His eyes widened slightly, but he nodded. "Okay, that's off the table. How about you and I on top of the table?"

I gestured around the academy library. "It's a little public, don't you think?"

I wasn't even surprised when he didn't flinch.

"I don't mind an audience." He gave me a speculative look. "You?"

"I like things a little more private," I said. "And a little less right in the middle of an essay." When I took over the family business, I would be running a massive empire, but that didn't mean my parents didn't expect me to get a degree. In business, of course. It was lame.

I could learn more following my father around and doing whatever tasks he assigned me. This whole university bullshit was at his insistence. I thought about taking out a hit on him, and making a shortcut for myself, but the rest of the family might object to that.

Unfortunately, I needed their support in the long run.

"How about we meet somewhere after dinner?" he suggested. "My room? Your room? The swimming pool change rooms?"

"That's strangely specific," I remarked.

He chuckled. "People are often naked in there, so it makes sense when you think about it. Besides, the pool is a good place for skinny-dipping."

"Wouldn't you get in trouble for doing that?" I asked.

"Not when your last name is Brantley or Bell," he said. "We get away with pretty much everything. Except handing in work late and failing exams. They don't cut us any slack there. Assholes." He shrugged.

"If we could buy a degree we would have just done that," I said. I didn't mind working hard to get what I wanted. Even if I thought it was bullshit. If I got better grades than Chloe, that could count in my favour when my father chose which one of us would be his heir.

If he had his way, he would have had a son to succeed him, but he didn't. So he was stuck choosing between us. I was determined he would choose me.

"How about I meet you in the dining hall after dinner and then we can go from there?" I said.

He grinned. "It's a date."

CHAPTER 3



Parker

"IF YOU EAT ANY FASTER, you're going to choke," I told Hunter. "If you die, I win the bet by default."

He slowed down but rolled his eyes. "I can't work in the kitchen if I'm dead."

"No, but I get to fuck Lila Bell and I get a hundred dollars," I said. "Sounds like a win-win situation to me."

"Except I would be dead," Hunter said.

I raised my eyebrows at him.

He slapped me hard on the chest with the back of his hand. "You're such a fucker. The next time we have swim team training, remind me to hold you under for about… Five minutes. That should do it."

"You only need three or four minutes to drown someone," I remarked. "Remember that drug dealer last year Reuben wanted me to get rid of?"

"Right." Hunter nodded slowly. "I was wondering how you did it. Sounds like fun."

I shrugged. "I guess so. It's more fun when they struggle."

Hunter smiled slowly. "Is that your philosophy when it comes to women too?"

I chuckled and didn't respond to that. Instead I said, "It's my turn to talk to Lila." As far as I was concerned, he struck out with her with their first conversation, and spite of the fact he got his hand up her skirt. That and having her agreed to meet up with him was as far as they got.

Now it was time for the expert to go to work.

"Yeah, yeah," he said. "I'll be here watching, ready to pick up the pieces when you embarrass yourself."

"Awww. It's nice to know I am supported by my one and only twin," I said.

He snorted. "I'll be there to pick up her pieces, dude. This time I'll get more than my hand up her skirt. For the record, she was wet as fuck for me."

"Says you," I sneered.

"Yeah, says me," he retorted. "I could feel her. She wanted me bad."

"And yet, she remains unfucked by either of us." Which I would remedy within the next hour or two. Without the need for alcohol or struggling.

"For now." Hunter nodded with certainty. "There she is. Go and get it over with so I can get on with my evening."

"And by that you mean, find someone else to fuck," I said. "Maybe you should try her sister. They are identical. Except Lila has shorter hair."

"Rumour has it, Chloe Bell has been seen in the company of a certain Mr D," Hunter said.

My eyebrows shot up. "And by in the company of, you mean—"

"I mean, apparently Ms Bell is fucking one of the teachers." Hunter shrugged.

"Interesting," I said slowly. "Whatever. As long as everyone is consenting."

I could see what Mr D would have to gain from that arrangement but the other way around… Maybe she was trying to put herself out of the running to be head of the Bell family. Or it factored in some kind of plan.

"Apparently she's fucking a couple of other guys too," Hunter said.

I looked at him in admiration as I rose from my seat. "Bro, your gossip game is on point today."

"When is it not?" He looked smug.

I gave him a high five and strode off toward Lila.

I greeted her with a smile. "Hey."

She looked at me with a response on her lips which she stopped short of saying. "You're not Hunter."

"Nope," I agreed. "I'm the good-looking one."

"Funny," she said slowly. "That's what he said too."

Of course Hunter would.

I leaned in as though I was about to share a secret and said, "That's why Hunter is in therapy. He has delusions."

She giggled.

Fuck, that was cute. And she smelled amazing. Just standing here beside her was enough to make my cock hard.

I put a hand over my heart. "I thought I would come over here and save you from him. You look like you need comforting and lots of it. Fortunately, I know just the right way to comfort a woman."

"I'm sure you do," she told me. "Does Hunter know you're talking to me?"

She was onto us. To be fair, she was probably onto us the moment Hunter sat down to talk to her.

"I don't answer to him. Do you?" I gave her a challenging look.

She snorted. "Of course not. If you're anything like my sister and I, you would be shoving each other out of the way to talk to me. Unless you have some agreement not to do that."

The look she gave me made me want to confess everything. She was clearly not stupid. I liked that in a woman.

"We might have an agreement," I said slowly. After a moment, I sighed. "Okay, we might have a bet."

She crossed her arms over her chest, pushing her breasts up. "Might?"

"We absolutely have a bet," I admitted. When she raised her eyebrows at me I added, "We bet on which of us could fuck you first."

"I figured it was either that or you bet who would survive my father coming after you," she said dryly.

"That would be me," I said quickly. "I'm much more resilient and resourceful." I glanced around just in case her father was nearby. It was always good to be careful.

"That's nice to know," she said slowly. "You understand the risks of being associated with any member of the Bell family?"

My heart thudded in my chest. If I didn't know better, I would think she was suggesting something

more than fucking. I can't lie, she was a beautiful woman as well as smart getting to know her could be… Interesting.

"I do," I said slowly. "Maybe our families don't need to be at war any more."

"Maybe they don't," she agreed. "The three of us could start to build a bridge between us."

"Three of us?" I echoed.

She nodded. "Me, you and your brother. We could be quite the team. When I'm head of the Bell family, you would both be an asset."

"We could be an asset in other ways," I said quickly. "For example, what are you doing right now?"

She smiled slowly. "How about both of you?"

I didn't even hesitate. "I'll get Hunter."

CHAPTER 4



Lila

OKAY, I admit when I made the suggestion to the guys, I might not have thought it through.

I mean, I was no blushing virgin, but I'd never been with two guys at the same time before. The idea was exciting and daunting. They were both undeniably hot and I had the feeling this was far from the first time they shared a woman.

As a Bell, I was used to being in control. I would have to relinquish a little bit of that to them.

I still led them to my room, which I had to myself, queen sized bed and all.

They hardly said a word the whole way. They each slipped a hand into one of mine and walked with me.

It felt strangely…normal. Shouldn't it feel weird or at least uncomfortable? Perhaps it should, but it didn't. I wasn't going to fight it.

The moment I closed and locked the door behind us all, their hands left mine and started to touch me everywhere else.

Hunter turned me so I faced him and pressed his mouth to mine in a heated kiss.

Parker stood behind me and slipped his hands under my blouse and up to my breasts.

It didn't take long for me to wonder why I hadn't been with two guys at the same time before. All of their attention was on me and they didn't spare lavishing it.

While Hunter kissed me with lips and teeth and tongue, Parker unbuttoned my blouse and slipped it off my shoulders. My bra followed a moment later.

The sudden rush of cooler air was refreshing on my hot skin.

Hunter broke off long enough to admire my breasts and my firm, hard nipples. "Hells bells," he said softly. "You're even hotter under your clothes."

"Fuck yeah I am," I replied. To punctuate my words, I undid my skirt and let it drop to my feet. I stood dressed in only a black G string.

Parker promptly put his hands on my bare ass and massaged my skin.

"Fuck, you're so firm," he marvelled. His fingers slid down between my crack and lightly over my rear hole.

Without answering, I grabbed the front of Hunter's shirt and pulled it up over his head, then started on his pants.

In about thirty seconds flat, both guys and I were completely naked.

Parker grabbed my hand and gently pulled me over to the bed.

I lay back. The guys knelt on either side of me. Both already had rock hard cocks.

Big ones. Fuck, I wanted to feel them both inside me. The sooner the better.

Parker leaned in to lavish attention on my breasts with his mouth and tongue.

Hunter walked on his knees to position himself between my legs and did the same with my pussy. He put an arm under each thigh, opening me up to him. He licked and sucked my clit with expert attention and skill.

Yeah, this was definitely not new to either of them. It was pretty fucking amazing though.

Between both of them, I was panting and ready to come within a matter of minutes.

Parker looked up at me from where he was sucking one of my nipples. "I want to see you come," he said. "Come on, baby."

I fixed my eyes on him and let a burst of desire wash over me. I could barely see him through the stars in my eyes, but I kept looking as wave after wave gripped me and held me for the longest time.

My soul left my body for approximately a lifetime before wading back in when I was semi-floppy. I had more to give, but it took me a while to come back into myself.

When I finally did, blinking hard to clear my head, Parker smiled. "Good girl."

Shit, why was that so hot?

I smiled back.

"Do you have any lube?" Hunter, his mouth shining, lifted his head.

"In the drawer beside the bed." I waved vaguely in the right direction.

He nodded and scooted over to get it out.

In a dance I suspected they had rehearsed many times, Parker lay down beside me and rolled me over so I lay on top of him. He gripped my hips gently and manoeuvred my pussy so I was right above his cock.

"Impale yourself, baby," he said softly. "I want to feel you all around me."

I lowered myself down onto him and moaned at the feel of him filling me.

"Fuck yeah," Parker whispered. "Good girl."

"Lean forward," Hunter said.

I glanced at him over my shoulder, but did as he asked. I heard the click of him opening the lube and felt the cold touch of his slippery fingers.

He tossed the tube aside and slid a finger inside my rear hole.

I tensed.

"Relax," he said softly.

I took a deep breath and forced myself to relax.

"Good girl." He slid another finger inside. Then another when I relaxed again. He teased my hole with his fingers for a while, then slid them back out.

His hands gripped my hips and I knew what I felt pressing against my hole next was his cock.

Slowly, stopping every couple of seconds to give me a chance to adjust, he slid his cock inside my ass.

"Fuck yeah," he whispered.

Slowly and carefully, he started to move, thrusting in and out of me while guiding me up and down on Parker's cock. After a minute or two, they started to thrust in unison.

I had never felt anything so amazing in my entire life. Especially when I realised they must have felt each other inside me. It gave a whole new meaning to twin closeness. And a whole new meaning to hotness. I could one hundred percent get used to this.

Gradually, they thrust harder and deeper, pushing me closer and closer to another orgasm.

Parker locked his eyes on me. "I'm going to come inside you, baby."

"Me too," Hunter grunted.

"Yes," I said breathlessly. "I want you to."

"Good," Parker said. "We're going to fill you with so much cum, you'll overflow."

Holy fuck.

His words threw me right over the edge of the precipice and into freefall. The only thing I knew was mind shattering pleasure and the thrusting of both guys into my body.

I barely even started to come down when Parker grunted and thrust frantically. He stilled and then Hunter did as they came almost simultaneously.

That might have been the hottest thing of all.

We all slumped, sweating and panting, with both of them still inside me.

"I think I won," Parker said.

"Only on a technicality," Hunter said.

I snorted at them both. "I think we all won."

"Yeah, that," Parker said. "Lila, you're fucking amazing."

"Fuck yeah I am," I agreed. "You guys are amazing too."

I had a feeling this was the start of something incredible. I didn't know how we were going to tell our families, but I wasn't going to let either of these guys get away now I had them. They were mine.

Now and forever.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maggie Alabaster is the poly pen name for an Australian romance author. Jo Bradley is her contemporary romance pen name. Between looking after a spouse, two adult kids and a dog, her pen names have worked together to bring you this, the start of a series of dark, steamy mafia romance.

Brutal Academy is coming. For more of the Brantley and DiMarco family, you can find them in Saving Abbie, a rock star mafia reverse harem romance.

https://books2read.com/u/mZQ6vR

CRUEL INTENTIONS



BY A.N. STAUBER

Ella wants more in life than the arranged marriage her mafioso father has arranged for her. She'll do whatever it takes to break the engagement, including fake marrying a Russian criminal.

Ivan's against his father's intention on marrying a young girl. He's got plans to stop the wedding, but when he sees the potential in Ella, he throws them out the window.

The couple embarks on a dangerous road of allying themselves for eight years without any pushback. But now, Ella's graduating college and she's expected to be the dutiful wife, fake marriage or not.

CHAPTER ONE - ELLA 18/IVAN 28



My heart pounded as I ran barefoot across the busy street of Jamestown, New York, forcing myself not to glance behind my shoulder. I'd come too far to look back. I wasn't an athlete by any means, but the adrenaline rushing through my body kept my legs pumping while men with guns chased me. Big burly men that were speaking Russian. Tattoos covered their bodies from head to toe. The scariest one had almost gotten me before he underestimated me and I had given him a swift kick to his balls.

But all that did was buy me time. He still caught up to me.

Fuck my father, and fuck Ivan Novikoff. They would have to kill me to get me to walk down the aisle with that old creep.

A large hand clutched against my waist. "Got you, little bird." A thick Russian accent called from behind me. The man grabbed my hair and pushed me against a car on the street.

I was trapped. Stuck between the wall of the vehicle and a hard chest. His breath smelled of liquor, and his nostrils flared as he wheezed.

I didn't hide my smirk. I would go down with a fight. Just because I'd been caught, didn't mean this was the end. It would never be over. I'd always try to find a way out.

The bald man squeezed me tighter to him.

"Let go!" I screamed. I tried to kick and punch, but the effort was useless. No one walking by gave a damn. Even with the hustle and bustle of the main streets–now as I had slipped into an off street with only a small coffee shop and some other random hotels–not a soul was around to witness my disappearance. Correction. My *kidnapping*.

"Bring the car around," the bald man spat at a younger man. He was still holding my head with a fistful of my hair in his hand. "Boss will not be happy if I harm you, little bird. Don't make me use force."

"Your boss can go fuck himself."

A black SUV came to a screeching halt in the street. The bald man moved his hands to my wrists, pinning them behind my back. I wanted to fight more, but I'd been running for three days and hadn't eaten in thirty-six hours. Exhaustion overcame me, even worse now that the adrenaline was wearing off.

Baldy laughed, shoving me inside of a black SUV. "He'd rather fuck you."

I stumbled forward and unable to catch myself, fell forward on my face. I grunted. Baldy let go of my wrists, and I pushed up, trying to get my bearings. Another man was inside of the vehicle already.

Icy blue eyes glared at me, and I shivered. I couldn't deny that he was handsome. I swallowed, desperately trying to force away the lump in my throat. My insides warmed, but I pushed down the

bubbling feeling. This was my enemy. Despite the fucked up marriage contract my father signed on my behalf. Ivan Novikoff and the Russians who worked for him were my enemies.

"Ella Berlusconi," the businessman said in a Russian accent. He placed his phone in his lap and smiled. His accent wasn't as thick as Baldy's, which made me think he'd lived in America longer. "You've made our fathers very upset."

I let out a deep breath, shaking my head. So this was the son of my future husband. The old geezer couldn't even be bothered to come from Miami to New York himself. He sent his protégé.

"My father can jump in front of a bus," I snapped. "And yours? Well, I'll happily push him."

Ivan chuckled, nodding his head in agreement. "Not if I push him first." He winked.

He's being…nice? Was he trying to get on my good side? It certainly seemed that way. His phone rang and he answered it swiftly. "Natalie… Yes, the black one is fine… I'll be back tomorrow and we will have dinner… Okay, dear… Goodbye."

I instantly imagined who Natalie was. I dreamed up a tall blonde with legs for days. Thin build and free to make her own decisions. Jealousy overcame me. Not because she was Ivan's flavor of the week. But because she could make her own calling in life. Unlike me, the daughter of a mafia don. A pawn because I was born with the wrong parts between my legs.

Ivan placed the phone back in his lap and let out a tsk sound. He wanted me to know how irritated he was to be dealing with me. I was a minor inconvenience in his day, and honestly, I hoped he dealt with inconveniences with a bullet to the head. I'd be so lucky as to not have to marry his diaper-ridden father.

"Ella, you've caused me lots of trouble. My father doesn't like his investments taking flight, little bird. You've given me no choice. You'll be staying with me until we leave for Miami tomorrow."

My top lip turned up in a snarl. "The only way I'm going to Miami is in a body bag."

"Don't worry," Ivan said. "I have different plans for you. No marriage to my father. Promise."

My face twisted in confusion and I tried to work out what that meant. "What?" The only way I could get out of marrying his father was if… My jaw dropped. "I'm to marry you? Wasn't that your girlfriend on the phone?"

He scoffed, adjusting his tie as he looked out the window. "I don't want to marry you. You're just a child, Ella."

"Then… what?"

The car came to a stop. I glanced out the window to see we were parked in front of a hotel. Ivan pulled his attention from the window and turned to me. "We will discuss it over dinner. Come. We have just enough time for you to change into something presentable."

Is this man serious? Dinner? With him? I'd rather drink bleach than be near this insufferable criminal. I didn't have time to object before Baldy was grabbing my arm and yanking me out of the car.

CHAPTER TWO - IVAN



This poor girl. Only eighteen, yet destined to be a slave to my father. She was just a child in my eyes. I never understood the fascination of older men in our line of work forcing young women to stand by their sides. My father included. I liked my women experienced and feisty. I enjoyed a woman who knew what she wanted, who wasn't afraid to demand what she needed and took what she wanted. An eighteen year old girl simply couldn't have life experience to be that for me.

Taking the virginity of a teenager was vile, and I was going to put a stop to this. My plan was already in motion, now I needed to fill the little bird in.

Ella's father, Antonio Berlusconi, was an Italian mafia lord in New York. He and my father had been doing business for years. My father gave him high-end women, and Antonio gave my father drugs. The entire thing was sickening, and once I was fully in charge of our business transactions, it would all change. I could stomach blood and murder, but I wouldn't tolerate women being held against their will, forced into a life they didn't want.

When I heard of the arrangement Antonio and Ivan Senior had, that my father had bought his virgin daughter as a bride, I lost my shit. Then, my father had ordered me to collect her in New York, and when I arrived, Ella took off before we even reached Antonio's estate.

It was the last straw. I wasn't forcing this child into anything.

Now, as I sat across from her in the hotel restaurant, I knew it was time to fill her in on my plan. Before she ran from me again. She was wearing a navy blue sequin dress, and shifted uncomfortably, her dark eyes darting around the room, attempting to find an exit strategy. No dice, little bird. My men covered every exit.

The nickname had rolled off my tongue in a fit of anger when I found her and she'd run from me. Now it stuck, and I knew I was doomed. No woman had ever forced an endearing nickname from my tongue. Shaking that thought, I turned to the caged bird.

"Drink," I ordered, nodding at her wineglass.

"How do I know you didn't poison it to get me on a plane?"

She was right. She didn't know. Shifting so I was standing a bit, I leaned over and grabbed her glass. I took a swig, then returned it to her side. "No poison, little bird."

Reluctantly, she sipped the red liquid, then relaxed her shoulders and took a bite of her steak. She'd been running from me for three days with no money for food. It was clear she was starving when she let out an audible moan of pleasure.

"I have a proposal for you," I said.

"Does it involve leaving me here and pretending you had to kill me?"

I laughed for a moment, shaking my head. “Our fathers will get their way. You’ll be sold to the highest bidder if mine doesn’t want you anymore. So here is my proposal. I’ll tell him I found you sleeping with a man. This makes you tainted. No longer a virgin. He’s signed a contract for you, so I will suggest I marry you, allying our families.”

“I don’t want to marry you, either. I want to go to college. I want to date and experiment. I want friends and a life. Not to be owned by a Russian mobster.

“And why does everyone keep referring to me as a virgin? It’s disgusting, and also not true. Also, you’ve gotta be like forty. Which means your father is probably sixty-five. And he wants to fuck a teenager? It’s disgusting.”

“I’m twenty-eight. My father is sixty-eight. But I see where you are going with this. As for not being a virgin, good. Makes this easier to sell. Tell me about your dreams. Where will you go to college? What will you study?” If I was going to let this girl free, I wanted to know if she would aspire to be better than the life of crime we were both raised in.

“I want to be a doctor. An OBGYN.”

Impressive. I sipped my wine, then cut into my steak. “That’s the one for babies?”

“Mothers delivering babies. My mom died giving birth to my little brother. They both died.”

“And you’re smart enough for it?”

“Yes. I got into a school in D.C. That is, before all of this…” She dropped her gaze toward her plate.

“We’re going to the courthouse in the morning. We will have a fake marriage certificate drawn up and we will take some pictures with the judge to make it seem real. After that, you’re free to go to college.”

“Why would you do that?”

“You’re my responsibility now. We will hash out the details tomorrow on the way to Miami.”

“This is insane.”

It was. I cleared my throat. “Maybe so. But this is the life of the children of criminals.”

With one sentence, I watched the flicker of fight she had left in her dissipate. The dull shine of a helpless girl was all that was left. She sipped the wine and muttered, “I didn’t get to choose who I was born to. He didn’t even prepare me.”

“Somehow, you seem to be doing just fine.”

CHAPTER THREE - ELLA 26, IVAN 36



Eight years of schooling, and today I was finally a doctor.

My stomach growled. Opening the fridge in my apartment, I inspected its contents. I closed it just as quickly when I realized it was empty. Turning around, I spotted a bouquet of fresh flowers on the kitchen counter. In the center of the bouquet was a tiny square envelope addressed to me. I recognized the handwriting to belong to Ivan Novikoff.

Over the last eight years, Ivan had kept his word and our arrangement. Every now and again, he'd send me flowers or appear on my doorstep if he was in town.

Always with the excuse that he was checking up on his investment. Although, it was extremely convenient that it was whenever I got serious with a man. A man would spend the night, and a few days later, he was demanding to have lunch to catch up.

I couldn't say no. The man saved me from a life of misery. Ivan had even shown up to my first college graduation, claiming it was for appearances. He even snapped a photo and sent it to our fathers.

Grabbing the envelope, I opened it, revealing a handwritten note from my savior.

You did it. You beat the odds. Congrats, you're not a criminal.

-Ivan

A smile tugged at the corner of my mouth and I stuffed the envelope in my pocket before Chase, my most recent boyfriend, could see it. Swallowing, I moved the flowers to the windowsill and hurried to my bedroom to get dressed.

This was going to be a mess. Chase was in my graduating class, so he would be at the ceremony tonight. So would Ivan. If I had handwritten notes and flowers inside of my apartment, it meant Ivan was in town. That he would be at the graduation.

My roommate, Ali passed down the hallway in a pink satin robe. "Ali. Where did these flowers come from?"

"Some guy dropped them off. He didn't say much, just that they were for you and took off." Her eyes widened. "Oh my God! Are they from your Russian boyfriend? Is he here? What are you gonna do about Chase?"

"He isn't my boyfriend!" I shrieked.

"He pays for your half of the rent, sends you flowers, and gives you an allowance. He's your sugar daddy, at the least."

"I think sex is involved to be a sugar baby. Besides, he has a girlfriend."

"Have you met her?"

"No. But she follows me on Instagram, and her stuff is public as hell."

"Are you jealous?"

"No," I laughed nervously. "Ivan has made it clear I'm not his type. And he isn't mine, either."

Except for the fact he was the sexiest man I'd ever laid eyes on. I understood why women fawned over him. He was tall, dark, and handsome. Having a pocket full of cash and expensive suits only made him more desirable. If Ivan wasn't a criminal, he would definitely be my type.

"Does Chase know about this? That Ivan will be there tonight?"

"He knows I have a family friend who has invested in my tuition." I shrugged, downplaying our situation. Though, now with my graduation, I wondered where it left us. We didn't have the excuse of college keeping us apart. What would we tell our fathers? Would he expect me to move to Miami?

I had already applied to do a residency in Miami, just in case Ivan expected me to leave D.C. It wasn't ideal, and I didn't want to do it, but I owed Ivan my life. If he wanted to keep tabs on me, it would be best if I were in the same city. I hated the idea, but I was still technically his property. He paid a shit ton of money to make sure of that. Though, it isn't what I wanted. I wanted to stay in D.C. with Ali. She was the only family I had.

Ali sensed my nerves and quickly changed the subject. "What are you wearing tonight? Under your gown."

"It's a black, strapless dress. Stops at my knees and has some lace design."

"Hot. Chase will lose his mind at the after party."

I rolled my eyes. There was no way Ivan would be okay with any of this. Reality settled in my stomach. My time was up. I couldn't imagine he would want his 'pretend wife' to roam the country and do whatever she pleased. It was already a bad look that we lived on opposite sides of the country. That he let me become a doctor was a crazy amount of progress in the organized crime world. Wives were only good for making heirs.

Chase knocked on the front door, then used the key to the apartment I'd given him to let himself inside. Kind of counter-productive if you ask me.

"Hey babe." He smiled when he saw me standing in the hallway between the kitchen and living room that lead to our rooms. He kissed my cheek, then headed for my room.

I followed him and watched as he sat on my bed to take his shoes off. He was pretty comfortable in my space. We'd been dating for a year now, and suddenly his presence suffocated me. He ran a finger through his blond hair and smiled a smile that reached his brown eyes as they twinkled and soaked in my appearance.

This man loved me, and I didn't reciprocate. Oh, how badly I wanted to. I wanted to complete my training, buy a house with him and maybe eventually have kids. But in the back of my mind, I knew I belonged to Ivan.

The thought should have scared me, but it only made my stomach turn as butterflies fluttered inside.

CHAPTER FOUR - IVAN



Unbuttoning my suit jacket, I sat in the bleachers in the gymnasium of Howard University. My gun felt tight in this position, sitting without a back on my chair, but I wouldn't risk being on a large campus without it. Today was the last day of Ella's education. My little bird was finally fleeing the college nest.

Eight years ago, I met a young spitfire girl–naïve–but ready to tackle the world. Now, I had the privilege of knowing a young doctor.

Eight years ago, she meant nothing to me.

I wasn't attracted to the young girl then, but now she was a woman. When I watched her leave her apartment this evening, dressed in her tiny black dress and carrying her graduation gown, I felt a sense of pride swelling in my chest, and my cock hardened. It was like I'd finally realized that she'd turned into a woman. She wasn't that girl anymore.

Fuck, this would be hard. I sighed, running my hand over my chin. My gaze landed below on the basketball court, searching for Ella. She was easy to pinpoint in the middle row, smack between two men.

When the ceremony was over, I made my way down the bleachers and to the center of the room. Straight for my girl. Her boyfriend, Chase, was occupied with his family as she stood alone beside him.

"There she is." I smiled, approaching her.

She turned, nervously shifting on her feet.

"Ivan. Thank you for coming," she said, standing on her tiptoes to embrace me in a polite hug.

"I heard Antonio couldn't make it, and I couldn't leave you with no one here to congratulate you."

The boy's parents heard my accent and whipped their heads around to see who was speaking. His mother looked me up and down, catching a quick view of a tattoo escaping from the sleeve of my jacket on my right hand, and she tensed. When people saw me, they didn't initially judge. But when they heard me, and caught the hint of a Russian accent, I was immediately pegged as a criminal.

They wouldn't be wrong, but I knew the look of judge-mental Americans, and I also knew that it made Ella uncomfortable as fuck.

"Ella. Who is your friend, dear?" The boy's mother asked, and my little bird turned pink. Fuck, I needed to stop referring to her as mine.

I stuck my hand out for her to shake, saving Ella from having to come up with a white lie that would be enough to stifle her curiosity.

"I'm Ivan. Our fathers are business partners," I said, then turned to Chase. "You're Chase? Ella speaks of you. Nice to meet you."

He nodded awkwardly, placing his arm around Ella. “Let’s get a picture together.”

“Here. I will take it. And then you can take one of the two of us?” I asked, taking his camera from him. “I don’t have a camera. You’ll send it to me, Ella?”

Ella nodded. Her roommate, Ali, hurried over, wrapping her arms around Ella’s neck.

“Oh, you must be Ivan,” Ali smiled, shaking my hand. “Our friend is having a party tonight. You should tag along with us.”

Ella at a party with alcohol and Chase, the boy who didn’t deserve her? Count me in. “I’d love that. Do we have time for dinner? My treat.”

Ali’s she’s widened. “Hell yeah.”

“Chase?”

“Oh. I was hoping we could spend time with my mom and dad, Ella,” Chase said nervously, side-eyeing me.

“Another night,” his father said. “Go and have fun. We can celebrate later.”

“Here. That picture,” I offered as Chase and Ella smiled, while I fought the urge to strangle this kid, his arm wrapping around her possessively. Around what was really mine.

CHAPTER FIVE - IVAN



Chase held his fist next to Ella's head as he pinned her against a wall in a hallway. This party was getting out of hand. We'd only been here two hours, and already, people were puking everywhere.

And my temper got the best of me when Chase had Ella cornered. Rushing towards them, I grabbed him by his throat and shoved him against the opposite wall, pinning his throat with my arm.

"Don't you fucking touch her," I snarled. His face turned white when I cut off his air circulation.

"Ivan. Let him go," Ella called behind me. "It was my fault."

"I doubt that." I hissed, but dropped the boy anyway. Chase stood and took off down the hall the moment he was free.

"What the hell, Ivan?" Her tone was firm, and it irritated me that she was upset I stopped someone from hurting her.

"He was about to hurt you. You need to be more careful. If I weren't here–"

"Stop fucking saving me, Ivan!" Ella growled, her fists clenching at her side. Her face turned red, and the attraction I felt earlier increased by a million. She was extremely sexy. The yelling only made it hotter.

I ran a hand through my hair, turning away. My jaw ticked. Fuck. What was happening to me? Before tonight, I never would have let a man touching her the way Chase did upset me. I would have stepped in if she needed it, sure. But Chase pinning her to the wall made me unable to think straight.

"Stop saving you? Would you rather be locked away in a room at my father's beck and call?"

"Fuck you." Letting out a huff, she stormed away from me. I wasn't about to let her get away that easily. I followed her down the hallway and out the front door.

"Ella!" I called, chasing her as she ran down the street.

When we were pretty far from the house, she turned, glaring at me. Ella approached me with aggression, stomping as she drew near. Placing one hand on my chest, she reached the other inside my jacket until she felt the cold metal of my pistol. She knew I was carrying, knew where I kept my gun. Pulling it from its holster, she placed it to her chin.

Eyes closed, she exhaled a long breath. "Just fucking kill me. I can't do this."

Why did I let her take my gun from its holster? *Fucking moron*. "Never, little bird," I whispered, brushing hair from her face. I pressed a kiss to the top of her head. It was soft, just enough to reassure her that a man like me could be gentle. "I didn't give you a second chance just for you to throw it away."

"That's exactly what's happening, Ivan. I was so stupid. This whole time, I thought I would get to live and be free! It was only temporary. You extended my life, but now what? I've graduated and time

is up. We're expected to be… to be Mr. and Mrs. Novikoff. I'm such an idiot, to think I'd ever get my life back. Please. Just put me out of my misery."

"Give me the gun," I said sternly, my hand still stroking her hair.

She shook her head, still holding the barrel under her chin, tears running down her cheeks.

What I first thought was a spoiled girl throwing a tantrum, I now saw as a troubled young woman, cracking under the pressure of reality. She was right, she would always be in danger. Whether she was with me, or we were apart. Being associated as my wife protected her temporarily, but now that her education was over, we would be expected to live together. If not, it would be assumed we divorced and either way, she could be a target in this world. The only safe place for her was with me.

Ella was my responsibility. Mine to protect from our enemies.

"I won't let you." I placed my hands over hers and removed my gun from her face. She rested her head on my chest and cried as she soaked my shirt.

I pulled my phone from my pocket, calling Damien, my driver. Within moments, he was bringing the car to our location. I slid her into the back seat, climbing in behind her.

"Are you hungry?" I asked, her eyes closed as she rested her head against the window.

"No. I just want to go home."

"You're staying with me," I said.

She laughed "Won't your girlfriend be mad?"

"Helena will get over it, if she likes her allowance. You're not to be left alone with these ridiculous suicidal thoughts."

"Chase will be mad. And he doesn't get an allowance. Guess that means I'll be single again soon enough."

"Good. He doesn't deserve you anyway."

"Do you ever think that maybe I'm the issue? I pushed his buttons on purpose."

"Why would you do that?" I asked, my brows drawing tight.

"I'm not scared of Chase. Maybe that's the issue."

I pinched the bridge of my nose, exhaling a frustrated breath. "You make little sense when you're drunk."

"I mean, I can handle him. I've been sheltered my whole life. I didn't even know Antonio was a mafia boss until he told me I was being bid off to a fucking mobster old enough to be my grandfather. I had no clue what this world was or how it works.

"I was tossed into college life and had to figure it out for myself. Chase is just some guy to pass the time. So when I drink, I like to push his buttons. See if he'll hurt me. He never does. I just want to feel…" she stopped, sighing and turning back towards the window. "I don't want to feel numb anymore."

"This is what you feel? Numb? Ella, you're a doctor now. You pushed through eight years of school, of living on your own, despite your odds."

"And now what, Ivan? What happens to me now? It was foolish of me to think I'd ever get to just live my life without being connected to you."

She's right. It was extremely naïve of both of us to think that she could walk away from this life. Especially now that she was done with her education. Today was a reminder she'll never be free from this bullshit.

"Boss. We're here," Damien said. We came to a stop in front of the hotel.

"Let's go," I said, opening the door to the car. Ella followed me out of the vehicle and through the lobby of the hotel without protest. We arrived at the top floor of the hotel where my suite was. I

followed her inside.

"Go take a shower," I demanded.

"Ivan?" Ella asked, standing in the center of the living room. She held my gaze as I undid the cuff links on my suit and stuffed them in my pants pocket. Next was my tie. When I didn't respond, she spoke again. "Ivan. Will you make me feel something? Will you make the numbness go away?"

"No."

Her brows furrowed. "Why not?"

"You're drunk."

"So?" She crossed her arms.

"So, you're not thinking straight. Both of us are in relationships."

"Oh. Ivan Novikoff, king of morals and ethics," she taunted. "Will pin a college student to a wall but won't cheat on his girlfriend. But technically, aren't you cheating on me?"

"We're not really married. Remember?"

She turned around, lifting her hair away from her neck. "Unzip me?"

My hand touched the back of her skin as I grabbed the zipper, sliding it down. Ella dropped her hair, grabbed the sides of the dress, and stepped out. The dress fell to the floor. Her back was to me, but I knew she wasn't wearing a bra, and her black laced panties were just barely covering her ass cheeks. I willed her not to turn around, because if she did, I wouldn't be able to control myself.

Ella bent down, giving me a full view, and picked up the dress. I stifled a groan, unable to stop staring at the tight ass before me when she stood. She covered her chest and turned to face me. "You should probably help me shower. What if I slip and hit my head?"

My growl was audible this time. I clenched my fists, forcing myself to stay in control. But, Ella was right. With the amount of alcohol in her system, falling and hitting her head was a possibility.

I licked my lips. "When did you grow into a woman?"

"When you let your little bird fly out of the nest."

Letting her live her life was probably the best thing I could have done for her. She was a young, strong, and beautiful woman. She wasn't the high school girl I once wanted to save.

Most men in the crime world preferred younger women that they could mold into who they wanted to be. Me? I always wanted a woman who thought for herself. And my little bird turned into just that.

Helena, my current girlfriend, was too much drama. I kept her around mostly for her oral skills, but the expense of having her in my home and taking care of Ella, too… well, if I could get rid of one to save money, that was a plus to this whole situation, right?

Still, I had to refrain. If I had sex with this woman, it would be game over for both of us.

Ella followed me down the hall and into the larger bedroom with a king-sized bed. I flicked on the lights, heading for the bathroom. Inside, I turned on the water in the shower stall. While she stepped in, I undressed down to my briefs.

"Ivan?" She called ten minutes later when she finished. She turned the water off and I handed her a towel, keeping my gaze away. "What happens now?"

She wrapped the towel around her body, stepped out, and pressed her hand on her chest.

Her question was valid. "None of it matters. You're not my wife. We will get this fake marriage taken care of. Fake divorce and you're free."

Her jaw dropped. "Don't you expect payment? You paid for my tuition, and my apartment. You give me an allowance."

"You're free, little bird."

"No."

"No? You just told me you want to die because you're stuck with me. Placed my gun to your head, and begged me to pull the trigger. You're not cut out for this life. I need a wife that can handle who I am and what I do for a living."

Her face twisted, and the color rushed to her head. And then she stomped her foot as she let out a shriek. A true child tantrum if I ever saw one. "Fuck you!" Her favorite insult flung through the air.

I smirked, which seemed to only enrage her more. Her fists raised towards me. Ella's towel dropped when she lunged for me. What the hell was happening right now? Wasn't I giving her what she wanted?

Quickly, I grabbed her fists, stopping her from the attack on me. Ella screamed loudly in my ear. I moved my hands to her waist and scooped her up, placing her over my shoulder. Her fists pounded into my back as she kicked my stomach.

I chuckled.

She wanted to feel something. I would give her something to feel. *My hard dick shoving inside her*. "Such a child. Throwing your fists in the air and screaming. Shall I spank you like a child, too?" I plopped her onto the bed.

"No!" Ella yelled.

I knelt at the edge of the bed, taking in the sight of her naked body. "'No' must be your favorite word."

"I just meant you can spank me, but I'll enjoy it, so you'll have to figure out another way to punish me."

I let out a low growl. She was taunting me too much tonight, and I wasn't going to take it much longer. "That can be arranged."

"Are you going to take off your underwear?" she asked, licking her lips as her gaze fell to my chest.

I didn't need to be naked for what I was planning to do to her. I grabbed her waist and flipped her onto her stomach. She harrumphed. My fingers dug into her sweet ass as I lifted her so she was on her hands and knees. I dropped, lying under her on my back. Fuck, it gave me such a sweet view of her exposed pussy. I wrapped my hands around her ass and lifted my head.

Ella moaned at the feel of my tongue sliding along her exposed flesh. I feasted on her, kissing, sucking and biting until her hips bucked, grinding down on my face. She was already close to her climax.

"Yes, Ivan." The words came out on a low moan, purring as she reached between her legs to grab hold of my hair. The poor girl had no idea of what was to come.

If she enjoyed the pain of being spanked, I wouldn't give her that pleasure. Instead, I was going to bring her to the brink of her orgasm and then deny her, over and over until she was panting and needy. Until she apologized for coming at me with her closed fists.

My tongue continued to devour her. Picking up the pace, I sucked on her clit. Ella let out a sweet moan that sent my cock twitching. She was panting hard and grinding her pussy into my face, and I knew the second her thighs tightened around my head that she was there. My hands came to her waist. And just as she grabbed my hair in anticipation of her orgasm, I stopped.

"Please!" A whine pulled from her. "Ivan. I was *right* there."

"Exactly, Ella," I say. "I can do this all night." I glanced up at her, wiping the evidence of her arousal from my chin. "Bring you to your orgasm and then deny you. How is this for a punishment?"

I pushed her off me so I could sit upright. My hand fisted her hair and I tilted her head toward the ceiling. Ella was on her knees now. She tried to arch her back so she could pull herself free from my

grip.

I pressed my mouth to her ear. "You'll be begging for me to end your misery. How many times will it take, do you think?"

She grunted. "I'll do it myself." Miss Independent moved her hands between her legs.

This woman would be the death of me, fighting me every way instead of giving in to me. Grabbing her wrist, I yanked her hand away and pinned it behind her back. "Let me be clear, little bird. This is your punishment for stomping around like a brat." I moved so I was kneeling behind her and started rubbing her clit, readying her for her next almost orgasm.

She didn't like my answer, because suddenly she was turning to face me. Lust twinkled in her brown eyes. Ella placed either hand on my shoulders, pushing me so I was sitting. I wanted to fight her push to climb me, but I was too intrigued. Watching her take what she needed from me was way sexier.

Ella climbed on top of me, grinding against my thigh. She squeezed my shoulders, fingers digging into the skin. "Condoms?" She asked, and I shook my head.

This visit was supposed to be a formality. I have a girlfriend back in Miami. I never expected to want Ella as badly as I did at this moment. I may have been a player, but until this moment, I'd never been a cheater. I wasn't expecting to need condoms.

She sighed. "Fuck it." Biting her lip, she grabbed a hold of my cock. My little bird moaned so beautifully as she sank down onto me. In one quick movement, I was buried inside her to the hilt.

Fuck, did I want to stop her. How could I know she didn't have STDs? She probably didn't wear condoms with Chase if they were serious. I knew I was disease free. I never went bareback with Helena. Not to mention the risk of pregnancy was on the table.

But she felt too damn good. Tight and warm, and mine.

Fucking mine.

Ella was mine to protect, to cherish, and apparently, now mine to fuck.

"I hope you're clean," I growled. My hands ran along her back as she pressed her mouth to my neck, licking and biting.

"Shut up and fuck me." Ella moved her hips, bouncing her thighs up and down. Over and over. A hand moved to my hair, tugging. She rode my cock, her breasts bouncing with each move.

I took one in my mouth, sucking her nipple. "So fucking sweet, *malyshka*."

Her mouth opened slightly as she sighed with pleasure.

Oh, no. No, fuck no! I shook my head, remembering I'm not supposed to be letting her come. I grabbed her ass and, gaining my momentum swung her forward. I pinned her on her back, still keeping my cock buried inside of her. She wrapped her legs around my waist, hooking me into her, but I didn't budge.

The little bird let out a frustrated groan, pounding her fist into the sheet. She wasn't strong enough to get out from under me, so she wasn't even going to attempt it. I pulled out of her, lowering my head and pressing my thumb to her clit, rubbing circles. Her hips bucked into the sensation. She was desperate for more friction.

But I wouldn't give it to her. Instead, I pressed my lips against the soft flesh of her thigh and nibbled. A sigh escaped from Ella, her body relaxing. She sunk into the mattress.

Providing her pleasure was giving me great satisfaction, it almost pained me to stop when her breath caught.

"God damn it!"

"Beg me, and I'll end it," I said, my mouth against her pussy. I buried my tongue in her folds,

tasting her arousal, lapping eagerly as she moaned again. “Beg me and it ends.”

