

HIGHEST
BIDDER



Given

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WILLOW WINTERS

GIVEN

HIGHEST BIDDER

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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.

 Created with **Vellum**

GIVEN: HIGHEST BIDDER

BY LAUREN LANDISH & WILLOW WINTERS

I knew she'd ruin me. But I wanted her anyway.

I was born into wealth and my name comes with a reputation.
One I've upheld and leveraged for power.
Now everyone owes me and I plan to keep it that way.

Until she's offered to me. My sweetheart. Only for a single month to repay a
debt.

Her tempting curves call to me and beg me to risk it all.
I shouldn't take her, I shouldn't even consider his offer.

Women like her bring men to their knees.

But there's something in her baby blues. They're haunted by what lies
behind them.

She sees through me, leaving me nowhere to hide.

I knew taking her would destroy me, but it only took one taste.

Now I'm addicted. And I'm not giving her back.

PROLOGUE

ZANDER

*B*oth of my hands tremble and the adrenaline pumping in my blood makes my muscles coil, ready to fight. I grip the edge of the dresser to keep my body upright. I only need to breathe. A long and slow exhale leaves me, lowering my tense shoulders. I crack my neck before looking over my shoulder at her. *My sweetheart.*

I've never run from anything in my life. And I'm not about to start now.

But I should have run from *her*. I knew I should have walked away when I first laid eyes on her.

She's destroyed my control. Ruined my reputation. She'll be the end of me, I know it.

Her soft moans of pain from across the bedroom call to me. She's so beautifully broken. She *needs* me.

I took it too far, and I can't take it back.

They'll come for me; I'm certain the cops will be here soon. I'm guilty, and I have no one to blame. The evidence is all right here, and I can't deny a damn thing.

For the first time in my life, I don't see a way out.

There's no one I can turn to. No one who owes me who can make this right.

But I can't stop wanting her. She's gotten under my skin. And I won't stop

fighting for her.

Never.

“Zander,” she says and her small voice is choked. Her brow is pinched as her head thrashes from side to side and the doctor works on the deep lashes on her back. Agony rises through my chest; it stiffens my body. My eyes burn and my throat closes as I try to breathe.

She’s stripped to the waist lying face down on the bed, her bottom half barely covered by a thin white sheet to keep the doctor’s prying eyes from seeing even more of her.

I know what he thinks. What they all think since I took her.

I don’t give a fuck. I pay him well to turn a blind eye, and that’s exactly what he’ll do. It’s what they all do. They only want the money, and they’ll do anything for it.

But not her.

My heavy footsteps are softened by the plush rug as I cross the master bedroom and walk to her. She lifts her head as I come closer, but the moment she does, she winces and sucks in a reluctant breath through clenched teeth.

I’m quick to gentle my hand on her shoulder, keeping my contact confined to the small area of soft skin without any wounds. “Don’t move,” I say and my voice is low, admonishing even. I hate myself. I’m so devoid of the ability to comfort that I can’t even speak softly to her when she’s... like this.

“I’m sorry,” Arianna says quietly, her voice muffled from the mattress.

A chill runs over every inch of my skin. She has no reason to apologize to me. She never did anything wrong. Not since the first moment this started.

I swallow thickly, and the lump forming in my throat feels as though it scratches the tender skin on the way down. “It’s alright.” I try to soften my voice and put as much warmth into it as possible. I pet her hair with soothing strokes.

“I never should have left you,” Arianna replies, her words coming out slow and full of genuine remorse.

She shouldn't have. This wouldn't have happened if she'd just listened. If she'd *trusted* me.

But it's my fault. Not hers.

"It's going to be alright," I say softly, crouching down so my eyes are level with hers. It's a lie. It's not going to be alright. I'm damn sure of that single truth. Everything is fucked.

But I'll tell her whatever she needs to hear.

I can't lose her.

I press my lips to hers, my hand cupping her jaw and my thumb rubbing comforting circles on her soft skin.

"Is it going to be okay?" she whispers against my lips. It's only when I open my eyes and see hers are still closed with tears running freely down her reddened cheeks that my heart shatters.

I wish I could tell her I'll take care of everything.

