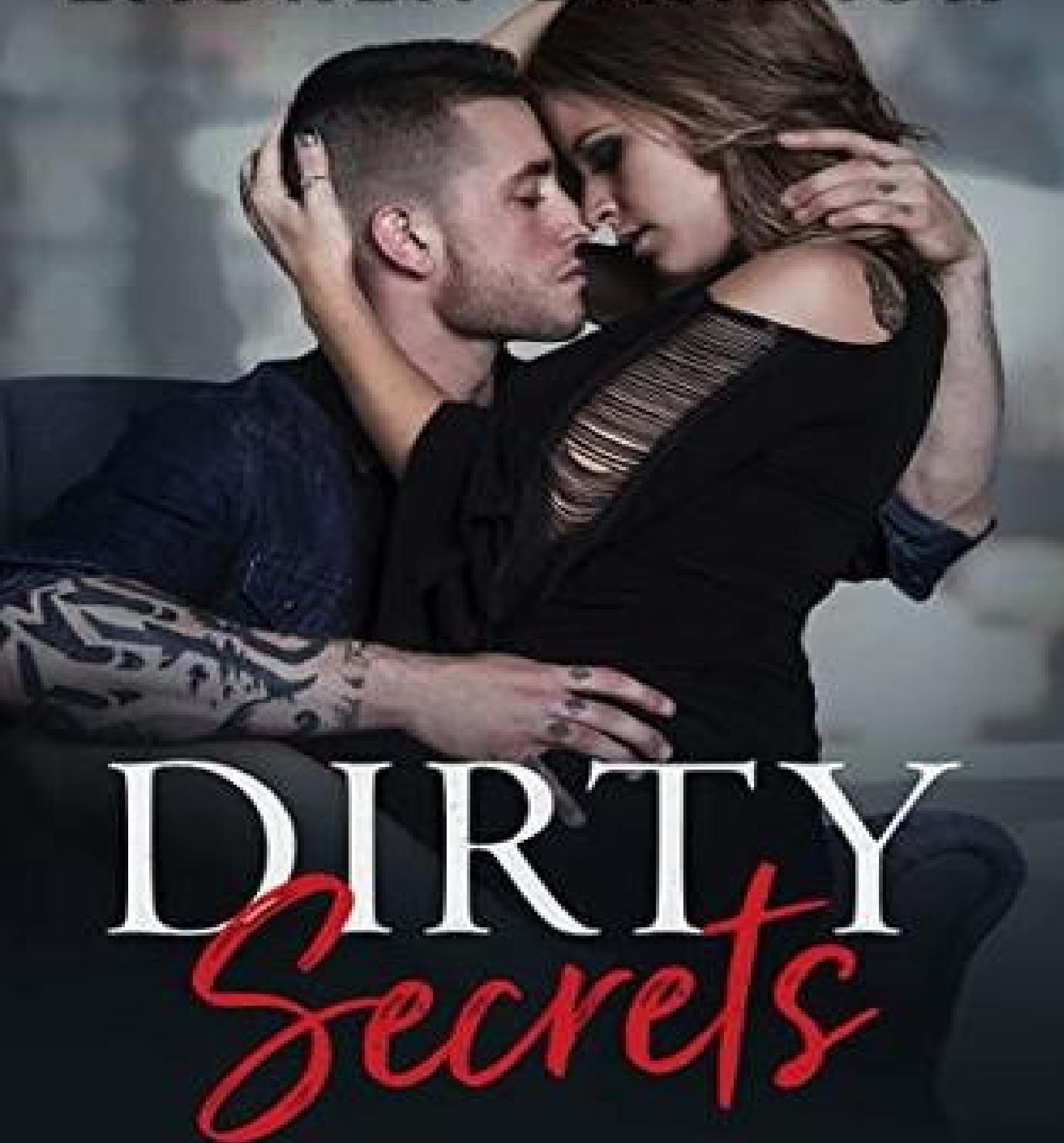


WALL STREET JOURNAL & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LAUREN LANDISH



DIRTY *Secrets*

SHE DOESN'T KNOW IT YET, BUT SHE'S MINE.

DIRTY SECRETS

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The following story contains mature themes, strong language and sexual situations. It is intended for mature readers.

All characters are 18+ years of age and all sexual acts are consensual.

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Prologue

Dominick

The shot rings out, and before the echo even dies, I'm running to her. I don't care about the rest. I just care about her. I will not allow harm to come to her.

I hear a high-pitched scream pierce the air. Someone's hurt, and I start uselessly praying to anything listening to a devil like me . . . *please, let her be okay*. I'll trade everything I have. The empire I've built can turn to dust if it'll ensure her safety.

By the time I reach the hallway, there's already a small group of my people standing in the doorway, mouths hanging open. Whatever they're looking at, it's the sort of shock that makes people forget themselves, the sort of thing only violence can bring. It's a look I'm more than familiar with.

I don't even have to order them to move. They just part like the red sea as I approach, barreling in to take stock of what's happened. There's blood spray on the walls and a dead guy in an expensive suit sitting in a chair, but he doesn't matter. I'll get the details on him later.

All that matters is Allie.

My heart starts beating again as I see her. She's cowering in the corner, her brown eyes wide with terror. The spatters of blood on her face, on her breasts, on her stomach make me hot with fury, but at least she doesn't seem to be wounded.

Still, the fact that someone has sullied her body, so sweet and tempting and *mine*, makes the insult of a hit in my territory that much worse. My men quickly follow my orders to handle the situation, but my attention never wavers from Allie. She's what counts, and I can't wait to get everyone else out of here.

Thankfully, my men are well-trained and professional. Once they scatter to carry out my commands, I gather her into my arms, ushering her into my office. She's so shocked I finally scoop her up to carry her up the stairs, nudging open the door with a toe before I set her down in a chair, cringing at the smear of blood bright against the white leather. It doesn't matter. I'm just

thankful it's not hers.

I fill a crystal glass with whiskey and force it into her shaky hand.

"Drink this."

She glances at it unseeingly and I can tell she's lost in her head, replaying what she just witnessed in her mind's eye on an endlessly-looping, surreal repeat. I remember when I felt like that. In my mind, events slowed and sped up at chaotic intervals, fresh details coming forward to be blurred into confusion by the next replay as something else takes precedence. It pains me to watch my Allie suffer through the same torment.

I lift the glass with a gentle touch, and as it reaches her lip, she drinks reflexively. Encouraged, I tilt the glass up further, and she downs the whole shot.

Setting the empty glass on the nearby table, I take a handkerchief out of my breast pocket. It's silk, but still not fine enough for a creature as beautiful and precious as Allie, but it's all I have.

I squat in front of her, my hand moving slowly so as not to startle her, but she still tries to intercept it.

"Let me," I order, not allowing disobedience. Her hands fall to her lap and her eyes flutter closed, flicking behind her smoky lids. She's made up for the stage, not like I prefer her, fresh-faced with only a hint of makeup to highlight her natural flawlessness.

As I clean her face, I'm struck by how easy it would be to finally give in. She's so close, mere inches from me, eyes closed, lips parted, her spicy floral perfume surrounding me though it's tinged with the metallic tang of blood. She's soft right now, all her defenses lowered in shock, and I could ease her anguish, give her something else to focus on . . . me.

I wipe a smudge from right beside her lip, close enough that our breaths mingle. My thumb trembles, and I take a deep breath.

"Allie," I rasp, my voice a rough rumble. Her eyes pop open, meeting mine, and I can sense that she feels the charge in the air too.

She bites her lip, white teeth bright against the deep red, and her breath catches.

"Dominick?" she whispers, the confusion apparent in her questioning tone.

The sound of my name on her lips, breathy and soft, is a memory I'll keep forever. A better one than the rest of the shit show tonight has been.

But it's enough to wake me from the hazy fog Allie puts me into. I know

better than this. I am better than this. I set the rules for a reason, and no leader can be effective if he holds himself to a different standard than he holds his subordinates.

With all of my mental strength, I slam the door shut in my mind, breaking the moment and cloaking myself in my usual stonewall defenses. I stand slowly and her brown eyes follow me. Any other time, this position, with her sitting and me looming over her, my cock at mouth level, begging for her kiss, would be my undoing.

But not now, not here, not like this. I'm a cold bastard, but I wouldn't dare take advantage of her.

"Let me take you home."

She nods, and with an almost childlike innocence, she lets me escort her downstairs to the changing area and then out to my car.

Arriving at her place, I tuck her into bed, wishing I could crawl into the mess of brightly colored blankets with her. I know I can't, but it would be heaven.

Her deep chocolate hair fans out on the pillow and her face relaxes as she looks up at me and smiles tentatively, an angel swaddled in cotton. She looks soft, her usual fierce shell chipped away by the night's events.

I'm sure the shower and hair brushing I forced upon her helped. She'd argued lightly that she just wanted to fall into bed, but I'd known she'd needed care after such a violent experience. And she'd sighed as she admitted I'd been right.

I didn't need to be too forceful. I just reminded her that sleeping with her stage makeup on would be a mess in the morning, and it did the trick. She even gave me a heartfelt smile when she came out in a towel and saw that I'd laid out a pair of pajamas for her.

I pause at the door as she falls asleep, watching the even way her chest rises and falls with each breath. She'd understandably asked me to leave the hall light on, and now the dim light illuminating her lets me see every expression on her face as she fades deeper into slumber.

I should go, leave her to rest. But there's no damn way I'm leaving her.

Instead, I sink into the chair in the corner of the room, watching her, protecting her, possessing her, even if she doesn't know it.

Even if my own morals won't allow it, that's what I'm going to do. I've fought myself to stay away from her, but tonight, things changed.

I could've lost her, and that is one thing I won't allow.

I'll always keep her safe, even if it's from me.

Chapter 1

Allie

“A nd *grand jeté* . . . soft landing, Brynn . . . and *plié* with your bow. Beautiful!” I tell my student, offering a light applause as the soft classical music ends. “You’re getting much better. Your leap must be at least two inches higher than last month.”

Brynn, a young girl just out of junior high who decided to ask her parents for ballet lessons for her birthday, beams at me. It’s a late start for a ballerina, but she’s making leaps and bounds of progress to catch up with her peers because of the amount of work and time she puts forth.

“Really? That’s awesome! Thanks, Miss Allie!”

She does a little *pas-de-chat* step of happiness over to her bag, tossing it over her shoulder. “When I get the part as the Sugar Plum Fairy, you’ll have to come watch me!”

I smile back, remembering when I used to think being the Sugar Plum Fairy was the best thing in the world too. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

Brynn leaves the studio in a whirlwind of energy that is wasted on the young. I don’t envy her youth, the fourteen-year-old ballerina just starting her career and still living on hopes and dreams, because I was once that girl and tasted firsthand how sour those dreams could turn.

Once, I was the little girl who dreamed of wearing the white tutu and prancing onstage. A couple of injuries and a body that turned into something that isn’t quite suited for ballet dancing . . . and now I’m something different. Older, jaded, maybe even a bit cynical. At least where dance is concerned.

At twenty-six, I’m virtually ancient in the ballet world. Not that it matters, considering I left any chance at a professional career behind at barely twenty-one when I injured my ankle, tearing two ligaments.

Nine months of rehab, and it’s fine for daily life and even for dance, but not for the daily grind of being a principal dancer *en pointe* in any company worth the work.

It put me in a pretty dark place for awhile, and I did some things I’m not proud of. I don’t regret them. I have some good relationships out of them,

friendships, and I've made damn good money . . . but none of it's going on my resumé anytime soon.

And that's why I live for teaching the next generation of dancers, wanting to ensure that they have long and healthy careers by taking care of themselves better than I ever did.

The thought of how poorly I treated my body for years makes my stomach turn. I force it all to settle with a deep breath that I hold for a five-count before letting it out slowly, counting the good things I have in my life as I do so. I repeat the process twice more, just as I learned, counting out the beat to maximize my lung capacity before I feel re-centered.

I head to the lobby to see Eileen on the phone. She's one of the dance moms, but thankfully, not like the drama-mamas on television. She just works at the studio, answering phones and doing paperwork to help offset the cost of her daughter Sydney's lessons.

I admire that about her. Actually, there's a lot to admire about Eileen in general. She's a single mom doing whatever it takes to support her child, and though she's not a dancer herself, she doesn't harbor any desire to live vicariously through Sydney's journey. She kind of reminds me of my own mother, though my parents are still happily married and act more like newlyweds than a couple going on thirty years of wedded work. That's what my mom calls it, 'wedded work,' and she maintains that people who call it 'wedded bliss' are just lying to make it seem easy.

Eileen told me once that she'd put in all kinds of work to make her marriage last, but it'd been one-sided then, and now she basically parents alone. I hate that for her, but Sydney is a happy kid, so Eileen must be doing something right.

"Hey, Ei—" I start, but she holds up one finger, telling me to wait a second.

I stand for approximately two seconds before lifting my right leg up to the counter and stretching. It's a dancer thing. Any free moment is spent stretching, bending, lifting, tilting, always working somehow.

Even if I'm in a position where I can't physically move, my brain is constantly dancing, practicing choreography or considering new combinations. It makes the line at Starbucks seem to move much faster.

I've barely begun when Eileen hangs up and squeals, "Are you ready for tonight?"

"You mean they didn't cancel? I swore they would." I feign shock,

knowing that my private class tonight definitely wouldn't cancel, considering they paid extra to rent the studio for this lesson. And considering just how much extra, it'd take an emergency for them to break the deal.

"Shut up, you know the ladies are excited. This is a good thing, girl."

She's right and I know it. I'm just nervous, which seems silly considering how many times I've performed on stage and how many classes I've taught.

But this class is different. This class isn't people of all walks of life, toddlers to adults, wanting to add a bit of ballet to their life.

No, this class is a bachelorette party where I'm teaching the bride and her bridesmaids a little routine to use . . . in private.

I'd automatically refused when Donna, the studio owner, had asked me to teach this class. I've always kept the other side of my dance life separate from the studio. It's like I'm two women, two dancers.

But when Donna promised it'd be just the one time and told me she'd share the rental fee with me fifty-fifty, I'd reconsidered. The money is . . . good.

And now, Stripper 101, as I've been jokingly calling it, is almost in session. Eileen, of course, doesn't understand.

"I hear you, Eileen," I reply, sighing. "I just thought that I'd left the sequins and body glitter at the other place. But it's following me."

I glance over my shoulder like there's somebody there, and she laughs as I intended.

"You act like it's a bad thing. You can be Ballerina Barbie and Stripper Suzy at the same damn time. There's no shame in dancing, however and wherever you do it, if you enjoy it and it supports you."

I smile, glad for her lack of judgment. I can't say that I would've ever dreamed I'd be making a living as a stripper, but alas, here I am.

At least I'm fortunate enough that Petals from Heaven, the club where I work, is top quality, VIP only. I'm one of their star performers, able to set my own hours and prices.

It's a far cry from the ballerina I thought I'd be, but at least now, I get to live both sides of the coin, stripper and ballerina. And still pay my bills.

"I still can't believe you don't care about that," I tell Eileen. "I honestly figured that if the dance moms here found out, they'd yank their kids out of my classes faster than you can say 'hell to the no.' "

Eileen's smile is sad but at the same time mischievous. "Honestly, there are some moms who would, so we just don't tell them. All I care about is

your ability to teach the kids proper technique, something you are excellent with. You connect with the kids and never, ever make them feel like they're wasting their time or not doing fantastically."

"I love their faces and their hard work," I admit. "Who cares if they make it pro or not?"

Eileen grins. "Exactly. And there are a handful of us who know your gig. We're just waiting for the stars and babysitters to align so that we can come crash one of your performances en masse. Girl, I plan on making your night by making it rain." She giggles, covering her mouth with her hand. "I've always wanted to say that."

I laugh. Eileen's ridiculous sometimes. "That sounds awkward as hell, but awesome. I'd put an extra spin in my pole routine just for you." I bat my lashes at her and we both laugh again. "Anyway, guess I'd better get ready for tonight."

I head to the back studio to set up. Encore Studio is decent-sized, with three rehearsal rooms lined up along the left side of the building with the lobby and other facilities arranged on the right.

Normally, I like snagging Studio One because it's in the front with full glass windows, so I feel like we're performing every time we hold class there.

But for Stripper 101, I'm choosing Three, all the way in the back. It's almost the same size, but with no windows, it feels cozier. My choreography for this group is a bit risqué, including some good floor work, and I'm betting the ladies will prefer the privacy over flashing their business to everyone on the sidewalk.

I set up the music, dipping back into the nineties and naughty eighties for that slow, sexy RnB that straddles the line between sexy and slutty. Even I get the warm tingles when Janet Jackson sings *Anytime, Anyplace*, and I've danced to it before.

That done, I set up the snack table with the sandwiches and cupcakes the maid of honor dropped off earlier. I grin at the little plastic dicks stuck in the pink frosting on top of the cupcakes, thinking that at least there's diversity in the coloring. Although if any of the ladies does find that her man has a naturally blue dick, she should take him to a hospital.

Eileen set up a borrowed frozen margarita machine earlier, so it looks like everything's ready. I change out of my pink leotard and into black booty shorts and a loose tank top with a light sports bra. I could be going to yoga or

the gym, but nope . . . Stripper 101 class is in session.

“Okay, ladies. All right, remember, this isn’t about the guy. Trust me, most men are easy. If you just show up and show some interest, he’s gonna be in there like a rocket. Stripping is about the slow seduction, letting the anticipation build and creating tension. You’re dancing for your partner—”

The blonde to my left interrupts me, squealing out, “Jason!”

The bride blushes but finds her balls and says decisively, “Hell, yeah, I’m dancing for Jason.”

I smile at her confidence, something the shy brunette had been lacking an hour ago. She’s beautiful, and Jason’s a lucky guy . . . who’s going to get his world rocked after this session.

“Yes, definitely dance for Jason,” I say, giving her a wink, “but also for yourself. Find your own strength and sexiness in the moves and seduce yourself just as much as your partner. They’ll respond to seeing your arousal more than if you’re focusing on choreography or doing something ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. Just live in the moment and enjoy.”

Pep talk complete, I hit *Play* on the stereo and watch as the group of twenty-something, giggly girls turn into sexy women right before my eyes. Softly, I coach them.

“Long lines. Point your toes. Use your eyes to direct his gaze . . . that’s it, Sarah.”

The music gets bass-heavy, the lyrics more pointed, and every woman in here is feeling like she ‘Earned It’ as they work the floor, toss their hair, and let their hands trace their curves as their hips sway.

“Great job, ladies. Jason is one lucky man, Sarah.”

She grins and the girls all high-five before grabbing drinks and sandwiches. Lesson’s over. I don’t mind if they toss back the tequila with abandon now. I let the music play, fiddling with the stereo so as not to intrude on their after-party.

I’m about to pull a fade and let them have their time when the maid of honor comes over.

“Hey, Allie? Do you think you could show us how it’s *really* done? I mean, I feel like I’m definitely better at this than I was an hour ago, but maybe a bit of inspiration would help? It’s not like I’m ever going to be dancer, but I’d like to seem . . . comparable?”

She says the word questioningly, like she’s not sure if that’s what she means, but I get it. Some women freak about their guys going to strip clubs,

like the stripper has something they don't, and God knows, society encourages women to compare themselves enough.

"First," I tell her, "don't compare yourself to anyone else. You do you, and you'll be just fine. But if you want to see, I guess I can do a demonstration for you guys."

She nods, and I realize that the whole group was waiting to see if I'd agree. I really don't mind. I perform all the time and enjoy it. It's like my therapy, allowing me to live in the moment, creating a connection that threads from the music through my body to the audience.

It's a powerful rush, whether I'm dancing ballet or seduction or even working the pole. There's no pole here tonight, but that's okay too.

The women all crowd over, sitting on the floor and leaning back against the mirror with cupcakes in hand. I click into character, hitting *Play* on the stereo and striding to the middle of the floor as Imagine Dragons fills the room. It's not a routine I normally do, but I love it nonetheless.

Before my first hair flip, they're caught in my trap, cupcakes forgotten and mouths hanging open as I sway my hips, dropping to the floor in a slow plié and letting my knees splay wide. I stretch one leg out, letting my fingertips dance from my ankle to my hip before turning to plant my hands, lifting my hips in a sexier version of downward facing dog.

I dance and move, tease and tantalize until the final notes of the song ring out, and I let my eyes drop for a beat before looking up through my lashes at Sarah, making the bride feel extra-special as a way of saying thank you.

The women all clap, one hand popping against their other wrist so they don't drop their dick cakes.

"Wow," the maid of honor says. "I want to do *that*!"

I smile at the praise, but more importantly, seeing these women empowered and happy in their own sexiness and cheering on their fellow females is pretty amazing. It gets me through the cleanup, which actually isn't so bad as the designated driver makes sure all the garbage is hauled out.

I lock up the studio after the bachelorette party leaves, loving that not only did I make half the rental fee, but the maid of honor tipped me rather generously too.

It nearly made up for my missing one of my usual performances at Petals tonight. A piece of me wishes I could just go home, put on sweats, and curl up on the couch, but I promised Dominick, my boss at Petals, that I'd be in for my late-night performance. He'd been understanding about the missed

time, and he probably would've given me the night off if I'd asked, but I need the money, so I can't skip the whole night even if I wanted to.

As I walk to my car, I scan the deserted lot. There are security lights so it's not dark, but the emptiness makes me feel vulnerable. I swear I can feel eyes watching me, following my every movement.

On stage, that's what I want. Here, alone in the parking lot, it feels spooky. It's been that way since that night, even if I've been able to get past most of it.

Still, I glance under my car and in the backseat, just like those Facebook warnings tell you to, and hop in, immediately locking the doors.

I pull out of the lot, laughing at myself a bit. I'd planned to stop for a Monster Zero on my way to the club, but with the way my heart is racing, I think I'll skip it and use the adrenaline pumping through my body to perk me up after the long day for my performance tonight.

Chapter 2

Dominick

I watch her from my vantage point across the parking lot. Allie doesn't know it, but as soon as she started teaching classes at Encore Studio, I rented a second-floor apartment in the strip mall.

In theory, it could be a safe house. In reality, I know what it is. It's my blind, though I'm not hunting her, merely watching her to keep her safe. Sometimes, I come here to keep an eye on her myself. Other times, I delegate the task to one of my men, but tonight, I'd wanted to be here to make sure the bachelorette party hadn't gone astray. Judging by the smiles on everyone's faces when they left, it'd been fine.

She hurries to her car, looking around as though she can feel the weight of my gaze upon her. Perhaps she can.

The thought gives me pleasure.

I stand in the darkness, knowing my black suit and dark hair hide every trace of me through the tinted glass. I wait until she pulls away before heading to my own car.

I don't need the GPS tracker I had installed on her car to tell me where she's going, but I turn the app on anyway, letting the glowing green dot of her car soothe me as I start the car. It's not my usual Mercedes, but rather a nondescript black Lexus sedan, like so many others on the road in East Robinsville.

At least, until I touch the accelerator and the work that my boys at the chop shop did on it comes to life and I quickly leap out of the parking lot.

I easily catch up to her, maintaining a safe distance behind her so she doesn't notice me, and follow her straight to Petals from Heaven. I'm a little surprised. The other times I've guarded her like this, she usually stops for a quick energy drink and sometimes a bite to eat.

Tonight, though, I phone in to Logan, who's working the back door, and he wisely answers my call on the first ring.

"She's coming to the back parking lot. Escort her in," I tell him.

I pull over to the curb, my lights already turned off so that I blend into the

night. I want to keep her safe, not creep her out. I know I'm walking that line. Shit, I'm probably over it, but I also know how to make sure she doesn't ever have to worry about her safety again.

Before she even turns her car off, Logan is at her door, his muscular frame properly contained within his suit, just like I insist. I can read his lips, greeting her politely and offering to accompany her inside to safety without a smile but also not hard. It's why I trust Logan to do this job more than the others. He walks that line perfectly.

I see the flash of lights as she locks her car before tossing her keys into her bag. Logan scans the lot, keeping his eyes open for any threats and off Allie.

Smart man.

He sees my car and gives the slightest lift of his chin. It's why he works for me. He's smart enough to know better than to touch what's mine but also skilled enough to protect it.

I wait until they're both inside and then move the Lexus to the front of the building, parking it in the far corner of the lot next door. I own it too, so no one will question the lengthy stay.

In my office, I check the crowd through the one-way glass that overlooks the floor. I have security monitors, of course, new ones that cover every inch of the club to make sure *nothing* ever happens again like what happened before.

But still, it's sometimes better to look out over the club this way. It gives me a better feeling for the atmosphere. I know that nothing is amiss, or else one of the security team would have alerted me, but I like to check for myself as well.

A man who depends solely on others is a man who is neither independent nor dependable.

Everything seems to be in order tonight though. There's a group of businessmen, more interested in their wheeling and dealing than the show, a bachelor party by the stage, a few couples, and multiple tables of single guys, both alone and in small groups.

Everyone is being respectful and behaving themselves, not that I'd have it any other way in my club. Some places may get rowdy, but not Petals. I won't allow it, and anyone who knows a damn thing about me wouldn't dare. I don't just run Petals with an iron fist. I run the whole damn city, though I prefer to keep that little tidbit quiet.

Let the local media think it's someone else. I don't need the adulation. I just want the power. Those who need to know, do, and those who don't should hope they never need to meet me or it's a sure sign their life insurance is about to come due.

The knock on the door is expected since I saw Logan climbing the stairs on the security monitor.

"Enter," I say simply.

Logan comes in, his bald head freshly shaved, his coat and slacks impeccable, and his respect obvious in his stance, feet apart and hands clutched behind him.

If I hadn't investigated him thoroughly myself, I'd think him a military man. But Logan's background isn't military. No, he grew up in strict fighting gyms, respect beaten into him by trainers who pushed him to be better with every landed punch and kick.

He's my best fighter, though I rarely need him to use his considerable skills. Why use a precision scalpel when a dirty axe does just as effective of a job? Logan seems to appreciate my respect for his abilities too, especially when he has a fight coming up and needs to stay fresh.

I like that about him too.

He has dreams and plans of his own and isn't dependent on me for some lifelong goal to be a made man in my crew. I don't play by the old-school rules like that anyway, though there are a few of my dad's old company men still running crews.

No, I prefer for everyone to know that today could be their last day and act accordingly, myself included. This isn't the old days. There are no gimmes, no free passes, nothing deserved. Only earned.

Logan waits for my eyes to land on him, the permission to speak silently given.

"Sir, the evening has been as expected. House's averaged eighty percent full, bar and waitresses running acceptable delivery times, and the second round of performances is well underway. Allie is in back, getting dressed, and she said she'd be ready for her stage time at midnight. Wilson is on the front door, Thomas on the private rooms, and Gavin and I are floating the crowd."

He pauses, knowing I'll double-check his report on the security monitor.

"Good. Anything else?"

Logan nods. "Pete came in early. Said to tell you that he knew your

meeting wasn't until later, but he wanted to enjoy the evening before, if that was okay. He's ready whenever you are."

I turn back to the window, eyes searching, and then I see him sitting alone at a corner table, his back to the wall ensuring him a full view of the main floor. Pete is one of my captains, a holdover from my dad's days, though Pete was just a soldier then.

He's in his early sixties now, well past his prime, but he can still admire the view, he says. He runs the crew on the South Side, making sure product moves smoothly, the violence stays at a minimum, and the streets are safe for families. When he retires in a few years, it'll be tough to replace him.

"Very well. Send him a couple of fingers of Yamazaki in appreciation for his patience. Tell him I'll see him at one as arranged."

In the reflection of the glass, I see Logan dip his chin and leave, the door shutting softly behind him. Moments later, Sarah delivers a glass of the amber liquid to Pete. He holds it up aloft, toasting his thanks to the black windows he can see from his side, trusting that I'm watching.

But as the bass I know all too well begins, my eyes float to the stage.

At the press of a button, the speakers come to life, filling my office with the music. I sit in my desk chair, the black leather soft beneath me as I spin to watch the show.

She may be dancing for the fuckers down there on the floor, the ones laying twenties on the stage to tempt her into coming closer, but as her eyes glance up to the window where I'm sitting, I know who this show is *really* for.

She can't see me, but she's performing for me. There's a connection between us. It might be unspoken, but it's there, and in the months since I carried her away from the bloody shooting, it hasn't lessened. Even though we haven't acted on it . . . it's there.

I watch as she moves her lithe body from the back of the stage to the front, making eyes at every man along the rail.

One man has a stack of green sitting in front of him, and though I can't tell the denomination from here, it must be high-value because Allie chooses him as her mark. She drops down into a squat, her skirted ass resting on her heels and her knees spread wide.

I growl, knowing that even though her skirt hangs between her legs, the fucker is too damn close to her pussy. She runs a black fingertip along the jeweled strap of her tiny corset bra, leaning close as she pulls it out slightly.

The man takes the hint and slips a bill between her skin and the strap, thankfully for him, not touching her.

Watching her this way is somehow the sweetest torture, knowing that she enjoys being onstage and is getting what she needs, both personally and financially, but wanting to kill every asshole who so much as glances at her.

The demon on my shoulder reminds me that I like knowing that though they may watch, not a single one of them can lay a hand on her. No one ever does . . . because she's mine. Whether she acknowledges it or not doesn't change the fact that everyone else knows.

Allie slowly pulls her knees closed, waiting for the man to look up and meet her eyes. With a smile that could make an angel have lustful thoughts, she hair-flips around and drops to her hands and knees, her ass pressed back toward the rail. She glances over her shoulder, her eyes full of false heat, and pulls at her hip.

Forty dollars later, or hell, maybe it's two hundred, she crawls away, making sure her hips swing right and left with every inch closer to the pole she gets.

She's like a panther, all dark hair and honey skin in the warm light. She presses her shoulder to the pole, letting her head hang down, and with a kick, she's suddenly in a handstand, her ankles wrapped around the brass so quickly it seems like she floated there.

There's a collective gasp in the audience, and then Allie lets one ankle free, her leg stretching long before her foot comes to rest on the floor. With one leg on the pole and one on the floor, framed by her hands, she holds the splits position before she slowly, and with enviable control, lowers her leg from the pole to stand tall, as if what she just did was normal. She plays with the tie of her skirt, teasing it loose and then letting it drop to the stage at her feet.

Her costume tonight is one of my favorites, the thong framed in innocent pink satin even as the black see-through lace panel and jewels show her other side, a perfect blend of nice and naughty. The pink tone even gives me hints of the sweet ballerina inside her.

She stands proudly, letting everyone look their fill, though I suspect my eyes would never tire of her beauty, before beginning her show in earnest. It's worthy of the fucking Cirque de Soleil, trick after trick along the pole, spinning and climbing before inverting and dropping.

It's a show never seen in Petals before Allie arrived. She is somehow part

gymnast, part dancer, and part goddess, elegance and grace woven through every athletic move as she seduces the audience.

And me.

Though she seduced me a long time ago, I find myself entranced once again by the siren song her body is singing to mine. Toward the end of her routine, she leans back against the pole, her knees bent in a sexy version of a plie with her legs spread wide.

Her hands trace her body, her breasts heaving in the corset cups, a sweet smile on her face. Her eyes look up, not at the crowd clapping and waving bills, but at the blacked-out windows to my office. I know she can't see me, but she must know that I'm watching her, my cock rock hard in my slacks and demanding attention.

I consider palming myself, knowing it'd only take a stroke or two before I'd cum all over my hand, likely saying her name as I did so, but I force myself to refrain.

I need to be clear-headed for the meeting with Pete, not in a post-orgasmic haze.

As Allie leaves the stage, I radio down to Logan.

"Go ahead and send Pete up."

Only a minute later, Pete sits across from me, my brain zeroing in on business, all thoughts of pleasure and Allie shutting off and getting locked down behind a wall. My cock's even mostly deflated, although it's not too happy about that particular situation.

My face is neutral as I greet him. "Pete. Good to see you."

He nods casually, well aware that his position and age do not get him any special privileges or allowances in my presence, though they may grant him some on his block.

"Dominick. Thank you for seeing me, and thank you for the drink. Truly a delicious treat. How'd you know I like Japanese whisky?"

I merely nod, already done with pleasantries and ready to get to the meat of the meeting.

Sensing this, Pete clears his throat and speaks again. "I've got a couple of new guys in my area I thought you'd want to know about."

"Soldiers?" I question. I don't like fresh heat in my town without preclearing it.

"Yes, but not in the way you mean," Pete says, choosing each word carefully. "Not Mob and not my guys. They're actual military, from what I

can tell, out of uniform now, but they ride with a group out of Johnstown. The bikes are what caught my attention. Big, loud motherfuckers, running up and down my streets.”

I choose not to correct his wording, both of us knowing that *all* the streets of this city are mine, not Pete’s, even if he watches over a section for me. And perhaps a taste of ownership helps him take pride in his work, even if it’s only an image of possession.

He shakes his head in annoyance and continues. “The two guys in my block are Robert Zallow and Anthony Chambers. One’s a former Lieutenant, the other a Staff Sergeant, and the group they’re riding with call themselves the Eagle Raiders. Not exactly a one-percenter group, but they get into enough shit that I wanted to mention it. Especially since these two fuckers are the first ones to set up home base in my area. I want to make sure they’re not trying to expand territory, especially not into mine. I’m doing some looking, and I’ll send you what I have, but it’s not much. I figured you’d want to dig a bit deeper than I can, see what turns up. Hell, they might be useful, one way or another.”

I nod, mentally recording the names and considering what I know about the local MC groups. East Robinsville is unclaimed by any biker group because it’s claimed by me, but it’s a prime thoroughfare to get from the docks to upstate and beyond. If the Eagle Raiders are trying to start a highway run through my city without seeking permission or paying their tolls, they’ve got another thing coming.

I won’t allow it and would kill to prevent it . . . if I have to.

A knock on the door interrupts my dark thoughts.

“Enter,” I say.

Logan’s head pops around the door, not even fully entering. “Pardon me, sir. Just informing you of departure. Proceeding as scheduled.”

I nod, and Logan closes the door behind him. I don’t bother glancing at the monitors, knowing that he’s got the situation handled. The situation being that Allie is done for the night and leaving the club. She’s the headliner, and after that dance, she doesn’t need to work again, especially after the long day she’s had.

Either way, Gavin will follow standard operations and escort her to her car like he will every dancer when they leave tonight. Allie is parked in the back lot, where Logan will be waiting to follow her home and invisibly guard her until my arrival.

Pete grins as the door closes, unaware of the message that was sent.

“Your guys always tell you when they’re headed home for the night? He tell you when he gets his dick wet too?”

He laughs, the lines at the corners of his eyes crinkling at his own joke, but I don’t laugh because it isn’t funny.

“He does whatever I tell him to. Simple as that, same as you,” I say, reminding him that though he may be a high-ranking captain with a territory of his own to maintain, he’s no better than any other man. “Now, give me the rest of your news.”

It’s not until hours later that I finally get to dismiss Logan and settle into my barebones apartment.

I neatly hang my jacket up in the front hall, untuck my shirt, and roll up my sleeves, sitting down with a nightcap of whisky.

I turn on the television, but it’s not some late-night rerun that grabs my attention. No, it’s the night-vision camera feed hidden in Allie’s bedroom. She may be only one floor away from this secret apartment, but I’d needed more. More insight, more closeness, more of *her* to feed my obsession.

I know on some level it’s wrong, intrusive, and a violation of her trust. At first, it had truly been for her safety. The threat back then was significant, and it was only with a bit of luck and the appearance of an unexpected ally that she never found out just how dangerous it was.

But she’s no longer in danger. I dealt with the fallout from the shooting at Petals months ago. It was only recently that I’ve been forced to admit to myself that my surveillance wasn’t for her.

It’s always been for me.

Chapter 3

Allie

“You want me to do *what?*” I screech in surprise, my eyes wide and my mouth hanging open.

Donna just smiles back, like she didn’t just set my world atilt. “Look, I didn’t know who she was either, but the publicity from your class is like a tidal wave that won’t be stopped. You’re seriously blowing up on Instagram and Facebook, and the studio’s getting *lots* of attention.”

I click my mouth closed and swallow.

When Eileen had said Donna wanted to talk to me today, it’d felt a little like getting called to the principal’s office and was sure I was going to get in trouble. I figured some parent had found out about the private class and riled everyone up. By the time I knocked on Donna’s door, I visualized parents pulling their kids from my classes in a mass-exodus of soccer mom hair flips and snarky comments. Maybe even a few *I’mma pray for yous* thrown in too.

What I didn’t expect was . . . whatever this is. Donna sits before me in her small but tidy office, the walls covered top to bottom with pictures of her with students from the last thirty years. She still looks like a regal ballerina, thin and fit from dancing, with a harshly crisp traditional bun that’s softened by the lines on her face that show how often she smiles.

“What do you mean? What attention?” I ask, scared of the answer. I can just see it now. *Tonight on Action News at Six, Dance Studio or Strip Club?*

“Allie?”

I blink, realizing Donna’s talking. “Sorry, again?”

“It seems the maid of honor for that party—”

“Jenny. The maid of honor’s name was Jenny.”

Donna nods, snickering. “Yeah, do you know who Jenny Wartham is?”

I shake my head, utterly confused. “The maid of honor?”

Donna sighs, as if she’d hoped I knew. Sorry, Donna, I’m sort of too busy to keep up with celebrities outside of mainline sports and the dance world.

“Well, yeah. But she’s also a bit of an internet celebrity, apparently. Now, I didn’t know that when I booked the class. But she wrote this whole long

Instagram post about your class and the great time they had.”

My eyes shoot wide open in surprise. “She did?”

“Yeah, she didn’t mention you by name, but she mentioned the studio and the amazing brunette who had her, and I quote, ‘feeling like a Sex Kitten Goddess.’ There were some pictures of cats and some various meows, which seemed crazy and weird to me, but the gist was that it was a raving review. And when I came in on Monday, my inbox was flooded, and Eileen has been answering calls requesting private classes and asking if we hold public classes too.”

My breath escapes my chest in a whooshing sound as I slump, something I never do, but I’m so shocked that I can’t even hold myself up for a moment.

“What? I thought it was just a one-time thing?” I say, though I’ll admit to myself that now that I’ve done one, having another class would be fun. “I mean, Donna, I don’t want to ruin the studio’s rep as a ballet school because someone wants to do stripper-robics.”

Donna locks her eyes on me, scoffing. “Not to put too fine a point on it, but this school is mine and I’ll do what I want with it. I’m smart enough to know that people come here for ballet because of my reputation as a dancer and as a teacher. But as a businesswoman, I know how to use my resources, work the strengths, and play away from the weakness. And you are a strength, to me and to this studio. Allie, if you’re up to it, I think it’s time for your encore, my dear.”

I nod like a bobblehead, encouraged. “Absolutely, I’m up to it. What are you thinking? Just private classes, or maybe do a public special event every once in a while? I’m open to whatever you think.”

Donna claps in delight then points at me, grinning. “Good. Remember you said that, though, because I’m going to hold you to it.”

I sit up straight again, feeling like this is Donna’s big solo moment, what she was building up to for the whole rest of the conversation.

“All right, hit me. What are you thinking?”

“Well, like I said before, I want you to teach not just a class, but classes. I’ve been doing quite a bit of research and watched some rather steamy performances too. Everything from burlesque to striptease to pole fitness. And whew, let me tell you, I thought I’d seen some things, but no. Now, I’ve seen things.”

She laughs, and I blush, thinking she’d probably faint at the tricks I pull on the pole at Petals. Thankfully, Donna has known about my other job since

she hired me to teach a couple of adult beginner ballet classes, and she's okay with it. More than okay, considering she's given me several additional classes to teach. And she is the one who asked me to do the bachelorette party dance class in the first place.

She continues, "I think we've been given a golden opportunity here. It's no secret that profit margins for dance studios are low, but I think this is an untapped niche in East Robinsville. And to be honest, your name brings a certain clout with it."

Donna looks at me knowingly, and I wonder if maybe she has seen my performances before, though I'm careful to never post anything online. And recording is strictly forbidden at Petals. It's a rule heavily enforced by Dominick, so I'm almost 100 percent sure nobody would risk his wrath for a blurry, dark video. I don't even dance under the same name. At Petals, I'm Allie Angel, but here, I'm Allison Bancroft, and only my child students call me Allie.

"I guess."

Donna chuckles, reassuring me. "I want to begin offering classes a few days a week. Whatever you want to call it and whatever you want to do. We'd work the schedule around our current class offerings, and these would be yours, so we'd split the class fees fifty-fifty. The private classes . . . I doubled the charge for those, and nobody blinked an eye."

I stammer, shocked. "Doubled?"

Donna's smile is vibrant, infectious. "Yes, ma'am, doubled them and booked six already over the next three months alone, and we'd split those fifty-fifty like the bachelorette one. You with me so far?"

Holy shit. "Yeah, I'm with you. I'm so with you."

"Good, here's where the real fun starts. I want you to rent studio three from me, install some poles, and offer pole fitness classes. In return, I get the rent, low, of course, and ten percent of the class fees. You'd keep ninety percent. We'd be more like business partners."

Donna sits back in her chair, an expectant look on her face.

I'm stunned, shocked by everything she's saying. The opportunity, the possibilities astound me. It's definitely not what I ever saw myself doing, but honestly, I had to let go of that dream a long time ago.

Now I have the chance to not just instill a love of ballet in upcoming stars, but maybe help everyday women feel a little extra special too. It's heady. I mean, I can actually make a difference in the world, as small as it

might be.

“Wow, that’s a lot to take in. I’m definitely in for the private classes and a couple of weekly public ones too, as long as that’s in addition to the ballet classes currently on my schedule.”

Donna nods. “Of course. The company performance wouldn’t be the same without you, and the kids respond well to your teaching.”

I bite my lip, thinking quickly. “As for the pole classes, I’m definitely interested, but I’ll need to do some research to see what the investment costs would be. Money’s always an issue, and it sounds like this could be a big undertaking. But my answer’s yes, if you’ll let me do some homework.”

Donna claps again, happy. “Whatever you need, but I’ll say that we need to strike while the iron is hot. Let’s get this rolling as fast as possible. Even if it’s pole-less.”

She offers me her hand, and I reach across the desk and shake it, the reality suddenly hitting me.

I can do this.

I *am* doing this.

I spend the rest of the day clicking around online, doing as much research as I can, from vendors to construction. I fall down the rabbit hole of watching videos of classes other studios offer to see what the competition is like too, but Donna’s right.

There’s nothing like what we’re talking about doing within a hundred miles of East Robinsville. It’s an untapped market, and we can be first to fill that need, even if it’s a need people don’t know exists . . . yet.

Hours later, I have what I think is a pretty good grip on what it’d cost to get started on paper. But it’s admittedly a bit daunting and makes me question myself. I need backup. I move my laptop to the coffee table and flop onto the couch as I dial the one person who can talk me through this, my friend Maggie. She doesn’t even answer with a hello but instead launches in full-on.

“Hey, girl! Long time no talk! What’s up?”

That’s Mags. Got me smiling before I even said a word. “Hey, Maggie. I know. It’s been what, two weeks since we talked? I miss your face!”

That’s not really that long, especially in the busy world she lives in these days, but I have missed her.

“Miss you too. But I’ve been out on assignment, and my new contract starts in two days. I’m just trying to decompress before I’m gone again.”

“Wow, sounds intense.”

That’s putting it mildly, to say the least. Maggie works as a sort of ‘researcher’ for the FBI. Considering her past as an investigative journalist, she’s good at her job. She’s kind of the last person you’d suspect because she comes off as sweet and innocent, but beneath the surface lurks a whip-smart brain.

And her brain is what I need. I give her the short version of everything that’s happened and what Donna proposed. Maggie hums in all the right places, tells me she’s pulling up Jenny Wartham’s Instagram, oohing and ahhing over the racy sections.

“Okay, this all sounds great, and your business plans seem sound, especially if you have the money. Invest in yourself, Allie.”

I hum, waffling even though I know what I want to do. I’m just not sure it’s the smart thing to do, especially when I have other debts that should probably take priority to my chasing a dream I never knew I had. But maybe this dream is the thing that could finally pay off those debts completely.

“You think so?”

She tsks through the line, as if I’m a naughty student. “You said the class went well, the women obviously felt like it did, and you made bank. You can duplicate that experience with no problem, and it sounds like people want you to. Expanding into pole classes sounds solid too, because Lord knows, you’ve got crazy skills on the pole. And it’s a way for you to share that without . . .”

She pauses, and I know what she’s going to say, so I finish the sentence for her. “Without getting naked on stage.” I sigh, knowing she’s right.

I certainly never thought I’d be a stripper, and while I don’t get naked, only stripping down to a G-string and tiny bra tops, there’s definitely something naughty about it.

Of course, I’ll admit to myself that the little bit of exhibitionist in my makeup that makes me a performer is pretty okay with the taboo of stripping. It’s different from ballet, of course, but I do enjoy it. Strutting the stage makes me feel powerful, in command of everyone in the room. Most people think it’s about getting the audience’s attention, but really, it’s about making them hungry for my attention.

It’s very much a symbiotic energy exchange and a total rush.

“You know I’m not judging you, Allie. You’re a beautiful dancer, wherever you want to perform. I just have one question. Did you have fun

teaching the class?”

I consider her question because it feels pivotal, maybe the most important part of our conversation.

“Absolutely. I got to witness that switch moment for those women, when they go from an everyday ‘good girl’ who does what’s expected to a ‘sexy siren’ who feels powerful in her body and mind and can do whatever she feels honors that.”

I blush at the intensity of my words but can’t help but keep going. “Maybe that sounds silly. But it’s empowering, usually in a way they don’t expect, and it’s inspiring to be a part of that.”

Maggie’s grin is evident in her voice as she replies, “I think you have your answer, girl. You didn’t need me to tell you that. You just needed me to listen to you decide for yourself.”

“You’re right, as always. Thanks, girl. I appreciate the backup.”

“Anytime and always. Well, except for the next two to three weeks. I’ve got a little . . . ah . . . work to do, and I’m incommunicado unless there’s an emergency.”

“And then we’ve got a coffee and mani-pedi date. Deal?”

She agrees, and we hang up. I lean back on the couch and stare up at the ceiling with a smile on my face. I can do this. I *am* doing this.

Chapter 4

Dominick

I've already been alerted by the man on duty tonight that Allie is coming to the club. He's to give her the full respect and treatment she deserves. What I'm not sure of is . . . why is she here? It's not her night to work, though I'm happy to see her anytime I can.

But her choosing to come to me is rare. Though we play this game of cat and mouse, always orbiting each other, acutely aware of how close we come, I know she harbors some fear of me to counteract her attraction.

It's understandable. Allie's no fool, but she was thrown into the deep end of my world unwittingly and hasn't fully learned to swim. Before the shooting, my being a 'Mob boss' was just theoretical, a rumor she wondered about but didn't really give credence to.

She didn't break the rules I had in place, so she had no need to see or immerse herself in the reality of my life. But one shooting changed all that. Now, she's retreated into a gray zone where she pretends nothing's changed between us while we both know it has. I can see it in the way she looks at me the few times her eyes meet mine and when she looks up at my window as she dances. She might want to pretend that her life is normal . . . but her body and her eyes tell me something very different.

On my part, I know I've crossed a line. She's interfering with my business, and every time I step into one of the 'blinds' I've set up to keep an eye on her, I know I'm taking a risk. If she discovers me, she would be fully within reason to freak out, calling me a stalker and worse. But I swear, as much as I want to claim her as mine publicly, my number-one concern is seeing that she remains safe.

The knock on the door makes my heart stutter for a beat, and though I know my slacks and dress shirt are impeccable, I can't help but run my palms over my chest, smoothing my tie to make sure I look my best.

"Enter."

The door cracks open and Allie peeks in, looking unadorned compared to her usual stage makeup but so beautiful that she brings light into the club. I

glance behind me, trying to calm myself and look at the relative plain appearance of Petals before opening hours. With normal lights on, the mystique of the club is killed, and it helps calm me a little bit.

“Hey, Dominick? Logan said I could come up?”

I grin at the question in her tone because all the guys know that Allie has a free pass to me, whether she knows it or not. I am hers, any time she wants me. I turn away from the club, away from the dullness awaiting magic and special effect to seem magical, and toward a creature, a woman who truly is magical.

“Of course. Come in. Sit.”

I gesture to the leather chairs on the far side of my office and watch as she glides across the room. Allie never merely walks anywhere. She seems to float like an angel, but her hips naturally sway with the devil’s seduction.

Her curves are covered in casual faded denim and a silky black tank top that almost looks like a chemise. It’s simple and elegant, like she is. She perches on the edge of the chair, and I sink into the one across from her, relaxing back and letting my knees spread wide around her crossed legs even though there are two feet between us.

Her foot bounces, and I notice that she’s wearing short-heeled boots, cute and nothing at all like what she wears on stage. She’s anxious, and the rare sign of her nerves thrills me. Not that I want her to be uncomfortable around me. In fact, I want the exact opposite, but her jitters show that I have some effect on her, and it warms my icy heart.

Her full lips spread wide, but it’s merely a polite smile, not reaching her eyes, which seem clouded with uncertainty.

“Thanks for seeing me. I, uh . . . I need to talk to you about my other job.”

“I would love to see you anytime you’d like, Allison,” I tell her with utter sincerity. It’s refreshing, and I relish the luxury. “And please, tell me about the dance classes. I have been interested, and I’ll admit, hoping that you have been successful. I’m proud of your courage in trying to expand your horizons.”

The words are a rare honesty for me, no game or strategy, no ulterior motive, just truth. I would do anything for this woman, and she barely acknowledges my existence beyond my ownership of the club and a few longing looks, although the *longing* part may be just me. She is wholly unaware that she owns my heart, whatever there may be left of it.

She squirms in her seat, the leather creaking mellowly beneath her, and an impulsive bit of jealousy hits me that the chair gets to cup her ass the way I want to when I have to refrain.

“Oh, well . . . thank you,” she says, blushing a little. “It’s been going really well. In fact, I wanted to let you know that things have changed there. I know we originally talked about my teaching a couple of classes a week, and it’s really grown a lot over the past few months. But one of the private party classes I did has taken on a life of it’s own, and I feel like I need to give it a real shot. That means more nights there, more private classes, and I’m going to set up one of the studios to teach pole fitness classes.”

Her words are one long run-on sentence, and at the end, she smiles like saying them aloud somehow makes her plans more real. I understand. Sometimes, reality is woven not from our thoughts but from our own speech which leads to the actions that make those words real.

Her excitement is infectious, bubbly, and light in the dark depths of my soul, an addicting brightness. I start to smile until a devastating thought occurs to me. I’m stricken, though I keep my voice coldly steady as my smile dims slightly.

“Are you giving notice? Do you want to stop dancing at Petals from Heaven, Allie?”

What I really mean is, ‘Are you leaving me?’ but I don’t voice that question aloud. I can’t say that anyway, because regardless of how I’ve claimed her in my mind and she’s claimed my heart by her silent actions, the words have never been spoken. The reality has never been forged.

Still, when she shakes her head, my heart resumes beating.

“No!” she says, gasping before blushing. “I mean, not exactly. But I was hoping we might be able to rearrange my schedule some? Let me just do feature appearances once or twice each week instead of multiple slots several nights per week? I’m hoping that if my performances are rarer, people will flock to them like a headliner act and I’ll still make enough money to supplement while I’m getting things off the ground at Encore.”

It’s an interesting idea, and I spin the family crest ring on my pinky finger, the one that denotes me as the head of the Angeline family, letting the idea turn, analyzing it from every angle as the silence stretches.

I normally wouldn’t, especially for a girl who’s just a dancer. Still, it’s Allie. The word *just* doesn’t apply to anything she does. She’s never *just* anything, especially to me.

Our eyes are locked on one another, the tension between us palpable, at least to me. I wonder if she knows that I can see the racing flutter of her heartbeat at her neck. She unconsciously licks her lips, drawing my attention to the flash of her pink tongue, making me want to nip at her with soft kisses before biting her fuller bottom lip, leaving that sharp mark of possession I've dreamed of for months.

I let a victorious smirk take my face, and I decide on the best course of action. Though it does probably give me more benefits than she gets, it's not unfair by any means, and I do think she'll be agreeable to my terms.

Leaning forward, I clasp my hands between my legs, letting my elbows rest on my knees and closing the distance between us to so close that I could, if I wanted, pull her in to taste her forbidden sweetness.

"You are a delight, on and off the stage, Allie. I think you know that, which is why I'm certain your new venture will be a success. If there is anything I can do to assist with that, please let me know. It would be my honor."

She blushes, her eyes sparkling. "Dominick, thank you. I know . . . well, I know you're not the nicest man, but you're always good to me."

The compliment is somehow soothing and exciting, making me think just how *good* I could be to her. Or maybe how bad? But I lock those thoughts away, again denying myself and denying her the possibility of what we could be, and focus on what she's asking for now.

"As for your shifts here, instead of paying your house fee and tip-out and keeping the remainder of your tips as per usual, I propose something a bit different. Though not common, you do know we've done headliner feature acts before. Our standard contract in that respect is an eighty-twenty split of door cover charges. No house fee, but you would still tip-out for the DJ, waitstaff, and bartender. Tips would be yours after that. It's your idea about rarer performances being more in-demand but significantly amped up."

It's a good deal, one I've only offered a handful of times in my time as owner of Petals. With the proposal I'm presenting, Allie would receive a small portion of Petals's profits for the night, a flip of the norm and a hefty bump in her pay, and considering feature performers perform on-stage for much longer sets, the potential for tips is greater too.

It's an opportunity only given to the *crème de la crème* of dancers, ones I'm certain can fill the club and make both of us considerable bank.

Someone like Allie.

Her jaw drops open wide in shock, tempting me to fill her mouth with something I suspect we'd both like, but to my surprised delight, she's not mindlessly celebrating my offer.

Through her shock, her mind whirls around and lands on . . .

"Make it 75/25 and you have a deal."

The surprised chuckle escapes before I can stop it, but I recover, dipping my chin as I incline my head.

"Very well. 75/25. On one condition."

At my agreement, even with a caveat, she leans forward, bringing our lips within inches of each other, our breath mingling as she lifts one eyebrow in question. Though there is desire in her eyes, there's also a wariness, that hint of suspicion telling me that she's so much more than one of the typical girls downstairs who would trade their bodies to me in a heartbeat without so much as considering the cost. And as much as her body tempts me, it is this inner beauty that draws me in more, the innate goodness that remains inside her heart and the swift intellect behind the golden chocolate of her eyes.

"Dinner. That is the condition. Have dinner with me."

Her breath falters, and though she disguises it quickly, I see the quick flash of confusion in her eyes before she schools her features.

"Like a date? But that's like rule number one around here. Girls and staff don't mix."

She's not wrong. I have many rules, and one of the most steadfast ones is that there is no fraternization inside the club. Employees are strictly forbidden from dating, an offense punishable by many rather creative consequences, up to and including death, depending on the betrayal and rank of offenders.

Only one couple has ever violated that rule and gotten away with it, although I overlooked that because of the other benefits involved in that particular transaction. Having a marker with the FBI is a powerful token in my line of work.

I shrug my shoulders, smiling a little. "You are correct. And you know from personal experience that I don't break my own rules. How is Maggie, by the way?"

"Well, uhm . . . happy." Frustratingly, one half of that couple is one of Allie's best friends, but sometimes, you can't choose your friends. I couldn't deny Allie her friend in any case. "But you and I—"

"Would no longer be employer and employee," I finish for her reassuringly. "In this scenario, you become more contractor than employee,

so a date is no different than if I saw the CEO of the beer distributing company I utilize but do not employ.”

Her eyes narrow, her cheeks flushing in delightful jealousy. “And have you *dated* the beer CEO?”

I adore her reaction but keep my face neutral as I nod knowingly. “We have had dinner *many* times. Ron is a rather entertaining fellow, and his wife is delightful.”

She chuckles, just the way I’d hoped she would, but then she sobers slightly, sarcasm teasing at the edges of her words.

“But you wouldn’t be setting a very good example if you go around seemingly breaking your own rules. Some of your men could see it as your splitting hairs. You could be inciting mass-anarchy.”

I lift my brows, thinking about my crew. “I sincerely doubt that. People are too fearful of me to risk my wrath over a bit of pussy or dick, as the case may be.”

Instantly, I wish I hadn’t phrased it so, because a weight falls between us. I take pride in speaking as an educated man, a man who might not have gone to Yale but still completed his MBA at a perfectly respectable university and who strives to make more of himself than the greaseball wise guy my grandfather was, no offense.

But my poor choice of words reminds Allie of who I am. *What* I am. The aftermath of the shooting tore the veil from her eyes more than anything else, and I had to reveal just how deep my connections ran. She knows that I’m in charge of East Robinsville, that I’m The Boss, the Don, though nobody uses that antiquated word anymore.

And though her eyes track me the same as they did before, full of restrained lust and a desire to know more about me, I can see that the questions beneath the surface of her attraction are scarier to ask, but they’re ones she wants the answers to all the same.

She deserves those answers, and it’s the other reason I’ve never pushed breaking my rule with her. Any woman who deserves to share my life with me to that level deserves to know. If we go there, she’s going to know what I am, what I do, even if I don’t want her involved.