“Shit.” She sighed. “Fine. Okay. Ivan. Please make me come.”

“Not enough, *malyshka*.”

My tongue flicked her clit just enough to give her a bit of what she needed. It drove her wild. Her back arched and she moaned. “Fuck, please. Please, Ivan. I need your cock. Please, let me come.”

I grinned, sitting up. I shoved my cock back inside her, her pussy clenching around me. Pumping inside of her, her body matched me, her hips pushing into me as I filled her until my balls hit her ass. Over and over again, I pulled in and out, rubbing her clit with my fingers until I felt her again tightening around me in anticipation of her climax.

“Fuck, *malyshka*.” I groaned as she tried pushing me out, screaming in pleasure. “You feel so good. Come for me, *malyshka*.”

“Ivan,” she moaned, her body collapsing, her pussy pulsing around me, milking me to climax. When I was done, I fell on top of her, panting as she wrapped her arms around me.

“Fuck.” Ella tensed. “Shit. We didn’t use a condom.”

“You made it clear you didn’t care,” I said, sitting up and pulling out of her.

“I’m drunk! And I was horny as hell!” She shouted, standing up. “Shit shit shit. I didn’t take my pill today! Or yesterday.”

“We will get you the morning after pill tomorrow. Are you… I assume you don’t have any diseases? We don’t need to worry about that?”

“No,” she nodded, pressing her head into her hands. “Oh my God. I just cheated. I’m a cheater.”

My face shriveled in disappointment. Seeing her feel shame didn’t settle well in my stomach. “I think Chase is the least of your worries, little bird.” I stood, grabbed her, and carried her back to the shower to clean her up. The alcohol was clearly wearing off, and she regretted being with me.

It was too late. She was mine now, whether she liked it or not.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A.N. is a wife and mother to three children. She enjoys writing dark romance novels with strong female leads, always with a HEA. When she isn't reading and writing, she spends her days with her family. Other passions include: crafting, horseback riding, and procrastinating.

Stay up to day on her latest works by following her on instagram: www.instagram.com/authoranstuaber

CHAIN OF COMMAND



BY COLLA TRITI

Detective Gemma Greer planned to make a name for herself, becoming the first officer to officially take down Tristan Giridano, the most wanted man in River Cove City. Over the years while working her way up his chain, her dedication to the crime lord evolved. What she wanted originally, has since faded, leaving her to fight for her right to remain with him.

What happens when Gemma's heart's desires uproot her goals for all to see?

Will the Boss be able to accept her when the dirt on her runs clean?

It's the familiar tumble of the links in the chain he wore that gave it all away.

His mood.

Her behavior *and* his for that matter, that drove her further into the endless night with the devil that controlled these streets.

Tristan Giridano. The single most lethal man stateside had more connections than there were people in the city. He was untouchable; untraceable despite being out in the open, among the public's eye.

No matter how many times a team had investigated him, allegations were dropped and search warrants were nullified immediately. Far too many undercover operatives were revealed based on their own swelled egos, thinking they got Tristan *this* time but in reality, no one got *him*.

Except her.

Detective Gemma Greer set out to be the first undercover agent that would get her glory and the respect she deserved at the ripe age of twenty. She'd been in the field for nearly ten years by now, playing the game of cat and mouse that Tristan seemed to love so much, just for the chance.

To him, she was of the many women he claimed to prefer. The fact that there were more irked Gemma, but they were the shade that hid her shadow, her key to unlocking his secrets. Who needed their assault weapon when her pussy did the work of ten men?

A soft gasp ripped out of her as the promise his gold chain links continued to grind against the hardwood bar top they sat at. Each one, still holding the other. Not one, but all sending her a message this time. Behave, he's watching…

It was hard to pull her attention away from its sway. While it alone challenged the details of her control, Gemma knew it was her choices that condemned her to their means, furthering the notion that she, in fact, was still capable of the win. All she had to do was break him just enough, split the links and throw him one last time tonight.

* * *

Tristan smirked, amused with his little pet's awareness of him. Gemma's attentiveness was second to none. Her whole body betrayed her in his presence. It was one of her best selling points, besides her pretty little lips swallowing him whole, of course.

Her submissive state, on the other hand, was still in training. The trials of which they'd lay to ruins while he taught his little brat a lesson, or more, were a good enough workout as any and as for Tristan? He wouldn't have it any other way. Gemma gave him the satisfaction of the hunt. Her refusal to just lay back and take him toyed with his ego in all of the right ways. Her little stunts even dared to play a game he could barely resist. Even now he watched her. The depth of her inhale told just how eventful this evening would be.

His bar, Giridano's, was not only unmarked by way of the street but was also an alley entry only. The usuals who respected Tristan enough to pay him a visit, knew loyalty was thicker than blood, and *that* was the only true way in. The establishment, Tristan panned his attention away from Gemma's perfect curves as she perched herself a little higher at the edge of his rustic, reclaimed wood bar top, was second to none. Every material had a reason, a message, and better still, his promise. It was one that he'd be there in times of crisis but fully expected the same right when the time came to serve him.

Briefly he caught the eye of men he's known his whole life settling down at tables nearby. Neither were threats but the mere drag of his bracelet against the corner of his bar told his baby girl to put her tits away before she lost the opportunity to. The roll of her shoulders backwards, defiant as ever, however, made him curse.

Being with him put her on full display, and she didn't ever seem to mind. Tonight was no different.

Not even the indoor balcony that severed the space like a knife wound, separating the warmth of the bar with the open-ended possibilities of what was best for business as his office wasn't free from spectators tonight.

Just the thought that he'd have to consider bringing Gemma up there to deal with her blatant disobedience thrilled him. The corner of his lips curled up in an amused grin as his eyes landed back upon Gemma's tantalizing body while she continued to tempt him.

* * *

This was the best part of the job, Gemma thought as the satin fabric smoothed over her skin, besides, well… she casually looked over Tristan. Her eyes lingered longingly down his body before returning to herself. She knew he was waiting there with those piercing eyes of his and his expressionless mug, but for as long as his eyes drilled into her, waiting to reconnect, she played innocent. He was on *her* line, regardless of how he tugged at her for the attention he thought he deserved. His power was only that. Her own was knowledge and Tristan didn't have the slightest idea about what was coming.

Gemma smirked softly to herself before dragging her attention back to the bar. Despite being there for nearly an hour already due to business, among other things, Gemma was ready to play again..

Her body keened as the electricity between them began to charge, still after all of this time. It's telling. It's demanding and she absolutely loved it.

Ignoring him, even this slightly, undermined the boss in a way she'd reserved as a promise for later. It was, after all, part of their game. His chain of command; the literal inanimate part of him that took her over, or at least tried to, gave her only the best thrills, much like this place. It seemed like an extension of Tristan, right down to the last detail. While the bar felt like him, the office felt like the legacy within, tearing him apart. The thought hung heavily in her mind; too heavily…

Gemma let herself slouch, shedding her need for attention, only to have it shoved back in her face. The bartender this evening firmly set a plain white napkin, of which, shouldn't have made her flinch but it did. Next to be set down was not only a glass but also Tristan's personally brewed whiskey that she, nor he asked for.

To Gemma, everything had a tone, a message, or a warning and never particularly in any order, but this was something else entirely. Gemma schooled her features and casually followed the offering to the waiting tender. This one, was not one she knew, she realized as she carefully took stock of him. He was on the softer side, green eyes, reddish blond hair, Gemma noted, as she made quick work of his validity there.

The longer she stared at him, the more their company began to fall away. Muddled voices faded into nothing and not even the electricity flowing between her and Tristan could be felt. Once she realized it, Gemma quickly talked herself out of looking away. Doing it would have her paying for her actions in blood. *That* she knew, even if she couldn't place this man.

"Boss," she murmured instead, lining up three of her fingers against the whiskey glass.

The endearment seemed mutual as the tender selected the bottle and poured the golden liquid up to

her expected measurement, but even this seemed more intimate than it should have been.

Maybe it wasn't, but Gemma was already on edge. There was no reason to over interpret the way the whiskey settled within the glass or how the encounter felt like a long lost lover reinserting himself into her life. It simply wasn't the case. Not here in the lion's den. Tristan was the king of the urban jungle. He liked his toys and she was one of them. It was enough for this gig, and being taken care of didn't suck as much as trying to be a submissive did.

The position he proposed let Tristan think he could take over control of her mind and body but that was hardly true. He couldn't be her dominant. She needed more from him than a hard piece of flesh to come on to allow even a semblance of it. However, in the name of "this is how the game's played" her cunt attempted this. It damaged her to give in but Gemma knew *everything* about having to stay strong.

Hating it, she glanced up at the bartender, this time into fearful eyes. Gemma frowned once more, unable to place him.

Just as she began to question who he was, Tristan's thick fingers found the base of her spine. The feeling accompanied by her confusion made her jerk back immediately. Within her panic, the room looked as if it were spinning, especially with the angled wood grain above them.

"Oh!" she exclaimed rather loudly and the volume around her returned. "Tris–boss, I…"

"Is this for me?" he interrupted, casually, as if he missed the way she floundered around him.

"Yes," Gemma answered, handing the glass to him.

"More than usual," his statement came off like a question served on a double edged sword.

"Your fingers are thicker than mine," she replied earnestly, biting her lip.

The extra involvement wasn't necessary, Gemma knew, but his extremes always landed on a specific amount of paranoia. Tristan's intensity seemed to ebb as he looked down into the waiting beverage. The warm, honey colored liquid, called to her then too.

"What's wrong, Boss?" she purred, despite her nerves.

* * *

"Stop calling me that," Tristan growled.

Daddy was one thing, but she failed so many times to establish his role with her that even this game infuriated him.

His hot breath against the shell of her ear certainly begged to differ, but Tristan's power did not bend for anyone. His claim of disapproval would be known throughout their space and even men who congregated there knew to give Tristan, if not the pair of them, a wide berth because of it.

"Good girls know their place," he added.

Tristan watched Gemma bite back her snarl as she reached for his glass. Her move registered briefly as it numbly transferred to her.

Tristan quickly snatched her wrist, tempting their drink to lurch out of the glass, ribbed by the rim, hard enough to splash between them. It was a bold move on her part, but offering him a drink only to have it taken away was a huge offense. Gemma would pay for it regardless of their audience.

His smirk barely curled his lip at the thought.

His eyes caught hers as she pulled away, concerned for where the drink had fallen. It was so unlike her to chase it. It made him wonder just what card she'd be playing tonight even though he prided himself on knowing them all.

Tristian knew everything about his inner circle and was always several steps ahead, in every instance, but this? This, he watched, as she chased the spill down his wrist…this was something else entirely. The sight of her inhale. The surprise laced within it. The flash of her teeth, gone in an instant, all heightened his senses. His blood rushed quickly through his veins, ready to stomp down her recklessness if he had to.

His palm began to itch at the thought.

Gemma's tongue lapped dutifully over the back of his inked hand, flattening wholly there for just a moment too long. Tristan managed to clear his throat, expecting to end the additional surge that rushed through him. If she wanted him, after what he caught, she'd have to work for it.

Gemma lifted her eyes to his as she wrapped her lips around the curve of his palm, unwilling to let up. She had him, he knew. No woman could do what Gemma could, but she was no submissive, and truthfully, Tristan couldn't stand the competition.

"Mhm," she hummed, still latching to his hand.

Tristan laved his tongue over his lower lip, then followed it with his teeth, as he tried to ground himself in place. They were in the middle of the floor, as if he wasn't always, but here they were far enough in the open, putting distance between the bar and seating across the way. While business felt like a game, Gemma's claim felt like a show, and Tristan was there in her spotlight..

His pretty little vixen still suckled at his hand while her free hand slid up his thigh to brace her. The feel of her thumb tracing the seam of his slacks forced him to shudder.

"Good girls don't matter, Boss," she murmured against his skin, trailing her attention down his wrist.

Tristan grumbled at that.

"Good girls are *all* that matter," he huffed as her hand traveled higher.

"Hmm," he heard her hum.

The crack of her slurp, popped noisily around them at her release.

"Good girls aren't here are they?" she replied, staring him down as the annoyance in knowing she was right began to build.

She played his own message to trip him up…

His attention flared, building the scenario as his eyes flashed around the room, looking for ways to teach her how to behave.

"No other submissive sluts can have *my* cock," she warned Tristan as she cupped him, still with his whiskey in hand below them. "Can they, Boss?"

"*Your* cock?" he questioned with authority, refusing to thrust against her hand. "This cock will stretch any pussy *I* want it to."

* * *

"It hasn't," she tutted, knowingly.

Tristan has been completely hers this whole time. Whatever game he thought he was playing, it wouldn't work against her. Although the pit had already sunk in. It hurt to know that he'd be able to promise such things. The thought of him thrusting into some other woman's cunt was blinding. Sure, he made his point but she wasn't about to let him go without knowing who would have him for life… behind bars that is.

"Sure of yourself, are you?"

Gemma carefully sets her reclaimed drink on the floor as she kneeled between them.

"Boss… I've *killed* for this cock," she paused as he lifted his brow in surprise as she released him to work to open his slacks.

Gemma shivered as she slipped her hands into his pants, releasing his long, lean dick, already erect for her.

Her game was working.

She doesn't care for the hushed comments circling around them but more for the way that Tristan stands there, mesmerized by her, taking what she wants from him. It's as thrilling as it's always been. The rush of it all. The disappointment in the faces that only wish they were strong enough to off Tristan themselves and reclaim the prize that was herself. It was a lot to take in, but as filthy as it made her feel, the rush of being good enough to share this with him was electrifying.

"Who have you killed?" he gasped as she circled her fingers around the base of his shaft.

"Too many to list," Gemma hummed as she reached for her glass beneath them.

As she brought the whiskey to her lips she paused to wait for his response but nothing came. Not even a smirk.

"I don't share, Boss…" she said, taking a long sip of her claimed drink.

Swallowing seemed harder this time. The light burn that followed wasn't even a match for the rising concerns that falling for this man would be met with. The anger she barely managed to get through while each wandering hussy who looked Tristan's way for more than a second was astounding.

She hated them.

Gemma's position be damned, no one else would take him so long as she was part of this picture. A second later, her grip on him grew tighter, hard enough to pull him forward a half a step.

"...Is this how you think it's gonna be?" Tristan gritted through his teeth.

One hand quickly scooped up her hair the way she knew he would, while the other palmed the back of her head. The thickness of his cock seemed to only grow in her hand and the thrill that the burn remained was enough of a temptress to take him fully down her throat.

The sound of his complete and utter satisfaction that he could sheath himself within her quickly followed with his surprised withdrawal.

Another line of curses followed as he batted the drink out of her hand with the one that cupped her head.

"Fuck!" he swore. "What the fuck was that?"

"The burn or my teeth?" she muttered, as she adjusted to his quick removal. "I have them," she fought back her impending cough, trying to add that he should know.

Tristan yanked her hair back roughly, expecting to quiet her which did for a moment.

"I wanted that…" Gemma growled hoarsely.

"*Bad* girls don't *get* what they want," Tristan snarled, as he walked her back against the bar, keeping her just out of reach of him.

"I *get* punished too, don't I?" she questioned cheekily.

"Oh you will, baby girl," Tristan replied and Gemma softly gasped, surprised by her pet name.

He didn't always call her that, but when he did it made her feel precious, even if she wasn't.

Her whole body buzzed, set to life by his endearment, however shallow it truly was. The traitorous fabric of her satin dress over-accentuated the way her nipples hardened and her chest began to rise and fall with heated anticipation. Her inner voice mewled over her desperate desire to give in; to show him just how good she could be. It genuinely wrestled with her bitter need to prove the

precinct wrong, that she had all the answers she needed to take Tristan down… but *fuck*, his *tone*, his *message*, the way he moved her made it all too hard to keep her control.

"What do you think a stunt like that would get you?" he asked, as he tucked himself back into his pants.

The strain against his slacks was enough of a reason to stare. She worked for that. Albeit, Gemma didn't have much resistance from him. There were no words to explain how difficult it was to get Tristan vulnerable, but he was open with her, the thought was heady.

"Feeling giving?" she questioned regardless of his pass.

The snap of his wrist, the tell tale jingle of his bracelet did wonders to throw her heart into overdrive. What they had was neither intimacy nor infectious… It was just business; something to quench the other's thirst, if even just for a little while. Maybe that, along with all of her reasons, was why she didn't mind this side of things. The torture wasn't entirely so, Gemma told herself as she welcomed his heated stare.

Tristan's grumble spoke mostly to the guests surrounding his bar, clearing each and every one from their stools to get a better viewpoint, Gemma presumed. None were loyal enough to look away and part of her didn't mind. She'd smile to herself at times, basking in the feel of his claim, thrilled that no other slut would be milking him dry.

The thought was jarring.

What would happen when it all came to an end? Would she celebrate or mourn the loss of him?

Tristan gave no more warning than a disapproving eyebrow before situating her across the bar. Even with her silk dress she could feel the cool top penetrate through to her skin. Although, that alone wasn't what made her shutter.

Instead, it was watching how he moved away from her, peering in the direction of the filled seats, as if this was meant for more than the two of them. He liked his dominance. He liked the way they cowered when he challenged them.

Still, she stared him down. Ready and waiting for whatever she had coming.

* * *

Gemma made him feel alive. She made it possible to chase his needs, especially with her smart mouth and gorgeous determination to displease him.

Tristan's threats to return to that life were shallow, he knew, but he couldn't let Gemma in on it. Her head was already inflated with expectations he considered fulfilling, but on nights like these, where she's looking for more, rather than settling for what he'd give her, Tristan could only come to the conclusion that she was just another chick looking for a wild time.

Only, the more Gemma applied herself, the more he needed her in his life. Even as he lifted their glass to his lips and tipped back more of his fine bourbon, he'd come to expect her next move. Tristan's amusement didn't bother reaching his eyes this time. Not while she hiked her knee up over his hip and pressed her heel firmly against his ass drawing him near.

"Giving," Tristan tested her question, rolling it over his tongue as if it was the liquid itself.

"That's right," she tested, looking solely back up into his eyes.

He knew her game; her little traps here and there. The drawn-out moan that reached for his primal side to kick into gear and use her, willingness and all. Gone. He'd ruin her, time and again until all she could be was a cum soaked body on display. One of his, and only his doing. The thought alone

pricked determinedly through his foresight, looking for answers into her own loyalty.

Tristan straightened at that, narrowly missing the apex of her thighs or the familiar drag against her that Gemma craved. He watched her body bow in response, amused at the slight betrayal. She would turn. His control would inevitably rule her, as if it didn't already.

His smirk pulled higher into his cheek.

"I've *given* enough," he murmured. "Don't you think?"

The crease of her brow slowly formed in thought.

"Mm," Gemma hummed. "I'd say not nearly enough."

Of course she'd say *that* in front of *them*.

"I've done my time," she continued, as she sat up. "I've taken your heat," Gemma added before reaching for his toned stomach.

Tristan stifled his exhale as she let her hands explore him. It was almost tender the way she'd trace his skin. Almost…

"...taken you *anywhere*," she murmured only to add, "I still *take* you," then looked up away from traveling with her tiny palms, her fingers toying with a single button as if the decision was hers about just where to take this. "…it's not fair."

Tristan tilted his head as if he was considering what she said, but followed, the murmurs overtaking the room instead.

"I'm not your prize, baby girl," he bit out, watching her shoulders seize for a fraction of a second.

"I beg to differ," she replied, then bit her lip.

"You are *begging*, aren't you?" Tristan followed, his eyebrow lifted as he turned to challenge those around him with a glare. "You beg, baby girl. You beg me for all I can provide," he growled as he turned back to face her. "And what do I beg for?"

Gemma's eyes went wide, her backhanded comment dying on her lips. The way it quivered only told him he was winning.

"What do *I* beg for?" he questioned, his tone warning her further.

"Me," Gemma bit out, just loud enough for him to hear her. "And I'm done waiting for what I want," she snapped.

* * *

Gemma's heart never beat so hard in her life. Her vision spun around the hardwood decor as Tristan made short work of flipping her away from him. Her stomach now laid across where she sat, the warmed surface oddly welcomed her for a moment before cooling under her.

"You'll *take* what I *give*..." Tristan growled in her ear.

His weight was a slight anchor to where she wobbled against the bar. Gemma could barely feel the flat of her heel find the ground once more. The sway of her dress only exposed her more thanks to the way it bunched against her thigh and the ledge. It should have been humiliating being defiled by him there but this was truly what she wanted. One last time. One last memory if that was all she'd be afforded to live within…

"*Yes*," Gemma sighed her praise as his hand smoothed its way over the soft curve of her ass.

The strap of her thong, the only thing that got in his way as he warmed her up, was also the only way to ignore the scrape of metal from the chains on Tristan's bracelet. It roughly jolted around over her waiting skin with a merciless promise that she fucked up.

Gemma's brow furrowed while she tried to place just what could have brought that on aside from her smart mouth. It didn't matter. Not then. Not as he withdrew his gentleness and replaced it with a bitter slap. His chains whipped carelessly as his hand followed, slicing right through her focus.

"Ah!" Gemma screamed, trying to hide whatever evidence he thought he had.

His grunt is slight but amused, she knows. The blows are steady, each cracking with the intent to open her up, but Gemma's never fully open to anyone, not even herself. It's why the sting is welcome. It's why she needs to feel this, because in these moments, she's alive with him.

It's when her tears fall without warning that really startles her. That last bit, the realization that she needs him wickedly plucks out her identity, leaving her bare for all to see.

Another jolt forward brings her back. He's almost done, his body can only take so much before that blissful moment between where instinct takes over and his feelings briefly show. Somewhere in there she'll surprise him. She'll take over. The team outside will flood in and at the very least find her taking him for all he's worth in the most unconventional ways.

The clearing of a throat just beyond her pulled Gemma's attention back behind the bar to the man she'd come across to begin with. A feeling of dread came over her as she came hard, clenching wildly around nothing. All the while Tristan began to smooth his hand out and over the top of her sensitive skin, praising her in his hushed tone.

Usually, their banter would continue, and she'd see just how far she could push him but her attention remained on the man just before them. She strained her eyes to focus but even that was difficult. She knew that man from somewhere… but where?

Tristan's palm still covered her hot cheek while the other trailed up her spine, ripping her from her concentration. His fingers slipped into her hair, then gripped it near the root to challenge her further.

"See something you like?"

* * *

She didn't need another strike against her, Tristan thought. She really didn't… but pretending to be emotionally invested in their foreplay only to size up another man right in front of him, cut Tristan deeply.

What the fuck?

Tristan didn't bother looking up at the stocky bartender. He knew exactly who this man was. A spy. One that Tristan brought in to find the rat at the exchange of his life. Lieutenant James Rutherford of the River Cove Police Department pleaded for it after a failed bust, promising his service to expose detectives that were positioned to take Tristan and his empire down. How could he refuse? The offer was just too good. And when the first dozen were removed, the good ol' Lieutenant kept bringing them in, ridding them of their evidence against Tristan, and alerting him of power plays the department expected to pull off and when. Rutherford became the best informant fear could buy.

The information was invaluable which gained James a place in his circle. Close enough to keep an eye on though because this sort of rat would turn. It was only a matter of time. However, when Detective Gemma Greer's name was mentioned, Tristan's whole world shook.

Gemma was *thoroughly* vetted, though. She had next to nothing to her name. Not even friends or family. At the very least she knew what it took to survive on her own. Tristan could give her that. She went to school, worked two jobs, finished, at least that was a given, especially after he found her

diploma in the trash at her own apartment. To him it meant one of two things, she graduated to do it or just needed an alternate route to prove herself and it failed. Given the way she responded to him, Tristan added it up as the latter. It simply just checked out.

…and so did his own reality after their first hook up.

Tristan sneered at James, then looked down into Gemma's constricted pupils. Her eyes showed fear; an emotion she'd never shared with him before. Minutes passed between them before she could even find him it seemed. Tristan watched intently, his tightened muscles relaxing as she did, despite how he held her.

"Who is he, Boss?" she asked quietly, fear still deeply set within her.

Tristan regarded her with a simple nod, "This here is Jimmy," he replied evenly. "We go way back," he lied.

"Is that why he's armed?" she worried.

Her question caught him off guard. Enough of his circle carried and she trusted *them*. What was it about this man? Her concern continued to seep into his mind as he deftly rolled her back over onto her backside, watching her wince as she settled. In part it struck him with pride, especially in the way she clung to him looking for relief.

"He scares me, Boss," she added softly into his neck, just under Tristan's jaw.

"*He* scares you?" Tristan chuckled beside her. "You bit me. *I* should scare you."

"You don't," Gemma inhaled, pressing kisses just above his collar.

Her fingers roamed the plains of his chest, up and over his shoulders, then down them, removing his suit jacket as she went. Tristan allowed the layer to shed its way off of his body as she marveled in his promised strength. The drop of the thick garment down to the floor sparked a new need, warping its way through his body.

He had to know the truth past those two words.

He had to know what he really meant to her.

* * *

Holding Tristan tenderly wasn't something new. He was the first to engage all that time ago when he first let her stay in his bed. These moments were just extensions of that.

If *Jimmy* was here to end the charade, then he'd have to take her down too, Gemma swallowed at the thought.

"I don't?" Tristan followed, as he released her hair, shielding his hands from the way they expertly unclasped the hook and eye and helped himself to her zipper.

Her silky number tumbled down from her shoulders, catching just barely over the tops of her breasts, tempting him further.

"No," she assured him. "You, *Boss*," she paused to pull him closer to her, "have been my first and only lover."

Admitting it blinded her to the room unfolding around her.

"I've never been afraid of you," echoed between them next.

Gemma missed the way he picked her up and held her against him as she wrestled with his buttons. She missed the way he moved her from the bar but certainly felt the way he ripped the remainder of her dress from her body, leaving her in her thong and heels. The push of his weight pinning her against the exposed brick wall was the only indication of where they were now, out in the

open, away from his guests, regardless of their definite presence.

This was it. Them. Her craving, to be at his mercy, impaled on his cock while he promised he'd take everything from her. Only, it wasn't the flesh of his dick that rushed into her. It was the roughness of his knuckles that wrenched their way between the lasting fabric that covered her. Gemma mewled at the feeling, her slick coating him in desperation.

"How can I fear who I need?" she moaned as she scrambled to release his dress shirt next.

His response was cold, calculated even, worrying her further.

"Now you need me?" he asked, his tone unusually masked.

"When don't I?"

She was in over her head. There was no going back to the life she thought she had before this. Not while she was skirting around the ten years of collective emotion she had for this man.

The bite of the brick still held her attention while he slipped two fingers between her slick folds. His fingers stretched her magnificently while his presence kept her open wide to him.

"Boss," she whimpered as her head rolled around against the wall.

"I said stop," he growled as he scissored his fingers inside of her.

"Stop what?" Gemma finally complied.

"Stop calling me Boss," he gruffly answered her.

"What do you want to be called?" she questioned softly.

"My name, baby girl," he replied but even that seemed like a lie.

Gemma nodded, then tested it out as his fingers languidly massaged her clit.

"Tristan," she yelped, and clawed at him. "Oh, fuck," Gemma swore. "Ah, yes, *Tristan*."

Her whole body sang. His permission to even speak his name was a dream come true.

"Not a single other person can have you," she babbled, and reached for the hem of his shirt. "I'll kill them all."

* * *

Tristan's rhythm escalated roughly as she worked his shirt completely off of him. He grinned hearing that. It was oddly settling listening to her promise havoc to anyone that came between them.

"Please Tristan, *please*," she moaned as her legs trembled on either side of him. She was close, he knew.

"You'll do anything for me?" he questioned, crossing his knuckles inside of her.

The sight of her eyes rolling back in her head and her desperate pleas to come only heightened his attention to her.

"Get a hold of yourself, *Detective*," the bartender, *Jimmy*, grumbled, not at all amused with their behavior.

Gemma's gasp, as faint as it was felt like it could be heard throughout the entire bar. Tristan's fingers slipped out of her automatically, disgusted.

James was right. She *was* a rat.

Her whine, while pitiful, couldn't quiet the echo of her initial response.

"Tristan," Gemma whimpered his name, trying to shift closer to him.

Her pussy, as inviting as it was; soft, glistening and ready for his cock, could wait. Those sweet fleeting promises Gemma spouted out only moments ago smothered his hopeful heart with lies. Shock tumbled through him, making it dangerously difficult to respond. Tristan, however, was a master of

hiding his true emotions. He'd won. She was floundering somewhere between the truth of it all and needing to come. If he knew this girl at all, she'd tell him exactly what he wanted to know or her release wouldn't be an orgasm.

"*Baby girl*," he warned, as he set her down on her own two feet.

Despite what raged around in his mind, none of the words flowed, only anger. All that was left was to get rid of her. With the confirmation evident, despite being so slight, it made him scowl in James' direction. Next he collected Gemma by her wrist to haul her across the room and finally up the iron stairs to his office. Her heels slammed onto the ground shakily, uncontrollably as his heart did within his chest.

How could he say goodbye to the best thing that ever happened to him based on an inhale and James' smug smile?

Tristan had to know for sure…

"Tristan, *baby*," Gemma whined against his hold. Her gasp came again as tears pricked the corners of her eyes. "You're hurting me."

All he could do was growl as he turned the corner to head into his office. The air was much cooler there. Cool enough to claim his attention long enough to slam the door behind her. Gemma jumped despite how she said she trusted him and that was yet another nail in her coffin.

"Baby?" he rasped.

"Yeah?" Gemma replied, expecting him to accept it.

Her infuriating tone made him lunge at her. To his surprise she hadn't jumped or worried over his jerkiness. She just stood there, unsure of what to do with her arms.

"You think you can…"

"I've been with you for six years, *Tristan*," she interrupted him. "Years!" Gemma ground out as she folded her arms finally under her boobs.

The movement guided his eyes there, taking in their chill and hardened peaks.

"You're…mine…" Gemma yelped as Tristan cut her off.

His palm quickly covered her throat, his fingers curled around her easily thereafter as he roughly guided her towards the window overlooking the lounge floor. People she knew throughout the years gathered for the show, some took video while others gawked at her as he pressed her up against the glass.

"You've only been here to *out* me," he ground out as he wedged his knee between her legs, opening her up to him. "You didn't *want* me. You wanted me *gone*!"

"I didn't," she squeaked.

Tristan tisked in her ear as he rustled with his slacks, releasing himself from his boxers. His pants then pooled around his ankles before he swatted her backside. "Don't lie to me, baby girl."

"But I didn't, *Tristan*," Gemma whimpered. "I didn't!"

"*Yet*," he corrected her. "You didn't get rid of me, *yet*!"

* * *

Gemma was used to being confronted. People did it all the time but this was so much worse. She fell for him and was outed by some prick she didn't remember.

And what was worse? Tristan picked *Jimmy's* word over hers, she cried as he buried the blunt head of his cock swiftly inside of her.

What the fuck?

Tristan was supposed to only side with her, she told herself as he stuffed her full of him.

"Tell me the truth, baby girl," he pushed as his arm wrapped possessively around her waist. "Good girls tell the truth."

Words flew from her mind. Her fullness paralyzed her thoughts and when he withdrew all Gemma could do was mourn the loss of him. She was so fucked.

Literally.

What little mindfulness she had left escaped her when she deflected, wailing his name instead. No matter how she called for him, he continued his deliberate thrusts, fully expecting her to answer. Gemma clamped down on Tristan as a final plea for his attention, gaining yet only another snarl from him and the excruciating pain of missing yet another orgasm.

Lights above them temporarily burned her eyes while two silent shots zipped past them ricocheting around the room. Gemma reached out to cling to Tristan if he'd allow it but failed. He was already above her, his own weapon in his grasp, pressed firmly against her forehead. A moment later, Gemma realized he'd reestablished his control over her, deep between her legs.

"Is this really all we are?" she whimpered.

"You tell me, *Detective,*" Tristan grumbled.

"What?"

Tristan ignored her, leaving Gemma to lean her head back in defeat.

She was a dead woman.

"What was your directive?"

Tristan thrusted into her slowly then, keeping her attention on just how much control he had over this situation. He had all of it. Every desirable sensation licked its way through her system, while the reminder of death still hailed her through a darkened, loaded barrel.

"I set my *own* directive. I wasn't sent by my department," she replied, her lip trembling as she answered. "I wanted to take you down because no one else could."

Tears streamed down her cheeks as she blew her own cover.

"Crying because you got caught?" Tristan questioned, his tone bitter. "Childish…"

Gemma shook her head.

"Bullshit!" he roared, making her jump. "How's it feel to be on my bad side? To know that the last thing you'll feel is my cock inside you as I pull the trigger?"

There wasn't time to answer, nor was there a good enough one to give.

Tristan pumped into her harder, making the point that he owned her completely thereafter.

"Do you have any idea," he snarled as his palm came down hard on the desk beside her.

His body filled her view completely; beautifully, like he always had. Focusing on him rather than his threatening piece was the game he played. She'd learned from him, his technique, just how he could manipulate others into owning up to their faults. She'd even used them against her competition, ruining lives and love before he'd even had a chance to move on without her.

"…how many sniveling pieces of shit," he grunted as he angled himself a little higher to reach her.

Gemma couldn't help the way she tilted her hips to accept him despite it all. He's close, she knows, but his message is clear as he grinds the cold metal against her temple. This isn't for her. It's for him, like it's always been.

"...beg for their lives," he continues, "*fuck*…"

"So good," Gemma lets slip as she settles into his rhythm, but she goes ignored, like she's a thing.

"...when they betray me?"

"I didn't… betray. You…" she desperately pushed out.

"Liar!" Tristan snarled.

"I wanted this," she huffed, clenching around him as his thrusts became erratic.

"You wanted to put me away!"

"At first," she agreed and she watched his anger multiply. "Yes. At first, it was all I wanted."

Hollers below them grew louder as her years of detective work came to fruition. "River Cove PD! Drop your weapons!" shouted from officers should have brought her relief but it did the opposite.

Gemma leaned into the piece that he still gripped tightly, then added, "But I fell in love."

Tristan worked his jaw, the anger palpable. Fear climbed over his collar the more she entertained the thought of loving a man like him.

"Do you remember our first time?" Gemma asked, wordlessly begging for him to just pull the trigger.

His silence was damning.

"It was in the pantry at your aunt's house. She kept asking for things so you came in her sugar for disrupting," Gemma sniffled. "I loved you then."

Despite his frown, she continued. "I struggled with your reputation. What I thought I knew. I didn't care anymore," Gemma shook her head. "I just wanted us. This… I thought I made that clear."

"Open the door!" hollered another officer, while boots still tracked up the stairs to where he held her.

Tristan's silence cut her further. She shouldn't have said anything at all.

"I hated them, the other women that lined up for you," she added as he stilled inside of her, overwhelmed by the scene unfolding around them.

"Line the door," the officer bellowed as a result of being ignored.

They were done waiting. It had been years after all, and he had her, a detective of the law, held at gunpoint and what could be classified as an active rape if the evidence department had anything to say about it. If they didn't kill him right upon breaking in and entering, there's no telling what they'd charge him for.

Regret snared her. She should have just disappeared back then. At least her double life wouldn't have backfired the way it did now; her lover coming face to face with his own fatal blow. It was all unfolding far too soon.

Gemma's chest heaved as she fought the need to move. She didn't deserve his mercy, she told herself, he'd fulfill her role with some other whore later that night. What they had wasn't real, she added while she desperately tried to fight back the next wave of tears that threatened to fall.

"Just pull the trigger," she whispered to Tristan, who still looked like his whole world was crumbling before his eyes.

The slide of his cock out of her, only to slide back home was a surprise. Her eyes flew open, looking up into his. He looked untamed, completely off the rails mad as he pummeled into her. He marginally slid the gun away from her and faced it outward before gripping her tightly against him.

"Come," he commanded.

Gemma frowned in confusion unsure of what to make of his decision.

"Don't then," he grumbled as he found his release, pouring himself into her.

"Oh *fuck*," she mewled as the flat of his stomach slapped roughly against her sensitive nub.

"Tristan Giridano," Lieutenant Rutherford called out, surrounded by officers that rushed in to secure the premises. "We have a warrant for your arrest…"

The pressure was too much to ignore now. Her release claimed their space as Gemma cried out,

cutting them off completely. “I love you,” she whimpered, pulling him down to her with finality.

* * *

Her fingers entwined in his hair while she let the police force watch her fully come apart on him. His moan, the single best sound to come out of him since being outed up there was rudely interrupted by a safety release. Gemma continued to pulse around the love of her life as she rolled him over for dominance, the fired shot hurtled deeply within the soft flesh of her ass.

Gemma’s scream caught deeply in her throat.

“Fuck,” Tristan roared, pulling his weapon up to protect the both of them.

His arm stayed wrapped posessively around her body as he pointed his weapon back at them in warning.

“Which one of you fuckers shot her?” he growled, gaining no answer, just cop banter and codes throughout their radios about shots being fired.

They had no idea what kind of war they started. They fired at him, he shook his head in disbelief. They came into his space, uninvited, unwarranted, and shot at him?

His baby girl, the one he outed, the only one in his life that told him she loved him, sacrificed herself for him. He, who threatened her life at his own hand, within seconds it registered just where the bullet would have breached him, tearing through enough tissue for him to hemorrhage on the spot.

Her cries were hushed between them as she tried to keep herself calm.

“Run,” he heard her say, wordlessly requesting the gun in his hand.

Slipping out of her never quite felt like the last time as it did that night.

“I won’t let them take you,” she whined, then pitifully called for a medic.

“No one else is coming for you,” Tristan fumbled with his words. “I’m all you’ve got.”

“Then I have enough,” she replied, howling in pain as she turned to put each bullet in his revolver to good use. Men and women looking to deflect landed them with non-life-threatening injuries that would promise an early retirement for most, except for the one he referred to as Jimmy. Gemma unloaded on that sonuvabitch as if he killed her in the first place.

Maybe he did, Tristan considered the possibility briefly as shrieks called more officers up the stairs.

“We gotta go, baby girl,” he managed to scoop her up into his arms and hustle across the room to his waiting chopper.

“Leave me,” were her last words before shock took over.

Her blood drained from her there, the color in her skin along with it.

“No, no… no… no! You stay with me, you understand, Gemma? I need you,” Tristan hurried out, his body trembling like hers as they settled into the bird. “You can’t go. Not without me.”

Those were the last words she heard before shock blanketed the events of her night with a thick, impenetrable mass. It smothered away life as she knew it; erasing the paths she took to get there. And if she did wake up from this, Gemma taunted the notion with hope, she knew nothing would be the same.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

There’s an opportunity to tell a story at every angle and Colla Triti is always willing to explore them. She’s written within many different genres, all of which focus on their plots, the depth of her characters and their growth throughout her books. She's a prolific author who started by dabbling in fanfiction and then ventured onward to online libraries such as Dreame and GoodNovel under the pen name: LostInQueue.

Her plans for the future are to cut her teeth with TNRC and publish a few stories on Amazon as standalone stories later this year.

For more on her work, please check out her website here: https://lostinqueue.wixsite.com/my-site.

SAVAGE KING



BY ANGELA BREEN

The captor of a mafia boss, Serenity has no hope for a future. She's to be sold off to pay for her father's debts. Until her usual midnight visit to the house library, leads her down a new path. Her future may just be with the most Savage King the Mafia has ever seen.

The thing about being sold to pay off your father's debt is, you throw things like love and respect out the window. Instead, you might hope for survival. And if you're really lucky, you can dream of escaping back into the real world. It might be harsh and difficult, but at least you're free. Free to choose. Free to bear the consequences of your own actions rather than being beaten for mistakes that normally wouldn't even get a raised eyebrow. This is my story. Serenity Basel, daughter of a baker, sold into a life of pain and suffering. But don't worry about me. I'll get my happily ever after.

* * *

I'm standing in the backroom of a bar with my dad. The man he's speaking to is looking at me and only me. I cross my arms over my chest and turn away—it seems to pique his interest. His dark green eyes are full of something I've never seen before, though I've seen it over and over since. Greed, desire, and worst of all, entitlement. I can't hear my father's words, but I know when the man demands me as payment because he gets angry. Then, I hear the last words he ever spoke. "Over my dead body."

The man looks at him, bored, before shrugging and shooting my father several times in the chest. All I can do is watch as my father bleeds out on the cold concrete floor. Hands grab me, so many hands. Pulling me away. My eyes lock with his, and I swear he mouths the words "I'm sorry" before I'm pulled from the room. But I know that's my imagination. He was dead before he hit the floor.

I shoot up in bed, the adrenaline from the dream still pounding through my veins, tears streaming down my cheeks. The nearly-full moon bathes the room in a bluish glow. My prison. Full of cushy pillows and nice fabrics. Sadly, it's only a matter of time before Zair, the man who murdered my father, figures out how to get his uncle to let him have me. Right now, my father's debt is what's keeping me safe, but with each day, I know my time is running out. I can see it in Zair's eyes. His uncle, Richard, wants to sell my virginity, but Zair, he wants it for himself. He wants me as his pet. Locked up to be used and abused at his leisure.

I pull my knees into my chest, a shudder passing through my body at the memory of his cold, evil gaze. I don't know why he looks different in my dreams. Zair killed my father, pulled me into this life. And Richard who stopped him from hurting me that night. But he wasn't an ally, either. He just wanted to get the most money for me. I'm an object to these people. A widget to be moved about for the highest profit. Or poked for the most pleasure.

Unable to sleep or even try, I slip out of bed and make my way to my closet. I'd discovered a way to move about the house early in my stay here. Placing both palms on the back panel of the closet, I give it a push until it comes loose. I slip inside the wall and move ten paces toward the outer wall, then turn down another corridor. Another eight paces and I reach the shaft for the dumbwaiter. Grabbing the ropes for it, I lean over the shaft and lift the door. I slip one leg through the door and haul myself into the library. And yes, I almost fell to my death the first time I did this. But when your life isn't your own, there are worse things.

Sliding the dumbwaiter door closed, I turn, expecting my sanctuary of books and exactly zero people. I stop dead in my tracks. In the chair by the entryway is a man. His icy, blue eyes glued to my every action, a copy of "The Art of War" by Sun Tzu held out under the dim glow of a desk lamp.

I swallow hard. I've never seen him before. His forearms are covered in tribal tattoos that

disappear under rolled up sleeves of a white button-down. He had at least a week's worth of growth on his cheeks. His eyes looked right through me, sending a chill down my spine.

I turn to make a hasty escape, but he's there in an instant, one hand blocking my exit, the other on the wall. Trapping me between his arms.