But it's not okay. And I can't fix this.

I know I shouldn't, but lying comes so easily to me. "Everything's going to be fine," I tell her. Her long lashes flutter and her gorgeous green eyes open to look back at me. So much raw vulnerability and something else are clearly evident in her gaze. Something that should push me away.

I didn't even want to take her when she was given to me at first. I should have refused.

Maybe even then I recognized what she would do to me. How she would change who I am, and destroy everything I've worked for. When they put me behind bars, they'll figure out everything. The corruption, the money, all the lies.

Even knowing that, I wouldn't hesitate to take her if I had the chance to do it all over again. My hand clenches into a fist, firming my resolve. Even if I couldn't change a damn thing, I'd still accept that sick fuck's offer.

She was given to me.

Now she's *mine*.

CHAPTER 1

ZANDER

I clasp my hands behind my back, staring out of the floor-to-ceiling window in my office. It's on the top floor of Penn Square, one of the three tallest skyscrapers in the city. My fingers run along the cold metal of my Tag Heuer watch as I let my gaze fall to the world beneath me. My shoulders are squared and the rush of the city flows easily through my blood.

This is where I thrive, where I make the deals that run this city.

"Are you listening to me?" my father's voice spills from the speaker on my desk, and the corners of my lips turn up into a smirk.

"I am." I answer easily with an air of confidence I learned from him.

"You never should have accepted." His words are sharp and firm. But he's right.

A heavy sigh leaves me as my eyes narrow at the park directly beneath the building. Although my blood chills at my father's words, I ignore him, cracking my knuckles and continuing to watch the specks of people moving about.

I'm the one that kept our family name from falling. We were going bankrupt because of *his* bad investments and trusting the wrong people. My teeth grind as I clench my jaw. Yes, I fucked up, but not nearly as much as he has. It's been almost ten fucking years of me rising to the top and carrying our legacy with me, creating not just a pristine reputation in the eyes of the community

and business elites. I've also worked hard to create one of fear for those who run the underside of this city.

There are many men with power, but they all owe someone... and I happen to be that someone. My father's voice drones on as I move my gaze toward the streets. My father's still admonishing me for a single mistake.

A bad investment named Daniel Brooks.

That dumb fuck owes me a lot of money, more money than he should.

He knew how much debt he had, and he still gambled away my money. He thinks I don't know... I know *everything*. I was the first to know when the sum left his account and wasn't directly passed to mine.

This happens from time to time. *Everyone* owes me, and that's how I like it. It's only a matter of time before something gets between me and the money they owe me.

I don't care; I always come out on top, and that's what matters. Money isn't power, it's leverage. Being owed is power. True power. And that's what I want. It's what I have. But right now Brooks isn't an asset, and I have no way of knowing just how he's going to pay me close to the half a million I'm due. It's not the largest sum, but it's a deal that was public. A debt that many are aware of, and therefore, must be paid.

"Did you hear me?" My father's voice is low as I turn from the city to face my hard maple desk, my eyes focused and narrowed on the black corded phone that came with this office. It's at odds with the modern touches, but the line is traceable and I've been able to use that to my advantage more than a time or two.

"I did," I answer although I'd rather hang up the phone altogether. I don't wait for him to reply.

"Brooks owes me more than what's excusable. More than he's worth." I take my seat, leaning back and propping up my feet on the long, sleek desk.

"You can't allow him to get away with it." My father speaks with authority.

Brooks may be a high-up executive and think he's untouchable, but the

alcoholic, gambling degenerate is going to give me my money one way or the other. And then I'm done with him. I have enough pull to bury him if I want. I tap my fingers on the hard wood top, debating. The *rap, rap, rap* echoes rhythmically and calms me slightly.

I could destroy him slowly. Cripple him financially and embarrass him in every way possible. But not many would know why, and he's too pathetic to waste that much time and effort on. No, I'll just take my money and be through with him. He'll hang himself on his own.

My eyes lift to the office door as a solid knock rebounds through the large space.

"Come in," I call out as my back settles against the leather desk chair, but my fingers never stop tapping on the desk as I wait for the door to open.