I think Allie knows this, and she swallows, digging for her courage. My heart leaps as my brave girl finds it and graces me with another angelic smile.

“I would love to have dinner with you. Though not as a part of the agreement. Simply agree to the 75/25 split. You don’t need to manipulate me

with money to have dinner with you, Dominick. You . . . you never have.”

My name on her lips is a heavenly hymn my sullied soul doesn't deserve, but I take it anyway, hoarding it like treasure while at the same time promising myself to make her scream it, sigh it, and sing it, again and again.

The fact that she is agreeing to dinner despite the agreement tells me everything I need to know. Allie wants me, maybe as much as I want her. We've been good, as good as we can be, which for me isn't much, but we've followed the rules.

And now it's time for something else. “Good. Then let's eat.”

The lilting happy sound of her giggle delights me.

“I didn't realize you meant right now!” she argues. “I thought you meant you were going to pick me up for dinner sometime.”

I shake my head, standing up reluctantly because I don't want to be an inch farther apart from her than I have to. I want to feel her breath on my skin forever . . . but I have to order dinner.

“I don't want to give you time to reconsider. So now it is.”

That's the God's-honest truth because I know if I give her a moment to analyze this, she'll come out on the same side every time. The one where she doesn't go out with me at all.

So I'm pressing tonight, hoping that by keeping her slightly off balance, I can get more into her psyche, learn more about her, and maybe make her not so frightened of what I am.

Though I strongly suspect that's an exercise in futility. I pick up my phone, calling my favorite Italian restaurant, one of my own, of course.

“I want one large order of lasagna, salad for two, and a bowl of roasted tomato and basil soup.” I nod as they repeat the order, promising to have it here as quickly as possible. I take the moment to let Thomas know since he's currently serving as front-door security.

“How'd you know I'd want soup?” Allie asks as I hang up.

Though I know her preferences in and out, I choose to tease her. “Just a lucky guess, I suppose. Though how do you know the soup isn't for me and the lasagna for you?”

Her smile is one that says she gets my humor, something most people would say I severely lack. “Well played, Dom.”

Sitting back down, I frame her crossed legs with my spread ones again, though I pull her chair closer to mine, caging her in with my thighs.

“So, now that this is dinner,” I say, intentionally not calling it a date

because I know she's still a bit skittish, "tell me something about yourself I don't know."

I'm curious what she'll share, though I already know so much. I want to hear the stories of her past from her own lips.

"Hmm," she hums, obviously searching her mind as she glances off to the side. If I were a more artistic man, I would insist that she pose for a portrait because her profile is elegant, the slope of her nose giving way to her lush lips, and the graceful length of her neck begging me to nibble.

Instead, I stay in my seat, giving her time and space to adjust, patiently hooking her so as to reel her in without her even noticing. Finally, she turns back, eyes landing on mine.

"I always dreamed of being a dancer."

I tilt my head, amused. "And this is supposed to be new information? Allie, you *are* a dancer. I knew that the first moment I saw you perform."

She shakes her head like I don't get it. "No, not like this," she says, shaking her hand toward the wall of windows I currently have set to opaque so as not to allow the distractions of the club's pre-opening activities to invade this moment between us. "I mean, a *real* dancer. Ever since I was a little girl, it was all I ever wanted. To be up on stage, dancing and performing, creating those moments for the audience and sharing in their experience. And I worked my ass off for it too, hours of class and practice everyday, stretching until I cried, working until my toes bled and then bandaging them and continuing. It was all I thought about, dreamed about. It was *everything*."

This is nothing unknown to me, but it is fresh from her lips, so I let her continue. "And what happened to divert you from that dream?"

Allie raises an eyebrow, curious. "How do you know I didn't just give it up, that I didn't get so tired of the constant drive to be better that I just walked away?"

I give her a narrowed-eyed look, showing her a little bit of what I know of her past. "Because if you decided you didn't love it, you wouldn't be teaching ballet to the next generation. You wouldn't be performing in small community theater ballet productions. And you certainly wouldn't light up like a star just from talking about it. But you do all those things. Even as you talk about how hard it was, I can tell you miss it. So, what happened? Something to do with that scar on your ankle?"

She huffs out a woeful sigh, looking down at her leg, though her ankle is

hidden by her jeans and boots. “Not quite. Or at least, not at first. The real problem was puberty.”

I can’t help the bark of laughter that escapes at the unexpected answer. “What?”

She smiles, though it’s small and sad. “Well, several things, but that was the real trigger. Ballerinas are small, thin, light wisps of women, and I was until I turned sixteen. Luckily, or maybe unluckily, I was a late bloomer, but when I blossomed, I did so in a big way.”

She holds her hands out in front of her chest like she’s grasping huge melons, not the delectable full handfuls of breasts she actually possesses, which are in proportion to her curvy hips, giving her an hourglass shape.

“Almost overnight, I went from straight and thin to curvy, and no matter what I did to fight it, Mother Nature had other plans for my body. And I fought hard for years . . . diets, chest compression with elastic bandages, hours spent figuring out how to angle my hips so that I was never square to the directors, trying to mask it. I had to give up so much as the guys stopped wanting to do partner work with me. I knew I couldn’t be the Prima, but I thought I could still at least be one of the cast, one of the ensemble.”

I flush with anger. This precious being, not the center of attention? Insanity. Then again, the dance world has always been insane to me.

“Eventually, it caught up to me. I hadn’t eaten anything significant in days. I’d been on a broth and celery cleanse before a performance, and I was weak but pushing through. I’d overstretched, but I’d been so pleased with my progress that I didn’t consider that my body couldn’t keep up. I did a move where I was supposed to land in a deep pli  with my feet turned out, and I felt a pop. I collapsed to the stage and passed out from the pain.”

My gut churns at her words, the story so very different from the dry words on paper I’d gotten in her background report. I can imagine a younger her, driven and hard-working, refusing to accept no for an answer from anyone, least of all herself.

She is still determined, but it’s softened with a cynical acceptance that sometimes your best still isn’t good enough, and perhaps now I understand why.

“And that was the ankle?”

She nods, rolling her right foot unconsciously. “Two ligaments, some space-age NASA stuff I can’t pronounce . . . and that was the end of my *Sugar Plum Fairy* dreams.”

Her voice is so heartbreaking, so sad, I want to gather her into my arms and reassure her that it doesn't matter. At least to me, it doesn't.

"I'm so very sorry, Allison. That sounds awful. Truly."

I don't try to temper the words with useless reassurances that she knows are untrue. I offer my true feeling of remorse that her dream was snatched from her.

She waves her hand, dismissing even the bare-boned words. "Like they say, the show must go on. I did months of physical therapy to make sure my ankle was strong and healthy again, but the real work was in here."

She touches her fingertip to her temple, and I give her a questioning look. "Three months of inpatient treatment at an eating disorder clinic and then years of therapy after, but I came out healthy. Better than I'd been in years, maybe ever."

A lightbulb goes off in my head, and I realize what brought her to Petals in the first place. It wasn't just dance.

"Your medical bills. You'd said when you began that you were paying off medical bills. You took them on yourself."

She nods, wounded but proud. "Of course. I didn't feel like my parents should have to pay for all that after paying top-dollar for my ballet for so many years. Dancing here has given me a way to pay off the hospital faster than I would've been able to with a desk job."

I nod, numbers whirling in my head, and though I know I could easily wipe her debt clean, I also know she would never allow it.

"But with a feature gig contract here plus your classes and private events at Encore, you should make considerable progress, right?"

She taps her nose and smiles as she points at me, grinning. "That's the plan. Taking over the world next week."

Her casual sass is enchanting, an uncommon behavior from most people when they sit alone with me. I'm accustomed to nerves or machismo, wolf tickets and bragging, fear and ego, and sometimes flat-out manipulative desire.

But Allie is none of those things. She's simply herself, and I want to bask in her authenticity and soak up the wholesome goodness of her soul that some might dismiss because of her job but is so readily obvious to anyone who takes the time to actually speak with her. I also like that while she may be deeply unsure about the ethics of what I do, at least on the surface, she is relaxing around me, talking and sharing with ease as we chat like two regular

people, though the reality is that only one of us is ‘normal’.

“What about your family? Do they know how you’re paying the medical bills?”

She rolls her eyes like an exasperated teenager who just got asked a stupid question.

“Yes, and of course, they hate it. Which I understand, because who wants their kid to grow up to be a stripper? I definitely think they expected something a bit classier from me after all those hours at a ballet barre, but all things considered, they don’t give me much of a hard time.”

The thought of her parents criticizing her at all frustrates me, but I can understand their conflict, both wanting her to fly and satisfy her obvious need for the stage, while at the same time wanting to protect her and keep her selfishly to themselves.

“Class is not in what one chooses to do for a living, Allie,” I reassure her, seeing the question hiding behind her eyes. After all, I’ve seen almost everything her body has to display. Many men would disrespect the woman inside at that point. But then again, I am not many men. “It is how you carry yourself, the way you stay true to your own compass. And you have done that beautifully, through both adversity and privilege, with a refined elegance that has shone through. In the end, you will shine like the star I’ve seen from the first moment we met.”

The silence that follows is deafening, her cheeks pink with pleasure as the words sink in. I give her the moment to truly hear them, hoping she can feel the genuineness of them.

A knock on the door surprises me, which is a dangerous thing. I am always aware and alert of my surroundings, but while I’ve talked with Allie, listening to her story, I’ve been immersed completely in her.

It could have been a threat, though they likely wouldn’t have knocked and would have to be ninjas to get past my outside security. Fortunately, it is merely our dinner delivery.

We move over to the casual seating area of my office, and I unpack the bag of food, setting each dish on the coffee table. Allie foregoes the couch in favor of sitting on the floor. I stare at her for a moment and then follow her lead.

I don’t know that I’ve ever sat on the floor to eat, not even as a child, unless it was at a Japanese restaurant. My family was always more formal, more about rules and expectations of propriety. But sitting here this way feels

oddly intimate, and I find that I enjoy being this casual with Allie, sharing a meal in my office at Petals, a place I rarely relax.

We're sitting close, just the small piece of glass holding our food between us, but the food delivery gave us a bit of a break, letting each of us reset from the deep conversation and the confidences Allie shared with me.

Dinner is delicious, with the anticipated lasagna and soup as mouth-watering and perfect as I could hope for. However, I pay little attention to the food, listening aptly instead as Allie gushes over her plans for Encore, going so far as to give me the breakdown of her business model for the pole dancing fitness classes.

The excitement and joy at the new undertaking is obvious as she speaks, lighting her from within with a warm glow that only serves to somehow make her that much more stunning.

"I mean, I know that fitness crazes come and go, but the big thing is striking when the iron's hot. If I can get the women in there for the sexy classes, they'll be happier and healthier. A bit of 'I am woman, hear me roar,' if you know what I mean. But most of all, I'm going to keep it fun for them, and then we'll . . ."

She's like a fountain of energy, words, and ideas, and as she rambles on, I find myself inordinately relaxed by the buzz she creates with her speech, her presence, with just . . . her.

Chapter 5

Allie

“Beautiful, Isabella! Now reach through the top of your head and down through your toes. Find your length . . . yes,” I encourage, seeing the already tall girl transform before my very eyes.

She’d already been a well-trained dancer when she joined my classes, but her progress has been rather phenomenal, if I do say so myself. She’s at that awkward age where girls sometimes begin to try to hide away their inner light as their bodies become unfamiliar and seemingly strange. I’m bound and determined to make sure she lets her light shine like a beacon, so bright that others can’t help but acknowledge her.

The music ends, and the whole group takes their curtsying bow, some graceful as swans and some still hatchlings finding their poise, but I applaud them, one and all.

“Great job today, ladies. I’ll see you all on Wednesday, when we begin the next set of choreo. Make sure you do your home warmups in between now and then, and listen to the music.”

There’s a chorus of ‘Thanks, Miss Allie!’ and ‘Bye!’ from the gaggle of girls, and they leave in a mass of buns, duffel bags, and booties. It’s the flight of the tweeners, and I can’t help but grin as I watch them go.

My next class is a bit easier, ‘Baby Ballet,’ which is mostly just jumping around and having fun to music with little kids between the ages of three and five. It’s physically fun but mentally easy, which is a good thing since my mind begins to lose focus and wander back to my ‘dinner’ with Dominick.

He thought he was being so slick, but I know a date when I’m on it. There’s been tension between us for months, going back to even before the shooting. And since that awful night? Even more sparks.

I think he honestly believes he is subtle, that I’m unaware of his eyes tracking me at the club. I know he’s had people watching me as well, and while I haven’t said anything to him about it, I do know that every time I go to Petals, I’m given a security detail on Secret Service levels going and coming out of the parking lot. He’s protective of all the girls, but with me,

there's just a little extra care.

Dom doesn't think I notice, but I do. I see everything. I watch him too . . . the way his broad shoulders sweep through the club and people move like parting seas before him, the way every word from his mouth is calculated and carefully considered, the dominant aura that surrounds him leaving no doubt of who's in charge.

I knew he was a boss long before I knew he was The Boss, and I was attracted to him then.

I'd held back from any flirtation for the longest time out of respect for his rule, though we'd made eyes at each other so many times I thought I'd combust just from the heat of his gaze.

It's part of who he is. I had enough pretty guys with bodies carved from stone and perfect faces when I was in the dance world. Dominick's handsome, yes, but it's in a dark, brooding, intellectual way. His body's not just strong but also stocky, his shoulders broad and thick, an intellectual savage, I would say.

For months, we circled each other, always wondering which of us was going to take that first step toward something more. Spoiler alert—it was never going to be me. I'm crazy, but not *that* crazy. And I think he was already close to giving in and making a move, but our little dance took a very abrupt ninety-degree turn when the shit hit the fan a few months ago and my world was sent flying totally off-kilter.

It forced me to recognize all the little signs that I overlooked, the hints that I didn't bother to add up because I was too busy crushing on my hot, slightly older, dominant boss. But now that I'm forced to acknowledge just who Dominick truly is, he honestly scares me a little bit. The fact that he's not *of* the Mob but actually *is* The Mob tears at me.

He's not someone to mess with, and I'm not sure I should involve myself with him. But with everything on the table, more or less, I can't help but admit that the twinge of danger he has only adds to his charms, attracting me more even as my mind wars with the stupidity of it.

He's the walking, talking, sexy epitome of the bad boy you know you should stay away from but want desperately anyway, even knowing it's going to end poorly. And even knowing the risk, I couldn't help but say yes to our dinner-not-date, despite the pretty blatant and cheesy segue.

Surprisingly, Dominick was easy to open up to about my past. I'd told him things I hadn't said aloud in years, and even then, only to a therapist.

Perhaps even more shocking was the lighter conversation while we ate. He'd listened attentively to my gushing plans for the business with Encore, never once making me think he was bored of my excitement or thought my plans were silly.

If anything, he seemed quietly supportive, making insightful commentary and offering advice that actually helped my thoughts.

He also hadn't zeroed in on my eating after I'd dropped the eating disorder bombshell. It's not exactly top-secret or something I'm ashamed of, and I have told friends and boyfriends before, but there's always that adjustment period where they're suddenly hyper-aware of everything I eat.

Not Dominick. He was already hyper-aware of me, and that little factoid in my history didn't add or detract from his attentiveness.

But his willingness to move our orbiting interest in one another into a different path is both terrifying and thrilling. He's not a man to get involved with casually or thoughtlessly, but I guess on some complicated level, I've already been entangled with him.

Lord knows, I haven't dated, or dined, with anyone else in ages. It's not because I haven't been asked. I can barely go a shift at Petals without some guy dropping a note with his phone number or something on stage along with his money. Some have even had the guts to approach me in person. I'll give them credit, considering how protective Dominick's security is over me.

But I know where my heart lies and didn't want to disrespect Dominick by giving the guys more than a polite refusal, even if Dom was keeping his distance. That time seems to be over now, I think, and though my stomach has been doing little backflips that have nothing to do with the delicious food we shared, my heart races.

My thoughts are interrupted by a little voice at my side, and I look down to see Cindy, one of the five-year-olds, looking anxious and doing the pee-pee dance at the same time.

"Miss Allie? Isn't class over? The big hand is past the one again?"

I shake myself out of my reverie and glance at the clock, seeing that it's 7:08, eight minutes after class was supposed to end.

"Oh, thank you, Cindy. Yes, class dismissed. Thank you for the extra work tonight. Beautiful job, everyone."

They shuffle out, and luckily, I don't see any upset moms from keeping them over time. I clean up the studio quickly, making sure all the lights are off. The only other classes tonight are advanced classes that Donna's

teaching to her students.

I give Donna a wave as I pass by her studio, where she's stretching out and preparing herself for teaching. Outside, the lot is well-lit, but there are still darker shadows where SUVs, trucks, or just the arrangement of poles mean the light doesn't quite reach.

I scan my surroundings like I'm supposed to, but I'm still surprised when I see Cindy's dad, Mr. Duncan, sitting on the trunk of his car, his head in his hands. He watched his daughter's class today, but . . . where is she?

"Mr. Duncan? Sir, are you okay?" His head pops up, and I see him sweep a quick finger under each eye, making me think he's crying or at least tearing up for some reason.

He stutters a bit and hops off the trunk, clearing his throat. "Oh, Allie! Sorry, I thought I was alone."

"No problem. You okay?"

He nods, but it seems more like he's trying to convince himself than telling the truth.

"Yeah . . . we're going through some stuff, and watching Cathy drive off with Cindy, knowing they're going home and I'm heading to one of those extended-stay studio hotels is rough. I just miss her."

Understanding dawns, and I feel my heart go out to him. I don't know what the issue is between him and his wife, but the man's obviously in pain. And those extended-stay places suck.

"I'm sorry to hear that. I had no idea. Do you miss Cindy or Cathy? Either way, you should tell them."

He smiles as he snuffles again, hooking his thumbs in his belt loops and looking bashful. "Cindy . . . I miss my little girl. Cathy can rot in hell, for all I care."

His words are spat out, coated in unexpected venom that makes me flinch. He sees the cringe and winces apologetically.

"Sorry, didn't mean to sound so mean. I found out she's been cheating on me. Lawyer said I should let her keep the house because it's best for Cindy, but then they get to home like nothing changed, and I'm alone. Ah, fuck, it's just a little raw right now, and I'm bitter as hell."

My eyebrows furrow at his pain, but I find I'm fresh out of encouraging responses and he doesn't seem to want the platitudes anyway. Mr. Duncan pushes off from the car and stretches his arms up and over his head, taking a long, shuddering breath before blowing it out as if to clear the painful

thoughts.

“Enough of that drama. I really need to move on, I think.”

Again, it seems like he’s convincing himself more than me, so I shrug non-committedly. “If you’re okay, Mr. Duncan . . .”

He nods and musters up a small smile. “Hey, I heard about your new classes. Congrats on that!”

His words are polite, the same ones several other parents have given me in response to the news, thankfully. Though there’s something different about hearing them post-class from a mom with her child swirling around her legs than from a sad dad alone in a parking lot. A wiggle of concern blooms in my belly, though Mr. Duncan has always been nothing but nice to me.

“Thanks,” I say as I reflexively scan the parking lot, wondering who Dom has following me tonight.

I don’t feel the weight of Dom’s gaze like I do sometimes, and my gut tells me that he would never let me talk to a man alone in a dark parking lot because he’s way too powerful to let something like that slide. But there’s no one around but me and Mr. Duncan.

But maybe Mr. Duncan’s just trying to be nice. I mean, he hasn’t said anything that—

“You should have the class do a recital like the girls do. I’m sure the husbands would love to come see that.”

He just blew past the line of acceptable conversation, regardless of where we’re standing, but out here, what he said somehow sounds even more skeezy. My nose crinkles in distaste, but he doesn’t notice or doesn’t care.

“You’re really beautiful, you know that?”

I step back, gaining space between us, but before I can answer, there’s a clanging noise as a metal bay door slams a few suites down from the dance studio. Both Mr. Duncan and me instinctually look over. Two big and broad silhouettes come into view, and then I can hear the guys’ loud chatter and laughter as they joke around.

Whew, thank fuck. I was getting a bit nervous that Dom’s guy, or guys in this case, I guess, were sleeping on the job. I don’t think Mr. Duncan would really try anything, but you can never be too sure.

“Hey, guys, thanks for meeting me,” I say, though I guess I wasn’t really expecting anyone to show their face. Dom’s guys are usually relatively discrete. *Relatively* being the operative word because how do you miss a big guy in an Italian suit following you down the sidewalk?

But they seem to read my discomfort and play along. The brunette who looks like he was carved from marble says, “Sure, no problem, baby.”

His phrase throws me for a second, because at Petals, ‘baby’ is code for ‘help me,’ and it’s ingrained in my head to hear ‘danger’ with the word. He should know that. Unless it’s supposed to be some Jedi reverse mind trick, like he’s telling me that he recognizes that I’m in danger? Convoluted, but as long as they’re here, I’ll take a little weirdness.

They give Mr. Duncan a careful look. He seems to catch up to the developing situation, realizing that he’s on the losing side of the scale.

“Well, I guess I’d better get going. I’ll leave you to your . . .” —he gestures at me and then to the two men— “evening. I’ll see you next week when I drop off Cindy. Thanks for listening, Allie.”

Mustering the most dignity he can, Mr. Duncan steps back and faux-casually goes over to his driver side door, getting inside. With a roar of the engine, he pulls out of the parking lot, gassing it down the street.

I turn back to my sorta-saviors, a bit wary since they’re not my usual guys. “Thanks! You saved my bacon there. Mr. Duncan’s probably safe, but you never can tell. I thought you weren’t gonna come out for a minute there.” They glance at each other, confusion written on their faces like they’re still not sure what to say, and I try to fill in the quiet. “Sorry, I don’t know if we’ve met yet. I’m Allie, but I guess you already know that. And you two are . . . ?”

I let the syllable hang, inviting them to answer, but there’s a sudden slapping of shoes on the pavement to my right and I look over to see Logan running toward me. Talk about a welcome surprise.

The two guys go back on alert, though I think hear one mutter, “What the hell? Another one?”

I’m shocked as Logan growls as he gets closer, his hands balling into fists.

“Get back.”

I’m not sure if he’s talking to me or the guys, but I step back anyway.

Logan puts himself between the guys and me, looking at the two guys. “Stay behind me.”

“What’s going on, Logan? How many guys are here tonight? Is something wrong?” I can feel my heart start racing in my chest, worry blooming that maybe something happened at Petals. Maybe something happened to Dominick. It’s the only explanation for why I’d have three

guards tonight.

Logan talks over his shoulder, eyes never leaving the two monsters in front of him. “They’re not with us, Allie.”

I gasp, realizing just how foolish I’d been. Hell, I’d jumped out of the frying pan and into the fire, a big ass bonfire that scared off the hurting dad I know and left me alone with two beasts I don’t. All because I stupidly assumed they were Dominick’s guys. But what else should I have thought when there’s always some huge guy tailing me at Dom’s instruction? This just seemed status quo.

“Oh, shit,” I whisper, the curse coming out before I can stop it.

The brunette speaks again, apparently the spokesman for the pair as he tries to make eye contact with me and offers a friendly smile.

“Look, I don’t know what’s going on here. I’m Max, and this is my buddy, Dalton. We’re opening an MMA gym right over there.”

I back him up, telling Logan, “I know there’s going to be some kind of gym opening soon. I’ve heard the occasional thumping metal and hip-hop coming from inside, but it didn’t occur to me that they might be random guys. The timing was right, and I mean, look at them! I didn’t care if they were Dom’s guys, or powerlifters, or Crossfitters. Hell, I would’ve been happy if they were buff yoga dudes. Just someone to help me get a little distance.”

Dalton smirks, and Max points behind him to the door they came out of and turns his attention back to Logan. “We came outside and . . . Allie, right? Seemed nervous with that guy, so we came to see if anything was going on.”

Logan is still tense as he questions me. “That true? I missed some of it because I was coming down the stairs.”

I nod, then realize he can’t see me because his eyes haven’t left Max and Dalton.

“Yeah, I just needed a little assist. I thought they were my guards for the night, and Mr. Duncan left. I don’t even know if he meant anything, but he was weirding me out. No harm, no foul, Logan. Now, what the hell’s going on?”

He snorts. “You know what’s going on, Allie. You’ve had eyes on you all this time. You obviously know that.”

His words shock me. Not that I didn’t suspect—okay, I knew—but that he’d come out and say it. But if he’s willing to not play shy with the truth, neither am I. “Okay, I knew that but have been choosing to ignore your lame

attempts at ‘reconnaissance’.” I say the word with finger air-quotes because seriously, how am I supposed to miss Logan in a crowd? “But can we just pretend this never happened? That’s what I want to do. Rewind ten minutes like zzzzzz.” I make a whirring sound like my dad’s old cassette tape player. “And maybe poof . . . none of this ever happened. Yeah?” I coat the request with sugary goodness, like it might entice him to agree with me.

Logan shakes his head. “You know I can’t do that, Allie.”

I knew that’s what he’d say. Logan is a great guy, precise and intelligent in addition to being a badass in the ring. But he’s not really a shades of grey kind of guy. To him, things are black or white, right or wrong, what he was told to do or not. And I’m sure Dominick has told him to report everything, judging by the way he confessed that Dom’s keeping eyes on me.

Dalton, the blond with shaggy hair, finally speaks. “I feel like we’re missing something here, but if everything’s good, mind if we head on out? We had a long day and I’m wiped. Laying two thousand square feet of wrestling mat is a pain in the ass.”

I’ve never laid wrestling mat, but I can imagine. “Yes, let’s all do that. I’m ready to go home.”

Max seems to be the more curious of my new neighbors, and he gives me another friendly but careful smile. “Before we go . . . Allie, are you okay with this guy?”

“Definitely safe with Logan. Only one guy I’d be safer with, and let’s just say, it’s probably good for all of us that he’s not here.” Just to be sure I’m correct that Dom’s not lurking nearby, I give a pointed look around the parking lot.

Logan sighs and his head tilts back. I imagine he’s saying a prayer of thanks that Dominick isn’t here too. Ignoring him for a moment, I step around him and offer my hand to Max and Dalton.

“By the way, welcome to the neighborhood. Like I said, I’m Allie. I teach at Encore Studios.”

I point over to the side, where our lit-up sign blazes brightly. They glance over and then back. “Yeah, we were going to go over soon, swap hellos and do a sound check so our music doesn’t screw with your lessons and stuff . . .” Dalton says before his voice trails off and he looks back at Logan. “Not to make an already weird situation weirder, but aren’t you Logan Hendricks? I follow your career, man.”

Logan almost imperceptively nods, but Dalton catches it and gets excited.

“Holy shit! You’re like one of the best one-eighty-five guys around. What the hell are you doing out here?”

Logan’s answer is deadpan sarcastic, but I can see the way his lips twitch in a small smirk. “Obviously, moonlighting.”

Both Max and Dalton chuckle and then glance at me. I realize that my hand’s still hanging out, and they both shake, their eyes naturally drifting down my body and back up. I’m used to it and almost don’t give it a second thought, knowing that I’m fully covered in both dancewear and a top layer of sweats.

But Logan doesn’t let it go so easily. “Careful. She’s Dominick Angeline’s.”

Judging by the guys’ reactions, that means something to them. I’m actually surprised, and it fills in a few blanks that Logan and I need to discuss. Having Dominick stake a claim on me is sexy as hell, but it’s not actually him doing it, and I wonder what exactly Dominick has told Logan.

Max tilts his head slightly, and I can see his mind working as he quirks one brow, poking at Logan. “Angeline’s what? His sister? Girlfriend? Cousin from a second marriage?”

Logan’s grin is a feral baring of his teeth. “She is simply his.”

And isn’t that the absolute truth. But judging by what’s happened and what Logan has said here tonight, Dom and I need to have a serious talk.

Dalton’s humor breaks the tension as he laughs and says, “Okay, motion to move back to my action plan of leaving and going the fuck home. Seconded?” He doesn’t wait for anyone to speak, continuing on. “Motion approved. We’re out. But hey, man, anytime you’re around, stop by. I’d love to pick your brain on your counters against a southpaw. You really picked that last guy apart with those.”

Max and Dalton back up a few steps before hopping onto two gleaming motorcycles, starting them up to a huge bass rumble that echoes through the lot for a moment before lowering to a leonine purr. With two-fingered waves, they pull out. Logan turns to me, and I intercept him before he can pull a fade.

“Okay, you have about ten seconds to fill me in on what’s going on before you find a ballet slipper shoved up your nose.”

There’s no way I can back up my threat, but Logan respects me, and he sighs, nodding.

“Fine. What do you already know?”

I shrug, surprised that he's willing to give me any information at all. "All of it. But I want to hear it from you, Stalker McStalkerson."

He laughs hollowly, shaking his head and muttering, "You have no idea." But then he looks at me. "How come you never said anything? Never called me out or asked Dominick outright?"

I bug my eyes out. "Seriously? Have you met him? I'm not scared of him, not one bit, but he's intimidating enough that I'm not really going to waltz into his office and start demanding answers, especially when there for a while, I really needed the security. Not because I was in danger, exactly, but the whole shooting thing was scary as fuck for someone like me, Logan. You guys' being around made me feel safer, and then I guess I just kind of got used to it. Maybe liked it a bit." I point a finger at him threateningly. "But if you tell him that, I'll tell him you play games on your phone when you're supposed to be on duty."

He sputters, "I do not!" But then he stops at my evil grin. "You'd do that, wouldn't you?" At my nod, he hooks a thumb over at a black sedan in the far corner of the parking lot. "All right, but not here. Your place?"

"I guess it's a given that you know where it is," I reply, annoyed. "You following me like usual?" I can't help but get in the dig. "And we talk there. Deal?"

"Deal."

At home, Logan walks me to my door, a new routine, apparently.

As I unlock the door, I stand aside, motioning him in. I'm not scared of Logan. In fact, he makes me feel safe, and it's probably easier for him to guard me from here than it is downstairs, or wherever it is he hides out.

I'm surprised, though, when he doesn't take a single step inside but instead crosses his arms, shaking his head once.

"He's coming to talk to you himself."

I can't decipher his tone, but he looks at me like this is bad news. Honestly, though, I don't care. Dom might be The Boss of East Robinsville, but he and I need to get some shit straight between us. Still, realizing that Dominick Angeline's coming to my apartment makes my heart flutter in my chest like a hummingbird after a Red Bull.

Dominick is coming here? Shit, I need to change and pick up a bit. I don't want him to think I'm a smelly mess, though that's probably more true than false on most days.

Chapter 6

Dominick

“Say that again, slowly.”

Logan’s voice is filtering through the cabin of my car as he tells me again what happened after Allie left her classes tonight.

“And the MMA guys? Are they a problem?”

There’s a beat of silence as Logan considers what I’m asking. “They’re legit fighters, both heavyweights. No reputation for anything other than hard work and being tough sons of bitches. If anything, I’d say they might be good backup on-site if they agree to some terms.”

I let that idea roll around in my head, nodding to myself. It would make keeping an eye on Allie easier now that my duck blind has apparently been discovered. I’m not upset with Logan about it. He did his job exactly as I requested, and I wouldn’t have wanted him to lie. At least, not to her.

“I’ll take that under advisement. I’ll need full workups on them both . . . families, allegiances, strengths, and weaknesses.”

“On it. You’ll have it by tomorrow,” Logan says, and knowing him, I’ll probably have their grade-school report cards in there as well. He’s that sort of thorough.

“And the rest? What exactly did she say?”

I listen as Logan explains that he had to break cover, and that Allie knew she’d been under observation, which was a surprise to me. I don’t like surprises. Not at all. She says she knows *all of it*, which I seriously doubt, so I’ll have to tease a bit at her to test the edges of her knowledge. I don’t want to share too much, too soon.

I knew there’d come a time to reap what I’ve sown, even though I’ll admit I’m a man who likes to control what goes on in my life. But I have crossed a line with Allie, and I need to deal with that.

I pull into my reserved spot and head upstairs. As I push the button for the third floor, my heart flutters a little as I realize I’m going to see her, to be in her space again, not by stealth and sneaking but by invitation.

It’s an intriguing idea since this will be the first time she willingly lets me

into her apartment. I've been here, of course, the first time when I took her home after the shooting, still shivering in my arms, and then again to carefully install the cameras.

But this will be a first of sorts.

Logan is in the hallway, giving me a respectful nod before pulling a fade and standing by the elevator door where he can keep his eye on the entire hallway without any issues.

At my knock, the door breezes open and she stands before me in a pair of short shorts and a strappy tank top that grazes her body. If I didn't know better, I'd think she dressed for me, but I know this is her usual nighttime attire. I understand. After a day of dance tights, she must want to be as comfortable as possible.

I step inside and turn as she closes the door.

"Allison," I greet her, my voice deep and intense. Until I saw her, I hadn't fully processed that tonight could have played out much differently. Forget the questions I'm going to have to answer, the explanations, and possibly her recriminations. The thought of something happening to her makes my blood run cold in my veins.

Her eyes drop for a moment, the picture of submission before she remembers herself and lifts her chocolate gaze to mine. There's fire in her eyes, an inferno I want to burn me, but also one that I want to tame and bring under my control . . . and she knows it, even if I've unknowingly stoked those particular embers tonight.

"Dominick," she mimics, holding a straight face for as long as she can before pointing toward her living room. "We have a lot to talk about."

Most people wouldn't dare speak to me in such a direct manner, not if they wanted to be sure of seeing next Christmas. But Allie's different, and she knows without a doubt that she's special to me now and that I'm likely going to let her have more leeway than most. I suspect she'll push and press my every button just to explore the reactions. But then, I tend to do the same thing, so I can't blame her for that.

"I'm not going to apologize," I tell her evenly. "I did what I did, and I'm willing to live with the consequences."

"Even if it means I don't want to see you again?" Allie asks, and I hope she's bluffing. "Face it, Dominick. We're not talking a legal line, although I know those don't mean anything to you and I'd never take that up anyway. But you crossed the lines of honor and respect, which I know you hold

important.”

I think about it, then nod. “I did. For that, you’re right. I apologize.”

I wait patiently to see if she’ll give in, rewarded a moment later when she sighs and rolls her eyes.

“Come in. Want a drink?”

I follow her directive, sitting down on her plush couch. It’s a bright red velvet piece with high, rolled arms and button tufting. It’s bold and loud, especially with the mis-match of patterned pillows piled in the corners. It’s as much Allie as my cold, sleek office is me.

“Do you have whiskey?”

She shakes her head. “Nope. Red wine, beer, and water are all I’ve got. Take it or leave it.”

Sassy . . . and still a little pissed, but the apology seems to have taken the edge off the confrontation. I’m still going to tread carefully, though, because I don’t want this to be my only visit to this particular domicile.

“Water would be fine. Thank you.”

She pulls a jug from the fridge and fills two short glasses, bringing them over to set them on the coffee table. She sits down beside me, and I’m suddenly thankful for the abundance of pillows because they force her closer to me.

But she sits sideways, her legs crisscross folded between us, showing me a lot of very long and beautiful leg, but definitely not inviting.

“So, that’s the polite hostess part. Let’s hear it, Dom. All the nitty-gritty, all the yelling, all the everything. Let’s get it out on the table.”

My eyes narrow questioningly. “Have you ever heard me yell? At anyone, about anything?”

She tilts her head, thinking back. “Actually no, that’s not your style. You’re more Disappointed Dad with hard looks and calculated punishments. It’s when you stop talking that you’re scariest. But I was expecting *me* to be the one yelling. You know, since I’m the wronged party here and all.”

Her rapid-fire speech slows as she finishes her thought with a dose of sarcasm on her tongue, and I set my glass back down from where I’d picked it up.

“You’re very observant. How closely have you been watching *me*, Allie?” I ask as dark heat unfurls in my gut, and I’m far more interested in her answer than I have been in anything in a long time, though I suspect she won’t let me get away with the stalling tactic for long.

She bites her lip nervously, the unconsciously coquettish gesture sending a line of heat down through my gut. I feel my cock stir in my slacks. While it isn't time for that yet, my cock seems to have a mind of its own. What it knows is that the woman who's captured my imagination and my heart is sitting just eighteen inches away from me, her chest rising and falling quickly as her heart hammers within.

"You know I have, Dominick. I've been watching you the same way you watch me." I sincerely doubt that's remotely true, which she concedes when a small smirk ghosts across my lips. "Okay, maybe not as closely as you, but still, I've been paying attention. But *my* watching isn't why we're here, is it?"

She looks me dead in the eye, demanding, "Who's following me, and more importantly, why?"

I lift an eyebrow, sipping my drink. "Logan said you assured him that you already knew everything. Perhaps I should ask you what you know, and we can go from there?"

It's a bit like cat and mouse, not showing my whole hand but throwing out the challenge to see if she accepts. And then pulling her this way and that, subtly closer to my reach with every move so that I can snare her and hold her close.

She growls, her voice hard, "What I know is that you have people following me. I know that you have an apartment by Encore. I know that you watch me sometimes and have security guys from work watch me too, usually Logan, but other people too. I know that I walked up to two big-ass motherfuckers thinking they were going to save me tonight, only to discover that they're just my new neighbors. What else is there?"

It's obvious she suspects that there is more and has likely even been looking for other signs of my shadowy observations. I stay silent and she adds more.

"A few times, I saw Logan down in the parking lot and waved, figuring he was seeing someone from the building. There's a cute girl who lives up on seven that I could see as his type. I figured he'd wave back, but he didn't, just kept his head buried in his phone."

A small giggle jiggles her chest, and I wonder what's funny about Logan and his phone. "I thought, for a busy guy, he seemed to sulk around me silently a lot."

I remind myself to both thank Logan and to advise him to work on his tailing skills. He's seen more of Allie than anyone else on my crew and more

than once could have taken advantage. Thankfully, Logan is who he is and minds his business better than most lifelong men in my crew. It's too bad he doesn't want to be a permanent part of my team because he'd be an excellent asset, but I'll utilize him while he's available to me.

More important than my thoughts of Logan are that Allie didn't mention anything beyond the surveillance. She doesn't know about the apartment upstairs. I war with myself about telling her, but in the end, I can't imagine not being able to check in on her, so I stay mum about it for now, knowing it'll rightly be another log on the fire if she ever finds out.

"I'm impressed that you even caught what you did. It means you're observant of your surroundings and staying safe. Good girl."

The compliment comes naturally, but she beams at the praise for a split-second, or maybe it's the phrasing. I store that away in my mind for later and continue.

"You sure you want to know everything? If I remember right, you were pretty freaked out by what you learned last time you got a glimpse behind my curtain."

It's a polite way of reminding her just how ugly my world is. I've tried so damn hard to protect her from it, from me, but I just can't stay away any longer, even as I give her one last out to stop this madness.

"Tell me. I want to trust you. I know that's insane because of your job, but you've never given me a real reason not to trust you. Unless you lie to me right now. I'm going to give you a chance because you've earned it with me."

I take a deep breath and lay it out. She doesn't react when I confirm that I have a guy watch her at the studio and follow her to the club and home every day. However, when I tell her about the people watching her apartment, she colors.

"Dominick, what if I'd had someone over?"

"You always had freedom to choose your own . . . friends, even if I would not have approved," I force myself to admit. "I would not have liked it."

The dangerous confession hangs between us, the possessive tone of my words unmistakable.

"Tell me why. Why do you have your men following me? Why did Logan tell Max and Dalton that I'm yours? Like I belong to you," Allie says, and I can hear it in her voice. She's upset with me, but at the same time, she likes that I feel the way I do about her. She *wants* to be claimed, but only by someone who deserves it.

I'm not an emotional man. I'm a cold bastard who typically sees every angle of the game board and can strategize my way out of something unpleasant or into something desirable at will. But I'm not sure how to answer Allie's question without scaring the shit out of her.

I think she expects it'll be some light, superficial answer that she can romanticize, but this is not a fairy tale and I'm damn sure not some sweet prince.

I'm the Bastard King.

The honest truth is obsessive and possessive, even more than her own assumptions about the line she thinks I've crossed, and I know the edge I'm walking is fine.

But the thrill of any degree of openness with her is tempting.

"Both of those questions have the same answer," I reply, reaching out and putting my hand on top of hers. "From the moment I saw you in that corner, a blood-splattered angel, I felt it inside me. You are mine. We danced around it even before that, but that instant was the switch when you became the most important thing to me. And since then, I've been patient. Fuck, I've been so patient."

My voice goes quiet as I reach up to slip a tendril of hair behind her ear. Even with the majority locked in a tight ballerina bun, there are wisps of hair breaking free from the bonds she has them in. It feels a bit like Allie . . . easy and tight on the surface, but with a desire to be free.

At her core, Allie is a free spirit, tamed and tamped down by life and circumstance. Alternatively, I am cold at the surface, and the deeper one delves into my soul, there is only darkness. Perhaps that's why I'm so attracted to her light. I stroke my thumb along her jaw, and she tilts her chin, giving me greater access.

"Why did you wait? Why now?" she whispers.

I notice she doesn't ask what happens if she says no. She's giving herself to me, and somehow, I feel like I've both been granted a precious gift and sullied a flawless jewel. She doesn't deserve a bastard like me.

That doesn't stop me, though, as I grasp her chin in my fingers, bringing her eyes to mine.

"You weren't ready then. I wasn't sure if you would ever be able to deal with me and everything that comes with that. I'm still not sure, but with you no longer at the club, I couldn't hold myself back any longer. And while tonight might have been hurtful and my actions likely criminal, this feels like

a karmic jumpstart, giving us a giant leap forward by exposing more than I ever thought I'd be able to. Every breath I take, I think of you. Every beat of my heart, I want you. Every thought in my mind is of you. And while some would call me a strong man, I could never, ever let you just leave my life without trying to at least come to this point, to look you in the eyes and tell you that whether you've known it or not, you are mine, marked eternally as such. Because you've marked me."

My words are intense, leaving no room for doubt at how serious I'm taking this with her. It's pedal to the metal, no coy dating with pecks on the cheek at the doorway. No will-he-won't-he. None of that shit. It's scary, it's frightening . . . it's jumping into the abyss without a parachute and praying your soul isn't consumed by it.

I only hope that she can find some dark romance in the honesty of them. Her breath hitches, her eyes jumping from my left to my right as she searches for . . . something. I don't bother to hide, wanting her to see me just this once.

All of me.

I might be an ugly monster that rules with an iron fist, a bastard that runs this town, but for her, I'm but a man whose heart is vulnerable to the one creature that can kill me with barely a thought . . . Allie Bancroft.

She lets the moment stretch, torturing me before mercifully placing her hand on my cheek and touching her forehead to mine.

"Okay. I'm ready—"

Before the words fully leave her lips, I'm on her, pressing her back against the pile of pillows and plundering her mouth. She has been in control for too long, leaving me dangling from a leash like a lovelorn puppy even though she was unaware of her power.

Even tonight, I submitted myself to her will and answered her questions. I apologized. That hasn't happened since, well, I can't remember. I have let her be the boss, but it's time I take the title back, show her who's in charge. Both here and everywhere.

I'm a force of nature. I'm thought, and will, and determination. I'm who took the world by the throat and am forcing it to bend to my plans.

I use a handful of her hair to hold her head in place, teasing and savoring her lips until she whines in need before giving her a deeper taste as our tongues twirl.

She tastes like cinnamon and coffee, a spicy combination much like her own fire. I press into her, needing every inch of her against me, even if there

is a thin layer of fabric separating our skin.

Thinking of her skin, I reach down, running a rough hand up her thigh, enjoying the satin of the legs that have taunted me endlessly.

Going higher, I grasp a handful of her ass, kneading her soft tautness in my grip. She whimpers, and I remember something.

“I have watched for months, Allie. Every dance on stage, you do a special move. You do it on purpose to taunt me. You know it, don’t you?” I ask, her eyes flaring in realization. She always does it, no matter the routine. She locks eyes on my window and lifts the right side of her skirt, rubbing her hand over her cheek before smacking it once, daring me as she gives me the private smile that has fueled my fantasies. “And I agree that you deserve a good spanking.”

Without warning, I grab her around the waist, pulling her up from the couch and lifting her into my arms. She’s light as a feather, and as she flies upward, she gasps at the weightless sensation.

“Whaaaa? What are you doing?”

I don’t answer in words, instead turning and arranging her over my lap. Her head twists back, eyes glaring at me, but I can see the breathless anticipation underneath her argumentative nature.

Her eyes narrow, disagreement on her tongue, but I circumvent her with a good smack to her right cheek. She sputters incredulously, her eyes flaring.

“You actually *spanked* me?”

I give her a victorious smirk and do it again, this time to her left cheek before rubbing the fabric, wishing I could pull her shorts down and do it to her bare flesh. Later. My control of the world starts with my control of myself.

She doesn’t say a word, but I can feel the slightest hint of vibration against my thighs and I realize that she moaned. I’m certain it was unintentional. This woman wouldn’t give in so easily, but it’s a sign that I’m moving in the right direction. I pop each cheek again and again in quick succession, her shorts riding up as she begins writhing in my lap. Soon, I can see at least half of each cheek, right at the dimpled part where her muscles pull the curve in slightly as she dances.

“I think you like your punishment, don’t you, Allie?” I ask as I rub at the pinkening globes of her ass, soothing the ache as the warmth of her skin heats my palm. “Tell me.”

Her moan is all the answer I need, and her hips buck, lifting her ass to my

hand, begging for more. I grab the fabric of her shorts, pulling them up tight between her cheeks in a sexy version of a wedgie that shows me her ass but also lets her pussy rub against the seam of the shorts.

Unconsciously, she grinds against me, rubbing that seam up and down her slit, soaking herself so much I can feel the hot dampness through the leg of my slacks as my own cock rages against her side, thick and throbbing.

I give each cheek one more solid tap as she cries out, so close to coming I can feel the tension of the precipice she's riding. I bend down, laying one sweet kiss to each pained cheek and using my nose to nuzzle along her crack and close to her pussy, breathing her sweet arousal in, needing to take some piece of her into my soul.

Before she goes over, I carefully adjust her shorts, setting them back in place and helping her rise up from my legs. I place her in my lap, sitting on one thigh as if I'm Santa and she's going to tell me what she wants.

She hisses slightly at the pressure on her sore ass and wiggles as she searches for some release, but she eventually settles, releasing her breath in a shaky exhalation that tells me she's almost in pain from being denied her release.

I hold her wrists in the cage of my hands and all of her in the confines of my heart. She doesn't move, but I know she can feel the rock-hard throbbing pressing against the side of her thigh, my cock demanding that it be allowed to fill her sweet, cherished folds and release my passionate torrent inside her.

But not yet. Because Allie was right. I've violated the codes of honor. And as much as this means a new start between us, I haven't earned the right to that yet.

"Is that it?" she whispers softly, looking back at me in desire and confusion.

"Punishment and reward, sweetheart. For us both."

She murmurs again, seemingly understanding even as the words are unintelligible. She half turns, resting her head on my shoulder, and minutes later, she drifts off, my arms around her waist and her warmth telling me that I'm an undeserving bastard . . . but I hold on anyway.

Chapter 7

Allie

The thought hits me as I towel off in my bathroom the next morning, the steam swirling around me and my body still tingling from all that happened last night.

I think I'm dating Dominick Angeline, head of the Angeline crime family. Mob boss of all of East Robinsville.

How in the fuck did that happen?

How is this my life? I remember falling asleep last night . . . in his lap.

How embarrassing is that?

The hardest part was waking up in bed alone. I'd been oddly disappointed that he wasn't curled up around me in my small bed, fighting for space with my overabundance of pillows.

I'd even fantasized about what he might look like relaxed and vulnerable, all harshness softened from his features by a peaceful sleep. But over my morning coffee, I consider that he might've recognized that I'd need some space this morning to process everything and had left to be nice. Polite. Sweet, even.

I smile. These are not words I think most people would use to describe Dominick Angeline.

Maybe cold, indifferent, ruthless? And while I'm sure they're true in some sense, they're definitely a part of his work. You don't get to be The Boss by being polite and sweet. You get them by being a motherfucker.

But Dom's not that with me.

Not at all. And after our impromptu dinner and last night, whatever that was, I think we're . . . something?

Maybe dating isn't the word, but it's something more than this distant dance we've been doing, where all my attention is drawn to him the instant he enters a room. Where I search the shadows around me, hoping for a glimpse of him in some weird form of 'gotcha' like it's a game he doesn't know we're playing. Where he owns me without even truly acknowledging that he wants me.

I pause at that last thought, thinking it through.

That's not really true.

He may not acknowledge whatever we've had with grand gestures, but he's always had this way of looking at me like I'm his everything.

Until last night, I didn't realize the depth of emotion behind his protective measures. I didn't realize just how much of his everything I've been. He crossed the line, but still, that level of commitment makes me feel ten feet tall and bulletproof.

I've had men caught up in my stage persona beg to worship the ground I walk on, and others in my real life who started out normal but ultimately treated me like shit mentally. They didn't want the woman inside. They just wanted the package— my face, my tits, my ass. I can definitely put those to good advantage, as evidenced by my job, but it's left me more than a bit doubtful that any man would care what was underneath the pretty packaging.

But Dom is something else entirely. Dominick took control, unafraid to send lightning through my body, but in every motion, every word, every look, he truly does worship me, but it's balanced with the way he respects me. The real me, not some image he's created. He's actually taken the time to learn about me, albeit in an odd way.

But he sees me in a way no one else ever has. And that is the most powerful aphrodisiac, one that puts me under his spell, hungry for every morsel of his attention. His words. His touch.

He makes me feel beautiful on the inside. And outside of family, that's not something I've had.

With a smile, I scribble on a sticky note, *You are beautiful . . . on the inside*. I slap it on the floor-to-ceiling mirror in front of me, adding it to the mix of choreo notes and self-affirmations already in place there.

I continue practicing the routine I've created for this week's Diva Dance class. That's what I've decided to call my non-pole studio class, figuring that every woman wants to tap into her inner Sasha Fierce-slash-Beyoncé for a seductive performance now and again.

With a swish of my hips, I trace my curves, following the movements in the reflection, but the disarray of pillows on the couch behind me catches my eye, and I turn in place, my chest rising and falling as my heart continues to hammer in my chest.

Usually, having a dance space in my apartment is a good thing, even if it is my teeny-tiny dining room that's been converted with a full wall of mirrors

and a ballet barre. The carpet's been covered with plywood and laminate until it's as smooth as a stage.

Yeah, I'm never getting the security deposit back, but it'd been a small price to pay for the comfort and release a 24/7 dance space allows.

Usually, I can tune everything else out when I practice, not seeing the dishes in the sink or the floor that needs to be vacuumed. But the disarrayed pillows draw me in like a moth to a flame, a visible reminder of what happened last night.

And specifically, what *didn't* happen.

After that spanking, I guess I'd expected him to press for more. Fuck, I wanted him to press me. I wanted him to tug my panties the rest of the way to the side, to mark me inside as well as out.

We've both been patient, but these months of prolonged foreplay have built an inferno inside me that's already on the edge of explosion. Even a small step like last night has me wanting to rush into his fire, arms wide open and eyes squeezed shut, leaping blindly into whatever may come.

Like that thick dick I felt pressed against my thigh last night. I can definitely see that coming for me.

Terrible puns aside, I haven't been with anyone in a long time. I was waiting for him, and it seems the time for waiting has finally come to fruition, if I can use his words last night as any indicator.

I'm not a shy woman, never been one to hem and haw about what I want, but I am a rule follower. There's a method to the madness in my mind, a progression from one step to the next that creates that beautiful flow of movement, and I've followed those steps precisely.

I've respected that Dominick wanted to keep me at arm's length while I was an employee. I've honored that he held himself back from me with an unspoken demand that I hold myself back from anyone but him, knowing that it sometimes left me lonely. And horny.

But the time for rules and games is over. He showed me his heart last night, with his words more than his body, but that's the true barometer of a man. And that's why after class tonight, I'm going to Petals.

I haven't been in over a week, and my first showcase feature isn't for another week and a half. I miss the other girls there, my friends and sisters in the sorority of skin, so a visit seems in order.

But the main reason is still to see Dominick.

I'm more than ready when I park in the back lot at Petals and wait for

Gavin to park next to me.

After our chat last night, Dom had texted me this morning, saying that perhaps some openness was warranted, and then he gave me the schedule for my assigned detail for the week. It'd been a weirdly kind gift, like he was letting me in and dropping the curtain a bit more. Gavin's on 'Allie Patrol' tonight and followed me from the studio.

I'd asked if he would not tell Dom I'm on my way, wanting to surprise him, but he'd just laughed and said Dom knows where I am at all times anyway.

Cryptic, but I think he had already told Dom we were leaving the studio. Whatever. I'm just ready to see him, and if it's not quite a surprise, so be it.

The back door opens, and I rush inside, greeting Thomas. He's been here at Petals longer than I have, and I recognize he's someone within Dom's hierarchy now, but still, he's just a good guy to me, sometimes a bit off-color with his humor, but overall, a good guy.

Mostly, I beeline straight for the backstage dressing room. "Hey!" I call out as I burst through the door.

There's a chorus of high-pitched squeals from the girls, and then Tina, one of the other experienced girls, says, "Where the hell have you been, girl? I was gettin' ready to send you a thank-you card for the extra work!"

Her eyes are playful and teasing, belying her question and saying that she really just wants the details of what's been going on.

"Oh, you know, around. Been putting in a lot of hours at the studio. Amelia did fantastic today, by the way."

Tina smiles at the compliment about her little girl, who is the light of her existence. Tina supports both her daughter and her mother with her job at Petals, and her mother helps take care of Amelia in return, bringing her to Encore for weekly lessons.

"Yeah, well, guess she got something from me. Long as she don't have to do this shit too. I want my baby to put that brain she has to good use." She taps the side of her head.

I nod, giving Tina a warm look. "She's smart as a whip, Tina. You know that."

Tina smiles, then clears her throat. "I heard you added some sexy classes and are starting up some pole gig too. I plan on booking a private session to learn some of those tricks you've got. Time for you to teach us padawans."

We laugh at our jokes. She's an inner nerd at heart. "Seriously, though,

good for you. As long as you keep teaching the babies, we're solid, because Amelia only goes to ballet for you."

Her words touch me. Maybe it's in the way Dom runs this place or maybe it's in how he hires us, but there's a real feeling of family. We really are a supportive group of girls, and I know they'd have my back in an instant if needed, the same way I would for them.

"Thanks, honey. I'm teaching the kids, but I'm still around here too," I assure Tina. "Actually, I've got a feature soon, and I'm keeping my fingers crossed that the finances work out on that idea. It's a bit counterintuitive to the usual *give them what they want*, more *only give them what they want every once in a while* and hope they pay extra for the rarity."

One of the other girls, a newbie named Sarah, chimes in. "Well, if they don't, I'm sure Boss Man will make up the difference for you."

She says it in a good-humored teasing way, but it stings a bit anyway. I try to laugh it off, not sounding all that convincing.

"Not really how that works." But at the five sets of eyes boring into me, I falter some more. "Uhm, so does everyone know?"

Tina laughs loudly. "Does everybody know?"

She looks at the other girls, her face telegraphing *Do you believe this shit?* When she turns back to me, she grins, but seeing my face, she gets up and talks to me in that mom voice that tells me she's going to make sure this is the last time anyone says anything about me and Dom.

"Hon, we've known there was something between the two of you for months. We knew you weren't breaking the rules. I woulda called your ass on that. But we could get high on the fumes of your chemistry just by walking by. What do you call those? Phera . . . phomo . . . pheromones?" She snaps her fingers. "Yeah, pheromones in spades. We had a pool going on for a while, betting on when you two would finally combust. Too bad Logan put a stop to that after his dates were all past. Sore loser, I think." She winks like that's funny, but I'm aghast.

"Whoa, I'm not really sure what to say to all that," I say quietly. "Tina, you—"

Tina pats my shoulder, ever the momma of the group, "Baby, nobody here is judging you for falling for Dominick. He's a good man, even with who he is, and it's not like any of us are jealous because we thought we had a chance with him. We've always known you've had that man on a string, for a lot longer than you've known it, and it's about damn time you yanked on that

line.”

She mimes jacking off, her hand pumping an invisible cock.

I laugh at her outrageous action as much as the thought that I have Dominick on a string. If anything, it's the exact opposite. I feel like he's not teasing me to him. He's just inserted himself into my life and expected that I'll accept that.

Funny thing is, I really want to. He's different than I'd thought, kinder and more respectful, and definitely hotter than the ice-cold image he projects. In fact, I can't believe I ever thought he was cold.

“Thanks, Tina,” I reply, not hugging her simply because I don't want body glitter all over my black T-shirt. “All right, ladies, I think I'm gonna head upstairs to my man.”

Claiming Dominick, even lightly to my friends, feels big, really big, but I think I like it.

It feels right.

There's a round of catcalls, but Tina's words are the most heartfelt. “Allie, go be happy. Go on, girl.”

I swear she's looking at me with a hint of motherly pride as I leave the dressing room, which is extra-odd because Tina, for all her wisdom and life advice, isn't that much older than me. But the hand life dealt her made her pretty perceptive, and I'll keep her advice in mind.