"Hold on now," his accented voice I couldn't quite place cooed in my ear. His breathing heavy. It's obvious what he wants. I've gotten a crash course in men in the last sixteen days. I should be repulsed, afraid even. But I'm not. My body reacts to him like it never has before. "Who are you?"

"If you don't know, I won't be the one to tell," I said, my voice shaking as I shifted in his arms to meet his gaze. He was too close. Leaning over to keep the door closed. I pressed myself into the wall in an effort to get some space, clear my head. Unrelenting, he closed the small gap quickly, his eyes traveling over me. "You spend a lot of time in libraries at two in the morning?"

He chuckled, and his breath fell over me. He'd been drinking. Regardless of his initial allure, that was a bad sign. But if he took a liking to me, perhaps he wouldn't rat me out to Zair or Richard. I needed my library escapes, to lose myself in the pages of novels, or I'd lose my sanity. And the romance selection here was amazing.

He slid the back of his knuckles up the bare skin on my arm, brushing against my nipple before he pinched a lock of my brown hair between his fingers. "Only when I can't sleep."

My eyes shift from his fingers playing with my hair to his face. He looked sad. Exhausted.

"Where are you from?" I ask.

"Here, but I grew up in Italy." That explained the slight lilt. His lips were full and left slightly open after answering my question. I wondered what he'd taste like. Giving myself a mental shake, I put that thought to rest.

His attention shifted from my hair back to my eyes. "Seriously, who are you?"

"You tell me who you are first." I puffed out my chest only to realize it was a mistake as my breast pressed into his hand. A smile curled the edges of his lips as he looked at our new place of contact. I quickly shrink back into the wall.

"I'm Conrad." The name means more than it should after sixteen days of almost no contact with anyone here. But even I know this is the one person who can foil Zair's plans. He's the other. The kid whose father ran the family business but was killed years ago. Zair and Conrad shared an uncle. Richard, who was currently the head of this branch of Italian mafia. Think Tony Soprano with no kids to take over but oodles of nephews. Despite the other competition, the only two anyone talked about as real contenders were Zair and Conrad.

Conrad smiled at me, pulling me back from my mental tally of their family tree. A strange yearning shot through my body. *He should always smile*. "I take it that means something to you."

"It means something to everyone here," I say. "So much that even I've heard of you."

"And who are you, that no one would talk openly to you about me? Please don't tell me you're Zair's sister." He pushed back, distaste marring his features.

A laugh bubbled up in my throat before I could stop it. "No."

He leaned back in, his smile back in place as he watched me laugh. "So, your name?"

Fear overtook me as I watched him. "I'm no one."

"Come on now," he shifted in front of me, leaning in. God, I wished he'd kiss me already. The suspense was killing me. "I told you who I am. Turnabout is fair play."

"My name is—Serenity." To my complete surprise, his eyes lit up in recognition, and he took a step back. My brows knit together. "You know who I am?"

Nodding, he wiped a hand down his face.

It's officially my turn to invade his space. I take three large steps forward, two in pursuit of him. His last step back causes him to trip and land on the couch that ran along the wall. I had a choice—sit next to him and risk his leaving or sit on his lap.

The prospect of actually knowing what my future held pushed me to do the latter. I placed one knee on one side of his lap and swung the other over him before he could escape. The hem of my nightgown sliding up my thighs.

His hands flew into the air as if he were surrendering. "What are you doing?"

"Tell me what you know," I demand, leaning in to stare him down. The feel of his erection beneath me gave me a thrill. I rocked my hips back, pressing into him with nothing but thin cotton underwear between me and his gray slacks.

"You're a virgin, and you're worth a lot of money. They're holding an auction. Now, get off me!"

My eyes narrowed. "It doesn't bother you at all that the empire you will inherit is built with virgin blood?" I ground my hips into him, and a moan escaped me as his hardness hit parts of me, never before touched.

"I'm here to hand the thing over to Zair and get back to Italy, where I belong." His hands were firmly on my hips to prevent any further exploration on my part, but there was longing in his eyes. "You've been kissed, though, haven't you? No way a girl like you gets to twenty-five without even a kiss."

His hands on me had sent my body into a frenzy. He made no advance and refrained from anything sexual, save for the fact that he didn't lift me off of his raging hard on. I was losing my damn mind.

I shake my head. His eyes ignited like I'd hit a switch with my admission. He flipped me onto my back on the couch, positioning himself on top and between my legs. He smells so good, I just want him to do it already. *Get it over with, and then they can forget about me*. Pushing my arms up over my head, he began to grind his hips into my core. A moan escaped me. He placed a finger over my lips, shaking his head.

"You have to be quiet, or we'll get caught," he warned in a husky whisper. I closed my lips, nodding. "Good girl."

Conrad slid his free hand down my side, knuckles grazing my nipple on their way down to my hips. He slips the hem of my nightgown up further exposing my belly, his thumb pressing into my hip flexors. Pleasure ignites. My entire body is buzzing in anticipation of more. *I want more*.

Burying his head into my neck, he sucks at the tender flesh with a low growl that vibrates through me. I swallow hard as his weight presses me into the couch. He explores every inch of me except where I want him most. *Why am I dressed? Who invented clothes anyway?*

"Are you going to kiss me?" I ask, breathless. *What the hell is he doing to me?* If anyone had said making out was like this, I would have called them a bold-faced liar.

"Patience," he rasped in my ear before nipping my lobe. "If all I get is one taste, I'm going to make it last."

"You can have whatever you want," I say before I can stop myself. A laugh rumbles through him.

"Conrad?" The voice pulls me from the heightened sense of pleasure right back into reality. That voice was engrained in my brain. I struggled violently beneath Conrad. He pushed himself up but didn't get off me, he just frowned.

"It's Zair!" I hissed. He shot up, eyes darting to the closed door. I scurried to the dumbwaiter. He caught me with one leg through the hole and captured my lips with his. I opened my mouth to protest, but he slid his tongue inside. Burying his hand in my hair, he pulls me hard against him. God, I wanted more time. Wanted more of *him*.

Pulling back, I grabbed one of the dumbwaiter ropes and nearly fell down the damn shaft. My leg hooked the wall at my knee, my other knee slamming into the wall as Conrad held me up by my bicep. Gripping his arm, I pulled myself up enough to grab both ropes and get my foot onto the ledge. With some hesitation, he released me, and I sat inside the wall as adrenaline from my near-death experience began to pound through me.

A chuckle bubbled up from my throat. My first kiss damn near killed me. My eyes locked with his, a mischievous smile on his lips as he closed the door.

Zair's voice stripped the happiness from my chest.

"What the hell are you doing in here?" It was Zair. If he wanted to, Conrad could've turned me in right then, and the one tiny piece of solace I had would have been gone forever.

"I was reading," he said. "You should take advantage of this library. There are a lot of excellent titles in here."

"My mother put it together, it's mostly smut," Zair spat. "Hurry up and get downstairs. Richard wants us both in the basement."

"Sounds kinky," Conrad chuckled. Their voices became muffled as they moved away, toward the hall. Richard was their uncle and the man who currently held the listing for my virginity, and with it, my life. I didn't sleep that night. Haunted by Conrad's kisses and icy blue eyes. *Would he be the hero or another monster, hell-bent on destroying me?*

* * *

The following day was longer than any of the others. Prior to my midnight visit to the library, all I had was the promise of a horrible existence as a sex slave. But now, the taste of Conrad's lips and his woodsy, fresh scent haunted me. I watched as the sun refused to set, tempted to go to the library anyway.

My hand was on the closet door when a knock sounded. Maisey, the housekeeper, entered, a beautiful, red gown in her hands. She laid it on the bed and turned to face me, hands on her hips.

"Are you ready?"

"For what?"

"Dinner," the older woman scoffed. "Didn't anyone tell you? You're to have dinner with the family tonight."

I frowned, and my stomach sank. "Why?"

"Hell if I know," she spat. "They keep you locked up like a damn animal, and I have no idea why they do that either."

I glared at her. She knew exactly why I was here. She had the decency to give me a sheepish look before pushing past me to the closet.

The hairs on the back of my neck raised. A shiver ran down my spine, and I turned away from her, toward the door. Sure enough, Zair was standing just inside it, leaning against the frame, his eyes fixed on his fingernails. He looked up slowly, and a feeling of dread filled me—this couldn't be good. Could I make it to the library? Would he fit in the walls to follow me? I knew the rage it would ignite. And eventually, he would find me.

He was next to me before I could make my decision. Pushing me up against the wall, he eyed me with a chastising look. "You think you're so goddamn smart, don't you?"

"Uhmm," was all I managed before he punched the wall next to my head, I screamed.

"You little whore, throwing your ass around at the first guy you see. I could have saved you. I would have—"

I seethed, anger building in my chest. I forced the words out violently, like venom from a snake's fangs, before I could stop them, "Abused me? Raped me the first chance you got!"

"It's not rape if you want it," he grabbed his belt, tugging at it, and I realized exactly what he was here for. I looked to my right, but Maisey was gone, and there were four men adjusting their belts by the door. *Fuck*. "I'm gonna rock your world, and then he's not going to want you anymore."

I shook my head. "What are you talking about?" Then, it hit me. Richard found a buyer. "Richard will not be happy about this!"

He smiled. "Don't you worry about me. My boys here will hop on after me," Zair leaned in, pressing his body against mine, his sickly-sweet scent of sweat and body spray filling my head and turning my stomach. His hot breath violated my ear and neck. "When I'm through with you, it's off to the brothel. If you'd just let me fuck you that first night, none of this would have happened. This was *your choice*."

Bile rose up in my throat, and I heaved. He shoved me hard as my lunch landed on the carpet.

"Nice try, bitch," he laughed as he threw me onto the bed, rolling me onto my stomach. My sweatpants were jerked away—fear and anger were the next things to come up in my throat. But they weren't the fierce roar I'd hoped, they escaped my lips as more of a strangled cry into my blankets. I knew this was going to happen. I'd prepared for it as best I could—but this was so much worse than I'd imagined.

Just as he grabbed my hips and yanked me back so he could access me, he was gone. With a *thud*, I hit the floor, pulling my pants up and scuttling away from the commotion. I heard shouting and fists hitting flesh, but I couldn't make out any of it. Everything seemed to be happening so slowly, I couldn't focus. Until Conrad's voice filled the space. He roared, "She's mine!" as he struck Zair in the face again and again. Other men tried to stop him, only to be attacked by man-turned-feral beast.

I watched the chaos until it stopped as suddenly as it had started. Conrad put his hand under my chin, staring into my eyes. His voice was calm and quiet, but I couldn't tell what he was saying. Then, he scooped me up and took me down a corridor I didn't know existed. My eyelids were so heavy. I let them close and just listened to the rapid rhythm of his heart.

He opened and then slammed a door once we were through. Placing me gently on the bed, he moved away from me so quickly, I was left longing for the safety I felt in his presence. I followed him with my eyes, my body frozen in time. He placed both hands on the wall in front of him and put his head down. His knuckles were bloody, and his body shook with every ragged breath.

Standing, I struggled to see his face, leaning to one side and then the other as I took slow, deliberate steps toward him. Reaching out, I placed my hand on his shoulder, and he turned so quickly, I yelped. He slid his arm around me and pulled me to him, pressing me into his chest.

"Conrad?" I asked. "What just happened?"

"I'll kill him," he growled into my neck before he started nuzzling me. His scent washed over me, and I shivered. I stood on my tiptoes to press my face into his neck. Opening my mouth, I pulled at the tender flesh, giving a sharp suck. A low moan escaped him. "Don't play with me, Ciliegina. Not unless you want it all."

I pulled back to look at him. "All what?"

He took my hand from his shoulder and pressed it into his crotch. Even through his slacks, I could tell exactly what he was offering. Nervous energy shot through me. I offered a smile as I stepped back.

“That’s what I thought,” he whispered before stepping forward and placing a kiss on my forehead.

“Conrad?” I asked again.

“I made a deal with my uncle,” he said. “It was the only way I could save you.”

I frowned. “What?”

He offered a half smile. “I’m taking over for him. And we’re getting married tomorrow.”

My eyes grew wide. Marriage? “I’m sorry, I think I’m still in shock—I thought you said we were getting married.” I was laughing hysterically by the time I finished my sentence.

He was laughing along with me, but much slower. Nervously. “We are. Midnight tomorrow.”

I sobered, swallowing hard.

He dropped down on one knee and took my hand. “As long as it’s what you want.”

The resounding ‘yes’ caught in my throat as I tried to process what was happening. “What does marriage mean to you?”

His icy blue eyes bored into mine, blazing sincerity as he spoke. “I will honor, respect, and protect you. And in time, if you’ll let me, I’ll love you.”

I couldn't stop the smile from spreading over my face. This might be crazy, but a month ago, I thought sex slaves were only drug addicts and runaways looking for cash. I opened my arms and nodded my agreement. He stood, pulling me against him, his hard muscles capturing me in a glorious hug as he spun us around the room. Even in that moment, I knew this brief happiness was shrouded in darkness.

* * *

It was approaching nine in the evening when I heard a knock on the door. Conrad had gone to dinner without me and ordered me to lock the door behind him and not open it for anyone.

Assuming it was him, I rushed to the door. A frown covered my face as Maisey stood on the other side.

“I thought you were Conrad.”

“You’ve stirred up all kinds of trouble now,” she said, pushing her way into the room with a large box in her hands. “I just got this from the dressmaker. He was in a tizzy. A dress like this on such short notice and for someone like you.”

The back-handed comments were generally easily ignored, but knowing I had Conrad in my corner gave me a voice I hadn’t been able to express in nearly a month.

“Someone like me?” I asked. “You mean someone who was kidnapped against her will and sold for the pleasure of others?”

She glared. “Zair’s gone completely off the rails. He’s gonna get himself killed or do something real stupid.”

“And that’s my fault?”

“Yes.” She spit the word.

I stared at her, my teeth clenched painfully as I chose my next words carefully, digging deep into what little I knew of her to cause the most pain. “You’re pathetic. You think because you get paid to clean up their messes, you’re better than me or the other women they like to trade in. But you’re not. They own you just like they own me. And you’re pissed because I found a way out in less than a month, and you’ll be stuck here forever.”

Her lip curled as she threw the dress box onto the bed. “Try it on so he can get the alterations

done."

* * *

I had already fallen asleep by the time Conrad returned. He slid into bed behind me, slipped an arm under mine, and pulled me against the hard planes of his body. He buried his face in my hair and placed a kiss on my head.

Something hard slid between my legs, but he didn't move. I wasn't so naive not to know what it was, but *what was I supposed to do with it?* He seemed perfectly content to go to sleep. It's not that he persisted—it seemed more a consequence of spooning. But was it polite to leave a man who saved you from a lifetime of rape and abuse— well, hard? Who was I kidding? I didn't want this to be taken from me by someone like Zair. I wanted to experience it with someone like Conrad.

I shifted slightly, trying to see him, my shoulder pressed to his chest, and he pulled me closer to him. His cock dug harder into my center. Soft lips pressed into mine while his stubble scraped against my face. I pulled back, and he cupped my cheek.

"Did dinner go well?"

"As well as it could. Richard feels he's made the right choice and started going over the logistics. I'll need to shadow him for some time still."

"I can't live in this house, knowing what goes on." I shook my head. I couldn't live out my fairy tale knowing other women were being put through the fate I escaped.

"We discussed it," he nodded, kissing my bare shoulder as his hand found my nipple. "We have several options, but our business partners will be the largest hurdle."

"Turn them in to the authorities," I said simply. He froze in his exploration, propping himself up on his elbow.

"It's not that simple—it will create a blood feud with those either not imprisoned or those released after a few years."

"You don't think it would shake things up enough that we could rebuild, find new allies, and perhaps someone else to take over altogether?"

He cocked his head to the side. "It's something to think about for sure. What have you been doing the past few weeks? Working out a plot to take down the mafia?"

I shrugged. "Maybe. Between bouts of crippling anxiety and hopelessness."

He kissed my neck again, and my hips thrust backward, finding his now rock-hard cock. "Want me to take care of that for you?"

He sighed. "Unless you want to lose your virginity tonight, don't do that again."

"I thought I was supposed to," I replied with a frown.

"I thought you wanted to wait until we were wed."

I looked away from him to the window and my moon. My only companion these last few weeks. A million things could go wrong in the next twenty-four hours. "Maybe it's the anxiety talking, but there's no time like the present."

Before I could say anything else, he pulled my underwear down to cup my ass. "The first time isn't always the best for women. It's awkward and new." He slapped my ass, and wetness pooled between my legs. Who knew I liked being spanked? "Are you sure?"

"Yes," I breathed as his hands slid over my bare skin, tugging my shirt up over my head. He wasn't even touching a particularly private part of my body, but he made every inch of me sing with

need. I was completely attuned to his every move. Sliding my underwear the rest of the way off, he spread my legs, and just when I thought he'd finally touch me, he grazed over my center, barely brushing my clit as his hand skimmed up to cupped my breast. He pinched my nipple between his thumb and forefinger, and my body shuddered. Moaning his approval, he laid his body between my legs, his bare, rock-hard abs pressing against my clit as he nibbled and sucked on my neck. I thought I was going to explode.

I moved my hips to slide my clit against his stomach. He chuckled against my neck as he moved lower, pulling one nipple into his mouth while he pinched and twisted the other just hard enough to make me see stars.

"Conrad, please, you're torturing me," I rasped.

"I like how you say my name," his voice rumbled through him, only adding to the pleasure of each lick and suck of my nipple.

"Conrad," I said again. A smile spread over my face.

With a light laugh, he worked his way lower. "What are you doing?"

"Getting you ready."

"Ready?"

"Trust me, *Ciliegina*."

I swallowed hard, watching as this large man positioned himself between my legs. Watching him stare at a part of my body never touched by a man before made my heart thunder. And when he leaned down and placed a kiss on my clit, a pulsing throb started in my core.

"Oh, my God."

He looked up at me, half a smile on his beautiful face. "God has nothing to do with this, *Ciliegina*."

Before I could ask what that nickname meant, he licked my clit, slow and swirling. My back arched of its own accord, and my hand buried itself in his hair, pulling him against me. "Don't stop, Conrad."

He didn't respond, but rather, he persisted with the assault on my body, slipping one long, rough finger inside me. I thought I was going to die from the pleasure. It felt strange and new, and I wanted more. *More of him.*

"Conrad, please, I need more."

He found a rhythm, flicking his tongue over my clit from side to side. Instead of waves of pleasure, it was constant, building and building as it filled every cell of my body, sending me right over the edge, into a frenzy of convulsions. Waves ripped through me over and over. He didn't stop until every tremor had been wrung from my body.

Wiping his mouth, he climbed up me. "Are you ready?"

"There's more?" I almost whined. I couldn't imagine moving, let alone participating in more of that.

"The main event, *mi Ciliegina*."

"I don't know if I can move. I don't want it to be bad for y—"

"Shhh," he soothed into my neck. "You don't have to do anything, so just relax and enjoy."

I watched as he positioned himself between my legs. He pulled back to look me in the eye. "Are you ready?"

I nodded, brows knitted in determination.

He moved forward, fast and hard. A yelp escaped my lips as he filled me to the brim, and a sharp pain overrode the pleasure. He froze, allowing me to adjust to his length and girth. The longer we

stayed connected, the more the pain faded, and I wanted him to move. It felt so good. Strange but good. I rocked my hips beneath him.

"Be patient," he scolded, but he angled his hips, and ecstasy unlike before, shot through me from somewhere deep inside. I wrapped my legs around his lean hips and urged him on. He smiled at me before covering my lips with his. His tongue swept over mine as he found a pace to please us both. Before long, his body convulsed, and his weight pressed me into the mattress.

I nuzzled into his neck and gave a sigh of contentment. I never thought this would happen. *I thought my life was over.* Thought I'd never be free. But somehow, I'd found hope in the arms of a Dom.

* * *

The sun shown, birds chirped, and best of all, I was outside! My bare feet in the grass, I wriggled my toes. I hadn't been outside in nearly a month. The scent of saltwater from the pool to my right gave the yard a beachy vibe I couldn't get enough of. Though, there was part of me that was ready to run away just because I could. I even had my cell phone back. As long as I was here at midnight for a moonlit ceremony, Conrad said I could do anything I wanted today.

Judging by the disapproving scowl zeroing in on me from the patio, this was not what he had in mind.

"Why don't you go see your mother?" he offered as he closed the folder he was looking over. "She's got to be worried sick."

I frowned. *I missed her, but what would I say ?* "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why?"

"Is, 'I'm marrying a mafia boss 'cause dad owed the wrong people a shit ton of money' any better than not knowing?"

"You can't run from this. And why tell her I'm a mafia boss? I mean, until tonight I'm not anyway. Just tell her you met a sexy Italian man, I swept you off your feet, and you're madly in love." His smile was contagious.

"Who says I'm madly in love?" I teased, even as the ache in my core made itself known with each tiny movement. I might not be madly in love, but I felt something for this man. And it grew stronger by the minute. I could tell by the way my heart swelled at the sound of his voice or the sight of him, making it hard to breathe.

How could I be happy here? Where I thought I'd come to die? And yet, I was. Sure, there was a lot to do, but Conrad was up for the challenge.

"Sir," a man in a black suit rushed over and whispered in Conrad's ear. His grimace was rivaled only by the seriousness in his eyes as they shot at me.

I took a step toward him.

"Richard has been killed. Sometime in the night," Conrad informed me. The man speaking to him looked shocked, eyes darting from me to Conrad.

"What does that mean?"

"It means we're not safe," he said. More men approached, one I recognized as another man in line for the title "boss." He clapped Conrad on the back and looked to him as a leader.

My phone vibrated in my hands, pulling my attention from the men. My mother's number was displayed on the screen, and for a reason I couldn't explain, all my protests from before vanished.

“Mom?” I said, holding the phone to my ear as I took a few steps away.

“Baby?” Her voice was strained like she’d been crying, and I hated myself for not running down to her bakery as soon as Conrad had given me the go-ahead.

“Mom, it's me, I’m so sorry I didn—”

“Mommy can’t come to the phone right now.” Zair’s voice sent bile up my throat. Oh, God. I looked over my shoulder to Conrad, but he was walking away. One man still stood by the table where we’d shared breakfast. He looked bored and took no notice of my panic.

“What do you want, Zair?”

“The same thing I’ve always wanted. You. You’re mine. My little whore. I don’t care what kind of deal that prick brokered, and no one else will soon enough. I’m the strongest, I’m the natural pick to take over.”

“You’re pathetic,” I snapped before I could stop myself.

My mother screamed somewhere away from the receiver.

“Don't hurt her!” I shouted. The man watching me was still indifferent to my situation.

“Get your ass down to your mom’s shop right now. Just you, or I’ll kill her before you get out of the car!”

* * *

Anxiety and adrenaline fought for top spot in my chest, sending waves of nausea through me as I struggled to stand outside my mother’s shop. I’d left the phone, praying Conrad would know to come here when he saw it. Zair probably wouldn’t kill me right away. Maybe I could make it. I’d slid a kitchen knife up my sleeve with a plan to kill him before he got the chance to touch me. But I wasn’t optimistic about my chances.

Taking a deep breath, I pushed the door to enter the shop. Usually a busy place, it was eerily quiet. No employees bustling about the pastry cases, no customers, and no children running by on their new-found sugar rush.

I made my way to the kitchen. It felt like exploring a ghost town as I pushed on to the storage room in the back. It was dark, with a little light from the door on the other side that went directly into the shop itself. Rows and rows of flour, sugar, and baking necessities stood before me.

“Mom?” I asked. *He’d said the bakery, right?* Great, I was about to kill my mother because I couldn’t listen to directions!

A muffled cry from the back corner drew my attention. I raced over to see her on the floor with her hands and feet bound behind her, a gag in her mouth. Her eyes were full of unshed tears, and her cheeks were streaked, but otherwise, she appeared unharmed.

“Oh, god, mom!” Forgetting everything else, I rushed to untie her hands. She shook her head violently, and I moved my attention to the knot holding the gag in place. After what felt like a lifetime, it came loose. I glanced around the room before focusing on her bound hands.

“Where is he?” I asked as her hands came free.

“I don’t know. We made the call, and then he put the gag in my mouth and left through the kitchen.

“We need to get out of here, call the police.”

“He took my phone and disconnected the bakery phone. I know he won’t be long—he’s expecting you.”

She wasn’t wrong. The ties around her ankles loosened, and she got to work getting free.

"Where have you been?" she demanded.

"Would you believe me if I said I met this amazing Italian guy and lost track of time?"

"No."

"Eh, worth a shot." I shrugged.

"When we're safe, you're gonna spill the beans."

"Doubtful," I stood, offering her a hand as the door to the bakery swung open, slamming against the wall. I bit back a shriek as we both jumped. Yanking mom in the opposite direction, we crouched down behind the flour bags.

"You're faster than I thought." Zair's voice was excited. "But not that fast."

Listening to his voice travel, I stepped silently toward the kitchen door. I slipped the blade from my sleeve and clutched it in my fist as we moved, my mother's hands on my back so I didn't have to wonder if she was still there.

"Come out, come out, come out, little mouse. Or I'll gut your mother right in front of you."

Fear welled up in me as we persisted. Nearly to the kitchen door. I reached back with my free hand, taking my mother's. I ran for the door. We slammed into it full tilt, but it didn't budge. *Fuck!*

I grabbed her and ran for the shop, only to crash into a solid wall of flesh. I threw my blade forward, but he caught my wrist. My mother slapped him, and a twisted smile spread over his face. Yanking the blade from my grip, it sliced my arm. I cried out as he turned me around to face my mother, blade to my throat.

"She's mine now," he cocked his head to the side as he inhaled my scent. "You're going to wish I'd just killed you, Mommy. When she screams out for you, you won't be able to help her. When you try, I'll gut you, so you can watch a little longer as you die nice and slow.

"You're sick," I spat.

"Yeah," he laughed. "That's half the fun."

He grabbed the front of my dress and ripped the fabric exposing my breasts to my mother as well as anyone passing on the street. He groped me with sticky, blood-covered hands, and I stared at the ceiling, desperate to be anywhere else. Even if only in my mind.

Glass shattering to the floor pulled me back to the present. And there, I saw Conrad. But his eyes were not the icy blue I'd fallen in love with. They were dark, savage. He cocked his head, taking in the sight of me. Zair's hands on me.

"You want to watch, too?" Zair asked excitedly, squeezing the blade harder into my trachea.

Conrad didn't respond. His eyes scanned the room, taking in details I could only guess at before lifting his arm and firing one round into Zair's shoulder. He flew backward, and I fought to control the knife as we fell. The blade *clanged* to the floor as yowls of pain filled the tiny space. Rolling away, I covered myself, and panic set in, tears now cascading down my face. My mother was with me in an instant, holding me as Conrad knelt in front of me. He cupped my cheek, giving me a once-over before picking up the knife and approaching the thrashing Zair.

Conrad placed a knee on Zair's hip and one hand on his shoulder before stabbing the blade into Zair's gut and slicing it open. He reached inside as Zair screamed in pain, pulling out long, stringy intestines through the wound. Holding them out, his eyes flicked from Zair's face to the organs. Then, he dropped them, spreading his arms as he did. Zair's cries were brutal, feral, and then they faded as he breathed his last breath or passed out from the shock.

Standing, Conrad approached me.

"*Mi Ciliegina*–"

"Get the hell away from my daughter!" My mother's cries were met with me struggling to be free

of her hold. Conrad was back now. His eyes had returned, and he was hurting as much as I was.

"It's okay, mom," I sobbed as I pushed toward him.

"Get the hell away from my wife!" he barked at her. She watched in shock as I threw my arms around him.

"What does *ciliegina* mean anyway?" I asked.

"Cherry." he chuckled, pulling me in close. I'd never felt safer than I did at this moment. In his blood-soaked arms.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Angela Breen is a romantic suspense author with a passion for true crime. She likes blending her interests in her writing. Love stories are rarely picture perfect. They can be both pretty and gritty and those are the kinds of stories Angela likes to bring to life.
When she's not writing, reading, or sailing, she's homeschooling her three children and joking around with her Marine Corps Veteran husband. Laughter is the best medicine.

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SECRET TRUTHS



BY REMY REIGNS

Alonzo Moretti excelled in his family's underground business. Unlike the other Moretti men, he found love at a young age. Carlie Wascom has overcome the fallout of being in love with a mobster. He has shown her family can be everything. However, he is unaware that she's been hiding something of her own. Will love prevail when secret truths come to light?

CHAPTER ONE - CARLIE



"Now that that's out of the way, and you both suffered through like champs, I made reservations for us. Lunch will be my treat for all the pain and suffering," I say, giggling to Aurora and Tera as we walk out of the bridal shop. We'd been there for hours and I felt bad. Neither of them are really into this girly stuff. I head to a neighboring cafe where they already have a table ready for us.

"We should be treating you to lunch," Aurora says, sitting down beside me. Tera sits across from us.

"You know I don't have family. You bitches have been with me every step of the way with this," I tell them as the waitress fills our glasses with the champagne I ordered when I made our reservation. As she leaves, I hold my glass in the air, and Aurora follows suit. We look at Tera, who's sitting there acting like she's never made a toast before. She finally grabs her water and holds it up since she's unable to drink. "The big day is tomorrow and my dress is now perfect!" I say with excitement. The sound of flute glasses clinking fills the air as we toast to me. The seamstress had to work all night on my wedding dress because it wasn't fitted right the first few times. As we finish our toast sips, the waitress approaches the table with a tray of food for all of us. I had told them ahead of time what we would be eating. Damn, I never realized how much I try to control things until now.

We fill our lunch with chatter about how Alonzo and I met. Tera has never really been told the story. Aurora, Alonzo's cousin, still laughs so hard when she tells the part of me being close to dead drunk on the floor at the party. It wasn't funny then, though. Although, it was worth it to have met my soon-to-be husband and Aurora.

"I'm running to the ladies' room," I say, standing from the table.

"How's the pregnancy going?" Aurora asks Tera as I start to walk off.

"It hasn't been bad. I haven't been sick at all, so..." Tera's words fade within the noisy cafe, but I hear them both laugh from a distance.

I walk into a nook that holds an entry table with a mirror above it and a plant standing tall in a planter's pot. The bathrooms are adjacent to one another with the table in between. The cute decor lining the small area reminds me of planning this wedding and how Aurora and Tera have been such a big help. The girls have been great and on track with this entire wedding thing. Aurora has been like my sister since day one. Although I haven't known Tera super long, she's been a delight, too. I couldn't imagine planning all this without either of them. Alonzo has been so busy with work, it feels as if I haven't seen him much lately.

As I stare into the mirror, the bad feeling that has been haunting me all day returns with a vengeance. I figured it would leave once my dress was finally perfect, but it still lingered in the pit of my stomach.

“Hello, there,” a familiar voice flows from beside me, breaking through my silent thoughts.

I glance to my left, but turn quickly and enter the ladies’ room. Rushing to the sink, I catch myself panicking in the mirror. I cup my hands, letting the water pool in their depths before splashing my face. No! This can’t be happening. Letting out a slow, deep breath, I straighten my shoulders. I can handle him.

I walk out of the bathroom with my head held high. I’m met by a man with an all too familiar face. My eyes grow larger as I take in this moment that I prayed would never happen.

“I said, hello there,” he chants with a soft smile. Closing more of the space between us, he uses the small table mirror to fix a strand of his white hair while gauging me through the mirror.

All my courage deserts me as my heart pounds harder in my chest. He has this way of intimidating people in his presence. I’ve seen it happen many times and this time is no different.

Looking in the mirror, I watch as he wipes his hands with one of those shitty brown paper towels from the bathroom dispensers. He doesn’t look up from his hands until he turns to face me. His voice, posture, and white head of hair are things that always give away who he is without seeing his face.

How did he find me? Has he known this whole time that I’ve been here? A million more questions whirl within my mind, but I can’t muster up enough courage to say shit. I look down, inhaling and trying my best to dig for what bravery I can. “Why are you here?” I ask timidly.

“I heard you were getting married and I couldn’t miss it,” he says. I can feel his devilish eyes peering down at me.

I look up, but cower under his gaze. I’ve never been strong enough against him. *Weak, Carlie*. No. I refuse to fall for his mind games this time. I straighten my back. “I have to go,” I retort, quickly turning on my heels.

Catching Tera’s eyes on me as I exit the intimate nook makes my heart pound even harder. She quickly shifts her eyes to Aurora and laughs. With all my anxiety, I didn’t notice we were in view of the restaurant attendees. I hope she doesn’t ask any questions.

I let out a small, calming breath as I walk back to the table. “Let’s go, ladies,” I say with a smile as soon as I get close enough to the girls. Throwing my purse across my body, I turn toward the exit, praying the entire time that he doesn’t approach me in front of Aurora and Tera.

Once we get into the car, I drive us toward the compound. The family is having dinner tonight and I’m so excited. It’s my favorite time. You can feel the togetherness and the bond in the air. Coming from my family… well, I’m not sure you could even call it that. A household, yeah, that’s more like it. A dad that works all hours of the day and late into the night. A mother that’s so hung up on herself, she’s naïve to the world around her. The nanny being the one raising the child. She was the only person I was able to converse with, except the butler on occasion. My parents could’ve at least given me a sibling to keep me company.

When we pull up to the big house, Aurora is the first one out. The children are in the yard playing with Cade, Franco, and Nico. She rushes toward them, going straight for a kiss from Cade.

Tera hesitates. I can sense the curiosity, see the consuming twinkle in her eyes, when she turns to me. She gives me a small smile before following in Aurora’s steps, heading toward her husband, Franco, and the kiss that is waiting for her. But I know; I know she saw me with *him*.

CHAPTER TWO - ALONZO



"Are you getting cold feet?" Dino asks, standing to my right. He's ordaining the ceremony for us today.

"Nah, but I've had this weird feeling all morning," I say, looking around the field Carlie picked out to host our wedding. Being in the wide open space hasn't helped this feeling that has plagued me all morning.

"It's probably cold feet, little brother."

"It's not that. I've known for years that I want Carlie for the rest of my life. Officially making her mine is the only thing left to do."

"Okay, what is it then?"

"I just feel like something bad is going to happen, and I can't squash it."

"Look, you both have waited for this day to arrive. It's only normal for you to feel like it won't go as planned. It's just nerves."

"Perhaps you're right."

"Always," he smirks, giving me a wink. "But look around. If anything happens, we have a lot of people that will have your back. Anyone in their right mind wouldn't be fucking with us on this day of all days."

My father and uncle Sal take their seats in the front row. Uncle Nico and Gretna sit on the bride's side with Aurora's husband, Cade. A few of our business associates show up and fill the rest of the audience. Dino is right. Someone would have to be deranged to mess with all of us here. Carlie doesn't have family around here, so she asked me to fill our wedding congregation. *"Thugs and friends… they'll all look the same in pictures."* Her words play in my head, causing me to smirk. Her personality is something else.

That woman always keeps me on my toes. The only thing that's ever scared me was the way she accepted who I am, and what family I come from, with no hesitation. For someone that didn't grow up with a lot of family, she sure does understand what the word family means. She's always asking how she can help with the business.

I take note of all the details Carlie has put into this day. She's relentless in all aspects of life that she pursues. The thick wooden table that holds everything for our sand ceremony sits proud and pretty behind the bridesmaids. Carlie insisted on having it even though I didn't, and still don't, understand how sand is supposed to *unionize* a couple. Franco had mentioned she could've picked a smaller and lighter table to display everything on after he and Cade struggled to carry it to its perfect spot. Carlie just smiled and thanked them for putting it just where she wanted it. The arranged seating curving around the altar and even her colors of choice for the flowers are unique and totally Carlie. I store

everything in my mind so I can dote on her later and make brownie points for myself.

The music starts, playing the usual wedding tune. Dante and Franco, my cousins, stand by my side. Tera, Franco's wife, and Aurora, my feisty-ass cousin, walk down the aisle. Aurora's son, Nathan, takes his lone prance through the ceremony with the ring pillow. Tera's little boy, Braxton, carries Aurora's little girl, Linnie, down the aisle. Carlie insisted on having all the children be a part of our big day.

Fifteen minutes and a flute of sand later, we're about to say "I do." I can't help thinking, "*Carlie put all this work in for twenty minutes and the event is over."* My beautiful bride clears her throat as I'm lost in my thoughts. Internally shaking my head, I admire this beautiful woman. She's mine; all mine! She motions her head to Dino, bringing my thoughts back to the here and now. "Oh, fuck yeah, I do!" I lean toward her, taking our first kiss as husband and wife as Dino brings this to a close. Before I can part with her lips, I hear an all too familiar sound rip through the air.

Wrapping my arms tighter around Carlie, I pull her down to the ground. Keeping close to the ground, I maneuver us behind the sand table Cade has pushed over on its side. His marine background gives him fast reactions when called for.

Gunshots ring out, coming from our west. I look to my side and see Dino kneeling down shooting back at something. Pulling my weapon from the back of my pants, I aim and shoot toward the sound where shots ring out. Two slow-moving SUVs with men in each window are the culprits. I knew I should have believed the nagging feeling within me.

Franco and a few of the associates start firing off shots. A guy exposed in one of the vehicles goes limp in my view. The SUVs increase their pace, but with us being out in the open, they still have plenty of time to attack. Another man in the vehicles goes slack, his head pierced with a bullet. The SUVs' tires squeal as they drive away.

"Get the children and women in the limo. We will box them in with a lead and tail. Everyone move now!" Dino commands. Everyone listens as the Don of our family spouts his orders.

"It's ruined! I knew this would happen," my bride screams. "Look what he's done, he's ruined everything. Anything that makes me happy, he finds a way to rip it away. But this, this is the one thing I thought he couldn't touch!"

"Shhhh, breathe," I tell her, rubbing her hair from her face. "We have to get out of here."

"It's like the fucking *Red Wedding* episode to *Game of Thrones,* Alonzo!" Carlie screams.

"Baby, we have to leave in case they come back," I say, picking her up and carrying her to one of our dark SUVs. I won't let her out of my sight. She's obviously freaking out. Who's the *he* that she's proclaiming as the person behind the destruction and attack?

CHAPTER THREE - ALONZO



"I know we're supposed to be on our honeymoon right now," I tell Carlie, pushing the fallen hair from her sleep out of her face. I pull her closer to me in our bed. Resting my hand on her hip, I notice the sheet keeps me from feeling her warm skin. I kiss her forehead. "I'm so sorry for what happened at our wedding." This woman has been my everything since the day I found her. "You could've married a stockbroker or something. This is what choosing a mobster gets you. A blown up wedding," I say against her hairline before kissing her head again.

She laughs and playfully slaps my chest. "How boring would that be? I'm a wife who lives for the challenges her husband's dangerous life gives her." She kisses my bare chest.

"How do I deserve you?" I ask, lifting her chin up to kiss her lips.

"You've saved me." Carlie touches our lips together. "Now, more than once." She glides her lips down my jawline, spacing out the kisses she lays. "The real question is, how did I catch you?" Her hand sinks between us. She smirks when she realizes I'm already hard for her.

I push on her ass, guiding her further into me. Her hand that's caught between us pushes against my bulge. I thrust against her once before rolling on my back so she's on top of me.

Straddling me, her warm pussy sits bare on my throbbing dick that's covered by my underwear. Pulling my big shirt over her head, I strip the only thing keeping me from every part of her flesh. She insists on sleeping in my shirts since we've been together.

Slipping her fingers into the waistband of my briefs, she gives them a tug. I help her glide them down below my ass. My hard cock springs free, wanting, needing to be inside her warmth.

Everything about this woman excites me. Her strong will. Her touch. Her admiration. Her playfulness. All of it makes me love her. She's my everything, but *this* is a bonus.

Sliding her pussy down onto my dick, she lets out a soft moan that ignites something inside me. God, I adore her. With my fingertips, I gently brush back the blonde locks falling into her face as she looks down at me. Her eyes sparkle with arousal. Her hands land on my chest as she starts to rock her hips. Biting her bottom lip, she holds in another moan. I want to hear all her sweet symphonies. Running my thumb over her mouth, I softly push on her bottom lip, releasing it from her teeth's grasp. Her lips instantly wrap around the tip of my thumb before sucking it fully into her mouth. The vibration of her moan sends a tingle from the tips of my fingers down to my toes. Her pace picks up as she rocks fiercely to find her release. Moving my thumb from her mouth to her clit, the wetness allows me to easily rub soft circles on the sensitive nub. When her lips part with her next serenade, I lift my shoulders off the bed. Still keeping both our movements, I catch her moans with my lips. Throwing her head back and releasing my lips, she finds her climax as her pussy pulses on my cock. With that, I find mine. Kissing her neck and wrapping my arms around her slender figure, I pull her

body tight to mine. I take control of the pace as a second orgasm rips through her before she falls limp on my chest. I hold her for a second before she moves over to her side of the bed.

I lay back on the pillow, turning my face to the side as she rolls over on her back, breathing heavily. Her blonde hair cascades itself across her pillow. "That's why you deserve me," she says with a wink and giggle.

"I have a meeting today to try and find a lead on who sabotaged our wedding," I say, turning to my side to face her. I grab one hand and lay a kiss upon her fingertips.

"Find a lead?" she asks, grabbing her necklace and fiddling with it. "You don't have any ideas on who did it?"

"We have a lot of enemies," I say. "Though I've got to ask," I pause, running my thumb over her tiny fingers within my hand. "When everything happened, you said something…"

"I was just freaking out," she cuts me off.

"I'm sorry that your perfectly planned wedding became a drive-by shooting target." I place her hand on my chest.

"We both still said *I do,* so that's all that matters." She gives me a small smile before kissing me on the cheek and standing from the bed.

A feeling in my gut tells me she's hiding something, but since I have no clue who could have done this, I know she couldn't possibly know who did. I push that plaguing feeling down and get ready for the undesirable meeting happening later today.

* * *

"WELL, WELL," Dino hums, rubbing his chin as he realizes Marez, the Cartel leader, is not exiting the dark sedan. "The old man must not be taking my leadership seriously if he's sending his daughter to this meeting," he mumbles toward Franco and me.

"Daddy sent you here to check up on us?" Franco sarcastically asks Diandra, Marez's daughter, as she walks up the path followed by three armed guards.

Diandra just glared at his sarcasm. "I'm here to get affiliated with the business running through this area." She rests her elbows on the railing near me. "Soon it will all be mine," she says as she looks out across the waters.

Dino looks at me as an uneasy feeling washes over me. "What do you mean, all yours?" I ask her.