Charles walks in with a mask of indifference. I'm used to it. When I first met him all those years ago at boarding school, I thought there was something more behind his dark eyes. But now I know the truth; the only emotion I've ever seen reflected in his eyes is anger. It's that, or nothing. And I prefer nothing to his temper.

With short pitch-black hair and eyes to match, Charles is just as lethal as he looks. He didn't grow up with the lifestyle I'm accustomed to, but I made sure to make friends with him. It's been mutually beneficial.

I nod toward the phone before he has a chance to speak. Sharing a glance, he quietly shuts the door behind him, a soft click the only sound in my office.

"I'm going to have to call you back," I lean forward, speaking into the phone and preparing to hang up, knowing damn well that I won't return the phone call. There's nothing to discuss. He'll see me at the next social event and until then, the only thing he'll give me is shit over this debt.

Charles is silent as he takes a seat across from me. Placing an elbow on the arm of the chair, he stares back at me with his finger resting on his bottom lip.

Large black and white photos of the nighttime skyline decorate the wall behind him. The furnishings in my office are entirely black and white, with the walls painted a light grey. To an observer, my office may seem as if it's a

minimalist and masculine design. And that's true, but more importantly, it suits me. Cold and simple. No room for bullshit.

I didn't even want the fucking blown-up photos, but I needed something to make the room seem... normal. Complete, even.

"We have a problem," Charles finally says after I've hung up the phone.

I may be deceptive. Born with a silver spoon in my mouth, I come off as playful and charming. They don't see me coming. And most of my clients never have a problem with me. The legal ones, anyway. It's a handshake and a smile, an exchange of money and profit. Those are ninety percent of my interactions. But the other ten percent, well that's where Charles comes in. I can't get my hands dirty. My reputation is everything.

He doesn't attend the social galas and business openings. He doesn't give a fuck about rubbing elbows and being seen with the right people. He meets his clients in back alleys. As far as anyone's concerned, he's an associate.

Everyone in my life is just an associate. And that's never going to change.

"And what's that?" I ask him as my lips kick up into a charming smile. It's always there. Even though it doesn't affect Charles, I can't help the false expression. I've learned to play this role. It pays me well.

"Brooks is a problem," he states and leans forward in his seat, grabbing a paperweight off my desk. It's a small slate cube, heavy with sharp edges. He runs his finger down one side.

Although he's not a threat to me, I can only imagine what he'd do with a weapon like that. I roll my eyes at what he just said and stretch my neck to look out of the large windows again as the sun sets behind us, darkening the room. I can't take another person telling me I've fucked up. I get it. I need someone to offer me a solution to fix it, not tell me the obvious.

"No shit," I say, waiting for his eyes to meet mine. It only takes a moment, and his movements stop.

"Are we offing him?" he asks me.

My blood turns cold, sending a biting wave through every inch of my body. It

takes its time, slowly coursing through my veins. I don't take death lightly. Ending someone's life isn't as easy for me as it is for Charles. He grew up around it, made a career of it; killing is simply a way of life for him. They all have it coming and for good reason, but he's quick to take it that far.

I break the hold his dark eyes have on mine and stare at the large clock on the left-hand wall. It's simple and modern, so there aren't any marks on it. It's just a large white circle with contrasting black hands. The second hand sweeps by, rhythmically and perfectly. There's no sound, but I can only imagine the soft *tick, tick, tick* in sync with my own heartbeat.

I click my tongue, feeling the smile fade for a moment before turning my attention back to Charles.

"Who did he give it to?" I ask him. Brooks had the money in his account. I know for a fact what Danny Brooks was worth when I loaned him the investment. It should have been a good return, had he done what he was supposed to do.

"A bookie," Charles answers in a rough deep voice, setting the slate paperweight back down at my desk.

A huff of a humorless laugh rumbles up my chest.

"I'm guessing he thinks the bookie breaking his legs is worse than what you would have done to him," Charles adds and then cracks his neck and settles easily into his seat. He's probably right. Most of these men who work with contracts think I'd settle a dispute using the legal systems.

I'm sure Brooks thinks I'll sue him. But that takes so much time and sets a poor example. It would tarnish my spotless reputation as well. I don't set foot into courtrooms. I'm not interested in a lawsuit or having anything in the paper.