Upstairs, I knock and go in at Dominick's called-out invitation.

I've gotta give him credit. He does a good job of pretending he hasn't known I've been downstairs for the past ten minutes as he crosses the room and kisses my cheek.

“A pleasant surprise. You couldn't wait to see me until later?”

I smirk at his cocky arrogance and assumptions, teasing back. “Maybe I came to see the girls, not you. I just wanted to toss you a bone before going and seeing how Sarah's new routine is working out.”

His smile falls in increments, his eyes darkening at my insolence. If he were looking at anyone else this way, I'm sure they'd be shaking in terror. I'm shaking, but there's not a drop of fear in my blood.

No, for me, it's all adrenaline and arousal.

He smiles, calling my bluff. “Well then, by all means, let's get you a seat for the show.” He takes my hand, leading me to the wall of glass windows.

He grabs his desk chair, a big black leather throne fit for a king.

No . . . fit for a Boss.

He sits down and pulls me into his lap. We face the windows, which are transparent right now, though I know that from the floor, they're blacked out.

I don't know what kind of one-way glass magic Dom invested in for this wall, but it's worth it. I feel like I'm floating above the crowd, with an unrestricted view of Sarah on stage as she twirls around the pole, one leg bent and one leg stretched long, her hair hanging down her back in a blonde sheet.

"Do you like what you see?" he whispers, his voice hot against my ear.

I squirm, trying to relieve the building pressure as my body responds to the warmth he's creating inside me already.

"She's good . . . knows how to play up her features and be sexy without being sleazy," I say, my eyes evaluating Sarah's technique. "You know, Tina said something about a private lesson to work on a trick or two. I hadn't thought of doing that too. I'm feeling a little like the Pied Piper of Stripperdom . . . women of all ages, stages, shapes, and sizes following me along to find their inner goddesses."

My voice is hushed, excitement tinged with the responsibility of helping these women grow in their own self-confidence and power. I gasp when Dominick's finger teases just above the waistband of my jeans, finding the sensitive skin of my back.

"I'd certainly follow you."

I smirk at the promise, glancing back to see him watching me, not looking at Sarah at all. "Dom, do you ever watch any of the dancers?"

"Of course," he says, still watching me. "Mostly the try-outs, and I try to catch each girl's performance every once in a while, strictly professionally to make sure they're fitting in well with the clientele. But I always watch your dances." He leans into me and teases my ear with hot breath. "Unprofessionally. I watch you just for myself."

His deep voice sends a thrill to me, and I turn back to watch Sarah just to keep myself under control. Still, Dom questions me. "Do you miss it? It's been a bit since you've been on stage."

I take my time before answering. I don't want to sound needy, but also, I want Dom to understand the nuance of what I want to say. I don't have the same skill with words that I do with my body. I can't express myself quite so clearly.

"Yes and no. I've always been on stage, performing in one way or another, and I enjoy that rush of connecting with the audience. But really, it's about me connecting with myself, with the shy insecurities, with the bold

brashness, with the hopeful innocence and whatever else the piece requires of me. I get to experience and explore every facet of myself on stage.”

The truth feels exposing, making me vulnerable, and I work to retreat to safer ground. “Plus, the applause is pretty sweet,” I add with a grin, looking back over my shoulder. “I always thought you were clapping too.”

Dominick doesn’t smile back. Instead, he looks at me, looks into me like I’m a puzzle he’s trying to solve, taking every word I say as a clue to some solution that ultimately explains me.

But I’m the simple one. He’s the enigma blanketed in layers of questions. I feel like I’m just beginning to get to know him, and it’s on his terms as he doles out tidbits of information like clues leading me deeper and deeper into his web.

It’s on the tip of my tongue to ask, demand that he share a story with me, something, anything, just to learn about him. But before the words leave my tongue, he lifts me off his lap.

“Dance for me.”

That is certainly not what I expected. “What?”

Dom pushes back and rolls himself back to his desk. “You miss the stage, miss exploring who you are. Do that for me, *with* me. Let me see who you are, right now, in this moment.”

There’s no request in any of his words, merely orders, soft as they may be. I walk to the center of his office, and he presses a button on the console on his desk, letting the speakers in his office come to life with the music from downstairs.

“I’m not dressed for this,” I say awkwardly as I get a feel for the music.

Dominick’s grin is feral but supportive. “I know. That’s why this is sweeter. I don’t want your stage persona, Allie. I just want to see *you*. I want to see you express yourself, how you feel, how you . . . exist. Tell me with your body what you want me to know.”

I bend down, slipping my shoes off and setting them to the side, not in a sexy way, but just in a casual movement. Dom lifts an eyebrow but nods in encouragement.

“Good girl. Now dance . . . for me.”

The music fills me, throbbing bass and drums that click inside me. I open my eyes, watching Dominick as I feel the tigress inside me begin to stalk her prey, the man she wants.

His gaze travels up and down my body, pausing at my tits and hips but

also taking the time to appreciate every inch as I begin to move, sashaying across the floor before kicking my left leg up and coming up onto my right toes, thanking whatever genius came up with spandex denim. Dom's eyes widen as I hold the pose, bending my leg at the knee before lowering it while unbuttoning my jeans.

I tease them down my thighs, trying to accomplish the impossible . . . taking off fitted jeans without looking like a total doofus.

I do my best, a genuine smile crossing my face at the absurdity of wiggling the denim down and off.

I twirl, letting Dom see the curves of my ass peeking out from beneath my top before I slip it off too, turning to face him as I drop it to the floor. My curls flutter around my shoulders, and I shake my head, letting the length fall behind my shoulders so nothing is hidden. I reach behind my back and unhook my bra, pulsing my body to the beat slowly as I inch the lacy straps down my arms but hold the cups to my breasts.

The tease has Dominick panting, craning to see every inch of my body at once as his eyes dilate just from watching me. My nipples harden when I see the growing bulge in his slacks, knowing that I'm doing that to him. Me, Allison Bancroft, not Allie Angel.

I face away from him, letting him see the expanse of my back as I remove my bra and toss it overhead where it lands in his lap. He grabs it, fisting it like it's more than a slip of silky lace.

I swing my hips side to side, drawing his attention lower by running my hands down my curves to one of the two places I desperately want him to fill.

The other is my heart, but that seems dangerous to consider, so I let the dreamy thought drift away like my panties as they hit the floor and I step out of them.

Fully nude for him, I sway seductively.

"Stop," he says, softly but forcefully, his voice barely audible over the music from the speakers.

I freeze instantly, and Dom's eyes meet mine despite the enticement of my bared body.

"You have pretty words to explain your desire to dance, to be on stage, and they are true, but I think you haven't admitted the most obvious one."

I suddenly feel vulnerable again with nothing to hide behind, and the naughty fun of the moment squeezes in tight as I fear what he sees. He comes around the desk, and now I'm the one being stalked as he slips a hand around

my neck. I don't resist but instead lift my chin defiantly in false bravado.

"What do you mean?"

He leans forward to whisper in my ear, holding me in place as if I'd try to get away. "You like to be watched. It feeds some beast in your core to not just explore those experiences but to have them watched by the audience."

He's not wrong, though the way he says it makes it seem dirtier than it is. I shrug, not giving him the satisfaction of my agreement nor the disappointment of a denial.

He growls, turning me around and pushing me forward until I'm pressed up against the glass. I know that we can see out, but the people below can't see us.

"Look down there, Allison. See all those people in the audience? Do you want them to watch you dance, watch you seduce me with your smile and your sexy body? Do you want them to watch while I fuck your sweet pussy?"

With his last question, he moves his free hand down my back to cup me, hissing as he discovers how wet I am.

Not willing to admit it, I sass back as a last-ditch effort of rebellion. "If I'm the exhibitionist, you're the voyeur, always watching from your perch above everyone else. You like to watch and manipulate people like chess pieces for your game."

He's not nearly as shy about the admission as I am, chuckling proudly. "I do like to watch . . . but only you. And I'm going to watch you give yourself fully to me, right here, overlooking that entire audience. Perhaps I'll make the glass transparent? Would you like that?"

I bite my lip, shaking my head. "No, not them. Just you."

His grin is full of victorious pride as my words betray me, confirming the exhibitionist tendencies I'd never really given a second thought. He rewards the honesty by slipping his fingers through my folds, gathering my juices and spreading them over my clit.

His touch is teasing, never staying exactly where I want him, not out of lack of skill but simply because he can since he's in control.

He presses me firmly against the window, the cool glass against my cheek and breasts in contrast to the heat he's building at my core as he tugs my hips back, forcing me to arch for him.

He smacks my ass, and I whimper in need. "Good girl," he praises me, and I can't help but circle my hips, wanting more, *needing* more. "Tell me. Who do you need?"

“You,” I whimper, and at the first thrust of his finger inside me, I involuntarily clench down, wanting to feel every inch, even if it’s not his cock.

His groan is guttural from beside me, and his finger slips deeper, curling and making my fingers claw against the glass.

“So fucking tight, Allie. I don’t know if you can even take my cock in your tiny pussy. It’s going to be a stretch, that’s for damn sure.”

He’s dirty, his normally formal tones forgotten as I drive him as wild as he’s driving me. And his words are enough to bring me closer to coming, imagining how full I’ll feel when he finally gives in to what we both want.

A gush of wetness eases his way as he adds a second finger before beginning to fingerfuck me in earnest. My eyes flutter closed at the overwhelming sensation, but Dominick slaps my ass, his voice harsh and commanding.

“No, keep your eyes open and on the crowd below you, so clueless to your getting filled with my fingers right above them. So close, but they don’t deserve your exhibition. Only I do, so give me one, Allie. I’m watching, and I want to see you come for me.”

Instantly, I’m on the edge, ready to shatter at the slightest stimulation, and Dominick does what I don’t expect. He shoves another thick finger inside me, and the stretch verges on pain, but the pleasure is so overwhelming that I come hard, crying out his name and steaming the glass with my panting breaths.

Ignoring his order to keep my eyes on the audience, I focus on Dominick, whose eyes are burning with something bigger, deeper, darker than lust as he watches me. I can feel my juices leaking over his fingers, and the weight of his gaze sends me spiraling again, an aftershock orgasm riding the wave of the first.

His fingers still deep inside me, he growls into my ear, “Tell me, Allie. In this moment, whose are you?”

I don’t even think about my answer, the word quietly falling from my lips unbidden and honest. “Yours.”

I see the flash in the depths of his eyes though his expression doesn’t change, and then he presses a gentle kiss to my neck before whispering in my ear, so soft I almost miss it, the breath of absolution upon his soul. “Mine.”

Chapter 8

Dominick

Looking at the front door of the duplex I'm standing in front of, I'm struck by how often my business is conducted in the most innocuous of settings. The door's painted bright blue, like sunny skies and happiness. The house itself is a bright white, seemingly freshly painted.

I can appreciate that someone is caring for the home, and even their color palette. Nothing garish, but also nothing beige and boring. It's tasteful, and that's something I can give credit for. Though who's doing the caring leaves a bitter taste in my mouth.

I glance once at Gavin, who stands by the car at the curb.

At his nod that everything is clear, I lift my fist and knock twice. There's a screeching cry from inside and a hushed voice whispering, both sounds getting closer to the door.

When it creaks open, I see a tiny woman with a bundle of blanket in her arms. I can't see the baby cradled there, but as most people aren't in the habit of caring for baby banshees, I make the obvious assumption.

The woman looks confused but continues her bouncing attempt to soothe the baby.

"Can I help you?" Her voice is high-pitched, not unpleasant, but it adds to the youthful effect of her threadbare cutoff shorts and tank top. The only major signs that she's not a high school babysitter are the tattoos trailing down her left arm and the possessive way she's holding the baby, obviously her own and not a paid charge.

I can understand her feeling of protectiveness, though her first mistake was in opening the door at all to a stranger she doesn't know. She might be experienced, but she's not that wise.

"Myra Cole?"

I remind myself to say it as though it's a question, though I already know exactly who she is.

"Yes," she replies warily. "Who're you?"

"I'm Dominick Angeline. May I come in?"

My name means nothing to her, a pleasant surprise. Myra's blue eyes scan me head to toe as the door inches closed ever so slightly.

Smart woman.

"What's this about?" she asks, bouncing the babe and stealthily moving the door another two inches closed with her hip. The baby, sensing the tension in her mother, stops caterwauling, and I get a glimpse of a round, if still mostly bald, head.

My lips tilt up in the slightest smile, not altogether fake, designed to put her at ease. "I'm here to see Robert Zallow."

She's good, not flinching at all at the name, no increased breathing, not a single tell. The lack of reaction is what tells me that it's a practiced response. Most people, when they're confronted with a strange request, will at least narrow their eyes a little in confusion.

Myra doesn't. "Don't know anybody by that name. If you'll excuse me . . . have a good day."

She makes no attempt to hide her movement to close the door this time, but there's no way she's getting the door closed past my shoulder. I lower my voice, dropping the soft tones.

"Let's not play coy. I'm here to see Mr. Zallow. I'm willing to sit on your couch like a proper guest while he comes home, or I can meet him in a less . . . *pleasant* situation."

I let her imagination fill in the gaps. I find that people are much more creative than I am with threats. Myra's no exception, coming up with ones specific to her own fears. It's a twisted joy of mine, watching her eyes flicker as her own worst-case scenario filters through her mind, wondering if I can make it come true.

I wait as she swallows once and then opens the door and gestures with her chin toward what looks like a living room. "Won't you come in, Mr. Angeline? Would you like a drink?"

Her voice is pure saccharin, fake politeness with an undercurrent of fear. I step inside, taking in the small home with a glance. A couch and single chair take up the living room space, likely once fluffy, but now the lumps are apparent. There's a tear in the fabric, but someone's already mended it with secure if ugly stitching.

The television sits on a wooden cabinet, locks already in place on the doors though the baby likely can't even sit up yet.

It shows care, forethought, and attention to detail, along with an intention

to stay here long-term.

I go over and settle into the chair, unwilling to offer the entry my back, and resume pleasantries.

“Thank you, Miss Cole. Water would be lovely.”

She disappears into the kitchen for a moment, and I hear the faucet turn on and off before she reappears, handing me a plastic cup emblazoned with a BBQ joint’s name on it.

Her hand is steady, though her eyes are twitchy, watching for any threatening movement.

I feign taking a small sip, though I doubt she has poison handy. Still, I didn’t get to where I am by being careless. Resting the drink on the arm of the chair, I gesture to the phone on the couch, a small smile on my lips.

“Feel free to call Robert when you’re ready.”

She bends down to grab the phone, choosing to stand rather than sit, keeping herself close to the back-door exit. Smart lady.

It’s a pity she’s running with an Eagle Raider, though a woman like her being with Zallow is already perhaps a more valuable recommendation than I’d previously received on his character.

She picks up the phone and dials quickly, whispering harshly when the call’s picked up. “Sorry to bother you at work, but there’s someone here to see you.” She pauses a second, and I presume he repeats her words because she says again, “Yes, here. Sitting in your chair in the living room. Says his name is Dominick Angeline.”

I see the moment the questions in her eyes turn to terror and watch as she takes two steps back, getting closer to the back door.

“Miss Cole,” I say, raising my voice simply to make sure that it comes through clearly on the other end of the phone call, “if I’d wanted to harm you, I would have already. I merely wish to speak to him.”

I hear the yell as the phone slips from her ear, and on the other end, a deep voice promises, “I’m on my way, baby.”

There’s a soft buzzing tone as the line disconnects, and I imagine that right now, Robert Zallow is probably setting a personal best sprint time out of whatever job he’s working at, rushing home to come in like a saving knight in shining armor to rescue his woman from the big, bad dragon.

That’s me.

But not now.

Though I can be monstrous, dangerous, and threatening, today is merely

about setting boundaries and expectations. If Robert Zallow can behave like a gentleman, this should be nothing more than a polite but professional conversation.

Five silent, frozen minutes later, the loud rumble of a Harley being driven to its limits breaks the tension. I can feel Myra's relief at the return of her man. Apparently she's just as entwined in this apparent fairy tale where he's rushing in to save her.

Odd how those childhood stories are so deeply ingrained in our psyches. I suspect that it steers more of our behavior than most people are willing to admit.

But if anything, the man rushing through the door and shoving Myra and her baby behind him is no prince. Instead, he's a big bad wolf, a mess of shaggy blond hair windblown from the frantic ride, cheeks rough with weeks of growth, and an oil-stained tank top and jeans atop black engineer boots.

He doesn't look at Myra, his eyes fixed on me.

"You okay?" he says over his shoulder.

Her response has just a touch of vinegar, but she's quiet at least. "I'm fine. Mr. Angeline has been polite . . . mostly."

I lift my eyebrows at that, considering I've been more than polite under the circumstances. Her man's defensively hard look would be scary if I were anyone other than who I am. Behind Robert, I can see Gavin coming up the walkway, but I shake my head once, stopping him. No need for that yet.

"Please sit," I say, choosing to let the steam out of the pot before the situation boils over needlessly, though ordering a man around in his own home is rather cocky of me. I lean back, taking a small delight that my chair is apparently 'his chair', watching as he sinks to the couch.

"Go on and take the baby to the bedroom, Myra," he says.

She takes a step toward the hall, following his instructions wordlessly, but I hold up a hand, stopping her. "That won't be necessary. I believe you both should hear this . . . since it concerns the entire family. Please sit."

She pulls the baby tighter to her body, her eyes flashing to Zallow, and he scoots to the side, keeping himself between me and her as she sits beside him.

I take a deep breath, letting a long sigh out into the room.

"There are times when melodrama takes over the world. This is one of those times, I suspect. This feels like a rather significant build-up to what is really just a mere conversation. Mr. Zallow, I am Dominick Angeline. I suspect that means something to you. I simply wanted to stop by and

introduce myself, seeing as how you've moved into East Robinsville so suddenly. And without my permission."

His eyes narrow as he takes me in, still trying to decide whether I'm here to harm his blossoming family. Still, he sees that I haven't moved in any threatening way.

"My apologies, Sir. My move-in was unexpected." He glances at the baby and then back at me. "And unrelated to any work or affiliations I may have."

His words are careful and crisp, like the military man I know him to be, but also ones of intelligence and manners. I re-evaluate him as he speaks. He might look a little wild, but there are brains behind that outer mask. I wonder if the discrepancy is intentional, meant to confuse others and lead them to underestimate him.

I won't make that mistake. I can see the cunning light in his eyes and recognize a man who could be either a valuable ally or a deadly opponent.

I rub at my chin as though I'm thinking, but I already know my play here, what will give me the upper hand. "Perhaps you'll let me tell you a story?"

He swallows once, an involuntary tell, but nods his chin. I lean forward, uncrossing my legs and planting my elbows on my knees, looking Zallow directly in his eyes.

"Once upon a time, there was a king. He was known as the Bastard King, not because of his birth but because he ruled his kingdom with an unyielding grip. He kept his subjects safe from threats outside their borders." I glance pointedly out the window and then back to the family before me. "But also from dangers within. To do so, he kept a tight rein on everything and everyone who lived in his kingdom. He knows all. Names, addresses, familial ties, allegiances, strengths, weaknesses . . . everything that made even those who loved him admit privately that yes, he was a bit of a bastard. He didn't like engaging in violence but knew it was a tool, a necessary evil, if you will. But more commonly, his showing up for a friendly chat to someone's home would be considered a sign of respect or a warning if they had mis-stepped in some way. Only after ignoring a warning would he lose his . . . patient nature."

"Some, I'm sure, have tried to take advantage of that king," Zallow says in reply, and I nod. "Yet he stayed solidly on the throne."

"Because he only warned once," I reply. "Then he crushed his opponents mercilessly. I'm sure you understand. If someone from East Robinsville, say, one of Pete's boys, decided to set up shop next to your clubhouse in

Johnstown, you'd have something to say about that. Correct?"

Zallow scoffs lightly. "Damn straight, we would."

Myra gives him a harsh glare, and he clears his throat, continuing. "I'm not setting up shop here, Mr. Angeline. Just trying to make a home."

I nod. "I'm aware of that, or this conversation would be rather different. I'll admit I don't always hold true to the fairy tale and give warnings. Sometimes, harsher engagement is necessary from the get-go. Something I'm sure you understand. You also understand rank and protocol from both your time in the service and your time with the Eagle Raiders. Yet, you chose to skirt both in this instance, which begs the question . . . *why?*"

His face clouds, and his gaze turns inward, as though he's deciding something important. After a few moments, he looks up, his eyes full of concern.

"Mr. Angeline, do you have someone? A woman? A best friend? A dog, for fuck's sake? Someone really important?"

Allie flashes to mind, but I'm certainly not telling this man about my love life. Instead, I hum an agreement, which he seems to accept because he continues.

"Then you understand loving someone so much that you want to shout it from the fucking rooftops, tattoo their name on your skin, claim them proudly everywhere you go, but knowing that would be dangerous for them. So you bottle that up and keep how special they are private to protect them from the bad parts of your life. And you know they deserve better, and you wish that you could give it to them, but you're giving them all you have and just hanging on for dear life, hoping that it's enough. To keep them with you and to keep them safe, always walking that line."

His words are honest and hit with a sharp sting, more accurate than he could've guessed. And with his simple declaration, the pieces fall into place. These two MC soldiers aren't living here as any means of moving into my city. They're merely watching each other's backs as one of their own tries to find whatever version of a 'happily ever after' he can.

It's poetic in a way, a tiny dandelion whisper of hope to even a monster like me. I nod my head several times and let the corners of my mouth tilt up in a hint of a smile.

"I can understand that, even appreciate it. But rules are rules. What exactly are you willing to do to stay on the proper side of that line?"

Zallow's off the couch in an instant flash of anger, his words spat with the

venom he has yet to show. “I’m not one of your guys, Angeline. I’ve already pledged allegiance and that’s not fucking changing.”

I didn’t move when he stood and I don’t now either, simply sitting back and letting my sigh of disappointment wash over them both. Myra grabs at his hand, pulling him back to the couch beside her. She holds his hand tightly, her thumb running a soothing path along his skin. It’s a fascinating thing to behold, the way he relaxes in increments from her mere touch.

She’s obviously somewhat submissive to him, she’d have to be to be his Old Lady, but she has such power in their dynamic. It reminds me of Allie and myself, though Allie has yet to recognize the power she holds over me.

Once she has calmed the beast, I give him a genuine smile. “I never asked you to. In fact, I respect that more than you’d know. But that wasn’t what I was implying when I said rules are rules.”

His eyebrows furrow together, and then he gets it. He growls under his breath, frustrated and searching for a way out of doing this. Such a simple thing, a small ask, really, but it’s the point of the matter between men like us. Of course, he’s not on my level, but he is a proud man, and I’m asking him to castrate himself, in front of his woman, no less.

He looks to Myra and then to the babe I’ve yet to glimpse in the bundle of blankets, his eyes soft, but when he turns back to me, his gaze hardens.

The words are forced out of his throat, but they come. “Mr. Angeline, may I live inside your city with my family? I intend no ill will toward you and yours. I merely wish to live a simple, happy life, knowing we are safe here.”

I know he can see the sparkling light of triumph in my eyes, though the win is small now that I know he’s not a scout looking for a way into my town.

“You and your family are more than welcome in East Robinsville, Mr. Zallow . . . provided you maintain a household, not a stronghold. No more than your immediate family plus one at any time. I will make Pete aware of our arrangements, and I trust that you will you do the same for Mr. Chambers as his VP.”

Robert nods, and then he realizes what I said a heartbeat later. “How did you—” he starts to ask.

I tsk a bit, giving him a knowing smirk. “Did you forget what I told you about the king? He maintains his throne because he knows everything, even those things that others think are hidden from his sight. Please tell Silas hello

for me.”

I pause, waiting for it to sink in that I’m acquainted with his MC President. He pales for a moment before reddening, his jaw clenching as I turn to Myra.

“Miss Cole, my condolences on the unexpected loss of your mother. It seems you’ve done her memory a great service with the way you’ve maintained her home.” I turn toward Robert. “Take good care of them.”

Confident that I’ve dropped enough information to assure his continued easy homesteading and lack of violence in my town, I make my way to the door.

I glance back once, taking in the family. The love is obvious, even through the fear of the moment. He would die to protect them. He loves them that much. The vision is oddly sentimental to me, making me wistful for happier times with my own father and mother, before I knew what the family business really was and I’d thought my father simply a businessman who would regale us with silly stories over Sunday dinners.

The door swings shut behind me, and I climb into the back of my Mercedes, letting Gavin drive us to the club as I text Pete.

Eagle Raiders secure. Zallows + one allowed safe passage. Be watchful.

I know that Zallows prostrated himself today, but if a future situation requires him to break his vow to me, he will readily do so because his allegiance lies elsewhere.

I’ll let sleeping dogs lie, but I won’t turn my back.

Chapter 9

Allie

“Hey Allie, can you come here for a minute, please?” I hear Donna ask from the front lobby. I finish wiping down the mirror and toss the rag and spray bottle of cleaner back in the cabinet in the corner.

“Coming!” I holler and fast-walk down the hallway. I can see Donna and Eileen at her desk, looking back and forth between me and something in the lobby. Confusion is written all over their faces, which makes my steps slow and my eyebrows pull together. “What’s up, guys?”

Eileen’s face breaks into a huge grin, her eyes open wide, and she points a finger to something I can’t see, licking her upper lip like a giant chocolate gummy bear’s in the lobby . . . or Chris Pine. She’s got a thing for him.

I take a few more steps and I see what has them all buzzy. Standing in the lobby of Encore is Dominick. He’s dressed as he always is, in a custom-tailored suit that emphasizes his broad shoulders, a silk tie and pocket square . . . yet somehow, he looks oddly at ease, considering there are gym bags and kids sprawled out on the floor around him and a group of three moms in the corner openly ogling him.

When he sees me, his eyes light up for a moment before going dark as he takes me in. I’m not dressed inappropriately for the studio, but the dance shorts and sports bra seem to make him . . . angry?

Or is that desire making his eyes stormy?

Maybe an equal measure of both, I decide, but whatever it is, it’s heated and fiery, making me want to twirl around a bit to give him a better view.

“Allison,” he says, his voice seeming deeper than usual in the space that usually only holds teenage girl screeches and classical music with the occasional burst of pop. As far as greetings go, it’s light on the words but feels heavy, powerful.

“Dominick,” I reply, trying to sound as casual and as normal as he does, if anything, to screw with Donna’s and Eileen’s heads. It’s a total fail, as my voice comes out breathy and fizzy. I want to shout, ‘He came to see me at work!’ and then I want to tell the moms in the corner to back the fuck up

because he's mine.

Instead, my eyes stay locked with his, which seems to amuse him for some reason, and I wonder if he can read my mind. He steps forward, placing a chaste kiss to my cheek, and I'm surrounded by his spicy, masculine scent. I fight to hold myself back from climbing him like a spider monkey and burying my nose in his neck for another hit. Instead, I step back as he turns and picks something up from the small table next to him.

I'm shocked and blushing furiously when he holds out a small bouquet. "These are for you."

I take the wrapped flowers, burying my nose in them, but honestly, he smells better.

"Thank you," I tell him politely, trying to maintain my dignity in the lobby as best I can. "Wildflowers? You seem like a roses kind of guy."

He smirks, the cocky one that lets me know he's about to say something he knows I'll like, and then twists a lock of my hair around his finger before stroking the back of my neck.

"I do prefer roses, but you're more like a wildflower. A bit untamed and unruly, but beautiful not in spite of the wildness but because of it."

His words are quiet, meant for me, but I can hear every woman in the room sigh. A few of the older girls, just at that age when boys stop being icky and start being interesting, even gawk openly. I laugh and give him a saucy wink and kiss him on the cheek.

"Well played, Mr. Angeline."

His lips twitch like he's fighting back a grin himself.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, surprised to see him. I lead him off to the side of the room, where we can have at least a modicum of privacy, and lower my voice. "Is everything okay? I saw Logan's car in the lot already, and he's supposed to be my shadow home today."

Dominick looks pleased. I think it's because I've been inordinately agreeable to the whole chaperone thing. It was weird at first, no lie, but I've already gotten so used to it that having it in the open seems natural.

"He was. But I've asked him to check out the gym next door. They're friendly now, apparently, and he's over there working on jiu-jitsu techniques in his off time."

I grin, glad to hear it. "I'm glad Logan made friends with Max and Dalton."

His eyes narrow when I say their names, obviously not liking that on my

lips, so I correct it immediately but with enough sass to let him know I saw his flash of jealousy.

“So, *Dominick*, if Logan’s busy now, who’s escorting me home tonight?”

I play coy as if I don’t know that’s why he’s here, and at the sound of his name on my lips, he chuckles, rolling his eyes.

“Me. Get your bag.”

I offer him a soft smile and consider arguing back just for fun, but he knows as well as I do that I want this. I want him to show up, bring me flowers, take me home . . . or just take me wherever he is.

So I don’t bother with the façade, instead looking back toward reception, where everyone’s still trying to do their best to pretend they’re not listening. It makes me grin.

“Hey, Donna. I’m all done with classes and Studio Two is clean. Mind if I knock off a little early today?”

From behind her, I can hear Eileen snicker, but Donna tosses me a thumbs-up. “Honestly, I don’t know why you’re still here. I’d already be halfway down the interstate if a man like that showed up with flowers for me.”

I squeak a bit, trying my best not to jump up and down like a teenager. “Good point! Here, hold these, please.” I set the flowers back in Dominick’s hands and still can’t help breaking out into a *chasse* down the hallway to get my things.

He must make a move to follow me because I hear Donna clear her throat. “Nuh-uh. You stay right there, Mister. She said she just cleaned Studio Two, and I’m not redoing it because you two made a mess in it. Don’t bother denying it. I can read that you’re a split-second away from doing things I won’t say in front of the teenagers.”

I laugh, but the fact that she can see that in the tension between us is sweet and sexy. I pull loose sweats on over my shorts, a V-neck T-shirt over my bra, and slipper boots on my feet.

It’s not a sexy look by any stretch of the imagination. It’s more ragamuffin college girl than anything refined, but it’s standard dance cover-up gear and all I have with me.

Doesn’t matter, though. When I step back into the lobby, Dominick looks at me like I’m dressed to the nines for a night on the town.

“Ready, beautiful?”

I realize it’s probably one of the only times he’s asked me a question, not

given me orders or leading statements, and I can't help but blush again. It feels important, like he's letting me decide for myself whether I'm ready, not just to go, but to go with him.

Obviously, this isn't just a casual ride home. But nothing with Dominick is ever casual, I suspect.

Still, he's letting me decide.

"I'm absolutely ready," I tell him and hope he hears the deeper meaning in my words too. Judging by the approval I see in his eyes as he hands me back the bouquet, he heard it loud and clear.

He escorts me to the door on his elbow, oohs and ahhs echoing behind us, but it's not the usual romantic gesture I'd expect. Instead, when he opens the studio door, he steps outside and scans before he lets me exit. He crosses the lot to his car, but he doesn't hold my hand and walk beside me, rather staying one step in front of me, his head on a swivel the whole time.

He does open the car door for me and lets me get comfortably situated before closing it behind me, but never once does he peek down my T-shirt.

It's somehow gentlemanly and tactical all at the same time, and I can't decide how that makes me feel. I'm definitely not used to caring who's in the parking lot, other than the usual female safety measures, which I've been much more cautious about since Mr. Duncan's little scene.

But Dominick's eye is practiced and actively seeking out threats. It's strange, like I'm suddenly Whitney Houston in *The Bodyguard*, my lover going all Secret Service on me, and I wonder if there's a gun underneath Dom's suit jacket. It's a reminder that I am just a regular average woman and he's . . . *him*.

I'm not putting myself down. I know I'm the shit, but there's something *more* to Dominick. It's nothing you can put a finger on, just an importance, a weight, a responsibility he bears that I can't imagine. Not when the most important thing I do is pay my bills on time, and I have a bad habit of leaving a trail of dirty coffee cups in my wake. He's just . . . extra.

He comes around, getting in, and I don't even have to ask what'll happen to my car. If I need it before tomorrow, it'll be there, perhaps even washed, waxed, and last week's Starbucks cups cleaned out of the passenger seat.

I am surprised when he pulls out of the lot and goes right instead of left as I expect. "Hey, I live that way," I say, pointing behind us.

"I know," he says simply.

I raise an eyebrow, looking at him, but he doesn't turn his eyes off the

road, handling the Mercedes with the respect it deserves.

“I thought you said you were taking me home?”

“I am,” he replies. “To *my* home.”

There’s no hint of a smile, no sign he’s joking. His words broach no argument, not that I would, but at the stoplight, he looks to see my reaction. That look tells me more than any words could.

He’s used to getting his way, people jumping when he says to, and though he likes to order me around, he cares whether I want to do what he’s demanding. He’s domineering, but with good intentions, at least where I’m concerned. He’s a man who may never ask my permission for anything, but I have no doubt that if I said to take me to my apartment, he would.

But I don’t want to go there. I want to see where Dominick lives, what his space looks like, feels like.

My answer is a smile, and I place my hand on top of his big right hand until the light changes, and I wiggle back, enjoying the luxury of leather seats and ready to see where this ride takes me.

His home is beautiful, a huge house on the outskirts of town, with vaguely Italian décor with statues on pedestals and fancy paintings like a museum, poufy leather couches with tufting, and perfectly-placed pillows and throws.

It feels warm and inviting, but nothing like the man.

It’s like a decorator version of what a mansion should look like.

I settle down on the couch, running my hand over the pillow as Dom watches me curiously. “What do you think?”

I war with whether to be polite or honest and decide that he’d see through any falseness anyway, so why not go for broke?

“It’s pretty, but completely *not* you. You hired someone to decorate and gave them free reign. It’s them, not you.”

His lips draw down until they’re nearly invisible, and for a second, I think I overstepped big-time, but then he chuckles, nodding. “You are very observant, Allison. What would you have expected if it was ‘me’?”

Now that’s a dangerous question, but I stick with honesty as the best policy and jump into the deep end.

I let the words rush out before I’m even aware of thinking them, “Modern. Sleek lines, nothing extraneous or fluffy. Keep the leather seating, but it’d be a different style. More metal accents, bare-boned but with each item being one of luxury. Something you appreciate, not merely fancy

because of the price tag on it. Like . . . your office?”

He seems surprised, and his smile widens a little more as he comes over and sits next to me. “Good read. And you? What does your space speak about you?”

I consider the question, thinking about my apartment and what I thought of as I decorated it. “Brightness. Dance. Comfort. Layered. In that order.”

He nods, taking my chin and turning my face to look into my soul. “I agree. Your home is a good representation of your own vibrancy. It’s light and exotic. It feels like your inner chaos exploded all around you.”

My burgeoning smile falls, and I’m struck by a sudden bout of insecurity. Dom’s so buttoned up, every I dotted, every T crossed. But me . . .

“Is that a good thing? You don’t exactly seem like the chaos type, if you know what I mean?”

I let my eyes drift down his pristine shirt and slacks, his black shoes buffed to a military shine with a fresh wax, and back up to his carefully combed dark hair. Everything about him screams power, control, and dominance. In contrast, I’m wild, sloppy, and weak.

Dominick lets me scan him, then he leans closer, invading my space but not touching me. I mindlessly arch my back, yearning for contact, wanting more, impossibly aware of the heat of his skin just beyond the borders of mine.

“My entire life depends on predictability, knowing others’ moves before they do themselves, and analyzing every factor in my life from every angle.”

Disappointment blooms in my gut, the voice in my head chastising me for thinking I could be more than a fuck for a man like Dominick. But the ever-hopeful pixie in my heart whispers that if he wanted a quick fuck, he wouldn’t have shown up to my new work and brought me to his home. He wouldn’t follow me and protect me, even when it’s not needed.

He certainly doesn’t do that for the other dancers at Petals. Maybe . . . maybe I do have a place in his life, the crazy loop-di-loop straw that stirs his quiet drink into a tornado and brings a bit of chaos to his perfect order?

The thought gives me the strength to meet his eyes equally. “And what is my place in that life of order, Dominick?”

Dominick takes my hand, his voice strong and sure. “You are impossible to predict. The things you say, the way you behave, the paths your mind takes, I never quite know with you. I find it invigorating and refreshing. Your chaos disturbs me, but I daresay, I secretly find it beautiful in a messy way.

As if your being is livelier simply because you don't try to cage it into submission."

His words wash over me, silkily working their way into every dark crevice where doubts and insecurities lie, filling me with breath. Before I can consider the consequences, I attack him, pressing my full lips to his with abandon and letting my body finally press against his completely.

Every hard plane of his chest and abdomen meets my softness, my breasts and belly conforming around him to maximize every bit of contact as I climb into his lap, straddling him and pinning him to the couch temporarily.

He tastes of coffee and mint, energizing and powerful. His hands catch on my hips, an automatic response to my weight being thrown on him, but then he grasps my flesh, dimpling my skin under his fingers.

I can feel the thoughts swirling in his head, the buzz of whether we should do this, or maybe it's whether we should do this now. But I've wanted it, wanted him as I tracked him as much as he watched me. The rules may have changed mere days ago, but this has been months coming and I'm not willing to wait any longer.

I nibble at his bottom lip, demanding his presence in this moment, here with me, not in his thoughts. For this instant, I'm the boss, and the sharp edge of my teeth seems to do the trick. He growls into me and I swallow the sound.

"Allison—" he starts, and I can hear his question in the singular word. I don't want his hesitation, so I cut him off, something I know he'd never allow someone else, but I take the liberty anyway, taking him at his word that he appreciates my challenging personality.

"Fuck me, Dominick," I growl, grinding down onto the hard bulge that's appeared in his trousers, rubbing it against the heat between my legs. "Fill me and make me yours."

There's the briefest flash of surprise at my words, and then he takes control, his hands tightening around my ass cheeks and cupping me roughly.

"You have no idea what you're asking for, but very well, love. Remember, you asked for this." His words are a dark promise, one I want to hold him to and that I have every belief he can deliver on.

Sitting forward, he surges off the couch and lifts me like I'm as light as a feather, his strength thrilling me as my legs wrap around his torso naturally. He strides down the hall and up a flight of marble stairs, carrying me easily before tossing me onto a bed.

I want to look around, take in his space here, but my eyes refuse to leave his. His fingers dig into the waistband of my sweats, taking them and the shorts underneath off in one fell swoop while I pull my shirt and bra over my head.

Bared to him, I pose like I'm gracing the cover of a naughty calendar, not a single doubt in my head as to how sexy he finds me when he looks at me the way he is.

His jacket seems to evaporate he has it off so quickly, his fingers flying as they undo his shirt, virtually throwing it and his undershirt off.

It's the first time I've seen this much of his skin, and I want to touch every inch of his chest, to trace the other tattoos I didn't even know he had. They're not overly done, but they're there, and my mouth waters as I think about outlining each and every one of them with my tongue.

I lift to my elbows to make sure I don't miss a thing as he keeps going. As many times as he's watched me strip down to next to nothing, it feels sexy to watch him remove his clothes for me, though there's no slow seduction. It's all rushed need.

His hands work at his belt, and his slacks fall before he lowers the front of his boxer-briefs, letting his cock out.

My breath stutters, failing me. It's like the rest of him, thick and powerful, the wide tip standing proudly from his body. He wraps a hand around the length, and as he gives himself a stroke, a bead of precum pearls at the tip.

His voice is deep, smooth as silk as he sees my hungry reaction, but there's an undercurrent of arrogance. "Like what you see?"

I like that it sounds like something I'd say, like maybe my sass is rubbing off on him just a little bit. I bite my lip, looking up at him through my lashes, and nod, not sure exactly what I'm begging for.

"Please."

He climbs onto the bed, looming over me as he lays me back, and I spread my legs, welcoming him. He grinds his hips against mine, rubbing his cock along my folds, coating himself in my wetness. I can feel my legs trembling, my hips lifting to encourage him where I need him.

Dominick pins me between his arms, his eyes burning with an inner light, their depths gleaming with lust and . . . more, just for me.

"You have no idea how long I've waited for this, how many times I've dreamed of you this way," he rasps, his body vibrating from the restraint as

he looks at me, his hips paused momentarily. “In my bed, begging for my cock, ready to take everything I can give you.”

I can hear the promise in the dirty words, and I want it all. I wrap my arms around his back, and my breathy moan seems to be the tipping point. He thrusts into me in one sharp movement, sheathing himself fully, driving the breath out of my body. He’s huge, and even with the fingering he gave me a few days ago, my body is shocked, galvanized as if I’m a newly-broken virgin, opening for the first time.

He pauses balls-deep, filling me until I’m riding that edge of pleasure and pain. I can feel my inner walls quivering, gripping him greedily, so I wrap my legs around his, tangling with him to hold him inside me. My nails score his back, and I growl, demanding more.

“Yes,” I cry out softly as he rolls his hips, making the pain melt away. He lies on me, pressing me into the soft bedding with his weight and slipping his hands under my shoulders to clasp me to him, pinning me helpless to the foam as he kisses me hard.

I arch, both loving and hating the restraint. I want to perform for him, to show him how much he pleases me, how he makes my soul cry out for his completion, but instead, I’m forced to take what he offers me.

His strokes are sharp and short as he rapidly spears into me, hitting a spot deep inside me that drives me wild.

“Oh, my God, Dominick,” I cry out, already dangerously close to coming.

His eyes seek out mine, the room’s bright light leaving nowhere to hide. He can see me, the reckless abandon he’s driven me to as I beg and plead for more, shamelessly wanting him to take me to the edge. But I can see him too, see the depth of his desire. I can see the joy at finally being right where we’ve both wanted him to be, inside me, making us into one, if only for a moment.

Our breath mingles in the small space between us, creating a world all our own. Dominick presses his forehead against mine, his hips slapping roughly against me and shaking my body all the way up my spine.

“Look at me, Allison. Say my name when you come.”

It’s a demand, but one I happily obey, not wanting to look away from him for even a second. He slams into me, hard enough that I know I’ll feel his mark tomorrow, and his name escapes with every thrust, over and over again, like a mantra. I leap into the abyss this time, unafraid as he holds me tightly, knowing that he’s got me, and I’m awash in the pleasure.

“Dominick . . . Dominick . . .”

And though my eyes try to roll in pleasure, his fierce look holds me steady, and I stay connected to him as the tidal wave washes through me. He grimaces, his cock growing impossibly harder inside me as I squeeze against his thickness. I can feel him holding back, but I need him to give in to this moment, so I boldly entice him.

“Come inside me, Dominick. Please.”

I think the pleading note does it, and he stills, holding himself deep inside me as he roars. I feel the throbbing heat as he fills me, but as full as I feel, both with his cock and his cum, what fills me the most is my name on his lips, breathy and weak, as though it takes everything he has to get the three syllables past his lips.

“Allison.”

Chapter 10

Dominick

“Here. Eat this,” I say, placing a small plate of cheese and crackers on the island in front of Allie.

She’s mussed and soft, wearing my undershirt and nothing else. Her hair seems to be held up in a bun by magic because she just did some fancy twist with practiced ease and it stayed.

It’s one of the multitudes of secrets I want to know about her.

“Yes, sir,” she says sassily, one eyebrow quirked and a smirk taking her lips. She tosses me a sarcastic salute and then reaches out to pick up a cracker and a small slice of cheese, stacking them and popping the whole thing in her mouth.

A win for us both. I set a glass of water in front of her too and watch raptly as she stacks another slice of cheese onto a cracker before holding it out to me.

It’s such a small gesture, but the sweet offering has multiple layers of meaning, and I eat from her hand, making sure to nibble her fingertips slightly.

Her giggle brings a full smile unbidden to my face. It feels both odd and somehow natural, like something I’ve forgotten how to do. I try to remember the last time I smiled without having some ulterior motive behind it, the last time I laughed with true humor.

It’s been a depressingly long time. The realization makes me frown, and Allie’s eyebrows lift in worry.

“Hey, where’d you go?” she asks around a mouthful of crumbly cracker.

I wipe a crumb from her lip with my thumb, shaking my head. “Just thinking.”

As my silence draws out a bit longer, she sighs, giving me a *Come on, buddy* look. “Normally, people say, ‘penny for your thoughts,’ but I’m thinking you couldn’t give a rat’s ass about a penny, so how about a kiss for your thoughts?”

She grins, flirtatious and happy at the brilliance of her idea. She’s not

wrong. It's a good negotiation point for our current situation and she knows it.

"Okay, but I'll take the kiss first."

I lean in toward her, forcing my way between her legs as she sits on the barstool. She lifts her chin, her lips pursing slightly. I pause for a moment to marvel at her absolute beauty, cupping her chin and forcing her to lift higher to meet me as I bend down.

With one last look into her eyes, I kiss her, enjoying the moment her lashes flutter as she closes her eyes to enjoy the contact. Only then do I close my eyes too, and I let myself plunge, lost in her wild brambles and the overwhelming emotions she draws out of me so easily.

Breathlessly, she breaks the kiss, another angelic smile on her face. "Wow. That was . . . wow. But don't think I forgot our deal. What were you thinking about that took your smile and turned it upside down?"

She reaches up, pushing at the corners of my mouth with her fingers like I'm a frowning toddler. It's irreverent madness and I love that she feels comfortable enough to do it.

I let her tease a small smile out once again before confessing. "You make me smile so easily, and I was trying to remember the last time I truly smiled or laughed in happiness. It was painfully long ago, I'm afraid."

Her mouth opens in surprise. "That's . . ." she says before pausing and shaking her head and starting over.

"Tell me something that made you smile. From a long time ago or from recently, whatever you want. Just tell me something that made you happy."

I lift my eyebrow and giving a pointed look down the hallway toward my bedroom. "Well . . ."

She laughs but puts a finger to my mouth before I can say more. "Not that, although I'll give you a bonus as incentive to spill your guts." She pauses to let her meaning sink in, then points down the hall and stage-whispers like her words are a secret, "*That* was awesome, maybe more missionary than I expected from you, but also so much more . . . intensely intimate than I've ever had."

She blushes as she says it, like she rethought her confession halfway through but completed the thought anyway. Her guts impress me, make me want to give as much as she is, which is the point, I suppose.

I sit on the barstool next to her, trying to decide what to divulge.

"First, I'll agree *that* was something different. You are different." I run

my hand along her bare thigh, wishing I could avoid the rest of the conversation and just throw her on the island and fuck her again. Maybe a little less missionary this time, perhaps with her cheek pressed to the granite and her apple ass in the air for me. I have a suspicion I'll always want to be inside her. Every moment I'm not feels like I'm missing an integral part of my being. She's the one person I've ever felt totally at ease with, and being inside her . . . it's heaven.

But I owe her something beyond the physical, at least for a moment. "Something that made me smile? Once upon a time, I was a little boy."

She feigns shock, teasing me with a hand on her cheek. "You? A little boy? That's hard to imagine. You seem like the type that just sprang forth, fully-grown and serious, with the weight of the world on his shoulders. You were probably born with an Armani suit on. Tell me I'm wrong."

I laugh, shaking my head. "I wasn't that bad."

"Well then, tell me about Little Dominick. Paint me a picture of that first."

I think back, nodding to myself as I recall the memories. "Actually, I guess I was a bit like a mini-me even then, a serious child who mostly read, played chess, and excelled at school. I didn't really have many friends, at first because I was quiet and studious, not really the gregarious kid who drew people in."

Allie hums, and I continue. "Later, some who were in the know became afraid of me because of my dad. But as I grew up, I learned to use that to my advantage, and I spent most of my teen years as a bit of a hellion, confident that no one could or would dare touch me. I was, I'm sorry to say, a bit of an entitled jerk. Ironically, I'd become what I thought I didn't want to be. That changed on my sixteenth birthday though."

In my mind, I can see my mother holding up my favorite chocolate cake, a sad smile on her face illuminated by the single candle. I hadn't understood it then, but she'd known that when I blew out that candle, my world would change and I would become an apprentice for my father.

"That was when I started working for my father as his right hand . . . good, bad, or ugly, and there was plenty of each. It shaped me, changed me. I'd already gone from a quiet, nerdy kid into a rowdy street urchin too cocky for his own good, but after that I became . . . The Boss."

It's the first time we've acknowledged the elephant in the room since she first found out exactly who I am. It's been mentioned in conversations, but

it's the first time those words have crossed my lips about myself in her presence. I gird myself for her reaction, ready for the judgment and the disgust to cross her face.

But there isn't any. Instead, she studies me silently for a heartbeat, then another. "You've heard the expression 'rough around the edges'?"

I nod, unsure where she's going with this. "Yeah?"

She continues. "I think that once upon a time, you were rough around the edges. I've heard stories. Hell, I've seen you have to handle business in the club a time or two. You're street smart, willing to cheat, get dirty, do what's needed. But also, like a sword, you've honed your edges through years of work, experience, and knowledge, and now, you're more like the sharpest blade, gleaming and dangerous on the surface. But still with that roughness at the core. You are The Boss, with all that entails, but you're also still that quiet boy too. You've spent so long trying to hide it . . . but I see it. And to me, I think it's the best part about you, Dom. You know what I've noticed?"

"What's that?" I ask, and she gives me a smile that stops my heart again.

"You almost never curse in your work. You don't need to because you let your intelligence help you get your point across with a fierce elegance. But when we're together, you do curse, and I think it's because you relax around me, let your rough edges show. Side note—it's hot when you talk dirty, so don't be using fancy language for that shit or I'll cover your mouth so you don't distract me with some thees and thous. A well-timed 'Fuck, Allie' can sometimes say more than a whole Shakespearean sonnet, know what I mean?"

She winks at me, then grins. "You could do with a bit of crazy to shake up your controlled, precise existence and force you to let loose and enjoy life. I know you're The Boss, but spend some time as the hellion and the quiet kid too. I'd like to get to know all three characters you have hiding in there." She lays a hand on my chest and then pats me like that's a done deal.

Her words soothe something in me I didn't even know was ruffled, a question I didn't know I had. "That sounds oddly accurate."

The quiet descends and stretches out between us, but it's comfortable, our eyes locked on one another as the weight of my confession and her analysis sinks in. The fact that she's so insightful but somehow not running honestly surprises me.

It forces me to think about myself some. She's right. I have hidden a lot of myself behind my mask as The Boss. But that's part of me as well. I'm not

some melodramatic character from a movie, itching to let go of my position in order to retire to a quiet life. But I do want to be able to do . . . *more*.

She smiles. “Okay, let’s rewind to where we started. Tell me something that made you smile.”

She’s giving me an opportunity for lightness, recognizing that I’m uncomfortable with the unusual plumbing of the depths of my soul, my past, and my psyche. But telling her things doesn’t feel like exposing a weakness. It feels like bringing her into my mind, my heart, my past, present, and future.

I purposefully frown, screwing my face up like I’m thinking hard to even remember. “Ah, I did smile the time I put Don Rivaldi in his place for trying to start a coup in my town. That was entertaining.”

She laughs, semi-familiar with the incidents surrounding Don Rivaldi since it involved her bestie, Maggie. “An evil genius grin isn’t the same thing as a smile. Try again.”

I think back further, looking in my mental archives for what she’s asking, and then I remember. “When I beat my father at chess for the first time.”

“Ooh, that’s better,” Allie says. “Tell me!” she squeals, wiggling in her seat a bit like an excited puppy.

The echo of the smile from my youth ghosts across my face as I tell her the story. “My dad and I used to play chess after dinner every chance we could. It was our thing. He’d talk and impart wisdom. I didn’t realize at the time that he was grooming me to take over. I just thought he was sharing about his day with me. Edited versions, but sharing nonetheless.”

I think back to those nights in my father’s study. He had a classic study, all leather and oak, and the chess board had its own special table. The pieces were carved stone, obsidian and marble, the board inlaid with gold. It felt like a special board, a magic talisman to teach me wisdom. Maybe it did.

“We’d play, and he always won. I read books about chess strategies from the masters, learned different plays to counter his moves, all so I could be better. It felt like if I could win against the greatest man I knew, then I’d have really accomplished something. But whatever I did, I couldn’t beat him.

“One night when I was fourteen, I finally did it. I was so stupidly arrogant about it too, downright cocky as I strutted around with a big smile on my face and told Mom all about my win.

“But when I looked at Father, that was when I really smiled. He was so proud of me, not mad that he’d lost to a kid but proud that we’d both played our best and I’d come out on top. It took me a long time to realize how

prophetic that was. I try to make sure he would always still be proud of me.”

She reaches up to run her fingers through my hair, her nails scratching my scalp deliciously. “I’m sure he would be. You’re quite a man, Dominick Angeline.”

Her words elicit a truly genuine smile from me, wide and as unrestrained as she is. “Do you play chess?”

Her laugh is infectious. “Normally, I’d say yes, but I’m afraid you’re gonna wipe the board with me in five moves.”

I chuckle, standing up. “I’ll take it easy on you,” I vow, taking her hand and leading her to my office, where my father’s chess board rests on a side table between two chairs. It’s just as it always has been, right down to the chipped bishop on the obsidian side, a product of my over-eagerness when I was seven. “It’s a game of kings . . . and their queens.”

She settles in the plush armchair, crossing her legs in front of her like a child, but there is nothing innocent in the way she looks up at me, her voice sultry and her intent clear.

“Maybe I like it when you *don’t* go easy on me.”

She’s not talking about chess anymore. I let a bit of growl into my voice, challenging her. “Maybe we’ll make this a win in three moves then, so we can see just how *not-easy* you like it.”

She rises to the bait, planting her feet cutely on the floor. “Challenge accepted.”

I settle down behind the board, looking across at her. “Ladies first.”

Allie grins, resting her chin in her palm “Mmm, giving me the advantage? Rather sure of yourself, aren’t you? What if I’m actually sandbagging you?”

“I’ll take the risk,” I reply, getting into the game as we each make our opening moves. I’ll admit that my competitiveness almost immediately kicks in, but I’m enjoying playing the game with her.

She’s good, but it’s an uneven match. Still, I find myself making moves to prolong the game, but she calls me on it the second time I pass up a chance at checkmate.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were trying to let me win. But that can’t be. So maybe it’s that you want to play longer?” She lifts one eyebrow teasingly, and I hum, but Allie isn’t having any of that. “Too bad. I had other thoughts on ways we could play, ones that don’t involve chess.”

Her voice promises all types of heat, and it’s a distraction move that I’ve never had used on me before. I sit back in my chair, deciding on my strategy

for her more than the game as I eye her.

Ever the impulsive one, she reaches for the hem of her shirt and pulls it over her head, unceremoniously exposing her body to me, perfection in the flesh. With a smirk, she leans back, her breasts rising proudly from her chest.

“Your move.”

I force myself to wait one second, not letting her have the upper hand before I stand, lifting the board and table out of the way in one smooth movement, and then I’m on her, her chair scooting back a few inches from my power. I shove her legs open, her knees resting over the arms of the chair and her pussy spread wide for me.

So pretty, so pink, so . . . mine.

Slowly, I sink to my knees in front of her, making her wait and watch every inch that I get closer to her center. I can see the pulse at her throat fluttering, giving away her façade of patience, but that’s okay because I’m not patient anymore either.

I need her again, her taste on my tongue, my name on her lips, her wild abandon as she comes for me. I nibble at her inner thigh, drawing a groan of desire from her throat.

I’ve resisted tasting her, waiting for this moment when she would be spread out, offered to me without hesitation. I want to look in her eyes as we see each other’s reaction to the first touch, and it’s magic as I lick along her pussy, so sweet and feminine. Immediately, I suck on her bud, fluttering my tongue over it, and her hands weave into my hair, holding me there in a silent demand for more.

I tease her, savoring her lips and sipping on her sweet, tangy wine before sliding two fingers inside her, rubbing along her front wall and finding the rough spot that I know drives her wild when I coordinate strokes of it and flicks of my tongue on her clit.

“Oh, fuck, Dominick, right there, yes,” she moans with each breathy exhale.

I give her a few strokes, watching as she takes my fingers over and over inside her and enjoying the glistening evidence of her arousal.

“So perfect, Allison. You said you didn’t want me to go easy on you. Is that still true?” I ask, knowing that my ‘soft’ tongue is harder for her to handle than even the fiercest assault on her pussy.

She cries out, begging for me, and I lift up on my knees, getting a better angle to dominate her. I slide my free hand up to cup her neck, not putting

choking pressure but letting her know that I'm there and that she shouldn't move or fight back.

She bites her lip, but I can see the pleading agreement in her eyes. I fingerfuck her hard, slamming into her with power and using my thumb along her clit when I have the opportunity.

"That's it, take it hard, love. You can handle it, handle me. I want this pussy to know who it belongs to with every step you take tomorrow."

She's getting close, I can feel her walls swelling and clenching, and her eyes flutter closed. I pause, my thumb resting on her pulsing clit but not moving at all, drawing it out until she opens her eyes to look at me in silent pleading.

"Say it, Allie. Whose pussy is this? Tell me as you come all over my fingers."

She groans a guttural sound, more primal than I've ever heard from her before, and that I pulled that noise from her makes my cock throb in my sweats. She whispers, her voice almost lost from her repeated pleas.

"Yours . . . it's yours, Dominick."