"Well," she starts as she turns to rest her back against the railing. "These cute stilettos will be stepping into the role of a lifetime." She runs one shoe up my pant leg.

"Oh, so it was you?" Dino cuts to the point. "That's why you attacked us during his wedding?" he asks, pointing a finger toward me. "Wrong way to try and *affiliate* yourself to this area."

She smirks at his accusation, but turns to me. "Oh, Querido, no." She runs a finger down the seam on my jacket. "I wouldn't shoot up your wedding as a business gain," she says, tsking. "I'd only do that to make you realize what a terrible choice you're making."

I take a few steps away from her touch and her hand falls to her side. I lean against the rail. "I doubt there's any boundary you wouldn't cross," I say, crossing my left foot over my right and folding my arms over my chest.

"When will you learn, Alonzo? You don't need a damsel." Diandra doesn't get the hint I'm giving and steps back up to me. She runs her finger across my forehead and around to my ear, tucking the small amount of hair behind it. "You need a woman that matches your power." Her hand drifts to the

back of my neck. Tightening her grip on the strands within her fist, she gently tilts my head closer toward her so her mouth is near the shell of my ear. “If only you saw the power you could have with me standing next to you,” she whispers.

I pull back against her hold.

Her hand lets go of my hair and lightly falls to my chest. “You’d be your brother’s equal instead of standing in his shadow.”

I dust her hand off, pushing past her. I accidentally bump into her shoulder and make her stumble back. One of her men steps toward her at my sudden movement, catching her before she falls. Having just tripped over her own feet, she straightens her back and brushes the hair from her face. When she composes herself, her eyes snap to me with an uncontrollable glare from embarrassment.

“We’re here to discuss business, not your long-lived infatuation with my brother,” Dino spits out, annoyed at her.

CHAPTER FOUR - CARLIE



After leaving Alonzo this morning to get ready for his meeting, I headed to the compound. As I step into the foyer, Tera rushes up to me.

"Carlie, I need your help with something," Tera says in a low voice.

"Why are you whispering? And where are we going?" I ask her as she pulls me from the foyer. I'm confused about the fact she's led me off behind the grand staircase.

"Just come with me," she demands, gripping my arm a bit hard.

"Ouch! Watch that preggo strength," I say with a laugh. It doesn't hurt, but it's a bit uncomfortable for sure. She's not leading me anymore, she's pulling me.

She pushes through a door that I've never been in, and into an office that appears beyond as we enter. "How the fuck do you know him? I got an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach seeing you talking to him," Tera spits when she shuts the door behind us.

"Who him?" I ask. She's starting to scare me.

"The mystery man from a few days ago." It's like she's talking out of her mind.

"Mystery man? What are you even talking about?" I look at her like she's crazy. She just glares back at me. "Tera, has the pregnancy brain gotten to you?"

"Carlie, don't play with me," Tera says, placing a hand on her hip. "I saw you talking to him at the restaurant."

My face falls. Fuck! I knew she saw me. I had hoped she hadn't, but I knew better. "I'll tell you, just not here. Please, Tera!"

She nods. Her eyes that once held worry and frustration now hold something else. Something much worse. Pity. "You know, I spent years running and hiding from a man."

I don't want her pity. I've never been, nor will I start now, to be a burden to anyone.

"I can't help it. It was like I was seeing a mirror image of my old self when he was speaking to you." She places her hand on my shoulder. "Slumped posture, refusing to hold eye contact. You were cowering to him." She gives my shoulder a sympathetic squeeze. "Carlie." She grabs my hand in both of hers. "What happened at your wedding was horrible. Thankfully, not one person was hurt." She runs her hands through her long, brown hair. "Despite that, I hope you know how strong you are and how this family will stop at nothing to keep you safe."

"He doesn't have the power to do something like this." I rub my temple with my fingertips. "He can pass laws. Pay off a judge. Hide shit from the public. Get his own press. But shoot up a wedding? *My* wedding?!" I shake my head at her. "He's not a thug. He's just a politician, Tera." I take a deep breath, running my hands down the corset top and pushing on my stomach in an attempt to soothe the uneasy sickness. "And, my father."

Full Story Coming Soon!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Remy has always been a reader of many genres but started forging her way into the romance genre in 2016. She saw romance as a genre bringing hope, love, and encouragement to people who devour each written word and fall in love with it.

In 2019, Remy decided to become that inspiration for people around the world. Writing has been a fun way to express emotions and feelings she doesn't in her day-to-day life. The characters and worlds Remy creates are filled with strength, survival, and romantic encounters. She believes you have to fight for what you want since things aren't just handed to you—who knew, right?

Her goal for this new adventure is to bring to readers similar feelings of inspiration she receives when reading other amazing authors.

Her newsletter signup ——>
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Her hangouts——> https://linktr.ee/Remyreigns
Also, her catalog ——>
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DARK SECRET



BY P.T. MACIAS

Rossetti Crime Family
Blue Blood Deadly Sins
Mafia Crime Family Romance

Nicolo Capella
I clawed my way up the ranks.
As the Capo, my job is to protect the Don, the Rossetti crime famiglia.
I live the Omerta oath.
The Don tests my oath.
The order.
Protect his secret at all costs.

* * *

Tiffany Rossetti
I live a normal life.
I work hard.
I'm surviving.
Out of the blue.
My world crashes.
I'm not just any girl.
The Mafia is after me.
I don't know why.
The Capo offers to help.
I don't know if I should trust him.
He's so damn dark.

But.
His eyes call me.

Dedication

I’m dedicating this book to my husband, Jose Arturo, my children Erica, Andres, Ricardo, and my grandchildren Anthony, Gabriel, Christian, Elizabeth, and my family. I’m thankful for your love, patience, and support.

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They're awesome!

CHAPTER 1



Nicolo

Dino ~ Ciao, Nicolo, I have a job for you. Same time tonight.
Nicolo ~ Molto bene.
Dino ~ Ciao.
Nicolo ~ Ciao.

I scrub my face, exhaling deeply, and lean across my desk to grab my cigarette from my silver case, lighting up.

It's been a long day, and it's not over yet, but that's okay.

It's never-ending; no time out for the Capo; it's my job.

I worked fucking hard to promote within the Rossetti Crime Family, and it's a damn honor working for Dino Rossetti, my Don. I worked so damn hard to move up the ranks; that's why I'm here in this house and the Capo.

I usually work directly under my Underboss Carlo Capon, Consigliere Claudio Rossetti. However, at times, I do special work for the Don, Dino Rossetti, so you can say that I'm high in the Rossetti's Crime Family hierarchy.

I'm the fucking master in what I do.

At times I do special work for the Don; he has another special job for me, we're meeting later tonight, and that's fuckingtastic. So, I love that my work is appreciated and noticed by my Don.

I take a long drag of my cigarette, inhaling the smoke and feeling the nicotine invade my lungs as I lower my eyelids looking at the red glowing end burn. I release the smoke, staring at the red ember that reminds me of why I'm here, of the abuse I endured by my stepfather's hand until I killed him. The fucking images of the last day that he lived flash through my mind. I close my eyes tight, clench my molars, inhaling deeply.

"Stupid runt, get your ass over here! What did I tell you, you stupid little shit! You're fucking worthless, punk! I don't know why I married your whore of a mother. She couldn't keep up with the fucking Johns and got herself fucking killed! Now I'm stuck with you, but you will work off your keep," Luther yells, glaring at me.

Luther takes long strides, moving his huge thick arms side to side as he takes a step, pounding his work boots onto the dirt gravel, and chases me into the shed.

"Don't fucking run from me, boy," Luther growls, grabbing me by my hair.

Luther puts out his cigarette on my arm, flipping the cigarette butt on the gravel. He swings back his arm, hitting my face with his huge fist, throws me on the ground, and kicks me. I grab the

wrench from the ground and stab him in the neck, grinding it deep. The blood spurts out like a fucking fountain. I stare into his eyes; his face looks shocked.

The bastard still calls me runt, but I've grown tall and worked to build my strength.

I push as hard as and slide out from under the monster's dead weight. I'm covered with blood and run to the water hose to rinse off. I grab some clean clothes from the dryer and drop my filthy clothes into the washer. I grab a bag, stuffing as many clean clothes as possible into my backpack. Then I ran into the house to grab my small savings and that bastard's Benjamin's in his closet. I'm a ghost, I got gone!

The breeze blows through the open door whirling around me, scattering the cigarette ashes over my desk. I open my eyes, take another drag, inhale the nicotine, and lean back into my black leather chair, trying to relax for a few moments.

I don't think I will ever get rid of those fucking memories, but that's okay. Those memories are what keep me on edge, alert, and ready for anything.

The fresh smell of the ocean breeze flows into my office. I take another drag inhaling the smoke, looking out into the ocean, and slowly exhale the smoke.

The view in my office is incredible; the entire wall is glass with a seamless glass door that I have open. The moon's rays caress the ocean's surface, making it look like a shimmering black ribbon, and the waves crash on the beach, creating white foam.

My house is a beautiful mansion located in the exclusive luxury homes in the Del Mar area and overlooks the ocean, it's a stunning panorama, and it's the only place where I feel at home, and it's a place that I earn with blood and sweat.

My honed senses, my gut clenches, and my skin feel tight, alerting me that someone is nearby. I listen to the soft footsteps hitting the polished black marble floor, stopping at my door.

"What is it," I utter in a low tone smashing the cigarette into the crystal ashtray.

I grab my black special edition John F. Kennedy ballpoint pen and roll it in my fingers, looking at the waves crash.

I know it's my soldier walking into my office; no one else can enter my estate without having the code to do so. The code is entrusted to my loyal soldiers, using their fingerprints to gain entry to the gate and my doors. I have several soldiers working as guards, so it would take extreme force to penetrate my residence.

"Boss, we found the Mexican Cartel's warehouse," Marco says, standing in front of my desk.

Marco is my loyal soldier, and I trust him implicitly with everything and I'm confident that the information is on point. The man is a solid, tall, buff bald man, a dark Italian who migrated to the states and joined my crew when climbing up the ranks.

"Eccellente! Marco, give me the DETS," I say, nodding.

* * *

THE TAPPING sound echoes in the hallway; Dino must be here.

"Nicolo, the Don is at the gate," Marco says, standing at the door.

"Molto bene, show him to my office," I say, nodding.

I push off my chair, pulling at my black shirt cuffs and adjusting my white gold and diamond cufflinks. I'm very particular about my appearance, and my suits are custom-tailored Italian suits that fit perfectly to my athletic build.

A couple of minutes later, the sound of the Don steps alerts me that he's in the house and is walking down the hallway.

"Nicolo," Don walks into my room, looking around, and nodding.

"Dino," I say, walking over to give him a respectful side hug.

"Nicolo, this is a very delicate matter, and I need you to handle it with care. It's important to keep this secret for me until I feel it's time to tell my famiglia," Dino says, rubbing his hands.

I've never seen him show his feelings, and he looks fucking stressed out.

"Dino, I understand. Tell me what you need; you know that I will handle it and keep it a secret," I say, sliding my hand into my pants pocket.

"I need a drink," Dino says, walking to my bar.

"Molto bene, I'll join you," I say, walking over to my bar.

The gold liquid sparkles as Dino pours it over ice in the crystal glass. He takes a drink, finishing off the brandy. Then he pours more brandy, nods, and walks over to walk out onto the balcony.

I grab a glass, pour some brandy, take a drink, and follow him onto the balcony. It looks like my Don is stressed out.

"Did you get the DETS on Torres," Dino asks, moving his hand and watching the liquid swirl.

"Yes, we have the warehouse location, and it's where they're fabricating the low-grade snow. After we killed Jose Torres, Daniel moved his Capo Ruiz into the area, and they're infringing on our territory, and now we have confirmation," I say, nodding.

Torres is the Mexican Cartel's Capo in the Northern California area, but he's been trying to take over our territory, and it's not happening. They took the Don's daughter Bianca a couple of months ago, gave her their low-grade drugs, and caused her to OD. She made it, but Torres crossed a line, and Dino was pissed off. So, we went after the bastard and killed his Capo, Torres's brother in retribution, but Dino has been on edge ever since.

"Eccellente! I want Capo Ruiz Killed. Torres is the reason that my little girl Bianca is broken, and now the bastard wants to go after my other little girl," Dino growls, taking a drink of brandy.

"What does that mean," I say, furrowing my forehead and rubbing my finger around the edge of the glass.

What in the hell does he mean?

Does Dino have another little girl?

I thought that he only fucked up once, fuck.

"Nicolo, I have another girl, Tiffany; she's older than Bianca. I was young and stupid when I had her mother as my mistress when Elena was too busy with the twins, Stephano and Angelo," Dino says in a low voice.

The twins Stephano and Angelo are my soldatos, and they were pissed off about Bianca. I know they will be furious about Tiffany, especially since she's a couple of years younger.

"How old is Tiffany," I ask, taking a sip of whiskey.

"I believe that she's twenty-four," Dino says, nodding.

"Do you think that Torres will send his Capo Ruiz after Tiffany," I ask, leaning against the iron rail?

"Yes, the motherfucker message was loud and clear," Dino says, throwing the glass onto the patio.

"Do you want me to get you another drink," I ask, raising my right eyebrow?

"No, I'm good. I need you to get close to Tiffany; I'll text you her address and cell number. She doesn't have a clue about me or that I'm a Don. I need you to talk to her so that bastard doesn't get to her. Then you can invite her to dinner so I can meet her," Dino says, looking at me.

Dino pulls out his cell, slides his fingers over the screen, and I hear the beeping on my cell.

"Va bene, I'll seek her out soon as possible," I say, nodding.

"Eccellente! I know you will take care of Tiffany and protect her until she learns about me. I need you to get on this now before the Mexican Cartel grabs her. I don't want her hurt," Dino says, smiling.

"Molto bene," I say, nodding.

I don't like this babysitting job, but what the fuck!

I'm his Capo, and I will do as he asks.

"Keep me updated," Dino says, staring at me.

"Andrà bene," I say, pushing away from the rail, standing tall.

"Grazie, ciao," Dino says, giving me a half-side hug.

"Ciao," I say, walking into my office.

I walk him down the hallway to the front door, antsy, ready to search everything I can on Tiffany Rossetti.

* * *

THE NEXT DAY.

I wake up early; it doesn't matter that I go to sleep late because I believe that I need to be ready. I can't sleep late, it's too much precious time that gets wasted, and I have tons to do.

I turn down the treadmill to slow down and then grab the towel. I wipe my face and neck. Then, I walk into the hallway, looking around at my house; it's silent. The house is huge, way too big for just me, but it's what I need for protection and to feel and see my achievement.

I walk up the stairs to my room, walking to the huge bathroom. I take a quick shower because I have a lot of work.

A few minutes later, I'm in my office, walking over to my desk to review all the new DETS Marco gathered from our associates.

My housekeeper brings me my coffee and breakfast.

* * *

"MARCO, RICO, LET'S GO," I say, walking out of my office, pulling my black shirt cuffs, and adjusting my cufflinks.

"Ready, boss," Marco says, nodding, walking next to me, and Rico walks up and walks with us out of my home.

"Where are we going, Boss," Marco asks, opening the back passenger door for me.

"We're going to have some dinner at Nico's," I say, sliding onto the black leather seat.

"Eccellente, I love some good Italian food," Rico says, sliding into the right front seat.

Marco gets into the driver's seat, turning on my new 2022 Mercedes Maybach S650 Pullman, which I purchased because of the bulletproof windows. It's a must to drive a bulletproof vehicle with the fucking risks that I take.

I'm going to see Tiffany, and I need to get close to her, and maybe if I invite her out and start a connection with her.

Hopefully, Tiffany will trust me.

Fuck!

I scrub my face, closing my eyes. Her photo image runs through my mind, and the girl is beautiful; she looks sweet and innocent. It's odd, she stopped going to school a couple of years ago, and I wonder why. It appears like she was working on a paralegal degree. That's fucking funny since her blood is pure Mafia.

She's working at Nico's, one of the Rossetti Crime Family businesses, and I called the manager Tito to get additional DETS and to give him the rules in handling Tiffany.

The idiot wasn't aware that she was Dino's daughter, geeze.

Yeah, I guess it's because Dino did say it was his secret.

Fuck!

Does that mean that Dino didn't get her the job?

I told Tito to increase her salary and have her attend us in the VIP room.

We arrive at Nico's, get out of the car, and walk inside.

I can't wait to see if she's as beautiful as in her photos. I'm so curious about her.

CHAPTER 2



Tiffany

"Luna, yes, I'm off tomorrow," I say, looking out the window.

The front of the apartment complex looks full of the thugs that hang out in front. I hate it because I know that they're up to no good. I'm lucky they don't mess with me, but I think it's because we grew up together.

"Hell yes, it's about time we go out and have some fun," Luna squeaks.

"Yes, it's been a long time since I have Friday off, but I'm not really happy about not working because I get great tips, and I'm going to lose them," I say, chewing my lower lip.

"Fuck Tiffany, one night is not going to hurt your piggy bank," Luna says.

"Yeah, it will, but I need to have some fun. So, pick me up tomorrow," I say, lowering my eyelids and staring at the hoods.

"Awesome, later," Luna says.

"See ya," I say, walking across the living room, walking to the kitchen, and looking at Mom making her snack.

"Mom, I'm going out tomorrow, and I'm going to miss out on the Friday tips. Oh my god," I say, running my fingers through my long hair.

"Darling, don't worry. I got this," Mom says, grabbing the bread and peanut butter.

"Yeah. I think that I'm going to work in the morning. I'll talk to my boss Tito," I say, nodding and grabbing the glass from the kitchen counter.

"Oh Tiffany, you don't need to work in the morning, we got this. Darling, I want you to sign up for your classes so you can get your degree," Mom says, spreading the peanut butter on the bread.

"Mom, we can't afford for me to go back to school," I say, shaking my head.

"It will work out; I'll work extra hours," Mom says, sliding the sandwich into a plastic baggie and grabbing an apple.

"Mom, I don't know if that's a great idea because I don't want you to work so much," I say, chewing my lower lip.

"Sweetheart, I don't mind because it will be worth it! I can't wait to see you return to school to get your paralegal studies done," Mom says, smiling, resting her hands on my shoulders.

"Mom, it's not important; I can return next year when I save some money," I say, turning up my lips and looking at my beautiful Mom.

"No, no, that's not a great idea, you've already put it off, and I want you to achieve your goals," Mom says, nodding.

"Okay, but I wouldn't cut back my hours until I start," I say, inhaling deeply.

"Sounds like a plan! We can do this because I can start working the extra hours. So, we will have a little cushion by the time you start in the fall," Mom says, smiling, her eyes crinkle.

"Yes, that will work. I need to get ready for work," I say, hugging my Mom.

"Okay, dear, I'm going to work," Mom says, walking towards the door.

I follow her to lock the door, and then I take a shower.

Nico's Italian restaurant is packed, like always, since it's popular and a little classy. I park at the back, close to the back door. I turn off my car, grab my oversize black purse and jump out of my old white Honda. I take long, quick strides across the parking lot, open the back door, and walk down the hall to get to the employee's room and to my locker.

Geeze, I barely made it, and I hope that manager Tito doesn't fucking give me hell. But, technically, I'm on time.

Yeah, on time is late, and early is on time. But I'm not perfect, and I always try to get here on time.

"Tiffany, get your ass out there; we have a full house," Tito yells from the door.

"Will do," I yell, closing my locker door.

I think that he fucking loves to harass me.

I look into the small mirror on the door and adjust my high crown ponytail and my black skirt. The uniform is cute, with a black thigh-high fitted flare skirt and a white button-up shirt.

The restaurant's decoration is romantic, with hardwood floors, black tables, and chairs with white tablecloths, candles, and flowers. The candelabras are huge, hanging from the ceiling and casting a light romantic glow.

My assigned tables are packed, so I get to them smiling, taking orders, and serving. Halfway through my shift, the restaurant is still busy, and I take a break in the employee's room.

"Tiffany, I need you to work the VIP area," Tito growls, leaning into the employee room.

"Oh, okay," I say, pushing off the chair and adjusting my skirt.

"Take good care of the VIPs in room seven," Tito growls, gathering his eyebrows.

"Will do," I say, nodding.

Fuck!

Room seven is for the VIP but more like the owners use it; it's at the end of the hall and much nicer than the other rooms. My nerves hijack my senses, and my heart pounds quickly since I don't ever work this section; it's nerve-racking. I'm not sure what to expect, but it can't be bad, right? Of course, it's part of the restaurant, but still, the servers working in this area are secretive and earn huge tips.

The VIP rooms are smaller for more intimate dinners, so I don't know what to expect since this is the owner's VIP room.

Hopefully, it's all good; it is a normal restaurant, geeze.

I'm getting all hysterical with these wild thoughts; it's not a fucking strip club.

The door is closed, and I open it and walk into the room with a bright smile. The room is dark; the candles are on the table, a sitting area in the corner, a table, and dim lights.

I look at the three men sitting at the table, drinking some wine.

"Hello, I'm Tiffany, and I'll be your server this evening. I hope you're enjoying the wine. Would you care to try a different bottle of wine," I ask, smiling at them? Then, I look at them again, waiting to take their order.

"This wine is perfect, but I would like you to bring us a bottle of Old Rip Van Winkle," the

handsome man says, looking at me and leaning back into the chair.

"We don't carry Old Rip Van Winkle, but we do carry Macallan 25 Year Old Sherry," I say, smiling.

Yeah, I hope it's good enough for fancy pants here; it's a twenty-seven hundred dollar bottle, geeze.

"Nicolo, I'm good with this wine," says the other buff man holding the wine glass.

"No, Marco, I think that we deserve some good whiskey. So that will do," Nicolo says, smiling at me and waving his hand at his companion.

Wow!

The man is the most beautiful man I've ever seen. His eyes are dark blue, black slicked back hair that he's wearing in a ponytail, and his lips are so masculine but full.

Damn!

I need to pay attention and do my damn job before Tito fires my ass.

"Okay, have you had a moment to review the menu," I ask, holding my pen over the pad.

"Yes, we will have the chef's special," Nicolo says, gazing into my eyes.

Damn, he's making me forget everything, but I need to pay attention; this is the VIP section.

I can't fucking mess up.

"Awesome, I'll be right back," I say, walking out of the room.

Wow, I wonder who this man is. He looks dark, intense, and oh so sexy. His smile makes me feel butterflies.

* * *

"I KNOW that you're going to love the Shrimp and Scallop Scampi with Linguine," I say, placing the plates in front of the men.

"It smells amazing," Nicolo says, smiling at me.

"Oh yeah, I can't wait to taste it," Marco says, grabbing the fork.

The other man starts eating; he's silent and looks mean. But I can't help but look at Nicolo; he looks like a model, yet he seems like a bad boy, no, more like a gangster.

Geeze, I'm fucking crazy.

"I'll get you some warm bread," I say, taking the basket from the table.

When I return, the two men are gone, and only Nicolo is at the table.

"Oh, did your friends not, like the food," I ask, biting my lower lip.

Oh my god!

What if they're complaining to Tito?

I really need this job.

"Tiffany, no worries. They had to go to work," Nicolo says, taking a drink of the whiskey.

"Oh, okay. I thought they didn't like the food," I say, smiling, placing the breadbasket on the table.

"Is the bread good," Nicolo asks, smiling.

I gaze into his beautiful blue eyes and see some interest, but I must be imagining it.

"It is; all of the patrons love it," I say, nodding.

"Could you do me a favor," Nicolo asks, taking a drink of his expensive whiskey and leaning back into the chair, resting his hand on the armrest.

"Sure," I say, nodding and chewing my inner lower lip.

"I would love you to have a drink with me," Nicolo says, taking my hand in his huge hand.

My body lights up; I mean, it feels like electricity flashes through my body.

Oh my, it's like the romance stories I read occasionally, and I never believed it possible to feel this instant connection.

Geeze.

Now I'm really crazy.

Foolish.

"Mr., . . . uh," I say, holding onto my pen really tight.

"Mr. Cappella, Nicolo Cappella," Nicolo says, kissing my knuckles.

My heart stops, and I stop breathing for a second; then, I inhale deeply to catch my breath, gazing into his heated blue eyes.

The man is a charmer, that's for sure.

I've never met a man like him.

He definitely is dangerous on so many levels.

Oh, God.

His scent is so damn delicious and it's making me weak.

Yeah, that's really stupid, Tiffany.

The man is only talking to me, nothing more.

"Mr. Capella, ...I," I say.

"Nicolo, just Nicolo," Nicolo says, rubbing his thumb over my knuckles.

"Nicolo, I'm at work, and I can't drink," I say, shaking my head.

"Ah, Tiffany, yeah, that's right. I'm sorry, I forgot that you were working. I just want to talk to you for a little," Nicolo says, smiling.

"Oh, okay. We can talk for a few minutes soon as I clock out. My shift ends in ten minutes. Would that work," I say, nodding?

"Yes, that works; I'll wait for you; we can have some wine and talk," Nicolo says, smiling at me.

"Okay, I can do that. I'll return in a few," I say, standing next to him.

"Fantastic," Nicolo says, turning up his lips in a gorgeous smile.

I walk out of the room, shaking my head.

* * *

WHAT IN THE world am I thinking?

The man is so out of my league, and he's a customer. I don't need to cause any issues with Tito, especially since the man knows him.

With all my doubts, my heart pounds so damn fast; my stomach has freaking butterflies that just wouldn't quit.

I walk into the employee's room, clock out, and then adjust my shirt, hair, and lipstick.

It has to do.

I grab my purse and walk out of the employee's room, down the hall to the VIP room, feeling the fucking butterflies; they just wouldn't quit.

The romantic music in the background and the dreamy décor gives the room an intimate romantic feel that makes me think for a moment that I'm on a date with this hottie.

Oh no, that's really stupid.

I inhale deeply, exhaling as I walk into the room, turning up my lips and standing tall.

"Nicolo, the restaurant is closing, so we can't stay long," I say, stopping at the table.

"Indeed. I told Tito that I'm going to be here for a while, and I paid my tab," Nicolo says, turning up his lips, confident and a little cocky.

The man is confident, cocky, and demanding.

Nicolo pushes off his chair and pulls out the chair for me, and that's fucking amazing.

"No worries, Tiffany, as long as you can, would be great," Nicolo says, sliding the chair close to the table.

"It's nice of you to invite me to a drink," I say, looking at him.

"My pleasure; I'm glad that you can because I want to relax for a bit and enjoy your company. I would like you to try the whiskey," Nicolo says, grabbing the empty, clean glass.

"Ooooh, I'll like that," I say, nodding, taking the glass, holding the glass with both hands, and smiling.

I wouldn't have another opportunity to taste this whiskey; it's an insanely expensive bottle of whiskey, yeah, three grand.

"Try the whiskey because I think you would like it," Nicolo says, taking a drink of whiskey.

"Right," I say, nodding.

Geeze.

I gotta taste this.

I take a sip and swirl the burning liquid in my mouth to absorb the flavor.

Well, it tastes good, but hmmm, is it worth that much money?

The rich do spend their money on frivolous things.

It must be nice.

Right.

"Tiffany, how long have you been working here? Because I haven't seen you," Nicolo says, taking my hand.

"Ah, I've been working here for a few years," I say, taking another sip of the whisky.

"Oh, it's sad that I never saw you here, and I do come here often," Nicolo says, looking at my lips.

"Maybe you didn't see me because I don't usually work the VIP section. Today was the first time," I say, licking my lip.

"That could be," Nicolo says, smiling, running his fingers over my knuckles.

"Where do you work," I ask, trying to get to know the man.

"I'm a businessman, and I'm always busy, but tonight I wanted to treat my men," Nicolo says, turning up his lips.

"Ah, it does sound like you're busy. What type of business," I say, drinking the last of my drink.

Nicolo pours more whiskey into my glass and takes a drink of his.

I take another drink of whiskey, holding the glass in my hands, feeling the warmth spread through my body and feeling inhibited, making me a little more open.

"I have several different businesses, some properties, bars, and clubs," Nicolo says, gazing into my eyes.

I can't believe that we've been talking for a while, and I'm surprised that he's so open, answering all of my questions about his life, his likes, and dislikes as if he really wants to know me.

"I can't believe that you like that old movie, Grease," I say, laughing, throwing back my head.

"Hell yes, Danny is cool, a bad boy that gets the good girl," Nicolo says, gazing into my eyes.

"Oh my, well, it's one of my favorites, but I truly love Ghost and Pretty Woman because that's true love that transcends death and prejudices, and I would love to experience that kind of love," I whisper, looking into his eyes.

"I'm sure you will experience a love that transcends all darkness, trials, and obstacles. Tiffany, you're a special young woman, and I would love to get to know you," Nicolo says, moving his hand to tuck a lock behind my ear.

He runs his fingers over my wrist, making me burn slowly.

Ah, I'm feeling a warm tingle deep in the center, a burning ache.

Nicolo looks at me, I can see in his eyes that he feels the same connection that I do, but I feel so lost. He's obviously experienced, wealthy, and has tons of women at his fingertips, no doubt.

So why is he showing interest in me?

Maybe I'm wrong.

I take a drink of whiskey, finishing it off, but it burns, and I start coughing.

"Oh my," I say, closing my eyes.

Nicolo pushes off his chair and rubs my back.

"Easy, piccolo," Nicolo says, taking the glass from my hand.

He takes the napkin and gently wipes the whiskey from my chin and the few spittle on my knee.

Oh my God, this is so embarrassing. The perfect hunk is cleaning up my mess.

Geeze.

"Ah, thanks," I say, gazing into his eyes and feeling the heat spread through my face.

I know that I'm blushing like a stupid schoolgirl.

"Hey, are you okay? No worries," Nicolo says, throwing the napkin on the table.

Nicolo is squatting next to me, looking at me with interest.

It's crazy, is he really attracted to me?

His eyes are heated and connecting with my soul. I lean forward, gazing into his eyes, and I can't believe that I see lust and need.

Nicolo grabs my arms, pulls me up in his arms, and walks over to the sofa. He sits on the couch, holding me close on his lap. He takes my lips in a kiss and slowly slides his velvety tongue inside my mouth, tangling with mine. In the heated daze, I shift, straddling him, rubbing against his hard cock.

A soft moan emerges, surprising me.

Nicolo moves his hands up my back, leaving a burning trail as he grabs my head, tilting me back and kissing me deeply.

Oh my, this kiss is like nothing I've ever experienced.

I return his kiss, moving my hands inside his suit jacket, and wrapping my hands around his waist.

Nicolo grabs my ass, pulling me close to his hard erection.

Ohhhh, he's making me melt, and I love feeling that I can make him so passionate.

Nicolo moves his mouth down my neck, sucking and biting my flesh, using his other hand to unbutton my shirt's button. He pushes my bra aside and takes my nipple in his hot mouth.

Damn, this feels so good.

Nicolo runs his hand over my thigh, and then his fingers slip under my wet thong. Slowly his fingers move up my slit and rub circles around my throbbing flesh.

"That feels so good," I say, moving my fingers through his hair and pulling off the leather strip.

His hair is so silky and soft; I grab his long locks, pull his mouth up, and kiss him with hunger, biting and sucking his lip.

Nicolo shifts, pushing me onto the sofa, settling between my thighs. He moves his hand down my

curves, tears off my thong, rubs his fingers over my flesh, and slides a finger inside me, pressing against my inner walls.

My body feels the burn, an incredible feeling that makes me weak, and then I tense as I reach my orgasm, trembling in his arms.

"That's it, Piccolo. I'm going to make you come again and again," Nicolo says, licking his fingers.

"Oh, my, that felt amazing," I whimper, moving my hands to his pants.

I'm going to get myself some because, for some reason or another, I've been unable to get to this point. The one time that I was close, the guy had another girl that showed up.

Yeah, it didn't happen.

Now, of fuckingcourse, I will fuck this delicious man.

When will I ever get another opportunity to be with a hottie?

"Yes, one small taste before I fuck your sweet pussy," Nicolo says, talking dirty.

Oh my God!

That's so damn hot and sexy.

"Yes, yes," I say, looking into his dark blue eyes.

Nicole moves down, slides his tongue up my slit, licking my honey, and then he sucks my flesh, making me explode.

"Fuck, that feels good, Nicolo," I whimper, pulling his head closer to my pussy.

Nicolo slides his tongue inside my pussy, and then circles my flesh, making me tremble. I'm so close and needy.

"I need you, Nicolo," I whimper.

"What do you want, Piccolo," Nicolo asks, gazing into my eyes and rubbing his hard cock at my entrance.

"I need you to fuck me," I whimper, touching my breasts.

Nicolo lowers his eyelids, groans, and shoves inside me, tearing through my pussy like an invader claiming.

Ahh, arg, it hurts, and he's huge.

But, ah, he feels so good; he fills me.

"Fuck," Nicolo gasps, looking at me.

"No worries, it was meant to happen with you," I say, biting my lip.

"Fuck," Nicolo growls, moving slowly.

Oh my God, I need more!

"Nicolo, I need you to fuck me," I groan, holding onto his shoulders.

"I want you to get used to me," Nicolo grunts, moving faster and deeper.

"Yes, that feels so good," I whimper, meeting his thrusts.

"Fuck, your pussy is so damn tight," Nicolo groans.

He kisses me with wild hunger, sucking my tongue, and it feels like he's claiming me.

Nicolo rubs my flesh, thrusting deeper, faster, and pushing me over the edge, turning me into jelly.

"That's it, grab my cock," Nicolo hisses, thrusting and grinding against me.

I feel his hot release deep inside me as he buries his face in my neck, biting my shoulder.

A moment later, Nicolo's breathing returns to normal, and he pushes up onto his hands, gazing into my eyes.

"Tiffany, that was a nice surprise, and thank you," Nicolo says, kissing me.

"Thank you, it was amazing," I say, smiling at him.

"I want to see you tomorrow," Nicolo says, pulling away.

I bite my lower lip; my heart pounds, watching him grab the napkin. Finally, he returns to clean me up, folds the napkin, grabs my thong, and shoves them into his suit pocket. I can't stop the fucking blush; it's so sweet.

Right?

"Yes, I want to see you, but tomorrow I have plans to go with my girl to the Burning Pit club," I say breathlessly.

"Great, I can take you, give me your number," Nicolo says, pulling me up and smoothing my skirt.

"Okay," I say, pushing off the sofa to get my purse.

I pull out my cell and watch him tuck his cock back into his pants and pull his shirt cuffs.

"Come here," Nicolo says, sitting back on the sofa.

I walk back; he takes my hand and pulls me onto his lap, taking my cell phone.

"You're a little bossy," I say, rolling my eyes.

"Yeah, a little bossy, a little possessive, a little dark, and totally loyal and honest," Nicolo says, turning his lips into a cocky smirk.

I watch him enter his cell number in my phone and call his cell phone and save my number

Geeze, the man is cocky.

But I love it.

No loser.

Honest?

Yeah, I like that.

Loyal, oh yeah, that's a huge plus.

I think that the man is a keeper regardless of the mafia vibe.

Geeze!

Me, and my imagination.

"Good, I like that," I say, laughing, throwing my head back.

"Eccellente," Nicolo says, kissing me.

* * *

THE NEXT DAY.

"Darling, Luna is outside," Mom says, walking into the small apartment.

"Thanks, Mom," I say, pulling on my black booties.

I look into the mirror at my door, ensuring the dress looks good.

"I just stopped to get some food," Mom says, stopping at my bedroom door.

"I might be late or stay with Luna," I say, grabbing my small cross purse and throwing in my cell phone.

"Okay, be careful; you know that nowadays, the club scene is crazy," Mom says, crossing her arms.

"Yes, Mom, I will; promise you won't work too late," I say, throwing my arms around her.

"Yes, I'll be home at a reasonable time," Mom says, nodding.

"Great, I love you. Later, Mom," I say, kissing her cheek.

"I love you," Mom says, kissing my temple.

I walk over to Luna to tell her about Nicolo.

"Luna, I have so much to tell you," I say, getting into the car.

“Yeah, you look fucking excited,” Luna says, smiling.

“I am; I met this dude that is totally hot, a dream,” I say, snapping the safety belt.

“What? You have to tell me all the details,” Luna shouts, laughing.

“I will, and even better, I’m meeting him at the club later as soon as he gets off work,” I say, bopping in the car, smiling.

“Fucking hell! I’m so happy for you, and it’s about time,” Luna yells, turning on the car.

“Yeah, so let’s get to the club,” I say, nodding.

* * *

Nicolo ~ Piccolo, I’m running late. I’ll be there in a few.

Tiffany ~ Awesome, see you soon.

Nicolo ~ Ciao.

Tiffany ~ Ciao, xoxox.

“Well, I met Nicolo last night at work. He was a patron in the VIP room . . . . . then he asked to see me today, so I invited him to join us here at the Burning Pit club,” I say, flipping my long hair over my shoulder.

“Fuck, it’s incredible, Tiffany. I can’t wait to meet this bad boy,” Luna says, taking a drink of her beer.

“Yeah, Nicolo should be here soon,” I say, looking at the text.

I take a drink of beer, smiling. I can’t wait to see Nicolo again.

“Let’s dance,” Luna says, bopping her head.

“Yes,” I say, hopping off the high wooden stool.

We walk to the dance floor, and we gyrate to the music, and I feel fucking on fire. Then, after a few songs, we return to drink some beer and cool down.

I look at Luna's eyes widen, and then I hear Nicolo.

“Piccolo, finally I’m here,” Nicolo says, wrapping his arms around my waist.

“Ohhhh, yes! I’m glad to see you. Nicolo, this is my BFF Luna,” I say, leaning back and looking at his smile.

“Hi, Luna,” Nicolo says, lifting his hand.

“Hi, glad to meet you,” Luna shouts, staring at him.

“Tiffany, Luna, this is Marco, my good friend,” Nicolo says, looking at a tall buff man.

“Hey,” Luna says, wide-eyed, breathlessly.

“Hello,” Marco says, smiling at Luna.

“Tiffany, I . . get down,” Nicolo yells, pulling me down and turning the table to take cover.

It all happens so damn quick, the gunshots, the people yelling and trying to take cover. The gunshots are loud; fear spreads through my body; I see Luna next to Marco.

Nicolo pulls out his gun and shoots at the guys at the door.

“Piccolo, don’t move until I tell you. I will protect you,” Nicolo yells, holding my arm and staring at me.

His eyes roam over my face, making sure that I understand.

“Tiffany, did you hear me? Do you understand? Run when I tell you to run,” Nicolo growls, cupping my face.

“Uh. . . .yes,” I whisper, nodding.

“Eccellente,” Nicolo growls, moving to the side of the table, and shooting.

“Run,” Nicolo yells, pulling me across the room and into the hallway, following his friend Marco and Luna.

To Be Continued.

Available Soon.

NOTE FROM P.T. MACIAS

If you enjoyed Dark Secret, Rossetti Crime Family, please consider leaving a review. Reviews are essential and help tremendously with other consumer decisions to purchase the book.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I live in California with my husband, children, and grandkids. They're my pride and joy. We adore Bella, our sassy, sweet Maltipoo.

When I am not writing, I enjoy spending time with my family, going on cruises, seeing concerts, eating white peaches, and pistachio ice cream, walking with Bella, and sipping margaritas.

Enjoy my stories about the dark, sexy, dirty-talking mafia, bad boy bikers, alpha billionaires, MMA cage fighters, and paranormal romance. My stories are full of action, suspense, danger, secrets, a dash of romance, and HEA.

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Note To Reader

Dear Reader, I'm inviting you to check out Elite Power, Blue Blood Deadly Sins, Blue Blood Deadly Sins Mafia Crime Family Romance, Forged In Twilight, and Angels Of The Fallen, The Watchers.

I know that you will enjoy these dark, sexy alphas!

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Angels Of The Fallen, Lucifer

SHATTERED GLASS



A DARK FAIRYTALE RETELLING

BY M JAMESON

Luna grew up protected, a mafia princess with the world at her feet.
One tragic event takes away everything she's ever known.
At thirteen, she's shunned by her stepfamily and made a slave in her own home.
The only thing she held onto was the future and the day she walked away from the Rossi family.
Her plans didn't include Matteo Valenti, son of the enemy, the man of her dreams,
and as luck would have it, the man promised in marriage to her stepsister.
Matteo was the son of a once powerful mafia Boss.
His family's crumbling empire hangs on his marriage to a stranger.
But she isn't the sister he wants.
And he'll do whatever it takes to correct that.

CHAPTER 1



Luna

A PART of me died when I turned thirteen. It wasn't one particular thing, but a series of events all coupled together.

Standing at my father's graveside, clinging to my nanny's hand, I knew nothing would be the same. Stephan Rossi was dead. My protector was gone.

"From ashes, we were formed, and to ashes, we must return…." Father Diablo's words faded as the mahogany casket of the only man I'd ever loved was lowered into the earth's bowels. My eyes roamed over the crowd that gathered to pay their respects to my father. Some of these people I knew, others were strangers.

A lump formed in my throat, and a sob threatened to break free, but I held it together. Barely. A crippling dread fell over me at the thought of facing the world without him.

My stepmother Arianna's strangled wails had me lifting my gaze to where she stood opposite me. Her daughters stood beside her, solemn expressions on their faces. I could feel her gaze on me despite the dark veil shielding her obsidian eyes from my view, and at that moment, I was certain my stepmother and I would always be on opposing sides. No matter what she said to others or the words of assurance that I'd always be taken care of the night my father died, I knew better. I felt it in my veins.

A man can only trust his blood, mio Luna.

My father's words pierce me.

Maria squeezed my hand, bringing me back to the present. Arianna clutched a fistful of dirt, sprinkling it on the casket. I followed; the soil felt cold and foreign in my palms. Walking to the edge of the abyss that would be my father's resting place, I scattered the dirt and stepped back, my fists clutching Maria's black dress as fresh tears fell.

As if on cue, the dark clouds burst to send their own tears down on us.

Goodbye, papa.

* * *

THRONGS OF MOURNERS gathered at our home after the funeral. Many offered me their condolences,

but they felt like empty words. I was surrounded by people but had never felt so alone. The first chance I got, I slipped away to the one place I knew I'd be able to gather my thoughts.

Sitting at my father's desk, I traced my fingers over his papers, wondering which was the last one he touched. His office smelled of cigar smoke and old books. The faint remnants of his spicy cologne hung in the air. I opened my music box, and the sound of Beethoven's Fur Elise filled the silence. I've had this box since before I could remember. It was a gift from my papa to Mama on the day I was born.

"You shouldn't be in here." Marcia's sudden appearance in the doorway startled me. My stepsister's cherub-like face contorts in a scowl when she sets eyes on my music box. "Those are for babies."