When someone doesn't pay me, I make sure I get more than my money's worth of retribution. I think back to the dozens of men who have tried to get away from me and their debts in the past. They can't run though. They can't hide behind the law, or in the shadows; *I own both*.

"So, what are you going to do?" Charles asks me, pulling me back to the present.

I sit up in my seat and lean closer to him, feeling that slick smile on my face. My blood heats and the resulting adrenaline fuels me. I speak slowly but firmly, staring hard into Charles' unforgiving stare as I say, "I want to know everything about Danny Brooks."

CHAPTER 2

ARIANNA

“They had rabbits, dildos and pulsators,” Natalie shamelessly continues as she sets down her paintbrush in the cup of now-dirty water that sits between us. She’s got an asymmetric grin on her face as she rises from her seat to step back and survey her handiwork. “It was *awesome*,” she says and the smile doesn’t fade as she stares at her canvas.

I stop my brush midstroke to look at her, arching a questioning eyebrow. Even dressed in pale blue overalls with old paint stains all over them, Natalie looks beautiful. She has the kind of natural beauty that comes equipped with confidence. Her dark brown hair cut in a short side bob sways as she crosses her arms and nods her head, and her large brown eyes widen as she steps forward and smudges a small spot on her canvas with her finger. The smile only fades for a moment until she’s satisfied with the adjustment.

She lets out an easy sigh and her eyes sparkle as she meets my stare. I force a small smile back but avoid her gaze as I take in my own canvas. I’ve been in a cruddy mood all day. I was hoping painting would cheer me up. But so far, all I’ve done is paint a weeping willow that’s truly crying because of how damn dark the picture is. A frown mars my face as I realize there’s no fixing this.

I don’t know what’s wrong with me.

“Pulsators, huh?” I ask halfheartedly. “That’s a new one.” I shake my head as I set my brush down into the cup, dismayed with my lack of progress.

I pull my hair over my shoulder and twirl the ends as she continues, “Yeah. It’s a little ball that goes into your cooch and vibrates.” I stare at Natalie, slowly processing what she’s saying. Thank fuck I have her as my roommate, sharing a two-bedroom apartment together in the middle of downtown. We split the rent to make costs bearable. But more than that, she’s been my friend for years. Even through the darker times when I pushed her away. We picked up everything right where we left off when we reconnected.

Right now, I just don’t give a shit about whatever sex toy party she went to last night.

I clear my throat trying to muster an ounce of her excitement as I say, “That sounds... fun.”

Natalie pouts, her eyes dimming with concern. “What’s wrong, Ari? Considering the stuff you’re into,” she says, eyeing me curiously, “I thought something like that would be right up your alley.”

I feel like shit, but I just want to be alone. “I feel off. I’m just tired.” I swirl the brush in the dirty cup to get some of the paint off the bristles. I speak without looking up, staring at the murky water, “I think I need some sun or something.” I didn’t expect her to come in here and join me, but I wasn’t going to tell her no. Natalie’s frown deepens and then she looks past me toward my bedroom door. “I’m sorry I’m being such a downer, Nat,” I say, flashing her a weak smile. “I just feel like I woke up on the wrong side of the bed or something.”

Nat stares at me for a long moment, chewing on the inside of her cheek before finally saying, “I’m a little worried about you, Ari.” Her voice is delicate and cautious, but she doesn’t need to be. I’m okay. I’m not where I was before.

I wave off her concern. “Don’t be. I’m good.” I nod at my canvas. “Just let me finish this up.” I stare at the painting for a minute before pursing my lips. I should probably just trash it or paint the whole damn thing white and start over.

Nat gazes at me with suspicion. “You sure?”

I nod, picking my paintbrush back up and pressing the bristles against the

side of the cup to get rid of most of the water. “Yeah. Tell me more about the party,” I say, trying to change the subject back to her preference: sex. “It sounds like it was a lot of fun.”

Nat nods, but her enthusiasm from earlier is dimmed, which makes me feel like shit. I hate spreading negativity.