I stroke her clit once more, and her back arches so hard I can hear her spine crackle like fireworks, her breath catching as shudders grip her muscles, her pussy quivering. I ride her through every wave, drawing every last drop of pleasure from her with softening strokes until she can't breathe, and I tenderly squeeze her throat.

"Stay just like that."

She freezes as I withdraw and pull my sweats down, my rock-hard cock already weeping a joyous stream of precum. I swipe my fingers through her messy pussy, gathering her orgasm, and rub the sticky slickness on my shaft quickly. I jack myself with long strokes, pumping hard and fast into my fist. My tip bumps along her clit, edging her toward overstimulation, but I like the way she flinches every time I touch her.

Allie's eyes track my every move, like she's memorizing the way I enjoy being touched, like she's getting off on watching me get off.

"Fuck, Dom . . . that's so hot. Come on me."

I'm shaking, my thighs tight with impending release, and I'm already on the edge. "I'm going to mark you outside like I marked you inside."

She nods, though I don't think she's aware she does it. And with three more strokes, I grunt, my cum splashing across her mound as I come hard. A thrill rolls through me when as soon as Allie feels the heat of it, she slips a

fingertip into the puddle, spreading it and rubbing it into her skin, tracing something in silent letters that I can't quite make out. Lifting her finger, she slides it into her mouth, moaning at the flavor of me, which triggers one more jerky spasm from me that lands like an exclamation point at the top of her cleft.

Spent, I fold over her, kissing her fully, my heart pounding at the combination of our flavors on our tongues. Her lips tilt up into a smile even as we kiss, and when I pull back to look at her, I can see the devil in her eyes.

"I think we both won that game."

She looks so damn proud of her joke, but I tell her seriously, "Love, make no mistake. You might've had a good game, but I certainly came out on top."

Her laugh is all the answer I need to know I'm right.

Chapter 11

Allie

“I swear, Gavin, I’m fine. I don’t need you in here crowding the guys while they’re working,” I tell him, exasperated by his forced all-up-in-my-business jokes. At least Donna’s gotten used to him. Actually, I think she sort of thinks he’s cute in a *Let me introduce you to my granddaughter* kind of way.

He flashes me a wide, white smile that I’m sure gets him plenty of pussy, especially when it’s partnered with his wide, strong body and lighthearted personality.

But the gleam of his grin just annoys me even more. He shakes his head, leaning down to keep his voice quiet enough that not *everyone* in East Robinsville knows who I’m seeing.

“Allie, it’s cute that you think I’m leaving while you have strange men in the studio talking to you and looking you up and down. Maybe you don’t give a shit about my balls, but I’m rather attached to them and don’t want your man chopping them off anytime soon.”

I roll my eyes, laughing. “What if I promise to ask Dom to leave your balls alone? Then will you let me get some work done?”

He pales. “For fuck’s sake, do not mention my name and balls in the same sentence ever, but especially not to him unless you’re a heartless bitch. Which, to be clear, I don’t think you are.”

He sounds hopeful and not altogether sure of whether that’s true or not. I relieve his tension with a wink and pat him on the shoulder.

“Fine, but as soon as the workers are out of here, so are you. I’m here for the long haul today, deep-cleaning for my first class next week. So my evening detail can take over when I head home. Deal?”

Gavin smirks, probably relieved. “You drive a hard bargain, but deal.”

He takes my offered hand, shaking it firmly before saying, “You know I’m not agreeing to that because you said it but because that was already my assignment for the day, right?”

I growl. “Ugh. Men.”

He laughs at my pseudo-frustration, because really, I'm not all that upset about it. Gavin's a good guy, and I don't mind the chaperoning, but I had hopes to get the poles installed before lunch. And it's creeping up on late afternoon now. The hours just seemed to get nibbled away this entire morning.

First it was the contractors showing up fifteen minutes late, then parts not being in the boxes, which required a trip to the hardware store . . . just one thing after another.

We could've just used what we had, and if I were at home, I probably would've. But here, everything should be up to code. Still, it's taken forever for the contractors to install the poles.

Instead of getting frustrated, I go back to doing prep work around the room, setting up a small area in the corner with hooks where clients can store their jackets and coverups and a bench where they can sit down to change out of street shoes. Eventually, I figure some of the girls will be rocking the stage stilettos, but it might take a little while for some of them to really get into the flow.

I add a throw pillow with big tassels that says *You are Amazing* in gold lamé lettering on a soft pink background to the bench. It's perfect, a motto for every woman, every class, every day.

I'm just making sure I've got my playlist ready when I hear a voice behind me. "Ma'am?"

I look up to see the head crewman, Mr. Bayer, looking at me. He's middle-aged, with a bit of a beer gut that's mostly hidden by the stained Eagles T-shirt he's wearing. He's got his assistant with him, a younger guy who's probably learning the ropes.

"Yes? You all done?"

He nods, but I can see the gleam in his eyes as he looks me up and down. "Yeah, but the poles need a, uh, uhm . . . test run. Just to be on the safe side."

He says it with a hint of sleaze to his tone. It's one I've heard before. I lift one eyebrow, my eyes narrowing as he makes me feel dirty, like I should just hop up on the pole and put on a show for him. As if it's only natural because he did me a favor by installing the poles.

Except it's not a favor. I fucking hired him to do a job and he did it. Nothing more, nothing less.

Planting my hands on my hips, I glare at him until he starts to fidget, and only then do I speak.

“Then I’d guess you’d better hop on up there and try those poles out since that’s what I’m paying you to do. Make sure they’re all nice and secure. I’d hate for someone to get hurt after your company did the installation, catch an insurance claim or something.”

He shrinks a bit and walks off, but under his breath, I can hear him mutter, “Not like I can’t see it any time I want to at the club.”

I take a breath, balling my indignation into a missile and taking aim. “Hey, Mr. Bayer?”

He turns around, a sour look on his face. “Not anymore. Consider yourself banned, from here and from Petals. Drop off your invoice at the front desk on your way out.”

The raised voices get Gavin’s attention, and a few seconds later, he’s in the doorway, filling the whole thing as his shoulders brush from wood to wood.

“What’s going on, Allie?”

There’s a moment of anticipation where I wonder if this is about to get ugly. Gavin’s pretty easygoing, but he’s one of Dom’s guys for a reason. And even if these two contractors have hammers in their tool belts, things probably wouldn’t go very well for them.

Bayer looks over, realizing that yes, he just fucked up. He quivers, and I decide to let him off the hook, but my voice is hard.

“Everything’s fine. Mr. Bayer was just packing up his things. Please make sure that he leaves safely . . . and that he understands he’s *persona non grata* here and at the club.”

Gavin’s eyes narrow and his chest puffs a bit, making him look even broader, and his rumbling growl could make a lion piss his fur. “That sounds like a problem to me.”

Mr. Bayer turns to Gavin, looking outraged that someone’s violating the ‘bro code’ or something. “You just gonna let a whore like that make rules for the best titty bar in town? Bitch is just a piece of ass, showing off for money.”

I suppose I should have a thick skin after the length of time I’ve been dancing. I get it, my performances are about sexual fantasy. And I’d love to say that his words wash over me like they’re nothing, but *whore* is just one insult that I don’t think I’ll ever get used to. There’s a line for me, one that maybe some people don’t recognize or don’t respect, but it’s there, big and bold. Why do some people think that just because I’m a dancer, I’m hopping

on every dick that walks by?

But I do gasp, just a little, as my jaw drops in fury. Bayer's assistant even has the good sense to look chagrined at his boss's gross assessment, and he backs up a step. It maybe saves him a beating as Gavin steps forward, his patience gone.

"Time to go, asshole," he says, grabbing Bayer by the collar and jerking him forward. "And if she says you're out, you're out. If she decides to not be so fucking graciously nice and says you're dead, you won't live to see another sunrise. So I'd suggest you get the fuck out before I start asking her for permission. Hell, another minute and I might even ask for forgiveness instead of permission."

Bayer stumbles forward, looking desperately at me in some pathetic plea for help as Gavin half-drags him toward the door. I have no pity on him, though. It's what he deserves for thinking that I would happily put on a private thank-you show for a skeevy, gross misogynist like him.

His assistant gulps down his fear and grabs the tool box, casting nervous glances at me as he scrambles out the door, almost bowing as he leaves.

"Thank you!"

I sort of feel bad for the kid. He didn't do anything wrong today. In fact, he was almost Boy Scout polite the whole time.

A moment later, I hear applause from the reception area, and Gavin comes back in, his eyes ignoring the ruckus behind him as he checks on me. "You okay?"

I nod, realizing that it's probably Donna cheering him on. "Don't worry, guy was just a dick. Nothing I haven't dealt with before."

Gavin shakes his head, rubbing at his neck. "Yeah, that part sucks about my job. My opinion, you girls shouldn't have to deal with shit like that. Hey, uh . . . so you're here for the rest of the day, right? Cleaning and prepping?"

"Yeah . . . why?" I ask suspiciously.

Gavin grins, shaking his head furiously. "Oh, no reason. Like you said . . . I was here until the crew left, then you'd be on your own until your go-home detail comes. That's good, right? I mean, this place is busy enough and you'll stay inside?"

He's talking to me but taking baby steps toward the door and glancing behind him like he needs to go all of a sudden. I put my hands on my hips, trying to look intimidating, but I suspect that Gavin is a lot harder to scare than I'd first thought.

He is a big badass underneath his affable exterior, apparently, and I have a feeling about what he's about to go do. He's about to go teach Mr. Bayer a lesson.

"Go ahead and go. But do me a favor. If you *have* to do it, just scare him, maybe give him a little lesson in appropriate customer service. Make sure he knows the proper way to treat a lady next time. Can we stop it there though?"

He's taken aback at first by my knowing what he's up to, then he breaks out into a disarmingly boyish grin, and he flashes me a thumbs-up.

"Gotcha. Although I don't know what you're talking about, Allie. I just have some errands to run this afternoon. Nothing to be concerned about."

With a wink, he's out the door.

Donna's already got her next class in warmups, so I avoid any ribbing from her as I retreat to my studio, locking the door and grinning to myself. Assholes like Bayer will always exist, but good guys like Gavin do too, and hopefully, the balance will always tip that way.

An hour flashes by as I do my last-chance cleaning. Slowly but surely, the space is coming together, I think with a smile. Warmth bubbles up inside me. It feels like . . . pride.

I'm doing something scary, something that takes some major courage, but I'm chasing those damn butterflies in my gut like they're going to lead me someplace awesome. Because I think this whole setup really could change my life for the better in so many ways.

Actually, I feel like I'm on the precipice of a lot of changes. Professionally, personally, it's like everything is right on the verge of falling into place. With just a little nudge here and a little hip bump there, I'll be better than I ever would've thought possible just a few short years ago when everything seemed so bleak.

Excited at the prospect and at my excellent use of cleaning time, I decide to get started on polishing the chrome finish of the newly-installed poles. Each one will take me hours to get ready for class, removing the greasy ick of the factory and the installation, and especially Mr. Bayer's bad juju vibes on them.

I head to the front, pausing for a moment to remember that I'm supposed to stay inside like Gavin said. But the special cleaner I need is in my car.

Screw it. I'm grown-ass woman who can sure as fuck walk across the parking lot without permission. It's something I've done thousands of times. No biggie.

Feeling my sass, even at such a little thing, feels good, a tiny bit of wild rebellion, but a small piece of me realizes how crazy that sounds.

I'm halfway down the sidewalk when I hear a deep voice behind me.

"Allie?"

I turn, recognizing the voice instantly, but seeing him standing here in front of me is an unexpected surprise. I'm sure a few birds are startled at my high-pitched squeal of delight as I run toward him, launching myself into his arms with the full trust that he'll catch me.

"Oh, my God!" I exclaim. He spins us once with the momentum of my leap and then sets me on my feet, engulfing me in a big hug. Once upon a time, he was the same height I was, but now he's easily a foot taller and twice as wide as I am. Still buried in the hug, I whisper into his chest, "TJ! Holy shit! What are you doing here?"

He sighs, patting my back, and sets me down on the sidewalk. "Long story, Allie-Gator. Wanna go to dinner and I'll tell you all about it?"

"Of course!" I say with a laugh and a grin. He drops down in front of me, and like so many times before, I hop on piggy-back style.

"Do you need to lock up?" he asks.

I stare at him, thinking I'll wake up and this will be a dream any second, but I shake my head. "No, the owner's got another class going."

Without another question, he gallops down the sidewalk, me laughing at his silly antics. Just like before. Just like always. Unceremoniously, he plops me in the seat of his truck, and we roar out of the lot.

Max

"Keep going, kids. Hold for eight, seven, six . . ." I say, when suddenly, the parking lot quiet is broken by a scream.

Screams aren't really standard fare around here, not like the neighborhood back home. Around here, it's all proper manners and nice neighbors, and my last class is usually just us and the crickets chirping as the sun goes down.

But I've got responsibilities and duties now, so I turn, instantly on alert and ready to protect my charges against whatever incoming assault may be going down.

I realize as I look out the gym's open bay door that it's more squeal than scream, a happy, exuberant sound. Hell, if this were an adult class with my normal assortment of death metal blaring, I probably wouldn't have heard it at all. I scan the lot and see Allie running down the sidewalk toward a tall guy

with a big smile on her face.

My brows knit together as I watch her jump into his arms, her legs wrapping around his torso and their arms encircling each other. One spin later, she's back on solid ground but they're still hugging it out.

They're too far away for me to hear them, but she seems happy to see the guy, whoever he is. Even from here, I can see he's a big motherfucker, not like Dalton and me, but a tall, broad guy who carries himself with a sense that he could take care of business.

I turn back to my students, who have decided that I'm done counting. They're sitting on the ground, their squat positions given up. Kids . . . they'll work their asses off on the fun stuff, but champions aren't made of the fun stuff.

"All right, guys," I announce, going over to the boxing timer on the wall and flipping the switches. "Good job. One more cycle and we'll call it a night. Burpees, pushups, and sprawls. One minute each."

They groan a bit but get to work. That's the good thing about the youngsters . . . nearly endless energy. As the timer goes, I watch their burpees but hear laughter from behind me.

I turn, keeping an eye on the kids but watching as the guy deposits Allie into a truck and they go speeding out of the lot. It's not until the kids are halfway through their one-minute sprawls that I put it together that he looked nothing like Dominick's usual guys.

I've met Logan, and he's even been hanging out in the gym with us a bit. He's a monster of a guy, and I've seen another guy escorting Allie out sometimes too. And both of them, when they're on chaperone detail, are respectfully distant, dressed in fancy clothes, and on guard as they give her coverage similar to the Secret Service.

Allie seemed comfortable, but something is uneasy in my gut. That guy just isn't the usual, and it feels off for some reason.

Logan casually asked Dalton and me to keep an eye out for her, nothing official, but just a friendly request. Thing is . . . Logan isn't going to just make a friendly request like that for no reason. I know who he works for, who Allie belongs to, and the fight game isn't so far from its old Mafia roots that you don't get to know a few names around the streets. This feels like something I should call about.

Getting all up in Dominick Angeline's business is the absolute last thing I want to do. But not calling him when I see something out of the norm sounds

like a sure-fire way to get my ass kicked. Or worse.

I let the kids finish their drills and give them a quick dismissal before heading for my desk, where my cellphone sits like a package of dynamite waiting to make the call I'm dreading.

Chapter 12

Dominick

“Say that again, slowly,” I tell Logan, my knuckles rapping on my steering wheel in a measured beat to try and calm myself down. I heard every word he said the first time. I just don’t want to believe it.

What is she doing? What is she thinking, leaving the studio off schedule with an unvetted man?

“Max called. Said he saw Allie run toward a guy, hopped into his arms with a smile on her face. They hugged and then he carried her to a truck and they left.”

His report is objective, no judgments, no emotion, just the facts.

“I’m already in the car, heading back. Stay close and make sure she’s safe, but do not engage. Understood?”

Logan accepts the order evenly, even though I’m probably interrupting his evening off. “Of course, Sir. I’ll be in touch.”

As soon as the call disconnects, I press the accelerator on my Mercedes, speeding up a little. I open the tracking app and see the green dot that tells me where she is. Frustratingly, it doesn’t tell me if she’s okay, but knowing her location gives me the tiniest sliver of reassurance. But it still doesn’t answer the questions I have.

My mind races to every possible scenario . . . has she been kidnapped because of her importance to me? If someone thinks to use her as a pawn against me, I would readily slash, burn, and destroy everyone and everything involved. I would tear this city to pieces before anything truly damaging could happen to her.

The thought of what could be happening to Allie makes a knot of dread form in my gut.

The timing seems oddly convenient as well. The majority of my time is spent in East Robinsville, never more than a half hour from her side.

Today is the rare break from my routine as I left town on a short road trip to pay my old friend Silas a visit. It’s too opportunistic to be coincidence, and I wonder if perhaps his Eagle Raiders had something to do with this.

But for what purpose? To what end? I seriously doubt they want a war.

I evaluate everything I know about Silas and his Eagle Raiders, and I can't find a path that makes sense for that case. Silas is much more straightforward, a product of the open road. When he comes for someone, he's about as subtle as one of his unmuffled Harleys rolling down the street at full-throttle.

So, if not Silas, then who? I think through what little I know.

It seems she knew the man and that her leaving wasn't against her will. Could the man be an old lover? If it's something more mundane like an ex, I'll have to handle her messy emotions. Because her leaving me is no longer an option. She is mine, body, mind, and soul. I won't allow any other possibility.

My Mercedes purrs in contrast to the loud thoughts in my head, a technological ghost gliding over the miles of asphalt, relatively silent death coming, if need be. I still don't know what I'm going to do except that I'll try to remain calm. But if someone has taken my Allie, whether they be an ex who needs a lesson by castration, an enemy who needs a lesson in death, or . . .

There is another possibility.

Sure. There's a chance she just went willingly with a friend, although the blatant disregard for the reasonable protocol we've established would certainly warrant another discussion. And maybe a spanking.

One that she would not enjoy quite as much as the last. I'll never lay a hand on her in anger, but she needs to understand that her safety is of utmost importance to me. If a bit of pinkened skin and a sore ass get that message into her beautiful brain, then so be it.

But I have to hope that she is smarter than that, that she understands how dangerous the city can be for her and wouldn't go traipsing around unescorted after we'd agreed to chaperones for her safety.

My phone rings again, and I have a moment of hope that it is her, but the name flashing on the screen isn't hers.

"Yes."

Logan's voice comes through the speakers. "Sir, I've got eyes on her in a food truck park. Currently, she's sitting on the tailgate with the unknown male. They purchased some smoothies and a burrito and have been talking ever since. She does not appear to be in distress."

Cold fury runs through my body, every muscle tensing. She's sitting,

happy as a lark, with another man while I consider the awful things that might be happening to her if she'd been kidnapped.

Every bit of my being demands that I swoop into that food truck lot and grab her up, take her home, and demand an explanation. But a lightning-fast analysis tells me that without a doubt, it's the wrong move.

First, by showing Allie just how much of a possessive asshole I am. I'm already walking a fine line with that, I know. I need her to understand that she's as precious as diamonds and as necessary as air to me without coming off as a suffocating tyrant.

Secondly, there could be implications within my work. A public showing of her power over me, her disregard for basic rules, and that she is valuable to me would paint our relationship in a light there would be no recovering from. Word would spread, and she would be a constant weakness in my stronghold, an ever-present target for those who wish me harm.

As disappointed as I am, Allie is who she is . . . unpredictable, uncaged, and prone to flights of fancy. It both draws me to her and disturbs me. She is okay, totally safe with Logan observing her, and under no duress with her current company.

No, I'm the only one under strain in this situation, apparently, but I can withstand it.

I make a decision, one that will be the best move on both fronts. "Stay on her but out of sight. I'm going to her apartment."

"Understood," Logan says before clearing his throat. "And sir, I'm sorry."

The line goes dead, him hanging up on me this time, something that I normally would not be pleased with, but I'm too caught up in Allie to care. His words give me more of an answer as to his assessment than anything else has tonight.

I get to Allie's apartment and use my key, the one that I had copied months ago. Sitting in the dark of her living room, surrounded by the spicy floral scent of her perfume, I wait.

Logan sends me a photo he surreptitiously took of the two of them. The man does appear tall and broad, as Max reported, his hair shaggily grown out and in need of a trim, his skin sun-bronzed and faintly lined, putting his age close to Allie's but his life significantly harder than hers.

They look cozy, familiar in the picture. It angers me anew, and I trace her smile thoughtfully.

Could I let her go? If she truly doesn't care for me other than for sex, could I just let her walk out of my life?

No. I can never hurt her, but Allie's leaving my life would be worse than having my heart ripped out.

Logan sends me a text message. It seems she's coming straight here, with him. My eyes glare at the green dot on my screen, watching it move closer and closer.

It's not long before I hear the shuffle of footsteps on the hall tile outside and take a deep breath.

Showtime.

The door opens, the hallway light silhouetting the two of them for a brief moment before she flicks on the light.

"Allison," I say simply.

My voice is a harsh rumble.

Faster than I would've given the man credit for, he shoves Allie behind him, pulling a gun from his waistband. A tiny seed of approval at his protectiveness tries to take root, but I can't accept that he is protecting her from me.

From me?

From the man who has protected her for months, even at the detriment to my own sanity?

She gasps in alarmed surprise, but when she realizes who's sitting in her living room, the fire in her eyes is half relief and half anger.

"What the fuck, Dominick? What in the . . . you scared the shit out of me!"

The man's appraising gaze never leaves me, his hand steady on the gun. "You know this guy, Allie?"

She rolls her eyes, carefully putting a hand on his wrist. "Yeah, he's my . . . Dominick. Put the gun down, TJ. Why the hell do you even have that?"

But he doesn't lower the gun, smartly still reading me as a threat regardless of Allie's placating touch. "You gave this fucker a key?"

Allie's eyes whip to mine, and I take the chance of looking away from the armed man to give her a look, silently asking, *Really?* She presses her lips together in defeat and pushes harder on his wrist.

"Seriously, just put the gun down, TJ."

He slowly lowers the piece, and I rise from the couch just as slowly,

stepping closer to Allie. “You missed your detail. Seems you’ve been running around town with an unknown male, Allison.”

Her eyes flare, and in my use of her full name and formal tone, she realizes just how much she’s scared me and pissed me off. In a tumble, her apology rushes out in one long breath.

“Oh, fuck! I didn’t think. I just got so excited about TJ being here. I’m so sorry. Oh, introductions would probably help now that we’re not shooting anyone or scaring the shit out of them. TJ, this is Dominick. Dominick, this is TJ.”

I pause, my eyes flickering back and forth from Allie to TJ. He doesn’t move, and while he’s lowered his piece, this close, I can see it’s a decent little Smith & Wesson.

“So I’ve surmised. What I don’t know is who TJ is to you, Allie.”

She flushes and rubs behind her ear as she glances at him, and he lifts a brow slightly in a way that I’ve seen across from me at breakfast for the past few days, telling me the answer even before the words come out.

“TJ’s my brother.”

In an instant, my world is set right once again.

Not kidnapped.

Not *with another man*.

Just willfully and knowingly putting herself in danger as if she’s not my fucking heart, walking around at risk. My relief swirls with frustrated anger at her lackadaisical attitude.

No, not *her* attitude. I’m angry with myself, for not using my head and realizing that Allie has people in her life. Decent people whom I have yet to meet. I need to leave, get myself under control.

How ironic is that?

The man of utmost control almost spinning out because his woman went out for an impromptu dinner with her brother?

My jaw muscles nearly cramp as I gnash my teeth, trying to force out some words that might explain my actions without making too much of an idiot of myself.

“I thought you’d been kidnapped, Allie,” I say quietly, her eyes softening when she sees the emotion underneath my voice. “I feared I would be painting the streets red with the blood of whoever dared to lay a finger on you. While you were out having fun and sipping smoothies, I was trying to determine whether I would have to save you or avenge you.”

Her chin drops and her eyes go to the floor. “I’m sorry. I just didn’t think. I’m not used to all this yet.”

I nod my head and clear my throat. “Look at me.”

She looks up at me, and I realize . . . there’s no reason to apologize. The fault is mine and mine alone, and it’s my responsibility to educate her about my life. Something I’ve been woefully inadequate with if she didn’t understand the possible ramifications of her actions. A simple phone call is all it would’ve taken, from either of us, and this whole mess could’ve been avoided.

“We’ll talk about this later, but you did nothing wrong. I’m sorry. Logan will be downstairs tonight. Enjoy your visit with your brother.”

I take the few steps toward her, laying a kiss to her temple as I hold her hand for a brief moment. I can feel the tension through TJ, and his grip on the gun tightens ever so slightly, though his finger is off the trigger. He’s still uncertain whether I pose a threat to his sister.

There are times to answer a question with words . . . but I believe TJ needs a more visceral demonstration. Before my lips even lose contact with Allie’s skin, I make a grab for the gun, quickly and easily twisting it from his hand, a maneuver I learned years ago and still have the occasion to use from time to time.

“Motherfuck—” he stutters loudly. Instead of turning his gun around on him, though, I take a step back, dropping the clip and clearing the chamber before I offer it back to him, grip-first.

“A hint. In my line of work, if you pull a gun, you’d better be prepared to use it without hesitation. If you don’t, you could end up having it taken from you, or worse.”

His face flushes with indignation at being disarmed, but he reaches his hand out and takes it. “I look forward to our next meeting,” I tell him.

In the silence of the moment, I leave, not sure what to make of everything that just happened. It’s an uncomfortable feeling, not one I commonly feel. Simply put, Allie has me on such a tight rope, so readily able to pull me this way and that. It’s discomfoting.

But at the same time, I want nothing more than to be on her string, and her on mine, endlessly tied up in one another. I stride to the elevator, getting on, and though I have every intention of hitting *One*, my finger hovers and I press *Four*, admitting to myself at least that I can’t leave her tonight.

Not after all the ugly images my fear played through my head, like a

horror movie I couldn't escape. Before I call Logan and inform him of my change of plans, I place a call to another old friend.

“Yeah, it's me. I need everything you can get me on a TJ Bancroft. Tonight.”

Chapter 13

Allie

Dom closes the door behind himself with a soft snick. The silence is painful. It would have been easier if he'd slammed it or yelled at me, storming out of here. At least then, I could get a read on how angry he must be.

Instead, he walked out almost like a phantom, his presence here but at the same time, I don't even have anything to lash back against. He somehow makes the quiet sound of the door shutting behind him sound like a gunshot to my heart.

I know I'm not wrong. I'm just not used to the transparency of a detail and somehow needing to report my whereabouts to someone.

He's not wrong either though. If I'm to accept him as part of my life, I need to recognize that he has enemies, enemies who would use me as a weapon against him if they had a chance. What's that old saying? It's not paranoia if they're actually out to get you?

That's Dominick's life every day.

From beside me, TJ kneels, picking up the clip from his gun before hunting for the single ejected round and replacing them before turning to me.

"What the fuck was that, Allie?"

I sigh, looking at him and wondering when I get to ask him why my big brother's carrying a gun like he's a gangster himself. "Let me get you a beer. It's kind of a long story."

TJ says nothing for a minute, casually plopping down on the couch and making himself at home while I grab him a beer from the fridge and pour myself a hearty glass of red wine. I'm pretty sure I'm going to need it.

Handing TJ his beer, I sit down on the floor, a cushion under my butt.

"I don't know where to start," I say, truthfully not sure how to explain the dance I've been doing with Dominick for months, nor who he is, exactly, both to me and to East Robinsville. "How about you start with why you're carrying a gun?"

TJ shakes his head. "Nice attempt at diversion, but remember, I taught

you those tricks. So we'll talk about that later, *maybe*. Right now, I'm worried about my sister, who just had some guy chilling in her apartment when she got home. So let's start with who the fuck that guy is to you. Then tell me why you have a fucking guard detail. And wrap it up with how some slick asshole in a custom-tailored suit just disarmed me like I'm a damn noob. My old Top Sergeant would have kicked my ass if he'd seen that."

His voice is nearly a yell, but I know he's worried about me. My brother . . . still my protector, in his mind.

It takes me a little while, a full glass of wine for me, and TJ's three-quarters of the way through his beer while I give him an edited version, explaining that Dom's my boss at the club, and how we'd flirted and made eyes for months before anything actually happened. That recently, we've become more.

"So anyway, we sort of have a thing going."

"Are you telling me that your strip-club-owner boss is now your *boyfriend*?" TJ growls, disbelief and anger mixing in equal parts in his voice. "Are you shitting me, Allie-gator?"

I smile a bit at the label, even though TJ's obviously not happy about it. "You just saw him. Would you say he's a boy-*anything*? Yes, we're dating. Although, he's not really the casual type. Neither am I, I guess. It's gotten very serious, very fast. And before you ask, he isn't taking advantage of me because of work. He stayed away from me because of his being my boss. Not until my work contract changed did he even approach me."

TJ swallows back his frustration and finishes off his beer. "Okay, so you've got a boyfriend. I'm not done with that, but let's move on to question two. Why do you have a protective detail? Are you in trouble?"

I shake my head, standing up to get us both refills. "No, not really. He's just being careful. He's a powerful man in this city, and that comes with risks, Teej. They're real, and Dom's well-equipped to handle them. I'm not, and I'm certainly not used to *being* a risk. I just didn't think about it when I saw you. I know better."

TJ looks incredulous, accepting his beer only by reflex. "*You know better*? Are you serious right now? Do you hear yourself? Is that why you suddenly went from laughing and giggly girl-out-with-her-brother to shrinking-violet-apologetic when you saw him? If that's what he does to you, I should have pulled the fucking trigger."

I shift, pulling my legs underneath me and taking a big gulp of wine.

“It’s not like that. It’s just his . . . life requires that I accept limitations. Limitations that he places upon himself just as much as he asks me to do the same. He’s sweet in his own way, protective and caring, and he encourages me to become all I can be. But what I did tonight is like . . .” I search my mind for something to make him understand. “Being protective is like his love language or something, and I just shit all over that. Imagine if you’d bought Janine a dozen red roses and instead of saying thank you and putting them in a vase, she just ignored them and forgot, let them rot on the counter without a care. It’s a piss-poor analogy, but pretty much spot-on.”

He flinches and runs his hands over his face, his eyes downcast. “Well, I won’t be bringing Janine roses any damn time soon anymore. That’s for fucking sure.”

His voice breaks at the end, and suddenly, I realize why my bro’s turned up out of the blue. All evening, we’ve been chatting, reminiscing about the good old days, and it hadn’t occurred to me that he’s been intentionally directing the conversation to the past so that he didn’t have to talk about the present.

I’d been so caught up in my own head, not sure how to explain everything going on in my own life, that I’d readily let him keep us in the carefree days of our youth.

But now I can see that was a mistake. Regardless of my relationship with Dominick, and TJ’s questions about how Dom can be overprotective, my brother’s in pain, and he has issues that we need to discuss. I’m okay, but he suddenly looks like he’s truly not.

“Spill the beans, TJ. What’s going on with Janine?”

He sits silently, his jaw opening from time to time as he tries to start, but each time, he closes it. I noticed the habit the last time we were together, something he picked up in his time in the military. Before then, he’d talk first, think later. Now my brother’s a lot more thoughtful.

“She’s been distant when I’d get to call home,” TJ finally says quietly, rubbing at his cheeks. “I thought the deployment was wearing on her. Shit, I understand. It was wearing on me too.”

He huffs a laugh full of pain, and I reach over to take his hand. He squeezes back, holding on for dear life.

“I wanted to surprise her, thought it’d be like one of the fucking viral videos with her running into my arms and hugging me tight when I came home early. Hell, I even put in for a transfer so I could stay stateside for a bit,

be home for dinner and shit.”

I see the tear run down his cheek, but he swipes it away angrily. He’s quiet for a solid minute, lost in the video playing out in his head.

“What happened when you got home?” I ask, forcing him back to this moment.

“I took a buddy with me. He’d used his hazard pay to buy one of those really good camcorders. Like the dude could have filmed for Channel 7 with the fucking thing. I wanted it captured for eternity, you understand? I walked in the house, grinning like a fucking fool at the load of laundry waiting to be folded on the couch and the dishes in the sink. It felt real, ya know? Like she hadn’t spit-shined up for some big homecoming. I remember smelling vanilla cupcakes, best damn smell ever.”

He pauses, shaking his head miserably. “Janine doesn’t cook, not a lick. But she likes the house to smell like she’s been baking so she burns these candles all the time.”

I nod, and he disappears back into his story.

“So I’m walking down the hall, my buddy following me, recording. But when I opened the bedroom door, thinking she was going to be so happy to see me, she was . . . she was . . .”

He chokes, growling out in frustration.

“She was what, TJ?”

He takes a fortifying breath, spitting the words out like they burn his tongue. “She was getting railed by some guy. I caught her red-handed, Allie. Fucking some guy in our bed while I was on deployment.”

I wince, pain and shock rolling through me. I’ve met Janine a bunch of times and always liked her. She was a bit distant while TJ was on deployment, having her own circle of support, but she’d been nothing but good to him.

Until now.

“Oh, my God! I’m so sorry!” I whisper, squeezing his hand. “What’d you do? Please tell me you didn’t kill the guy, or if you did, let me call Dominick to see if he can hide the body.”

It’s just an attempt at humor, something he and I have done at inappropriate times since we were little kids, but TJ’s eyes flash dangerously, and I wince.

“Too soon?”

He coughs and shakes his head. “No, and no, I didn’t kill him. Dude saw

me and bolted out of there like his ass was on fire, yelling he didn't know she was married. Didn't even put his clothes on, just scooped up his pants like a fumbled football. He's not the one I was mad at anyway."

His voice gets hard, bitterness seeping in at the edges, "She's the one that stood up there in a white fucking dress, promising me forever, in front of everyone we knew and cared about. We talked about my deployments, had a plan so she wouldn't be left alone. She just changed her mind? Or fell out of love? Or fucking got bored? I don't know what the fuck she was thinking, but I know it's over. I packed my shit and got the hell outta there."

I nod in understanding. "I'm so sorry. I don't know what to say other than that sucks and I'm sorry. Anything you need, I'm here for you, brother. TJ —" I stop myself. "Fuck, I want to kick her ass for you!"

The corners of his mouth tilt up just a tiny bit, and he lets out a watery sigh that tells me the worst of the storm is past.

"No, don't do that, even though it might be fun to watch, and the thought that you would means a lot."

We hug, and when we lean, back I punch TJ lightly in the chest. "Don't forget, I fought Susannah Brighton for you in the fourth grade when she stole your lunch money. I can sure lay a beatdown on Janine now if need be. You'd just have to hold my earrings because something tells me that bitch would fight dirtier than old Susannah."

It's a weak attempt at humor, but it seems to break him out of the dark pit he's circling. I'm still shocked she'd be that cruel, and if I were anywhere near where she is, I'd be smacking that bitch up right properly.

"Seriously TJ, I'm sorry. You deserve better than that."

His brave shrug is half-hearted, but his broken heart is painfully obvious on his face. "I know that, but there are nights I blame myself too. Lot of what-ifs, like what if I'd made her my number-one and not the uniform. I made my move to be here for her, but I guess it was too little, too late."

I grab the shaggy sides of his hair, forcing him to look at me. "You listen and you listen good, Mister. This is her screw-up. She made those promises, and she's the one who went back on her word. You did exactly what you said you'd do, and she didn't. This is not on you. You're one of the best people I know, and you deserve better than her."

"Thanks, Allie-Gator."

Slowly, our conversation starts up again, returning to the safe zone of banal chatter about his buddies overseas and all the things he's seen and

done. I think the distraction is good for him, at least for a bit, and we studiously avoid discussing Janine or Dominick for the rest of the night. As the clock hits midnight, he staggers up, weaving a little before walking toward my bathroom.

“I think I’m gonna need to crash on your couch tonight, Sis. That is, if your boytoy isn’t coming back for a midnight booty call?”

“It’s so not like that, assface.”

He smirks, planting a hand on the doorframe of my bathroom. “Too soon?”

That’s it. I grab a pillow and toss it at him, hitting him squarely in the nose, a trick I probably couldn’t repeat if I wanted to.

“Keep it up, GI Joe. You’re welcome to the couch, and if Dom does show back up, I’ll make sure to keep the moans and screams to an *uncomfortable* level. ‘Oh, Daddy, just like that!’ ”

TJ blinks before pretending to gag, reminding me of when we were kids and I was asked out for my first date. He’d somehow just watched *The Girl Next Door* and told me Robbie Jenkins was going to shove his tongue in my mouth. I’d thought he was kidding, going on and on about how gross that was until he was rolling on the floor, laughing at my innocence.

“You’re welcome to my couch for as many nights as you want, TJ. You know that, right?”

His voice filters through the bathroom door, where I’m glad he’s at least learned to close it behind him. As a kid, I had to listen to too much. “It’s just tonight. I’ve got a room while I’m in town.”

“Fuck that!” I argue. “No, you’ll stay here. That’s what family is for.”

There’s silence from the bathroom until the toilet flushes and TJ comes out, wiping at his mouth like he always does after he’s used mouthwash.

“Allie, I’m doing good right now, especially considering our night. But it hits me sometimes, and I don’t want to have a breakdown in front of my sister again. I just need some space. But thanks for tonight.”

I understand but wish he would just stay here and let me take care of him a bit. Getting up, I nab him a blanket and pillow from the linen closet and help him set up the couch into a makeshift bed.

“Here you go . . . hope you don’t mind the pink fuzziness.”

TJ’s sleepy but still waves his hands in mock protest. “Allie, stop. I’ve slept sitting upright, on the ground in the freezing cold and the sweltering heat, and with a light shining in my eyes. A cushy couch with a pillow and a

blanket is already a luxury I appreciate.”

I pat his arm, nodding. “Okay, holler if you need anything. We’ll do breakfast in the morning, ’kay?”

He grunts as he rolls onto his side, and I choose to take that as agreement. Before I even make it down the hallway, I can hear his even breathing. Guess he really can fall asleep anywhere, anytime.

Lucky him, because I don’t think I’ll sleep at all tonight.

Heading back to my bedroom, I pick up my phone. I want to call Dominick, needing to hear his voice, but I’m not sure if this is something we should do on the phone. I can’t imagine how terrified he must’ve been. He’s not a man with friends, family, and definitely not one with lovers he cares about. I suspect he’s let me in closer than anyone in a long time.

I hit speed dial, waiting for Logan to pick up instead.

“Yes?” His voice is stone-cold.

“Um, hey, Logan. I am so sorry for any problem I might’ve caused. Did you or the guys get in trouble?”

Logan chuckles darkly, and I can hear him shift around, probably sitting in his car or something. “Trouble? No, although Gavin feels like crap right now, even though he did exactly what he was supposed to do.” His words are double-edged, hitting home the point that I didn’t hold up my end of the deal. “Allie, gonna be honest. You scared us shitless.”

That’s Logan, always straight to the point. “I know. And I’ll fix it, I promise. But I need you to do something for me tonight.”

His scoff is pretty obvious, even through my phone. “You’re asking me for a favor, at midnight, after giving up my night off to chase you all over town? You got some big brass ones, Allie.”

I startle, realization dawning. “How did you track me down? You didn’t follow me from the studio, and Dom said something about smoothies. How’d he know that?”

I can’t see him, but I can almost hear the shrug in his words. “You need to discuss that with him. Some of it’s just that I’ve got skills. So, what did you want?”

He’s back to all-business, his voice crisp and distant, not the sometimes slightly friendlier guy he’s been with me lately. I guess I deserve it after what I’ve put him through.

“Can you watch him for me, Logan? When he left, he was cold, and I know it sounds crazy, but he’s not that man with me. Ever. And I’m scared

for him tonight. Can you just make sure he's okay?"

He sighs, the sound staticky in the phone. "He's fine. He's tucked in for the night. Safe and sound. I promise."

His words reassure me and give me the tiniest sliver of hope that I might actually sleep.

Chapter 14

Dominick

Settling into the rich leather chair behind my home office desk, I pick up the file folder that Logan hand-delivered an hour ago. I twist my head first one way, then the other, the pops satisfying as the crackles ripple down my spine, relaxing me.

Before opening the file, I look at the picture. It's strange, how the eyes are so similar, and there's a hint of shared lineage in the jawline that I can see now. His deep brown eyes stare back at me from the matte paper, full of neutral apathy. No smile, no anger, just one of roughly a million soldiers, but this one is different, special. Not because of anything he's done but because of who he is.

Specialist Tyler David Bancroft, Junior. Also known as TJ . . . Tyler Junior.

I reach over and pick up my tumbler of scotch, sipping at it as I study TJ's file. He's probably the apple of his daddy's eye, I'd wager. More importantly, he's the brother of my Allie.

Last night did not go well. I was too angry, too hurt. As real as possible threats are, paranoia had let ugly possibilities brew in my mind. Though I think her brother might be the type to find some degree of respect in my actions, judging by the way he instantly protected her. He wasn't quite as ruthless as he should have been. He did make a mistake . . . but he was willing to pull a gun on a stranger.

It could have been worse. He could've been a weakling, one of the sheep that make up so many of the common man. Maybe throw out some bluster and then squeal in the corner when he's pushed. The kind of man I couldn't possibly respect.

No, TJ is someone worthy of my attention, though the idea of going toe-to-toe with him over Allie should give me pause. But strangely enough, I find the idea of testing myself against him invigorating, as if I can prove myself worthy and earn her affection.

I sigh at the fanciful ideology and return to studying my target. TJ is

currently on leave from the Army for three months pending a transfer. Seems TJ somehow timed his rotation just right and figured out a way to get himself three months of time off before going off to be a chopper pilot. Smart boy.

Looking over his service record, all his reports show him to be an excellent soldier, intelligent and well-equipped to both do what he's told and think on his feet. The letter from his platoon leader said he was only recommending TJ because he knew he'd lose him one way or another. Either to Warrant Officer school or to his being snatched away to be a Sergeant in another unit. So professionally, he's stellar.

Personally, though, his life seems to be falling apart. While no papers have been filed, it seems his wife spent his year overseas getting frisky.

After finding out, TJ waited for his unit to get back from the 'Stan before going on leave, and he's currently got a room in a hotel across town on the South Side, Pete's territory.

Everything in his backstory corresponds with the matching report I have on Allison. Father and mother happily married, well-educated, and live in the suburbs two states away.

But the things I really need to know aren't on these pages, though I'm going to give my people credit. It's a good start. There are so many intangibles about someone, like how Allie's pre-employment report didn't speak to her inappropriate sense of humor, her work ethic . . . her ability to make a desolate man feel alive again. I suspect there are key factors missing from TJ's report too.

And I don't like missing information.

My entire empire is built on knowing things before others and reading people better than anyone else. It's what allows me to be in place before my opponents know what happened. It gives me strength.

While this file tells me a lot, it doesn't tell me everything. And until I know, I'm going to have to consider TJ a problem.

A worthy adversary, perhaps . . . but regardless of the matter, he's a danger to what I'm building with Allie.

I close his file and set it on the side of my desk, thinking for a moment until the sound of feet thundering down the hall to my office catches my attention. I'm reaching for the pistol I keep under my lap drawer when the door opens, and my hand relaxes as I see Allie burst through like the world's cutest rhino charge.

"Dominick!" Allie says loudly.

At the same time, one of the cleaning staff pushes past and says at the same time, "I'm sorry, sir." Fiona's saucy accent blares over Allie's words, cutting her off. "I told Miss Bancroft she was welcome but to please wait for someone to announce her."

Allie's glare captures my attention and I wave Fiona off. She's new. She doesn't know Allie has free reign to come and go as she pleases. Fiona nods, shutting the door quietly behind her, leaving me alone with Allie.

She's fuming, her hands planted on her hips and looking so adorable that I have to grin at her gall before remembering that I'm supposed to be mad at her too. Quickly, I rearrange my features into the coolly collected sneer I typically use to show disappointment.

Allie, of course, is my opposite, and since she's riled up too, her madness comes out in a flurry of energetic pacing, her skirt flexing and thigh muscles bunching in ways that leave my cock tingling in my pants.

"So, I spent the night thinking, and some of breakfast too . . . TJ says hi, by the way."

Sarcasm coats her last words, and she tosses her hair. I want to pull it to my nose and see if it smells as heavenly as it gleams in the light of my office.

Instead, I lift one eyebrow warily. "I see."

"Well, okay, he didn't say that exactly, but he didn't stop me when I told him where I was going, so considering the Mexican standoff we had rolling last night, I'm choosing to call that a win, Mister. Anyway, that can't happen again. Not the gun pulling, not the scary drama where you think something bad happened just because I went for a smoothie, and not the stomping off angry deal. Okay, that one was a bit exaggerated. You definitely didn't stomp off, but you get my point."

Honestly, I have virtually no idea what she's talking about. All I can think about is the way her frenetic energy envelops me, the flush on her cheeks making me want to cup her face, the rapid-fire pace of her words making me want to kiss her to shut her up.

She stops, her word salad finally coming to a stop as she stares at me, and after a moment, I decipher enough to respond. "And what do you propose to do about this?"

I'm genuinely curious what she thinks is the appropriate response to everything that's gone on. To me, the best-case scenario would be for her to do as she's told and allow my guards to be with her at all times, for my sanity and her safety. For her to submit to being mine completely.

Not tamed. She's too wild, too beautifully unique to ever be tamed, and that would dim her gloriousness. But a little . . . domestication? Constraint? Maybe.

My lips tilt up at the idea of a tame Allie, not even able to picture what such a creature would look like. She's like a lioness. Sure, you can stick one in a cage, but that's cruel. If you are going to have one, let it have safety barriers but plenty of area to roam.

The question is . . . will Allie be willing to live within the barriers I've built for myself as well? Because if she's a lioness, I'm a lion, the pride leader.

"I propose transparency," she replies. "Again, I'm willing to admit that I was wrong. You were too," she says, getting a hit in, but I don't stop her roll. "And yes, I realize this is eerily similar to my guard issue before, though that one was accidental, a reasonable assumption on my part, and this one was thoughtlessly intentional. But I'll come back to that."

She holds up one finger, her eyes flashing and her head shaking back and forth. "Wait, Dom. Let's put our cards on the table, shall we?"

"I don't play poker, but I do own an underground casino, so why not?"

My unusual half-joke gets a small smile from Allie, who twists and sits down on the edge of my desk, which is amazingly cute.

"Fine. Here goes . . . I like you a whole fucking lot. And I don't say that lightly or to many people. I'm excited to get to know you more. So, I am sorry. Truly sorry for scaring you."

I inhale deeply through my nose, surprised at how soothing her words are to my soul. "Apology accepted."

She quirks her eyebrow, planting a hand on my desk blotter and leaning down, staring into my eyes.

"And?"

I lean forward. "And what?"

Allie sighs dramatically, not seeing my subtle sarcasm, and hops off my desk, taking two paces before turning and throwing her hands in the air. "And this is the part where you apologize for sitting in my apartment like a creeper. It's also where you explain how you got in my apartment in the first place and how you knew I'd been 'sipping smoothies' when I didn't have anyone with me when I left the studio."

I drum my fingers on the desk, not wanting to lie to her but afraid to tell her the full truth.

My hesitation is apparent, and she comes back around to sit on my desk again, looking into my eyes. “Transparency, Dominick. You want it from me, you need to give it back.”

She’s throwing down a gauntlet, and I know that I could lose her in this moment if I don’t share some hard truths.

“I can’t give you that in all things, nor would you want it, Allie,” I tell her with a shake of my head. “There are things that if you knew them, they could put you in danger. But I will say that putting a tracker in someone’s phone is rather easy. Logan followed it and watched you for me until I could get back to town.”

“And getting in my apartment?”

That one’s easy. “Your doorknob was replaced a few months back, remember? The locksmith gave me a copy of the key.”

“He just gave you a key?” she asks, looking horrified. “What the hell? You could’ve been a fucking serial killer, for all he knew!”

I clear my throat, realizing again just how . . . innocent Allie is. Secrets of bad men aren’t something she’s used to. The biggest one, of course, is sitting in this very chair.

“I’m quite certain he knew exactly who I was.”

“Oh,” she says quietly, nodding. “Okay, so to surmise, the locksmith gave the friendly local Mob boss a key to my apartment, you’re tracking my phone, and you have guards following me everywhere.”

She stops, then looks up like she’s not believing the words that are coming out of her mouth. “You know that’s crazy, right? It’s like some tier-one stalker shit, Dominick. You’re freaking me out.”

There is honesty in her voice, but I can tell that she’s only saying it because she thinks she should be nervous about it. Her heart is racing, but it’s not in fear.

Or at least, not totally in fear.

I reach up, tracing the flutter in her neck, enjoying the satin of her skin beneath my palm. Unconsciously, she tilts her head, giving me more access and proving me right. She’s not scared of me. She simply thinks she should be.

“Transparency,” I whisper, my voice hushed, barely audible in my soundproofed office. “I like you a lot too, Allison. More than like, though I won’t say it now and scare you away. Because I can see that all that I’ve done scares you, but the words I could say scare us both.”

She nods, but in her eyes, I see the same hunger for them that I have. “Dom—”

“But my life comes with a certain degree of violence and unpleasantness, and the idea that you might get caught up in that terrifies and saddens me,” I continue softly, stroking her cheek. “The night of the shooting, you were given a small taste of the world I live with every day. So for doing what I’ve done, I won’t apologize. For not telling you, yes, I do apologize. But for us to take this further, to explore this . . .”

I let my hand slip down her neck, a finger tracing along her collarbone, and delight at the goosebumps that rise against my touch. Her eyes flutter closed, and she lets out a soft sigh.

I wait until her eyes open again, this time dark with desire, but I have to hold back a little. She must know.

“There will be rules, and you need to follow them.”

Her eyes flash, and she pulls back, breaking our contact as she looks at me warily. “Rules? I don’t think I like the sound of that.”

I chuckle and lean back in my chair. “I’m sure you don’t, but you must follow them or . . . you must leave. For your own safety.”

She doesn’t like the ultimatum one bit. But I can’t waver on this. I can’t allow any negotiation.

“Perhaps you’d like to hear the rules before you decide?”

She nods once, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Rule number one. You need to stay where you’re supposed to be at all times. If there is a change in plans, you notify me or the guard watching you. I’m not trying to stop you from going anywhere you want, but someone will know where you are at all times.

“Rule number two. Your phone is to be turned on, charged, and with you at all times so that you can be tracked.

“Rule number three. Trust that I have your wellbeing in mind, and if there is a time where I ask you to go somewhere or do something that sounds wrong, you do as I instruct you to. I can’t have you questioning me in the moment if there’s a security risk. I can explain later, but in the moment, go without question.”

It’s basically things we’ve already discussed, just laid much barer with no pretty words and devoid of modifiers like *please* and *thank you*. These are non-negotiable and she must understand that.

She looks at me with sass in her eyes. “And if I agree to these terms, do

they hold true for you as well? Are you going to tell me your whereabouts every hour of the day and let me track your phone and such?”

She already knows the answer to her questions, but I still lay it out. “No. I’ll be as open and honest with you as I can be, but knowing everything would be dangerous information. But you can trust that I’m being as safe as possible while doing my job.”

“Can I trust that you’re not out fucking some woman in every corner of the city?” she asks, her words pouty with disappointment at turnabout not being fair play. I force her legs to spread open for me, her knees laid back against the edge of my desk, and harshly knead her honeyed thighs, dimpling the skin with my rough handling.

She gasps, but she lets me hold her there, not fighting to close her thighs against me. “You can trust that the only woman I have any interest in—have had interest in—is right here in front of me.”

I lean in, inhaling her spicy floral scent before nuzzling against the silk covering her mound. Allie gasps, running her hand through my hair, urging me closer.

“This pretty pussy of yours is all I want . . . to eat, to fuck, to own.”

She groans above me, my dirty words igniting her passion as much as my closeness. Her hips roll, desperate to get closer to my mouth. Running my thumb down the inside of her leg, I rub her through the flimsy fabric, enjoying the slickness as her panties become drenched. “So sweet, so *mine*.”

Suddenly, she sits up, palm to my shoulder, pushing me away and panting, “Wait, wait.”

I growl at her like a toddler throwing a tantrum after having his favorite toy taken away and hold myself steady, not letting her move me from the cradle of her legs.

“Dom . . . remember I said I’d come back to my messing up again?”

I barely nod, knowing that this is important but at the same time not wanting to handle it right this moment.

My words vibrate against her skin. “Do you want to remind me of that now, Allison?”

I lick a long line up the crease where her leg meets her body, nibbling along the edge of her panties, and Allie whimpers but keeps her voice steady and slightly stronger than before.

“Yes, I do. Do you remember what you did when I was bad then?”

I freeze, my eyes meeting hers and seeing the meaning in their depths.

She's asking for it, not in so many words, but she's giving me the opening to spank her ass.

The power in that is not in the actual contact of my hand on her skin but in the trust she places in me to allow it. The gift of what she's offering floors me.

In this instant, I can see a future where this woman will give me everything I demand, to be my one and true queen, equal, partner, Yin to my Yang . . . and still somehow surprise me.

I push back from her and get up, my cock straining my pants to her delighted notice as I remove my tie, letting my voice drop lower.

"Turn around and bend over, Allison."

She hops from the desk, spinning around and bending forward. My flexible girl grabs her ankles, her ass presented high in the air.

I push her skirt up to encircle her waist and rip the silky panties down her legs, leaving them bunched around her knees. I stay back, enjoying the view for a moment before touching her, running my fingertips over her outer hip, my cock throbbing as she shivers.

"Dominick . . ."

I place a steadying hand on her lower back. "Allison. Rule number one."

I smack her right cheek hard, instantly pinkening it before caressing it, the heat mixed with the soothing gentleness that makes her cry out in want and desire.

"Be where I'm supposed to be. Check in if it changes."

I pause and whisper roughly, "Why?"

She turns to look at me, her eyes flashing with acceptance. "To keep me safe."

It's good enough, a superficial understanding of the deeper truth. I spank her twice more before caressing her again, my fingers brushing lower to the wet dampness of her center.

"Rule number two. Tell me."

Her answer is instant, eager this time. "Keep my phone with me."

My hand stills and I repeat my question. "Why?"

She sobs ever so softly, her voice ragged as I trace her pussy lips. "Care . . . because you care."

Ah, closer to the truth. My girl is insightful.

I give her three smacks. Each blow is exciting, demanding, and painful. I never, ever will cause her real pain, but at the same time, this mock pain is

electric to us both.

“Rule number three.”

She pauses, and I can see her mind working, making me wonder what her concern is with the rule.

Finally, she simply says, “Trust you.”

My breath is taken away at the honesty in her words. I’d expected her to robotically quote back what I’d said, but she boiled it down to the real meaning behind the words.

She’s right.

Rule three is simply . . . trust.

I lean down, laying a gentle kiss to her heated skin, and she shivers as I ask once more, “Why?”

“Because I’m yours,” she whispers, trembling.

And that’s it, the deepest truth we have revealed yet. I know there will be more, both ugly and pretty, but I have to hold back, even as I demand her all.

She’s not ready for me, not entirely, but she will be.

I can’t allow myself to even entertain any other possibility.

Her knees give out, and she sinks down to the carpet, coyly looking over her shoulder at me.

“Do you remember what else you said that night?” Her flirty smile doesn’t let me search for the words she wants, so she answers her own question. “Reward and punishment.”

I bite my lip to stop from smirking, knowing exactly what she wants, and instead, I have to force venom into my words. “And do you think you deserve a reward after scaring the fuck out of me?”

She shakes her head, her ass moving hypnotically in time with her swishing hair. “No, but I think you deserve one.”

I can’t hold back my smirk any longer as I nod, unbuckling my pants and letting them fall before pulling my hard cock from my boxer briefs. She turns and crawls two steps to get closer, her ass settling on her heels and her eyes locked on mine as she takes me in her hand.

I’m throbbing, aching to feel her touch as her silky soft palm grips me surely, stroking up and down. She leans in, pressing a kiss to my crown and then swirling her tongue around my slit to taste my precum.

“Mmm . . . you’re delicious, Dominick.”

“Go ahead, Allie,” I whisper, watching her. “Suck me down your throat. Give me my reward.”

Her lips stretch wide around my girth, and I know she's having a hard time taking all of me, but she works at it, coating me in saliva and relaxing into the up and down bobbing of her head.

Deeper and deeper with every thrust, I let her lead until she guides me to her throat, gagging ever so slightly. She seems to take it as a personal failure and doubles down, going faster and deeper, fighting the impulse to stop for breath.

She's driving me mad, but I want even more of her. "Do you trust me, Allison?"

The look in her eyes tells me more than any words ever could, but she still tries, humming her answer against my skin. I spread my legs wider, taking a solid stance, and twist my fingers into her hair, forcing her head still and holding her under my control.

I pull back, letting her breathe, and she gasps and puts her hands behind her back. "Take me."

I growl lightly as I start to fuck her mouth, pounding hard and fast, much rougher than she was able to suck me. She gags as I press into her throat, her eyes watering, and I watch carefully to see if she's had enough. But she bravely takes it all as lust shines in her eyes, increasing even as tears start to trickle down her cheeks. I know not to stop though, as her tongue doesn't try to push me out but instead swirls and takes me, pulling me in deeper.

And she's never looked lovelier.