Luciana steps out from behind her. "You don't have to be mean, *Sorella*; her papa just died." My stepsisters, a year older than me, were related biologically, but that is where the similarity ends.

"Shut up, Luca," Marcia spins, and Luca shies away as usual. Being in the shadows is what she's required to do. Dim her glow to make Marcia shine.

Marcia crosses the room, grabs the collar of my black dress, and shoves me to the ground. She slams the lid of my music box shut and pushes it off the table.

Marcia, no!" I lunge, catching it before it hits the plush beige carpet.

"My mama is the Boss of the Rossi Familia now, that means I'm the favorite, so you, little sister, must do as I say, or I'll get one of the capos to get rid of you."

I shake my head. "You can't do that."

"Oh?" She swings in my father's chair. The chair he sang to me in. The chair he promised would be mine one day. I've wanted to sit in that chair my whole life. My father never believed in the age-old tradition of needing a male heir. I was his Luna, his guide through the darkness.

"Leave her alone, Marcia, *per favore*.

Tears spring to my eyes. Who was I kidding? I had no one to protect me. I was alone.

"Girls, it's time for dessert," Maria announced, her brow furrowed when she spotted me on the floor.

The girls rushed out of the room, probably to avoid a scolding from our nanny, but most likely because of the sweets.

"You can't let them push you around. Your papa taught you better, Lu." She helped me up, and I brushed the tears off my cheek.

"They hate me, Maria," I sniffed.

"No one can hate you, *amore*." She cupped my face in her warm palms, love beaming in her chocolate eyes. "And I'll beat their asses with a stick if they did."

I laughed, hugging her tight. "I love you, *mio* Maria.

* * *

FIVE YEARS Later

RUNNING UP THE BACK STAIRWELL, I slipped into the kitchen just as Maria walked through the doors. Her brows knitted together, and she shook her head in disapproval. I flashed her my most disarming grin, which only worked when I was a kid. These days she would skin my hide in a heartbeat because

we both knew my slip-ups came at a cost. I pulled on my apron, then tried to tuck the flyaway curls that sprung free, refusing to be tamed.

"What if it had been Olga, Lu?" She scolds, and I feel the heat rise to my cheeks. Maria was right. I was behaving irresponsibly. Olga would have run straight to Arianna to tell on lazy Luna. I won't let it dampen my mood; in six months, I'd be eighteen and finally be free from this hellhole. I'd saved enough of my meager allowance to catch a bus out of here. I don't care where that bus takes me. Anywhere is better than here. And my inheritance will finally be out of my trust. I can finally live the life my father wanted for me. Study art or music, maybe dance.

"Sorry, Maria. It won't happen again."

She softens and hands me a tray. "They've started the meeting, so remember, go unseen and unheard. It will all be over soon, *Tesoro*."

The weekly sit-down with the *Boss*, capo, and soldiers was the one thing I didn't look forward to. Seeing my father's men take orders from that bitch Arianna made my stomach curdle. Hearing her constantly tear down what he built and did for the Familia elicited a destructive rage in me. She made sure I oversaw breakfast to humiliate me in front of men who watched me grow in front of them.

Pushing the breakfast trolley down the hallway, I spot a soldier leaning against a wall outside the meeting room. I quip a brow at the cigarette hanging from his lips. Coming to a halt in front of him, I say, "Don't let her see you doing that."

He cocked a brow, piercing gray eyes like storm clouds raking over me. I figured he must be new. None of the men I know would dare look at me like that. But I can't deny that his appraisal sends heat to my cheeks. Handsome men aren't in short supply in the organization, but when they consider me untouchable, it makes it challenging to forge connections. I clear my throat, "Smoking, she despises it. Didn't your capo tell you?"

"He didn't actually, but thanks for the heads up."

"You should put it out."

"I'm not in the habit of taking orders." He opened the double doors, a cloud of smoke billowing in front of him. Twelve pairs of eyes stared at us.

"Your funeral," I muttered under my breath. Entering the room, my eyes met Arianna's, and she waved for me to carry on my duties.

"Gentlemen, I'd like you to meet the Underboss, my pride and joy, my son, Matteo Valenti." I keep my head down at the sound of Antonio Valenti's voice. The bastard was my stepmother's greatest ally.

I turned and approached the table, coffeepot in hand. I nearly spilled it at the sight of Antonio's arm around the man I saw outside. The arrogant asshole stared straight at me, a slight smirk curling his lips. He could have corrected me. I turned away.

"Miss, can I get an ashtray over here?"

Rolling my eyes, I turn around sharply. "Sure thing, sir."

The chatter around the table continued as I slipped out to get an ashtray from the den. "Fucking asshole," I uttered angrily to nobody.

Marcia was lazing in the den, sipping a mimosa. "Not cutting work, are you?"

Maria, who was setting up breakfast for my bitch of a stepsister, glared at me, silently warning me to hold my tongue. I had the tendency to lose it where Marcia was concerned.

I picked up a crystal ashtray and held it up. "As you were, your highness, I was just fetching this for a guest," I scoffed at her.

Marcia glowered at me, and it took restraint not to say something else.

My hand trembled when I set the ashtray in front of Matteo Valenti. His large hand covered mine

and elicited a gasp. "Whoa there, you're an unsteady little thing, aren't you?" My heart thudded in my chest, a bird struggling to free itself from its cage.

"Luna, that'll be all," Arianna said, and I pulled my hand free. My eyes snapped to hers, and there was a warning in them.

I could feel *his* eyes as I hurried to the door. My eyes fluttered closed as I rested my head against it a second later, a small smile tugging at my lips. I felt seen for the first time in five years, even if it was by a Valenti spawn.

CHAPTER 2



Matteo

"YOU HAVE NO CHOICE, Teo. You will marry that spoiled Rossi girl because I say so."

I took a drag on my cigarette, smoke distorting my father's angry face. A spec of dried blood on my shoe caught my attention. "I'm a grown man, Father. I won't be told who to marry."

I should have said I'd gone twenty-eight years without his presence in my life, and I did not need it. I was raised by my mother while he was out fucking everything on two legs. I was not about to settle down with a woman I'd never met. I preferred bachelorhood. It suited me just fine. Being the Underboss of the Valenti Famiglia left little room for much else.

"I don't have to remind you of our dire situation. That girl's trust fund is the answer."

"You seemed pretty cozy with the Rossi, widow. Would it not make better sense for you to marry her?"

He laughed, "Me, marry Arianna? Don't be a fool, boy. The woman has no money. Marrying her daughter off is the only way she can access Rossi's fortune. The man was fucking smart, I give you that."

Standing, I made my way to the bourbon decanter, pouring a glass. "I'll come to this fundraiser tonight. I am not making any promises I'll marry her, but I'll think about it."

My father scoffs, "Son. You act like you have a choice."

I shook my head. My father underestimated me. I would not bend to his will. "I'll see you at the party," I said, leaving him chuckling and believing he'd won.

The real reason I was attending had nothing to do with Marcia Rossi and everything to do with the girl I met the other day. Her hazel orbs have haunted my dreams. I've imagined tucking those ebony locks behind her ear countless times. And those fucking lips were the image I pumped my length to last night. I'm growing in my slacks thinking of her on her knees, choking and gagging on my cock. There was something about her. Unlike most capos and my father, I've avoided getting entangled with anyone who worked for us. She technically didn't, and I'd have a taste of her tonight. I'll turn that mansion over until I find her.

CHAPTER 3



Luna

SHE'D SUMMONED ME, and dread filled me as I walked the familiar path to my father's office. Whatever she was about to say to me would change everything. I was no stranger to my stepmother's wrath. I bore the scars from the times she believed I'd defied her. Taunted me by locking me away for days without food. Beat me until I wept. If five years with that witch taught me anything, it's that even if I had done nothing wrong, she would create something if she wanted to.

I worked alongside the staff in my home, constantly at Arianna's beck and call, forced to deny my identity. Some days I forget I'm Luna Rossi, Mafia Princess. Reminding myself of that dredged up the old hurt and loathing. My father's men, those cowards, stood behind her.

"Luna," Arianna beckoned me inside. All traces of my father were gone from this room. Valenti sits in the chair behind her desk. I walked in on the two of them fucking right on my father's desk the nights after his funeral. Antonio Valenti was now advising my stepmother, the widow of his sworn enemy. His eyes roamed over me from head to toe, and I felt exposed, dirty, under his scrutiny. "You remember, Mr. Valenti?"

How could I forget? I nod. "Good day, sir," I said, trying to keep the venom out of my tone.

"We're having a fundraiser this evening, Luna, and I expect you to be on your best behavior." I was aware of that. I was instructed to stay out of sight. "You need to pack your belongings. You leave here tonight."

I frowned, not sure what the woman was talking about. "Where am I going?"

Antonio stood and stalked over to me. "She is quite lovely. She'll make a nice addition to my household." What the fuck is he even talking about?

"You're going to settle a debt."

"What do you mean?" My gaze shifted between the two of them.

"Your father owed me, and you're the payment."

"Debt? My father had no debt. He left his entire estate to you, so this is on you. You squandered his money, and now I must pay for it?" I was a kid when my father died, but I knew he had no money problems. He paid his men well and treated the four of us like princesses. We wanted for nothing.

Arianna was on me in seconds, twisting my arm behind me. "You watch your tongue, selfish little bitch," she hissed in my ear. "You should be grateful I haven't put a bullet in your skull already."

My muscles ached, but I would not give her the satisfaction of a reaction.

"Let her go. The girl has spirit. I like that," Antonio chuckled. "You misunderstand Luna. This is non-negotiable. You'll leave with me tonight. If you fight it, it'll just get ugly, and you don't want that, do you?"

Arianna released my arm, and I wished the ground would open and swallow me. I pivoted and left the room, angry tears falling.

* * *

THE CHARITY FUNDRAISER is in full swing in the garden. Gorgeous men in tuxedos and beautiful women in dresses I would give anything to wear. Arianna took everything from me and was about to take it all one step further. I promised myself that when I finally walked out of those wrought-iron gates that held me, prisoner, I'd burn these rags and dress in every color of the rainbow. Now that seemed like a distant dream. She'd sold me, and to make her point, she'd threatened to fire Maria and kick her off the premises.

From my spot on the balcony, I had a pretty good view. Marcia had been draped on Matteo all night. I was almost worried the man had claw marks all over him. I tucked a stray curl behind my ear, only to have it spring free immediately.

"You could join the party instead of stalking me from all the way over here."

I spun at the sound of his too-sexy voice. It shouldn't affect me. In a few hours, I'd be owned by his family.

"I… wasn't…." Who was I kidding? I'd been watching him all night, how the twinkling lights shimmered on his raven black hair, how his tuxedo fit him perfectly. No, I reminded myself, he was the enemy. His father was my employer. If I was lucky, that would be all he was.

"Oh, it's quite alright, Luna." The way my name rolled off his tongue sent unwelcome chills down my spine. "I tend to have that effect on women."

He stalks closer, and he's even more gorgeous in the moonlight. Amusement danced in his eyes.

"I don't believe we've officially met."

"Oh, I believe our introductions were more than satisfactory."

He chuckles, not halting in his steps. He looks to be older than me, in his late twenties, probably. The kind of man that has seen the world and indulged his curiosity.

The wind blows my hair loose, and I reach up to settle it.

He's close enough for his smoky scent to engulf me. He reaches behind me, and it's loose in one quick slide of his fingers through my hair. Tingles erupt on my scalp, and my eyes flutter closed. "I like it better like this, *bei capelli*," he says, low and gravelly.

I'd never been close to a man before, never felt prickles on my skin at the touch of one. His fingers gripped my chin, tilting my face. "You really are exquisite."

He leaned in, his breath fanning my face. The pull between us was magnetic, but I knew that this-me and him-was not in the cards for either of us.

I shut my eyes, pulling away, and he frowns, seemingly confused by my reaction.

"I guess you don't have that effect on all women." As I stepped away, heading for the door, I dared not look back for fear that my heart would pound its way out of my chest. Tomorrow I'd be leaving one prison for another, and the man behind me would be one of my jailers.

* * *

"HAVE YOU HEARD, Lu? Marcia's getting married."

I'm packing up the last of my things, my music box. "Who's proposing to her, Luca? The man must be out of his mind."

"Well, he hasn't exactly asked. Mama says he will. You know whatever those two want, they get. Mama and Antonio have arranged it. One Matteo and Marcia are wed. They plan to merge the organizations," Luca said, and my heart sank.

Matteo. I didn't know why the thought of Marcia and the man who haunted my dreams since the day we met in that hallway made my stomach churn. My anger was unwarranted. I didn't even like him. A man like that could shatter a heart, and mine was made of glass.

"She wouldn't." Valenti's aren't Rossi allies. My father would roll in his grave.

Lucia shrugs, but then her eyes lower. "She would. We both know that."

"I'm going to miss you." Her voice is small. "I wish I could do something. I've always been a coward, Lu. Never sticking up for you. Letting Marcia bully you the way she did. And Mama…" she trails off.

"None of this is on you. Take care of Maria for me. She's gonna need someone when I'm gone."

Luca throws her arms around me, hugging me tightly. I squeeze her back. In another lifetime, she and I would be true sisters. Papa would be alive, and my life wouldn't be taking a turn for the worst.

CHAPTER 4



Matteo

"You did what? Father, you can't seriously have brought this girl here against her will. Who is she anyway?"

"Marcia's stepsister."

I frowned. "I thought it was just the two of them."

"Arianna keeps this one hidden away, and with good reason. She's a gem." I didn't like the devilish look in his eyes. "Anyway, I'll be out of town for a few days. I have some business to attend to, so you'll have to break her in."

"I want nothing to do with your kidnapping plot, Father. I have enough to worry about in the basement." And I did. Breaking men is what I did, and I was good at it. The man in chains downstairs was close. I could feel it. He'd spill his guts any day now, which will be another shipment of cash this family needs. Maybe even enough to ensure I don't have to marry the Rossi girl.

"Just keep an eye on her, and if she steps out of line, do something about it," he chuckled, like any of this shit was amusing.

I let out a groan. A knock at his office door had us both looking in that direction. Dimitri, a capo and one of my best friends, entered. "Now that one has some fire," he said, closing the door. "She's out in the hallway. Want me to bring her in?"

"Well, don't keep our new toy waiting," my father's excitement should concern me, but this world was fucked up.

Dimitri opened the door, and my fists clenched at my sides involuntarily. Luna walked in a small suitcase in her hands. One of our housekeepers, Greta, walked in behind her. When Luna looked at me, it was with warranted hatred. I had no idea *she* was a Rossi or that my father planned to bring her here.

"Ah, Luna. Welcome to my home." My father stalks toward her, and my jaw ticks. If he fucking touches her.

"Mr. Valenti," her jaw is set, chin tipped up in defiance. I must fix this.

"You've met my son."

Luna nods, but her gaze doesn't shift to me.

"Greta will show you to your room. I think you're going to enjoy your stay here."

I don't have to look at my father to know he's gawking at her, undressing her with his eyes. Hell,

Dimitri looks like he'll fucking drool any second. The girl is gorgeous. There is no fucking doubt about that, and my father doesn't realize that she's all fucking mine. One way or another. And any man who lays a finger on her won't live to fucking talk about it.

* * *

THE BATTLE LINES were clear for my angry princess, but they weren't for me. I've never desired a woman like I do Luna Rossi, and she'll be mine whether or not she wants to. She barely looked at me when we were in the same room, and I let her be because what else was I supposed to do, force her? She hated me. But that was going to change. But first, I had business to attend to.

Dimitri dragged Lorenzo by the arm. The man's eyes flash to where I'm standing, blade in hand. "No! No!" He protests as my friend marches him closer.

"Sit down, Enzo, and shut the fuck up."

Dimitri shoves him into a chair, securing his wrists and ankles. "You sure you don't need me here?"

I shook my head. "No, Enzo and I will be alright here."

"Fuck you, Valenti. I'm not saying anything," He spat at my feet. Dimitri whistled as he left the room.

My fist connected with Lorenzo's jaw, and he reeled back, spit flying. "Now, is that the way to start this conversation?"

CHAPTER 5



Luna

THE VALENTI MANSION IS STUNNING, centuries-old, much like my father's. Still, there is something hauntingly beautiful about this one with its grandeur, double-height entrance hall, and beautiful stone staircase. The landscaped gardens seemed to go on for miles, and a sunken courtyard was at the heart of the property. It pains me that I'm a prisoner yet again. My freedom was stolen from me. I should fight, find a way to get out of here, but the thought of Maria being tossed out of her home roots me to the spot. Arianna knew that her threats to throw Maria out of her home and have her sister deported would be enough to make me comply. I'd do anything for the woman who helped raise me. It was what my father would do.

I'd been exploring the house for the last few weeks. It's a sanctuary at night, and I can almost breathe knowing Antonio is away. Matteo has avoided me, except for dinner, where we eat together in silence, neither willing to cross the line me being here had drawn.

The way he looked at me in his father's office that first day sent chills down my spine. I wanted to believe that he didn't know because that is what his eyes said to me, but I knew better.

I halt in front of a door in the expansive library. Pushing it open, I find a set of stairs leading down. Despite every warning bell in my body sounding, I descend. A dimly lit corridor awaits at the bottom. I sigh. If I'm going to die here, it might as well be trying to find a way out. I take a few turns, finally reaching another set of doors. The sound of strangled screams had my heart catapulting, and I was tempted to turn and flee. But the Rossi in me kept pressing on toward a metal door left slightly ajar. A man was slumped over in a chair, dark hair hanging on his face. He muttered incomprehensible words, maybe prayed. A dark shadow stepped out from the shadows, positioning itself behind him. It took a second for me to recognize Matteo, his white shirt stained crimson. He tugged the man's head back by his hair, then leaned down to whisper something in his ear. The man's face was unrecognizable, eyes swollen shut, skin beaten black and blue. Blood trailed from his mouth and nose. I should turn away. I should not be drawn to Matteo's power over this man. My nipples shouldn't peak, and I shouldn't ache in forbidden places at the sight of such violence.

I held my breath as Matteo raised a knife and pressed it to the man's throat. Backing away, a gasp fell from my lips. Matteo's head snapped up, stormy gray eyes met mine, and a wicked smile curved his lips. His tongue jutted out, licking the lower one. He runs the blade over the man's throat in one quick swipe. Blood seeped from the wound, a deep red fountain, and I trembled at the sight, not with

fear but desire. A deep, dark, deviant desire coursed like wildfire through my veins.

"It's not polite to spy, *Principessa.*" The heavy desire that laced his voice sent shivers coursing through me.

My eyes shut briefly. There was no use running. He'd find me. I pushed the door open, tentatively stepping inside the room. His chest heaved, and the energy in the room was electric. A few feet away, the body slumped in the chair. "I wasn't spying."

Matteo took slow steps toward me, the blade still gripped in his bloody hands. Crimson covered his clothing. His eyes followed my gaze, and he unbuttoned his shirt. I've seen sexy men in magazines and on the internet with Luca, but not this close. His muscles rippled, coated in a sheen of sweat. Everything south clenched. I'd explored myself often, late at night in the confines of my bedroom, losing myself in self-induced orgasms, but the ache I felt at that moment wasn't the same.

"This is a restricted area. You're not supposed to be down here, not this late." Matteo brought the knife up and wiped it clean in the crook of his elbow.

"I got lost…."

My words trailed off when he stood a few inches away from me. I glanced into his eyes and fell prey to his darkening irises.

"Lies anger me," he growled the words. He leaned, his lips barely brushing mine. I felt him, though, everywhere. It's like he was touching me so deep inside he'd be etched there. Then he kissed me harder, his tongue slipping between my lips, his hand resting on the small of my back, pulling me against his erection. My face flushed, his cock pressing against my belly. He broke away, his hold on me tightening. "I don't like lies."

"It's a good thing I don't lie, then."

He backed me up against the wall. "Did you enjoy watching me work?"

"Yes," I managed between him, biting and nipping at my lips and chin.

"Because I enjoyed seeing you there." His hands roamed my body, squeezing my tits, rubbing my thighs, eliciting breathy moans. "My cock is going to fill every perfect hole in your body. Would you like that, Luna?"

I was speechless as he slid the knife down the front of my dress. It fell away in one quick motion. The air conditioning in the room felt icy against my skin, and I stood exposed to him. He licked at the angry scars that covered my skin, and my throat constricted.

"You are even more beautiful than I imagined, *Bella*, and whoever did this to you will meet the same fate as this man did."

He sucked on my nipples through the thin fabric of my bra, tugging at them with his teeth. The cold blade slid down my side, hooking in my underwear before it too fell away.

I froze, panic coursing through me. "Matteo, I've never…."

He pulled away, his eyes meeting mine. Realization hitting him.

I ripped my gaze away and focused on my feet. "*Mi prenderò cura di te*," he said as he dropped to his knees. I wondered just how he planned to take care of me. His large hands grabbed my ass. "Open for me, Luna. Let me taste what's mine."

He lifted one of my legs over his shoulder, and when his tongue darted into my slit and connected with the sensitive skin of my pussy, I cried out. He licked and sucked me like I was his favorite meal, moaning as he did. His tongue entered me, and I arched my back, pushing myself harder against his mouth.

"Teo…aah, it's too much." And it was; I'd never been so out of control.

Seeing him on his knees and his violent handiwork in front of me sent a sick thrill through me. He

brought me to the edge and drew back before I fell over. He looked up at me as he thrust a finger in me, causing me to gasp and throw my head back against the concrete wall.

"I'm going to stretch you, Luna, so when it's time, you'll be able to take all of me."

With that, he pushed another finger into me, sucking on my clit at the same time. It was sweet torture, and I knew I was close. When my orgasm tore through me, the world seemed to fade around me. I spasmed against his mouth, my pussy clutching his fingers.

He extracted his fingers and sucked me over and over again until I was whimpering, my hands gripping his hair, as another climax tore through me.

When Matteo was done, he stood, removed his shirt, and slid it over me. My legs shook, and he scooped me up, walking out of the room. I leaned my head against his chest, drifting off in his arms, knowing wherever he was taking me, I was willingly going.

CHAPTER 6



Matteo

LUNA LYING naked in my bed was not in the plan. Last night she was barely conscious when I climbed into the bathtub with her on my lap, but I needed to clean the mess I'd made. Blood covered her skin, another man's blood, and that sent rage, no matter how undue, coursing through me. This was fucking crazy. I traced my finger over her breasts, settling my hand between her thighs. She was already fucking soaked when my finger slid into her, and she moaned in her sleep, her hips involuntarily lifting for more. The girl was messing with my fucking mind. Her eyes flew open, and hazel eyes stared right into my soul.

"What are you doing?" She's breathless already.

I circle her clit, which elicits another moan. “Touching you, *Principessa*. Do you like it?" I thrust my finger into her, needing her warmth.

"Matteo." She closed her legs, my hand still buried in her pussy. Knowing that she was pure, untouched, and untainted made me rock hard. A true Mafia Princess to rule by my side. The thought shook me. The desire to own her taking over, but her next words doused the flame. "Is this why you and your father brought me here? To be your plaything?"

I withdrew my fingers, slick with her arousal. "Is that what you think? That *I* brought you here. I didn't even know who he'd brought here until you walked into his office."

She gasped when I sunk my fingers into my mouth, sucking hard. "But now you are here, and no one but me is allowed to touch you."

"Your father bought me, Teo," her use of the moniker my mother gave me squeezes my chest. She climbs off my bed, pulling the sheet around her.

"That changes nothing about what I said." Anger simmered under my skin, so close to the surface. One more mention of the man I call father will break the surface.

"If I go against his agreement with my stepmother, they're going to hurt the people I care about. My stepmother isn't…she isn't someone I want to cross. This…" she motioned between us. "...it can't happen."

My teeth clenched at the fear lacing her voice. "And I'm not someone Arianna Rossi wants to cross, either."

She sighs, sitting back down on the edge of the bed. I stand and kneel before her. "When my father died, Arianna stripped me of everything, Teo. My title, my home… it's why I felt my life was over

when your father took me. In a few months, I would have been free."

"Did she do this to you?" My fingers trace over a small scar on her collarbone.

She nods.

I'd seen the ones on her back. I can tell they faded over time, but the remnants remain. I can tell there's more, but I don't push her.

I wrap her in my arms, pulling her into my lap until we're both on the floor, her back to my front. "Tell me what I have to do to make this better, and I'll do it."

CHAPTER 7



Matteo

THE ROSSI MANSION sits atop a hill that overlooks the town. A long time ago, before our families were rivals, they were allies, but Arianna Rossi is no ally of mine. If those scars are anything to go by, Luna has endured terrors I didn't even want to think about. I had to keep my head in the game. I was here for one reason: to save Maria from Arianna's clutches.

The doorman leads me to Arianna's office, and she's standing at the window when I enter.

"Matteo Valenti, to what do I owe the pleasure? Please sit," she said, turning and motioning for me to take the visitor's chair.

"That won't be necessary. I'm here for Maria Cortez, and then I'll leave."

She smiles. "Maria? Whatever for?" She takes a seat behind her desk.

"Oh, I think you and I both know why. Now, if I'm going to ask again, I don't see this conversation panning out well for you."

She lets out a laugh. "Come now, Matteo. You, of all people, know that threats aren't handled lightly between our families. I'm going to go ahead and guess that this has something to do with my stepdaughter?"

I frown at the absence of surprise in her voice. She turned the laptop toward me, and venom ran through my veins at the image on the screen. The sound was muted, but it was footage of Luna and me last night in the basement.

"How the fuck did you get hold of that?"

She shrugs and runs her perfectly manicured nails over the desk's surface. "That hardly matters. But if you're here to go against the agreement your father and I made, you'll regret it."

I stalk toward her, turning her chair and standing in front of her. My fingers wrap around her ponytail, and she lets out a mewl when I tug it back. "Threats don't fare well with me either, bitch!"

Two capos rushed in, guns ready, and pointed at me.

"If you want to see your father again, you'll let go of me this second," she spat in my face.

I frowned. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

She reached toward her laptop, clicking a button. My father appeared on the screen. He was bound to a chair, obviously beaten. One of the Rossi capos held a gun to his head. I looked between the screen and Arianna, releasing my hold on her.

"Where is he?"

"Oh? Now, I have your attention?" Amusement laced her tone as she straightened in her chair.

I backed away. "When I saw how cozy you were getting with my stepdaughter, I figured I needed some collateral to convince you to hold up the Valenti end of the bargain."

"If you hurt him, I swear—"

She cuts me off. "Now, from your reaction, I'm going to assume you'll do anything to ensure he's safe, starting with marrying Marcia and ensuring I get my fortune."

I scoffed. "You'd want your own flesh and blood to be wed to a man who clearly doesn't care for her."

"This is no fairytale, Matteo. Marcia understands that money is the only thing that matters, so she'll do what she has to."

I run my hands through my hair. I'm not the man whose hands are tied behind his back. I'll save my father, but I must think this through and strategize. "Fine. On one condition. You leave Luna out of this."

"You are in no position to be setting out terms, Matteo. But I will let the girl be, as long as we do it my way."

I want to wrap my hand around her throat and press until I see the light leave her eyes, but with two weapons aimed at me, my father was trapped, God knows where, and Luna was unprotected. I do the only thing I can. "As you wish."

CHAPTER 8



Luna

MATTEO HAD BEEN GONE for hours when Greta knocked at my door. "Greta, is he alright?"

The older woman's brows furrowed together, and I didn't like the unease that settled in my stomach. "He's asked that you get ready, wear this, and take one of the cars. The driver will know where to take you. I know nothing more, miss."

I nodded. I knew it wasn't her fault, but it didn't stop me from being angry she didn't know more. With no word from Matteo for most of the day, I couldn't help but worry. Was Maria okay? Had my stepmother done something to her?

Greta left, and I opened the pale blue box, moving aside the tissue paper. In it was a dress as pale blue as the box. A smaller box contained a pair of heels, clear, with stones. It was stunning, but did nothing to ease my tension.

An hour later, I was in the car, being driven to an unknown destination. But soon, my surroundings became familiar, and when we approached the wrought-iron gates that held me captive, I sucked in a breath. "Stop the car," I demanded.

"Miss, I have strict instructions. Mr. Valenti told me to assure you that you can trust him. Please."

I tried the door handle, but it wouldn't budge. "Child locks, Miss Rossi."

I sat back in a huff, angry tears springing to my eyes. Why would he do this? After what I shared with him, why would he bring me back here?

Cars line the driveway to the entrance. Maria rushed toward me the second the valet opened my door, and I stepped out, tears filling her eyes. I hugged her tight. "Oh, Lu, I was so worried."

"What is all this? Why am I here, Maria? Matteo…"

She ushered me aside. "Haven't you heard? He and Marcia are engaged. It's their engagement party, amore.

Engagement Party. Is that why I was brought here? To be humiliated in front of Marcia and Arianna the way I have been my entire life.

"That can't be true," I whisper, and Maria's eyes widen, awareness filling them.

"Oh no, *Bambina*, no." She grabbed me by the shoulder. "No matter what happened between you two in that Valenti house, you leave it behind, *comprendere*. You forget it."

The panicked expression on her face has me reaching for her hand. "*Certo, Maria. Certo*."

She smiles and hugs me one more time before leading me into the house. The sound of laughter

and chatter made my stomach lurch. After Maria had returned to work, I stood awkwardly, smiling and nodding at the other guests as they passed me. A guest, that is what I was. Images of my father and me dancing at the foot of the grand staircase, his booming laughter filling every crook and crevice in this house, filled my mind.

To shake myself free of the past, I grabbed a champagne flute from a waiter, downing the contents and taking one more. If I'm going to survive this, I need some liquid courage.

"Oh, Lu! You came!" Luca's voice made my heart flop and, turning to see her barreling toward me had the first genuine smile spread across my face. My stepsister looked stunning in a lime green dress that brought out her green eyes and complimented her blonde hair.

"Luca. I missed you so much," I said as we embraced. She is the only good thing in this place; how she was related to Arianna and Marcia is a mystery.

"Isn't this all over-the-top," she laughed, but I knew her well enough to know she was in her element. She loved parties and not being under the scrutiny of her mother and sister, who looked down on her. She was not Marcia, Arianna's golden child, and that made her almost as unworthy as me.

I sensed him before I saw him, felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end at his proximity.

"Lucia," he said. "Your mother is looking for you."

She beamed at the man behind me, whose voice sent unwelcome thrills through me.

"We'll talk more now that you're home." Lucia placed a kiss on my cheek.

"The balcony, five minutes," Matteo whispered, and I spun to face him, but he was already making his way through the crowd.

* * *

DIEGO, Maria's nephew, was waiting for us as we hurried through the staff entrance. I will forever be indebted to my guardian. I didn't want to hear anything Matteo had to say, so I did the only thing I could do. I ran.

"Here," Maria said, handing me my music box.

"You kept this? I thought she destroyed it." Tears filled my eyes.

"She tried. Now, you'll be safe with Julia, but only for tonight. She'll get together as much as possible, and you take the first bus out of here. All your savings are in here," she tapped the box.

I placed it on the backseat and hugged Maria, unsure if this was our final goodbye. "I love you, *mio* Maria."

'I love you, *amore*."

CHAPTER 9



Matteo

SHE WASN'T on the balcony. Lucia had no idea where she slipped away. Rage simmered just beneath the surface as I searched the ballroom. Marcia's shrill voice called out to me, but I ignored her, heading for the staff quarters.

I pounded on her door until the older woman opened it. She tried to make it look like she'd been asleep, but her shoes were still on.

"Mr. Valenti?"

"Where is she?" I pushed past her into her small apartment.

"Who, sir?" I would wrap my hand around her throat and squeeze it out, but I knew what Maria meant to my girl.

"Don't play dumb with me, Maria. Where is she?"

She folds her arms across her chest. "No place you or that witch of a stepmother of hers will ever find her." Maria's courteous act quickly dropped.

"I. am. Not. Arianna."

"And Luna belongs to no one. Leave her be. Let her live her life, per *favore*. Hasn't she been through enough?"

Walking around the room, I threw open drawers, shuffling through them, unsure what to look for. "I will find her, Maria, with or without your help, but it'll be in your best interest to come clean now."

She scoffed. "I am an old woman, boy. I don't care about threats from the likes of you."

I slam my fist against the wall, inches from her head, and the woman doesn't flinch.

"Leave. Matteo. There is nothing for you here."

I stormed out of her apartment, dialing Dimitri. "She's gone, and I don't want to see your face unless you find her." I cut the call and made my way back to the party. Arianna expects me to be there, and I will play her game until I know where my father is, and then I get my girl, and I won't stop until she's mine.

To be continued…

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

M Jameson enjoys writing steamy, taboo, and forbidden stories. Sometimes dark, sometimes angsty, but sexiness and HEA (albeit not conventional) guaranteed. Jameson loves to delve into complex topics and push the limits, so if you're looking for escapism and, like your boundaries crushed, she's your go-to.

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THE BITTER ONE



BY SOPHIA VINCENT

When Cole Greco allowed his emotions to distract him from a very important business meeting with a rival family's boss, he knew he'd be punished. Severely.

Before he lost a piece of himself, he was going to come clean about a secret he'd been keeping locked deep in his heart.

His own family's boss, Alan Ricci, would never know what was going to hit him when Cole finally came clean.

Their dynamic, both personal and professional, was going to be tested. Would it be strong enough to withstand Cole's secret?

Breakups are a bitch.

I should know; I'm going through one that's been bad enough to affect my job.

And since my job is as a made man in the Italian Mafia, I can't afford to get sloppy. Sloppy means my shit doesn't get done. And if my shit doesn't get done, I end up in the Don's office.

Which is where I am now.

I'm wearing a suit that costs more than some people's annual salary, with shoes to match. My hair is perfectly styled, and I even washed behind my ears. Twice.

But, inside, I'm a puddle of piss. A scared kid going to see the principal. But, ya know, if the principal gave out bullet wounds instead of detention.

It feels like I wait a lifetime before his office door opens and he waves me inside, not even meeting my gaze. I try not to let that fuck with up my head anymore than it already is. It hasn't been long that Alan has been the Don; the whole family is going through a rough adjustment period, and that's one of the reasons that he's been so upset with my latest fuck up.

Ordinarily, I'd sit in front of his desk without asking or being offered a seat. This time, I stand, respectfully, feet shoulder width apart, hands clasped loosely in front of me, my gaze focused on the window behind his desk.

He waits until he sits down, leans back, props his feet on his desk, and steeples his fingers behind his head to say anything. I know it's a tactic to make me as uncomfortable as possible. Little does he know, I couldn't be less comfortable than I already am.

Alan and I grew up together. My father was his father's Capo for the South Boston region. He and I were essentially raised as brothers, or at the very least, close cousins. Now that both our fathers are dead, we stepped into their positions, and our dynamic has slowly been changing ever since.

It's taking me some time to get used to deferring to him on a lot of things. Not because I don't respect his position, or him personally, but when you've seen each other during the darkest parts of your lives, it's basically impossible to keep your relationship focused on business.

Especially when you've been in love with your friend for years, and he doesn't even know you're gay.

Finally, apparently satisfied that I'm shaking hard enough in my boots for his liking, he dips his head, inviting me to sit across from him.

I do so, and maintain my respectful, and - honestly - submissive position.

"You know why you're here." It's a statement, not a question, but I answer anyway.

"I do."

"And you know the usual, shall we say, penance, for that, shall we say, blunder."

I wanted to swallow and wipe the sweat I could feel dripping down my face, but I didn't so much as twitch. "I do."

"Then, Cole, do you care to tell me why in the fuck you screwed this up so badly?"

My eyes closed with my shame before I could stop them. "I have no excuse." Focusing on Alan's deep brown eyes, the ones that haunted my dreams, and now my nightmares, I said, "I'm sorry."

He stood abruptly, his office chair slamming into the wall behind him. Hands braced on the desk, he leaned forward, and I swear I could feel the fury coming off him in waves.

"You're sorry? Is that what you're going to tell Nicolò Vinezio when he asks me where his fucking assault rifles are? Is that what you're going to say to him right before he puts two in the back

of your worthless skull?" His hand sweeps out, crashing the contents of his desk to the floor. "You've set back *decades* of negotiations and diplomatic compromises in one fell swoop!"

I froze as he came around the desk to stand right in front of me, so close he was almost standing between my spread legs.

"Stand. Up." Now his voice was quiet, deep and demanding. I stood without hesitation. "The only reason I haven't killed you myself already is because of our history. But, if Vinezio demands it of me, I won't have a choice, Cole."

I nodded at him. "I'll do what I have to in order to make this right, Alan. You have my word."

* * *

I'd driven around the city for hours before finally going home. Breaking into my stash of 30 year old Macallan, I poured myself a double and sat heavily in my favorite recliner. I hadn't bothered to turn on any lights, so the only illumination was coming from the wall of floor to ceiling windows that looked out over downtown Boston.

My heart was broken. Shattered. I'd lost a girl who was the only person besides Alan I could imagine sharing my life with. I'd fucked up royally in dealing with one of our ally families, and had likely started a war with them.

And worst of all, I'd angered and disappointed my best friend. The one man on this Earth I loved more than anything.

All because I'd missed a goddamn meeting.

I'd never done shit like this before. I was a machine when it mattered, robotic and cool in all business situations. Never would I have allowed my personal life to bleed into my work life. It was unfathomable.

Now, I had not only fucked up, but I was being accused of betraying my family, my Don. Not to mention the Vinezio family. If this situation wasn't handled correctly, we were more than likely looking at another war between the two families.

The last time we'd battled them, thousands had died. Innocents; women, children. People that had no ties to the Mafia whatsoever, but who'd had the bad luck to be caught between two mobs.

That didn't even take into account the hundreds of our own soldiers that we'd lost. Nor the millions of dollars we'd lost trying to build back up the family after all the devastation. Now, almost fifty years later, we were as friendly as we could expect to be. Not truly allies, but no longer hostile.

And now, I had single-handedly managed to fuck it all up. Over a bitch. I winced. Calling Dani a bitch, even in my mind, wasn't fair to her. She'd done her best to put up with the life I led, but there was only so much an outsider could take.

Besides, we'd been doomed from the start. I may have loved her, but I never would have given her all of me. That had always been, and always would be, reserved for Alan.

And now, because I let Dani's leaving me throw me off my game, I'd lost his trust, his respect…

I should save Vinezio the trouble and take myself out.

* * *

Three hours later, I was trying to fall asleep when my phone rang. I didn't need to look at it to know it was Alan.

"Boss," I answered.

"Meet me at the loft in an hour."

He hung up without waiting for a reply, confident in the knowledge that I'd do whatever he said.

Forty-five minutes later, I was pulling up the highrise the family owned and handing off my car to the valet. I paced the lobby, knowing that whatever was going to happen because of my fuck up was going to happen tonight. Whether I lived or died, whether I retained my position, whether I just had to kiss Nicolò's ass, it would all be decided now.

Five minutes left, and I headed toward the elevators. One hour meant one hour. Not early. Not late. And I'd be damned if I fucked up again, even a little.

My hand was raised to knock when the door swung open and Alan met my eyes. I tried not to think about how deep and rich a brown they were, how I saw those eyes in my dreams. He didn't look nearly as pissed as he had in his office earlier, but neither did his gaze hold the warmth it usually did.

Stepping back, he gestured for me to enter. As I passed him, I had to force myself not to turn, not to reach for him. Not to fall at his feet and beg forgiveness.

"You want something to drink?" he asked, his voice deep and resigned.

"Sure." I didn't really, my stomach was in knots, but I was trying to draw out the moment and delay the moment in time that I knew he and I would never be able to come back from.

I took a seat on his couch, taking the risk of the lapse of formality since we were in his home. It wasn't something I ever would have hesitated over in the past, but I was no longer sure of my place.

"I talked to Nicolò," Alan said, handing me a highball glass then sitting down on the other end of the couch from me. He didn't bother to look at me as he continued. "He wants recompense for the lost merchandise."

"I assumed."

"I'm not finished, Cole. He wants recompense and he wants blood." There's a pause, and I felt the harshness of Alan's eyes boring into the side of my head.

I turned until we were facing each other, waiting for him to spill. "He wants Dani burned."

I lurch to my feet, feeling like I might vomit. "No fucking way, we don't fuck with women and children." Before I realize I've done it, my glass is flying through the air, splashing whiskey all over the floor and shattering against the wall.

I turn back to Alan, and I notice he's staring at me calmly, one eyebrow cocked as if to say "Are you finished yet?" I can't believe he looks so cavalier about this.

"I'll kill him if he so much as touches one hair on her head."

Alan dips his chin toward where I'd been sitting. Dutifully, I sit, but I can't stay still, the anger coursing through me feels like it's burning me from the inside out, and if I don't move, I'll go up in flames.

"I told him the same thing, Cole. Give me some credit."

"Then what are we gonna do about it?"

"He's going to have his blood. But, it won't be hers." He sighed, sat his glass on the coffee table, and leaned back. "It'll be yours. He wants your right hand."

It took me a few minutes to process what Alan had said, but when it did hit me, I felt sick again. It was both better and worse than what I'd been expecting, and my mind didn't know how to process this information. "My right hand? That's it?"

Alan laughed, but it held no humor. "No, he wants double the merchandise and your right hand delivered to him - get this - wrapped and with a bow on top."

"When?" I was barely able to get the word out of my mouth. A hand was better than my life, but I

had a hard time convincing myself of that.

"We've got a week as of this morning. So, six days."

Less than a week, and I'd lose my hand. It was better than my life, and it sure as fuck was better than Dani being in danger, but fuck… I had hardly any time to come to terms with losing a major part of my body.

Although, to be fair, most amputees didn't get any warning. So, despite the situation, I tried to view that as a win. Then, the word "amputee" hit me in the gut, and I was suddenly livid, irrationally, insanely livid.

"So this is it?" I asked, my voice deep and wavering with an emotion I refused to admit to myself was fear. "No negotiations? No second chance?"

Alan gave me a look that said I was too smart to even consider a second chance with the Vinezio family. "This *is* your negotiation. It was either your hand, or Dani's life.

I looked down at my hand. Scarred. Calloused. Large. My fingers were thick, and there was a light dusting of hair on the back of my hand, courtesy of my Italian heritage.

I was right handed. I'd have to learn to write all over again. Learn to feed myself. Dress myself. Wipe my own fucking ass.

In the grand scheme of things, losing a hand was a pretty minor punishment in our world. I could actually, in a completely fucked up way, consider myself lucky. Obviously, Nicolò was a blood thirsty bastard, and I'd known that he'd be looking for payback for missing that meeting. The fact that he'd originally asked for Dani's head was proof that he was keeping tabs on our personal lives, parts of ourselves that were supposed to be off limits.