I avoid her gaze entirely, shoving up my sleeves to add a bit of white paint to the background of the canvas. “It was. There’s a bonus right now-” Nat pauses, and reaches out for my arm, her fingers wrapping just below my elbow. Her grip is so strong she nearly pulls me backward. “What the hell happened to your arm?” Although it’s a question, there’s an accusation underlying her words as she stares at my arm in horror.

Shit. I pull away from her grasp, clenching my teeth and feeling a bit irritated. A bit ashamed. My heart is still lodged in my throat and I can’t respond for a moment. I’m feeling her judgment.

I part my lips to reply, to make up some lie, some defense, but then close them. Nat’s seen the bruises before. This is nothing new. She knows where they come from, and she knows that they’re there with my consent. That it’s just a kink.

I try to swallow, but my throat is dry. I hate how she does this to me. She makes me feel guilty.

Nat places her hands on her hips and glowers at me when I offer no response. “Well? And don’t tell me it was just how you and Danny like to play,” she says but her voice cracks with pain. Her nostrils flare as she glares at my arm. “I don’t believe it. Not this time.” A part of me loves her for caring. Another part wants her to fuck off. We’ve gone around and around with this issue. It’s how I’ve dealt with it all. It’s the one thing that worked. Or used to work.

The very mention of his name sends a chill down my spine and causes my skin to prick with anxiety, although it never used to. If it weren’t for Danny, I wouldn’t be here. He helped me when I was at my lowest point in my life, saving me from darkness that was on the verge of swallowing me whole. There’s no reason I should feel like this, but I do. I feel... afraid.

I pull my sleeve down, focusing on breathing and ignoring her. I need to talk

to him. I'm not into this lifestyle like he is. It worked for a while, so he was right about giving it a shot. I'm just not sure I want to keep doing it.

But I owe him. And he's made it clear that he doesn't want to stop. Even if there's no sexual pleasure in it. He's not my boyfriend. Only my Master. He gives me the release I need to get rid of this sadness through an outlet of pain. But it's not working anymore. I don't know what changed.

"It's nothing," I say hastily, quick to cut her off the path she's heading down.

"Nothing?" Nat asks in disbelief. "That looked like a hell of a lot more than nothing."

I give her a big fake smile in an attempt to put her at ease, trying to hide the anxiety that's twisting my stomach. "It's not though, trust me. Really, it's nothing," I lie as my throat closes and my chest feels hollow, "I enjoyed it actually."

Natalie stares at me for a long time, her big brown eyes roving my face, searching for honesty.

Finally, she shakes her head and the moment she does, I feel a wave of relief. I can't lose her. I have no one else. *No one but Danny.* Even though I don't want him anymore. Not like that though. I never wanted him *like that.* "I know this is supposed to be," Nat takes in a breath as she looks to the door again and waves her hand in the air, "the thing you guys have, but I'll never be able to understand it. And quite frankly, it scares the shit out of me."

I don't blame her. Most people wouldn't understand. In fact, no one I know does. I don't even remember why I wanted this to begin with. He said it would heal me and in a way, it did. But it's grown to be something different, and it doesn't feel like healing anymore. It's turned into something else. "But if it makes you happy and you're getting laid, I guess that's all that matters," Natalie mutters, clearly upset, but at least she's leaving it alone. I'm not getting laid, although she doesn't have to know the specifics. I'll fix this. I just need to tell Danny that I don't want it anymore and that I'm fine without it. Although I really don't know if I am fine. I will talk to him though... soon. I feel guilty for even thinking about it. Danny's done so much for me; I owe him my life. I feel ungrateful for wanting to complain, but it's time for me to move on.

“Maybe you should try it sometime,” I suggest playfully, trying to lighten the tone, but I immediately regret it.

Natalie shakes her head vigorously. “Hell no. I like my vanilla sex with pulsators just fine, thank you very much. I’ll leave that freaky shit to you. “I huff out a dry chuckle, but I can’t shake the feelings stirring in the pit of my stomach. I agreed to this M/s relationship, at at times I even wanted it. But now I don’t know how to get out.

“Ari?” Nat asks, breaking me out of my thoughts. I refocus my eyes on her face. “You sure you’re okay, Hun?” The words are on my lips. I could tell her everything about how I feel right now. Doing it would be like a weight lifted off my chest. I would finally have someone I could confide in about what’s really going on in my life. But that’s not what I do.