Amid the symphony of her moans and choking, I grunt, talking her through it all. "That's a good girl, Allie. Take me and I'll give you a reward too. You're going to swallow every drop of my cum."

Her eyes beg, as hungry for her reward as I am to give it. I tilt her head back slightly, letting her throat open more, and use my grip on her head to help move her against me, taking her for my own pleasure.

I see her hips squirm, and I know she wants to have release, but she's such a good girl, her hands still clenched behind her back.

"Hmm, so good of you. If I were cruel, I'd leave you on the edge so you remember the rules. Should I?"

She whimpers against me, and I shake my head, smiling down at her. "I want you to come, Allie. Come with my cock down your throat and your fingers buried in your pussy. Reward us both."

Permission granted, her hand almost flies between her legs as she buries her fingers deep in her pussy. Her moans become more desperate as I slam

into her mouth, my balls resting on her chin as she swallows. The caress of her throat sends me over, and I hold her there, nose buried against me as I give her jet after jet of my cum.

She swallows it all down before she moans helplessly around her mouthful of my creamy cock, her orgasm ripping through her so quickly it startles us both, her body jerking and shuddering against me.

I pull back slowly, letting her lick every droplet from my skin, sucking and nuzzling my softening cockhead before she withdraws her hand from her pussy.

“Give it to me,” I command, holding out my hand for her fingers. She rises to her knees, reaching up as I bend down slightly, sucking her slick fingers into my mouth and cleaning her until there’s nothing but her normal sublime taste on my tongue.

Letting her go, I help her up before we readjust our clothes. Sitting down in my chair, I gather her in my arms, holding her and somehow feeling like we just survived our first gauntlet. The bit I’ve revealed could’ve easily been too much for her.

She’d be well within her rights, and her right mind, to run screaming from me now, while there’s still a small chance I’d let her go. Instead, she presses her cheek to my chest, holding me tightly.

“So, about rule one.”

I can’t help it. I can hear her teasing tone, but I still growl. “Non-negotiable.”

I can feel her smile against me, and she runs a hand through my hair. “Chill out, I’m not arguing. I’m giving notice. TJ is coming over for dinner tonight. You’re coming too. You are two of the most important men in my life, and you definitely got off to a bad start, so I’m calling a do-over. Tonight.”

I have work tonight, nothing special, just schmoozing around the club and keeping an eye on things. But that can wait until later.

“Fine. What time?”

She hops out of my lap, making me regret it for a moment, but she’s so excited that I smile along with her as she squeals. “Really? I thought that was going to be a harder sell! I mean . . . yeah, you’re coming to dinner. It’s *non-optional*.”

She dropped her voice there at the end in an imitation of my normal gravely growl. “I’m not that bad.”

“So you say,” she taunts before humming. “How about seven thirty?”

I kiss her forehead, pleased. More than enough time. “And this afternoon? Do you need an escort anywhere?”

She starts to shake her head no and then reconsiders and sighs. “Yes, I’m going to the grocery store and then home. This is going to take some getting used to. What if I just want to run out and get ice cream at midnight? Am I going to have to wait for Logan or Gavin or whoever to get there just so I can go to the store?”

I smirk, shaking my head. “First, you don’t like ice cream. Second, you could call a delivery service. Third, if you must get out, then yes, you’d wait for an escort. Most of the time, though, someone would be there within five minutes. Clear?”

She doesn’t like it, but I can tell she’s trying her best. “Yeah, yeah . . . understood. But it’s weird. And overkill. Do *you* get escorted everywhere?”

“When I need it, yes.”

We agreed on transparency, but I’m already holding back from her. Baby steps, I tell myself. She thinks an escort is too much, though she didn’t balk at the tracking that much.

But the sheer depth of my obsession? Cameras and the apartments?

Weird? More like criminal.

But that’s who I am. That’s my life.

She’ll adjust, little by little, one baby step at a time.

Chapter 15

Allie

Dinner is not going well. I'd planned everything as well as I could, setting the coffee table with a tablecloth and candles, even giving the floor pillows a fresh fluff so we'd be comfortable sitting on them.

Not the usual dinner party set-up, but when my dining room is more dance studio, it's what I've got.

Maybe I'd been stupid to think getting the two of them together under better circumstances would make the introductions friendlier, the conversation politer, the air more welcoming.

Nope. Not with these two, apparently. I guess maybe it's asking for a bit too much, too fast, considering the start.

It's been a tense hour of interrogation-style questions, dismissive answers, and barely-contained dick measuring as TJ tries to intimidate Dominick with some version of big brother protectiveness. It might work with another man, but not with Dom.

I try to stop my near-constant eye rolls. I'm no expert, but TJ's antics are clearly telling more about himself than anything he's gleaned from Dominick. I could have told him it was a waste of time. Dom's spent years hiding himself behind a mask.

And we've barely started the main course. I take a bite of my chicken parmigiana, thinking for the third time that I should've made something less time-intensive that I could just shove in their mouths to keep them quiet.

Speaking of . . . "More bread?" I ask, offering the breadsticks and crossing my fingers under the table that TJ might eat a whole stick of garlicky goodness in one go. Because if he keeps this up, I'm going to be stuffing one in his ear. "Teej?"

His crooked eyebrow tells me he knows what I'm trying to do, but he takes one anyway, taking a bite and talking around the mouthful with a look that tells me, *Take that*.

"So, you own a strip club?" TJ somehow manages to sneer the words without losing a crumb of breadstick.

Dom's eyes flick to me, wondering how much I've told him.

I glare back, telling him wordlessly, *Of course, I didn't tell him. I'm not stupid.* That's not my story to tell, and not one I'd share without permission. And a shot of something strong to give me courage.

Dominick's attention returns to TJ. "Yes, I own several businesses, one of which is a club."

"A strip club," TJ says with scorn. TJ is trying to make the club sound seedy and disgusting, and by his ownership, painting Dominick with the same brush. But his disdain for the club stabs at me like a knife, hot betrayal burning through me. I set my fork down with a clatter.

Both men turn to me at the sharp sound, and TJ immediately reads the anger in my eyes. He grimaces, and his shoulders slump a little. "Shit. Alligator, I didn't mean it like that."

Once upon a time, I would've wilted and just forgiven him, but this is something I've had to deal with over and over again, finding strength I didn't know I had, to handle other people's misconceptions. I swing my legs around, getting up onto my knees and squaring my shoulders, strong and proud as I stare at my brother.

"Bullshit. You meant it just like that, trying to say that Dom's some sleazy guy who owns a sketchy club full of whores. That's what you implied. But while you were busy insulting him, you forgot . . . I fucking work there."

He cringes at my words, but also my volume, which has increased as I verbally slay him. "Allie—"

"I'm not defending Dominick—he doesn't need me to do that—but defending myself and my friends. The girls there at Petals, they're good people who work hard. I don't need you sitting at my dinner table insulting them or me."

TJ reaches for my hand. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that, truly. I know you're an amazing dancer and a good person. I just . . ." He shakes his head, trying to put his thoughts together. Finally, he speaks, his voice quiet. "I just didn't think this was where you were headed. You're a stripper, dating your boss. You've gotta see how I could want more than that for you."

I squeeze his hand, understanding that he's coming from a place of good intentions but going about it all wrong. He doesn't understand . . . yet. But that doesn't mean his verbal barbs hurt any less. Part of me wants to rage back. *How dare he insult me like that?* "The truth is, you're right. I am a stripper, dating my boss. It just doesn't mean what you think it does. It's so

much more than you realize. And *I* am more than you think I am . . . stronger, happier, healthier than you've probably ever known me to be. You just can't see it. And that makes me sad, not angry."

Dominick has been quiet during our exchange. I appreciate that he let me handle it on my own, seeing that this was something I needed to do myself.

But I know he's analyzing every word and expression and takes his time before he finally speaks. "TJ, when was the last time you saw Allison dance?"

TJ flushes nearly a deep purple, in either embarrassment or anger or some combination of the two, I can't really tell. "I don't want to see her like that."

Dominick sighs slightly, and I'm glad he's patient. "Not at my club. That I can understand. But anywhere. What about watching her do ballet?"

TJ's mouth snaps closed, and I don't think Dominick realizes just how much of a 'punch' he just landed on TJ. "Oh, it's been a while, I guess. I've been gone and it was always kind of her thing."

He looks at me, both of us thinking back through the years and various recitals my family came to. TJ would whine about it beforehand, like brothers do, I suppose, but he was always the loudest clapper, cheering me with enthusiasm.

"Probably three or four years ago. Right before I joined the service."

Dominick hums and looks at me with so much intensity in his eyes that I feel my pulse start to race with each passing second. "She is beauty in motion on the stage, both at the club, where she brings more grace and elegance than the clientele probably deserves, and in her ballet performances. The public performance she had of *The Nutcracker* . . . she brought the house down. She is still your little sister, the sweet ballerina who needed her brother's protection and support. But she is also a fierce woman who stakes her territory on the Petals stage, needs permission from no one to be her best self, and quite frankly, I'm honored to call her my woman."

His sweetly expressive words turn hard, challenging as he stares at TJ, who's shrinking by the second. "Allison also happens to work her ass off on the pole, on the barre, and in life. She deserves a family who supports her in that, not one that makes her feel 'less than' because of the choices she's made."

TJ nods, suitably chastised, but my heart's soaring in my chest at Dominick's words. I've seen him be rough, handling business like a monster, and dirty, bending me over his knee, but this is my favorite Dominick. The

one who wields his usage of words even better than his control over the city.

That's his true power, the brilliance of his mind. And it's sexy as fuck. I grin, both at the irony of my foul language compared to Dom's and from the joy springing from inside to shine on my face.

"I didn't know you came to see my Nutcracker performance."

Dominick's look is pure smoldering desire, devotion, and a demonstration of the man he is. "An opportunity to see you do what you love is a gift I would not waste."

Swoon. I think I literally wobble a bit, lightheadedly giddy and on the verge of jumping into his lap. But we're not alone, and the air is only recently cleared, so I somehow restrain myself. But it's hard. So fucking hard. I wonder if he is?

For a moment, I have a mental flash of him ripping the pink leotard I like to wear for personal practice off my body and slamming into me as I stretch, one leg up and the other out, fully open to his vicious hammering. I know one thing . . . I'd love every second of it.

At the sound of a throat clearing, I mentally return to the present moment to see Dominick looking rather amused and TJ rolling his eyes, although mostly good-naturedly now.

"Oh, uh, thank you," I tell Dominick.

"Of course."

We have a moment of eye-fucking, the connection heating up though we both hold our positions on our floor pillows.

TJ decides to break in. "So, Prima Ballerina, tell me all about your new studio work then."

Eager to keep some positive momentum going, I launch into telling him all about the ballet classes I teach, the upcoming kids' performance, making sure to also include how successful my Diva Dance classes have been and that I'm leading pole classes at Encore too.

"I'm not going to pretend that what I do is common, but it's something I'm good at and that I enjoy. And it's paying off my medical bills faster than any other job I could have so that Mom and Dad don't have to worry about them."

TJ frowns. "You know Mom and Dad, hell, even I, would take on those bills in a second if it meant you weren't a stripper. They worried so much and wanted you to be healthy for so long, and now that you are, you're an—"

He stops himself, but I want to hear the words. I need to know what my

brother thinks of me. “Finish your sentence, TJ. I’m a what?”

He shakes his head, like he knows he shouldn’t say it, but I’m not letting him off that easily. It feels like this fight has been a long time coming, and we need to clear the air, even if it gets worse before it gets better. We’re family, have pressed each other’s buttons for so long and so well, that I know him like I know the back of my hand. So I poke at him, picking at just the right scab to force his hand.

“Don’t wuss out now. You obviously have an opinion, so speak up or shut up. And I’ve never known you to be a pussy.”

He growls. “Fine, you want to hear it? An embarrassment, Allie. You’re an embarrassment. You think Mom and Dad are sitting around bragging about their stripper daughter to their friends over dinner?”

Fury runs through me at his audacity. “Oh, but they’re bragging about their soldier son? Because you’re doing so well right now?”

He recoils as if I slapped him, and I instantly regret throwing that in his face, the shame of my cruelty making me feel small inside. I truly didn’t think about what I was saying, didn’t realize that it would sound like I was blaming him for Janine’s actions until the words were already out.

“I’m sorry, TJ. I didn’t mean it like that, and I shouldn’t have said it anyway.”

But he shakes my apology off, turning his ire on Dominick once again. “You think you’re good enough for my sister, huh? Because what I see is you turning her into a bitch.”

He gets up, shoving the table slightly and stomping to the kitchen, where I can hear him breathing raggedly. My heart is in my throat as I wonder how everything went so wrong. TJ and I have always been so close, two peas in a pod. Sure, we’ve had fights, even some real doozies back in high school, but not like this. I’m horrified, embarrassed by our behavior with each other, but it’s even worse that it happened in front of Dominick. I let my eyes drift toward him, afraid of the judgment and disappointment I’ll see.

Dominick looks to me, his eyes full of so much that I can’t even decipher everything swirling in their icy depths. He takes a steadying breath and looks at me with eyes full of . . . something.

“I don’t, you know.”

I lift my eyebrows questioningly, so caught up in TJ’s outburst and my shame that I’ve totally lost the train of the conversation.

“Huh?”

“Think I’m good enough for you. Your brother’s right. My world is dark and ugly, I’m violent and possessive, and you are light and beauty, strong and wild. But my heart has chosen you, and whether you want it or not, it’s yours. And your heart is mine. *You* are mine, Allison. I’m choosing to be transparent with you as we agreed, but know that it’s an unfamiliar territory for me. This is only for you.”

I sit quietly, not sure what to say. It’s powerful, more than anyone has ever spoken to me, certainly more than a man has shared. It feels good, but the intensity of his emotions is a lot to bear, and the dark depths both scare me and excite me equally.

He doesn’t wait for my response, instead leaning over and weaving his fingers into my hair, holding my face lifted toward him to plant a soft kiss to my cheek. I fade into the supportive hold he has on me, needing the crutch for a moment.

The soft and hard, the brush of his lips and the grip on my head, are everything with him, driving me mad. I want him more than I even know . . . and at the same time, I’m afraid that I’m going to explode if I do.

I still can’t turn away, and as I lay my head on his chest, he kisses my head one more time, his breath warm in my ear.

“Talk to your brother. He loves you and is hurting, drowning in a world of misery, and his only way to deal with it is to lash out at the one person he feels safest with . . . you. I know it’s an impossible task, but don’t take it personally. The harsh judgments he had are more telling of what he feels about himself right now, not you. He feels worthless, embarrassed, lost to someone else’s decisions.”

“You know about his wife?” I murmur, unsurprised somehow. “What she did?”

I can feel Dom’s chin press into the top of my head once as he nods. “Yes.”

I hear the challenge, daring me to ask how he knows, why he knows . . . because TJ sure as fuck didn’t tell him. But I know Dominick and have no doubt that he had a full background check on TJ as soon as I introduced them.

It’s not right, it’s invasive and hostile, but it’s who Dominick is. I sigh, sad and angry that Janine is putting TJ through the wringer but not able to forgive him so readily for the gut punches he’s delivered to me tonight.

“Talk to him, Allison.”

I nod. "I will."

"I need you to know, it took everything in me to restrain myself from coming to your defense tonight. I hate that he spoke to you that way, and if it were anyone else, I would've destroyed them. But you are a force, Allison. Mouthy, strong, with big brass balls and a sensitive heart. Tonight, you didn't need protection. Even though it hurt and was hard, maybe even ugly, you protected yourself. And it was glorious."

He lays a chaste kiss to my lips, and I breathe him in, letting the smoky wood smell of his cologne and faint hints of garlic and tomato surround me, buoy me for the upcoming storm.

TJ

I can still hear them. My fingernails scour at my scalp, pulling at the strands that feel so foreign atop my head, looking for any distraction. But their voices still register. He admits to her that he's unworthy of her, flat-out telling her that his world is violent and dangerous. But even that he couches in fancy words.

He's a slick fucker, I'll give him that.

And Allie seems totally enamored with his bullshit, not hearing through the pretty to the gritty reality. When he says, 'you are mine', I have to crouch down to stop myself from rushing in and punching the fuck out of him.

She isn't his.

She isn't anyone's.

She's my baby sister. She deserves better than this, better than him, for damn sure. She should have a good life, teaching kids ballet, performing in city performances if that's what makes her happy, maybe having a couple of kids of her own.

She deserves a good man who treats her right, not like a possession to claim. His assessment that I'm lashing out is spot-on, and though I refuse to admit it, the painful weight sits heavily on my shoulders.

I'm a loser . . . failed at my marriage, though I was willing to give her fucking everything. I hurt my sister, though she's the one person who's always been by my side, and I'm a disappointment to my parents, who loved Janine and were ecstatically pressing for grandchildren.

Yeah, sorry guys, definitely not happening now. It's all just so fucked up. I hear the door open and close, signaling that Dominick has left, and know my time is up. Allie is gonna be gunning for me, as well she should. But I can't deal with that right now.

I need to get out of here, get my shit straight or just get shit-faced, I'm not sure which.

But I know that I can't be here with Allie's sad eyes and encouragement to talk about my feelings.

I stride back into the living room, making a bee-line for the door, but Allie's words stop me for a moment.

"TJ, wait. We need to talk."

She doesn't sound angry, and it's tempting, but I shake my head and don't stop walking until my hand is on the doorknob. "Look, I'm sorry for the hurtful shit I said. Really, I am, Allie. But this shit show tonight? That guy? With his obsessive 'you're mine' shit? The club dancing? You deserve a hell of a lot better than that. You should get the whole picket fence, two-point-five kids, and a dog type of life. Fuck knows, you've earned it. And I can't sit back and watch while you toss it all away, working for a guy like that who'll only hurt you in the long run."

I don't let her respond, slamming the door behind me on my way out.

Way to go, asshole. Two seconds after the devil whispers pretty words in her ear, you're the one who cuts her feet out from underneath her. Who looks like the devil now?

I shake my head, angry at myself, at her, at him. Down the hall, I start to hit the button for the elevator and realize with a vague unease that the elevator is going up, not down.

I'm literally seconds behind Dominick and he should've taken the elevator down to the first floor to get to his car, but he went up to the fourth floor?

Something is off here.

I already don't like this guy, but this is . . . wrong. I turn and quietly enter the stairwell at the end of the hall, adjacent to the elevator, going up a floor. I wish I had my gun with me, but out of respect for Allie, I left it in my truck tonight. No time at the moment, although I can bet money that Dominick's carrying.

Slowly and quietly, I crack the door open to peek into the fourth-floor hallway. I see Dominick's back, his broad shoulders encased in a steel-grey dress shirt unmistakable. Silently, I watch as he pulls a keyring from his pocket and unlocks a door on the other end. He enters and the door clicks closed behind him.

I wait one heartbeat and then close the stairwell door, pausing as I try to

think about the ramifications.

Dominick has an apartment in Allie's building.

I search my brain. *Did I know that? Did Allie say anything about them both working together and living in the same building?*

But I can't come up with any instance where she's said anything of the sort. And Dominick screams wealth and privilege, from his fancy clothes to the ridiculous ring on his pinky finger.

This building's nice enough, a damn sight better than the barracks, but this isn't his sort of place.

I almost go back to Allie and demand that she follow me up here and bang on Dominick's door. I imagine his smug face falling at being found out, but at the last moment, I stop myself, thinking.

What have I found, exactly?

If this is something innocent, or worse yet, that Allie knows about, I'm going to look like a goddamn fool. The imaginary image in my head shifts to one where he sweet-talks his way out of whatever this is and Allie believes him, making me even more of an ass.

I need to play this smart. I think she's safe, well, safe enough, for the night.

Turning as casually as I can, I make my exit, discreetly peeking in on every floor for anything unusual, but I see nothing until I hit the parking lot. Outside, I see a black Lexus across the street, a bald guy sitting in the driver's seat not even trying to avoid giving me an eye fuck as I come outside. Obviously, that's Dominick's guard he has stationed on Allie, which strangely doesn't make me feel any better.

I head to my truck and take my pistol out as soon as I have the doors locked and sit there for a full five minutes to see if the bald guy follows me, but all's quiet.

Driving back toward the hotel, I decide to stop at the bar down the street. A beer and some crappy tunes are just what I need to think this thing through.

Leaving my gun in the truck again, because guns and alcohol do not mix, I head inside. The bar is like one of a million others all around the world, dark and dingy, with buzzing neon and a ball game on the television.

Behind the bar, the tender's a woman, not too bad looking, honestly, but right now, it wouldn't fucking matter who it was, and I wouldn't give them a second glance.

"What can I get ya?"

“Draft, please.”

She leaves, and I’m able to disappear into my thoughts for a bit.

For once, they’re not about Janine and what I’m going to do alone, but about my sister and how I’m going to help her.

Missions . . . I know how to handle those.

Chapter 16

Dominick

Sitting back in my chair, I take the time to let options play out in my head. It's the same whether I'm in business mode or personal mode. I saw it firsthand on the chess board, learning that it wasn't just about my next move but about what happens ten moves from now.

And I'm doing that now as I steeple my fingers, considering every play, every angle, every possibility.

What are the pieces of the game that I know?

I know TJ dislikes me for frankly valid reasons. He's taking out his anger with his own situation on Allison. Still, he was aware enough that he followed me upstairs and saw me enter my apartment. And he made Logan sitting outside.

Those last two facts are what give me pause. It makes me wonder . . . what could he be up to? And is he thinking clearly?

He's a smart man, military trained and experienced. Despite the future military career opportunities, he's a man who might feel he has nothing left to lose except for the one person he holds closest, my Allison.

I wished I'd realized he was behind me, but I have to give him credit that he was rather stealthy in that. Only the building security system, which I'm hacked into, of course, alerted me that the stairwell had been breached.

What surprised me, however, was that he didn't immediately return to Allie to sell me out.

That has my internal alarm bells beeping. He's up to something.

We've already established that he thinks I'm unworthy of her, but perhaps with this ammunition, he thinks Allie would see the logic of his argument. Perhaps he's right, that he could spin this in such a way that it would be the tipping point for her.

I don't think so, but I can't be totally sure.

My phone rings on the desk, the buzzing vibrating it across the surface.

Seeing Gavin's name, I purse my lips. He's on pickup duty tonight, making the rounds to trusted locations, and it should be an easy evening for

him. Nothing worthy of a call.

“Yes?”

“Uh, hey, Boss. Sorry to bother you, but I’m out doing pickups. I was doing my check-ins with Logan per protocol, and I saw something he said you’d be interested in.”

There’s a pause I don’t bother filling. Gavin’s a good man, and there are times when his garrulous nature and easygoing talk are helpful. He can put people at ease a lot easier than Logan or myself. Still, I value words like they are nuggets of gold and find that Gavin spends his far too easily, so I sit back, waiting.

When he receives no response, he continues. “Yeah, or maybe not something so much as someone. I’m on the South Side, at Harry’s place. Allie’s brother is sitting on a barstool, nursing his second beer and staring vacantly at the wrestling. Shit show tonight, by the way.”

“That’s it?” I ask, blinking.

Gavin clears his throat. “Yes, sir. Logan said you’d want to know.”

“Thank you, Gavin. That’ll be all. Continue as scheduled for the night.”

“Sure thing, Boss,” Gavin says, hanging up quickly.

I set my phone down and lean back, another move on the chessboard becoming visible. I doubt TJ is drinking his worries away. He’s not the type.

He’s plotting.

Two can play that game, and I’m a Grand Master of it. The question, of course, is which piece I should use to counter him? Never do I consider whether what I’m doing is the right thing, whether it makes me more of a lowlife, or perhaps if I’m doing him a favor. No, I just decide . . . who do I use?

I pick my phone back up, dialing a number. The fact that the phone is picked up before the second ring and that a soft voice answers the phone tells me the baby is asleep.

“Hello?”

“Miss Cole, how are you and Violet this evening?”

The way her breath stops for a moment tells me that she recognizes my voice and knows exactly who I am this time.

“Mr. Angeline!” she says, and I can hear her moving before her voice picks up again, this time louder. “How . . . I mean, uhm . . . how are you?”

“Shh,” I reassure her, “No need to wake the baby. I’m just checking in.”

“Oh, we’re fine,” Miss Cole says, relieved but still suspicious. “Although

I'm wondering why you're calling. Robbie's been good. We're all good here."

Her words are stilted, coming bit by bit, but she's centering herself as the strong woman I know her to be with every syllable, protective of her blossoming family.

"Good, good. Speaking of which, is Mr. Zallow available presently?"

"I . . ."

I know she's going to tell me no, so I cut her off, letting a threat enter my tone. "Put him on the phone."

She sighs, and I hear more footsteps, a door open, and then she says in a background voice, "For you. It's Angeline."

There's a rustle and then a deep voice comes on the line. "Yeah?"

I'm not accustomed to being greeted so casually, but this man owes me no respect beyond basic civility. In some ways, it's refreshing, even if it is something I will need to curtail in the future.

And good form requires me to demand it anyway. "Mr. Zallow. I have an assignment for you."

He huffs a small laugh. "Polite decline. We've gone over this already. My allegiance isn't to you, and it never will be."

"Oh, but you do have a previous allegiance," I remind him, revealing my trump card. "To your military brethren."

I know he's a good man at heart and I'm happy to exploit that. That I would invoke his military experience will surely irk him but pique his interest as well.

He growls so softly he probably thinks I didn't hear him. "I'm listening."

Victory. So sweet sometimes. "I know of a man, a fellow soldier, who has recently come to town."

"Yeah, so? Lots of vets in town."

I hum, nodding to myself. "True . . . but this one, like you, has seen the horrors of a wartime environment. And when he came back, he was hit with another deep wound. His woman was unfaithful and there's the resulting emotional turmoil from that. While your emotional scars are not the same, I believe you can commiserate."

Zallow sighs. "And you're telling me this why?"

"He's at Harry's, down the street from you," I explain. "And I believe he may be contemplating . . . an unwise course of action. One that I do not want to see him undertake. If it were up to me, I would be happiest if this man

were to finish his leave and next month report for duty. And so I thought that perhaps you and Mr. Chambers would like to have a beer with a fellow soldier in his time of need. Keep him busy so that no harm befalls him.”

“What are you, the soldier suicide prevention hotline now?” Zallow asks, his gallows sarcasm oddly endearing.

But I don’t let on. “Have a friendly drink with him. That’s all I ask, though I may check in to see how the friendship is progressing to make sure he is okay. I would truly hate for my hand to be forced in this matter.”

I let the implied threat dangle, knowing that I wouldn’t hurt TJ, but Rob Zallow knows nothing of the sort. Whatever bonds of *esprit de corps* that remain in his heart tip the scales for him, and he relents.

“Fine. I’m feeling like a beer anyway. But it’s on your tab.”

His little jab does make me chuckle. It is too bad the man doesn’t work for me. He’s entertaining. “Very well, Mr. Zallow. That can easily be arranged.”

I click *End* on the call, placing one more. The crackle of the open line sounds for a moment before I hear an old, nicotine-roughened voice.

“Harry’s.”

“Hello, Harry. This is Dominick Angeline. I have a couple of friends coming in soon, most likely on motorcycles. If they are respectful, please quietly let their drinks be on my tab.”

Harry’s been wise to the game for decades and is unflappable. “Sure thing.”

I spend the next few hours watching Allie putter around her apartment. She cleaned up the mess left from our dinner, placing the leftovers into her refrigerator, though I suspect she won’t eat the heavy pasta again since she barely picked at it.

I wonder if it’s TJ’s favorite? Or perhaps because she wanted to find a happy medium between my heritage and her cooking skills? TJ didn’t say much, but he’d dug in with gusto until things had started to verbally go awry.

She’d done her usual nightly routine of stretching in her converted dining space. The first time I’d seen her stretching that way, I’d thought she was preparing to dance, but she’d merely worked through every muscle, getting long and loose, and then retiring to the shower before falling into bed. It seems to be meditative for her, and it’s become a comforting routine for me as well, giving me time to appreciate the work she puts into her craft but also letting me study the long lines of her sexy body. And now she’s sleeping in

the mess of blankets and pillows on her bed.

Knowing she's safe, I decide to get some work done and head to Petals to check in for the night.

Things are well at the club, a quiet evening with no complaints from anyone. I'm halfway through my paperwork when I look up and see it's nearly two in the morning and time for Harry's last call. Pulling out my phone, I make another call, this time waiting three rings before it's picked up.

"Hello?" the deep voice says, relaxed but not drunkenly slurred.

"How was your evening?"

Zallow sighs, pissed. "If you know my damn number, why'd you call the house and get Myra all freaked out?"

I don't answer him because he already knows the weight his woman's word carries with him, and now he's even more aware that I know it too.

Finally, he answers my question. "My evening was fine. Met your guy, TJ. We talked tours and shit mostly. Seemed well enough. Not suicidal or any shit like that, just down about his wife. So why the drama and ruse?"

I choose to ignore the inquiry. I may know my opponent's moves, but revealing my own is not a habit I engage in often.

"And your next engagement?"

Robert clicks his tongue. "Tony made plans with him to grab a bite to eat later this week. Tony thought it'd be good for TJ to see some fresh ass even if it was just in fun."

"Very good."

"Look, it's none of my business, and I probably don't want it to be, but what's up with this guy?" Zallow asks me. "He doesn't seem like your business type."

"Perhaps I'm just looking out for him," I reply. "Like a guardian angel."

Zallow chuckles darkly. "You're no angel. You're the fucking devil incarnate, Angeline."

"Indeed."

I hang up before Zallow can question me any further.

Chapter 17

Allie

“O h, my gosh, you’re the worst, Eileen! I’m trying to convince my brother that I’m an upstanding, moral woman with discriminating taste. You are not helping my cause!” I say laughingly as Eileen tells TJ the story of how I’d once suggested an open bar at the parents’ recital as a fundraiser.

Donna had been aghast at the impropriety, Eileen had outright laughed, and I still don’t see what the big deal is. People might balk at first, but by the time the third group of beginner ballet starts and you’ve already seen endless renditions of *Zippidy Doo Dah* or *Waltz of the Flowers*, half of the parents are ready to run for the nearest bottle of whatever they can find. And with the premium prices we could charge for some pinot noir, I’m pretty sure the studio would have made a serious, serious profit.

TJ laughs, though, unsurprised. “That’s my sis, the *immoral* majority.”

I like that he’s teasing me and hanging out without too much weirdness. After dinner with Dom, I was worried. “Come on, Teej, help me get ready for tonight. I’m putting you to work, and not just your mouth.”

“Haven’t had any complaints yet,” he says, a joke we’ve had since all the way back to his high school days, but before I can toss back the standard reply of *That’s what she said*, his face sours.

Shit, he just remembered Janine. I’m sure like a lot of trauma, it hits him at odd times. I’m worried about TJ, especially after the whole drama of dinner the other night.

But we had a good talk, and we both apologized a bunch of times, explaining ourselves a bit more rationally and calmly. There were hugs and tears, mostly on my part, though I’d swear I saw some shininess to his tough-guy eyes too. Now he seems to be trying to move on, so I am too. He’s my brother and he’s hurting, so I’m going to cut him some slack.

He has done the same for me, putting up with some serious shit when I wasn’t in a good head space before, angry about my lost ballet career and my body’s betrayal. But he took it and loved me through it, letting the sharp barbs I’d thrown bounce off because he knew it wasn’t really about him. It’d

been about my pain back then. And now, it seems it's my turn to return the favor and be the unflinching support he needs.

That's what you do for family.

So we hang out together in Studio Three, me getting some ripped-up T-shirts before we start cleaning the poles like I'd intended the day TJ showed up. It's even a good time as I work a little bit of fun into my cleaning, buffing each brass pole to a gleaming shine, climbing higher and higher to get the top section before taking one long drop to the floor for a final buff.

TJ, who's been cleaning a pole in a much more traditional fashion, turns as he sees me in the mirror, his jaw dropping. "What the hell, Allie? I didn't know you could do that!"

I spin on the floor before rolling to my feet and grinning. I love drops. "What? Slide down the pole? We have talked about what I do, you know."

He shakes his head, rubbing at his cheek. "I know, I just didn't realize . . . I mean, it's not like I've ever pictured you doing that."

I smile, understanding that because the thought of my brother doing anything sexual is a mental peanut butter and Drano sandwich to me. I just don't do it. I'm well aware he's a grown man and has a sex life, but I don't need to know anything about it.

"You wanna see?" I ask, looking at the pole next to me. "Not the whole stage routine, but I can show you some of my tricks."

He's unsure, terror and discomfort written all over his face.

I laugh. "Seriously, it's not gonna be bad. Watch."

Before TJ can answer, I walk around the pole, skipping the hip sway to just gather momentum. With a thrilling whoosh, I flip upside down, letting my legs stretch tall along the pole and my arms splaying wide in a T as I spin.

I laugh at my upside-down vantage of TJ's open-mouthed surprise. He plops down, leaning back against the mirror while I do a few more tricks before finishing in my favorite head-first hands-free death drop into a back walk-over off the pole, finishing with the splits.

"Ta-da" I say, grinning and waving jazz hands out wide.

TJ claps, at first in total awe before speeding up. He was always my biggest fan, at least before when it was ballet. "Wow, Allie-gator. That was . . . you are . . . wow."

Getting up, I do a silly curtsy, holding out an imaginary skirt and smiling. "Thank you."

We both laugh as I sink to the floor beside him, and it feels right between

us again for a moment, like we're still those same kids who stayed up late watching movies and annoying Dad with our feigned confusion when he'd tell bad jokes.

"So, what'd you think?"

TJ shakes his head. "I about lost my lunch when you took a dive toward the floor. I thought for sure I was gonna be mopping up your brains and having to tell Mom that I watched while you fell on your head. Not that I haven't done that before."

I mime holding a phone up to my ear, "Hey, Mom, TJ just let me plummet to my death and didn't even try to stop me." I let all the child-like whine I can muster into my voice to sell it.

He grins, a genuine happy smile, and it feels good to have this moment with him, no Janine, no Dominick, no awkwardness after the fight.

He sobers slightly, "Allie, you're really good. I didn't realize you could do all that." He bites his lip like he's looking for words. "I don't want to see you dressed for work, but I could watch you do that all day. It's like you took all your ballet, added some gymnastics to it, and then went vertical. Oh, and decided to add spins just for shits and giggles because why the hell not?"

I glance at the pole, agreeing. "That's pretty much the theory."

He clears his throat and strokes at his chin. "Will you tell me about the club? I want to understand."

I look into his eyes, searching for any ill intent, but it seems like he's almost trying to be supportive, accepting. "I've been there for a while now. It'll sound weird, but it's a good place. Dominick makes sure it's clean and safe, and the staff there are good people. I've made friends, almost a family of sorts there. We look out for each other. It's just lingerie, although the outfits are . . . you're right, you don't want to watch. But it's okay. I'm comfortable with it now, just another costume, you know? And I make really good money. I've already paid off over half of my treatment center bills. You know there's no other way I could've done that, and Mom and Dad shouldn't have to."

"It really does seem like you love it, but I can't help but feel like I failed you or something. I didn't realize back then how dire things had gotten for you, and you're still dealing with the fallout of that financially. I feel like I should've given you my enlistment bonus or been sending you my deployment bonuses to make it easier for you to move on. It's not like Janine needed it."

We're in dangerous territory again, and I hurry to steer the subject back to safe territory, not wanting to test the tenuous truce we've called.

"Just that you're making the offer says a lot about you, TJ. You supported me through all my years of dance and all my years of recovery. I'm at a good place now, healthy and financially independent. And dancing. I thought I would never get to dance again, but I get to dance every day. Here," I say, gesturing around us at the studio, "and at the club. I won't be there forever. I'm already stepping back and doing just features instead of weekly shows. But I get to *dance*, TJ. Maybe it's not how I always dreamed, but I get to dance."

He nods, but I can see there's still hesitation in his eyes. But he's trying and that means a lot to me.

He's known about my job at Petals, but it was always sort of surface, cerebral but not in his face. I think being here, it's gotten a lot more real, and it's hitting him harder than either of us expected.

I can understand that because I can't say I was ecstatic about his joining the Army when he told me he was enlisting. I wanted him to go to college, maybe find a frat he could act like an idiot with some before landing a six-figure job. Kind of the stereotypical high-school senior dream. But nope, he just decided to do his own thing, and I was terrified he was never going to come home again, or even if he did, that he'd be so different that I wouldn't recognize him.

But I've mostly gotten over myself and my fears and supported the hell out of him while he was serving, sending care packages and letters every chance I could. That's what family is supposed to do, support you the best they can even when they don't necessarily agree with what you're choosing. And he is different, but not in the way I'd feared. He's harder, stronger, and more cynical, but he's still my Teej under the tough shell.

"Okay, Allie-gator. I'm gonna do my best to support you, just like I always have. But from afar. I'm not coming to the club to cheer for you like a recital."

I feign shock, letting my jaw drop dramatically. "You'd better not. I remember how you were! Clapping the loudest and the longest like it was an audience participation competition. It'd be hella awkward for you to do that at Petals. Though some of the girls would probably love to meet you."

His smile falters, and I realize it sounded like I was going to set him up with one of my friends. "I didn't mean . . ."

“I . . . can’t,” TJ says, babbling a little over me. He takes a deep breath and looks at me carefully. “Look, I don’t want to talk about her and all that shit right now. How about you tell me more about Dominick instead?”

He’s trying to sound casual, but a warning siren starts going off after the disaster we had at dinner. I try to think positive, though, because TJ is asking, maybe open to understanding from my point of view, even if he and Dom are never going to be best buddies.

Even still, I double-check. “You sure?”

He lets out a dramatic sigh and shrugs. “If you’re hanging out with him, I want to know more. I didn’t think you’d be with . . . a guy like *that*.”

Okay, so not exactly open-minded, but baby steps. I try to gather my thoughts. “We met at Petals. He owns the club and a bunch of other businesses.”

I choose my words carefully because as far as I know, TJ doesn’t know the full story of who Dominick is. And if he’s struggling to accept the little things like his owning a club, the bigger stuff like his being The Boss is a definite no-go.

“He said that at dinner too,” TJ says warily. “How many businesses? Which ones?”

“I don’t know,” I reply evenly. “We don’t really talk business.”

TJ raises a brow but nods, letting it go for the moment, and I continue. “We made eyes at each other for months, so much that the other girls would tease me about it. But he was a total professional until I came in and asked to stop being an employee because of my stuff here.”

“Then he asked you out?”

I think back and laugh. “Well, not exactly, but we did have dinner that night. It was the start of something more for us.”

TJ hums darkly. “Is that when the guard dogs start following you around?”

I see where he’s going, and I set my hand on TJ’s shoulder, trying to relieve his worries. “It’s not like that. The guys had been following me for a while before then. There was some drama at the club a while back, nothing to do with me, but I got caught up in it and Dom started having his guys check in on me. It was a bit awkward when I realized what was going on, but while Dom’s not a classical romantic. His heart was in the right place. He wanted me safe. They tried to stay invisible, but when I found out, we decided to just be open about the whole thing. So now I know which guy is my detail for the

day and we're friends. It's just a nice thing he does, and it gives him peace of mind to know I'm protected."

"But they're his employees, his guys, so their loyalty is to him," TJ says carefully. "You have no privacy, no say-so, and you're just giving that up willingly?"

"Sounds like your life in the military," I counter but then answer him honestly. "I'm not doing anything sneaky, so I don't see the big deal." I shrug. "Really, who cares?"

"Do you know where he is every second of every day?" TJ asks a little more forcefully. "Do you have a team of guards reporting to you about his whereabouts? Or is that just one-sided?"

I blink, remembering when Dom had said that'd be potentially dangerous information for me. "I don't know where he is 24/7, but I don't need to. I trust him. He's good to me, TJ."

TJ snorts derisively. "Sugar daddies usually are. Are you sure he's not sleeping with the other girls at the club too?"

His words are venomous, poison, and my palms itch to slap the shit out of him. Instead, I settle for smacking him in the shoulder and getting up to pace. "Fuck you, TJ. Dom's not that kind. He understands fucking loyalty."

Ouch, perhaps there was venom in my words too, but they get through, and he reaches out, grabbing my wrist. "I'm sorry, Allie. I was over the line."

But the damage is done and I'm mad at TJ's continued dismissal of how good Dom and I are together.

"Do I think he was a monk before we started dating?" I ask, turning on him. "Of fucking course not, TJ. But what I know is that we laugh and play chess, he challenges me, and I challenge him, and I like that I'm the only person he's let past his ice-cold mask to see the warm, caring man inside. Yeah, he's intense. Yeah, he's possessive, but I've fallen for him and I need you to back me up on this."

"Do you hear yourself? Words *you* just used to describe your boyfriend—cold, intense, possessive. Does that sound like your dream guy, Allie?" TJ scoffs. "What would you tell me if I introduced you to a woman like that? He just bosses you around and you do his bidding like a damn puppy! That's not you, or at least not the Allie I knew. And who knows what all he's hiding. This is the honeymoon period. Does it feel like everything's roses and champagne? I can tell you what it looks like from the outside, and it sure ain't a 'happily ever after'. What happens the next time you find out he's

hiding shit from you? What happens when—”

He tries to say more, I can see the words on the tip of his tongue, but I cut him off. “Don’t make this about you and Janine!” I beg. “She hid stuff from you, admittedly really shitty stuff that I wish hadn’t happened to you, but that doesn’t mean Dominick is hiding things from me. Maybe it’s not the relationship you imagined for me, maybe it’s not what you would want for yourself, but it’s mine, and I want it just like it is.”

“You want me to just stand back and watch while you shrink yourself to fit into his world,” TJ growls, getting up and right in my face. “But you don’t even know what the fuck that world really is.” His voice softens as he holds my arms, not letting me escape his eyes. “I remember you . . . Allie who wanted to be a ballerina, who dreamed of dancing her life away and then retiring to live a happy life with a husband and kids. I just don’t see you having that with a man like Dominick. But the important thing is, do *you* see yourself having a life like that with him? Is that something you’re willing to give up for him? Because I’ve seen you around this studio, the way you bend down to talk to the kids, the way you light up when they share something with you or finally get a move right. That life you used to dream about? You still want it. And do you think *Cold Monster* is going to be the daddy you always wanted for your kids?”

I’m silent, shocked by his hard words and how they stick painfully in my heart. They hurt because they’re true to some degree. Dominick and I are still new, so intensely powerful, like nothing I’ve ever imagined, but new.

Is this a path I want to go down?

What does the future look like with him? It’s really hard to visualize Dominick burping a baby, changing its diapers, teaching a child to play chess, loving and caring for them as they grow up. I can’t see Dom teaching a little boy how to play catch.

It’s harder than I’d like to admit, but maybe that’s because I’ve never seen him in that role.

I do know deep down in my gut that he’d move heaven and earth to see me and our children happy. And that is worth more than all the dirty diapers in the world.

TJ softens, his hands relaxing a little on my arms. “Allie-gator, my life is FUBARed. I thought I was making a good choice with Janine, and I ignored some warning flags that I should’ve paid attention to. Now I’m paying the price and it fucking sucks. I’m just trying to do for you what I wish someone

had done for me. I love you, Sis.”

I sigh, hugging him. He’s my brother, after all. We’re going to disagree, fight, and nitpick at old wounds, but at the end of the day, I know he’s always got my back, hell or high water.

And I love him for it. He’s hurting and trying to protect me. I just don’t want or need the protection right now.

I’m fine.

Dominick is fine.

Together, we are so much better than fine.

I’m on the verge of a pivotal point in my life, I can feel it. The connection with Dominick feels steady, pulsing with not just heat but possibility, with the harmony that I’ve sensed a few times in dance when you click with a partner and you just *know*.

The opportunities at the studio are exciting and will give me some financial stability and let me grow as a dancer, but also as a businesswoman.

I feel strong, comfortable in my skin, and like I’m growing in a good way. If Dom were trying to really hem me in, to put me on a leash, he wouldn’t be so encouraging.

I just wish TJ could see that.

I look around the room, seeing my future here at the studio, and it gives me a warm, bubbly feeling until I see the clock on the wall. “Oh, shit, it’s late. Come on.”

TJ follows me to the front door, not quite as comfortable as before, but still okay-ish as I throw my bag over my shoulder and look outside. “What’s up?”

“Logan is following me home tonight. He works out at the gym over there, and I told him I’d be done twenty minutes ago. He must’ve gotten caught up though. He’s usually on time.”

TJ follows my line of sight, noticing the newly-installed glowing sign for Mat Madness. “Well, let’s go meet him.”

I take a step toward the door and freeze, shaking my head. “No, I’m supposed to wait here for him. Let me just text him.”

TJ’s anger is instant and hot, undercut with worry. “Seriously? Do you hear yourself right now? You think you’re not a trained puppy? You won’t even walk out of your fucking cage without permission to go four doors down a fucking strip mall to meet the guy assigned to you. You do hear how fucked up that is, right?”

“I made a promise and I’m keeping it,” I reply, refusing to get baited into another argument. “Something you should understand and appreciate.”

TJ shakes his head. “A promise to have a guard, right? What the hell am I? A trained fucking soldier, Allie. Let’s go.”

He has a point. I agreed to a guard, and TJ definitely qualifies. “Fine. Come on then, GI Joe.”

The studio door closes behind us and we walk across the lot, just a few doors down, but it does feel oddly like a rebellion. I may be Dominick’s, and the thought of being his does make my heart and my body thump just a little bit faster, a little bit hotter, but I’m still me.

A good girl through and through, but with a dash of crazy to keep things interesting.

We go into Mat Madness and see Logan tussling with a blond guy on the matted floor. Max and Dalton stand on opposing sides, yelling out instructions. Max calls time, and Logan and the guy separate, knocking knuckles and trading grins.

Logan looks up, seeing me, and his face falls. “Fuck. What time is it?”

“It’s good,” I reassure him, waving it off as Max helps the blond guy up and gives him some quiet words of advice on the other side of the mat. “TJ walked me over.”

Logan takes an appraising look up and down TJ. TJ takes the initiative, offering his hand. “Tyler Bancroft. Call me TJ.”

“Logan Hendricks. Good to meet you. Sorry I lost track of time.”

“No problem. I’ve been taking care of Allie-gator my whole life. Not stopping now,” TJ says with a hint of a threat in his tone, though the words are sweet.

While I introduce TJ to Max and Dalton, Logan grabs his bag, changing in what has to be World-Record time. It’s funny. It’s the first time I’ve ever seen him so casual, a T-shirt and loose sweatpants along with a pair of Nike running shoes.

“You ready?” he asks.

I glance over at TJ, who’s looking at one of the heavy bags and tapping it with his fist while chatting with Dalton. “Yeah, just heading home tonight, right, TJ?”

TJ turns, tossing me a little wave. “I think I’m gonna take off, actually, since you’re in good hands now. Got dinner plans, and I think you’ve probably had enough of my ugly mug for one day.”

I'm surprised he's leaving but glad to hear that he has dinner plans. After the back and forth of the day, a little time apart to settle might do us both good.

"Okay," I say, coming over. "But call me tomorrow? That's an order."

TJ grins, giving me a mock-salute before wrapping his arms around me in a hug. "I love you, Sis," he says quietly in my ear. "Just want you to be happy."

Chapter 18

Dominick

Standing at her door, I have that moment of unease. Is this the day she's had enough and leaves me? Or am I to be granted one more day of reprieve, of fizzy sunshine and burbling happiness instead of the chill and cold deadness my heart normally feels?

The moment of truth comes as her door opens, and my soul leaps when I see her face light up. I take a moment to bask in her glorious brilliance, letting her joy at seeing me on her doorstep nourish the seeds of hope deep within me. And though I'm not a religious man, I pray that those seeds take root and blossom into tall, sturdy trees befitting the strength of our love.

"Hey!" Allie says, letting me in before giving me a quick hug. "You're early! I thought you might be the delivery guy."

"I know what I want for dinner," I say salaciously, letting my eyes rove down her curves as my body tingles from the quick press of her against me. She's dressed in yoga pants and a soft sweater that slips off one shoulder, a hint of a lacy strap peeking out. I can't help myself. I lean in to kiss her, intending to be soft and slow, but the scent of her perfume hits me and the kiss turns passionate and needy.

It's been days since I've had her beneath me, barely able to find stolen moments together over the last week while she rushes around with work and her brother. But in this moment, she is here with me, mine and mine alone. The depth of my desire for her hits me full-force and she seems to be suffering from the same degree of need. Her full lips meld to mine, and when her tongue slips out to taste along my bottom lip, I growl and open for her, forcing her to do the same for me.

We're still standing in the open doorway, but I give real consideration to hiking her up my body, pressing her back against the door, and filling her right here. Let all of East Robinsville hear as she screams my name. She'd be a gift to me with every moan.

I need this woman soon, need to feel her walls clench around me as she's left boneless from the pleasure I'm giving her. I need to see her give in to me,

give everything to me and take all of me in return.

We're this close, my hand sliding down her back to her waistband, when the long buzz of my phone in my pocket stops me, both of us chuckling at the tickling sensation. I step back from the kiss reluctantly, placing a line of sweet kisses down her neck to her exposed shoulder as I pull my phone out to silence the alert.

"Dinner is here," I say.

Her eyebrows pull together. "How do you know that?" I give her a hard look, judging her openness. For once in my life, I can't read her, and my instincts scream at me to dodge the question until I can foresee the outcome of sharing.

A tiny angel on my shoulder, one that must've been placed there by Allie because I've certainly never had a conscience before, whispers in my mind . . . *tell her. Remember, trust?*

Still not sure if it's the right play, I decide to jump with the voice. Turning my phone around, I open an app, showing her the screen. "Remember, I told you I can ping your phone? I'm also hacked into this building's security. I get an alert whenever your code is used."

"You're . . ."

"I know a guy," I reply, trying to keep my voice light to ease the shock. "You said you thought I was the delivery guy so I'm assuming the usage of your code a moment ago is our dinner being dropped off."

I can see the gates drop down in her mind, closing her off from me. I hate it. I want to shake her and make her understand that it has to be this way. Before I can do anything foolish, however, the elevator dings.

"I'll get dinner. Can you take this?" I say instead, holding out the gift bag I brought for her. I'd almost dropped it in favor of holding her in my arms while we kissed, but I'm glad I kept my head enough to keep it in my grip. It's too fragile, too important to risk breaking.

"Yeah, what is it?" Allie asks cautiously, her eyes on the bag.

"A present for you," I say simply, signing the charge slip. I'm about to slip the guy a folded twenty as his tip when I see the way he's looking at my Allie and instead shut the door in his face.

Bag of food in hand, I stride into the kitchen, making myself at home. In some ways, though, this place already feels more like home than my own house does. It's like being wrapped up in all things Allie . . . things she has chosen on every surface, her subtly spicy floral scent in the air, her

dancewear crumpled in the corner, waiting for her to do laundry.

It's oddly both comforting and exciting to have to nudge them out of the way in order to be in her space. I take plates from the cabinet and fill them with her order, Chinese chicken and vegetables.

It smells delicious, and I set the plates on the coffee table, along with silverware and glasses of water.

Looking up from my seat, I notice she hasn't moved, her gift bag still hanging from her right hand and a suspicious look on her face. Trying to be encouraging, I pat the cushion next to me.

"Come, sit. Open your present."

She does so robotically, sinking to sit on the floor pillow by the table. "How'd you know where everything is in my cabinets?"

"I've eaten dinner here several times now. I'm observant by nature and have seen you pull dishes from the cabinets, from the dishwasher, and even from the sink where you fake-whined about having to wash them by hand and threatened to switch to only paper plates and plastic forks. I'm sure if we were at my house, you'd know which cabinet the plates are in too."

Allie pauses and then a tiny smile curls her lips. "Cabinet right of the stove. I remember thinking it was weird because they should be in the left cabinet."

I grin as she sees my point. "I actually agree with you, but my chef is left-handed. She set it up so she can spatula with her left hand, grab dishes out of the rack in there with her right, and plate dinner without even having to take her eyes off the pan. I suspect that if she had to do it in reverse, there'd be a higher chance of her dropping my dinner, so I let her put the plates wherever the hell she wants to. As long as I get to eat."

She laughs at my joke, and I move to put the awkwardness behind us. "Please, open your gift. I've been burning with curiosity about whether you'd like it."

Allie lifts an eyebrow but nods and begins tossing tissue paper around like confetti with a smile already on her face. "You know, if you got me diamonds—"

"I thought about it, but no. They're not precious enough."

Her curiosity piqued, she reaches deeper, pulling out a heavy wooden box wrapped with a silk bow. "What is it?"

It's a rhetorical question as her hands are already tugging at the bow, a delighted gasp coming from her lips as she opens the box. "Oh, my gosh,

they're beautiful!" she exclaims, lifting out the first piece, an ornately carved piece of white ash. Appropriately enough, it's the Queen. "Are these hand-carved?"

"Yes, each chess piece is done by hand," I tell her, letting her explore each piece. "The board's walnut and beech, and the pieces are ash and black oak. I thought about getting a stone board, but I decided a folding board so that you can store it or take it with us wherever we go would be more appropriate."

It's an important gift for me, both in the actual chessboard and in the admission that I want to go wherever this woman is. It's sort of a connection, from the fond memories I've had with my father, and now after a few games with Allie, it's something I want to share with her, too.

I'm sure my father is looking down on me, approving of the continuation of our tradition. Allie caresses each piece before closing the case and looking up at me through those beautiful mile-long lashes of hers.

"Thank you, Dominick. I know this means a lot to you. I want you to know it means a lot to me too." Her lips lift in a soft little smile and she moves closer to me, tilting her chin up. "Thank you."

She leans in and kisses me, but almost instantly, the passion from our earlier greeting reignites anew.

Dinner forgotten, she crawls into my lap, straddling me, her pussy hot against my cock. I grab her hips, pulling her fiercely against me so she feels how hard she makes me, how even just a few touches of her lips against mine leave me iron-hard and throbbing for her.

She whimpers, grinding against me. "Dom . . . be dirty," she begs. "Show me."

"Fuck, Allie," I growl, letting her past my outer shell to the deep, feral, filthy part of me. "I need to be inside you."

I climb to my feet, pulling her up with me before hoisting her in my arms, her legs wrapping around my waist as I stride down the hallway to her bedroom. I lay her gently down, stripping her clothes off and placing a pillow under her head. I like her like this, nude and in the nest of blankets and pillows on her bed, waiting for me to fill her, to fuck her, to make her mine.

She stretches artistically, showing off for me before reaching out with a soft hand. "You have on too many clothes. Take them off." Her grin is pure wickedness, a dare if ever I saw one.

"Then you show me something too. Touch yourself. Let me watch you."

She blushes, and I think for one second that she might refuse, but then the dirty girl I know she has inside wins over. She's pretty in pink, she's dirty in denim, and she's naughty in nude . . . and watching her is like a fantasy come to life.

Her finger traces along her sternum, the burgundy of her nail dark against her honey skin, and I watch the path she takes, letting her lead me along to wherever she wants to direct my gaze.

"Like this?" she teases.

"Beautiful. But not enough to get my shirt off. More."

Her pupils dilate at the challenge, and she brings her hands up her body, taking a breast in each one. She uses her thumbs to tease at her nipples, my fingers undoing my tie as they harden into diamond points that beg for my tongue.

I press my lips together, denying myself her taste so that I can watch her. Instead, I begin unbuttoning my shirt slowly, rewarding her continued movements.

"Yes, keep doing that, Allison," I growl, shrugging my shirt off and then tracing my rough palms over my chest as her eyes devour my skin. "Spread your legs."

She obeys, placing her feet flat on the bed and letting her knees splay open to give me an unobstructed view of her pink pussy.

"Like this?"

I nod, groaning. "Good girl. So pretty. Now feel how wet you already are."

Allie's right hand moves like it has a mind of its own, down her belly to her core, cupping herself and moaning as her head falls to the side and her eyes flutter closed. She strokes, the warmth burning against her fingers I'm sure, but she doesn't dip inside . . . she wants permission.

"Please," she begs. She's so naturally obedient, strong but right now so turned on and wanting to make me happy. I'm ecstatic.

"No need to beg. Touch yourself," I encourage her, undoing my belt and then the clasp on my pants. "Give yourself what you need."

She whines, knowing that I have what she really needs, but she begins sliding a finger along her slit, spreading her honey up over her clit. It's one of the sexiest things I've ever seen. I ease my zipper down, the soft click of the metal teeth pulling apart bringing her eyes back to me.

"Take it out, Dominick. Let me see you too."

My eyes flick between hers, dark with lust, and her fingers, which disappear inside her and reappear, shiny with her arousal. I'm torn, needing to grip myself, needing to taste her, needing to fuck her. The war rages inside me, filling me with lust.

But I know that my thirst for her requires sating first, and I drop to my knees at her bedside. "Let me taste you. Rub your clit."

She cries out but does it. Her hips buck into her hand as my tongue licks along her pussy, drinking her down. I reach up, laying my forearm across her hips, holding her in place.

"Faster, Allison," I order, my words muffled by her wet lips against my mouth. "Let me see you make yourself come all over my face. I want to taste your cum. Then I'll fuck you deep and hard, just the way you want."