But, there was no reason for him to mention her at all unless he knew what she meant to me. Or, I guess I should say, had meant to me. She hadn't been born into this life. She definitely didn't deserve to die because of it.

So, I'd man up and do what I had to to bring peace between the families again.

First, though. First, I was going to do something with this hand that I'd been wanting to do for what felt like a lifetime. And for once, I wasn't going to let doubt cloud my judgment. I wasn't going to puss out. I was going to grab what I wanted, needed, with both hands.

While I still could.

* * *

My hand reached out and I grabbed the back of Alan's head, pulling him to me. Taking advantage of his shock, I leaned in and kissed him.

The first touch of our lips ignited the spark that had been smoldering in me for years, and a feeling of rightness engulfed me, followed closely by a wave of desire that hardened my body.

He pulled back almost immediately, and while I mourned the loss of his mouth, I didn't expect anything else.

What did surprise me was the fist he threw into my jaw which snapped my head back. I'd assumed he wouldn't jump me, but I didn't think he'd hit me. Stars danced in my vision, and I shook my head to clear it.

Then, I doubled down, because what the fuck did I have to lose? At the very least, I'd be losing my hand. And if my behavior cost me my life, then at least I'd have gone out reaching for what I wanted.

I tasted my own blood in the kiss, the coppery tang of it smearing on both our mouths. Again, Alan jerked from my grasp, but this time, he didn't hit me.

He stared, his eyes full of shock. "What the fuck, Cole?" The question was asked in a voice that grated on me like gravel, but the pain of it only served to make me harder and even more determined to have him.

"I love you." I hadn't meant to blurt that out, but now that the words were in the air between us, I couldn't find it in myself to be upset about it.

Hell, even in this day and age, there was a very real possibility that I'd die from losing my hand, and I saw no reason why I shouldn't be completely honest with him.

He stood and backed away from the couch, not stopping until he'd hit the wall behind him. He stood frozen for an interminable moment, and I went to him, not stopping until I was pressing against him from top to bottom. I leaned in, grabbed his face with both my hands, and yanked him into me, laying a bruisingly hard kiss against lips that I'd dreamt of for so long.

He wrapped his hands around my shoulders and shoved, and his face showed anger, but I could have sworn I saw desire in his eyes. More than likely, it was nothing but my own need reflected back at me.

I was pissed, though, fucking livid, about Vinezio, Dani, the gun shipment… All of it collided in me and a rage like I'd never felt before washed over my body, fighting against the desire I wanted to indulge.

All of that anger needed an outlet and since Alan was there, and was rejecting me, I decided that there was nothing stopping me from using him as a punching bag. I cocked my right hand back and let loose with a punch that bounced his head against the wall.

Again, and again, I hit him. I gave way to my emotions and let them all flow out of me through my fists. It took me longer than I wanted to admit to notice he wasn't fighting me back. It took even longer than that for me to be able to calm myself down some, to regain my breath.

For the first time, I focused on his face and the damage I had done. I was horrified. He looked like he'd been put through a meat grinder, and a wave of guilt washed over me and threatened to down me.

"I'm," I began, but I couldn't figure out what to say. How do you apologize to your best friend for lashing out like I had? How do you say you're sorry for treating the most important person in your life like an object?

I sank to the floor and put my hands over my face, no longer able to stomach looking at the destruction I'd wrought on him. I noticed movement out of the corner of my eye, and watched as he walked to his bar and grabbed a towel. I watched as he wet it. I watched as he pressed it to his cheek, wiping his and my blood from his skin.

I hadn't cried since I was a child, but I could feel the pressure of tears build up behind my eyes and it took every ounce of will I had to hold them back. They would serve no purpose, and I didn't want to evoke pity in Alan.

When my head had cleared some and I didn't feel so close to weeping, I rose and walked toward the door. Just before I could reach it, I felt his hand on my arm.

I turned to face him, but couldn't meet his gaze, so I stared at my feet.

"What was that about?" His question was valid, but I didn't know how to answer it. Not with words, anyway.

I shrugged, feeling like a sullen teenager, and not really giving a shit about it. I had no excuse. I took my anger out on Alan. Anger at Dani. Anger at Vinezio. Anger at him for rejecting me. Anger about the very likely probability of losing my hand. All I could say, however, was, "I'm angry."

"Yeah, I got that, dick. But none of this is my fault. I wasn't the one who missed the meeting and cost Nicolò tens of thousands of dollars. I wasn't the one who made Dani leave you." He grabbed my shirt by the front and twisted it, bringing our faces closer together. "And I wasn't the one who kissed my best friend with no warning, then beat the shit out of him when he pulled back."

He shoved me against the door, and my head stung when it bounced off the hard wood. Then, his mouth was pressed to mine, and I tasted blood, his, mine, it didn't matter. I kissed him back, thrusting my tongue against his, hard and heavy. I wanted his pain. I wanted mine. I needed an outlet for everything that was going through my head.

I surged forward, grabbed his shirt, and ripped. Buttons flew through the air, but neither of us bothered to pay any attention. I yanked at his belt, ripped at his pants. He did the same to my clothes, and it wasn't long before our clothing was in shreds on the floor.

There was no thought of a bed, or even bothering to go to the couch that was just a few feet away. I tackled him until we both hit the floor, and he grunted as he took the full impact of the fall, plus the weight of my body. I didn't care. I was beyond rational thought.

Need was driving me. Need for him. Need for this connection. Need for a release.

Our mouths stayed connected, moving against each other with a strength that was entirely different than kissing a woman. There was no tenderness. No romance. It was raw, primal, and painful.

It was the best kiss of my life.

No longer content to just kiss him, I reached down and grabbed his dick through his boxer briefs. He was as hard as I felt, and huge in my hand. I squeezed, I kneaded, I stroked and pulled.

He began to moan into my mouth and I swallowed the sounds like they were nourishment and I was starving. Working my way down his body, I worshiped every dip and ridge of muscle, every inch of his tanned skin. I couldn't be bothered to remove his underwear so I pulled his cock out through the opening and shoved him down my throat.

His groan was deep, delicious. Full of desire. It was almost a growl, and I let it consume me, fuel me.

He tasted salty. Smelled like musk and sweat and all man. I allowed myself to revel in the tactile sensations. The feel of him, hard as a rock and incredibly large, hitting the back of my throat with each bob of my head. To be here, doing this, with him is something I never thought I'd have a chance to experience. Something that seemed so far away, unattainable.

He grabbed me by the hair, yanking hard, and the pain in my scalp only served to spur me on.

I bit him lightly, sucked him harder.

"I'm close, Cole," he said, the words coming out of his mouth on the tail end of a long, hungry moan.

I didn't stop. I wanted to feel his orgasm inside me. Feel his cum hit the back of my throat. Taste his release as I swallowed him whole.

When the first hot jet hit my tongue, I groaned along with him. It was almost like a dream come true for me. I gulped down everything he had to give, then licked his softening cock like it was the tastiest ice cream cone in the world.

He yanked on my hair again, pulling at me. I moved over his body, suddenly scared of what his reaction would be. We'd crossed so many lines in such a short amount of time, I had no idea how to act.

He took the decision away from me by pulling my head toward him. Claimed my mouth in a deeply drugging kiss that sent sparks through my body.

I pulled back, even though it was the last thing I wanted to do. "Are you sure?" I didn't want to

hear his answer, but I had to ask the question.

His reply was to flip me onto my back and kiss me with a fire whose intensity shocked me. That fire spread and burned a trail down my body and back up again, passing between us like a tidal wave.

"I want to fuck you," he said, and the words were whispered into my ear. I nodded, once, just a dip of my chin in affirmation

He turned me over, pulled my ass toward him until I was on my hands and knees, the hard wood floors digging into my knee caps and cementing the reality of this situation in me.

This wasn't a dream come true. This was real. This was happening.

Cold air hit my ass when he pulled down my boxer briefs. His movements were heavy, aggressive. We could do things to each other that we could never do to a woman. There was no need for gentleness. He seemed to know that I didn't want affection, I didn't want soft. I needed hard, heavy. Pain. I wanted this moment imprinted in my psyche, to think back on in the future. Whatever that future would hold.

My ass was in the air, and I felt him reach around me and grab my cock, which was already weeping precome. He yanked at me, pulled on me roughly, and I made a noise that was half way between a moan and a growl.

Suddenly, I felt the tip of his cock nudge against my asshole. No lube. No true foreplay.

I pushed back against him, urging him on, begging silently for him to take me.

When he finally did enter me, there was pain. But there was also pleasure. A soul deep rightness about us finally coming together. He fucked me hard, pounding into my ass, yanking on my dick with every stroke.

If I hadn't been so out of my mind with pleasure, I would have been embarrassed by how quickly I climaxed, my cum shooting out of me, covering his fancy expensive floors with the basest of all bodily fluids.

He came not long after me, yelling, shouting his release to the vaulted ceilings in his loft. The sound echoed around us, even as he began to pull out of me.

There was a twinge of discomfort when he did, but I'd never felt more at peace in my life. We flopped onto our backs, next to each other, not touching, just panting with exertion.

After a few minutes, he spoke. "What the fuck just happened?"

He hadn't rolled to face me, hadn't moved at all. I did the same, keeping my body still, except for my heaving chest. "Something that has been a long time in the making."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"I've been in love with you for years." I saw no reason to deny it, or keep it hidden. I was due to lose a hand, possibly my life, in a week's time, and I felt an urge to confess secrets to anyone who would listen.

"The fuck? Why didn't you say anything before?"

"Why would I? You're straight." I paused. "Or, at least, I think you are. I've never seen you with a man."

"Yeah, I admit I've never done anything like that before. But," he began, this time turning to look into my eyes. "I loved every second of it."

His smile warmed me a bit, giving me relief over the anxiety of his reaction to all of this.

"I didn't know you were gay, either."

I managed to shrug, despite being prone on the floor. "I don't know that I truly am gay," I explained. "I'm attracted to women, but the only man I've ever thought of in a romantic way was you."

Another few moments of silence passed as we both tried to come to terms with this monumental change in our lives, and what it would mean for the future. As friends, as colleagues. As potential lovers.

"I'd say we should discuss this, but frankly I don't want to," he said, a slight laugh audible in his words. "I'm relaxed and I don't want to think right now."

I finally turned toward him. "I agree. We'll discuss it in the future. When we both aren't covered in blood and cum.

He laughed loudly as he stood, then helped me to my feet. He'd grabbed my right hand, and as if hit by a bullet, I could see the moment when he realized he soon may never be able to do that again.

His sigh was frustrated, pained. "I'll talk to Nicolò. See if I can't get him to back off and use this as a warning."

"He's already backed off. You said he wanted Dani dead. My hand was supposed to be the compromise.

"I know." It was mumbled, almost as if he were thinking out loud. His gaze met mine, an intensity in his brown eyes that I'd never seen before. "But, things are different now."

"How so?"

"You weren't my underboss then."

I couldn't possibly have heard him right. "What? I'm a capo. He knows that."

Alan shrugged, smirked at me. "Yeah, but I was planning on promoting you anyway. It just makes more sense to do so now."

"You're shitting me. This isn't' because of what just happened is it?" I couldn't imagine him promoting me just because I'd sucked his cock, but neither had I ever imagined I'd be able to suck his cock, so who knew?

His expression became serious. "No. This was a long time in the making, Cole. I've just moved up the timeline. Vinezio will know that he can't treat my second like he could a capo. We'll just have to make it up to him another way."

I felt a smile coming. The stress of having my hand amputated fell away, leaving me almost weak in the knees. I walked on shaky legs over to the couch and sat down hard. "You really think he'll accept this?"

Alan came and sat next to me. His hand gripped my shoulder tightly, a display of comfort that I would treasure the rest of my life. "If he gets his dick in a twist over it, I'll just remind him of how much shit I've put up with since I took over for my father. Nicolò isn't exactly a perfect angel himself, you know."

I nodded. I did know. I also knew he could be vengeful if he didn't get his way, like he was a spoiled child or something. Dick.

Alan shifted his hand until his arm was wrapped around my shoulders. "Look, man, we'll take care of this. I promise."

I looked into his eyes. The same eyes I'd been staring into for years. For what felt like a lifetime. I trusted this man in a way I'd never trusted anyone before. "Okay," I finally said. "You know I trust you."

He nodded at me. "I do know that, Cole. And I don't take it lightly. So, whatever happens with Vinezio, your hand," he paused and I could feel an energy coming from him that hadn't been there before, a kind of frenetic power. "Whatever happens between us, I'll always have your back."

He leaned forward and kissed me, and his lips were worshipful, soft and sweet. This kiss wasn't an expression of need, it was the sealing of a pact between us. No matter what happened in our lives,

we’d be there for each other. Through it all.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sophia has been reading and writing romance novels since she was a kid. She's a girly girl who loves chocolate, glitter, and believes in the power of true love. She lives in Florida with her own romance novel hero and their dogs, Ringo and Ozzy.

You can find out more about Sophia and where to purchase her works at her Linktree here: https://linktr.ee/SophiaVincent

CASEN: THE MISUNDERSTOOD VIGILANTE



BY LEILA COLTYN

How do you resist a man you hate when you desire his freckles and have to spend four days working side by side?

Addax lost his faith in the justice system years ago, when there was none for his cousin. Now, he takes the law into his own hands as a vigilante—his team by his side.

Except Casen gets under his skin. Addax is diligent about who makes his kill list, but Casen doesn't seem to take killing people seriously. Add in freckles that entice Addax beyond his rational thinking and Casen using their first work trip together to needle him mercilessly and Addax doesn't know if he has any fight left against his attraction for Casen.

Will he give into temptation when they both need it most?

Casen: The Misunderstood Vigilante is a dark MM romance, hurt-comfort, enemies-to-lovers, BDSM, and forced proximity. Trigger Warning: off page mention of rape (not main character) and violence.

CHAPTER 1



Addax

"YOU'VE GOT to be fucking with me. *Casen?* Casen. There's no way I'm teaming up with him." Even though I know it's pointless to complain to my boss, Azariah, about Casen, I need to air my misgivings about this particular tidbit about the new assignment. Casen is the one person on the team I'm desperate to steer clear from because he repulses me when he opens his mouth and spouts his murder stories.

He fucking loves killing people, always coming back from gigs with new descriptions that has me grinding my teeth and squeezing my fingernails inside my hands to avoid punching the evil smirk off his face.

But I know it's no use. Azariah wouldn't have paired us up together if it wasn't warranted—meaning he needs the both of us to get this job done.

Azariah knows my irritation when it comes to Casen. I kill people for a distinct purpose—protect innocents from the cruel and sadistic motherfuckers like my ex-best friend, Jack McNeely. It's why I have an even higher standard than most of the other assassins on Azariah's payroll.

The motto I adhere to is I only kill the most sadistic of criminals, which means any complaints I throw at Azariah are a waste of breath—ergo he knows I'm in. I'm always in—even when it means being stuck with Casen for four fucking days straight. Just my fucking luck.

Although, I know deep down my negative response to Casen's presence has also been linked to the undeniable attraction I feel for him. Freckles are my weakness, and he has them in spades, dotting his nose, shoulders, and forearms. Each time I peek at him, my eyes are captivated and sweep each tiny freckle, which only irks me more when he spies my obvious obsession.

"Fuck." I close my eyes tight, trying to ward off another headache and the image of my boss' inevitable knowing smile.

I let out a long breath through my nose, "You know I'll do it." I scratch my hair near my temple and yank his hand away in frustration to this news clouding my day.

The smug smile shifts to his serious boss demeanor, the one I'm most familiar with when he's got no time for smart remarks from us. "Whatever issues you have with Casen stay here. You better be on you best behavior, because I'm not risking this guy hurting anyone else. You got it?"

One deft nod is all it takes. "You know you can count on me, sir."

"Good."

The door slams open, Casen popping in without a knock or vocal warning. "We hitting the jets or what, Buffy? We've got no time to kill." He laughs at his own joke, a smirk sliding across his face.

I grit my teeth together at Casen's use of Buffy, something he started when he learned my last name was Summers, which was Buffy Summers' last name. Being forced to spend any time, let alone four days with Casen, the immature killer with a sexy smile isn't my ideal way of spending a weekend.

I narrow my eyes and grunt at him. Letting him interpret that on his own, I turn to Azariah with my eyebrows raised, quietly asking why we need the private plane for this mission.

"We've narrowed Thomas Valentine's location to the outskirts of Savannah, so it'll be faster to take the plane for this one. And you know this is a top priority case. We've been after this guy for nine months now. It could be our only shot before he disappears again."

"Got it, boss."

"Yeah, Azariah. We got this, don't we, Buffy." Casen steps farther into the room, slithers his arm around my shoulders, and gives my forearm a squeeze. I ignore the shot of sparks and tingles that ignite with his unwanted display in front of our boss.

I also have to remind myself to take a deep breath and count to ten before responding, since all I want to do is punch the man's perfect smile off his face for once again referring to me as Buffy.

Slowly, I brush Casen's arm from my forearm, annoyed by his interruptions, something I know is only the beginning to what I'll be getting from him in the days to come. "Be serious for once, Casen." I huff the words at him before turning away from him.

"Oh, I'm dead serious about killing Valentine. No doubt about that, Buffy. We'll get the bastard together though." He takes a step back, heat in his eyes, and winks at me.

Casen's words pull another long, exhausted sigh from me. Has it only been five minutes in his presence? Feels like five days already and the clock hasn't started ticking on our time working together. "The name's Summers, not Buffy," I grit out as politely as possible with Azariah still witnessing Casen's banter.

"I'll call you whatever rocks that boat of yours, Buffy. You know you love it." Icy blue eyes with a hint of heat shine with amusement at me. One I want…no *need* to ignore. This is Casen we're talking about here. The man who always describes into the details of each of his kills Azariah gives him. I can't allow his hands to give me any sort of pleasure, even if I have to suffer through nights of waking up alone with his name on my lips and my cum soaking the sheets.

Fuck. I need to focus and not get hard in front of Azariah, let alone Casen.

Azariah clears his throat, "There is one more thing I wanted to go over now that I have both of you in here." He readjusts himself in his desk chair, signaling something I'm definitely not going to like. He only does that when there's a catch to a mission, usually one I pass up on. "With all the data our hacker collected on Valentine, we still weren't able to verify if he has any accomplices, which means—"

"Some creativity is called for. Gotcha." Casen winks at Azariah as I grimace at how quickly Casen relents to his talent for torture, which I assume is part of the reason Casen ended up on this mission. He's known as the expert among us who knows how to get answers by breaking a person down until they spill their secrets into his ear. It's a skill he cultivates every now and then when Azariah needs him to.

But this mission hits too close to home with it being a serial killer, a rapist with a track record for going after young girls. I want to help take this Thomas Valentine down. There's no way I'm letting even a slight chance of him getting away. Even Casen can't keep me from this mission, because it's another chance to get justice for all those girls and their families—something that I couldn't do for my

cousin.

I swallow hard when I realize Azariah is waiting for an actual response from me. I'm a man of few words, but even he's quietly asking if I'm okay with the plan to get much-needed answers from someone who doesn't deserve second thoughts, let alone second chances. There are some things in this world people do that are unforgivable. As far as I'm concerned, Casen can do whatever he wants with the man—as long as he's not capable of hurting anyone ever again.

But, I internally flinch, trying hard not to let it show, because the thought of seeing Casen torturing someone doesn't sit well with me.

Ignoring that last thought, I confirm my decision with Azariah. "As long as I don't have to witness it, I'm good."

One final nod from Azariah signals we're dismissed.

CHAPTER 2



Casen

My mission in life besides killing the scum bastards that God seemed to find satisfaction in creating is seeing how big Addax's vein on his forehead above his right eye can get before words burst from his pouty, sexy lips. It's a fascination of mine that I can't be compelled away from. I don't know if it's his anger that provides amusement and entertainment or the fact that he ignores my presence. But I pick at him like he's a volcano I want to see erupt to feel burns caressing my skin.

Those last thoughts have me shivering with want, want that has to be left forgotten since I'm confident Addax would rather jump off this airplane than admit his attraction.

While I don't know why I go into sordid details about what I do on my missions, it could be because it feels therapeutic—confessing all my sins and all that, especially with my religious upbringing. Or because I gain some kind of satisfaction in seeing people squirm.

But Addax is different.

I can't help but nurture my creativity by recounting more than what actually occurred during my assignments. It's to lure that explosive reaction from Addax, one where his eyes brighten with heated emotion and his thundering voice sends happy chills flowing through my body. I know there's a ruthless side to Addax that maybe even he's not aware of. I remember the gleam in his eyes after I related the time I took my sweet time cutting the balls off a man who wasn't so willing to supply valuable information we knew he had on a sex trafficking ring. That glint is the reason I continue bombarding Addax with my confessions and dramatic flares.

Which is probably why I find myself in the middle of a rendition of my iconic story where I took out five men with some farm tools and one bullet. "…the rusted axe was the perfect instrument for slowly sawing off—"

"For fuck's sake, Casen. Shut. The. Fuck. Up." The words burst from Addax as he twists in his plush leather seat next to the window, his peanuts skittering across the mini table that made it seem Addax was at a tea party in comparison to the bulk of his size. A head taller than my five foot six with a black t-shirt highlighting his thick, muscular body—it's no wonder I catch myself salivating after him. But it's the dark, black eyes that continue to hook me in, like he can almost grasp the real me but can't quite catch it.

Silence echoes for all of five seconds while I harden in my pants for another hot-as-hell explosion from Addax. For such a quiet man, he can really boost his voice when he's pissed off.

"All you've been doing since we got on this plane is talk my ear off like your life depended on it. It doesn't. If you're going to talk, we'll talk about the mission. Add value to the words I'm hearing, why don't you?" He blows out a breath, closes his eyes, and gradually unclenches his hands from the little package of empty peanuts. "Or better yet, wait until we reach Savannah."

"Fuck, Addax. That was sexy as hell." A hint of a purr echoes in my tone. "That's probably the most words I've heard from you since we met."

"Ugghhh." Addax punches the back of his head against his seat, shaking his head like he's giving up on anything to do with getting me to do anything he wants.

I take a brief moment to allow Addax some quiet relaxation time as I caress his smooth, high cheekbones with my eyes–making it seem like I'm giving in to Addax's demands. But what's the fun in that? I love the fire that burns in his eyes when he whips them back my way. It's better than the alternative—being ignored and dealing with his stoic, cold eyes and the back of his head.

I twirl my glass of sweet tea, the ice clinking along the edges. "You're right, though. Best not to obsess over the past when we can talk about something much more salacious." Why waste this opportunity now that I have him all to myself with him incapable of running away from me? I run my tongue along my bottom lip before gently biting it, hoping to entice Addax to peek over at me. "Do you have a secret sex fantasy?"

"*What?*" He cranks his head quickly toward me, disbelief echoing with that one word and in his widened eyes.

"You know a secret sex fantasy? One that you haven't shared with a partner. Ever."

"I know what you meant, Casen. Jesus Christ. I'm not making small talk with *you*, let alone sharing anything intimate. Fuck." He squirms in his seat, sneering at me before pressing his head against the head rest, rolling his head toward the window full of clouds and blue sky.

"Why not, Buffy?" He grunted, continuing his stare out the dinky airplane window. "Afraid I'll get too turned on during this flight?"

When he refuses to respond to that, I decide maybe a little sample into my own fantasies could spur a confession from him. Not likely, but I love seeing those brown eyes blazing. "All right, I'll go first. My fantasy is being held by the neck during sex." I see him swallowing hard, squirming in his seat once more with an obvious erection tenting his jeans.

Fuck, that's hot. And I haven't even tasted him yet.

"I love it rough during sex, but having someone deprive me of oxygen during my most vulnerable time when bottoming... Well, let's just say that hits the spot in my fantasies." A moan lets loose from my throat as I imagine Addax being the one to hold me like that. To actually put my trust in someone to help me would make all the difference.

I notice the slight shiver wracking Addax's long body, and I see more than hear the gulp he swallows as he swivels his head toward me one last time. He looks me directly in the eye, before uttering, "I really don't care who you warm your bed with at night, as long as it remains away from me. *Got it?*" He takes the torn pieces of paper towel he has been ripping the last few minutes, rolls them into balls, and finally stuffs them in his ears.

I'm always up for slight teases and oversharing my sex life with my teammates, so I'm used to the brush offs. But in this instance, when it's Addax doing the brush off, it like an unexpected bee sting. Burns deeper when you aren't prepared for it. Or maybe because it's Addax biting into my flesh with his words, but the disgust curling his lips is the alcohol inflaming the initial burn once more.

Still, I take it in. Digest it and move on by going back to my comfort, my therapy of a sort when my heart feels like someone shocked it with a defibrillator. Not sure if it's beeping again or not, but I

ignore it all the more by recounting the past, nonchalance ringing in my voice even though I know Addax can probably only hear bits and pieces. Going back to my comfort zone is much more preferable than overanalyzing why I care so much about what Addax thinks of me.

But one thing for sure: there's no denying the hunger I saw in his eyes. While he inflicted a little sting my way, I know there's more to this chemistry I feel sizzling in the air between us. And I'm ready and willing to wait out whatever is holding Addax back to see how powerful sex could be between us.

Or maybe more than that?

CHAPTER 3



Addax

MAKING it two days with Casen's constant chitchat without strangling him feels like a miracle. The guy can't take a hint when it comes to me not wanting to hear about any of his previous conquests or gruesome killings.

Thank God for small miracles that this is almost over, because while Casen has the power to annoy, it's his irresistibility that makes me want to move on to the next mission and forget that his voice and devilish smirk sends me masturbating late at night. It's only gotten worse since we're sharing a space at our safe house. Every time he takes a shower, I lose the fight and daydream what it'd be like to glimpse the rest of those freckles on his shoulders…and other more intimate places.

But the good news was it only took us half the time we originally planned to hunt this Thomas Valentine asshole down after the intel our hacker collected. After retrieving him from his secluded cabin, we headed toward the empty warehouse that Azariah arranged to use for this purpose.

Forty-eight some odd hours later, I find myself watching Casen get ready to interrogate Valentine, who seems disturbingly calm for a guy roped and handcuffed to a chair.

When I asked Casen about that overkill, he gave me his disbelief expression with that cute curl of his lips and raised eyebrows–as if he was questioning my sanity.

Ugh, I really need to get laid after this mission because I'm beginning to question my own sanity whenever attraction ignites against my better judgment–but at least the attraction remains locked up in my head with no fear of me rambling anything out loud to Casen.

Casen methodically takes off his white jacket, the one covering the light blue snug dress shirt that accents his narrow hips. It's as if he's shedding the charismatic, carefree persona—bringing to life one with emotionless blue eyes. Eyes that are harder than I've ever seen them, not an ounce of humor lurking in their midst as he begins to unhook his watch from his wrist and snag a pair of black gloves from what he told me earlier was his special torture bag.

I snorted at that before, but now I wonder what else he has hidden in there.

I wasn't going to watch this, but I can't keep my eyes off Casen. He's like another man, one without a human soul occupying his graceful movements. Looking back at Valentine, even he's starting to sweat when he meets Casen's eyes dead on and pales, reeking of fear with widened eyes.

More than anything this new shift is making me confused.

Where's the devil-may-care Casen?

Maybe this is how he's able to compartmentalize when he's inflicting pain on others, even ones who deserve it? Or maybe he's a psychopath with no real emotion. But no, that can't be true, because despite dismissing and ignoring him for the whole flight and half the car ride to our safe house, I still caught glimpses of guilt shining in his eyes when he thought I wasn't listening or watching him.

"You can leave now. I can handle this on my own." His words are crisp and empty of any indication of where he's at emotionally, leaving a trail of haunted goosebumps along my arms.

And then it hits me. He's not only turning off his emotions during this, he's also sacrificing himself to the cause. Eradicating anyone else on the team from having to deal with this–the real reason he always works alone. He wants to carry and hold all the burden.

Yet, the tiniest haunted expression in his eyes that I see each time he regales any of the rest of us with his tales continues to flicker in the back of my head.

Is that really what he does?

Takes all the heat so we don't have to? Maybe that's why he's always sharing his experiences with us–to rid his body and mind of the horrific memories.

And here I thought he was a sick motherfucker–when I'm the motherfucker who hasn't tried to get to know him and see past his defenses. Maybe what he needs is someone to share the burden.

And maybe more?

Shaking away that last thought, I answer loud and clearly. "No."

He turns to me with a hint of surprise peeking out of his blue eyes before they shy away toward Valentine. "Fine. Do what you wish. But you're not needed here, Buffy. It might be best if you leave now before I get started. You might like me even less afterward. It's not going to be pretty; I sense a strong fight with this one." He's right in that Valentine has gotten some of his color back, struggling anew and mumbling incoherently in the dirty sock gag Casen put in his mouth.

"I know. It's okay. I'll stay." I remain rooted to the corner of the room, far away to get a good enough view of what Casen will do to the man wiggling every inch of his body to get free now that he knows he's not dealing with amateurs. We're professionals, ones who aren't going to let him go even after we've collected the answers we're seeking.

I drown out all the whimpers from Valentine and remain focused on Casen. And it's not hard, because he's an enigma that I can't escape from. As Casen goes through each meticulous step and device, his shoulders gradually become more tense, something that echoes in the strain around his eyes and mouth.

This truly haunts him, each step he takes isn't something he *likes* doing, let alone craves to do like I always assumed. Instead, I see him sink inside himself more and more, until there's barely any Casen left, leaving me with an ache to soothe him back to the surface and vanquish all those who mean to harm him in any way.

Fuck. Where the hell did that thought come from?

After an hour of mutilation, Casen's black gloves staining with blood, Valentine finally relents with a small stutter, wheezing between his words. "Fuckkk. Okay. O-okay. Please. P-please stop. I'll tell you everything I know. Just p-please stop." He coughs, blood continuing to run down his puffy lips.

Casen straightens, takes a step back, and nods his head. "Who's your accomplice and where can we find him?"

"Yes. Y-yes. I have an accomplice." He lets out a small whimper and takes a deep breath.

"Well, who is it?" Casen impatiently inquires, sharpening his long knife while maintaining eye contact with Valentine.

“It’s Jack. J-jack McNeely, the senator’s son, okay…” As those words pierce my eardrums, ice invades my bloodstream, leaving me cold and numb.

My pulse continues to thunder in my ears, vision foggy as I hear snippets of what Valentine continues to stutter between gasping breaths. “...I ss-swear. It’s a-all I know…don’t know where he is…supposed to call him tonight but didn’t make the time. I swear t-that’s all I know.”

A cold smile slowly forms across Casen’s face, showing Valentine that he’s happy with the answer. Casen spares me two seconds of his stare, using his knife to end Valentine’s life before he can utter another word or wait for a response from me. Not that I would have argued or postponed his death any longer.

In fact, right now I am reeling with the new information Valentine provided us—Jack McNeely was his accomplice. My ex-best friend and the man responsible for my cousin Lulu’s suffering when he raped and killed her when she was only sixteen years old.

He took that from her, but he also took someone who was like a sister to me. With just two years separating us, we grew up together. Hell, I even thought Jack treated her like a little sister. Fuck was I wrong about so many things back then.

I knew he did it, despite the six weeks of denial. I finally wrangled a confession out of him eventually, but he got away with it due to some technicality. It inevitably had something to do with his billionaire senator father using his connections to get his son out of trouble.

Although, my parents were no better. They never lifted a finger to get any justice for Lulu. They merely sat on their asses and told me Jack must have been innocent. But they didn’t want the bad press it would do to the family name as well as severing the connection they had with Jack’s well-connected and powerful father.

Losing faith in the system and my parents lead me down the path of finding another home with Azariah and the other men—killing people who get away with sadistic and gut-wrenching shit. Even though we’re not that close, I’d kill and protect them more than my own bloodline these days. The only one who mattered from that previous life was Lulu.

I vowed a long time ago if I ever crossed paths with Jack McNeely again, he wouldn’t get away without it ending like it should have seventeen years ago. Him inside an unmarked grave, and I didn’t care if he still breathed or not when I sprinkled the last handful of dirt.

Looks like I might have to extend this trip with Casen after all.

CHAPTER 4



Casen

MOMENTS AFTER SEEING the life bleed out of someone's eyes, it's always quiet and cold. All I can hear inside the warehouse is silence–all except for the heavy breathing coming from me and the echo of the knife clinking against the cement floor as it slipped from my fingertips.

I snap the gloves off and throw them on top of the dead body.

This is usually the time where I sneak off to seek comfort in a warm body, willing my emotions to climb back to the surface with pain from a rough fucking in a back alley, bathroom, or anywhere that would do. The cleaners will take care of the body after I call Azariah up, but right now, I'm glued to the spot.

For once, I don't want to seek another random face on a dance floor to stop feeling so numb. I want Addax. But I know that's not on the table, not even close.

"Fuck," I exhale the word out as my breathing becomes out of control. "I've got to get out of here. You can call Azariah." I fling those words at Addax before I have the chance to look into his eyes and see disgust or worse, pity at what I turn into each time this happens.

"Wait." A large, warm hand snags my elbow, stopping me from fleeing.

Addax opens his mouth as if to reprimand me or ask a question, but the look in my steely gaze must hinder the words from spilling out. "Let. Go." I grit the words out, my heart beating louder in my heaving chest.

Fuck, I need to escape whatever Addax has in mind right the fuck now. I can't deal with anything but sex or further violence right now.

"No." Somehow Addax appears to grow an inch taller, standing up straighter with determined eyes shadowing the anger and paleness of his face.

Maybe, if he won't let me go and sex isn't what he's planning, a fight is. I wrench my arm away from his clutches where his fingernails were digging into my skin, and I force myself to ignore the slight shiver flowing down my body from the inkling of pain it left behind.

Instead of smashing my lips to his like I crave, I can't help mauling the front of his shirt between my fingernails and pull us both flushed against one another, chest to chest.

"You can handle the fucking rest, Buffy. You probably had your kicks watching all that play out. So, why don't you finish this up, and I'll go find someone to fuck me rough." I growl the words, barely getting them out between my grinded teeth.

As the last few words trickle into Addax's ears, the close proximity to him makes seeing his eyes dilate easy to spot, interest glowing in them.

Fuck me. Is Addax getting aroused by this?

With my hand still mutilating his shirt between us, I use the leverage to draw the remaining inch gaping between us closer together. The big bulge behind his jeans heating my stomach tells me he's clearly aroused.

From what is the question. The kill? Seeing me torture someone? All possible, but unlikely when it comes to Addax, since as much as he wants everyone to see him as gruff, underneath he is a teddy bear who wants to take care of someone. I just feel it.

"No," Addax replies again, voice defiant and confident, and after a small hesitation, he puts both of his hands on my waist. "What do you need?" he grumbles huskily, with a tad bit of uncontrolled fury hiding in the depths of his eyes, yet for some reason, I know it's not about me.

Wrestling with both confusion and lust, I give into the temptation blazing in front of me after he utters, "Tell me, Casen. I know you need it. We both do right now. I'll give you whatever you need and more." One of his hands crawls up my torso and lies flat against the base of my throat, twitching as he waits for an answer.

Fuck, he remembered my fantasy.

Since slicing into human flesh, my body has been buzzing and crawling to feel *something*. Feel pain, anything. But as he rests his hand against my throat, even lightly, the tenseness in my shoulders loosen, the buzzing and yearning to claw out of my skin feeling stops, and all that's left is arousal. Pure and simple arousal. But only for this man, for Addax.

"Fuck, yes. Yes. Addax. Please. I need it." I nod my head and whine against his palm, craving to be closer to him. For him to be inside me already, pounding me into the ground until I can't breathe and the only thing separating us is the sweat slicking our skin. "Please, Addax. Give me what I *need* right now. What we both need right now."

It's all I can get out because lust is blinding me to this moment. No other words or considerations matter right now. Not the dead man leaking blood across the plastic sheet and definitely not the fact that we work together. I just ache to feel him right now.

Addax cracks a half smile, "You're finally calling me Addax. Who knew it only took the threat of sex to get you to say my name right?"

I wave that off with my hand. "Fuck if I care about that right now, Addax. Do you want to fuck me or not?"

The half-smile turns into a full-blown smirk, half cocky, half tease. "Yes." It's all the words needed for me as I clutch the back of his head and crash his lips to mine, roughly biting into them at first. The taste of copper seeps into my mouth before his tongue clashes with mine, but his answering satisfied groan tells me he's not bothered by a little violent kissing.

The hand he has on my throat slowly slides farther up, tightening and tilting my head, directing the angle of my head and taking control of the kiss.

He breaks the kiss and eyes the dead body. "Not here." He shakes his head, and before I tell him that I don't have the patience to wait, he slides his other hand from my waist down to my ass cheek. When he lifts me up one-handed, not letting go of the pressure on my neck, I help along by boosting myself up with a hand on his shoulder and sliding my legs around his waist. The show of strength is sexy as hell, propelling me to grind my hard cock against his stomach.

"Fuc–mmm. Jesus, Casen, that's sexy as hell." He roughly presses his lips back to mine as he walks us to the closest door, leading us to some type of office. Addax shoves me against the wall

beside the door, our teeth clinking together as my head deflects off the glass window.

He slides me down his body enough so that his hard cock rubs against mine, and I reward him with a moan. “This has to go.” I mumble the words against his lips and tug on his neckline. “Now,” I gasp, greedy to feel his warm skin against my own.

Addax seizes both of my hands, slaps them against the cold window, and grumbles, “Hold them there and squeeze your legs tight to hang on.” I shudder against the directions, guiding me into a space where I don’t have to think anymore, just follow his command.

I nod my head, breathing harsher as I grow harder than I thought was possible.

He slowly lifts his shirt, teasing me with little increments of revealing skin and hairless chest. My fingers itch to touch and caress his skin, while my tongue aches to lick him until his skin melts in my mouth, and he cums just from my tongue alone. But a part of me revels in following his lead and letting him take over. So, I leave my hands where they are and another shiver wracks my body at the satisfaction glowing in his eyes.

“That’s a good boy.”

With his voice like silk, I whimper and plead for more “Please. Please, Addax. More.” The want, the need to have him inflict pain and pleasure in equal measure has me wanting to squirm against him to relieve some pressure off my growing cock and the need to be dominated right now.

“I know. I know you do, Casen.” I close my eyes and moan provocatively when his hand moves back around my throat and squeezes the perfect amount, and he claims my lips with his once more.

Our lips tangle as he mixes in elements of pain by biting into my lower lip and pulling as he rips the buttons on my shirt and swiftly bites into a nipple and sucked *hard*. Screaming, I feel precome wetting my boxers.

As he sucks, licks, and bites into both nipples, he unbuckles my belt and gets the zipper down with one hand. “Oh, fuck. That feels so fucking good, *Buffy.*” I can’t resist the tease along with curving my back, attempting to gain more pressure of Addax’s tongue and lips, but that’s when he pulls back.

“No more talking. That’s what always gets you in trouble.” He gasps before mischief flares in his eyes. He drops me back on the ground and bends over to snatch his discarded shirt and rolls a portion of it in a ball. “Is this okay?” he gently asks.

I nod my head, but he shakes his head, “Need your words, Casen.”

“Yes.” I say huskily.

His gaze serious, he adds, “Snap your fingers if you need me to stop. Okay?”

“Okay, but hurry and fuck me, Addax.” I groan, realizing that even with the distraction, my arms are still raised like he wanted them, yet I remain unbelievably turned on by the thought of Addax using his shirt as a gag. “I’m going to cum before you even get anything inside me at the rate you’re going right now.”

“Shit, you’re going to be the death of me. Can’t resist you any longer, Casen.” As he says the words, he stuffs my mouth with his shirt before he roughly turns me around and pulls my jeans and underwear down to my knees.

My fingertips squeeze the glass, slippery with my sweat as I feel calloused hands glide over my ass cheeks. “Fuck, Casen. You’re killing me. Even this sweet ass of yours has freckles.” His voice sounds mesmerized, and then he surprises me with a hot lick across my left cheek, leaving me shivering when he cools it with his breath. He does the same to the other side but adds a hard smack, eliciting a loud moan from me that rumbles against Addax’s shirt.

Fingers grasp my ass cheeks, opening me up to a warm breath heating my puckered hole.

After he loosens me up with spit and a package of lube he found in his wallet, he simultaneously slips inside and places his hand at home on my neck. The thought of his hand feeling like it's got its own place there is a little shocking, because I've never felt like this with the other men I use to get back to myself after nights like this one.

But I know with each rough thrust from the man behind me that I'm getting closer and closer to never using this as a way back with anyone else but him. Because he's got his hook in me, and I don't think I want to claw it out even if I could.

The End

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Leila Coltyn started her love of reading romance books with historical romance as a young teenager obsessed with love, romance, and happy endings. Then, she discovered contemporary romance that made her discover how much she loved LGBTQ+ romances. During her down time, she loves to read, drink coffee right after waking up, spending time with her cats and huskies, and watching TV that makes her laugh or cry.

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AFTER THE LIES



BY JAZMINE SKYE

Ronny wanted to get out of the life her father had created by joining forces with the mob. She had been kept in the dark for a long time, but she overheard a conversation that changed her life forever. She was determined to start over again and get her sister out too.

Malcolm was hired to bring Ronny home, but he met her and realized that she didn't belong in that life.

So how do two people avoid the mob and make a new life for themselves?

CHAPTER 1



Ronnie had just started her new job and finally gotten settled into her new apartment. Everything was going according to plan, until she met her new neighbor.

Her morning started like any other. Then she opened her door and saw him.

He was six foot five of trouble. His shirt was tight and showed every muscle he had, and his jeans fit him like a glove. His profile showed a Romanesque nose and he looked as if he could lift her with one hand. He gave off an alpha presence and she knew that no one would dare to defy him.

She wanted to say hello, but something held her back, so she stayed in the doorway. She broke out of her trance and headed for the elevator.

He is nothing but trouble stay away from him. Remember you have started a new life. Now is not the time to jeopardize that.

She hit the button hard and prayed that today was not the day that the damn elevator would take its time in arriving.

Don't turn around. Don't turn around.

Ronnie faced the elevator and counted down the seconds. Just as the ding of the elevator echoed in the hallway, she heard his door close behind her.

Whew, that was close. I would have made a fool of myself had I said something to him.

CHAPTER 2



When she arrived home from work she heard her neighbor's door open.

" Hello. I'm sorry I didn't introduce myself this morning. My name's Malcolm. I just moved in yesterday."