“Ari?” Nat presses when I don’t respond. I flash her a smile and reply, “I’m fine,” when deep down, I know I’m not.

CHAPTER 3

ZANDER

The Mercedes practically purrs as I park in the large, ten-story garage attached to the Parker business suite. This isn't the first time I've been in here. I don't own it, but I own plenty of men who sit behind the desks in this building.

And one of these fuckers is Danny Brooks.

The car door clicks shut and the alarm beeps as I walk across the concrete ground toward the entrance.

A smile creeps casually onto my lips as the greeter nods his head toward me, the automatic doors opening behind him. "Good evening, sir," he says in a raspy voice that's more comforting than anything else. His grey hair is barely noticeable under the tweed cap that matches his vest. As he smiles broadly at me, the wrinkles gather around his pale blue eyes.

"Good evening," I respond politely, heading straight into the building with a casual pep in my steps. The polished marble floors and stark white walls with gleaming steel framed ceilings make the interior seem so much brighter. Every bit of light is reflected off every surface. The sounds of heels clicking, people chattering and the large fountain in the center of the room spilling water over the edge immediately flood my senses.

It's almost five o'clock, close to quitting time and for a Friday, the main lobby is fairly empty already. But I know Brooks is still here. Charles knows his routine. He's useful for that, and damn good at what he does.

I head straight to the far wall, my hands in my pockets and the hint of happiness on my face. Always smile. *Make them wonder what you're up to.* I remember the words my mother told me once. Back when I thought it was playful... when I thought she was happy. I didn't learn the darkness behind her words until much later. Until it was too late.

The elevator doors open and a man in a crisp grey suit exits, all the while loosening the black tie around his neck and holding his briefcase in his other hand. Two women exit behind him, walking closely and speaking in hushed voices. As I enter the empty cart, I hear them laugh in unison, although it dims as the doors close, leaving me alone and in silence.

I push the button for the twenty-sixth floor, lighting up the ring around the number to bright green and instantly I'm ushered upward. My heart starts to race. It's not every day that I do this; in fact, it's a rarity. I hardly ever have to put pressure on my business associates. Let alone make them fully aware that they can't fuck with me and my money.

I don't enjoy this aspect, but it's a necessity. If you let one man push you around, the others will know they can push you, too. And that can't happen. *Ever.*

It only takes one time to fall. One chance for them to knock you down and tear you apart. Like what happened with my mother. She let them see behind the cracks, and she never recovered.

I shove my hands back into my pockets. I'm still wearing thin leather gloves. It's not so uncommon for them to be worn this early in March. But inside the building, it's warm. And I don't need to be seen wearing them and drawing any suspicion.

Ding.

The twenty-sixth floor comes faster than I anticipated. Showtime.

My dress shoes slap on the hard slate floor as I walk past the two office spaces on my right. My shoulders are straight as I walk with ease past the large glass fronts of the offices. They're all nearly identical in appearance, neatly lined up rows of glass boxes. Each one houses some sort of profession. I stop abruptly and turn on my heels as I spot 2614.

Although my blood's heating, my heart's hammering and I'm certain everyone can see the fire in my eyes, on the surface I'm the same man I always am. Nonthreatening, happy. Not a care in the world.

I keep my hands in my pockets and rock on my heels as I smile down at the receptionist. Forcing the charm to stay in place.

"Mr. Payne," the young woman at the front of the office behind a small white desk greets as she rises to her feet, finally feeling my eyes on her. "May I take your coat?" she asks politely, already holding out her hand. I've been in here several times before, but this is the first time she's remembered who I am.

"No, thank you," I say easily. "I don't have an appointment. I was just hoping to catch Mr. Brooks before he left." I think the woman's name is Delores. I'm almost certain of it. My eyes flicker to the name on her desk plate and I see it there, in thick bold letters. "I appreciate it though, Delores." She brightens at the use of her name. "Do you know if he's in?" I ask the question as I turn from her slightly, angling my body so she knows I'm headed that way.

"He is," she nods happily and takes a seat, scooting her chair back in.