I can feel her eyes as she looks down her body at me, but my gaze is locked on her hand, watching her fingers blur across her clit and timing my licks with her pace. I add my thumb, teasing in circles at her asshole, and I feel her clench and relax against me.

And then every muscle in her body freezes, tight and coiled in anticipation of the moment, and then she suddenly unfurls beneath me, free in her explosion. It's exactly what I want for her, both here in this bed and in life, for her to find her freedom wrapped in the cocoon of my love.

I flip her over, placing the pillow under her hips to arch her back. Kicking my pants and shoes off, I crawl up on my knees, lifting her hips until my cock is ready, pressed against her. She looks back over her shoulder, and my heart stops for an instant as I freeze. She gives me the slightest of nods, and I sheathe myself inside her deeply with one powerful stroke.

Instantly, my heart resumes beating, my soul is cleansed of the sin I inflict upon it everyday, and my mind quiets in peace. I am here, no future to consider, no plans to manipulate, no concerns weighing my shoulders down. I'm where I'm supposed to be, with the woman I'm meant to be with. Forever.

Allie sighs, and I tell myself it's because she feels complete with me inside her as well, but I don't dare ask, not sure I could withstand an unexpected answer when all my defenses are down.

"Ohh, Dom . . . move. I need you to move."

I squeeze her ass, loving the way it clenches under my hand as I lean in and kiss her shoulder softly, growling when I pull back.

"When I'm ready. Right now, I'm enjoying the way your velvet walls

grip me, kissing along my cock, like your greedy pussy has been waiting just for me.”

She moans, writhing back against me, fucking herself on my cock. I let her for a few strokes, giving her just enough leeway to let her punish herself, teasing and tantalizing herself but unable to get what she really needs.

“Such a naughty girl, using my cock like that. You need me to give you more?”

She mumbles incoherently, but she nods, tremors rolling up her spine as I pull back and thrust in slowly, torturing both of us and making her eyes flutter closed.

“Then give me your hands, Allison.”

She reaches her hands behind her, elbows bent and holding one another. I place a strong hand over her forearms, pinning them to her back before gathering her chocolate tresses in my other hand. I pull back gently, forcing her back to arch, opening her pussy even more as I thrust in deeper and find where that edge of pleasure and pain is for her, knowing I’m going to push her limits.

“Remember you asked for this, Allison.”

It’s both a promise and a warning, and I slam into her, her body quaking with the force of my thrust. She cries out sharply, and I thrust again and again, picking up speed until I’m fucking her hard and rough, deep and fast.

We’re a single body, the sharing of our fluids only making this more savage, and we both strive for more.

“Oh, my God, Dominick!”

I grin ferally, my inner beast unleashed as my hips smack her ass. “You like that, don’t you, Allison? You want me to fuck your pussy hard so you know who it belongs to, isn’t that right?”

“Yes!” she screams senselessly. “Yes!”

I’m not sure if she’s answering my questions or just begging me to keep going. I lean forward, my whisper harsh in her ear. “Who do you belong to? Say my name when you come, Allison.”

She shudders, the words more breath than sound, but she says it, sanctifying this and blessing me with her words. “Dominick. I’m yours, Dominick.”

I can feel her pussy quivering around me, hungrily milking my cock as it demands my cum. I can’t hold back anymore, physically or emotionally, as she repeats the words I so desperately need to hear, the ones that give me the

relief that she is mine. My hands tighten, my arms going rock-hard to keep her still, and I pound into her with deep, hard thrusts, each one emphasized with a word.

“I. Love. You. Allison. You. Are. Mine.”

The words and thoughts ratchet into a roar as everything releases, and I fill her with rope after rope of my hot cum, filling her to overflowing as it leaks out around me.

When I can breathe again, I stay pressed against Allie, releasing her arms and hair but wrapping my arms around her waist, grinding inside her as I look down. I marvel at the sight of her puffy lips still gripping me. If I could, I would never leave the warmth of Allie’s pussy, the shiny slick juices all over both of us. It’s the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen.

Evidence of our fucking. Proof of our love.

I slip out of her and crawl up next to her, lying on my back and pulling her to my side, where she lays her head on my chest.

“Are you lying in the wet spot?” she asks after a hushed few moments. “I think we made a *bit* of a mess.”

I smile lazily, my fingers tracing the soft skin at her shoulder. “I would happily lay in our wet spot if it meant cuddling with you after fucking you like that.”

She lifts up onto her elbows, a syrupy grin washing over face. “You say the sweetest things, always sounding like you’re quoting poetry or some famous literature guy, when they’re just your own words. But I think *that* is probably the sweetest thing you’ve ever said to me because I know what a sacrifice lying in the wet spot is. Especially for a guy like you.”

I grin and roll, putting her under me.

She squeals, laughing at the same time. “What are you doing? You said you’d lie in the wet spot but you’re getting me all in it now.”

“Not willing to sacrifice for me?” I say with a straight face.

She giggles and agrees. “Okay, maybe a little.”

It’s quiet for a moment, both of us just enjoying sharing space, sharing breath.

“I heard you, you know.”

Her eyes lift to mine, almost shy with the admission, and I can see she thinks I spoke the words in the heat of the moment, that I didn’t mean them. I brush a lock of hair back from her cheek, tracing her cheekbone with my thumb.

“I meant every word. I love you, Allison. And you are mine. Today, tomorrow, forever.”

Chapter 19

Allie

There's a moment of silence, and my brain resonates with the intensity of his words. It's seemingly so sudden, but my heart and soul leave no doubt that he's telling me the truth. He loves me. And in that instant, the truth strikes me hard. I love him too.

I take a big breath and an even bigger leap into the abyss that is Dominick Angeline's world. "I love you, too."

The wide, bright smile and the utter happiness in his eyes tell me that he was scared . . . that nobody's ever told him that before and meant it like I do. I feel like he's opening a window to his soul, letting me in, and I can see through the cracks in his armor to the real man beneath the persona.

He pulls me to him and kisses me sweetly, our tongues tangling together like we can taste the words we've spoken, savor them like candy. When we part, we snuggle back together, both of us on our sides, our arms and legs knotted in one another, drifting off into totally blissful slumber.

I awaken minutes or hours later, I don't really know. At first, I wonder if everything was just a crazy dream, but when I feel his weight on me, I know it was real.

I'm in love with Dominick Angeline and he's in love with me.

Boom. Mic drop.

But I really need to get up and pee. I wiggle, and he pulls me tighter at first, not letting me go, and I laughingly press on his shoulder.

"Let me up or the wet spot on the bed isn't going to be nearly as sexy."

Dom's lips twitch in a sleepy laugh, and he lets go. "Okay, okay."

I get to the door, looking back when I hear him turn over. "Hey . . . when I get back, wanna play strip chess?"

"You're already naked," he says, stating the obvious.

"Oh, guess we'll have to figure out something other than clothes to bet with," I tease.

He smirks, getting up on an elbow. "Dirty girl. I like it."

After a quick potty break, I wash my hands and try to clean myself up a

bit in the bathroom mirror. Wiping under my eyes to remove the mascara streaks and pulling my hair back up into its messy bun, I call it good and grab the chessboard and pieces from the living room.

I expect to see Dominick still lazing in bed when I get back, maybe asleep, maybe lying on his back with his cock saying he's woke as fuck. What I don't expect is to see him messing with the smoke detector in the corner, his naked butt and legs stretched long as he stands on tiptoe to mess around with the device on my ceiling.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"I thought I saw the light flash red and wanted to make sure the batteries are okay," he says, pointing. "You know, every six months and all."

But there's something about the frozen neutral look on his face, like his usual expressiveness with me has disappeared. It's his business face, I realize. The words are pretty smooth too, slipping off his tongue easily. But it's in that silky smoothness I can tell there's something more. And though I can't explain it, somehow, I can tell he's lying. Mere moments after being inside me and saying 'I love you' for the first time, he's being untruthful.

The disparity breaks my heart, and I feel as naïve as TJ made me out to be.

I take a step backward, hurt and confused over why he'd lie about something so unimportant as my smoke detector. I stumble ever so slightly and grab at the door frame, realizing a moment too late that the chess set's slipping, and the heavy weight falls at my feet, an inch from my toes as pieces scatter.

"Allie? Are you okay?" Dominick says, rushing for me, but I'm already on balance again, holding my hand up as I put space between us.

"No. You just lied to me, Dom. Your fucking hands-on privileges are revoked when you're doing that. Don't touch me."

He flinches like I'm the one who just cracked his heart and he pulls up, his face fraught with concern. "Allie, what's wrong? I was just checking the battery. Everything's fine."

He says it like I'm crazy, like he's coddling a child who just found out there's no Santa, but I can see the tension in the lines at the corners of his eyes and his chest rising and falling just a bit too fast. Shit, he's good, but he's got a tell. He's hiding something, maybe not lying that time, but deceiving me all the same.

"You're lying to me. Don't do it, Dominick. Don't you fucking lie after

you just told me you love me and fucked my brains out. Trans-fucking-parency, remember? If you want it, you need to give it.” My voice rises as I point a finger at him. He crowds into me until I’m digging a very nice manicure into his chest.

To his credit, he doesn’t step back from my anger, though I can see each word lash him like a whip. Instead, he looks steadily into my eyes, keeping his voice low and calm.

“Allie, I told you there would be things I can’t share with you, that it would be dangerous. I’ll be as open as I can, and I am more open with you than I have been with anyone, but you’re not ready for it all.”

Though this man would never beg, I can hear the plea in his words, asking me to let this go. But while I can let go of a lot of things, this is *my home*. If he wants some arm candy that’ll bend to his every whim like a willow tree, he needs a reminder that I’m not that girl. I have been to hell and fought my way to get back to where I am today. I am strong, not a weak willow but a fucking oak tree rising up to the sky, and I will not let him come in and slowly chop me away. He’s never tried to do that before, but I can feel the sharp edge of the axe’s blade in this moment. I’m not backing down.

“Let me decide that for myself,” I demand. “Tell me what the fuck is going on, what you’re doing. The truth. Or you’re going to find yourself outside buck-ass naked with Logan giving you a ride home.”

I’m not sure how something so seemingly minor has become something so gargantuan, but it has. And it feels like I’m doing the right thing. Whatever he was doing, it’s just the tip of an iceberg that can sink us if we don’t course-correct right the fuck now.

Dominick’s eyes glare at me, sharp as flint, analyzing even as their depths implore me again to let this go. Finally, he sighs and looks to the ceiling, and I’d swear he’s praying, though he doesn’t seem the type.

“Forgive me. I want you to remember that I love you. More than life itself, I love you. And I didn’t want to share this yet, but I knew I’d have to eventually.”

“Share what?” I demand, my patience gone.

“Here,” he says, grabbing my robe off the hook behind the door and holding it out for me. “I think it might be best to show you.”

The words are sarcastic, biting, and unlike him, which makes me curious, so I slip my arms into the robe, tying it at my waist as he pulls on his slacks. Bare-chested and barefoot, he holds his hand out to me.

“Come, Allison.”

He already seems resigned that this is going to be bad, and I fight the urge to rewind the last few minutes, to go back and have never seen him messing with the smoke detector, for him to have never lied to me.

But I need the truth.

This man holds my heart and is this close to having the keys to my soul as well. If I’m to give him all of me, I need all of him. So I step back, mindlessly slipping my feet into my fuzzy bunny slippers I keep by the door for late-night trash runs and follow him into the hallway.

“What is this? Is this rule three? Where I just go wherever you say without question?” I awkwardly joke, the pain in my voice evident even to my own ears.

Dominick frowns thoughtfully. “Perhaps rule three, but not the no-questions-asked aspect. More about the trust we have established.”

That sounds dire, and the foreshadowing of what I’m about to see sits heavy in my gut, bile threatening to rise up in rebellion.

We walk down the hallway silently, though I look at him with a raised eyebrow when we get on the elevator and he presses the *Four* button. We walk down a hallway very much like the one we just left, and when Dominick stops at the door directly above my own, an eerie sense of déjà vu sweeps through me.

I’m shocked as Dominick pulls a key out of his pocket, glancing at me as he unlocks the door. He pushes it open and gestures for me to enter with a sweeping hand.

“What is this?” I say, stepping inside.

It’s laid out identically to my place, but bare-boned, just a couch in the living room and a folding table in the dining area. I can see a coffee pot on the kitchen counter. It’s devoid of personality, cold and barren. I can’t see the bedroom, but as Dom closes the door behind us, he seems comfortable here.

Looking around again, I can see a hook on the wall, and my mind flashes an image of him casually hanging his suit jacket there. But . . . why? He’s got a place, a much nicer place than this.

“This way,” he says, his voice deep and pained. Whatever this is, he’s . . . ashamed of it.

Whether it’s at what he’s done or at getting caught, I don’t know. I follow him down the hall to the bedroom, and when he turns on the light, I’m greeted with an unexpected sight.

There's a small bed, barely larger than a cot, really, but most of the back wall is dominated by a wide folding table, and on top of it are four computer monitors, all of them flat and dark.

The meaning flashes in my mind and I gasp. No . . . no way. I turn to him, furious. "Are you fucking kidding me, Dom? Are you spying on me?"

A cold shiver runs through my body as I pray that I'm wrong. *Let this not be anything like that. Please.*

Instead of answering, Dominick clicks a switch on a central box and the screens flash to life, each one showing . . . my apartment. The screens are split, my parking space and car in the garage, my front door, and more.

I gasp, horrified at the invasion of my privacy, and reach out to touch the screen showing my bed, the sheets and pillows still mussed from where we just fucked.

Dominick stands tall, his hands behind his back, almost like he's awaiting my judgment, like he knows this is beyond the pale. He'd told me it was too soon, and maybe I should've believed him. But I don't think I would've ever been ready for *this*.

"What is this, Dominick?" I whisper, not able to find all the right words.

His eyes cut to mine, cold and fierce. "I protect what is mine, Allison. And you've been mine for a long time. We both know that. I love you, and you love me too."

The words hit hard, more steel than silk this time, and for the first time, I can really see the man that others see in Dominick. The monster.

It's what he's shown the rest of the world but never me. Now, though, he has slipped into that persona, so distant and unfeeling, when this is the moment I need him most. It infuriates me.

I rage at him, pressing on his chest, the muscles hard and unyielding under my pounding fists. "How long, Dominick? How long have you been watching me like this? Do you sit up here in your little hidey-hole, watching me eat dinner, dance, clean? Do you watch me fucking myself and jack off like a perv? This is wrong! It's a violation of everything we have, do you get that? Or *had*, because I can't live like this. You're not my boyfriend. You're a fucking stalker whose dream is finally coming true, isn't it? I guess you pulled one over on me."

I collapse, the tears bursting free, burning like acid down my cheeks as I bury my face in my hands, muttering to myself. "So fucking stupid, Allison. Should've known . . . just a stripper. He's a monster."

He roars, grabbing my shoulders and shaking me lightly to get my attention. If it were anyone else, I'd be afraid, but even in this pit of hell, I don't think he'll hurt me, not physically, anyway. But considering he just smashed my heart to pieces, maybe my faith in him is just another sign of how stupid I am, how naïve I am for believing he could love me and that I knew him.

Dom's voice is angry, fury dripping from every word, but it's not directed at me . . . it's directed at himself. "You are too good for the pity party woe is me shit. Stop it. You've worked too hard to let those thoughts have purchase in your mind again. You are a beautiful, strong, brilliant light. And I'm the one who's the darkness. I should have stayed away, pushed you away, but I just wanted a bit of your sun. You're right, I'm a monster, and I never told you otherwise. I will be until the day I die. But I do love you, and you have given me more happiness than I possibly deserve. But I'm a selfish bastard, Allison, and I want more. I want you. Forever. I love you. But I live in this world where I have to be The Boss . . . or I die."

I'm a tornado of thoughts and emotions, not sure which way is left or right or what to make of his words, so I latch on to the last thing he said.

"I know you're The Boss, but this is so much more than that!" I cry out, pushing all four monitors from the desk in a destructive warpath. "I could have accepted that! But I wanted US!" I snatch the laptop I think controls all of it and hurl it across the room where it smashes against the wall. The crashing sound as it hits the floor seems to break open a damn inside him.

"Do you? Do you really get that I'm the boss for the whole damn town?" he thunders, his voice shaking as he gestures toward the front of the apartment and the rest of town. "I know the rules because I make them. I know the expectations because I set them. And then here you come, not fitting into any of that. It drives me crazy, so fucking crazy. But I love it. I'm a cold machine, dead inside while I do the things I know have to be done, what I was raised to do. But you put life back into my existence. With you, I don't feel dead. I don't feel alone. I feel like I can be myself, not The Boss, not Dominick Angeline . . . but just me." He thumps his chest, reiterating his words.

He slumps, his shoulders sagging slightly, and he swallows. "And the thought that I could lose that, lose you, kills me. When you're out there, walking around and doing whatever crazy shit you're getting into for the day, you take my heart with you. And I'm that man again, empty and icy. It's not

until you're back by my side, when I can see that you're okay, that I can breathe again, that my heart starts to beat again. How can I apologize for that? To protect an angel, I'll gladly be the devil."

It's honest. It's bare. It's Dominick.

It feels like the biggest share of our time together, or maybe the biggest share he's ever given anyone, judging by the ragged way he's breathing. The heaviness of his truth hangs in the air between us.

But I'm not sure it's enough.

"So what am I supposed to do?" I ask, lowering my voice. "Just go along with this because your life is scary? This is *crazy*, Dominick. It's too much. I don't know if this is the life I want," I say, shaking my head. "What do I get? Cameras, guards, danger, and not knowing where you are or what you're doing for my own good? How is that a partnership?"

He huffs, maybe because he doesn't understand . . . or maybe more because he does. "You get me. And I get you. That's all we need. Each other. The rest of it is outside us. Just the things that allow us to *be us*. I love you, Allison."

"You keep saying that," I whisper sadly. "And I know you do. I truly believe that. And I understand that this is how you love. But just because this is the only way you can love, it doesn't mean it's the way I need to be loved. It may be your all, but that doesn't mean it's enough. I need more than protection. I need respect."

The words are almost poignant, and Dom's shoulders slump as the reality hits him. The little devil on my shoulder echoes TJ's words from before, asking me if this is the life I want, the life I dream of.

And this time, I don't brush it off. I listen.

"I need some time," I add after a moment. "I need to think this through. I think you should go. When you're here, it's all messed up in my head, because yes, I do love you. But you're talking about a whole life like this, living in a sanitized bubble because you think I can't handle the dark side of your life. Well, maybe I can't, but I need to decide that for myself. And you need to decide whether you're strong enough to let me not be that perfect angel you think I am."

Dominick holds my upper arms in his hands, gripping me tightly but not hurting me, and I almost wish he would hurt me, smack my ass and take control so I don't have to decide our fate, our future.

But he doesn't. Though he wants me in this gilded cage, he wants me to

come freely to it, to him.

His words are quiet, his emotions back on lockdown, but even now, when he's trying so hard to erect his shields, I can see the open honesty in his eyes.

"I understand. It's a lot. But you are it for me, Allison. Choose me or don't, but you will always be mine and I will always be yours. Logan will be downstairs if you need anything."

I shake my head, tightening my belt. "No. I need to be alone. *Truly* alone. No guards, no you. I need space."

He nods, kisses my forehead, and leaves.

I sag to my knees, tears burning my cheeks as the weight of everything pulls me down.

Everything in my head tells me this is crazy, to run far and wide to get away from the pressure of his rules and expectations, an inherent need to rebel against any restraint forcing its way through my soul.

But my heart thuds dully, just wanting him to come back and hold me.

I force myself up, needing to see if he does what I asked, like it's a litmus test that will tell me I did the right thing. I walk over to the window, peeking out the blinds.

Through blurry tears, I see Logan's car pull away, then Dom's black Mercedes leave the garage and do the same. I feel alone without him here.

For the first time in a long time, I am alone.

Chapter 20

Allie

I take a few minutes to get back to my apartment. Luckily but stupidly, I left my front door unlocked. I stay under control pretty well until the door closes and I slump onto my bed, the tears flowing freely as my heart shatters.

I bury my face in a pillow for a moment before realizing it smells like him, and I angrily snatch its velvet softness and hurl it across the room.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see a blinking light and look up at my smoke detector. The small green light taunts me. “Did you see that? Yeah? Fuck you!”

I’m not sure who I’m talking to. I pretty much destroyed the surveillance setup upstairs. But I need to rage at someone or something so the obvious culprit of crashing my happy moment is the inanimate device on the ceiling. I know that’s stupid and that this is all on Dominick, but I have to do something.

Swiping the salty tears from my cheeks, I jump up and rush to the kitchen to grab my little ‘one-step’ and hurry back to my bedroom. It’s a tough reach. I’m on tiptoe as my fingers scrabble to find that spot on the edge of the cover to get it off. With every passing second, my rage at the stupid chunk of cheap shit plastic rises, and I yank hard.

No dice, but in my anger, a piece of plastic slices my finger. It’s not serious, but the sight of the blood shocks me enough to tamp down my anger and give me pause. Sticking my thumb in my mouth, I climb down, heading to the bathroom to run cool water on my finger.

A tight Band-Aid later, and it’s fine.

If only my life were so easily cared for. I chance looking at myself in the mirror and am shocked by the haunted-looking specter staring back.

Is that me? How did I end up here, of all places?

Not able to meet my own eyes any longer, in the mirror, I see the reflection of the hallway behind me and distantly, my living room couch.

And paranoia sets in. Although is it really paranoia if you know someone really has been watching you?

For the next hour, I examine every corner, nook, cranny, and crack in my apartment, looking for something that looks out of place. I examine every smoke detector, even though I know they've been compromised.

This is bullshit. What he did is a violation I would've never imagined. I'm angry, hurt, and embarrassed. Your home is supposed to be your haven, your sanctuary, and now I feel vulnerable. Not knowing what to do, I reach out to the one person I trust to help me.

"Hello?" His voice is tight, as if he's preparing for a fight from me like last time. But I've got no fight left in me.

"TJ?" I greet him, my scratchy throat and the ghost of my tears making my voice hoarse. "I need help."

God bless my brother. His reply is immediate and heartfelt. "What's wrong, Allie? Are you hurt?"

A humorless laugh escapes, and yeah, I sound just a little crazy. "Yes, but not like that. He . . . oh, God, listen, can you . . . can you just come over?"

I can already hear him shuffling around on his side of the line. "I'm coming, Sis. Whatever that motherfucker did, I'm coming. I've got you."

I hang up, letting the phone drop and hanging my head. I let the tears take over again, sobbing silently. I need to get them out because as much as I need TJ right now, I know he's going to come in like a steamroller. If he sees me in tears, he's going to go postal, and that I don't want or need.

I just need his strength. That's why I called him, because he's always been there for me, and I don't think I can do this alone.

I manage to get halfway cleaned up and decently dressed before his booming knocks threaten to break my door in off its hinges, and as I shuffle to the front door in some old yoga pants and a T-shirt, I wish I'd showered before calling him.

I feel a little squelch inside me, and I remember that I'm still holding his mark. But . . . I think I might forever. He's in my pussy, in my heart, and apparently, all over my damn apartment.

TJ rushes in when I open the door, like he's looking for terrorists or something in here with me. Finally, when he sees I'm alone, he turns and gathers me up in a fierce embrace.

"What happened? What's going on?"

I can't answer at first, not without losing control of my emotions, and he leads me over to the couch, where I sit.

Through hiccups, I tell him, "Everything was fine. We had sex, but . . ."

I feel TJ tense beside me, thinking the worst, and I reassure him. “No, it was fine, it was better than fine. It was everything. He told me he loved me.”

The words force me into morose silence, trembling on the edge of tears again, and through his hug, I feel TJ’s patience wearing thin. “I need you to talk to me here. What’s going on? Because I’m about to go find that piece of shit and fucking kill him, and I don’t even know what for.”

I hold him tighter, not letting him go. “After, I went to the kitchen, and when I came back, he was messing with the smoke detector. I didn’t know.”

“Know what, Allie?” TJ says through clenched teeth.

“He’s been spying on me!” I rasp. “Cameras outside, in the smoke detectors, you name it.”

“The fucker was watching you without consent?”

His voice is eerily calm and steady, and I wonder if this is him in soldier mode.

I nod. “I caught him messing around with the smoke detector. I demanded to know what he was doing. He took me . . . oh, God, he took me upstairs. He’s got an apartment up there with monitors. TJ, who does something like that?”

TJ pets my hair, trying to comfort me. “Someone real fucked up, Allie-gator. Someone who doesn’t deserve you.”

He’s quiet for a moment, and when he speaks again, there’s guilt in his voice. “Allie, I knew he had an apartment upstairs. I followed him after dinner, saw him go in. I wasn’t sure what was going on, so I didn’t say anything. I couldn’t prove anything, and you didn’t seem open to hearing anything negative about him. I wasn’t sure whether you knew or not.”

I push away from him, pissed. “You knew?”

“I tried to tell you he was bad news!” he exclaims before forcing himself to lower his voice. “I tried to tell myself that it was just a place for the guards to stay on patrol. You know, a place someone could grab some Zs or something. Since they were following you, I figured they had to have a home base. But I didn’t think . . . this. Who the fuck is this guy, Allie? What are you messed up in?”

Even now, I defend him with my silence, keeping his secrets. I shake my head, not answering TJ’s questions.

“You know what? It doesn’t fucking matter. You are a grown-ass woman and you know what needs to happen. Say it.”

I know TJ’s looking for some big clarity moment where I denounce

anything and everything Dominick and tell him that he was right all along.

But I'm not there yet.

If anything, therapy taught me that I can't leapfrog ahead. I have to be right where I am, and that's okay. I feel betrayed, angry, and hurt, yes.

But I also love him. And no matter what people like to claim, you can't just turn off love. I would if I could, and I know I don't have to act on it, but it's there, still burning like embers, ridiculing my stupidity. But the pain itself serves as a lesson I won't soon forget.

"Just help me," I finally say. "I want this place bug-free."

TJ nods, but I can see the disappointment in his eyes. I can almost see him telling himself . . . *one step at a time*. It used to be *one bite at a time* but though I've been eating healthy for years now, those urges, ugly and mean, still have roots in my psyche.

The insecurities never really go away. I've just gotten better at shutting them up. But now they whisper to me. *Stupid girl. Never good enough. You thought a man like that would want you. He just wanted to use you.*

TJ takes my hand, likely knowing that my inner monologue has gone dark, but he's a man of action.

He pulls me into my bedroom, and after a moment of taking the scene in, he snatches all the sheets off my bed and balls them up, carting them into the bathroom and coming back a moment later, a false smile on his face.

"Well, I made sure the hamper lid still works. The dust bunnies at the bottom are pissed though."

I smile wanly, and he climbs up on the stool I'd abandoned, already reaching for something in his back pocket. Pulling out a knife, he studies the cover for a moment before opening up the blade and using it as a screwdriver to take the whole thing down.

"It looks like . . . yeah, got it."

TJ takes me with him, room to room, as he takes down each smoke detector so I can bear witness to each painful betrayal. An hour later, I have a box full of evidence of Dominick's sick obsession.

TJ sets me on the couch and then goes through an exhaustive search of my apartment, looking for bugs and other cameras, though he admits he's not an expert. It feels like a fresh violation all over again, even though I told him to do it. Seriously, having my brother go through my lingerie drawer to make sure there's nothing we missed wasn't cool.

He's thorough though, not saying anything as he opens every cabinet,

pulls out every drawer, lifts everything to see if there's anything attached to wooden frames or in crevices. Finally, he brushes his hands off and puts the knife away.

He takes a quick trip to the building's dumpster and returns, using our childhood secret clubhouse knock. It's a small thing, but it's reassuring somehow.

He fills a glass with water and downs it. "Okay, pack a bag and you can come back to the hotel with me."

I shake my head, curling deeper into the pile of pillows on my couch and pulling the blanket that's on the back tightly around me, like a security blanket. "No. This is my home. You checked everything, Dom and Logan are gone. I'm not leaving."

I know I sound petulant and whiny, but I'm hoping TJ will cut me some slack after my night. He's not quite willing to give it up though. Turning to me, he leans against the kitchen counter, his voice quiet and softly pleading.

"Come on, Allie. I've got two double beds in my room, comfy and warm, safe and . . . not here."

"Nope," I reply, shaking my head. "I won't be chased from my home."

Funny. I never felt in danger until Dom, and now he's the one I'm in the most danger from. He's the only one with access to hurt my heart, my body, my soul.

TJ looks around, and I understand the feeling. Even though he's searched, there's still that little niggling feeling that we've missed something, that we've got a big hi-def camera or something pointed right at us and it's streaming video of me right now.

"Listen, Allie, I can't leave. I just don't feel like you're in a safe place. But I won't force you. Can I stay the night?"

His question unknots a giant ball of tension from my chest, and I nod. TJ drops down on the couch beside me, relieved.

"Yeah, I'd like that."

"I got you, Sis," TJ says quietly, looking down between his knees.

After a few minutes, he speaks up again. "How'd everything get so fucked up, Allie-gator? What happened?"

I don't answer because he seems to be leading himself somewhere, processing something in his own mind. His head falls back to the couch and he stares at the ceiling.

"When I was in high school, I had this whole picture, you know? You

were gonna be this famous dancer, living in Manhattan or LA or Paris or some shit, and I was going to be the soldier boy. Yeah, I was thinking about it even then. Blame Dad with all those old fucking John Wayne movies, I guess. Then, well, I had Janine, dreaming of happily ever afters and all that romantic shit. I thought I was gonna come home, surprise Janine with being back, and we'd be *happy*. I mean, I was going to surprise her with damn-near a guaranteed year at the base stateside. We'd get the family started, have a couple of kids, dinner at home. And somehow, it all got shot to hell. Now I'm stuck here, without her, without the dream, without the happily ever after. I filed for divorce, did I tell you that?"

"No, you didn't," I reply, but I'm really not that surprised after what he told me. "I'm so sorry, TJ. If you need anything, please just say the word and I'm there."

The offer is real, but I know he won't call on me. That's not how he operates. He's always been the caregiver, not the care-receiver. He's always taken care of me, patiently and with his whole heart. It's one of the things I love most about him and an example I've always tried to live up to myself. Still, he nods, his head rolling over to look at me.

"Thanks, Allie."

I sit forward, putting a hand on his knee. "It's her loss, you know? You're an amazing man, TJ, and if she couldn't see that, didn't appreciate that, it's her loss."

He picks his head up and looks me dead in the eye. "His loss too. You're better than this, better than him. You deserve more than to be questioned and followed, kept in a cage. You are one of the strongest people I know, Allie. You've fought and reinvented yourself so many times, and you're so close to getting out of the tunnel you've been in for so long that I swear . . . looking at you, it hurts because your light is so bright. You can leave your debts behind, this life behind, and get all the things you've always wanted. Don't let him keep you in the dark."

Chapter 21

Dominick

Every morning when I wake up, I look at the calendar, each blank square stabbing in my heart as I look back at that night.

Two weeks. Two weeks, and tomorrow, the calendar changes over, taking that night off the page. And not a single word.

I've felt myself retreating day by day as my mind starts to fray before crystalizing back into the ice-cold, manipulative fucker I was before Allie. I hadn't realized how much she'd changed me, melting my frozen heart in a watershed of rebirth, shaping me into something better. But now, without her light, her sun, her warmth, every thawed drop has refrozen into sharp edges, making me ready to gut anyone who so much as looks at me sideways.

It's only by sheer force of will that I haven't gone on a rampage of violence, slashing and burning the city so it hurts as much as I do. Even before, I never felt this insane. Never felt this primal desire to destroy things.

Ironically, the more of a bastard I become, the busier Petals has been. In a twisted sense of irony, every night has more patrons, more people wanting a front-row seat for Armageddon, like I'm some daytime soap opera villain they want to see destroyed by his own weakness. But even as the darkness inside me grows, I keep my façade, stoic and impassive, not giving an ounce of show to the vultures.

I still make the required appearances for formality's sake, shaking hands here and there around the floor because it's expected and it would show weakness on my part if I didn't. That's something I'm unwilling to bear. I've been conditioned since birth to never, ever show weakness.

Instead of letting that happen, I take a few moments to have a seat at a table near the stage with a group of influential local businessmen, offering them a round of Jack on the house.

Nothing fancy—they don't deserve the fine imported stuff—but they're so enamored to watch Trish's turn on the pole that it doesn't matter.

I lift my glass in silent salute and hold it there as each man lifts his in kind. I wait, not saying anything but giving each of them a hard look of

expectation. These pampered princes haven't tipped Trish at all during her performance and they're taking up one of the prime tables. Unacceptable and downright rude.

Still holding my drink aloft, I watch as they set theirs down, quickly grabbing twenties from their wallets and holding them up. Trish sashays over, giving me a look of appreciation, but I don't acknowledge her in any way. She plucks the bill from each man and blows them all a kiss as she moves on.

I finally take the Jack in one gulp, not even feeling the burn of the whisky down my throat. A sense of relief washes through the men, and they follow suit, taking their shots at once too.

The ritual completed, I rise, laying a heavy hand on the shoulder of the leader of the little group, wishing them a good rest of their evening before continuing my way upstairs.

I can hear Logan coming up the stairs behind me as I enter my office, the weight of the crown weighing heavily on my head. I know he wouldn't dare approach without a reason, but I wish he would just leave me to sink into the darkness of my soul alone.

No such luck. He's a professional. I could order him to leave me alone for the rest of the night unless it's an emergency, but I've been doing that too often over the past two weeks.

Besides, he's my only source of intel, and even if it's a bitter, vile pill that I have to take each day as he shares his news with me, I swallow it eagerly. I know Logan's hoping that it'll soothe the beast I've become before my state of mind starts threatening everyone's well-being.

"Sir?" Logan says, asking for permission to come into my office and begin.

I wave him inside, holding up a hand as I sit down in my chair, pinching the bridge of my nose, trying to prepare myself. He must sense permission because he begins his report.

"Allie had routine classes today for Thursdays, two children's classes and her Diva class. Her Diva Dance class was full this week, three new attendees, all married females, nothing amiss. She had her first Pole Fitness class last night, also full, seemed to be majority of dance moms from Encore."

As hurt as I've been, I'm glad for her. She deserves every success in her dance dreams, and I hum, signaling for Logan to keep going. I need to get this over with, but I also want every morsel of insight to savor.

"After work, TJ met her. They went for dinner at a Mexican restaurant,

then back to her apartment. He stayed until just before midnight. Allie stayed in the rest of the evening. Wilson is on duty tonight.”

“Wilson?” I bark, suddenly angry. That’s a change in schedule, something I can question and reasonably expect an answer on, something I can be angry at without seeming like a heartbroken, lovelorn puppy. I make a plan, and it should be followed to the letter.

To his credit, Logan doesn’t so much as flinch at my outburst. At least, for me, it’s an outburst.

“Yes sir. There was an incident before TJ arrived.”

“What happened?” I growl, reining in my anger. “Is Allie okay?”

Logan holds up a hand, unruffled. “She is, though she almost took my head off.” He says it with an amused tone, like whatever happened was funny to him.

“Logan.”

My single word cuts through his attempt at lightness and refocuses him back to business.

“Of course, sir. I was at Mat Madness, not for duty but because Max and Dalton let me use their stuff in exchange for pointers on their amateur fighters. I’ve been helping them coach one of the up-and-coming kids.”

He pauses like he’s waiting for me have something to say about that, but I don’t have patience for that right now. “Continue.”

“She must have seen my car in the parking lot, assumed I was there to watch her,” Logan says, turning slightly red. “She stormed in, and before I could even greet her, she ripped me a new one, the gist of which was to *leave her the fuck alone*, and then she stomped out. Whole thing took maybe a minute? Max and Dalton were rather amused at seeing her hand me my ass while I stood there like a gaping fish.”

I have a flash of pride in my girl. It’s good to imagine her unafraid of someone as athletic and dangerous as Logan. Not that Logan would touch Allie. He’s a good man and has strict orders not to unless it’s for her own safety.

But her ire at being watched means she’s still fighting with herself over what we are, what I mean to her. I swallow the painful thought down, not willing to let Logan see my hurt at her dismissal of what we have.

“So what does that have to do with Wilson being on duty tonight?” I ask.

Logan rubs at his jaw. “You want us to stay invisible, Boss. Allie knows Gavin and me, knows our cars, knows our builds well enough to spot us in a

crowd. Wilson might not be the best, but he's . . . invisible because she doesn't know him that well. I also told him to dress casually when he's on patrol, just one more way to be inconspicuous. Because she's obviously looking, testing to see if you've really left her alone."

I growl to let Logan know he's walking a fine edge.

After our fight, I'd had to tell him and Gavin to step back in their chaperoning, to be invisible once again. Logan, who sort of knows what happened, hadn't liked it, but he'd done it when I reminded him that though Allie might not want to be guarded, she damn well needs the bare minimum because the whole town knows she is mine.

And though there may be suspicions as to why I've been such an asshole lately, no one really knows that there is trouble in our fucked-up version of paradise, so she's very much at risk.

"Wilson?" I muse. "He's a good asset here at the club, but this assignment is more important. Do you trust him to do his job, keep her safe, not be seen, and not touch her if he is?"

Logan nods immediately. "I do. I stressed the importance of the matter to him . . . personally."

With a sigh, I acquiesce. "Very well."

He turns to go but stops with one hand on the doorknob. He looks up and then turns to face me fully, his hands crossed in front of him.

"Sir, may I speak freely?"

It's a big thing to ask me in my current mood, and he knows it. To be honest, I'm not sure I want to hear what he has to say, but his proximity to Allison teases at me, wanting any tidbit of intel he might have on her.

I have done my best and haven't contacted her, haven't spied on her or knocked on her door to beg entry, but it's been hard. Without the insights from Logan and Gavin, I'm not sure I could've withstood the last two weeks.

I nod, not saying a word so he knows to be cautious.

Logan clears his throat. "Dominick, she looks like hell. She's holding it together, putting on a smile for the kids and the ladies in her classes, but it's fake. She's fraying around the edges. Her eyes are puffy like she's been crying a lot, and I think she's even lost weight. The light through the window says she's got her TV on into the early hours of the morning, so either she's not sleeping or she's sleeping in the living room. I think she's falling apart."

In an instant, I'm out of my chair, pacing back and forth. I run my fingers through my hair, grabbing handfuls and pulling hard to punish myself for

doing this to her. I hate that she is in pain. I can withstand anything but that. I need to go, need to hold her in my arms and tell her that everything will be okay. Reassure her and myself. She will come around. She has to.

I make a move toward the door and Logan bravely steps in front of me, halting my progress. “Sir. Stop. I wasn’t finished, and I can read it all over your face, but you can’t go to her. She’s working it out. It’s hurting her, but you’re in no condition to go to her either. As much as she looks like shit, you’re just as bad.”

He knows his words piss me off, and I narrow my eyes at him, pressing my shoulders back and standing upright. A king demanding reverence. “Excuse me?”

Logan doesn’t back down as I expected and continues. “You don’t wear it on your sleeve like she does, but you’re just as unraveled. I get it, she’s special. Everyone who’s spent five minutes with her knows that. She brought you to life, like the miracle worker she is. Now she’s gone, and you’re five different kinds of fucked up because of it. Just as much as she needs to figure shit out, so do you. Don’t go fuck her up more than she already is because you can’t handle your shit.”

It’s probably the longest string of words I’ve ever heard from Logan, which sucks because he’s one hundred percent right and we both know it. Still, his words sting, and my hand clenches in desire to punch him for the liberties he’s taking speaking to me, even if I gave him permission to do so.

Instead, after a moment, my hand relaxes and I reach up, patting him on the shoulder. “Perhaps you’re right, Logan.”

He nods. “You’re a good man, Dominick. As much as you can be. But what you’re asking her to do, to be, is a lot for someone who has no frame of reference for the world you live in. She doesn’t understand. But I think she *could*. You can’t keep her compartmentalized like you have been. Either she’s in all the way or out all the way.” He pauses, letting that sink in. “I think you need to bring her in, or at least give her the option. Be clear on it, none of this cloak and dagger shit that you’re good at. But just . . . give the girl a minute to miss you.”

A tiny smile of encouragement flashes on his lips, gone so fast I almost think I imagined it, but it was there. “You think she does? Miss me?”

The rare moment of weakness escapes with the hopeful question before I can stop it, but Logan doesn’t take advantage. “I know she does.”

It helps, and I take a deep breath, going back to my office chair and

sitting down to gather my thoughts. “What was she wearing for her first pole fitness class last night?”

It’s an odd segue, and though he looks confused, Logan takes a moment before answering. “I don’t know, sir. The classroom has no windows, you know, and when she came out, she was in her normal sweats, like I said. Same pair she was wearing when she chewed me out. But earlier, when she greeted the ladies in the lobby, she had on black shorts and a baby pink tank top. Why?”

I take a moment to savor the image in my mind. “Thank you, Logan. That’ll be all.”

He doesn’t question me further, hearing that our moment of friendly chatter has ended. But I know without a doubt that my Allison misses me now.

I sent her the package of dancewear with an encouraging note about her first class. Maybe it hadn’t been the smartest play, to push myself into her life when she’d so adamantly forced me out.

But she’d worn the outfit, which means she read the note I sent.

Maybe there is a chance I can earn my way back into her life.

But the last time I tried to do a delicate dance, it ended in spectacular flames and nine thousand dollars’ worth of broken surveillance equipment.

And my gut tells me that if I go in like a bull in a china shop, demanding and pressuring with expectations of obedience, Allie would rebel like the hellcat she is. While I enjoy her moments of wildness, I need it to be within reason.

There’s got to be a way to keep her safe, to keep her by my side, and to keep her mine.

Chapter 22

Allie

“O h, my goodness, girl. You look like . . .” Maggie says as I open the door before her voice stalls.

She just looks at me, her mouth pursing as she tries to find a nice way to put it.

Finally, I just wave her inside. “Helluva greeting after not seeing me for so long. And you can say it, I look like shit. Believe me, I’m well aware because I feel even worse.”

Maggie shakes her head, her newly-dyed platinum curls bouncing. “No, I mean you look fine, just . . .”

She doesn’t finish the thought, just grabs me in a big hug, squeezing me tight. She’s surprisingly strong for a little thing. I’d forgotten just how much.

“Grr, I could just shoot that man for what he’s doing to you,” she says when she lets me go, and though my lips tilt up slightly, it’s far from my usual beaming smile. “I can do it, you know. I think the law’s on my side.”

“Thanks. It’s the thought that counts, though I’d never want that. Even the thought of you brandishing a weapon kinda freaks me out. Like a Killer Kewpie Doll,” I reply, watching her plop down on my couch.

She grins, a full showing of her teeth like it’s a really funny joke. “You know me, I’m just your everyday FBI consultant Barbie doll. I’ll shoot you full of holes, infiltrate your organization, and discover all your dirty secrets. Then I’ll make cupcakes, paint my nails, and break your eardrums with my karaoke. Gotta have balance, you know?”

The sarcasm is a newer development in Maggie’s personality, and I like it. She used to be exceedingly sweet and innocent, but her man Shane has apparently changed that a little.

She still doesn’t curse, which of course means I’m even dirtier in my talk around her, trying to get her to let an F-bomb drop. So far, I’ve succeeded exactly once, an effort that took a lot of wine after a customer at Petals grabbed her ass, but today might be number two.

“You wanna drink?” I ask. “Oh, you can toss the jacket anywhere.” I

vaguely gesture to the hooks by the front door, which are so overloaded that there's a pile of hoodies on the floor too. At least they're in the general vicinity of where they're supposed to be.

Maggie looks around for the first time, seeing the mess I've created over the past two weeks. I'm not exactly a neat freak to begin with, and two weeks of going to work and then crashing on my couch haven't done a thing for my cleanliness, though some of it's been TJ. He went through here with a stick and some doohickey, checking every wall I've got. And then he moved stuff out of the way to install new camera-less smoke detectors. Only problem is, he didn't put everything back.

"Why don't we just head out?" Maggie finally offers. "Our appointment's in thirty minutes anyway."

Foregoing the idea of a drink, I nod and follow Maggie out, making sure to lock my door behind me. Her car's in the parking lot, a nice, new, very bland-looking Suburban.

"You planning on killing the planet one-handed?"

"Bureau issue . . . I gotta return it on Monday," Maggie says.

We get to the salon, and it's not until we sit in the big vibrating chairs with our feet soaking in the tubs that she finally looks over, her eyes piercing.

"Okay, what happened? Hit me with the whole sordid story."

This is us, what we have done countless times before. We've been through a weird tumblypants change in our friendship, but through it all, we've just become closer. And this is how we do our thing.

I give her an edited version, leaving out names because you never know who is listening. "And then after agreeing to transparency and telling me about some of it, he leaves out the biggest fucking part."

"What?"

"The spying! He had cameras all in my apartment. And he didn't tell me! When I caught him, he was fiddling with the smoke detector!"

Maggie cringes, biting her lip worriedly. "Yeah, that's awful. I mean, we have cameras at our place for security, I get that. But we know about them."

I shake my head, my deep sadness of the last days replaced again by fresh anger.

Maggie eyeballs me. "Okay, so let me just say something and have you not bite my head off, deal?"

I don't like the sound of this, but I nod.

"So if you were dating a celebrity or a politician or something, would you

mind the guards, the trackers, the reporting of your whereabouts, the cameras? Because, not that Shane is any of those things, but that sounds oddly familiar to my life.”

I open my mouth to answer, but before I can, she reaches into her purse, pulling out her phone. “See? Tracker. Cameras at home—want to see my bedroom right now?”

She clicks a few times on the screen, and her made-up bed, complete with pink floral pillows, pops into view. “And while I may not have a guard right now, I do partner up when I go into the field. When it’s not with Shane, he gets so nervous I swear he pees his jockeys if I don’t check in with him.”

“But you know about all that stuff, and knew it going in,” I argue.

Maggie holds up her hand, and I sit back, holding back my frustration. It’s not her, it’s this whole shitty mess. “I know,” she says after I’m fully in my seat again. “I’m just trying to figure out what the exact problem is. Is it the monitoring or is it that he didn’t tell you, because those are very different problems with potentially different solutions.”

“I’m not sure,” I admit. “I just know I’m mad. And sad. And just grr!” I finish with a growl of . . . confusion? Frustration? I’m not quite sure.

“Well, you’re fully allowed to be pissed off,” Maggie says, “and let’s be honest. By your own words, you didn’t have a problem with the guards. You knew who” —she raises a brow pointedly— “and *what* he is, and that his job would mean some additional precautions.”

“I know,” I admit. “I’m still shocked you’re not shitting kittens over it.”

Maggie shrugs. “I did at first, but I’ve learned nothing is black or white, good or bad. There are evil people on the right side of the law and good people on the wrong side. I’d like to think Dom’s one of those. But without a doubt, it is a different life. If you can’t handle that, definitely get out now because he can’t change that part of his world. My opinion, though . . . what’s got your tutu in a twist are the secrets, which I totally understand. I’d be pissed too.”

“I am pissed,” I agree. “But—”

She cuts me off, shaking her head. “I’m not done. Buckle up, because things are about to get bumpy. What about sad?” Maggie asks. “The million-dollar question. Do you miss him?”

I think about it, not saying anything as the foot bath finishes and the techs come to start messing with our toenails. Finally, I nod. “I do. But then I feel stupid for missing him. I shouldn’t want him, not after this.”

“Should, would, could,” Maggie sing-songs dismissively. “Doesn’t mean a thing. Just labels people put on expectations. Don’t box yourself in based on what someone else would do or thinks you should do. If you love him, make your peace with who he is and who you have to be to stay with him. It’ll require some give and take from both of you, but it’s doable. If you don’t love him, let him go and move on. It’ll hurt, but you’ll both be okay eventually.”

The casual way she says it is like a sharp knife in my gut, forcing me to picture my future without Dominick at my side, and more painfully, to picture his without me there.

Maggie’s comments make me think . . . would Dom ever open up to another person, let down his façade and be real, play chess with them and talk to them? I’m not sure I want it to be me by his side, but I sure as fuck don’t want anyone else there either. Still, the thought of him alone breaks my heart.

At the same time, I try to picture myself with the happy husband and two kids behind a white picket fence, like TJ keeps talking about, both for him and for me. The all-American dream, I guess. And while it is what I’ve always wanted, the picture blurs and the only face I can see beside me is Dominick’s. It’s ridiculous because he’s definitely not that guy, but a tiny voice in my head whispers . . . *maybe he could be?*

And that’s just it. There’s so much I know about him but so much I don’t. And I can’t go through the rest of my life only getting a portion of him while he demands all of me. I need to know both sides of his life, personal and professional, to see if I can handle it, to see if I can accept it.

The manicurist holds up a book of swatches, asking me what color I want. I don’t even think. I just point to the bloodiest red I see. It matches my feeling. I’m just bleeding out from the inside.

Maybe the lacquer will be a reminder, a visible shield to protect me tonight. Protect me from him.

* * *

This is impossible. I’m a strong badass bitch, but I can’t do this. Okay, I’m not really a badass bitch, but I am strong. I have fought my way through auditions where I was rejected on sight for my hair color, I have worked my body to its limits to master leaps and spins, and I have battled mental demons that still try to seduce me into their darkness with ugly thoughts about my worthiness.

I’ve done all that. But warming up at home, I’m not sure I can step on the

stage at Petals tonight, knowing that Dominick will be in his office, watching me.

I snort at the thought. I'd always known he watched me dance, even though I couldn't see through the blackout windows. I'd imagined him there on the other side of the glass, our connection pulsing through the din and sin of the club long before we'd actually touched.

It would fuel me, and I delighted in the show I was putting on for him, because even as the crowd watched, it was for him. But it was knowingly and willingly.

After talking to Maggie today, I had hoped to feel some clarity on the situation, but I'm still waffling. Option one, smack him stupid for doing that without telling me, getting a promise of honesty henceforth, and then forgiving him in a blaze of makeup sex glory. Option two, just walk away, however painful that may be.

I'm on the verge of talking myself out of going when my phone rings. I consider not answering, just hiding away in my room, nestled in the covers. No . . . one way or another, that's not who I want to be. Instead, I look at the name flashing on my phone. I don't want to admit, even to myself, that there's a small part of me that's disappointed it's not Dominick.

Other than that one gift with a tasteful card that simply said *My heart is with you. I know you can soar like the beautiful creature you have always been*, he hasn't contacted me in two weeks, honoring the time and space I said I needed.

The note had been signed with a scratchy capital D as if I'd have thought the gift had come from anyone else. It was a painfully reminding prick that he'd encouraged me to do the pole classes in the first place, and the simple and elegant wording had brought tears to my eyes.

But this isn't Dom. "Hey, Trish."

Trish isn't one to mince words, especially when she's gone into Mom-mode. Tonight's no exception. "Do not 'hey, Trish' me. Where the hell are you, woman? You should've been here thirty minutes ago to claim your spot in the dressing room. As it is, I'm fighting the vultures off because with you not here every night, it's technically not 'yours' anymore. I'm about ready to get my damn pepper spray. Hey, I said hands off!" she says, and I can't help but smile as I hear her continuing to rant on the other end to someone in the dressing room. "You'd better back that ass up. This station is Allie's tonight, so tonight is the night you learn to share a mirror with someone else.

Shoo . . . that's right, there ya go."

Ah, Trish. Bubbly but fierce as fuck. God, I love her. "Thanks for looking out, girl. But I don't know if I'm coming."

Trish's laughter rings out in my ear. "What the fuck ever! If you don't get down here ASAP, there's going to be a riot, backstage and front of stage too. Fuckin' house is damn-near chanting your name. So if you're bailing, you'd better give a girl a head start to get outta dodge. There won't be a sequin left standing if this place pops."

The crowd doesn't bother me, but it doesn't excite me like usual either. I take a deep breath, shaking my head. "I don't know if I can, Trish. I know he's there."

Trish clucks her tongue, lowering her voice. "Look, honey, I don't know what's going on with you and Dom. I just know that he's been a beast for the last couple of weeks. But you've both promoed this appearance like mad, and I'm pretty sure you need the money. I'm not shitting you. This place is packed wall to wall. Me and a few of the girls, we dropped hints with the right people. You know, the gossipy folks. Told them you've been working on a new trick or two and were gonna knock some socks off, theirs, not yours, obviously, because nobody's working the pole in ugly ass socks." She waits for me to laugh at the bad joke, but at my silence, she keeps going. "Bottom line, you're a dancer, right? Don't let drama steal your bankroll. Drama is gonna pass, but those greenbacks will too, so you'd better get 'em while the getting's good."

She's right. I do need the money. But it's not enough motivation to face him.

"Plus, don't let Boss Man keep you down. You get up there and do your job like a pro and show him that whatever he did, he fucked up the best thing he's ever gonna have. Because you sure as hell are, Allie. Show him that you can handle yourself, with or without his nonsense. Don't let him take this from you too."

That lights a fire under my ass, and I reach down, snagging my bag. "You're right. I'm on my way."

Trish's grin is audible over the phone line, and she hums happily. "That's my girl. I'll meet you at the back door. One thing. Don't you dare tell that man that I said one ugly word about him. I got a family to support, Allie."

It's a joke, but also there's a healthy dose of fear in her words and I'm reminded that while I'm lost in relationship drama with Dominick, he truly is

a man most people are scared of.

I'm not scared of him, though. I'm pissed at him. The thought somehow gives me an extra boost of power, and I strut to my car.

"Trish, I hundred percent promise you, it stays you-me-God. That's it."

Twenty minutes later, I park in Petals's lot and head to the back door, the same as I have so many times before, but I'm different inside. Gavin, who's on door security, doesn't even have a chance to open it for me when the door bursts open and Trish barrels through, sweeping me up in a big glitter-fueled hug.

"Holy shit, I've missed you! Come on, let's get you ready before the floor goes wild."

I grin, following her in the door. "I'm sure it's not that busy."

Gavin holds the door open for us both but fails to stifle a chuckle. "You gotta be blind, Allie. Did you see the front lot? It's so damn busy we had to bring in two valets because even the overflow lot next door is full, and we stopped letting people in about thirty minutes ago because the fire marshal decided tonight was a good night to check the place out."

He rolls his eyes, and I realize that I've missed him and Logan, had gotten used to hanging out with them everyday. I reach up and hug his neck. "How you doing, Gavin?"

He hugs me back briefly but brotherly and smiles down, a hint of sadness in his eyes. "Me? Fine. *Him*, not so much."

I bite my lip and sidestep the question I want to ask. "And Logan?"

Gavin grimaces, then forces a smile. "I think he's catching the brunt of the upstairs heat, but he seems to be getting his frustrations out on the mat. He's training a kid over at that MMA place by you."

I nod, feeling like hell. After going off on Logan, Max came by the dance studio to talk with me and told me about Logan helping out.

"Yeah, I might owe him an apology."

"Fuck it, he's cool. He understands."

Trish, eager to get things going, drags me away, pulling me into the dressing room. "We can all play Twenty Questions and shit later. Right now, though, you need to get glammed and get right in your head. Give me your phone so I can play your music for you."

This is why I love this girl. She could be mad that I'm taking the spotlight tonight, could be apathetic about whatever shit's going on in my life, could be gossipy about me and Dominick.

Nope, she's running stuff like a boss herself. In the middle of this chaos, she's the one keeping her head and issuing orders, making sure things get done. She's the girl you want by your side when stuff is going well because she'll celebrate right, but also the one you want by your side when it's all wrong because she'll hold you up when your knees give out. My music starts, and I give Trish a nod.

"Thanks, girl. You're a good egg."

She smirks. "I know." And then she's off, mothering the other girls and helping them get ready for their performances. Securing garters, pulling corsets tight, and adding an extra touch of glitter. And then another. Man, she *loves* glitter.

I start applying my makeup, going with a heavy smoky eye and red lips to go with my red costume for the evening. I needed something hard, something fierce to give me a bit of armor to do this, not because of the dancing. That, I enjoy and could do in my sleep.

This armor's to protect me from Dominick. I know he prefers me in pink, softer, more real, and that's exactly why I'm going full-vixen tonight.

Putting a wall between us, rebelling against him while flipping him the finger metaphorically, and making my own stand, my own way.

Listening to my headphones as Beyoncé belts out about running the world, it seems Trish was right. I am getting into the right headspace for this. I've got enough time to wrap it all up, do a full double-check of my costume, my hair and makeup, and every speck of glitter—yeah, Trish added some extra—and then it's go time.

I head to the 'gorilla position' behind the curtain, and moments later, I hear the DJ announcing me, getting the already worked-up crowd whipped into a frenzy.

It's weirdly . . . fun. I might not be a rock star, but I can understand the thrill, the rush as it hits me harder than ever before.

I remember that this is why I enjoy performing, that connection between me and the audience, sharing the experience of the moment.

My music starts, the intro long and sultry so I have time to make my entrance and walk the rail. I have a moment of falling out of character, so shocked by the sheer volume of people in the room.

Gavin wasn't lying. This place is packed, but they've made sure it's not sleazy. There's no concert vibe with horndogs packed five-deep around the stage in a standing-room-only leer fest.

Instead, they've moved in additional tables and chairs to fit as many people in the space as possible.