"Hi. I am Veronica but my friends call me Ronny. Welcome to the building. I just moved in a month ago, so I understand your predicament."

"Ah, so a fellow newbie."

"Yeah, I just started a new job, so I moved to be closer to work. Well, it was nice to meet you and good luck settling in."

"Thanks. How about I grab us dinner?"

"No, that's okay. I just want to unwind, but thanks for the offer."

"How about Friday? You can show me all the local places."

"Um, I'm not sure. I don't know a lot of the places myself."

"Well let's make it Saturday. We have all day to explore the city together."

"I'll have to see. Have a nice evening."

"You too."

Ronny slid down the door after she closed it.

Oh my god that was close. I am so stupid for even thinking of agreeing. He will be nothing but trouble with a capital T and I don't need that.

CHAPTER 3



Saturday arrived and Ronny still had not given Malcom an answer.

She was standing by the coffee maker, waiting for her daily dose of caffeine, when she heard a knock on the door.

Who in the hell could that be this early? I don't know anyone and if it's one of them damn salesmen or religious people they are about to get an earful.

She opened the door and there stood Malcom in all his fine ass glory.

"Mornin. Are you ready to go?"

"Go?"

"Yeah, our adventure in the city. We talked about this the other day."

"I remember the conversation; I just don't remember agreeing to go."

"Well, I figure you were up for it since you never said otherwise. I thought we would start with the bakery around the corner to grab some coffee and pastries and then make our way through town."

"I don't know. I really have a lot to do today."

"There is nothing that can't wait, is there? Come on, be adventurous. You won't regret it."

Oh, I'm regretting this already. My brain says no but my body's saying yes girl. Find out what trouble you can get into with him. It would be fun for sure.

"Fine, you win. Let me get ready. Come in and I'll be just a minute."

They spent the day browning the shops in town. When it became dinner time, they decided to stop at an Italian restaurant that was near their apartment building.

"Thank you for agreeing to go with me today. "Malcolm said.

"You're welcome. I admit I was hesitant at first, but it turned out to be a wonderful day. I can't wait to try the food here. Italian is one of my favorites."

"Mine too. So, tell me more about yourself. We really didn't talk much when we were walking. How did you end up here of all places?"

"Long story short. I didn't like my life at home. After I graduated from college, I decided to leave it all behind. The life my family participates in isn't good and I didn't realize how bad it was until just recently. My father had shield us from what was going on. Then one I accidentally overheard a conversation he was having, and it changed my life forever. I decided at once to leave and never look back. The only regret I have is not being able to get my younger sister out of that hell. Someday I'll be able to."

"So, what is so bad that you had to leave? Was he a serial killer? Did he abuse you or your family?"

"No, he's not a serial killer, or I don't think he is. He's just involved with some things I don't

approve of. So that's why I moved to get away from it all and try to restart my life. I don't plan on being dragged back into it. It's not a life I want for my future children."

"Won't it be hard to explain why they don't have relatives on your side?"

"No. Eventually I'd tell them the truth, but it's not something I'm worried about now. Hell, I'm not even dating let alone think of getting married. It's just a thought that stays in the back of my mind. Enough about me and my personal demons. How about you? How did you end up here?"

"Well, my current joy is what brought me here. I was hired to do research for a client."

"How remarkably interesting and mysterious. What kind of research?"

"Nothing mysterious. Just seeing if this town would be a good place for a new business."

"Ah, so you're a scout of sorts for businesses."

"Yeah, in a way." Malcom laughed.

"That sounds interesting. All I do is file papers and work on reports."

"Well, you are important then. If they didn't have access to files, then they couldn't complete their jobs. So, you are important. Do not forget that."

"Thanks." Ronny blushed.

The waiter arrived, so they ordered their drinks and meal. They enjoyed talking to one another and after they were done they headed home.

CHAPTER 4



Boy I should not have had that second glass of wine. It is making me feel lightheaded and I'm not sure what I might say and embarrass myself in the process.

When they reached the doors, Malcolm pulled them open for her. She tried to carefully walk through.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

When they got into the elevator, she was afraid to say anything, so she concentrated on the numbers lighting up for each of the floors until she saw the number 4 light up. She felt relieved when the doors opened up.

"Thank you again for a wonderful day. I had a wonderful time with you. I guess I'll see you around the neighborhood." Ronny turned to insert her key in the lock.

"Ronny." Malcom said sternly.

Ronny paused in turning the key in the lock. She was afraid to look back at Malcolm. Would she see fear, disgust, lust in his eyes?

"Ronny, turn around." He demanded.

She turned but stared at his chest and not into his eyes. Malcom reached down and tilted her head towards him.

"Hey. I had an amazing time with you, and I plan to see a lot more of you besides a casual wave in the hallway. All night, I have wanted to kiss you." He leaned in and kissed her soundly.

Ronny wound her arms up around his neck and held on tight.

I shouldn't be doing this. This is dangerous. I could fall for him so easily and where would I be? But damn, it feels good.

"What's wrong?" Malcom asked.

"This isn't right. I can't do this. It's wrong. I don't need to complicate my life right now. You're a great guy, but I don't think we should get involved. It's too dangerous for me."

"Dangerous how? I won't hurt you. I'm not a serial killer or anything like that."

"I know. It's just I need to get my life back on track and you're a threat to that balance. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to lead you on." Ronny turned and opened her door.

"Ronny." Malcom growled. She ignored him as she stepped through her door.

"This isn't over by a long shot. You and I are going to be together, and it will be soon. So don't think that you're getting out of this so easy. You will be mine."

I'm doomed, so fucking doomed.

CHAPTER 5



For two weeks, Ronny was able to avoid Malcom like the plague. She'd quietly open her door every morning and quietly make her way to the elevator and pray that his door would not open.

But as luck would have it, her time ran out.

She had just closed the door to her apartment and was making her way to the elevator when she heard it ding and there stood Malcolm.

Oh shit.

"Why have you been avoiding me? "He growled as he grabbed and kissed her fiercely.

"I told you this wasn't over. Now we're going to finish what we started. I know you want this as much as I do. I'm out of patience. You, my little pet, are mine to do what I want. Now come with me."

"I can't Malcom. I have to go to work."

"No, you don't. No one goes into work on a Saturday unless they're the boss, or they're trying to brown nose, plus you're not dressed to go to work. Nice try, little one."

Malcom grabbed her with one hand and dragged her through the door.

Once they were inside, he locked the door and pocketed the key. He walked her to the couch.

"You and I are going to have a talk and then get down to business. You can't hide my little pet. You're mine to do what I want. I want to talk about your manners and what's going to be done to change it."

Ronny stared up at him but said nothing. She was determined that she would get out of his apartment and make it back to her own.

She just had to figure out how to distract him long enough to get to his balcony and then climb over to hers.

She knew she had left the balcony door unlocked on her side.

She watched as Malcom sat in the chair directly across from her.

"Now, where to begin on your transgressions. One, you did not contact me for two fucking weeks. I've been worried that something had happened to you. I was ready to break your door down and confront you, but I didn't want to scare you or replace a door. Two, you have denied what you are feeling, and I don't like that one bit."

"How do you know how I feel? Are you a mind reader? "She asked sarcastically.

"Now, there is no way to speak to your master."

"Master? What the fuck are you talking about?"

"I mean that you belong to me. And I'm not going to stand for this brattish behavior of yours."

"I don't think so, mister. I'm not you're fucking slave. You don't fucking own me." She stood up

and made her way to the door.

Just as she reached the door handle, she felt herself being lifted onto Malcom's shoulder.

"Well, I guess we're just going to have to have this discussion in the bedroom where I can keep you tied up so that you have no choice but to listen."

"Excuse me? You fucking asshole. Put me down at once. I'm not going with you and there is no fucking way you are tying me up. I will scream bloody murder and people will hear me and then call the cops."

"Can't scream if I have your mouth stuffed."

"Put me the fuck down now Malcom. I mean it." she screamed as she kicked her legs and beat her fists on his back. Nothing she did seemed to faze him.

He kept walking to the bedroom. He walked to the closet and reached up to the top shelf and brought down a rope. She gasped when she saw what he had in his hands. She struggled to get down, but it was no use.

She let her body go limp in hopes that he might let her fall to the ground, but he didn't.

He tied one loop around her right wrist and then he flopped her down on the bed and quickly tied her left wrist to the bedpost.

After he had her secured, he reached in a drawer by the bed and withdrew another rope. He used it to secure her ankles to the footboard.

"What the fuck Malcom? I am not into BDSM shit, untie me right fucking now."

"Hush my little pet. I'm not going to hurt you. We are going to have a little talk. Well, I'm going to talk, and you are going to fucking listen."

He then reached back into the drawer of the nightstand and brought out a gag. He placed it around her mouth but made sure she could still breathe. Once he was satisfied with the secureness of the ropes and the gag he sat on the side of the bed.

"Now, we are going to have a little talk pet and you are going to listen to me."

Ronny struggled against the ropes, but it was no use. She finally gave in and laid there while she glared at Malcolm.

"I'm doing this for your own good. Now don't give me that kitten. I'm serious. I just want to protect you and I can't do that if I don't know that you're safe. Now, I am going to tell you how this is going to play out and when I think you are ready to talk without cursing or yelling at me, I will take the gag off. Do you understand?"

Ronny just laid there and glared.

"Now, dear I just need a nod yes so that I know you understand."

Ronny still stayed silent.

"Very well then. You shall stay like this until you are ready for an adult conversation. Believe me I don't want to hurt you. I'll return soon. And while I am gone you can lay here and think about what I said. You and I are meant to be together, and nothing is going to stop me from that goal."

She tried to struggle against the ropes when she heard the door close, but it was no use.

What the fuck have I done? I need to get the hell out of here. What does he think he is doing by typing me up and then telling me it is for my own good? Bullshit.

Thirty minutes later she heard the door open.

"Well, my little pet, have you decided?"

She nodded her head yes.

"Very well then, I will take the gag off but if you scream, curse or anything else. I will put it back on you. Do you understand?"

Ronny nodded. Malcom reached down to lower the gag and she took a deep breath.

"Asshole." She gasped.

"Now, now what did I just say?"

"I don't give a fuck what you just said. I want you to untie me this minute. People will be looking for me soon."

"I don't think so, my pretty little kitten. Remember it's Saturday and no one will miss you until at least Monday. So, if I choose to do so I can keep your ass tied up until then."

"Assshole, let me out of these ropes right now." Ronny gasped.

"I can't do that just yet my dear. I need to tell you something and I'm not sure how you are going to handle the news."

"I don't give a flying fuck about what you have to say. I don't care if you told me, you were the Pope. I wouldn't believe you and I sure as hell wouldn't care."

"Well then, here goes nothing. I am not a scout for businesses as I led you to believe. I'm a hired gunman for the 'family'.'

"What do you mean the 'family'? You've got to be fucking kidding me right. Right?"

"No, my pet. I'm not kidding. I was sent here to find someone and bring them back home. I can't tell you right now who that is, but I want to tell you that I will keep you safe and no one will harm you, but you have to trust me."

"Trust you?" Ronny scoffed. "I can't trust you any further than I could throw you and that ain't fucking far at this point."

"Please understand. I wanted to tell you from the beginning, but I couldn't for obvious reasons and now I have no choice but to tell you who I really am. I must leave town soon and I want you to go with me. It will be safer if you do."

"What do you mean? I'm not in danger. I'm fine." Ronny stared at him in disbelief.

"I mean that you need to come with me. It's for your own good. Whether you realize it or not you are in danger."

"From whom? The Easter Bunny? Santa Claus?"

"Now is not the time to be a smart ass. I'm telling you the truth and we need to be prepared to leave at a moment's notice."

"I'm not going with you, and you're crazy if you think I will just upend my life just because you say so."

"If you don't come willingly then I might just have to hog tie you and blindfold you and stuff you in the trunk of my car to get you to cooperate."

"You do that mister and that will be construed as kidnapping and then your ass will end up in jail."

"I won't be caught, and it wouldn't be kidnapping."

"Try me."

"Oh, my dear little pet. I don't have to try. I know. Although the thought of hog tying you and putting you in the car forcefully does have its uses." Malcom smirked.

"Asshole." Ronny said and turned her head away from him.

"Now dear, there's no reason to pout. I'm going to leave you here just a bit longer but I will loosen the ropes a little bit." Malcom leaned over and loosened the ropes on each side.

"I'll be back in a bit. I'm going to put this gag back in to prevent any mishaps. I'm going to get us some dinner and then we will figure out a plan on how we are going to leave without arousing suspicion. Also, I need to make sure all our fail safes are in place for the long trip."

Malcom rose and closed the door behind him. Ronny struggled to get free of the ropes but it useless so she laid there and figured a way out.

CHAPTER 6



Malcom returned an hour later. He set the food on the kitchen table and made his way down the hallway.

He carefully opened the bedroom door, anticipating that she had escaped the ropes and was ready to bash him over the head. Her eyes were closed, and he could see the faint streaks of tears on her face.

"Ronny. Ronny dear. I'm back. I have dinner out in the kitchen. I'm going to let you out of these ropes so we can eat but be forewarned I can catch you before you make it out of any exits here in the apartment."

Ronny slowly opened her eyes and glared at Malcolm, but she laid still as he untied all the ropes and took the gag out of her mouth.

"I need to use the bathroom." When she tried to stand up, she nearly fell from the lack of movement. Malcom rushed to hold her up, but she shoved him away and sat back down on the bed for a moment until she felt like she could stand.

She slowly made her way into the kitchen. She stopped at the end of the hallway and took a deep breath of Sesame Chicken and egg rolls. She heard her stomach grumble and hoped that Malcom didn't hear it.

"Come into the kitchen Ronny. Everything is laid out. I got you some tea because I wasn't sure what you wanted to drink."

"Oh, *how* considerate of you." She said as she made her way to the table and sat down in front of a plate piled high with her favorites.

"How did you know what I liked?" she asked as she picked up her fork.

"I know a lot about you. I've been studying you for a while. In fact, I have been here a little longer than I said."

Ronny dropped her fork on to the plate. "You've been spying on me?"

"Not spying per say, observing. I wanted to make sure you weren't a danger."

"So, you've known who I am this whole time?" She started to stand.

"Sit down and eat. It's not poisoned."

"What the hell is going on?" She scowled.

"I promise I will tell you everything even if it means you hate me more than you do at this moment."

Ronny picked up her fork again and began to eat.

After dinner Ronny stood up and was prepared to go back to the bedroom. Malcom grabbed her hand and led her into the living room. He had her sit down on the couch and he took a seat next to her

but kept some distance.

"You know I told you that I was here to find someone and that I work for the 'family.' What I didn't tell you is who it is I am looking for."

Ronny sat in silence.

"I was actually looking for you."

Ronny gasped. "Me? Why the fuck are you looking for me?"

"There are some people who would like for you to come back home, and they are pretty adamant that you agree."

"Oh fuck, you work for my father don't you. I should've fucking known it. He can't leave me alone. How in the hell did he find me? I thought I'd covered all my tracks this time. Shit, shit. Now I have to leave. Son of a bitch." Ronny stood up and headed for the door.

"Ronny, you can't get out, remember. I locked all the doors."

"Well, I sure as hell not staying here with you. You can go to hell before I agree to go back with you. I told you that I got out of that life for a reason and that I am trying to find a way to get my sister out too. Now there's no way for me to do that if you found me so easily." Ronny flopped back onto the couch.

"I'm so fucking screwed and not in a good way. "She mumbled.

"There's a way." Malcom said softly.

Ronny leaned up and looked at Malcolm in scorn. "What do you mean? You're here to take me back, right?"

"At first, yes, but then I got to know you and I realized that you don't belong there. We'll find a way to get your sister out too. I promise."

"How am I supposed to believe you? You haven't been truthful with me this whole time and yet you want me to trust you now? I don't think so. Just let me out of here and I will disappear again. I am sure I can hide better next time." Ronny said.

"You aren't going by yourself. I can protect you. He won't piece together that you're with me. I'll just tell him that I found you and should have you home in two weeks."

"But what about my sister? I can't leave her behind. One more day and it will be too late." Ronny murmured.

"I'll find a way to get her out, I promise but we have to get ourselves to safety first. It will be okay."

"Why should I trust you now?"

"In the past month I have developed feelings for you, and I don't think I could live with myself if something happened to you or even your sister."

"You what?" Ronny asked, confused. "You developed feelings for me? Me, who is your mark? This is just another ploy to get me to go along with you and then you dump my ass on my father's front lawn, you collect your money and then you disappear from my life. No thank you. I will do this my way or no way."

"Listen to me and listen well, my little pet. You are coming with me and that is the final word. I will keep your ass tied up and gagged the whole time I am making plans and getting you out of here. Now, you can do it the uncomplicated way and agree to trust me, or we do it the hard way and you stay tied up until I get you to safety."

Ronny just stared at him in astonishment.

Not sure if she could trust him or not.

She had been lied to so much in her past that it was hard to trust anymore.

“Alright, I’ll go but at the first sign of you lying your ass off to me, I’m out of the picture.”

“I will make sure that you are safe at all times and that no one can get to you or that you can leave and get yourself into trouble.”

Ronny just looked at him and stomped back to the bedroom, slammed and locked the door.

“Go ahead little pet, run and hide. Hate to tell you that I can still get into the room if I choose to. I have it rigged for fast escapes and necessary entrance.” Malcolm smirked.

CHAPTER 7

The next morning she slowly rose from the bed and unlocked the door. She made her way to the bathroom and then walked towards the kitchen where the smell of bacon greeted her.

"Breakfast is almost ready. Come sit down at the table and eat. Then we can get packed and hit the road in a couple of hours." Malcolm said from the stove.

"I'm not packing."

"If you don't pack for yourself then I will go do it. So, I suggest you be a good little girl and cooperate."

"Little girl? Listen here asshole. I'm a grown ass woman and I expect to be treated as such." she snarled as she plopped down into the chair.

"You will be treated as a grown ass woman when you start acting like one. Every second we stay here is dangerous. Your father will have others looking for you. I won't be the only one on the lookout for you. There is a big reward to get you home. I just want to get you to safety and then your sister."

"Fine, fine. Whatever you say. Let me eat and then I'll go fuckin' pack. Geez."

Ronny finished her breakfast and then headed next door to her apartment to pack all her essentials. She knew in her heart she wouldn't be back there again.

After they had packed Malcolm took their things down to the car and then they headed out of town.

"Crap, what do I tell work? They're going to wonder where I disappeared to." Ronny exclaimed as they were getting ready to leave.

"I already sent them an email from you stating that you had a family emergency and had to leave."

"*Geez thanks*, I guess. I mean are you going to be doing all my thinking for me from now on?"

"If I have to." Malcolm snickered.

Ronny turned her head towards the passenger window and ignored Malcom for the next two hours.

"We should be at our next stop in about three hours. I am going to get us a room there so we can rest, and I can get a hold of my contacts about a safe place for us to stay until I can get everything situated."

"A room together?" Ronny asked.

"Of course. I'm not letting you out of my sight. I will handcuff you to the bed, so you don't take off so don't get any ideas."

"Yes sir." she replied sarcastically,

"I'll remember that little snarky comment later."

They traveled for another three hours when Malcom finally pulled up to a local motel.

"Wait here and I'll get us a room."

* * *

MALCOLM SECURED a room and walked back out to the car. She still refused to talk to him, and he let her be for the moment. He really couldn't be too mad at her for her reaction.

Hell, if he was in the same situation, he might act the same way.

He walked to the hotel door and opened it and waited for Ronny to follow him inside. The room was fairly decent for being an off the highway place.

He noticed the one king size bed in the middle of the room.

He scanned the bed to see if there was a way to hook a handcuff to it if he needed it later.

He walked to the rack and set their bags down on it. He turned to look back at what Ronny was doing.

"Not gonna happen, pet. You're here with me and there's no getting out so get that thought out of your head. I'm going to wash up and then I'll go get us something to eat. Anything in particular you would like?"

"I'd like for you to go to hell, but then I'm already there so maybe I don't want you with me." Ronny snarled.

"Now is that really any way to talk to someone who is trying to help you?"

Malcolm walked into the bathroom and cleaned off his face and hands to wake himself back up.

He walked back into the room and saw that Ronny had laid down and fallen asleep. He quietly opened the hotel door and closed it behind him, checking to make sure it was locked.

When he returned with food, he saw that she was still asleep, so he put her food in the fridge.

He figured she would eat when she woke. He decided to wait on his dinner too, so he laid down on the other side of the bed and closed his eyes.

* * *

MALCOLM WOKE to someone curled up on his chest. He laid still so he didn't wake her.

He waited to see if she would wake up and scatter away from him. After five minutes she didn't move so he closed his eyes once again and fell back asleep.

He was woken again when he felt her hand running down his chest to the belt of his pants.

He figured she was still asleep because she wouldn't touch him with a ten-foot pole awake.

He stayed still and waited to see what she would do next.

* * *

RONNY FELT as if she was lying on a solid wall of bricks, but it felt good to her and not painful. She realized that she was lying on Malcolm, but she couldn't make herself move.

She started dreaming that she was in the bed with him and that she wanted to reach over and take off his clothes and feel his skin.

She wondered what it felt like and how it would feel to have sex with him after that kiss, but she had been afraid to act on her feelings.

She dreamt that she leaned over his body while he was on the bed and slowly undid his shirt and pulled back the sides to reveal his muscular chest which dipped down to his pelvic area where his

cock stood at attention.

She pulled his shirt to the sides and bent down to kiss each of his nipples and then worked her way down to his belt and undid the buckle and undid the top button of his jeans.

She pulled the sides open and could feel the tip of his cock straining against his underwear.

She wanted to rip open the buttons that were left but she knew she would hurt him if she did. So, she decided to undo all the buttons and then she ran her hand up his cock through his underwear and felt him become harder as she touched him.

She slowly lowered the top of his underwear over the top of his cock and leaned down to take it into her mouth and swirl her tongue around the tip and then gently sucked it in. She could hear him moan so she knew she was doing something right.

She then had him lift his butt into the air and she removed his pants and underwear in one movement.

She loved the saltiness and smoothness of his skin. She put as much of him as she could in her mouth but when she still had two more inches to go, she couldn't take him in any further, so she used her hand to rub him at the bottom and then grabbed his balls gently with her other hand so that every part of him was being consumed by her.

She moaned in her throat, and she felt him tense up at the movement, so she did it again.

She popped his cock out of her mouth and leaned down to suck his balls and twirl them around in her mouth. She felt his hands come down to her shoulders and try to bring her up to him, but she refused to budge. This was her moment, and he was going to have to live with the sensations for a few more moments.

When she had her fill of sucking on him, she leaned up and swung her hair back and slowly took off her clothes. She could hear him murmur in agreement.

She climbed over him and slowly slid down his cock. When she reached the bottom, she quickly opened her eyes and looked down to see that it wasn't a dream. She stopped for a moment in horror at what she had done but it was too late to stop.

She looked at him to make sure she hadn't made a colossal mistake, but he held onto her hips and guided her up and down until they both exploded. She quickly got off of him and ran for the bathroom and slammed the door shut.

"Ronny, come out. What's wrong? I'm not mad."

She sat on the edge of the bathtub and leaned her head down between her legs.

What have I fucking done? I hate him. I don't want to be with him, but I just basically attacked him. Not that he was complaining but I don't want this, or do I? I mean I am attracted to him, but this is a bad idea. Especially since we're on the run.

She stood up and turned the water on in the shower and climbed inside to clean up. When she got out, she wrapped herself in a towel and braced herself for the next step.

CHAPTER 8



While Ronny was in the shower Malcolm put his boxers back on. He got their food out and reheated it in the microwave.

He had just pulled their food out of the microwave when he heard the bathroom door open. He turned and nearly dropped the food when he saw Ronny walk out in just a towel. He walked their food to the table. He heard her rush over to her suitcase to grab some clothes.

"You don't have to get dressed on my account." He smarted off. "I think you look good just how you are."

She didn't say anything as she raced back into the bathroom. When she came out, she walked over to the table and sat down.

"Thank you." She murmured.

"You're quite welcome. I enjoyed it too."

"Asshole." She snarled. "I meant the food not sex."

"Oh, I thought you were talking about our lovely roll in the hay. Once wasn't enough and I want to explore this time. You had all the fun last round."

"Not. Happening. Again." She snarled.

Malcolm sat down across from her and began eating.

"It will happen again, my little pet. It's inevitable. There's too much chemistry between us. For now, eat, and then we'll get some more rest. We need to head out early in the morning and I for one need all the sleep I can get. So, try to be good and keep your hands to yourself, even though I know it's going to be hard to refuse all of this." He said as he moved his hands down in front of his body.

Ronny just glared at him and finished eating. When she was done, she put her container in the trash can and walked over to the bed, grabbed the tv remote and started surfing through the shows. She refused to look at him or even talk to him the rest of the night.

Malcolm finished his dinner, grabbed some pajama pants, and headed into the bathroom to take a shower and get ready to sleep.

CHAPTER 9



The next morning Malcolm found Ronny curled up on his chest. He didn't want to wake her so he carefully moved her arm to the bed. He got dressed and took the suitcases out to the car.

"Hey, beautiful little pet. It's time to get up and head out. I'll give you a few minutes to wake up. We need to be out of here in about twenty minutes."

Ronny grumbled and pulled back the covers and sat on the edge of the bed for a moment. She stood and stumbled her way into the bathroom.

While she was getting dressed Malcolm quickly made a pot of coffee.

When she came out of the bathroom, he handed her a cup of coffee.

"Thank you." She said quietly.

"I didn't put anything in yours. I didn't know how you took it. But there's sugar/sweeteners and creamer over there if you want it."

Ronny walked over to where the coffee maker was and put three packages of sugar and two creamers inside.

Malcom tried not to cringe at she made her coffee.

"You ready to go? We have about another five hours to go before we reach the safe house. From there I'll contact my friend."

Ronny nodded yes, grabbed her purse, and followed Malcolm out to the car.

* * *

THEY FINALLY REACHED the safe house after four and a half hours.

"You can have the bedroom here on the right. If you want to take a nap, you can. I'm going to make some phone calls." Malcom said.

"Thank you. I think I will take a nap and freshen up. Once I'm awake I'll cook us some dinner. I am assuming there are some essentials here?"

"Yeah, there should be. My contact knew we were coming so they usually stock the pantry and refrigerator when people are going to be staying here for a little bit."

A couple of hours later Ronny got up and made dinner. She found Malcolm sitting in the living room on a laptop.

"Hey dinner's ready if you want to come and eat. Did you hear anything?"

"Yeah. I'll be there in a minute, and I'll tell you everything I know." Malcolm replied. Ronny

headed back into the kitchen to grab their plates and brought them to the dining room table.

“This looks great. “Malcolm said.

“It’s nothing. But at least we can eat. So, what’s going to happen now? Where are we headed and how soon can we get my sister?"

"We are going to stay here for a couple of days while we wait for passports and plane tickets. My buddy is going to get us to Belize and set up in a place down there. Once it’s safe to come back to get your sister I will travel back alone to get her and bring her to you. I’m hoping that soon we can get you out of harm and you can be truly happy.”

“I know I’ve been a total bitch to you since this whole thing started. But I do want to say thank you for getting me out of the way of my father and willing to go and get my sister. I don’t know how I can ever repay you.”

“You don’t have to do that. Just be happy and if it means you and me, great and if not that’s fine too. I just want you to be safe and to make sure your sister has the same chance.”

EPILOGUE



Belize, Six Months Later

RONNY AND MALCOLM stayed in Belize and got married. Two months after they settled in Malcolm was able to go back and get Ronny's sister, Victoria. They all settled in the house that Malcolm had bought and started their own businesses.

Malcolm started a security firm and Victoria became his assistant. Ronny opened her own bakery like she had dreamed of and learned how to make a some of the local delicacies.

Their father ended up in jail for drug deals and money laundering, so he was not heard from again. Their mother eventually joined them in Belize once she knew it was safe to leave.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jazmine Skye is a new author to the dark romance genre. She writes as JK Lycke for the general romance genre. She will be having a website and page up soon. Her next story will be featured in the Rock Star Anthology.

BEAUTIFULLY FORGIVEN



BY TARA LEE

For Tiffany. Because you claimed Jacob a long time ago and you've waited patiently for your man.

He took it all away in one night,
the only thing I loved, the only thing I cherished.
Now it's his turn to pay.
They call me The Ghost and for good reason.
I'm not just good at what I do, I'm the best.
He will pray for the day he ever crossed me, the day he took everything from me was the day he became my enemy.
She is my revenge, my payment for what he took. She will pay for her fathers sins and I plan on taking everything from her.
I won't hold back and her cries won't stop me.
I'm the devil wearing a preacher's skin and she'll do well to remember never to cross me.

CHAPTER 1



Jacob

I WATCH as Savannah brushes her brown wavy hair and the way it falls down her shoulders in thick waves as she does. The flimsy, silky camisole she has on leaves little to the imagination. I ignore the stir in my pants as she starts to rub lotion over her body. Her hands reach up for the straps, slipping them down, exposing her bare tits. Her pebbled nipples point back at me. Her tits are perky and look to be a little over a handful, her pink nipples begging for my teeth. I've been watching her for some time now. Savannah is a small part of a much bigger plan to get revenge on her father for what he did to my family. She's a means to an end and this plan, it's going to start very soon.

I know she's innocent in all this, and I don't plan on hurting her too much, more like scaring her. Bishop would kill me if I did anything to hurt her. He may have only just found out about her but he's protective of his sister.

I continue watching as she glides her hands over her body, rubbing the lotion into her skin. Something so simple shouldn't be so damn alluring, but for some reason, my dick is enchanted with her. Her silky brown hair covers her tits just enough to tease and the flimsy shorts she has on and gives me a perfect view of her plump ass cheeks, something else I want to sink my teeth into. I let out a sigh as she moves around her room getting ready for bed. She slips under the covers, and I see her hand slide down.

I chuckle, watching as her hand moves, the sheets moving up and down as she begins to pleasure herself.

My dick hardens behind my zipper, and I groan. This isn't the first time I've had the pleasure of watching her do this, but it will be the last time she does it without knowing I'm watching.

I wait in the darkness, watching as her hand drifts up to caress her nipples under her top. She bites her lip, shaking as her climax detonates, and she throws her head back letting the pleasure envelop her. My cock protests, eager for his own release after watching the live porn, but I keep my head focused on the task at hand.

Finally, she turns out the light, and her room is etched in darkness. I wait, giving her time to drift off to sleep, then *it's showtime*.

I move like I'm invisible, climbing the wall up to her room.

It takes no time to reach her window which she leaves ajar to let in the cool night air. I look back, making sure we haven't been interrupted. The coast is clear, so I pounce. I've killed the half dozen

men who have kept watch over my sweet beauty, but now it's my time to watch her. Protect her. Own her. I open her window as quietly as I can. My foot crunches on something as I climb through, and I curse myself for not doing a better sweep. I've been in this room a dozen times before, but I should have known better.

Frozen, I watch as Savannah moves and lets out a soft sigh in her sleep. Kicking the object away, I get my soft light out and take in her room once again. She has clothes thrown all over the place making this more like a dump than her bedroom.

Once I'm near her bed I pull out the syringe. It's filled with a tranquilizer. It's only a small dose, nothing to worry about. Just enough to knock her out so I can tie her up and get her to her new home.

I stand over her small body and watch as she sleeps. The moonlight enhances her beauty, making her look like a goddess. I lick my lips as I watch her, taking in what is soon to be mine.

"Sorry, sinner, but someone's gotta pay," I whisper as I sink the needle into her neck, her eyes shoot open. She stares up at me in shock. She opens her mouth to scream, but I'm quicker, I cover her mouth as she grips my hands. Scratching at my skin in panic. Her eyes grow heavy as she continues to claw at my skin. Her nails dig into my flesh until she can't anymore. Finally, the drug takes effect, and her hands slip limply down to her chest.

My little princess is already mine, she just doesn't know it yet.

Flinging back the sheets, I lift her into my arms. She weighs nothing, and as if I own the place, I walk right out the door carrying the princess of New York with me. I place her in the trunk of my car and tie her hands and feet with the rope I placed in there earlier. I go to duct tape her mouth but decide I don't want her running out of air and dying on me if she happens to wake.

I brush the hair that's fallen over her face away and tuck it behind her ear.

"You're mine, princess, all mine." I lick my lip as I close the trunk. It's a long journey ahead, but for what I have planned for my little sinner, the journey will be worth it.

It's time my little sinner begins to pay her father's debt, and I have some delicious ways in which she can.

CHAPTER 2



Savannah

My eyes are heavy, and my head is pounding. I groan and try to lift my hand to my head, but it won't budge not even a little.

Panic sets in when I vaguely remember a man standing above me as I lay in bed. My eyes fly open, and I immediately realize. I'm not in my room. My gaze darts around the room, searching for anything to tell me where I am. Apart from a roaring fire in the corner and the bed I'm cuffed to, I have no clue where I am. A short chain is attached to my hands and a longer one to my ankles, but either way, I can't move far. I go to scream but realize I have something over my mouth. I scream anyway praying like hell someone will hear me. My screams are muffled, and as much as I try to kick and pull, my chains hinder my efforts. All I seem to be doing is hurting myself the more I struggle.

"No one will hear you, princess," a deep voice says from somewhere in the cabin. I can't move my head properly to see, and it's then I realize I also have some sort of collar on.

I struggle as much as I can, but the metal keeps digging into my skin, cutting it open. I cry out in pain as blood trickles down my arm, the metallic smell permeating the air.

"Now, we don't want you injuring yourself, do we, my little sinner?" His voice is deep and husky. He steps into view, but I can't see his face. I feel his presence, and it feels like I've seen him before. He touches my arm, and I squeal in fright.

"Ssh, you're safe, princess. You're safe here with me." I can hear the smile on his stupid face.

He comes closer, and I almost swallow my tongue when my eyes focus on him. Jacob, my father's best man. Handsome isn't a word I would use to describe him. He's more than handsome. He's a sculpted Adonis. Why am I here with him?

His thick, dark hair sits in a mess on top of his head. Dark chocolate eyes stare intently back at me. A jaw so rugged, you could cut just about anything on it. His shoulders are thick, stretching the material of the shirt he's wearing. His biceps are so wide he could choke me with them in seconds.

My eyes travel down. I can't seem to stop ogling him.

He smirks when he sees how far my eyes travel down.

"If you want to see my dick, princess, just ask. I'm more than happy to oblige."

I glare at the beautiful asshole before me… I hate him.

"I'll pass," I spit, but it's mumbled and muffled behind the duct tape, pissing me off, but from the smirk on his face, even with my mumbled words he knows what I just said. Jacob lifts his hand, his

fingers caress my cheek gently, then he rips the tape off, making me screech in pain. “Mother fucking, son of a bitch, that burns.”

He laughs, ignoring my rant. “Oh, but you will want my cock, princess” he pauses, “and I have many fun things planned for us.” He undoes the chains on my ankles and arms, running his fingers down my body, yanking down my camisole so my breast pops out.

“So beautiful, princess, and all mine.” He leans down, and as much as I try to stop him, he takes my nipple into his mouth and sucks. His teeth nibble lightly. His tongue laves my nipple, over and over. My eyes close at the sensation, never has a man done this to me. Never has a man touched me like this.

He bites down hard, and I scream out in shock and pleasure.

The evil laugh that leaves his mouth sends shivers down my spine.

“Did you enjoy that, sinner?” His hand strokes down my cheek and covers my throat. He grips gently, applying enough pressure to feel what he can do.

“Please,” I beg.

He leans down and kisses me. I pull away, but his hand tightens around my neck, and I almost gag on his tongue as he shoves it down my throat. “You will do as I say, when I say, because trust me, Savannah, you don’t want to know what will happen if you disobey me.”

He re-adjusts the chains while my thoughts try to process everything. Why did he kiss me? What is he planning with me?

Where are we?

Why does he have me here?

I now only have a chain on one ankle, but it seems long enough that I can move around. The collar still sits firmly around my neck, a reminder that I now belong to him.

“What do you want?” I plead as he picks up the other chains and deposits them into a bin.

“You. And you will do as I say, do you understand, Savannah?” His voice raises a few octaves, and I can’t help the shiver that creeps down my spine.

“Answer me,” he yells.

“Y-y-yes,” I stutter.

“You promise you’ll be a good girl.” I don’t answer right away, and it angers him. “I said.”

“Y-y-y-yes I-I-I-I w-w-will,” I whimper. This man scares me to my core, and I have no idea what he plans on doing with me.

“Good girl.” He strokes his finger down my cheek, stopping at my lips. His thumb drags my bottom lip down, and when he lets it go, it pops back up.

“It’s simple princess, do as I say and maybe, just maybe, I won’t kill you.”

He turns and leaves the room.

Standing up, I call after him, “Please don’t leave me, please.” Moving toward him, I come to a halt, my chains locking me in place in the middle of the room.

Jacob looks at me but doesn't say a word. He turns back around and closes the door behind him. Leaving me alone, I sink to my knees as tears fall down my cheeks. Curling up into a ball on the floor, I cry over everything that has happened. What am I supposed to do? Why am I here? What does he want?

I don’t even know where I am or what time it is. All I know is, it’s dark outside, and I’m alone with a beautiful mad man.

Sometime later, my heart pounds as I hear his footsteps coming closer and closer. I shuffle back and hide behind what looks like a closet.

Closing my eyes, I wait for him to enter. The door swings open and when I hear his voice, what he says makes my blood run cold.

“Time for your first lesson, sinner.”

CHAPTER 3



Jacob

SEEING Savannah hiding behind the furniture to keep distance between us makes my cock twitch. She's so damn beautiful.

She hides into herself, her arms curling around her knees. It's clear she's been crying. Seeing that makes me feel like the asshole I am, but I've given her enough time to process everything.

Placing the food tray down on the table she doesn't move. Eyeing me curiously I take the key from my pocket, stopping in front of her and unbinding her ankle.

"Come, eat," I demand, taking a seat on the chair across from her bed.

There is minimal furniture in here, just enough to get her by.

Silence, that's all she gives me as she stares me down.

Lifting the corner of my mouth, my gaze never breaks from hers. She's the first to drop her eyes.

"Why am I here?" she finally asks.

"Revenge," I simply tell her.

"I-I don't understand?"

She swallows, and tears fill her eyes.

"Your father took something from me, so I'm returning the favor, and I'll have my fun, just like he did."

"Please, I don't know what he did. I just want to go home." her cries mean nothing to me, they're white noise.

Running my fingers through my hair, doubt begins to creep in."I'm sorry, princess," I whisper. Bishop would fucking kill me if he knew what I was doing right now. He's the closest thing I have to a friend. My brother, Jensen, knows nothing of the life I live, and to keep him and his family safe, he never will.

Savannah eyes me cautiously as she reaches for the plate I sat down for her.

"You know who I am, yes?"

Nodding, she slowly picks up the fork on the tray.

"If I were you, I'd re-think using that on me."

Lifting her head in defiance, she glares at me."Why?"

Smirking, I stand to my full height. Fear instantly appears on her face, and it has my cock twitching.

“Because princess, it’ll end with your ass tied to the bed. Naked and at my mercy, ready for me to do anything I want,” I warn her.

Dropping the fork, she stares me down. I see it in her eyes, the moment she decides to pick it up and try to plunge it into my chest. I'm much quicker than she is, reaching out, grabbing her wrist, and twisting.

“Ow, ow,” she cries, dropping the fork to the floor between us. I pull her to me, turning her back to my chest, making her slam hard against me. I wrap my right arm around her waist, lifting her from the floor and holding her close to me.

She thrashes against me. Screaming as I carry her back toward the small bed.

“Let go of me,” she hisses, struggling in my hold. Throwing her onto the bed, I lean down, and she tries to claw at my face, forcing me to grab both her wrists, wrenching them up and above her head as I reach for one of the chains.

“Nononono, please,” she cries as I bind her wrist. She screams loudly when I do the same to the other. I brace myself above her, my hands on either side of her head.

“Stop,” I growl.

The tone of my voice makes her still instantly. She stares up at me breathing heavily. *Fucking hell she’s breathtaking.*

Her lips part as my own breathing slows down.

“I will keep your ass tied to this bed if I have to, Savannah, but like it or not. You. Are. Now. Mine.”

She gasps as I stand.

“Do you understand?” She takes a deep breath, turning her face away from me.

“Answer me?” I yell, making her jump.

She closes her eyes, shaking as she whispers.

“Yes, I understand.”

“Good girl.” I stalk out of the room, slamming the door behind me. Her soft cries are all I hear as I head to the security room.

CHAPTER 4



Savannah

WATCHING Jacob leave me chained to the bed almost breaks me. I've heard stories about him and know all the tales. He's a ghost. There is no one like him. It's why he's the best, and that is why.

I'm going to die here. Just now, he terrified the hell out of me.

I look over at the plate of food he left; my stomach growls at me for being so stupid.

My tears fall, and I fight the urge to scream. My body aches from our struggle, God he's strong compared to me. Why did I think I'd ever be able to get close enough to stab him?

I yank a few times at the chains attached to my wrists, but it's no use. I hiss as the metal shackles bite into my skin.

I have to escape, but how?

Apart from running like hell, I have no idea how to even start to escape. I have no clue how much time has passed, but the room grows darker, then the door is shoved open, scaring me.

"Scared of the dark, princess?" Jacob taunts, sitting on the edge of the bed watching me.

Shaking my head, he sighs, standing up again.

"Please," I plead with him.

"What is it you want, Savannah?"

"My freedom." I cry.

Chuckling darkly, he shakes his head. "That's the last wish you'll ever be granted. I told you, you belong to me now."

"I'm not scared of you," I lie.

Licking his lips, he comes closer to me. "You should be."

He turns to leave. "Wait." I murmur.

"What?"

"I need to use the bathroom."

Reluctantly, Jacob undoes the chains. He holds his hand out for me to take and when I place my hand in his, he pulls me up and leads me to a door.

My bladder is screaming at me. I sigh in relief when he opens it and I see a toilet.

"You have two minutes." He closes the door letting me have privacy.

I finish by the time the door swings open. He watches me while I wash and dry my hands, then his fingers wrap around my wrist, and he pulls me beside him and back toward the bed.

“Sit,” he orders practically throwing me to the mattress.

Getting myself comfortable I huff. “Your bedside manner needs some work.”

Jacob says nothing as he binds my wrist again.

“Is this really necessary?” I murmur, lifting my arms up, making the chains clink,“You're a risk, Savannah.” He puts a blanket over me, at least he's not a complete asshole.