"Have a wonderful weekend," I tell her, dipping my head and walking off as she calls out, "You too, Mr. Payne!"

My feet move of their own accord, everything seeming to narrow in my vision. The sound of my shoes against the thin, cheap carpet is being drowned out by the white noise ringing in my ears.

As soon as I stand in front of his door, every ounce of the facade is gone. I knock once, but I don't wait for a response. Instead I open the door and walk in, kicking it shut behind me as I put my hands back into my pockets.

I casually look over at Danny Brooks, who at first seems shocked but then annoyed.

"I'm not sure if you could hear me, Mr. Payne," Brooks starts to speak while his eyes are on me, but then he looks back at his screen and begins typing, the sound of tiny clicks accompanying his voice, "but I'm currently busy."

"I got your message," I tell him with my hands still hidden.

Brooks barely looks up to acknowledge me, his head still down as he types on the computer without pausing to answer me. “You’ll have to make an appointment,” he says and his voice is low as he blows me off. It’s easy for associates to do when they first meet me and before they’ve finished doing business with me.

I walk slowly to the side of his desk and it’s only then that he stops, his fingers hovering just above the keys. His lower back presses into the thin leather seat, making it creak as he sits straighter and finally acknowledges me. “Yes, it’s going to take a little longer than I anticipated.” He pinches the bridge of his nose as if I’m a bother to him. As if my mere presence has caused him undue distress or a headache.

The smile finally grows on my face as he continues to underestimate me.

“You aren’t able to make the payment?” I ask him, although it’s a question, not a statement. My feet move slowly, taking steady strides, rounding his desk but still staying a few feet away, seemingly nonthreatening as I lean back against the wall casually.

“I don’t believe so.” He types a word, maybe two and then gives me a look of irritation as he turns in his seat and lets out an exasperated sigh. “What can I do for you, Mr. Payne?” he asks in a voice laced with condescension.

I love it, the irony of it. But that’s how men like him behave. They act as if *they* own you. When really they don’t have a damn thing to their name, and *you* own them.

I shrug and look to my left. The blinds to his small window are closed, so the office is rather dark, and also quiet. It’s nearly perfect. But the walls are thin. Luckily, it’s past five on a Friday and Mr. Brooks is surrounded by empty office spaces.

I walk closer to him as I speak with an even cadence. “Why is the payment delayed?” I ask him, as if I’m curious. As if it’s acceptable to go back on our deal. As if it’s fine to piss away half a million that he can’t afford to pay back.

The fucker scoffs at me and rolls his eyes.

I don’t hesitate to rip my hand from my pocket, grab the back of his head and

slam it on the desk. Once, then again. There's no blood; his nose didn't even hit the hard wood surface, only his forehead.

He's merely dizzy as I grab him by the collar and pull him up so his face is just beneath mine. "Was it a sure bet?" I ask him, my voice a sneer. My muscles are tight and coiled. I'm on edge and seeing nothing but red now.

"Zander-" he begins, and my name is a strained plea.

Brooks starts to speak, but I don't give him a moment to continue. I push him backward, his chair rolling across the floor as the backs of his knees smack against it. "There are no *sure bets*." I push the words through clenched teeth.

It wouldn't have come to this if he'd shown respect at least. It wasn't his money to piss away.

My grip tightens as I haul his back against the wall, slamming his spine against the drywall and denting it from the force. My teeth clench as my left hand forms a fist and I land a blow into his kidney. My muscles are taut and adrenaline is rushing through me. My head feels light; my breathing is heavy.

A loud grunt spills from his lips until I tighten my hand around his throat, feeling his blood rushing just beneath the surface and his throat giving in to the brute force of my weight. Both of his hands instantly reach for my hand on his neck, his blunt fingernails scratching against the glove on my hand. It's no use. I'm not letting go until he receives this message loud and clear.

I lean in close to his ear and hiss between clenched teeth, "You'll pay me all of it by the twenty-fifth of April. Or I'll destroy you." I pull away to look into his eyes. The milky whites have turned red around the edges, his face is a brighter shade of red, and his hands are still struggling at my grip. I hold his eyes, so full of sheer terror, only for a moment longer before releasing him.