My mind whirls with the unexpected number of people, but my music reaches its first bridge into a crescendo that signals me to approach the pole.

It jolts me, and I adjust, dropping back into performer mode.

Immersed in the music, the throbbing erotic beat fuels me. My body spins and twirls, moving with a routine so memorized I don't even think about it. It just flows as an extension of my soul.

Time passes without my even realizing it as I dance, making eyes at the audience before swaying into my next move.

Fifteen minutes. Two extended-version songs with a short break that isn't silent but gives me a chance to catch my breath, work the crowd, and reposition on the stage.

The second song's the challenge, the pole routine that has me working my body hard. The stage lighting lowers to a deep red as I do my final tricks, glad that my new pole class has at least given me plenty of practice time to perfect my new favorites.

Of course, whatever new thing I'm doing is always my favorite. I climb up high, locking my left leg on the pole and arching my back. Lifting my right leg behind me, I arabesque and let the spin ensure everyone's eyes are on me.

Stopping the slow turn, I arch even further, reaching back to grab my right foot and lift it even higher behind me, the arabesque becoming a vertical split known as the Eagle. I hold the pose, feeling the stretch in my legs as there's a round of applause.

Without warning, I release and let my leg and head fall simultaneously, giving the impression that I'm out of control, but it's a planned part of my choreography to get upside down on the pole.

I switch positions, letting my legs free to spread wide as my right elbow locks around the chrome, my left elbow goes around my leg, and I clasp my hands for support.

It's a yoga pose called Bird of Paradise that's been adapted for the pole, and it's the perfect complement to my sexy ballet-inspired set. I hold the position, letting the slow spin show off the lines of my legs before I gain momentum, doing a fast flip so I'm upright once again, my legs on one side of the pole as I bicycle along on invisible pedals, getting closer to the floor with every rotation around the pole.

Finally, I touch down on pointed feet, and I flip my dark curtain of hair, resting back on the pole as I lower to the floor to gather the piles of bills.

My outro music plays as I crawl along, smiling and flirting with the people at the rail.

In this moment, I feel accomplished. I'm successful at the studio, the classes are going phenomenally well, even better than Donna and I had thought, and the feature here is an obvious hit.

But as I reach the edge of the curtain and look back, I feel fucking empty. I didn't dance for the money in my hand, though my bills will appreciate it. I danced for another reason, one I'm only willing to admit to myself. The thought triggers me to look up to the windows, something I'd purposefully avoided doing during the routine. But I can't help it now.

To my surprise, the windows are not all blacked out. Instead, on the far left, there's one transparent window, framing Dominick as he stands tall and proud, stoically watching me.

Our eyes meet, gasoline on the fire inside me, but I'm not sure if it's anger or want. Seeing him so close, but so far, brings back the times we both knew what we wanted but stayed away.

It seems pointless and stupid that we wasted so much time then. But what am I doing now? Am I making a stand, protecting myself from the fallout of a life where he takes my wild freedom and I allow him to put me in a cage?

Or am I wasting time, time I could be with him?

I can see it in his eyes, feel him holding back from me even across the rowdy space between us. Finally, he lifts his whiskey in salute and swallows the whole shot in one go, then turns away.

An instant later, the window is black.

Chapter 23

Dominick

I hadn't even pretended that I wasn't going to watch, didn't lie to myself that way.

I've been starving, desperate for even a hint of her, a whisper of her scent, her passion, her fire. It's worn me down and nearly broken me.

But tonight, I am going to feed the dark part inside of me that wants her, needs her, owns her. She struts the stage, made up in sultry paint and red lingerie that her natural beauty doesn't need, and I know she did that for one reason only.

To fight me.

To show me that she can be whoever she pleases.

But it pleases me too.

I want her to embrace every facet of her personality . . . the sweet and the sultry, the submissive and the sassy, the bold and the brash, and the bared and the buttoned-up.

I don't want a two-dimensional figure, a shadow of a woman. I want her to explore every interest she has. I just want her to explore them with me.

I will admit that I want her protected, but not in a cage. Or at least not a restricting one. I want her to realize that the cage I want to offer her is the same wildlife preserve that I live in, a place where she can be all she dreams of, safely free in her wild chaos.

I want her to soar and test her limits. I want her to be my queen.

An image of the chess set I gifted her falling to the floor at her feet flashes through my mind, a lance of pain in its wake. I've wondered too often if any of the pieces were broken, and if they were, what it means to my heart.

With a forced breath, I return to the moment, here and now, watching my Allison dance. I could do this all day, every day. Her grace and elegance astound me and make me see beauty in function, light in the dark.

But Logan is correct. Allie has lost weight, which concerns me. The shadows under her eyes are well-disguised with stage makeup, but I can see the weariness on her.

She hasn't looked up yet. I know because I purposefully left one window clear so that she could see me watching, a symbol of the transparency she wishes for between us. It's a small gesture, but she'll understand.

It's not until the end, as she's almost off-stage, that she looks up and our eyes meet. My heart stops at the pain I see in her expression. I hate that I put it there and wish that she would let me soothe it away and take care of her.

But I don't know how to compromise on this, balancing the risks to her life over her discomfort with being kept safe. And as much as I hate to admit it, she wasn't able to handle the truth of my life and how pervasive my love for her has become. I'd known she wasn't ready, but I'd truly hoped that we'd get there one day soon. But fate had forced my hand.

I lift the tumbler of scotch and swallow my drink in one gulp, the taste smooth on the jagged shards inside me, before turning away. I hit a switch, and the windows blacken to their normal matte exterior finish, leaving me in nearly soundproofed privacy.

I sit in contemplation, knowing she's in the building, so close but unattainable, at least for now. I want to rush down there, to throw everyone out my way and reclaim her, remind her that she's mine. But I don't move a muscle, forcing myself to stay in my chair, gripping the low armrests to ground myself.

When my phone buzzes, I almost jump, lost in my own thoughts of how to right things with Allison, to get her to return to my side. Glancing down at the lit screen, I see Logan's name and just two words, but my heart stops.

She's coming.

I glance up to the security displays and see Allie on the stairs, coming to my office. I consider whether I should turn the monitors off, not wanting to put salt in the wound, but I decide against it. She must know that this is the truth of me, of my life.

Even my own home is bugged. If she is to share this life with me, she must accept that reality. It's a big nature park, but it's still restricted.

Her knock is soft and tentative, which hurts, ironically. Part of me wishes she would have just kicked in the door and started kicking ass. That she is hesitant, maybe even fearful of me, is a jolt to my soul.

"Come in," I reply, my voice steady even as my heart races. I have sat at the table with the biggest, baddest men in the underworld, have killed in cold blood for nothing more than my family name, and am by all accounts a scarily icy opponent in any conflict, but this woman is my complete undoing.

She has reduced me to weakness, pierced all my defenses, and left me teetering on the edge of oblivion even as she's worn herself down the same way.

Shakespeare's infamous quote skitters across my mind. *Though she be but little, she is fierce.*

And my Allison is fierce, strong enough to stand at my side but also strong enough to stand against me and bring me to my knees. A worthier opponent I could never find, but also a more brilliant ally does not exist.

She closes the door behind her, coming to stand before me with her shoulders back, prepared for battle. She still has on the somewhat smeared remains of her makeup. Even stage makeup cannot withstand the amount of hard work she's been doing, and her mussed hair flows over her shoulders in battle snarls. If I were a betting man, I'd wager her sexy red lingerie is underneath the oversized black sweats she's currently wearing.

She's trying to get out of here as fast as she can. Trying to get away from me.

She lifts her chin, challenging me. "I'm not here to discuss personal matters, only business. We need to go over receipts for the night so I can get my share."

Though my every instinct is to rush her, press her into a chair, and beg for forgiveness with my tongue buried in her pussy, I know it's not the right move. Not for her, not for me, and not for us. Not now.

"If that's what you wish," I say, feigning acquiescence. "Please, sit."

I gesture to the chairs in the sitting area of my office, not wanting my desk between us. If this is the only taste I have of her at this instant, then I don't want even a scrap of paper between us.

She sits primly on the chair's edge, not relaxing even an inch. "So, fifty dollars a person entry tonight times . . . do you have a head count from the door yet?"

I eye her, keeping my face neutral. "The fire marshal said our capacity is maxed at 350. Logan will have exact figures after closing, but I'm certain we hit it, maybe exceeded ever so slightly."

She does some quick math in her head, ticking off things on her fingers to help out. "So the door take is at least \$17,500, and my share at twenty-five percent is . . ."

I already ran the numbers on a calculator earlier. "About forty-four hundred minus tip share. Not a bad night."

“Says you,” she huffs before looking to the side, whispering quietly to herself, “Took everything I had to walk in here tonight.”

Finally, I’m getting to her, ruffling her feathers and pulling her away from her desire to stay all-business. I lean forward, wanting to use this moment of honesty not as a weakness but to show her that I’m just as broken by what’s happened between us.

“Allison, I’ve had to near-physically restrain myself from breaking down your door for the last two weeks to force you to listen to me. It took everything I have to let you walk on that stage tonight without being marked by me. And it’s taking every drop of control I possess to remain in this chair and not drop at your feet to worship you like the queen that you are.”

I clasp my hands between my spread knees to watch her eyes come to me, her lips trembling as she realizes what I’ve said.

“Dom, don’t,” she finally gasps, shaking her head. “I can’t.”

“Don’t what?” I challenge her, my voice thick with emotion. “Want you, need you? Because I know one thing, Allison.”

I get up slowly, not wanting to startle or frighten her, and close the small gap between us. Bending forward, I place my hands on the armrests on either side of her and lean down to whisper hotly in her ear.

“You have damned me. I am yours. And you are mine.”

She turns her head away, and though I suspect it’s more to keep her lips from mine and create some space between us, she only succeeds in giving me greater access to her neck.

I lay soft kisses and licks along the tendon stretched tight there, letting her ragged breath be my guide. She whimpers as I get close to the juncture of her neck and shoulder, so I bite gently, not breaking the skin, but so that she feels the gentle tug of my teeth. I taste her sweat, drawing her flesh into my mouth and sucking to pull blood to the surface, wanting her to see that I am with her even when she’s alone later.

Because I know that she will leave me again.

It will take time. She is fighting herself as much as anything else, but she is still mine.

“You already know that you hold my heart, and though a part of you wants to rip your heart from me, I can’t let you go. I love you, Allison. Always,” I whisper, and a tear slips down her cheek. I chase it with my tongue, catching its saltiness and savoring it, though I don’t want her to cry.

She turns to look at me, her chocolate eyes pleading with me to stop this

madness, but I can't. With her bright red lips so close, I can't stop myself from tasting them.

She cries out against my lips, her hands going to my shirt, and though I think she initially intended to push me away, instead, she pulls me closer and kisses me back. Between kisses, she speaks in stilted utterances, foregoing breath. "I shouldn't. It's wrong. I can't be . . . who you want me to be."

Confusion races through me, and I pull back from her, searching her face. Her eyes meet mine again, and then she breaks, the tears wrecking the last of her makeup as sobs shake her body.

Reaching down, I gather her into my arms, holding her like a child in my lap as she shudders, her face hidden in her hands as I inhale the clean heat of her heavenly scent. When she can breathe again, I tilt her chin to look me in the eye.

"Allison, what are you talking about? You are already exactly who I want you to be. I'm not trying to change you." I rub her back, trying to comfort her, but she's still looking at me uncertainly. "I love you, Allison Bancroft, just as you are."

She shakes her head, taking a deep breath before answering. "But you are trying to change me. I'm not some kept woman, Dominick. I don't need guards and trackers and cameras. And *secrets*."

The last word is hissed like a cobra's venom on her tongue. It strikes home, lashing me like a whip, and I fall back, the chair the only thing holding me up.

"Allie, for two weeks, I've thought of nothing but that word. My life, it needs secrets. My empire is built on them, a foundation of knowing everything about everything. When I'm with you, I feel different, but the truth is I am not a good man, Allie. But you make me want to be. You make me wish that I were some regular Joe with a nine-to-five job, a minivan, khakis, and a golden retriever or something that could offer you an easy life. But I can't give you that. All I can give you is me. And I am a cold, cruel, manipulative bastard who is in charge of a corrupt city."

She looks at me, but I'm rolling. I can't let her interrupt me. I don't have the strength to do this again.

"My life, every moment is filled with risks. I am not trying to make you a 'kept woman'. I am trying to make you *my* woman, which means keeping you safe. I know my world isn't yours, and I wanted to introduce it to you slowly so that exactly *this* didn't happen. All the security isn't because of

you. It's because of me, and it tears at my black, black heart that I'm responsible for doing this to you. But I need them so that nothing happens to you. Because I couldn't bear that."

She watches me as I shudder, completely unfazed by my anguish and not scared of the monster that I am. "But what if it was the opposite? What if I tried to get you to leave your world, get that 9-to-5 and be a regular guy like you said? You couldn't do it. You're not willing to change for me, but you want me to change for you."

I look at her incredulously. "You really think that?"

I stand up, holding her in my arms, but turn to set her back in the chair so I can pace. I don't like it, the way she's studying me, but I need the movement to organize the chaos of thoughts in my head.

I don't like chaos. I am orderly and methodical, but in this moment, I am the tempest incarnate, swirling and uncontrolled. My steps echo in the quiet room, my eyes bouncing from her to the floor and back to her.

"I am a monster, Allie. Can you not see that? Ask anyone and they'll tell you the worst mistake of your life was to look at me the first time we met and see something other than the truth. I don't smile, I don't feel. I just rule like the calculating manipulator I am, whether I want the responsibility or not. Except with you. With you, I'm not a monster. I'm just a man, so quickly buoyed or crumbled by your every word. Weak, vulnerable . . . afraid. And in love. With you."

I chance looking at her and hate the way she's staring at me. Like she doesn't know me at all. Walking closer, I get down on my knees, bowing my head to the floor in total and complete subjugation to her.

"I am sorry I didn't tell you everything about the surveillance. Truly sorry. Please, that's everything. I swear it is. But you have to know that if you want me the way I want you, you will have to endure those things, and you'll have to trust me."

I hear her whisper softly in the silence, piercing my heart with every word. "Rule three. Trust."

Before I can ask her whether that means she does or doesn't trust me, the door bursts open and Logan appears. Quickly, I leap to my feet, but he looks on unfazed, all-business.

"Sorry, sir. Emergency. We need to go. Now."

I'm instantly back in The Boss mode, though I step in front of Allie, putting myself between her and Logan so that she can pull herself together.

“What’s wrong?”

Logan glances to Allie and replies *sotto voce*. “Pete called. There’s trouble. *He’s* involved.”

Allie doesn’t see it, but I catch the way he jerks his chin toward Allie. There’s only one ‘he’ Logan would mention in relation to Allie other than me. TJ. I turn to Allie. “Stay here. Please. The guys are downstairs to keep you safe, but I need to deal with this.”

She doesn’t agree or disagree before Logan interrupts. “Sir, it might be best to bring her.”

I look to him, eyes narrowed as I analyze his motive for wanting to bring Allie close to anything that might be construed as trouble. He doesn’t back down, though, his voice still low and calm but unafraid.

He grins, though it is grim. “Sir, that *minute* we talked about giving her . . . it’s up. Decision time for both of you.”

Logan is a smart man. It’s why I’ve entrusted so much to him, and even without the full picture of what I’m walking into, I have faith that he has my back and my best interests at heart.

Turning to Allie, I hold out my hand. “Let’s go, Allison.”

Chapter 24

Allie

It feels strange, riding in the back of a car while Logan and Dom sit up front. We're riding toward something, although they've been super-light on details.

Logan looks at me in the rearview mirror. I can't decide whether he's begging me to be onboard with whatever is happening or warning me off. Maybe both?

Still, until he gets the word from Dominick, he insists on talking in roundabout terms that remind me of when my parents would talk about 'adult things' with me and TJ in the room. Like when Grandma Ellie got cancer. It's infuriating and confusing all at the same time because I'm definitely listening closely, trying to figure out what the fuck is going on.

"Pete called. Unauthorized transport through the South Side."

Dominick's eyes are on the passing landscape out the window, seeing something in the darkness I can't, or maybe he's just using the white noise of the passing vista to help his mind focus. Either way, I can see his reflection, and the hard clench of his jaw and the way his face has gone from the expressive vulnerability of his office to a cold Terminator-like sternness is frightening.

"Involvement?" he asks crisply.

Only because my eyes are ping-ponging this entire trip do I catch Logan's slight wince, his mouth twisting down at the corners before he answers. "Chambers . . . plus one."

None of this means anything to me, except the word 'unauthorized'. That obviously means that something is going down in Dom's town without his permission, and I can't imagine that's a good thing.

Who would be stupid enough, brazen enough to do something under Dom's nose without his go-ahead? And why did Logan want to bring me? It seems like a risk Dom wouldn't usually take.

Dominick doesn't give me answers or explanations though, just picks up his phone and dials a number by memory.

I can only hear his side of the conversation. “Silas? It’s Angeline.”

There’s a slight pause, and Dom speaks again. “Chambers was making a run.”

Another pause, and this time, I hear a deep but tiny voice shout ‘fuck’ loud enough that it’s audible from Dom’s phone.

“Am I to take it by that response that you did not authorize it?”

While Dom listens to whoever Silas is, he traces patterns on the window of the car, almost all of them geometrically perfect.

“Very well. There may be other complications, but I leave Chambers to your discretion.”

Another pause, and I wonder . . . did Dom just give permission for someone to die?

“Acceptable. Consider this a gracious gift, Silas. Tonight could’ve ended much differently for you.”

Dom doesn’t wait for a response, hanging up as Logan pulls into a totally darkened parking lot. I’ve had plenty of time in the car to let my eyes adjust, so I can see the shadowy shape of what looks like a fifteen-foot moving truck.

A moment later, the moon comes out from behind the clouds and I see more shadows and realize there are two men on the ground, with another small group of men surrounding them.

Suddenly, I really don’t want to get out of the car. I’m terrified of what is about to happen, knowing I’m going to see the true Dominick Angeline. The monster. The boogie man people of East Robinsville fear.

It’s time to meet The Boss.

Though he may not be those things with me, I’ve been fooling myself that he isn’t that. I realize I’ve been living a fantasy, pretending that Dom’s some ‘villain with a heart of gold’ who only pretends to be a ruthless bastard in order to stay alive. And I don’t want my pretty fantasy shattered.

“No. No . . . uh-uh,” I moan wildly, shaking my head. “I don’t want to do this. I don’t need to see this.”

Dominick turns around in the shotgun seat, reaching back to lay a hand on my knee, looking back at me. “Allison, this is my world. This is who I am, what I am. Evil, perhaps, but a necessary one. You need to see, and you need to know.”

I want one more moment of innocence, one more taste of who he is right now before my image of him is forever tarnished. I lean forward and he

meets me. I kiss him softly, and it feels like a goodbye. In a way, it is. A goodbye to the delusion I've been allowing myself. His lips move against mine for a moment, soft and sweet, but all too soon, he pulls away, and I can see the mask come back on, his eyes going ice-cold and hard.

Undoing his seatbelt, he looks at Logan, his voice hard. "Stay with her, Logan. No matter what."

Logan dips his chin once and Dominick gets out. I can't hear, but I see him greet and shake hands with an older guy in a suit and give a nod of greeting to the three other men holding guns on the guys on the ground.

But when Dominick says something to the two guys on the dirty asphalt, they both look up.

One of them I don't know. The other is . . . TJ.

Before Logan can say anything or do anything to stop me, I'm out the back door of the car, running to him. "TJ! Oh, my God. What the hell is going on?"

TJ looks at me, obviously surprised at seeing me here. "Allie? What the fuck? Get out of here!"

I should do what he says, but in that moment, my eyes involuntarily turn to Dominick, looking for his guidance. I'm in way over my head here, and I don't know what's happening, but on some level, I trust that Dominick isn't going to hurt me.

The next instant, Logan is at my side, holding me back from TJ. Pulling me away, he growls lightly in my ear, "Settle down, Allie. Watch, learn, and understand."

Logan's the sort of man who always sounds hard. It's part of what makes him a good bouncer, but in the time I've known him, I've learned to read his rumbles. This time, there's no bullshit, no compromise. He's as intense as he can be, and I know if he has to, he'll pick me up like a child and drag me away.

I stop fighting him so that I can stay, though I'm not sure if it's for TJ or for Dominick. Maybe both, to some degree. I stand on my own quietly, and he slowly lets go. Logan and Dominick have a quick, silent conversation with their eyes, and whatever else is passed, I know that from this moment on, Logan is personally responsible for my safety. Knowing Logan, that means he'd lay his life down in the process and not even think twice about it.

My interruption settled, Dominick returns his attention to the man in the suit, though TJ is still begging me with his eyes to run like hell.

“Pete, this is Allie. Allie, this is Pete. He’s the man on the South Side. A good boss.”

Something in the way he says it makes me hear the lower-case ‘boss’ instead of the upper-case Boss I’ve heard others whisper when they talk about Dom. He doesn’t tell Pete who I am, and I wonder if that’s because Pete already knows or if that particular piece of information is something he doesn’t need to know.

Usually, I’d shake hands with an introduction, but my gut tells me to stay where I am. Dominick is on edge, and while the signs of his stress are very well-disguised, they’re there. His right hand is half-clenched, and the little wisp of hair just above his right temple is out of place.

I’m probably the only person in the world who would notice that, though. Instead, everyone else would likely see that his shoulders are down and tension-free, his breathing is slow and even, and by all accounts, we could just be having a casual meeting with friends about helping out with apartment moving tomorrow.

Except for the guns and the guys on the ground.

TJ on the ground.

I look down at him again, hating that he’s in this position and not understanding why. He’s still screaming at me with his eyes, anguish and apology in their depths.

I want to jump in and demand answers, but Logan’s words flash in my mind and I wait. Dominick glances at me, and though he doesn’t say it, I can see the gleam in his eye, telling me I’m doing the right thing. Telling me to trust him.

The kind flicker is gone when he looks back to Pete. “Pete, as you were saying?”

Pete swallows, eyeing my presence carefully, but he clears his throat and continues. “Yeah, so I got word a shipment was coming through. Knew you hadn’t authorized it or you would’ve let me know, and it would’ve been my guys, not these assholes. So I had my guys stop the truck, and here we are.”

He seems kinda smarmy and talks to Dominick like they’re old pals, even making it seem like he’s a big shot. Maybe he is, but Dom doesn’t seem impressed.

“And you found out about the shipment when?”

Pete flushes a little but answers. “Got word about a bit of trouble earlier today, but wasn’t sure it was real until we actually saw the truck.”

Dominick purses his lips, pinching his left shirt cuff to pluck off an invisible piece of lint, and when he answers, his voice is emotionless.

“I see. So you had intel but didn’t feel the need to tell me. Instead, you decided to choose your own course of action, also without authorization. Have you forgotten that there’s a proper way to do things? Seems you’re taking a lot of liberties. Just like these guys.”

Without warning, Dominick’s right foot pistons out, kicking who I’m guessing is Chambers dead in his chest. He’s knocked back, rolling over, but Dom’s foot meets him in the gut, driving the wind out of him. Though it’s Chambers on the ground coughing and moaning, the threat is obviously to Pete and everyone knows it.

“I was watching my South Side, like I’m supposed to,” Pete says defensively, still trying to sound strong but wilting by the word. “My guys stopped the truck, like I told them to.”

He’s emphasizing everything about this seeming like his territory . . . me, my, I’m, which feels dangerous. East Robinsville’s Dominick’s, not his. He’s just the store manager.

“Dom, I knew it was a big night at the club and I didn’t want to interrupt your night of dancing,” he says, more than a little disrespect in his eyes as he glances at me. In that moment, it’s apparent that he knows exactly who I am by the way he leers at me.

Though I’m fully dressed in sweats, I’ve never felt more naked, which pisses me off. I glare back, my fists bunching at my sides, telling him with my eyes to fuck off and hoping Dominick tells him out loud because I’m not real sure of the rules here.

Not that I’ve ever been one for rule following.

“Fuck you, Pete,” I say, disrespect and dismissal dripping from the words.

There’s a tiny piece of me that acknowledges it’s a stupid thing to do, but I’m secretly curious how Dom is going to respond.

My heart leaps as I see the slightest uptick of his lips, not a smile, but enough of one that I know he approves of my outburst and might even be a little amused.

But when he turns back to Pete, there is no smile and his neutrally impassive expression has given way to a clenched jaw and stormy eyes.

“It seems that you’re getting a false sense of your importance, your power,” Dominick says, pulling everyone’s attention back to him. “That’s something I can’t have. I have given you some slack because of your

experience, but let me be clear. You are a pawn trying to claim a crown that doesn't fit. I let you 'run' the South Side as my eyes and ears, but in doing so, you are to share that insight so that I can actually do something with it. Perhaps stop us from having an evening like this at all. Something avoidable with a single phone call."

Dominick tsks as he steps closer to Pete, who's watching with true fear in his eyes now. In a blur of movement, Dominick backhands him across the face, his ring popping the skin open at the point of contact as a thin line of blood instantly appears.

I gasp, my hands covering my mouth as my eyes shoot wide open.

I feel Logan place one staying hand on my shoulder, lightly but enough to remind me that this is a test, as much for me as it is for Dominick.

Pete wipes his cheek, and though he's cowering slightly, I can see the fury in his eyes. Dominick leans into Pete, forcing him to tilt back and putting him at a disadvantage. His voice is cold and sharp, cutting through the night air like a laser.

"Do not fool yourself, Pete. We are not friends. This is not *your* territory, and these are not *your* men. Everything you see, everything you eat, everything you touch . . . it's *mine*."

Pete starts to say something but freezes when Dominick cuts his eyes over to the three guys with guns. Instantly, they point their weapons at Pete.

To his credit, Pete stands tall in the face of the threat, head held high, but his retreat is complete as he takes a step back and adjusts his jacket lapels.

"My apologies, sir. Won't happen again, Mr. Angeline."

The moment stretches, and I'm holding my breath, waiting for the sharp cracking pop from my nightmares, the sound of a pistol going off and someone suddenly blooming red from some part of their body. But the silence holds as Dominick stares Pete down, searching his face for something, and whatever it is, he must see it because he relaxes incrementally and the tension in the small group lowers.

Looking around, I realize these men are just as scared as I am. Even Logan, who can dish out violence with his bare hands in the octagon like it's nothing, is relieved too.

Still, while the guns lower, nobody moves.

Dominick sighs like a disappointed parent and turns back to Chambers, who's gotten himself together enough to be sitting on the ground.

"What's in the truck?" Dominick asks.

Before Chambers can answer, a loud rumble fills the quiet night and everyone turns to look at the approaching headlights.

“Who the hell is that?” Pete growls, confused.

Dominick smiles. It’s full of teeth, but instead of looking happy, he looks feral. But also, he looks a little pleased?

What could make him that cocky in the midst of all this? The sound gets closer, and I see a big motorcycle and a muscle car approach. Half the guys turn their eyes away, but I forget and am immediately plunged back into night blindness as the engines turn off.

In those few moments of silence, Dom speaks.

“You may go now, Pete.”

It’s an order couched in pleasantness.

“I will be watching for any further signs of *trouble*.”

Everyone hears the implication. Pete steps back, waving ‘his’ guys back with him, and they all retreat slowly, none of them stupid or courageous enough to give Dom their backs.

Instead, as bootheels crunch on the blacktop and two newcomers approach, their eyes flick back and forth worriedly. As I look at them, I understand. It feels like everything just got worse. I had no doubt that Dom could handle whatever sniveling shit Pete was up to.

But these two new guys look rough.

They’re tall, hulking men, one with a beard and long blond hair making him look like a Viking, the other an older man with salt-and-pepper hair and eyes that even in the darkness burn with a hellish fire that says he’s seen some shit and come out the other side.

Nobody says anything until Pete and his men get into their cars and pull out of the lot. In the deep silence that follows, there are three groups, the rough biker-looking men, TJ and Chambers in the middle, and Dom, Logan, and myself on the other side. It’s like some weird sandwich, and I wonder if I’m the mayo or the pickle. No, not the pickle for sure, considering the swinging dicks around me right now as the men all take each other’s measure.

Finally, the Viking looks at Chambers and TJ, then up at Dom. “Well, ain’t this some shit we got here, Angeline?”

My eyebrows raise at his lazy tone, not disrespectful but just zero fear. Either he knows something I don’t, which is probably likely, or he’s fucking clueless about Dom.

Chapter 25

Dominick

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Logan subtly move in front of Allie, not cutting her off but making sure that if something kicks off, she's covered. Good man.

On the ground, Chambers starts to get up. "Fucking hell, Robbie. Where've you been, man?"

He's suddenly laughing and jovial, like he thinks Robert Zallow is here to save him, but one look at Robbie's eyes and I know that's not the case at all.

"Get on the ground, Chambers," I growl as he gets to a knee, but he knows who he answers to. Instead of following my order, he looks at Robbie and gets to his feet, but I don't give him another warning, sweeping his feet out from underneath him and sending him crashing back to the cracked asphalt.

"As I was saying, what's in the truck?"

Chambers looks to Robbie again, but I plant my foot on his chest, pressing down on his ribs. I don't lean my full weight into him, showing a glimmer of mercy mostly because Allie is here, but when I withdraw my shoe, his full attention is on me.

"*Fuck . . . fine. Open and see for yourself, asshole.*"

Chambers is digging his hole deeper and deeper, and I suspect he'll need a literal one before the night is through.

I nod to Zallow, who nods to Victor. I've never met him before, but I know all the players in Silas's crew because you never know when the insight might come in handy.

Like tonight.

Victor is Silas's Sergeant at Arms, a former Marine Scout Sniper and a weapons expert, and it makes me wonder if Silas suspects the unauthorized shipment contains guns.

Victor goes over to the truck, unlocking the door and pushing it up, the rollaway door rattling on its frame.

Suddenly, Victor steps back as a chorus of cries fills the night air, and

Zallow flashes a flashlight over the interior of the truck box, spitting out a harsh echo of my own thoughts.

“Fucking hell.”

Not guns, not drugs. Instead, a small group of perhaps a dozen or so women and children huddle against the back wall of the moving van, fear and confusion written boldly on their faces.

Victor recovers quickly, holding his hands out, showing he doesn't have anything in his hands, and rattles off clear, if badly accented, Spanish.

“*No problema, estais seguro.* You're safe, okay?”

He turns to Robbie, his look telling me what I need to know. Silas didn't know about this. His guys didn't know about this. And they're furious, judging by the glares they send Chambers's way.

The scared women are Allie's breaking point, and she rushes forward, dodging around Logan. “Oh, my God, help them! TJ, what the fuck are you doing?”

Victor stops Allie from climbing into the truck, but at my unintentional growl, he sets her down gently.

“You are not getting in there right now. It's not safe until we know what's going on. Now, how about you don't get me killed for stopping you, 'kay?” Victor says gruffly.

TJ's eyes dart from Allie to me, and he clears his throat. “Tony said he needed help with a coyote trip. They've got their menfolk north already, working up in the Midwest on cattle ranches and farms. They're meeting them there.”

Suddenly, Chambers laughs heartily. “Can you believe the fucking choir boy savior complex on this one? Hero for his country soldier shit. Just told him it was a rescue mission and he was right on board. Yes, sir,” he mimics, sloppily saluting, though I know he's a soldier himself.

It's an intentional slight.

TJ turns to Chambers, his anger growing before my very eyes, which tells me that Chambers did mislead him. “You're trafficking them, aren't you? I fucking asked you that. You lied to me, you son of a bitch.”

I don't move as TJ launches himself at Chambers, tackling him to the ground and proceeding to pound him into the pavement. It's not a fair fight, not after what I've already done to Chambers, but I don't interfere as TJ caves in his nose, the crack audible even through the sound of fists meeting flesh. TJ doesn't stop, landing shot after shot to Tony's face and body.

“Enough,” Zallow calls out finally, or maybe it’s too soon. Chambers deserves worse than a beatdown for what he was planning to do to these women and children.

When TJ doesn’t stop, he grabs him by the arm and pulls him off. “Goddammit, at ease! He’s still my brother. Get the fuck off, TJ.”

“*Uno momento*,” Victor says, holding up a finger to the whimpering women before closing the back of the truck. They cry out, but he throws the latch anyway. Allie lays her palm to the door, whispering something I can’t hear.

For now, Zallow faces me squarely, his arms crossed over his chest and his feet spread, trying to look dominant. I’m sure it works for him more often than not, but posturing and feathers are for peacocks. I don’t need some anthropologic dominance posture to be in charge because I actually am.

“Angeline, Silas said Tony was ours to handle. TJ, yours. Agreed?”

I look at the two men sitting on the ground, one beaten and broken and the other only restrained by his training.

I dip my chin once in agreement, but as Victor begins to move to Zallow’s side, I call out, stopping them. “Allie, come here.”

She doesn’t want to leave the truck. I can see it in her eyes, the glitter of tears pooling in the corners. But she obeys without complaint, and I take her hand, holding it tightly. Through my touch, I give her all the strength I can, all the encouragement, and the silent message that she’s been amazing so far. It’s far less than I wish I could give her.

Perhaps this is a mistake. Maybe I should shuffle her off to the car with Logan and hide this from her.

But she wants no secrets.

She wants transparency.

And as painful as it is for both of us, she’ll get it. No matter how ugly. No matter the stains it will leave on her soul.

It’s a fraction of the ones I bear, but she is innocent, more than I ever was, considering the family I grew up in.

Victor raises his gun and Chambers sobers, the realization dawning that he’s in far deeper shit than he thought.

“What . . . wait? Vic! You’re my brother. You can’t do this. Silas won’t —”

Perhaps in his former life, Chambers was a man who could give orders. His file said that he served his country with courage and honor during two

tours, one in Iraq, another in Afghanistan. And maybe he's served Silas courageously afterward, I don't know. But now he's at the end of his road, and like most men, he pleads for his life, all notions of honor or toughness forgotten.

Some would look down on him, but I don't. I've seen too many strong men do the same thing and too few truly face it with dignity. Death comes for us all, and when it does . . .

Victor's voice is stone-cold, devoid of all emotion. "Silas's orders."

The words stop Chambers's pleas, and though he is reluctant, he moves to swing his legs beneath him so that he's in a kneeling position. I'm surprised, and I tilt my head a little as he looks up at Victor, clearing his throat.

"Tell him . . . tell him thank you for everything he's done for me. And that I'm sorry for fucking up so badly."

Though I wish we were not here, not in this position tonight, there is some small amount of honor in the way Chambers faces the consequences for his choices, and I offer him a silent, respectful salute.

Victor nods once and then pulls the trigger.

Allie doesn't scream, but her knees unhinge, and I catch her as she looks wildly from Chambers's body to her brother, and finally, to me.

"No," she whispers pleadingly. "Please, Dominick, no."

I growl in her ear, forcing her to listen. "He brought this on himself, and he got what he deserved. You do not even want to have a glimpse of the hell those women and children in that truck would have been heartlessly sold into. At his hands, Allie. The world is better, and we are all safer without him."

She cries, the tears flowing as she sobs silently into her hands, but she nods so I think she heard me. TJ clears his throat, turning to me with as much dignity as he can.

"Just let us go, me and Allie. We'll go and you'll never see us again. We won't say a word. Please."

I know the last word was a fight for him, and yes, he'll plead, not for himself but for his sister. There is strength in him, more than men in my line of work often have.

"There's no need. She's not going anywhere. She's mine."

TJ nods, seemingly understanding that I'm not killing him on the spot. He's lucky. If he'd been knowingly trafficking those in the truck, I would've meted out harsher punishment than even Chambers received. His blood connection to Allie would not have saved him.

I would've made it hurt, sent a message to the city about what I allow and what I do not.

But TJ was deceived and thought he was doing something good.

Besides, I was the one who called Zallow and set all this in motion, hooking TJ up with Tony. It was not intended to lead to this, but regardless, I must bear a drop of the onus for beginning this mess with that small action.

Eventually, Zallow breaks the silence of our staredown, pulling out his phone and making a call, most likely to Silas.

"Vic's driving the truck. It's a mess. Tony was making a traffic run. Need a cleanup and someone for Vic's ride."

"Send Mac," Victor whines to Robbie. "I don't want nobody else driving Suzanne."

Victor turns to me, shrugging. "Suzanne's my baby. 1970 Plymouth Roadrunner. 325 horsepower, but the clutch is still a bit finicky. Mac's the only one I trust to get her home without stripping out my gearbox."

That he can talk about his car when his fallen brother is at his feet tells more about him than I think he realizes. Zallow relays the information and hangs up.

"Okay, it's covered."

"Where are you taking the truck? The women and children?" I ask.

Zallow looks to the closed door, haunted as if he can see inside. "We've got a place where they'll be safe, and some connections. No harm will come to them."

With a mental checklist complete, I turn to Logan, silently telling him that it's time to go. There will be more to deal with tonight, so much more, but what we can do here is done. Silas's Eagle Raiders will take care of their own and the victims, so it is best if I am no longer here.

As TJ climbs in the front seat next to Logan, I open the door for Allie, ushering her inside. As she ducks her head, Zallow's voice makes her freeze. "Hey, Angeline!"

I turn, lifting an eyebrow in question. "Two things. One, Myra says thank you for all the baby shit and told me to invite you to dinner or she'd have my nuts in a vice. So consider yourself invited."

I smirk at that, knowing that inviting the devil into your home must be hard for him, but he's more scared of making his woman unhappy than he is of me. It's oddly sweet. But by his tone, he doesn't truly want me to come over. Smart man.

“And two. Quit sending shit to my Old Lady, asshole.”

His face and voice remain that lightly threatening growl, which is his normal tone of voice. But a moment later, he breaks into a laughing grin, and though it is maudlin under the circumstances, I smile back and give him an unusual gift. Honesty.

“As you wish. I merely wanted to make their life a little more comfortable. I find your family . . . inspiring.”

He looks taken aback, then remembers himself. “Well, don’t be looking at us as your hashtag-couples goals. We’ve got our own troubles. Read a fucking romance book or something if that’s your kink, Angeline.”

His wave is dismissive, but I can hear the notes in his voice, the pride on his face. He recognizes how special his relationship is, a woman strong enough to withstand the life he leads. The thought burns in my mind, and I turn back to Allie to find her staring at me like she’s never seen me before, like something confusing just clicked in her mind.

The ride to my house is quiet, each of us lost in thought. Even TJ is quiet, perhaps assisted by occasional glances from Logan. I’m analyzing the events of the evening, making a note to call Silas for follow-up on the trafficking victims. I trust him or I wouldn’t have let them take the truck, but a call to ensure they are cared for sends the appropriate message.

I’m focusing on the business side because I’m not sure what’s going on in Allie’s head, and that, quite honestly, terrifies me. I glance down at our joined hands and rub a soothing circle on the back of her hand, hoping she can feel the depth of my feelings in the bare touch.

We pull up to my place, and Logan looks to me for orders. “Head back to the club to check in. Call me with a report.”

He nods, and I help Allie out of the car and lead her to the front door while TJ trails along behind us. As soon as we get inside, it all hits her, and I can see the weariness weighing on her. She slumps, and I hold her close. She buries her head in my chest and I rub her back in calming strokes. She snuffles a bit and then stands tall, still trying to be strong.

“I’m going to go clean up.”

She walks down the hall to the bathroom, and I think she needs this moment alone more than she needs to clean up the few shadows of makeup still on her face.

TJ watches her go too, and as the door closes, he turns to me, his hands down by his sides but the tension coiled in his body telling me he’s more than

ready to fight if that's what it comes to.

"Is this where you try to take me out, tell Allie that I left, and create some cover story about how I died in service?"

It's not a bad idea. It would solve a lot of my problems, take the devil who tells her to run from me off Allison's shoulder.

Instead, I chuckle and casually wipe at my ring with my handkerchief. "You said 'try,' but if I wanted you dead, you would be already. I have not killed you, nor do I intend to, because it would hurt her. And that is the last thing I want."

"Why?"

I look into TJ's eyes, deadly serious. "I love her."

He huffs a humorless laugh, shaking his head in rejection of my words. "Love her? And this is how you show her?"

I shrug, turning my back to him and walking away. "It's what she asked for. Transparency. No secrets. Follow me."

I can feel TJ's confusion at my apparent disregard for his posture or his words, but after a moment, he follows me into the living room, where he stops, looking around.

"Nice place."

I don't say a word as I walk over to my wet bar and hold up a decanter. "Drink?"

He nods, and I pour three tumblers of scotch. Allie comes in, looking freshly scrubbed with her hair piled on top of her head. She has on one of my long-sleeved T-shirts, so big it's almost a dress on her, and a pair of my gym socks. If her brother weren't here and things weren't so questionable, I'd snatch her up and carry her to my bed.

I like her in my space, in my clothes, raw and bare-faced with no walls between us. But looking into her eyes, I can see there is still a wall. It's not brick. It's made of the questions, the doubts, the fear she has of me. And I have perhaps this one and only chance to knock it down before the foundations settle and it becomes permanent.

I offer her the crystal tumbler, helping to steady her hand for a moment when she shakes. "Drink, Allison. It'll settle you."

She nods and tosses back the scotch like a shot. I take the tumbler, rinsing it out and setting it aside as she sits on the couch. TJ takes the spot next to her, pointedly looking at me, daring me to move him or her.

Unwilling to risk action that could further hurt the situation, I offer TJ his

drink before reluctantly taking the chair on the corner of the sofa. Settling down, I take a sip of my own scotch before setting the glass on the coffee table.

Allie pulls her feet up, curling her legs underneath her, and I can't help but read into the fact that she leans away from TJ and toward me.

"Dominick?"

There is so much in the single word, every emotion rushing through her blood buried in its soft plea. I can't look away, needing to see her, needing her to see me. Instead, I lean forward, placing my elbows on my splayed knees.

"You said no secrets, Allison. Is that still what you want?"

She bites her lip, and I can see her uncertainty, but this is the biggest crux of her concerns. What I do with her brother might be at the top of her mind, but this is the actual key point. She'll either accept me as I am or not, but I can't have her halfway.

She's better than that. She doesn't say yes, but I see the choice in her eyes.

I clear my throat and lay it all out for her.

"I am Dominick Angeline, head of the Angeline family, The Boss of East Robinsville. I take my job seriously and do everything in my power to make it a safe place. I work methodically to ensure everyone under my rule is provided for. It's not a pretty job, and there is often ugliness. But it is a responsibility I've been groomed for, a weight I bear by virtue of the last name given to me by my father, a future I hold by sheer force and the will to do what is necessary."

Allie's heard all these things before, in snippets and snatches, but for TJ, the whole truth hits him like a juggernaut's charge, and when I finish, he shakes his head slightly.

"Son of a bitch! You really are a fucking Mob boss? I fucking knew it had to be something like that."

"No TJ, I'm not *a* boss. I'm *The* Boss. At least, around here."

"This is why you had guards on her and were spying on her," TJ replies, anger coloring his words as he puts the whole picture together. "Because by being with you, she's in true danger."

"Yes and no," I reply honestly. "Months ago, your sister was an innocent bystander when someone tried to wage war with me. It was dealt with, but there was bloodshed, and I vowed that Allie would never come to harm if I

could help it. So the guards are for her safety, protection from those who might wish to do me harm by hurting the one person I care most about.”

I look to Allie, who’s holding her breath. “But yes, some of the surveillance was for me. Because long before you knew it, and forever, you are mine.”

TJ jeers, “I think you believe that sounds sweet or some shit, but it’s creepy as fuck. I took down the cameras from her living room, her kitchen, her bedroom. That’s not love. It’s control. It’s obsession.”

Though he argues, the connection between Allie and me never falters. Her eyes never stray from mine. “It is all of those. Love, control, obsession. And insanity. But you enjoy that, don’t you, Allison?”

TJ can sense he’s losing her the same way I can feel her body yearning to come to mine, so he tries a different tact.

“So you had Tony killed? Shot right in the forehead by his own club?”

“No. I merely allowed them to do what they saw fit. Mr. Chambers’s punishment was decided by them and then carried out,” I reply. “He nearly instigated a war between his Eagle Raiders and me tonight, and it was only luck and that you’ve also been on my radar that prevented it, TJ. Do you think he could’ve returned to the fold, having betrayed his President? You know better than that, Specialist Bancroft. Disobeying orders is simply not allowed, not by me and certainly not by Silas. Tony knew that.”

“And what about me? How come I’m not lying dead in a dirty parking lot?”

I sigh, knowing that this might be a decided matter to me, but it’s of paramount importance to him. And through him, Allie.

“As I’ve already told you, firstly, because by hurting you, it would hurt Allie. I would sacrifice anything, anyone, including myself, to prevent that. Though I may not deserve her, my goal is to spend every day for the rest of my life striving to be worthy of her and making her happy. Secondly, your involvement tonight, while your own doing, may have been instigated by my own action.”

“What? The truck was yours?” TJ asks, thinking he’s found a chink in my armor, and I narrow my eyes.

“Absolutely not,” I reply, a hint of anger in my voice. “I do not traffic people. Ever. But your involvement . . . the first ripple in the pond was at my encouragement. That night we first met, you left after dinner, upset. I knew why, and it wasn’t just me. So I reached out to Zallow, asking him to have a

drink with a fellow soldier. My desire was to keep you busy, admittedly, to lessen your influence over Allie, but also for you to truly have support in your time of need. It appears that your friendship with Mr. Chambers developed from there. Though I may have thrown the stone, may even be responsible for the first wave, your choices from there were your own.”

I can see that he’s searching for a way out of this, but he’s a true man, and in the end, he sags, accepting the blame for his actions and at the same time, accepting that he may not be able to rescue Allie from me, though it is only in his mind that she needs a savior.

He’s a good brother. He wants to simply grab Allie and leave, but he knows as well as I do that she won’t stand for that. She won’t leave with him any more than she’ll stay with me simply because we want that.

I just wish I knew which way she was leaning, but her expression gives nothing away, her beautiful face a mask as she processes tonight’s events and fills in blanks on the past couple of weeks that have now become clear.

My phone rings, and I know I need to answer it. I don’t want to leave them alone, don’t want to give TJ the advantage of free influence with Allie’s mind, but if she can be so easily swayed, then perhaps it’s for the best.

“Excuse me. I need to take this.”

I stand, giving TJ a glance, and despite his obvious fury at my liberties, I lean down to press a kiss to Allison’s temple, breathing her in. She sighs softly at my touch, relaxing even as she presses up to me.

I’d wager she’s unaware she’s done so, but both TJ and I realize it and recognize what it means.

She is mine.

Chapter 26

Allie

As soon as Dominick is out of the room, TJ turns to me, struggling to keep his voice down. “What the fuck, Allie? Did you know he was the leader of the Mob?”

The unbridled anger in his voice makes me cringe a little, but arguing with TJ is the most familiar thing I’ve had happen to me tonight, and the steel at my core springs quickly to life.

“What the fuck to *you*, TJ?”

He looks at me like I’ve lost my mind, so I reform what I’m saying and try again. “I’m serious, what the fuck? What part of this is where you get to give me a hard time for who I’m dating after what you got your dumb ass mixed up in? He’s the one who rescued you from some really shady shit tonight, TJ.”

“I—”

I growl, popping him in the chest. “You’re fucked mentally from what Janine did, I get that. But you told me you’ve still got a career in the Army. What happened tonight was your *best-case* scenario! Option one was that you’d get caught by some patrol car and end up dishonorably discharged and in prison for human trafficking. Option two was that you actually delivered those women and children into hell. But no, thanks to Dominick, those people are safe, you’re not in prison, and you’re also not dead. So wipe that look off your face. I think I’m the one who gets to ask you ‘What the fuck?’ this time.”

TJ jumps up from the couch, pacing and tugging at his hair in frustration. “I didn’t know! I met Tony and Robbie at the bar, and yeah, I hung out with Tony a bit. He said he understood. He got Jodie’d by his girl while he was in Iraq himself. So we talked about tours and shit. At dinner a couple of weeks ago, he told me he was working with an underground group, running missions to smuggle people to safety. He knew a couple of guys from Central America, and he said that whatever you see on the news, the reality is even worse. So I thought I was helping. I thought maybe, just maybe, I could do

something good, *be* something good.”

My voice softens at the vehemence of his confession, and I get up, still pissed but understanding that he’d acted with good intentions.

“But you ended up almost getting those people sold into God knows what! TJ, you are good. A good man, a good soldier, a good brother, but this is messed up.”

He can’t hear me over the thoughts in his own head, a trait that seems to run in the family. He mutters to himself, “Not a good man if I almost fucked those people over like that. Not a good brother if I’ve let you get tangled up with whatever Mob boss shit Dominick is doing! Sure as hell not a good husband, judging by the way Janine tossed me away.”

I’m not sure he even meant to say that aloud, but his words make me realize just how much he’s hurting. I don’t know the mental steps he went through that led him to all of this, but somehow, his heartbreak over Janine ended with his actions tonight. I suspect it was a combination of his desire to focus on the mission, have an impact, maybe even a bit of a confidence boost after she destroyed him.

I grab him, hugging him tightly, trying a therapy trick I learned to quiet my own demons. “Tell those voices in your head to shut up. That’s my brother they’re talking about, and I love him. I love you, Teej.”

He wraps his arms around me too, then lays his head on top of mine, squeezing me back. “How did everything get so fucked, Allie-gator?”

I don’t answer for awhile, wishing I could freeze time and figure everything out and then hit *Play* again. But I can’t. I pull back.

“TJ, listen to me. You are a great brother, the best I could ever wish for. Nothing will ever, ever make me stop loving you. And I am so sorry about Janine, but you’re going to move on.”

“How?” he asks, and I sigh in relief because at least this one’s easy.

“One day at a time. They taught me that, and even though it’s cliché, it’s true. But tonight, we live with it. Not forget, but forgive ourselves and live with it. You’re going to report for duty and enjoy the new assignment or put in for another one. Eventually, you’ll date again. But no matter what, you’re going to be okay. Tonight, what might’ve happened will be lesson, a reminder to find what you need inside you, not in some mission.”

His smile is grim. “You sound like a therapist.”

My lips tilt up a little, and I shrug. “Well, I’ve spent enough time with them. Speaking of which, if you need one, get one. And if you don’t wanna

talk to them, I'll be here."

He steps back, his eyes still full of worry. "But I can't leave you here, not with him. Don't ask me to do that, or I'm going to throw you over my shoulder and run you out of here. It's hard enough knowing that I couldn't protect my sister the last time she needed me, and that was saving you from yourself. I can't leave you with him now." He shakes his head, remembering what Dom said. "And what's this about a shooting?"

I shrug. I never gave TJ or my parents the details, not wanting to scare them. "Bad shit by bad men. But Dom protected me then. And in a weird way, he still is."

TJ growls, still upset. "He's a bad guy, Allie. You deserve better."

I frown, putting my hands on TJ's chest. "I don't know what the future holds with Dominick, but I'm going to figure it out. He loves me, in his twisted way. But it's a good twisty, like curly fries. He'll never hurt me, I know that. More importantly, I love him, and I owe it to myself to give that a chance."

"Do you hear the disclaimers you're spewing?" TJ asks, still upset. "He loves me in a 'twisted way'. It shouldn't be like that."

I sigh, knowing he doesn't get it, and truthfully, may never get it. "Maybe. But it is what it is. We spend all our lives growing up with this image of what life is supposed to be. We draw it in our minds from tv shows, books, our parents, just the whole world around us. But the reality isn't always like that. We don't get to order it up like a burger made our way. So what about just saying fuck it and taking life as it comes to us?"

"Sounds like a recipe for madness," TJ grumbles. "I don't understand, Allie."

"You don't have to understand it to support me. Just like I supported your enlisting, even though it was the last thing I wanted for you and I didn't understand it at the time. But Dom makes me happy, and I know you want that. And if a day comes that I'm done, that I can't or won't accept Dom and his life, I'll need my brother to swoop in to help me pick up the pieces of my heart. But right now, even with all the shit from tonight, the only thing I want is for him to hold me."

His shock is obvious. And if you'd told me that this is how tonight was going to go, I never would've believed it. I started out painfully separated from Dom due to his betrayal, and the violence of tonight was vicious, both things that should have me making my escape. Knowing Dom is The Boss

and seeing him in action are two very different things.

I'm probably in shock too, from the stark reality of what could've happened to those women, and definitely from seeing Tony shot right in front of me. I don't forgive him, not Tony, not Victor, and not Dominick. But I can see the grey like Maggie said. I can understand that there are good guys on the wrong side, and sometimes even they have to do awful things for the greater good. It's a harsh justice, but it is righteous in a dark way.

And in this moment, I know it. I'm his, no matter what. The curtain is down, the magic is gone, and he's still all I want.

"Even after all this?" he asks. "I feel like the devil is holding your hand, and you're asking me to just let you go because he's nice to you and said some pretty words. But he is a monster, make no mistake."

I take a big breath, trying to put into words what I'm feeling, trying to make him understand. "TJ, once upon a time, you told me that ballet wasn't worth what it had done to me. It fucked up my body and fucked up my mind. You told me to walk away from it, and I could've done that. But I knew that ballet was my soul, and no substitute would fulfill me the way dance did. But I knew, so I worked my ass off, healed my body, which was the easy part, and eventually, I got my head right, which was so much harder. And then I found a way to dance again. A way that is healthy for me. Not the way I imagined as a child, but at Petals, and now at the studio too. Something that had been bad for me in a lot of ways, dance . . . I've made it into my sanctuary again, like it should've always been. Dominick may be bad for a lot of reasons, and to a lot of people. But he's good for me and good to me. And that's enough. He's my sanctuary. Not the life I envisioned, not the one you keep telling me to chase, but one I want to live if it's by his side."

TJ frowns. "But if that analogy is true, what if he's what ballet was for you back then? The thing that fucks you up again, maybe worse than before?"

It's a thought that's run around in my head, and I smile softly because I already have the answer. "Then I'll have you to help me. If I could go back in time, knowing all the hell I went through, I would still start ballet. I would still want that first tutu when I was three, would want to push myself to begin pointe classes at nine, would still go on every audition that turned me down. Because it made me who I am. And TJ . . . I *like* who I am. If Dominick ends up being like that, something that gives me purpose, gives me joy, and then at some point destroys me, I will burn knowing that I chose it. That I wanted

every moment of happiness, knowing that the devastation might come. Would you give up every happy memory you have with Janine because of how it ended? Would you trade the inside jokes, the joy you felt when you fell in love with her, the beauty of how you came together if you didn't have to feel the pain you're in now? Or is the loss of that happiness what makes you angry?"

I can see the shine of tears in his eyes. I hate that I'm prying at a scab that is so sensitive, but I need him to support me, even if he doesn't understand.

"I don't feel like I'm doing the right thing here, but I need to go and let you figure this out, don't I?" he says, resigned to my choice.

I lift to my toes, planting a kiss to his cheek. "I'm okay, TJ. I promise."

He sighs heavily but steps back, nodding. "Okay, I'll trust you. I'm gonna go for a walk, call an Uber or something to go back to the hotel. I need to think some shit through. It's been a weird night."

I give him one more hug and he pats my back. "No matter what, I've got you, Allie-gator. Love you, Sis."

I smile, my eyes puffy and burning with held-back tears, but these are happy ones. It's not a perfect parting, but considering all the drama of the night, it's pretty damn good.

"Love you too. And I've got you. And remember, my offer to beat the shit outta Janine still stands anytime you wanna take me up on it."

"Same offer to you. Anytime you need me to, I'll kick his ass," he says, smiling, but the look in his eyes says he means it.

Suddenly, it feels like old times, the two of us against the world, though maybe a little wiser, a little more jaded, but at each other's back even when we're at each other's throats. We've had some pretty major blowouts, both as kids and more recently, but in the end, we're family and that's all that matters. I'd kill for him, I'd die for him, I'd bring the shovel to the body-burying party, no questions asked for him, though hopefully, it never comes to any of that. Point being, he's my brother.

He gives me a little two-fingered wave and disappears into the foyer, the door clicking quietly before closing softly.

I take a deep breath after he's gone. I know that I figured some things out through my conversation with TJ, truly worked my way through a mental labyrinth of who I am, who I'm supposed to be, and maybe most enlightening of all, who I want to be. As to my heart, it knows exactly what it wants. But tonight was a test for me too. And honestly, I'm not sure I passed.

I walk down the hall toward Dom's office, listening to see if he's still on the phone but only hearing silence. The door is open and the room is deserted, so I take soft steps toward his bedroom.

When I stand in the doorway, the sight breaks my heart. Dominick, the cold, unfeeling monster that everyone fears, sits on the edge of the bed, utterly broken. His shoulders are rounded, his head hanging, agony pouring off him in waves.

"Dom?" I whisper, worried.

His head jerks up, his eyebrows lifting as he sees me, a hopeful gleam coming into his eyes. "Allison? You stayed? I thought I heard the door. I was sure you'd left."

Now his misery makes sense and hope blooms in my heart. He thought I left him, went with TJ. I shake my head, stepping tentatively toward him. I sink to my knees before him but don't touch him. I'm not sure if I should.

"That was TJ. I . . . I don't want to leave. Do you want me to?"

He cups my face in his palm, and I lean into him, wanting his touch so much that I raise my hand to hold him there and close my eyes, savoring the slight rasp of the calluses on his fingertips against my cheek.