“Risk?” I question, but he ignores me. He focuses on making sure I'm secure, while I nibble on my lip as I think of a question he might answer.

“You’ve killed before, correct?”

“Yes.” His matter-of-fact answer is simple.

“How many?”

He doesn't answer, and for a moment,I don't think he will but then he says.

“Three hundred and sixty-seven.”

My gasp is loud and unforgiving.

“Relax, if I wanted you dead, princess, you’d already have a bullet between your eyes.”

He turns and leaves me staring after him, looking back just before he closes the door, and I see a flicker of something pass over him.

He's killed a lot of people. What's one more? What’s stopping him from ending my life? And what did my father do to him that is bad enough for him to kidnap me?

I let out a disgruntled huff.

CHAPTER 5



Jacob

I KNOW this is fucked up, but Savannah has no clue how evil her father actually is. She's caught in between a battle of good versus evil or in this case, evil versus the source of all fucking evil there ever is.

I know the moment she finds out what dear old dad really is capable of, she won't think so less of me. Yeah, I am who I am, I kill people. I've never denied what or who I am. I am a cold-blooded killer. And soon her father will feel my wrath. Pasquale is a real piece of work, he has had this coming. He made his bed, and now, he has to lie in it. Hell, he tried to have his own sons murdered. He nearly succeeded with Ethan. Who does that to their own flesh and blood? A fucking psychopathic monster, that's fucking who.

But Savannah, she's his hidden secret. He's locked her away, just like Rapunzel, keeping her hidden from the world and her brothers. I know for her to truly know and understand who her father is, I have to tell Savannah about them. About my family. I've kept them hidden in the deep dark recess of my mind, and it's going to be hard and painful letting their memory out, but I need to do this. For them. For her.

* * *

SAVANNAH HAS BEEN HERE for a few days, by now her father will be searching for her. But lucky for me, I don't leave a trace behind, after all I am a ghost.

Opening the door. I place the tray of food down. At first, she doesn't even glance up keeping her eyes fixed firmly on her lap. Which suits me just fine. The less she annoys me, the less likely I'll want to leave her tied to a tree in the woods.

I start to undo her chains, and she grabs at her wrists as I do. She slowly lifts her head, her face red raw from all the crying she's been doing. I catch myself lifting my thumb to wipe the moisture under her eye. She stares at me in surprise. I pay her no attention.

"Let's go." I lift her arm and drag her off the bed. She squirms and smacks me as I pull her toward the bathroom.

"Let go of me, you asshole." She slaps my chest as I yank her harder. She yelps a little when I tug

a little too hard.

"Ow, let me go." This time her hand collides with my face. I grab her around her throat and lift her until she's sitting on the sink.

She grips my hands trying to scratch at my skin for me to let go.

I lean in. I'm inches from her face. My lips a hair's width away from hers, our exhales mingling together.

"You hit me again, little sinner, and you won't like the outcome." She side-eyes me and glares as my hand tightens around her neck.

"I'm going to give you a bath, but since you've misbehaved, now I think I'll punish you instead. Is that what you want?" She frowns, making a little v pop up on her forehead.

"I hate you," she spits.

I smirk and lean in close to her ear.

"I'm not saying you need to fall in love with me, princess, you just need to accept your fate."

"Which is?" Her chest heaves as my fingers crush her windpipe.

"You're mine." Her eyes go wide in fear as I pull her down and make her fall to her knees in front of me.

"You better accept your new role, little girl, because I can tell you now you'll never see another living soul again if you don't." She swallows, and her strap falls down slightly revealing the top of her breasts. I tug at it, and she tries to cover herself.

I grab her chin tightly and lift it toward me.

"Do as I say, and I'll spare your life, get it," I demand.

Her eyes widen and then, like the good girl I know she is, she nods. Without a word, I drop my fingers and turn away from her. Walking over to the tub, I start her bath. She sits still, staring at the floor. Once it's ready, I pull her up and she offers little help. So, she's going to be difficult, I'm going to enjoy this now. Stripping off her clothes, my eyes wander over her naked form. She has curves in all the right places, and her pussy is bare and glistening, just for me.

I lick my lips and smirk down at her.

"You want me, princess, you just have to give into those needs."

"Never." She whimpers as my fingers trail down her neck, over her pulse, and across her collar bone, marveling at my collar on her as I do.

"This looks good on you, little girl." I pull on it for effect. She grits her teeth as my fingers continue their descent down her delectable body.

I trail a soft line over her flat stomach. My fingers keep going eager to sink into her wetness.

I touch her pussy. She whimpers and squirms as I trace a line from the top to bottom.

The wetness that meets my fingers has my dick throbbing and in need of relief.

I push a finger inside, and she cries out as I force a second one in, feeling the one thing that will belong to me. *Her virginity.*

"This, all this will be mine very soon, sinner, you'll see why you've kept it for me," I hiss. I move them in and out as her breathing escalates.

"Fuck, this pussy is so tight, sinner, I'm going to fucking destroy you," I growl, and her breath hitches at my words. Turning her around, my fingers leave the warmth of her pussy.

"In time," I whisper before I lift her up and help her into the bath. She slowly sits, and I hear her wince as she does.

Once she's clean, I help her out and dry her off. Instead of the flimsy pajamas she has on, I dress her in some of my clothes. They are far too big and baggy but at least she will be warmer.

I lead her back to her room, but before she gets there, she grabs a lamp and hits me in the head with it. I land with a thump and see her dart for the door.

“Savannah,” I yell as I stand up, wobbling, my vision a little blurry. I touch my head and feel wetness, but it’s the last of my worries. She manages to get the door open, even with all the locks. She falls out the door, but I grab her foot and she falls. She manages to kick me and my hand slips, she races down the steps and out into the woods.

The darkness takes her, and I give chase.

“You want to play, baby girl? Let's play,” I growl.

CHAPTER 6



Savannah

I HAVE NEVER RUN SO FAST in my life. I take off into the woods and even though I can't see anything in front of me, my legs keep carrying me. Adrenaline courses through me, allowing me to move through the darkness. I trip over a rock and land on my face. I cry out as I feel a twig or stick scratch my leg. I force myself up and keep going. I can hear him calling for me, yelling my name. *Just run, don't stop.*

He's behind me.

He's catching up.

My feet land heavily as my legs begin to ache, but I don't stop. I keep going. I'm panting with every step I take. My lungs burn, needing more and more oxygen with each breath I take. "SAVANNAH," he bellows, my name echoing through the night air. I look back, and I hear him coming. I have no idea how close he is, but I know I need to keep going.

I stop to look around, but all I see are trees in every direction. He yells again, and I panic so I start to run again. I don't know what direction I'm going in or where it leads, but I just keep going. The moon shines down between the treetops and I look up as I run, big mistake. I trip over a log and tumble down a hill. My face hits something, and my vision blurs as my head pounds. I grab the side of my face and feel wetness there.

I will my legs to get up, to run, but I'm dazed and confused. I hear twigs snap in the distance and his voice echoes around me.

"I'm going to find you, little girl." His voice is pissed, that much I can tell.

Finally, I lift myself up, and start to run again. I've messed up my ankle because it hurts like a bitch with each step I take. I'm limping, my speed much slower now. The pain becomes so bad that I fall to my knees in a heap.

"Come on." I plead with myself.

I try again and this time, I use the trees to hold myself up. I'm not as fast now, and I know it will only be a matter of time before he catches up. Light shines behind me and I know it's him. I push on as fast as I can, but my top gets caught on a passing branch. I'm trying to free myself when I stumble and land with a thump on the ground.

"If you want to play cat and mouse, sinner, all you have to do is ask." His voice is so close. I lean up on my elbows, and there he is, standing in front of me, staring down at me. Smirk in place, full of cockiness—asshole.

He steps over and pulls me up by my hair.

I scream out in pain as he drags me back toward the cabin. I grip his arm with one hand trying to punch him with the other, “Enough,” he growls as he lifts me over his shoulder and carries me through the woods.

I continue to cry and kick and scream with everything I have as he takes me back to hell.

“No, no,” I scream and punch his back. I kick him, and he stops, adjusting me so I can’t afflict any more pain before he keeps going.

“Kick and scream all you want, no one will hear you.”

Each step creaks as he walks us inside.

He closes the door behind him, locks every lock, and I see him pull something out of his pocket, it’s a key and he locks a few deadbolts.

He walks me back to the room I've been kept in, and throws me on the bed before chaining me back up.

“No, stop.” My voice shakes as I try to hold my arm to my chest. “Please,” I beg, but he’s too strong and before I know it both my arms are chained up again.

I shake my arms back and forth, and the metal links rattle against the headboard.

“Let me go,’ I scream and kick him as he grabs my leg. He yanks me down, and it pulls the chains tighter making my shoulders cry out in pain. I throw my head back and cry as he refastens the chains around my ankles.

His breathing is heavy. He has blood dripping from a small cut on his head. He leans over me, his forehead touches mine and he starts to laugh. I mean really laugh, like a maniac.

“You just changed the game, sweetheart.” He licks the side of my face and bites down on my earlobe making me cringe. His breathing is erratic, and I see a new darkness in his eyes.

“I hope you enjoyed that little game, sinner, because now, now we’re going to play.” His hand slides down my body, and he pulls down my pants revealing my bare pussy to him. He grins. “I’m going to have fun destroying this, sinner.” Throwing me a wink, he walks out.

What the fuck?

“Please,” I beg him.

He stops in the doorway and turns his head slightly.

“Begging won’t work, Savannah, now you play by my rules or you will see what I’m really capable of.”

Then he’s gone leaving me scared, confused, and in so much pain I almost pass out.

* * *

“YOU’RE AWAKE.” He stares at me with a slight smile that makes me shiver.

I try to sit up, but it’s pointless, the chains keep me locked in place. He stands slowly, his shirt pulls across his chest as he does revealing muscles that stretch the material just the right way.

I swallow the nervous lump in my throat as he approaches. My legs try to close even though I have a blanket covering my bottom half.

He stops next to me and leans down. I hear the click of the chain and then my arm drops, and my body almost sings in relief. He does the same on the other side and then releases my ankles, one after the other.

He then pulls the blanket back up and over my legs. I move freely around the bed, my limbs

thankful for the freedom.

"What you did is very stupid, little girl," he says as I pull the blanket over me to cover myself. I keep my eyes down, afraid I'll anger the beast.

I feel his finger on my skin. He slides it down to my chin, forcing me to look into his eyes.

"You need to behave and maybe, just maybe, these can stay off." He tips his head to the chains sitting next to me. I nod so fast I swear it's going to fly off.

"Good girl," he says in a deep and gravelly voice.

Good God, why is it so sexy? There's something wrong with me? Lusting over my captor.

I watch him as he places some clothes onto the bed and a bucket of water.

His eyes lift to mine, and he watches me as I watch him, his arms flexing as he wrings out the cloth.

"Lift up?" he says. I lift my arms above my head, not really sure what's going on, but I know I want these chains to stay off so I behave.

As he takes my torn, dirt-covered top off of me, I wince as pain travels down my shoulders into my neck. I screw my face up in agony. I hold my hands over my shoulders and lean forward a little.

"Let me," he says, and I feel his strong fingers move over my skin.

He spins me around on the bed with little effort at all. I feel so small compared to him, he makes me feel fragile, and I know my father taught me to be anything but that.

His fingers work over my shoulders and neck. He's massaging me?

I try to turn my head to take a peek.

"Eyes forward." His fingers hold my cheeks and turn my head forward again.

I wince when he rolls over every knot, his fingers and hands working them out one by one. I moan as his fingers wrap around my neck from behind and he massages every little piece of me. My head tilts, not being able to take the pleasure the relief brings.

I feel him lean down, his hand splayed out over my neck and his thumb runs over my bottom lip.

"If you keep moaning like that, I'll give you something else to moan about, and trust me, you won't like what it is."

I bite my bottom lip at his threat, but I'm salivating over my captor's magic hands. My eyes drop down and I have the sudden urge to peek at something else.

"See something you like, sinner?" His husky voice runs through me like a tidal wave. He leans down and takes a nibble of my ear, his teeth gently sink into the skin. I flinch a little at the effect it has on my body.

"I-I—" I stumble on my words as he grins down at me with a devilish look. It's almost too evil.

"Are you going to behave, Savannah?"

"Yes." I nod frantically.

"You promise?"

"I swear I won't do anything." The way he looks over me as if he's questioning his better judgment makes me almost cry out with joy.

He caresses my cheek, and his thumb slips over my lip again as he stares down at my mouth. I watch his eyes dart over them and then back up to my eyes. *He wants to kiss me?*

"Don't make me regret leaving these off?" he says, lifting one of the chains in front of me to make sure I get the memo.

"I won't, I promise." I whimper slightly as his hand travels down and covers my neck.

"I assure you, you won't like what I'll do if you disobey me." The threat in his voice is enough to make my skin crawl.

I nod and wait for him to drop his hand and move away.

"What did he do? My father?" I murmur.

Jacob sighs.

"He murdered my family. Destroying the only things I loved."

"Why?" I gasp.

"Because he was teaching me a lesson."

"A lesson?" I question what possible lesson my father could have for murdering innocent people.

"Because I wanted out," Jacob simply says then he walks out leaving me stunned but also understanding why I'm here. *I'm his revenge.*

My father truly is a monster.

CHAPTER 7



Jacob

ARE YOU FUCKING INSANE, Kipling? My brain screams at me while I stand on the other side of her door. I almost bang my head to make sure my brain is still working because there is no way I just admitted that?

Why on earth would you keep the chains off? You know the first chance she gets she's going to run.

I run my hand through my hair and tug a little, fighting with myself on what the hell to do next. This isn't going the way I planned. Months of planning out the window all because she's so fucking beautiful it should be illegal.

And my cock seems to think for himself.

It's like he's a soldier drafted to war except the war he's going to is fighting with the man he's attached to about where he wants to spend his nights. The one cozy place he hasn't been in a very long time.

* * *

WALKING toward the door and unlocking every lock slowly so she knows to prepare for me, I enter and find her sitting by the fire. On her knees looking all kinds of delicious in a towel. She freezes when she notices me, it's as if she didn't hear me enter. "Bed now," I demand.

She scrambles up, holding the towel to cover herself. Flashing me a glimpse of her pussy as she scurries to the bed like the good little prey she is.

I can practically hear her heart beating from where I stand by the door.

I slowly close it behind me and take the key from my pocket, locking it. I turn around, ready to feast on my little sinner. I see fear in her eyes. It's time I take something from her.

I smirk as I take small steps, eyeing her in the towel, her wet hair hanging over her shoulders. Stopping in front of her, my eyes trail down her body and take in the way the towel hugs every delicious curve.

My tongue wets my lips as I lift my hand and let my fingers trail up her wet thighs. She lets out a small gasp when they hit the opening of the towel, and her hands hug tightly as she watches me. My

fingers keep moving through the small gap. I see her sink into herself as my hand travels farther up until finally touching softness like I've never felt before. I growl as my finger plays along her folds and feel the wetness I create.

"Like that don't you, little sinner?" I hiss. My other hand finds the towel and I yank it hard making her gasp, leaving her sitting there naked before me. She's a tasty feast and I can't wait to devour her.

Her eyes stay down as my finger plays. I force it inside and she whimpers as my finger pumps in and out, her legs opening a little farther making it sink deeper. She moans and I see her face scrunch up hating herself for the sound that came from her.

I grip her face in my hand forcing her to look in my eyes. We stare at one another while I finger fuck her tight little pussy.

I feel her legs shake as her climax nears. I lean down and take a pebbled nipple between my teeth and bite down hard. She screams out as I lap up her nipple like I'm starved. I feel her tighten around my fingers so I pull out and stand back up. She whimpers in despair but watches as I pull my shirt over my head. Her eyes go wide when she sees the marks marring my skin.

I force my jeans and briefs down revealing my very erect, very large cock, and she stares for a moment as I pull her toward me.

"Suck," I command. She bites her lip as she stares at it, and I lose my patience. Gripping her head, I force her toward my cock.

"I said suck, sinner, or I'll fuck you in the ass."

Her eyes widen, and she quickly leans down and opens her mouth letting those plump little lips open ready for me.

She doesn't get a chance to back out before shoving my cock down her throat. I hear her choke, but I keep going. I hold the back of her head as I fuck her mouth hard. Savannah gargles and salvia flies everywhere as I use her mouth. I hiss as I watch her little ass in the air just for me. She hollows out her cheeks and her tongue licks around me as much as she can while I force more of my cock into her mouth. I don't let her up for air, and I don't stop. Her eyes lift to mine, and I'm almost proud because she is handling this like a pro. I hear her retch as I touch the back of her throat.

"Take it all, baby girl, and prepare to swallow it all. If you lose any, I'll fuck you in the ass while you're tied to the bed." I grip her throat as her eyes water, making her look at me. My hips move back and forth as liquid leaks down her cheek, but she doesn't pull back doesn't even blink as I fuck her mouth with so much force it's a wonder it doesn't snap.

"That's a good girl," I praise her.

Her tits swing around as I hold her head in place, I can see her jaw is aching, but all I care about is my release. I feel the telltale sign that I'm about to explode and I let out an almost animalistic sound as I empty into the back of her throat.

"Fuck." My body twitches a little as I pull back my cock, sliding between those plump lips that look so good with my cum dripping from them. Savannah licks up the runaway cum as I pull my clothes back on.

I lean toward her, and she almost flinches as my hand touches her cheek.

I brush my thumb over her lips and smirk down at her. I place a soft kiss on her forehead and pull back.

"Good girl, princess." I walk backward, leaving her breathing heavily as I see her pussy glisten with arousal.

Fuck me.

I'll get my revenge, but first, I'm going to own Savannah in every way possible.

It’s time I show her the true monster inside me.
Sorry, princess, please forgive me for what I'm about to do.
The End…for now!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tara Lee was born in Hobart, Tasmania Australia

She is a qualified baker by trade and loves to read as much as she can in her spare time. She fell in love with writing while on maternity leave with her son the stories had to come out.

She loves to write romance novels because she's a hopeless romantic by heart The Notebook being her favourite movie.

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GILDED CAGE



BY HOLLAND REIGN

Dove

One night I'm kidnapped. I know it traces back to my brother. The four men holding me aren't monsters, at least not to me. During the weeks I was with them, they made me feel emotions I hadn't felt in a long time.

They made me feel loved and safe. One minute I was feeling cherished and the next I find myself waking up in my own bed again.

I know I didn't dream it; I know my brother is the reason I was there.

I also know I miss the four men that I was falling for. I know that's hard to comprehend, but it's true. I only know their first names, but I will find them. I need to know if they feel the same way.

Do they care about me or was it just for them to get their kicks while my brother comes up with money he doesn't have? And why let me go? I saw their faces. I should be dead. What does it all mean?

I plan to find out, I just need to know where to look.

DOVE



"See you tomorrow," I wave at my friend over my shoulder after class. He watches me as I get into my car, and leave. He's just being protective, and I love him for it. Though I think he's being overprotective at times, constantly sounding like my father as he lectures me about leaving campus alone.

It's a short drive to my condo, and all I can think about is drawing a bath and soaking in it to relax. It's nearing the end of the semester, and coursework is piling up. I need a break.

Parking in my attached garage. I head inside and as I shut the door-- I stop just short when I see a man in my kitchen. A mask covers his face, but his eyes hold me prisoner. They're light blue, so light they look almost white.

Run, stupid.

I try to turn back to the garage but find another man staring at me, mask in place. Amber eyes staring at me.

I can't breathe, terrified, I run for my back door. When the man catches me, I start laughing.

This must be a joke, Mill trying to hit his point on the head that I should be careful.

"Okay, you got me," I laugh as the man throws me on the couch. They stare at me, but with their masks on I can't tell if they're smiling.

"Mill sent you. I get it," I shake my head as I laugh.

"This isn't about Mill," I hear a voice to the side of me and I realize a third and fourth man has joined the party. Oh, no. This isn't a joke.

I try to scramble from the couch, but the fourth man lunges for me. I try to fight him off, but he's stronger. I feel something stick in my neck and my body goes limp and not from what I'm doing.

A mask slips over my eyes as they start to feel heavy. I watch helplessly as I'm carried to a car, I didn't see it on the street earlier. As I'm set on the seat, I pass out.

ENZO



Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Did she recognize me?

I knew that when her brother started borrowing that she would be collateral. It's why I started going to college, to get closer to her. I even warned her about being by herself, but this isn't a joke. She won't find it funny that I was the one to take her.

Dove is beautiful and she doesn't even know it. Where we are dark, she is light. From all of the time we've spent keeping an eye on her, I've come to see that she loves the world, despite who her family is. She laughs in class at the dumb jokes the professor tells us, even when they are terrible. She's paid for others' lunches in the cafeteria when a person was running low on funds. There isn't a bad bone in her body. At times it makes me want to dirty her up a little bit, spank her ass while I finger her in class.

That gets my dick hard.

Her brother is the reason she's here and because we're dicks. When we want something, we take it. She's ours, if only for a few short weeks.

We aren't gentlemen but we will let her go. Then it is up to her, she just won't know it.

DOVE



I wake up in a bed, a soft one. Blinking my eyes open, I see I'm most definitely not in my room.

This room is beautiful. Large windows look out onto a lake, trees for miles. If I do try to run, I'll just get lost in the endless forest and die of hunger or freezing temps.

The walls are a soft white. And the dresser is grey but looks worn, giving it a rustic vibe. There is a chair near one of the large windows, wicker with what looks like a comfy cushion.

I sit up straight when I hear the door open. I look for a weapon, though I don't see one. And from the looks of the guy, I'd be dead if I try anything.

"I've brought you some food," he gestures to the tray in his hand. There is a mask covering his face. I should be scared but for some reason, I'm not. I can't explain it, but it's something about his eyes.

When I don't answer he sighs, setting the tray on the small table near the window.

"Please eat or I'll feed you myself," he grumbles. Very carefully, I climb out of bed and quickly walk to the table. I don't want to know what the consequences will be.

He takes the other chair and watches me.

"Why am I here?"

"Your brother."

"What did he do now? If it's money, I can pay it."

"That's all you need to know," he replies.

I relent, knowing that if I'm a captive for something he did, it's about money.

"Are you going to kill me?"

I have no idea why I'm so calm asking a question that could result in my death. Maybe if I were dead, my brother would be accountable for his actions for once. Instead, he uses me to get out of his stuff. It's happened several times now. Though none of those times have ended me in a nice bedroom and hospitable captors. Hospitable so far.

"No and I would tell you the truth always," he replies. He stands up and takes the tray before strolling from the room. I hear the door lock from the other side. I'm still a prisoner, but something makes me feel safer.

I must be delusional.

CHALEN



"I don't have the money," the asshole says for the hundredth time. He sounds like a broken record, one that I wish I could just kill and be done with.

I can't do that because of her. Dove.

Enzo applied to the local college the minute her brother came to us. He's more approachable than the rest of us.

We listened in on the times she was warned about being alone or taking night classes. It made me snort just to know that he was going to end up being her nightmare.

What surprised me was she didn't put up much of a fight. First, she thought it was a joke, but after that, it was as if she knew what was coming next. She tried to fight—a little-- but she must have realized it wasn't worth it.

I have a feeling that her brother uses her a lot for when he gets in a bind, which makes me want to kill him.

"You have a week, or your dear sister takes a bullet," I hiss at him, tossing him to the ground.

"No!"

"No?"

"Don't hurt Dove. I need her," he whimpers. "She's the only family I have left."

"Here's the deal. We're going to keep her until you pay."

What I didn't say is the deal is for her to leave us and want to find her way back to us on her own. If she does, his debt is wiped free, but he'll no longer be able to borrow from the house.

I don't tell him that because it has to be on her terms, no influence from him.

DOVE



"Please," I beg the masked man.

"Only because you said please," he replies huskily. I hear a zipper and then pants drop to the floor. I watch as he drops his head between my legs, his tongue lapping at my clit like it's his last meal.

"Oh, oh, oh," I chant as he keeps bringing me closer to the edge. I need to fall off, I need the release.

"Not yet," he crawls up my body and then he thrusts into me, making my back arch off the bed.

"Fuck," he groans as he lazily thrusts in and out of me.

"You like that?" he asks, and I nod as he wraps his hand around my throat. He doesn't squeeze, it's just there. Making my heartbeat faster.

He picks up his pace, reaching down to pinch my clit. I scream as I come hard, seeing stars that burst behind my eyelids.

"Fuck," he shouts, his thrusts getting erratic. He rides out until his dick stops twitching in me. I wince as he pulls out and missing his cock.

"See you again," he says.

I sit up in bed, sweat dripping off my brow. I've had dreams like that every night this week. Every night since I've been here. Sometimes it's just one of them, sometimes all four. Vivid, real, almost wish it were happening.

I groan, looking at the clock on the wall, it's four in the morning. Now, I'm worked up and horny.

"I could take care of that," I hear from beside the bed.

The one with the ice-colored eyes stares at me from the chair.

I don't say a word as he crosses the room. No mask, but it's dark in here except for the moonlight. He's shirtless and from what little light there is I can tell he's fit. Just as fit in my dreams.

I watch him as he lowers himself to the bed, kissing me lightly. One-touch and I'm hooked.

Does this make me a whore? I mean I want all four of them and yet, I'm their captive.

I raise my head, deepening the kiss as his fingers trail down my leg. He soon goes with it and when his tongue hits my clit, I almost come from just that. His tongue is magical.

"I'm missing out," another voice says and soon hands cup my breasts before he licks them.

In my dream I was on sensory overload, in real life I'm about to combust.

"Please," I beg.

"She needs your dick," the one grazing my nipple with his teeth mumbles.

"I know she does," he chuckles darkly, and I feel like I'm in for a wild ride.

"The room?" the other one asks.

"Yeah, the room."

I have no idea what that means, but I'm hauled up and over someone's shoulder.

Where am I going? Is this where they kill me?

This whole week I've been lured into a false sense of security. This is it.

The door opens but it's not what I'm expecting.

I'm dropped on a bed and see that the room is a sex room, but not quite like the one in the books.

One of the guys takes my arms and lifts me up into a contraption that leaves me spread-eagle, standing on a platform. I'm also naked, something I didn't realize before coming here.

"Beautiful," the one with the ice eyes says. Masks are back in place. But why?

"I agree," the other one chooses a paddle, smacking my ass lightly, causing me to moan.

"She likes that," they murmur in unison.

The one with ice eyes moves in front of me, thrusting two fingers in front of my face.

"Suck," and I do. I have no idea what is going to happen but for some reason I know I'll like it.

"Perfect," he coos. He leans forward so I can't see his face when he takes off the mask, he licks my clit as he thrusts two fingers in me, fucking me with them. Not hard. Lazy strokes in and out that have me chasing the orgasm.

As he does this, the other one slaps my ass with the paddle with each stroke of the fingers.

The contraption lowers and I groan from not being able to come.

"Hush," the one with the paddle says as he thrusts into me from behind.

"Fuck," he moans.

"Right?" Ice Eyes replies.

Ice eyes grabs something that looks like, yep, nipple clamps. He licks and sucks my nipples into his mouth before adding the clamps. There is a long chain and another clamp, and he bends down to suck my clit before I feel a clamp on it.

"Oh, fuck!" I call out, as the guy fucking me pumps even harder. Ice eyes gives the chain a little tug and the pain and pleasure are too much. For the first time in my life, I come so hard I'm gushing around paddle guy's cock.

"Holy shit," he mumbles, pulling out.

I go limp from everything, sensory overload. Intense.

"Sleep," I hear from somewhere in the room before darkness overtakes me.

LUCA

I plate eggs, bacon, and pour a glass of milk before popping the toast out. With everything situated on the tray, no mask, I go up the stairs to her room.

We've decided to stop wearing the masks.

It's our way of trying to get her to trust us. For some reason she does, or she doesn't question why she's here nor does she ask to call her brother.

It's something I want to broach with her today. We need to know what he's already made her do.

From the minute we laid eyes on her, we knew she was ours. The fuck sessions that she thinks are dreams have been off the charts.

But we all agreed that she needs to come back to us on her own.

"Morning," I open the door and greet Dove.

She turns to look at me and her eyes widen.

"No mask?"

"No. We want you to see our faces," I tell her honestly.

She blushes like she's remembering her "dream." The one where I fucked her up against the window. Yeah, it was fucking hot.

"I want you to see my face as you come on my fingers," I say softly.

Her eyes widen.

"They weren't dreams?"

"No, and you're going to be a good little girl," I pull her out of the chair and sit down, pulling her onto my lap.

"You're going to eat while I play," I pull her hair to the side and kiss her neck.

She picks up her fork shakily.

"If you stop eating, I stop," I whisper as I kiss her neck again.

My fingers brush across her stomach as I lift her nightshirt. No panties. That was from last night. It's confirmed when I glance to the bed and see them peeking out from underneath the bed.

I part her folds as she groans, but she keeps eating.

I trace circles around her clit, before slipping two fingers in. Fucking her slowly as she eats the last piece of bacon. Her eggs are almost gone. When they are, I'm going to fuck her against the window.

I fuck her with my fingers, and she squirms.

"You don't get to come yet," I slap her clit, making her squeal. When the last of her breakfast is gone, I set her on her feet to face me, before whipping my dick out. Everything else will wait; I want to watch her ride me.

“You want it?” I gesture to my dick, and she nods.

“Ride me.”

She does, sliding down my cock, making me moan along with her.

“So, beautiful.” I tuck a piece of her hair behind her ear as she bounces up and down.

“Oh, God!” She gasps right as her pussy grips my cock in a vice, causing me to yelp as I shoot my load inside her.

She collapses on my chest, and I hold her for a minute. Not just because what we just did turned my legs to jelly, but because I want to feel her heartbeat against mine.

DOVE



I've learned those "dreams" aren't dreams. They have been taking me to new heights of pleasure every night. If they kill me this is a good way to go. It's off the charts and every night I can't wait to see what I'm going to experience.

There is morning sex and kisses as well.

But it's also just *them*. Each day one will spend time with me in the room, this pretty cage that I've come to like. They bring me gifts and one even bought a TV for the room.

And each day they tell me something about themselves.

Luca wanted to be a football star at one time. Chalen likes to play the piano. Nero likes sci-fi shows. The only one that hasn't shown me his face is Enzo. I asked him why, but he wouldn't tell me. I feel like I know him but can't place where I would.

"Dove," Luca clears his throat as he steps into the doorway.

"Hey," I give him a genuine smile. I should be scared to be here, scared they can kill me. But I feel oddly safe here and I love just being able to be just me for a bit.

"I'm so sorry." He sits on the bed and I'm trying to understand why he's apologizing.

His hand comes up to caress my cheek and then I feel a prick in my neck.

"Please remember to find us," he pleads with me, as my eyes grow heavy.

What does that mean?

"I love you all," I say this as my eyes close.

NERO

I hate that we have to do this, but she has to come back to us. On her own. For her brother's sake, I hope she does.

Every night with her has been heaven. Demons taking flight and an angel coming to sit on my chest as I watch her sleep afterwards.

She calms my heart, my bloodlust. Though I still want to kill her brother. If I can get away with it, without her suspecting anything, I would. She needs people that care, not a douchebag like him.

Right now, *that* douchebag is sitting across from me, and I just asked him why she wasn't surprised to be taken by us.

He's sweating, not sure how to answer me.

"Ummm." He mumbles as he wipes the sweat off his forehead, before placing his hands back on the table, fidgeting with his lighter.

"It was a question. You answer it or I assume. And we don't want me to assume."

We've had our suspicions, that he uses her to get out of his gambling debts. He doesn't know she's been released, and he won't know. I plan on keeping him busy pacing a basement floor.

It's the least I can do to scare him straight a little bit. Dove loves her brother, that much I gathered from her, even if he does dumb things. Borrowing from the wrong people is stupid.

Luca took over the family business and we're his captains. More like his consiglieres but we run the streets with him. He's not one to sit back and just watch from his throne. He likes blood and gore just as much as the rest of us.

It was weird to see him be soft with Dove, but she just has that effect on all of us.

I hear a switchblade open, and douchebag whimpers.

"He just pissed his pants," Chalen groans.

"He's a pussy, what did you expect." I turn to face her brother. "See, what I think you do is use her to settle debts, just like you did with us. The problem is others weren't as nice to her as we were. She was merely a guest while with the others treated her as a captive and forced to do things for your debt." I'm foaming at the mouth I'm so angry. The look on his face tells me it's all true. What a fuckwad.

"I'm sorry," he tries to sound sincere.

"What are you sorry for?"

"For doing using her."

"But didn't you tell us that you needed her? That's what you need her for, correct?" Luca hisses in his ear and douchebag goes white.

"Take him," Luca barks at two men standing off to the side.

“Don’t kill me,” he hollers as he’s manhandled out the door to his new digs, the bloody basement.

“I want to kill him,” Enzo says. He rubs a hand down his face in frustration.

“You and me both, but we can’t,” Luca agrees. He signals for the man at the bar to bring us another round.

“I go back to class tomorrow,” Enzo says.

“How are you going to play it?” Luca asks him.

“No idea. I will have to see what she says to me. Hoping to drop plenty of hints though,” he grins.

We need her.

DOVE



I stretch as I roll out of bed. I've been home a week and hate it. I've been trying to forget what happened, sleeping on and off since I've been back.

But I can't forget.

I remember Luca and then a pinch. My eyes went heavy. I also remember him saying remember us.

What am I supposed to remember?

What does it say about me that I wish they would have kept me? Does that make me stupid? Or just a whore?

They might have kidnapped me, but they treated me like a queen. They ruined me for other guys.

I'm trying to rationalize all this in my head. I have no idea how to process what I just went through. Others would have been inconsolable, scared, terrified.

I guess since it happens all the time, I knew what I was in for. Or so I thought.

I felt love, even if the words weren't said. It was like they cared about me, my happiness, my dreams, my fears. They would listen as I told them about what I wanted to do after college. Not once did they tell me I couldn't do it or tell me my dreams are stupid.

Even though I never left the house, and I didn't want to, I felt safe with them, felt like we could have a relationship. But maybe not?

Showering will help me get my thoughts together. I swipe my phone from the charger as I trod to the bathroom. Turning on the water to let it warm up, I pick clothes to wear. I might as well make an appearance at school and call my brother.

I notice a lot of messages from him. Deciding to call him back, I punch call.

It goes to voicemail. I shrug, strip out of my clothes and step into the shower. I let the hot water relax my tense muscles. I remember the time Nero took me in the shower and I reach down to circle my clit as I let the scene play back in my head. Fuck, his tongue was relentless.

I shake as my orgasm hits, sagging against the shower wall.

I miss those guys. *My guys*.

I dry off and put my clothes on, trying my brother again. No use.

I remember Luca, who is the one with the white-blue eyes like ice. I remember him telling me I was there because of my brother. Did they kill him? Or did he pay and that's why I was released?

I doubt they killed him, but why is he not answering his phone, then? I do see a voicemail and click on it.

"Dove, they're going to take me. You have to make this right."

What does that mean?

I shake it off, grabbing my keys and heading to the college. My mind on other things.

ENZO



I wait by the library for Dove to arrive. She strides across the campus, waving at people, stopping to help one of the old professors to their feet from a bench. Even after us taking her, she still loves the world. Sees the good in it.

If she comes home to us, we will still shelter her from all that we do.

She sees me and her smile gets big. I kept my mask on the whole time she was there, she did touch my face, but never saw it. I miss the taste of her sweet pussy and her how tight she was. I miss how she felt in my arms.

"Dove, where have you been?" I ask as she steps in next to me and we start our walk to our class.

"You wouldn't believe me," she mumbles.

"I might," I wiggle my eyebrows at her.

She changes the subject, except it's another one I'm familiar with, "My brother isn't answering my phone calls. But I got a weird message from him."

"Oh?" I quirk my brows at her.

"Something about someone taking him and I must fix it. I don't know how to fix it. I don't know who to call or pay money to."

"Why do you always have to bail him out?" I say with too much force. I hate that she's always digging him out of the holes he digs himself. He learns nothing.

"He's all I got. Can I tell you a secret?" she asks as we slide into our seats in the back.

"Yeah."

"I was kidnapped. That's where I've been. But they didn't treat me like others have."

"Others?" My brows raise in question though we already know.

"He has a gambling problem, my brother. I'm his get out of shit free card. Though the others didn't make me feel things. This time, I was falling for my captors. What kind of person does that make me?" She asks, her voice soft, almost broken.

"Mine."

I watch as it dawns on her.

DOVE



"You were the one in the mask?"

I watch as Mill's eyes widen and then he smirks. I caught on pretty quick.

"Yes."

"I….I…" I have no idea what to say.

"I think you told Luca you loved us," his smirk grows to a grin.

I'm still at a loss for words.

"Do you go here because of me?" I ask, scolding myself for being so naïve.

"I'm a student. When your brother approached us about a loan, he offered you as collateral. What he doesn't know is that when you come back to us, it will be wiped clean. But he will never be allowed to use you as bait or come to our casino again."

I blink my eyes. I knew that Enzo, Mills, whoever seemed familiar to me. He was the kindest out of all of them, but I grew to love them all in their own way.

"Are you mad? I know my brothers will be mad I told you."

"No, I woke up this morning, missing you," I admit. I catch him smiling at me.

"I know this isn't a conventional way to start a relationship, but you are the missing piece to our puzzle."

His words warm my heart.

"I should be mad. I should be terrified, but I'm sure you know by now that my brother does this a lot. I guess that makes me a psycho."

"If it does, it makes you our psycho," he snickers.

"So, I have to find you to fix all of this?" I ask him, feeling him reach for my hand.

"Yeah. Do you want to find us?"

I think it over for a minute. It did hurt when Luca put the needle to my neck and I woke up at home, alone. I woke up missing them, Luca's grumpiness, Nero's attitude, Enzo's kisses through his mask of course, and then Chalen's smiles and stories.

"Yes."

He hands me a piece of paper, with an address is on it.

"It's not the house we were at, it's a bar. It's Luca's, that's all you need to know."

I put the paper in my pocket, knowing I'll be showing up right after this class.

LUCA



Enzo strolls in after his class looking like he won the lottery.

"Why are you so fucking happy?" I ask him.

"Can't tell you—yet."

What the fuck does that mean?

It's just the four of us and some of my soldiers. It's been quiet on the streets, but I think that's because I went on a rampage after I dropped her off. I needed to make some people bleed. It's where Nero came up with the underground fighting ring, people can make their bets, fight, shit they can even fuck for all I care, as long as they place the bet and buy the booze.

I grab a beer and take a seat at the table with him, sighing.

I'm about to ask about her when the door opens, my men moving in, guns drawn.

"She's with me," Enzo states, and I swivel around in my seat.

"Dove?"

She stands right inside the door, looking unsure.

"I was told to come find you," she says, stepping closer to the table. I turn to glare at Enzo, but he just grins.

Then what she says next floors me, "I don't care if my brother lives. I'm tired of picking up after him. I love him, he's family. But I'm tired of him not learning anything."

Did not expect that.

"Also, I started catching feelings for guys who showed me more kindness in just a couple of weeks, than I've been shown my whole life by others. Do I hate what you did? Or how you went about it? Yeah. I should be angry, but I'm not. I should be terrified, but I'm not. I felt safe with you."

I feel Nero and Chalen behind me as I stand from my chair.

"I'm here. Like you wanted. But more so where I want to be."

Nero rushes past me, wrapping her in a hug, Chalen right behind him.

"You told her?" I ask Enzo. "I'm not mad, just wondering."

"I did. I know it influenced her decision, but I also gave her the choice to be out."

"She chose us?"

"She did. You just heard her," he chuckles. "Go."

I grab her in my arms, holding on for dear life.

"Go get her brother," I nod my head at my men.

"He's here?"

"I think we should sit." I lead her to a table, Nero grabbing a beer for her.

"What the fuck?" her douchebag brother yells.

He stops when he sees his sister.
“Dove?”
“Sit down,” Nero pushes him down into a seat.
“Time for a family chat,” I tell him and Dove nods.
She’s perfect.

DOVE



EPILOGUE

Three years later

TODAY ENZO and I are graduating. It's surreal and exciting. I already have a job lined up, thanks to Luca.

Speaking of Luca. He, Nero, and Chalen are front row, center.

My brother, Dallon is with them. Finally sober, clean, and no longer gambling. Luca gave him an ultimatum the day I came to the bar. One that Dallon took seriously. He works for Luca.

They think I'm stupid, I know Luca's job. They do keep me sheltered as much as they can and I'm grateful for that. But I know that Luca Genoa is the same Luca Genoa that is the mob boss.

I still love him.

I'm excited to be working at a shelter to help neglected youth. Luca built the center and staffed it, which is why I have a job. I love the kids and the job.

"Dove Genoa."

Oh, I took Luca's last name, though I'm all of theirs.

They know I belong to them, and they belong to me. Turns out I can get a little territorial. I punched a girl the other day in the bar when she tried to rub up on Enzo and then Chalen. Nero dragged me away to the office and fucked my brains out to destress me. Couldn't complain.

The guys cheer as I walk the stage to get my diploma. I won't be sitting back down; Enzo is waiting at the bottom for me, and we head toward the parking lot.

We're moving today, back to the place where they kept me. I love it out there, this time I'll have my freedom. I get to decorate the house how I want. Turns out that my room was the only room with furniture, other than the "Room."

The guys left after the night and would drive back to their home in town. The lake house is only thirty minutes from the bar.

Today we're going out there to make a list of what we need and have a BBQ. Luca's men will be there, some of them have girlfriends or wives we have invited. My brother will stay at Luca's mansion in town, just to have it look lived in.

I stay out of that business.

I'm holding Enzo's hand when I'm ripped away. I squeal as my ass is spanked and Nero is smirking down at me. Chalen is the one holding me.

"Dallon, head out to the house. We'll be there in a little bit," Luca orders. My panties dampen at

his command. I mean whenever he is in alpha mode always makes me wet.

"She's wet," Enzo swipes a finger through my folds.

"She didn't wear panties," Chalen smirks.

"Bad girl," Luca growls.

"She's our bad girl," Nero licks my neck and I moan.

"Always," Luca agrees.

We're going to be late to my party, but I don't care. I love my time with my guys and will take it however and whenever I can.

I love them and I know they love me.

This is my family.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Holland Reign lives in Las Vegas, loving the area and everything there is to do. While she wishes for rain and colder weather, she makes do. Holland is a Military veteran and has two cats, and a dog. Newbie to the writing world, she writes to help with her anxiety. She loves bringing stories to life for others to read.

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