"No," he says, his voice jagged and rough. "I don't want you to leave. Ever. Allie, I'm yours."

I know we have so much to talk about, and it'll be hard, but I can face it with him. "Dom—"

Whatever I was going to say is swept away as he leans forward and steals the words with a kiss, his mouth devouring mine as he holds me in place.

I give it all to him, all words, all power, all control. With this kiss, I let him know the truth. Yes, he owns me.

The difference is that I'm giving him everything knowingly and willingly this time. No secrets, nothing held back. I want him, want his cage, however gilded or rusty it may be. As long as he lives inside it with me. We'll have to talk, hammer out the details soon, but his kiss vows to me that we will do it together, and that's enough for the moment.

He grabs under my arms, suddenly yanking me onto the bed and rolling, pinning me beneath his weight as his mouth consumes me even more deeply. As his mouth works at my neck, his hand creeps lower, pulling the long T-shirt up by the fistful until my panties are exposed.

I'd needed to change out of my sweats earlier, wishing I could shed the memory of the scene at the truck as easily as the clothes. I'd wanted the

comfort of Dom's scent surrounding me, but going into the living room for a difficult discussion had not seemed like the time to go commando, so I 'd left my red panties from my stage costume on underneath his shirt. And now as he looks at me, I'm so glad I did.

Dominick groans painfully as he traces the line of them at my hip, bringing goosebumps to the surface.

"My Allison . . . so beautiful. When I saw these on your honey skin tonight, all I wanted to do was rip them off and claim you. Make sure every man in there knew exactly who you belong to."

I bite my lip, permission given in my eyes, but while I expect him to roughly tear them, I'm thrilled as he gently slips them down my legs, tossing them to the floor before tenderly caressing my calves, kissing the sole of my left foot as he does.

The control he has not just over me but over himself is magnificent. I'd trust him either way, rough and brutal or sweet and soft, but I know that we're on the precipice of something here that there is no coming back from.

He kisses up my leg, soft tickles and arousing sparks alternating until he's between my legs, his fingertips soft on my pussy as he spreads my lips. His eyes never waver as he smiles cockily.

I think to tease him about his smugness, if for no other reason than to entice him, challenge him, but he moves in too fast, his tongue tracing a wet line from my opening to my clit.

I cry out, my hands grabbing at his head to hold him there, wanting every drop of pleasure he can give me, needing that connection as I'm under his control.

He licks and sucks as I buck against him, not fighting him but fighting for more, until he smacks at my hip before pinning me with a hard grip.

I let him hold me down, let him take me higher and higher, knowing I'm going to be sent flying to heaven. He nibbles at my clit, and the sharp pain followed by the flutter of his tongue pushes me over, and I scream, my legs clamped tightly against the sides of his head. I can't take any more and I know I'm smothering him, but I don't care. I pull him closer even as I overload, and Dominick senses it, laying one lingering kiss to my clit like he knows it's just on the verge of too much.

Gasping, my chest heaving, I look down at him between my thighs. He's beautiful, his dark hair mussed from my hands, his eyes bright with depraved desires, and his mouth shiny with my juices.

He's a monster. My monster, obsessed with me in a way that should terrify me. But as he prowls up my body, I'm not scared. I'm hungry for more.

He kisses me, and I moan at the taste of myself on his tongue. But he takes it away from me as he lifts to his knees, pulling my legs onto his shoulders. We both look between us, his cock thick and hard and already leaking precum onto me as he rubs his head along my sensitive clit.

"Please," I beg, needing him inside me, needing him to tell me with his body that we're going to be okay. That he believes I am strong enough to be what he needs by his side.

He's my king. I'm his queen.

Whatever that means, whatever it takes, I'll learn, not because I want to please him but because I want to. For me. For us.

His gaze meets mine, like he wants to watch my face as he enters me, his eyes burning with unspoken soulful release, and he slams balls-deep into me in one stroke, driving my breath out of me in one sharp, glorious explosion.

"Yes!" I cry, fighting to keep my eyes open, wanting to see him too as my walls quiver around him, teetering on edge again from the way he stretches me. It's an overload, from tonight's dance, to the terror of the parking lot, to the conversations here in Dom's house. And now this. I'm in need of release, again and again, and Dom knows it.

He pounds into me, giving me no mercy. But I neither want nor need it. I simply need *him*, however he comes to me.

He leans forward, bending me in half easily, thanks to my flexibility, and grabs my hands, holding them to the bed with our fingers interlaced. His hips piston against my ass as he fills me and retreats, pulling all the way out and leaving me desperately empty and wanting his next stroke. He thrusts in deeply, taking me over and over until everything from before, everything outside this moment is washed away in our passion. And it is just us. Now.

We are reborn, exposed and vulnerable, with no secrets from one another, just the way it should be. "I love you, Dominick Angeline."

I say his full name intentionally, communicating as best I can that I accept him, all of him, just as he is. Not the monster, not the man, but both and everything in between.

He hears me and roars, the orgasm crashing through him at my words, and he rides me hard as he fills me with his hot cum, sending me off on another wave of bliss too. It's huge, powerful and monstrous, and that's just

what I want. It's what I need.

As the tremors slow for both of us, he lets go of my hands and lowers my legs to the bed before lying on top of me, his legs splayed enough to not crush me, but instead, he's a warm, large, powerful security blanket. One with soulful eyes that search my face and hands that brush a lock of hair away to make sure there's nothing between us.

"Allie, are you sure? I can't let you go, but that doesn't mean you have to accept me."

I notice he hasn't said it back, but I know why. He's trying to raise his shields, to prevent himself from being hurt, but I know he loves me. Looking up into the scruffy face, the steel eyes, the face of my king, I know what he needs. He needs *my* strength, and in that sharing of our strength, we're more than the sum of our individual abilities.

So I give it to him, unconditionally. "I love you, Dominick. Yeah, there are some things we'll have to talk about and some fights we're probably going to have—fair warning, I fight dirty—but I'll let you in on a little secret . . ."

He lifts his eyebrows, waiting, and I can't help but grin. "My secret plan to always get my way is to annoy the fuck out of you until you give in." I smile like it's a genius idea. It actually really is. He just doesn't realize how annoying I can be when I put my mind to it.

He smirks. "Ah, but if you misbehave, you already know there will be consequences."

He says it like he's already imagining some dirty punishments he could mete out, and though I have a quick mental flash of blood blooming on Tony's forehead as the punishment he received, I willfully choose to let that go, knowing that though Dom might be a dangerous man, he would move heaven and earth for me and would never hurt me.

I tap his nose. "Silly man. If I like it, is it really a punishment? It's a win-win for me either way. I get my way, or I get a good punishment that'll leave us both sweaty and satisfied. And I'm betting that I could get you to agree to just about anything if I pouted enough or had you gag-deep in my throat. Or maybe . . . well, there are things I could tease you with that *nobody's* had before."

He swallows, then laughs fully at my sexy tease, and it's like beautiful music to my soul. I want to record it and dance around to the sound of his chest-rumbling baritone.

I smile, just taking it in.

He smiles too, but when it's over, he sighs, sounding a little sad. "I don't remember the last time I laughed that hard. You bring out good things in me, woman. Though they may be few and far between and buried beneath layers of mud and muck in my soul."

I smile big enough for the both of us. "I'll find them, but you only get to share them with me. I'm a greedy, possessive girl like that."

His face is serious. "And I'm an obsessive, overprotective asshole. But I love you, Allison Bancroft."

And finally, the dark question in my core dissolves.

Chapter 27

Dominick

She sleeps peacefully, and I dread waking her, but know it's inevitable. We made our peace last night, but there are still landmines to traverse that could blow the whole accord to smithereens.

But I need to know. I need to make sure she understands what I'm giving her, what I'm offering, and that I want to take those steps to have her fully at my side without a barrier between us.

So I'm ripping my mask the rest of the way off, exposing it all to see if she truly wants no secrets between us. To see if she truly wants me.

Placing my hand on her shoulder, I shake her gently, my voice soft but firm. "Allison."

She stirs but moans softly before wiggling in place and drifting back into sleep. I set the hot cup of coffee I've prepared for her on the nightstand and run a hand through her hair, rubbing my fingertip along the curve of her earlobe where I know she's slightly ticklish.

"Wake up, Allie."

She does so in stages, almost putting on a show with it as her long legs stretch under the blankets and she twists her body this way and that before her arms stretch overhead, almost in a caricature of wakefulness. Finally, her eyes open and a smile breaks across her face.

"Rule one. If you're waking me up, there'd better be coffee or sex involved."

I can't stop the curl of my lips, and I have to tease back. "Do you have a preference?"

She looks me up and down, eyes tracing the tattoos on my broad chest and down to where my hips disappear into my sweatpants. Her gaze leaves a trail of heat in its wake, and I suddenly feel a small dose of what she must experience when she performs, that sexy sway of power I hold knowing she wants me.

I play with her, picking up the coffee mug and taking a sip of the bitter roast, moaning softly as the hot liquid rolls down my throat. As soon as the

cup's clear of my mouth, she lurches for me, sheets falling to her waist and giving me quite the morning view.

"Gimme! That's my coffee."

I'm tempted to pull it back until her body is pressed against me and I get a moment of bliss from feeling her breasts pressed against my skin, but I relent, handing it to her carefully. She takes it with a smile, her eyes closing, and a moan works its way free as she takes a sip.

"Not sure how I feel about being second-string to your daily dose of caffeine."

She shrugs and winks. "Well, at least now you know how to bribe me." She rises to her knees, wiggling her hips again. "Coffee, dick, or both."

She takes another sip but raises a pointed brow as she notices that her little dance has certainly woken up another part of my body, smirking as she sees my cock thickening unrestrained, tenting against my pants.

"While I would love nothing more than to bury any part of me I could inside anything you'd let me have access to, I think we might have some pressing matters to attend to."

She wrinkles her nose, setting the cup aside. "Ew, Dominick. I mean, it's bad enough you're hitting me up with the 'we need to talk' speech right after we wake up, but do you have to make it sound like a business meeting? I tell you what, why don't you go get the chessboard? I think you promised me a game of strip chess with some dirty side-bets. We can talk while we play."

I think she's fucking brilliant, coming up with a distraction to get us through what is bound to be an awkward conversation, though the memory of the fight after we'd initially made that plan stings.

"Don't move," I order her, and go get my board from my office, carefully carrying it back. I set it on the bed and climb in across from her. She sits on top of the blankets now, wearing only my T-shirt.

"Seems like the strip part of these bets will be over rather quickly," I say as I look her over, noting silently that I only have a pair of sweatpants on myself. "Hope you have some valuable bets to make."

Her look is pure seduction, and she rolls her shoulders back, showing exactly what she can distract me with if she wants to.

"You know I do."

We set up the pieces and I let her go first. We play a couple of moves each, both of us moving our pawns but making no real progress. I'm not really trying to push her, and besides, neither of us is truly focused on the

game. It's just busy work for our hands.

Allie breaks first. "So last night was fucking awful. How often is it . . . that?"

Right to the point, no beating around the bush from her, which I appreciate.

"I feel like the answer to that question might be bigger than you think," I reply as I counter her move, placing a pawn in a position where either she takes it and I take her bishop with my rook, or she retreats. "You're asking for complete honesty, which I will give you. This house, this room, can be a place for that. If you want it."

She nods, as I knew she would, and pulls her bishop back. Even if she doubts her ability to accept my world, she wants all the information to make that call.

"Go ahead."

"I run a tight ship in East Robinsville," I reply, taking my time as I ponder my next move, "and everything dark passes through only on my approval after the transporter pays a percentage to the family. I do my best to keep the city as safe as possible. That means controlling the influx of drugs, weapons, and people."

Allie looks at me sharply. "You said you don't traffic people."

"I don't, nor do I allow it," I clarify for her. "But by giving my disapproval, I must then enforce that ruling. Like last night. My life is not like some made-for-TV movie, full of drama and shootouts. Most days are boring, checking in with businesses, meeting with Captains and Lieutenants, and monitoring all the moving parts that make East Robinsville what it is. Having said that, there is danger, real threats to me and to you. Those who are not in power always imagine it is some glorious feeling of control, like an ultimate ego boost, and they'll do anything to experience it, not realizing that it is more like . . ."

I pause, searching my mind for the right words, and finally land on a funny phrasing I heard recently.

"It's like trying to herd kittens, but they're tiger kittens, not housecats. They will scratch and bite the hand that feeds them merely to be difficult because they do not know any better."

She laughs at my explanation and makes her next move. "That sounds oddly accurate. But if it's so hard, such a heavy responsibility, why do it? Why not let someone else do it or let everyone do their own thing?"

I move a pawn forward, sacrificing it but not mentioning that I should remove my pants, letting the bets go for now in favor of the raw nakedness of our souls.

“An anarchist, are you?” I ask with a smirk. She shakes her head and I continue. “I will not let my city fall into the hands of someone who would ruin it with their narcissistic need for power. It is mine by birthright, but it remains mine because I am willing to do whatever is necessary for it, not for me.”

She runs a red fingertip along her King piece, my words turning in her head. “I think I can understand that. You couch it in pretty words like you always do, but every kingdom has war, insurgents, and instabilities. I need to know, though, Dominick. If I’m going to do this with you, I will not be set aside like some pretty woman without a brain in her head, kept in the dark as you do shady or dangerous things. Look at this board. A player who hides their Queen away is going to lose every game.”

“True, but real life isn’t chess.”

Allie smirks, trying a different route. “You’ll have to tell me everything, all of it, even the parts you know I won’t like. One, because I won’t stand for it any other way, and two, because I think you need that. Somewhere you can filter all the ugliness, a soft place to land, someone who doesn’t give a shit about the city but cares for you. Let me be that for you?”

I look at her in surprise, sitting up to my knees to lean over the board and kiss her. She leans into me, our kiss warm, smoldering, but not naughty . . . yet.

I whisper against her lips, letting her taste the truth. “You already are.”

She smacks her lips against mine and pulls back slightly. I watch as the smile grows from a small hint to a wide, full exuberance. She’s happy, and I marvel that I can be the cause of that for her, something I rarely give to anyone, but she seems to take it from me easily.

I can see she’s aroused too, but when my eyes flicker down to her stiffening nipples, she holds up a hand. “Whoa, cowboy. We’re not done with Serious Talk. But remind me to return to that.”

She winks at me, but a moment later, the roller coaster of emotion drops in freefall and her face is washed in a sense of sadness as doubt takes her.

“I’m scared, Dominick. Seeing what happened last night, I don’t know if I can really be the right woman for all *that* out there.” She waves a hand at the window, indicating the city outside. “But I’m damn sure I can be the one

for you, if you'll let me."

I can see her demons chasing her, whispering in her ear that she's weak, not good enough, can't handle this, but I am fierce enough to fight her demons. More importantly, though, she can fight them herself and has done so many times over, beating them into a box in her mind. I just need to be the backup sometimes, give her the right words to remind her. She's the true Rocky Balboa. I'm just Mick, though thankfully, younger and better-looking.

"Allison, I know you are strong enough. Last night was the deep end, and you got tossed in without warning to a near worst-case scenario with it being your family, but I can be your water wings until you're comfortable swimming. Because yes, I'd appreciate your opinion, your insight, and your tendency to make things a little chaotic. We balance each other, I think." I take her hands in mine, vowing, "You are the only one I would want to be by my side, here or anywhere. You're mine, Allison. Before you even knew it, you were mine. And before you'd even asked for it, you had my heart. And it is the same today as it will be tomorrow."

Allie takes a deep breath, and I hope she's letting the promise of my words fill her, leaving no room for doubts. Finally, she lets the air out slowly through her nose and looks me squarely in the eyes.

"So that means trackers, guards, and all that again? Cameras?"

Part of me feels like things have come full-circle, and we're right back where we were weeks ago. Even as readily as she seems to have accepted the ugly parts of my role as The Boss and the cold machinations I'm known for, I'm hesitant to subject her to the constant watchfulness again.

But it simply can't be any other way.

"Yes, though we can ensure full transparency. You'll know everything. I need that from you or I'll go mad with worry, Allie. But," I say, holding up a hand before she can object, "I offer something in return."

"What's that?" she asks, tapping her fingers together.

"Reciprocation. If you ask, I will tell you. If it is something I do not think you'd wish to hear, I will warn you. But if you insist, I will tell you. You will be the only person in the world with such access to my whereabouts, but more importantly, to my body, my heart, and my mind."

She moves a pawn on the board, stalling, and my heart ceases beating as I wait for her verdict. Finally, she looks at me, steady and sure. "I can do that."

It feels like a negotiation, but she's giving me everything, and I'm more than happy to take all of her, hoard it for myself if I can, and then yearn for

more. I'm greedy, I know that.

She bites her lip and then I see it.

She's set me up. Somehow, somehow, she had already reached that determination in her mind. She might have been willing to fight me for my giving in on my transparency, but she had made up her mind sometime during the night, maybe in her sleep, that she was mine.

I'm not mad. If anything, it just proves to me just how special Allie is. She's going to keep me on my toes, keep my mind sharp and my heart full.

But there is something more.

"Dom?"

I give her my full attention, the chessboard all but forgotten as we move to the endgame of the real contest we've been having over this bed.

"When Robbie said you were sending stuff to his Old Lady, you called his family interesting. What did you mean?"

The tension in her shoulders seems heavy compared to the question, and I analyze it, looking for hidden subtext or something she would deem important because she doesn't seem the least bit jealous. She's . . . curious.

"As part of Zallow entering my territory without clearing it with me, I went to his house," I explain carefully. "I met Myra, his woman, and their daughter, Violet. They're a good match. He is a rough man and has seen and done awful things, and though Myra is small, she is strong enough to be there for him. In return, he worships the ground she walks on. After he and I smoothed over our differences, I sent them a few baby goods as congratulations, to make their life easier. I take it that he didn't appreciate the gift as much as I'd hoped."

I grin, knowing that he had appreciated them in his own way, but he's a prideful man who wants to provide for his child himself, something I can respect.

Judging by the way Allie has moved from biting to full-on chewing her bottom lip, there's still something bothering her. I reach out, placing my hand on my King and tilting it over, surrendering to her.

"Just ask it, Allie. No secrets."

"Do you want kids?" she blurts without hesitation. "I mean—"

Though I know she is on birth control, my first illogical thought is that she's pregnant and my heart soars. "Are you . . . ?" I say, eyes jumping to her belly.

She places her hands there, blocking my sight, gasping. "Oh! No! I just

mean . . . ever?”

I beat back the swarm of butterflies that had taken flight at her words, knowing that they will have their time, but it is not yet. Instead, I reach across the board and lay my hands on top of hers.

“Allison, it would be my pleasure to see your belly swell with our child, to hold a baby created from our love.”

Her eyes tear even as her lips smile. “Really? But how? With all this?”

I shrug. “My childhood was seemingly normal, with private schools, bodyguards, reading, and chess games with my father.”

Allie bursts out laughing. “None of that is normal, you goofball. Not by a mile. But I guess it can be done. Part of me was just worried that you didn’t want that.”

Her words get quieter, and I can feel that this is the root of her worries, the thing that has held her back.

“Why would you think that, Allison?” I ask gently. “Do you want children?”

She nods, and my heart leaps in my chest. “I do. Not now, but I really do want that husband, wife, two-point-five kids and a dog family. But I want it with you, so maybe we’ll have to make it a guard dog and the kids can call the bodyguard Uncle Joe?”

She looks at me hopefully. And I know in this moment that I will do anything this woman wants me to.

“I think that’s reasonable.”

Her smile emerges from the depths of her soul, so bright that it dazzles the sun as she beams, just freed from darkness. We can do this. She is willing to stand at my side, perhaps not in spite of what I am but because of it.

She finds romance in my obsession, beauty in my icy heart, and worthiness in my dirty soul. With a small smile, I pluck her Queen and place it next to my now upright King in the middle of the board.

“It seems we have a winner.”

Allie nods, biting her lip. “I’m not sure, but I think that was an illegal move there.”

“You get used to those with me,” I deadpan. “Now take that shirt off and lie down. I think that ass needs a good spanking.”

She laughs and flips over, sending the other pieces of the set tumbling off the board and onto the comforter.

“Sounds to me like *I’m* the winner.”

In moments, my shirt she's wearing goes flying across the room to land haphazardly on a chair and her ass wiggles in the air before me. I take the time to set the chess pieces aside, mostly because I don't want a piece of marble to roll underneath my knee in the middle of our passion but also in deference to the sentimental value of my father's chessboard.

He taught me so much in those hours on either side of the board. Patience, strategy, sacrifice.

And I think I'll need every one of those lessons with my Allison.

Chapter 28

Allie

A few months later . . .

“And step, two, three, and lift. Let the spin build, extend your leg, and then your arms,” I say, coaching the class through a basic move on the pole.

The women beam, proud of themselves, feeling powerful in their bodies. And they should be. They’re amazing. Clapping, I give them a celebratory yell, embracing the woohoo girl inside me for a moment.

“Yes! And land it, dropping that booty to your heels, open your knees wide into a Hello Kitty, and close that peekaboo tease. Lead up with your ass, letting your head stay low . . . and pow!”

The ladies scissor their knees *Single Ladies* style and then drag their hands up their thighs to finish in their closing poses. If their men were here, there’d be some babies getting made tonight.

Excited, I run around the room in my heels, high-fiving each woman as they break pose and the room goes bubbly and giggly with laughter.

“Great job, everyone! Beautiful and fierce!”

I can see the praise warming their spirits, but more importantly, they’re feeling it from within, having been transformed from busy women rushing around, focusing on everyone else, into goddesses, unlocking their own inner sexy.

Their faces remind me again why I have the best job ever. My mission is literally to make women feel good about themselves and love the body they have, and I’m rewarded every time I see someone go from tentative newbie to stomping pole queen over the course of a few classes.

As everyone waves goodbye, I do my daily cleanup, running a cleansing towel up and down each pole. Tomorrow, I’ll use my ‘pole polisher,’ as Donna laughingly calls it, which makes sure every inch of brass remains gleaming.

I’m just finishing up when I hear a soft knock on the doorframe, and Donna asks, “Good class?”

“Yeah, great one!” I reply, tossing my cleaning rag behind my back and

catching it.

Donna hums. “Well, receipts look great, and we’re getting enough interest that you might need to open another class.”

I’ve considered it because my pole classes, private lessons, and Diva Dance classes are almost always fully booked, so there’s definitely a demand for it. But between those, the private bachelorette parties, ballet classes, and the once-a-month feature at Petals, I’m doing everything I can.

Although some of that dancing isn’t *just* for me. Dominick has been putting my body to work every morning and night, and while I love it, something’s got to give. I don’t want it to be my body, so I’m carefully weighing each commitment before signing on.

I finally respond, “I’m going to leave my schedule as it is so I have time to practice for myself. I need that too.”

Donna nods, her smile one of motherly approval. Before she can say anything, Eileen sticks her head in, grinning lewdly.

“Hey, Allie, your chunka escort is here for the night.”

I grin, knowing that she’s taken to giving Logan a good-natured hard time about his weight. He’s simultaneously bulking up and leaning out, something about weight classes. I don’t understand the reasoning behind it, but he can go on for hours on end about his macros.

Luckily, I don’t understand a word, or I would’ve had to tell him to shut up about it, and I don’t want to do that because I like Logan and our guard-slash-friend relationship. Though I have years under my belt with healthy eating, one of the key components of lifelong recovery is to not overanalyze and focus on what I put in my mouth, which is basically what he’s doing in a healthy way. Making healthy choices and *not* obsessing is how I know I’m doing well.

And I am doing very well.

A couple of feature appearances at Petals paid off what was left of my medical bills, and with the classes doing so well and my partnership with Donna, I’m truly a successful businesswoman. I’ve even drawn up a tentative five-year plan to buy in with Donna on the ballet side of the business and be full co-owners. She’s told me that she’d like to retire one day, maybe travel and see all the top ballet company performances, and that she’d be honored to metaphorically hand her pointe shoes to me. One day, that’d be a great honor.

For now, though, I’m happy.

“Thanks, Eileen! I’ll see you tomorrow. Remind Sydney to stretch her

feet tonight. She's this close to pointe." I hold up my finger and thumb an inch apart.

"Trust me, I know," Eileen says with a laugh. "It's all she talks about, and I won't have to remind her to stretch. I'll have to tell her to stop stretching. I've had to resist telling her that there are much more disappointing 'few inches' she'll have to deal with later."

I laugh, loving that Sydney is so dedicated but also that Eileen doesn't let her go too far and still wants her to be a kid. Picking up my practice heels, I change out, laying them carefully into my duffel bag and pulling on sweats and Nikes.

"Hey Logan, how was your practice today?" I ask as I enter the lobby. He's grinning, his hair still wet from his shower after MMA practice and wearing a fresh set of athletic clothes.

Honestly, workout stuff is almost all I ever see him in now. He's stepped back from doing shift work at Petals, focusing on an upcoming fight. He laid out his normal training day for me, up at five in the morning and down by nine thirty, and I'll admit, he's got dedication.

He's thanked me and Dom for the shift in his duties, which mostly consist of escorting me from home to Encore and back again, with a midday gap where we run errands.

I think it's a routine that works well for both of us.

"Feeling good," Logan says, sipping at some nuclear green drink that supposedly has a bunch of protein. "How was your class?"

"Excellent," I reply, adjusting my bag. "I even met someone I think you'd be interested in."

It's a common tease between us. I don't understand why he's single when he's such a kind-hearted badass. But like always, he shakes his head.

"Nope. No matchmaking here. I've got an evil, cold-hearted mistress already . . . the ring. It's all I have time for right now. If you're itching to play matchmaker, work on Max or Dalton."

He throws them under the bus easily, my mind already scheming. Now that I'm in love, I guess I want to share the happiness and let everyone experience the joy. Admittedly, my relationship with Dom might not be most folks' ideal, but it works for us.

Even TJ is slowly coming around, now that his divorce is final and he's let go of most of the bitterness, starting to realize that he's going to be okay. I think it's that he is truly enjoying his new life, though it's different than he

pictured. His new job is awesome, and he made some good friends immediately with the guys he flies with. He's got something new to focus on and it's good for him.

I do think he still wishes I had an easy, Hallmark movie-type love story, but he'll at least sit down to dinner with Dominick and me now. He even jokes around a bit, once telling Dom that if he's in charge of the city, could he please do something about the potholes on 8th Street? So he accepts the situation somewhat, but at the same time, he hugs me goodbye every time we see each other and offers to whisk me away anytime I'm ready. It's a tricky balance but a tightrope we're walking together.

It'll take time, but we'll get there.

We have to, because I love them both, and they both love me.

"So," Logan says, interrupting my thoughts. "The usual tonight?"

"Yeah, I want to rinse off and then head home."

'Home' is, of course, Dominick's house. Well, *our* house. It took us about two seconds to agree to move in together after we completed a very vigorous, very angst-filled, very sweaty, and very *complete* weekend of negotiations. We kept my third- and his fourth-floor apartments as safehouses, but I moved all my things into the apartment across the parking lot from the studio.

It's been a godsend to be able to have a place this close to work when I need to clean up before going home.

We walk across the lot in silence as I let Logan work, his eyes diligently scanning though there has never been a single threat toward me. Only once was there even a hint of something wrong, but it turned out to be a backfiring pickup truck. It was good to know that Logan's not all for show, though, because he'd had me on the ground and covered to make sure I stayed safe in an instant. Once we'd realized it was safe, I'd jokingly started counting and called it a TKO. I'd declared him the winner and did a fairly decent imitation of a cheerleader right there in the parking lot, much to his chagrin.

At the top of the stairs, Logan stops, glancing at the phone buzzing in his hand. "Hey, I need to make a couple of calls. You okay if I stay in the hall while you do your thing?"

"Everything okay?" I ask, worried.

He smiles, something dancing in his eyes. "Yeah, nothing to worry about. Just gonna wait out here."

He sits down in a chair and shoos me down the hall where I let myself in. The door closes behind me and I feel the chill in the air instantly. Every light

is off except for one, a spotlight over the pole I had installed in the dining room here.

Dominick had laughingly asked me if I even knew what dining rooms were for, and I'd felt like it was an accomplishment to be able to joke like that after my love-hate history with food.

I'm still working on getting one put in at home, mostly because all the ceilings are so damn tall, but for now, the light shining on this shiny pole calls to me. I can feel his presence, know he's sitting in the shadows of the living room, can smell the faint hint of his favorite scotch.

And though I'm not in our house, I am home. With him. Wherever he is, that's where I want to be. We've found our own routine as well, learning how to click our seemingly odd puzzle shapes together, softening here, growing there until it's a seamless fit. He laughs at my crazy impulsiveness and smiles at my messes. I take delight in his detailed plans and perfectly-arranged sock drawer, though I did buy him some checkerboard ones emblazoned with chess pieces and a bright font proclaiming, *Don't Fuck with the King!* He's even worn them . . . around the house. Baby steps, I guess, but I'm determined to get him to do a little hip-wiggling strip-tease for me and get down to nothing but those socks. Hashtag-dream it and make it happen!

But for now, it seems like it's my turn to put on a show, even if I don't have any cool or even sexy socks. Silently, I set my bag down, kicking off my Nikes and sweats, slipping my heels back on, and stand tall. At the last minute, I pull my tank over my head too. In my sports bra and yoga shorts, I approach the pole, smiling to myself as the music begins.

The song he chooses isn't a song I have choreography to, it's just a slow-driving bass line that resonates through my body. There aren't any words even, just the throb and the music, and so I dance for him. I dance for *me*. Swaying my hips and tracing my curves, I work my way up to spinning around the pole. I don't do the fancy death-defying tricks, the showy moves meant to shock the audience into tipping more.

This isn't about that. Instead, I seduce him, my eyes boring into the darkness, willing him to see me, to watch me. And though I can't see him, I can feel the heat of his gaze on my skin, can almost taste his need in the air around me.

I need more, need him.

I take slow steps toward the mirrored wall, pulling my sports bra over my head and freeing everything for him. In the reflection, I watch myself palm

my breasts, their fullness almost painful.

In the darkness, I can see a shadow move, and he's on his feet silently, slowly moving closer. I push my shorts down, stepping out of them too, to stand in only my heels as he becomes visible in the light, his dress slacks perfect and his white dress shirt already halfway unbuttoned.

His heat licks at my skin as he presses himself to my back, one arm slipped around my waist and the other at my throat, turning my head to meet his eyes.

"I've dismissed Logan for the night. You have a new escort home."

I can see the darkness in their icy depths, can read that he wants me rough tonight, and I gratefully oblige, pressing my hips back into his hardness. I never know exactly what I will get with him. Sometimes slow and sweet, taking hours to worship every inch of me, letting me 'boss' him around. Other times, he's a beast, rough and hard, brutally using my body in ways I never knew I'd love.

But always, he's in control.

Even when I tempt him too much, begging him to lose control, he never falters, his control absolute. Always. It's become the stabilizing foundation for my chaotic ways, the cage for the black swan I can be, and the freedom for the woman I never knew I could be.

His coarse growl into my ear sends shivers down my spine. "Mine."

I nod, the movement putting the slightest bit of pressure on my neck where his hand lies. "Yours."

His hand releases my waist, and I hear the slip of the leather as he undoes his belt and slacks. I push back, knowing what's coming and loving it. After all, this is the secret reason I bought these heels. They're just the right height.

I whimper as his cock pushes into me, filling me and completing that connection we always need with one another. I look back in the mirror, watching the ecstasy on his face that leaves my heart filled with warmth, even as my pussy throbs with another type of welcome heat.

Dom uses his body to press me against the glass, my nipples hardening at the cold even as I buck back to take him deeper. Gripping my hips, he holds me steady as he starts viciously pounding my tight pussy, sending shockwaves up my spine almost in beat with the music that's still playing. Cries pour from my mouth like I'm singing, adding my own creative lyrics, but it is just his name over and over against the throbbing bass and electric strings.

“Look in the mirror, Allison,” Dominick grunts, pulling me back enough to actually see. “Watch me claim your pussy, mark it as mine. Watch . . . us.”

I do as he says, enjoying the way the spotlight creates shadows and highlights along our skin, the way his muscles flex and my ass jiggles with every stroke. My eyes are drawn to the shaded spot where he disappears inside me, anticipation building, amplifying the feeling of him filling me.

Still, I’m drawn upward, until my eyes meet his and that’s all I need. I see the love there, raw and vulnerable, and his joy that he has found it with me.

He is a monster, but he is my monster.

And I love him.

His cock swells, impossibly harder inside me a moment before he comes, and his pleasure triggers my own, a sharp cracking sound filling my ears as I scream his name. He pumps his cum deep inside me making my pussy spasm, milking everything from him hungrily.

As our breathing returns to a more normal pace, he holds me tight, biting at my earlobe and then his hot breath is there as he whispers, “I love you, Allison.”

There is no doubt, no question in my heart when I look to him and whisper the same words back, “I love you, Dominick.”

We step back, and I realize what the cracking sound is. That last thrust accidentally made us break one of the mirror panels. “Uhm . . . seven years’ bad luck?”

Dominick grins. “I make my own luck.”

We both do.

Epilogue

One year

I hate that I had to take care of some work today, knowing that she's been looking forward to our anniversary dinner. But I have something to tell her, and I'm not one for surprises.

But this one can't be avoided any longer. Pausing, I pull up her phone GPS, seeing that she's at home, and a small knot of stress loosens in my belly.

She's fine to come and go as she pleases, especially since she's quite good about staying with her guard now. So much so that I've had to find other misbehaviors to 'punish' her for, but I rather think she enjoys coming up with new, creative ways to get me to spank her ass. It's become a game for us, one we both enjoy.

Knowing she's home safe, getting ready for our date, comforts me. I don't even hesitate about opening the home security app. She knows about the cameras. Besides, the only two phones in the world with access are mine and hers.

It's become a game she plays with me from time to time. Lots of things you can do with a security camera and a naughty girl.

Scanning the camera feeds, I find her.

Perched on the bathroom counter in a sexy bra and panties set, she's applying her makeup with her hair up in curlers. I watch her, tracing the line of her body on the small screen and wishing I could do so for real.

Her mascara complete, she leans back, and I can see her contemplating something for a moment.

She glances up to the camera in the corner of the room, and I can see the smirk on her face. She knows I'm watching, can feel my eyes even when I'm not there, and will often text me just as my eyes are on her. Or sometimes, she delights in torturing me with a show that makes me race home. One of those inventive misbehaviors she's discovered because there are lots of things you can do with a security camera and a naughty bad girl.

Today, she seemingly ignores her instinct that she's being watched and picks up the towel from the counter, dropping it casually over the little plastic stick sitting there. So she finally knows. My 'surprise' is ruined.

I'm not disappointed. I have waited for her to realize it, for her to tell me.

I knew weeks ago, could taste the difference in her honey, could feel the ripeness of her breasts, and I knew she was late. It seems my anniversary surprise is a great one, the best one. Allison is mine, and our child will be mine as well.

Somehow, a monster like me found his happy ending. I've gotten my obsession. My love. My Allie. And now she is creating life where before there was nothing, the same as she did for my heart.

She looks back to the camera and gives a little two-fingered wave as she grins.

I'm instantly out of my chair and headed home to take care of what is mine.

Always.

The End. Thank you for reading!

If you enjoyed this book, stay in contact! You can join my mailing list [here](#). You'll never miss a new release and you'll even get 2 FREE ebooks!

Want more of Allie & Dom? Make sure to check out [Dirty Deeds](#). Allie & Dom are secondary characters, with Allie's friend Maggie as the heroine, and Shane, one of Dom's former men, as the Hero. Read on for a preview!

Preview: Dirty Deeds

Shane

Reaching down, I wrap my hand around the handles of each keg, lifting one with each arm. Marco needs the help restocking or else he's going to be here until sunrise, so I normally help him out by carrying the kegs up from downstairs while he brings up the bottles he needs and sends in our orders for the suppliers.

My arms are a little tired by the time I get the two kegs up the stairs, and it's with a grunt of relief that I set them down. Marco's working the register, checking his money against the Point of Sale system. "You have a good night tonight?"

Marco nods, smirking a little. "Yeah, pretty solid. Decent tips, and with the eye candy from Allie's new routine, I can't really complain."

He waggles his eyes at me, like he expects to chatter on about Allie's tits or something. It feels like a test. I'm just not sure if it's a bro one or seeing if I'm aware that Dominick has marked her as off-limits.

Doesn't really matter either way. I'm a fucking professional and I know that I *do not* get involved with any of the girls here, whether they've been tabbed by Dominick or not. So Marco's going to be disappointed in my answer. "Yeah, she's good. She's been working hard and it's paying off."

A couple of the girls come into the club from backstage, and I'm thankful for the break from Marco's slick vibe. Time to do my actual job and not just help out. "Ladies, let me walk you out."

They murmur their thanks but basically ignore me, especially Tina, who's already gabbing away on her phone, telling her babysitter that she's on the way home. I get it. They've got men talking to them all fucking night, and ninety-nine percent of it more or less leads to 'I wanna fuck.' They just tune it all out. It's a survival instinct.

I don't mind. Walking the girls out is one of my usual duties and the one I take the most seriously. There's always a chance that some 'fan' might not be able to check their fantasy at the heavy door, and I'm here to ensure that doesn't become a problem. I make sure they get in their cars safely and then

watch from the doorway to make sure they pull out alone.

It's a little sad, really. I can't imagine any of them as little girls thinking, 'Hey, when I grow up, I wanna be a stripper.' But life sometimes doesn't go according to plan, and we do what we need to so we can get by. So when these girls are under my supervision, they deserve respect and safety, and I'm gonna give that to them, even if no one else in their lives does.

After the girls are gone, I head back inside, seeing Meghan swinging through the saloon-style doors from backstage. She looks young, even more so than usual in her sweats and oversized T-shirt. She could pass as a college freshman on any campus in the US.

She's 'just' a waitress, but in my opinion—not that anyone asks me. I'm not paid to have an opinion—she's the best-looking girl working here. She's absolutely gorgeous when she's done up for a shift, all poufy blonde hair, big doe eyes with fake lashes, puffy, kissable pink lips, and a sexy rack atop a tiny body. She usually favors a sort of 'naughty innocent' look, and there's a reason she's getting more tips than any other waitress.

But my favorite is her 'after shift' style, when she's fresh-faced with her hair pulled up, wearing her big owlsh glasses and jeans or sweats. She looks cute and sweet, and small enough I could pick her up and put her in my pocket . . . or over my shoulder. She's almost shy, walking into the main room like she's making sure she's allowed to come in before committing to the movement. She sees me and smiles, walking with more confidence.

That smile feels like a secret view not many people get, like it's a lazy morning at home with a lover look, even though it's damn near three in the morning and we're at a strip club. It makes me . . . Shaking my head to let that train of thought go, I call out to her. "Meg, you ready to go?"

She nods, giving me a little wave and a thumbs-up. "Yep. G'night, Marco. See you tomorrow night."

I have the urge to stick my elbow out for her, gentleman style, but the no-touching rule extends to staff. Unless asked, don't. And I'm the enforcer of the rules, so there's no way in hell I'm going to let myself break them. So I clamp down on that urge and have to be satisfied with opening the door for her. Still, I do let myself take a moment to admire her pert ass as she walks through. I can't help it.

Outside, I ask her the same generic question I asked Marco, but I hope for a better answer from Meghan. "You have a good night tonight?"

Meghan gives me a nod, adjusting her glasses and giving me a tired

smile. "It was okay. Good tips, even from that one table," she says, and we both know exactly what she's talking about. "Thank you for that, by the way. I didn't even have a chance to react before you swooped right in."

I shrug, not letting Meg know that when she's on shift, I always keep an extra eye out for her. She's just so . . . innocent. "That's my job. Already had my eye on that table anyway. They were giving bad vibes."

She nods in understanding. She's been here long enough to get those gut feelings too. "Well, I appreciate your being the bad guy so I could be the good girl."

I tease her, knowing it's a bad idea but unable to stop myself. "And *are* you a good girl?"

My voice has dropped a little, low and gravelly. Meg always makes me feel this way, like a caveman on the verge of dragging her off to have my way with her. She makes me yearn to control the situation, control her, but I have to settle for controlling myself.

She giggles, but it's not the false one she gives guys in the club. She sounds nervous and . . . flirty, maybe? "I try to be, but sometimes, it's hard to be good."

There's a hint of sex to her voice, but it feels like there's more truth to what she said than a casual coy response. It's maddening, the way we seem to dance around each other, half innuendos and comments that just toe the line between 'playful banter' and 'outright suggestion,' but I can't go further. It's too dangerous, and not because of her.

Before I can think on it too much, we reach her car and the silence of the early morning dark is broken. "Hey, honey! You ready to go?"

I'm instantly on alert, shoving Meghan behind me as I turn to see the finger sucking asshole who was putting the moves on her earlier. Considering that it's now a good hour after the last patron was out the damn door, we're way, way past the bounds of appropriate behavior.

He's leaning up against the car next to hers like he's waiting for her. While it's against the official rules, some of the girls will do date-nights with patrons on the side, almost sugar daddy style. But Meghan isn't the kind to do that sort of thing, and I don't consider for a second that she told him anything but a polite version of "fuck off".

Even if she did, I'm not letting her leave with him. Not her. Not with a guy like him.

Instead, I shift my left foot forward while covering Meghan with my

body. “You need to leave, asshole. The no-touching policy extends to when we’re closed too. So get in your car and take a fucking hike.”

Blondie pushes off the car, facing me fully, and I do a quick assessment. He’s big, at least six feet, but I’ve got a few inches on him, and though he looks muscled, it’s in a gym rat way. Not the look of someone who’s surprisingly strong because of real manual labor.

Most importantly, he doesn’t have that air of ‘I’ll fuck you up.’ He seems on the verge of drunk and a bit prissy, like he’s used to getting his way.

Well, not tonight. Instead, Blondie talks about Meghan like she’s not even here, and as she almost shivers behind me, I know that if a line needs to be crossed, I’m going to cross it. “We’re partying tonight. She told me to wait for her.”

“No,” I declare, bringing my right hand slightly up while tilting my hips to protect against a bitch move kick to the balls. “Leave now.”

I see the fire flash in Blondie’s eyes as he steps closer, and Meghan steps forward a bit too, leaning around me and setting me on edge because she’s too close to this jerk.

“I can’t,” she says sweetly, trying to de-escalate things before I put this asshole on the ground right here in the parking lot. “I’ve got early school tomorrow, remember? Sorry, baby.”

I tense just a little as I hear the code word all the girls have for trouble. They’ll call patrons just about anything—honey, daddy, sugar, sweetie—but the rule at Petals is that ‘baby’ is the safe word that’ll get security on a patron like white on rice.

I already knew he was full of shit, but Meghan just let me know for certain. I shift a little more, knowing that the beating is about to commence. I just have to make sure Meg’s safely out of the way before I start.

Blondie’s either too drunk, or probably too stupid, to notice. “C’mon, baby. Just a quickie. We don’t even have to leave. I’ve got some goodies in my car so we can party right here. Big Guy won’t mind, right? I can slip him a few bills.”

He reaches for Meghan’s wrist and it’s automatic from there. In a move that’s so fast that most people don’t even realize what’s happening, I deflect his hand, directing it down and back while grabbing his wrist in a sweeping motion as I twist it up behind his back. In less than half a second, he’s fully hammer locked, and in the next half second, he’s pivoted away from Meg and toward his own car.

I slam him face down on the hood, lifting his wrist while twisting his hand to maximize the controlling pressure on his shoulder, finding that edge where the pain is balancing on the razor's edge right before his arm dislocates. "She said no, asshole."

Blondie yells out in alarm, struggling from pure instinct. "Hey! Hey! Ow! Fuck, man."

I press him into his hood some more, using my booted foot to kick his legs out from under him, holding him in place easily even as he struggles.

"Meghan?" I chance a quick glance behind me to see she's frozen, her face a mask of shock. I raise my voice a bit, knowing she needs a bit of command. "Meghan."

She shakes her head, her vision clearing as her eyes meet mine, wider than usual behind her frames. "Yeah . . . yeah?"

My voice is clipped, all business. Right now, I don't have time for emotions. "Get his wallet out of his pocket. Read his license for me."

She's shaking but does as I order, coming close and with delicate fingers, reaching into Blondie's back pocket and withdrawing a brown leather wallet.

"What the fuck, dude? You're robbing me now? I just wanted to talk to her."

He has another burst of energy and thrashes underneath me, making Meghan jump back. I grab his neck with my free hand, thumping him head first into his hood, not hard enough that he can't drive out of here . . . yet. "Shut up, asshole. Meg?"

She opens the wallet, finding his license inside, and starts to read out loud. "Miles Jacobson, 3654 Sidewinder Trail. He lives here in East Robinsville."

I nod, giving her a professional smile. "Good girl. Now put it back, carefully. And Miles, if you so much as fucking move, I'm going to break your arm."

I emphasize my point with a little yank on his shoulder, encouraging him to be still while Meg puts his wallet back.

Waiting until Meghan's stepped back and is safe, I yank him off the car to growl in his ear. "Miles Jacobson of 3654 Sidewinder Trail, you are banned from Petals from Heaven. If I ever see you even close to this block again, I'll take special care of you. It won't be over quickly, and you will not enjoy it, I promise you."

"But—"

“If you ever see my girl here anywhere at all,” I interrupt him, “you’d best run the other fucking way because if you so much as lay an eye on her, I’ll fuck you up so badly, your own mother won’t be able to identify the body. *If* they find it. Clear?”

He nods jerkily, weeping softly and sober as a judge at the turn of events. I don’t feel sorry for him at all. He probably thought a little more forceful asking in the deserted parking lot would lead to Meghan partying with him, willingly or not.

Fucking pricks like him, thinking they’re entitled to whatever they want just because they want it.

Still, I don’t have time for a philosophy lesson. “Meghan, open the car door.”

She moves from behind me, and I keep an eye on her movements, making sure no other threats pop out of hiding in the dark lot. I pull up a bit on Miles’s arm, the pressure forcing him to stand in front of me. I prisoner-walk him to the side of the car and push him in, where he clumsily falls into the driver’s seat, yelping as his shoulder gives him a warning twinge at the release of the hammerlock. “Fuck, man, I’m gonna—”

I lean down, keeping eye contact as I cage him in with one hand on the roof and one hand on the door. “Think about your next words and where you’re making your threat. Goodbye, Miles Jacobson. I don’t want to ever see you again.”

I give him a hard stare, memorizing every detail of his face and his car, down to the company parking garage badge hanging from the rearview mirror.

Stepping back carefully, I slam his door and then give it a swift and solid back-kick with my hard-soled boots, denting the panel. It’s not enough. I’d rather break his jaw or the glass out of every window of his fancy car, but it’ll have to do.

I stand, stoic and solid, still threatening as Meghan hides behind me again. He peels out of the lot, but I catch the ‘Fuck you!’ he yells out the open window.

Not worrying about his need for the last word, I turn to Meghan, gently putting my hands on her shoulders. She’s trembling for real this time, and so tiny I have to be careful not to accidentally hurt or scare her with my roughness. It’s more difficult than I thought. I’m still on edge, and this is the first time I’ve touched Meg other than to shake her hand the first night we

met.

“Are you okay?” I ask. “It’s all over now.”

Her eyes are glassy, but she nods, biting her lip. My thumbs are tracing circles on her arms, soothing her and soothing me too. This could’ve been bad, really bad, and I’m glad I was here to keep her safe.

“You’re okay. He’s gone, and you’re safe,” I murmur softly. “I’ll always do my best to keep you safe.”

She suddenly collapses forward, all the energy keeping her upright whooshing out as she falls against me, shaking and rambling. “Holy fracking . . . he could’ve . . . fluffernutter . . .”

She says some of the words like she’s cussing, even though she’s decidedly not, and even in the midst of the insanity, it makes the corners of my lips tilt up. I’ve noticed it before, and in some ways, Meg sounds a lot like someone’s churchgoing cousin.

She’s sweet, an innocent little darling who doesn’t belong in a rough life like this. She’s way too much of a good girl for someone like me. I gather her closer, wrapping one arm around her shoulders, and lead her back inside the club.

“Marco. Hey, man!” I call out as the door closes. “Get your ass out here!”

Marco pops up from below the bar after a few seconds, already teasing. “Took you long enough. I need your help grabbing another case of—”

His words cut off when he sees Meghan, and he rushes out to get on the other side of her. Despite his player tendencies, he’s got a decent heart and knows a girl in need when he sees one.

I squeeze off the growl of ‘Don’t Touch’ that threatens to pass my lips when he grabs her hand, but together, we get her sitting at the bar.

“You got a pen and paper?” I ask as Meghan shivers, putting her head in her hands.

Marco rushes behind the bar again, grabbing a tumbler and filling it with ice and water before setting it in front of Meghan. “Yeah, yeah. Here you go.” He grabs a notepad and pen from beside the register, and I write down Miles’s information and description, along with his vehicle description and license plate.

I push it back toward Marco, who looks the information over. “This guy. He’s banned from the club, from the whole damn block, and definitely from Meghan. Pass the word.”

Marco reads the note and nods, knowing that my request isn’t directly to

him, but to Dominick. His club, his rules, but for something like this, Dominick will definitely agree with my assessment of the appropriate response.

Pocketing my note, Marco turns to Meghan. "You okay, sweetheart? You look pale. Need something a little more than just ice water?"

She shakes her head, then seems to reconsider. "Can I have a scotch? Just a little sip to settle my nerves?"

It's part of Meghan's magic. Here she is, scared out of her mind, and I swear she sounds like little girl who's asking to have a sip and not get in trouble for it. Marco smirks, turning to grab a shot glass that he fills to the brim with the amber liquid before setting it in front of her.

"Don't sip it. Just shoot it down so it can work its magic, warm you back up."

She picks the shot up with delicate fingers, and for a moment, I wonder if this girl has ever even done a shot. If not, she's about to be in for a rude awakening.

But she tilts it back, opening her throat and swallowing it down with ease before slamming it back to the bar top. Wiping her lips, she offers Marco a hint of a smile. "Thanks. I needed that."

All on its own, my cock jumps right to attention in my pants, wondering if she'd swallow something of mine down her pretty little throat, and if I could put a bigger smile on her face than what the scotch has.

Fuck, I've gotta get my head on straight. Now is definitely not the time for me to be thinking dirty thoughts. Hell, there's never going to be a time for me to think that about Meghan. Even if she wasn't too damn good for someone like me, I'd break a sweet little thing like her.

Still, I can't help but put my arm around her, mindlessly patting and rubbing her back, even though I'm treading dangerous territory for us both. "You gonna be okay? We can hang out here as long as you need," I reassure her. "Whenever you're ready, I'll walk you out to your car again. Make sure you're safe. 'Kay?"

She sighs, looking up at me, her pupils black and large behind her glasses. "Actually, do you think you could drive me home? I'm not much of a drinker, and I have a feeling that scotch is going to knock me out in three, two, one . . ."

She smiles a tiny smile, but it sounds like she's telling the truth. This is a girl who can sling drinks like a certified pro, but one shot knocks her out for

the rest of the night. And no, my dirty fucking thoughts don't avoid the innuendo there either.

"Yeah, I can do that," I reply, even as part of me says this is a bad move. I've wanted her for weeks, and my instincts are going apeshit. *Bad move, Shane. Bad move.*

Doesn't matter. The smile she gives me is more than enough to overcome whatever my mind is saying. I turn to Marco, who's cleaning the shot glass carefully. "Will you let Dominick know I'm leaving my truck here overnight? I'll drive Meghan's car to her house and cab it home."

Marco gives me an evaluating look, and I again appreciate that for all his slick player persona, he's actually a pretty solid guy and is making sure that I'm not running some game on Meghan when she's shaken up.

I must have passed his test because he nods and sets the glass aside. "Yeah, I'll let the boss know. Take care of her."

With a nod, I help Meghan up. I walk her back outside, head on a swivel as I look for any threats, any sign that Miles Jacobson got a shock of courage and came back, but all seems to be quiet and dark. We make it to her car, a nondescript little thing that looks like it sort of hangs together by sheer force of will.

Meghan digs in her bag for her keys and hands them to me. I do a slight double-take as I see her keyring has a fucking pompom on it. A puffy fluff of soft fur that's white like a rabbit's tail. It suits her.

I hold the passenger door for her and make sure she's buckled in before I go around. "You ready?"

"Yeah. And thanks, Shane," she says, giving me a smile that could melt Ebenezer Scrooge's heart. I pull out, still keeping watch for anyone who might be following us, and head away from the club, toward the main road.

"Where to?" I ask, and Meghan gives me directions to her apartment from there. As we drive, I have to admit I'm interested to see where she lives.

A tiny piece of me is disappointed when I pull up outside a regular apartment complex, just one like a hundred others around town and not some special, secret hideaway with unicorns in the driveway befitting the fairy-princess sparkle of this girl. I walk her to her door, planning to get her safely inside and then call a cab . . . from the parking lot, not wanting her to feel weird about being alone in her apartment with the huge, scary guy from work.

Hey, I know what I look like, and yeah, I use it around work to my

advantage. I'm surprised when I turn to go and she calls out, "Shane!"

I turn, hearing the fear returning to her voice. "Yeah?"

She's clutching the door, the toe of her Ugg boot digging in the carpet, looking for all intents and purposes like the scared little girl she is. My heart melts even as another side of me growls possessively, wanting to claim her as mine.

She takes a deep breath, biting her lip, but her voice is surprisingly strong when she speaks again. "Do you want to come in? Have a cup of coffee or something?"

I pause, most of me wanting to say no. This has bad idea written all over it. We're pushing four in the morning, I'm with a girl who's had a scare and might be slightly drunk, and for the past two months, she's jumped to the top of my fantasy list as she ticks boxes on my mental fuck list I didn't even know I had.

But I can man up, be the security she needs, and not let on that she's slowly driving me insane every time she looks up at me in those glasses. That half of me wants to comfort and soothe her, to tell her she'll never be hurt . . . while the other half of me wants to rip her clothes off and make her hurt so damn good she screams in blissful agony before I empty my balls deep inside her body.

"Are you sure?" I ask, keeping my voice calm. "You're home, and you're safe. I can just call a cab."

She doesn't answer, just gestures with her hand into the apartment, inviting me in. I walk past her, careful not to touch her or crowd her so she doesn't spook again. Keeping my steps casual, I feel dirty as my heavy boots cross the threshold into her apartment, and I feel an intense, sudden need to just take them off and not pollute her space.

Her apartment is cute, just like her. Her living room is full of soft furniture, with fuzzy blankets thrown over the arm of an old, overstuffed sofa and a floral coffee mug sitting on the table. The room is white and beige and all the other shades of . . . white. With a few highlights of pink.

I'm nervous to sit on her furniture. I think of the places my pants have been, and I'm afraid I'll sully it up just with my presence. But she motions for me to sit, so I do. "Uhm . . . thanks. It's a nice place you've got here."

"Thanks. Just hold on a moment, would ya?" she asks, bustling off to the kitchen. Moments later, she's making coffee, by the sound of the clinks I hear.

I look around and see a huge bookcase filled with books. I don't recognize any of the titles, but whatever type of books she reads, she's got a shitton of them. "You're a reader, huh? Lots of books in here."

Her laugh from the kitchen is slightly self-conscious, and I hear the click-thunk of a knob being turned through the open doorway. "Yeah, I read . . . a lot. Little bit of everything. Non-fiction, like historical stuff and biographies, and fiction too, romance, drama, mystery. You read much?"

I grin, even though she can't see me. Romance, drama, and mystery? *God, you're fucking perfect, Meghan.* "No, can't say I'm much of a reader," I reply. "I'm more of a dumb jock type."

A minute later, she appears with a tray, holding two cups of steamy coffee and the fixings. "I wasn't sure how you take it."

She sets the tray down, and I lean forward to grab a cup. "Black is fine. Sugar at this time of night gets me jittery."

She scrunches her nose and adjusts her glasses again. "Ew, too bitter for me. I like lots and lots of cream."

Oh, for fuck's sake, she's really testing me here. If it were any other girl, I'd think it was intentional. But Meghan seems completely oblivious to the effect she's having on me.

She sits down next to me, and I watch as she adds enough creamer and sugar to her cup to make it basically coffee-flavored ice cream before taking a sip and sighing happily. I sip my own coffee, and I have to add another mark on this girl's list of accomplishments. I haven't had coffee this good since a vacation to Chile two years ago.

There's a comfortable silence as we both sip before she breaks it, looking at me earnestly. "Shane, thanks again. That was some scary intense stuff tonight. I'm glad you were there."

I nod, setting my cup down on the tray. "It was no problem, Meghan. I'm glad I was there too."

She flinches a little, and I'm afraid she's having a bit of a flashback, so I slip my arm across the back of the couch, not touching her, but she scoots closer, curling into my side, so I place a light hand on her shoulder. "I usually think of myself as capable of handling whatever comes my way, and I've dealt with some handsy customers, but if I'd been alone in that parking lot tonight . . ."

Her voice trails off, and I know she's imagining all the ugly things that could've happened. "It's okay," I reassure her. "You're safe now."

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