I leave him there, heaving for air in a slump on the floor as I walk quickly to the door, shaking out my hand and ignoring the force inside of me begging to unleash itself. Begging for a fight.

"Wait. I have something you may want," Brooks calls out in a croak. His words stop me midstep, but I continue momentarily, ignoring him and turning the doorknob.

“I want my money, Brooks. I won’t take anything else,” I tell him firmly.

His eyes stare back at me with a darkness as I stand in the doorway.

“I know what you like most at the club,” he says then noticeably swallows, the soft, sick sound filling my ears as he rights himself, still slumping against the wall.

“The club?” I ask flatly, my face devoid of emotion or interest.

“Club X,” he says loudly and clearly. The name makes my blood run cold. I only go there to watch my investments, for appearances only. I’m not interested in anything beyond that, and I haven’t taken part in any of the... activities for a reason.

“I know you like the Slaves.” My eyes narrow, and I have to keep my feet planted before I crush this fucker’s windpipe. Brooks continues, “But there aren’t many. Take mine... for a month.”

My heart beats loud in my chest and blood rushes in my ears as I finally move slightly backward onto my heels and open the door wider so I can leave this prick and get on with my life.

“You have until the twenty-fifth,” I reiterate and turn my back to him.

“You don’t want her then?” he asks with slight disbelief, and I quickly turn to face him when I hear him take a single step toward me. The moment my eyes lock with his, he freezes.

“No,” I tell him with a chill in my voice. “You’ll pay me what you owe me-”

“She’ll go up for auction then.” He nods sternly, not backing down from my cold gaze. “I’ll get that money to you on time. I have three hundred thousand coming. She’s good for the rest. I know she is.”

His admission makes rage and adrenaline pump through my blood. “That’s not *your* money,” I answer him.

He shrugs slightly, seemingly more at ease now that he’s figured out a way to pay me. “She’s mine. She’ll do what she’s told.”

“On the twenty-fifth, Brooks,” I say one last time, turning and closing the

door behind me as I go.

I'm on edge and uneasy as I slip the gloves off and shove them into my pockets. My strides are larger than normal, the outrage apparent no matter how much I'd like to hide it. As I pass the rows of desks, I know they can see me. The real me, but in this moment, I can't suppress it. I can only move faster and leave before I turn around and do something I'll truly regret.

CHAPTER 4

ARIANNA

*W*hack!

A strangled cry escapes my lips as my head falls backward, the stinging pain racing up my ass cheeks, spreading out to my lower back and traveling downward through my thighs. *Fuck*. It hurts.

My breath comes out in short gasps as I try to bear the wave of stinging aftershocks, my face twisted into a tight mask of pain. I try to remember to give my worries to Danny. To relax and trust him that the pain will give me pleasure in the end. It's all for a reason. Everything happens for a reason and I deserve this, but in the end, it'll be alright.

That's what I used to tell myself, and it did bring me relief in the past. At times, I even looked forward to it. I deserved this, and the end result made a weight lift from me. It was freeing. But not now. It's only mind-numbing agony now.

My heart skips a beat as I sense movement. And I brace for another one. But it doesn't come right away.

I can hear Danny behind me, his breathing deep and ragged, stalking me like I'm a wild animal that needs to be put down. But he doesn't have to do that. I'm chained to the wall, my hands cuffed above my head, my bare ass behind me, giving him complete access. He just likes doing this. He likes building the anticipation of a hit, but never striking until I least expect it.

I hate it. As I wait for his next blow, I can't remember what I used to think about during these times. I don't remember them. *It wasn't like this.*

I wait in agony, my limbs taut and sweaty, knowing the next one is coming, even if I don't know when. I hear his footsteps move to my right side and then to my left. Then I sense him directly behind me. The sound of his breathing fills my ears and my heart pounds faster. It's coming. Everything goes silent.

A drop of sweat runs down my forehead, down my nose, all the way down my chin and drops to the plush carpet below. I swear my heart is about to race out of my chest as I wait, thumping so loud that I know he hears it. I feel dizzy as I grip the chains, bracing myself for what's to come.

"You're holding back," his voice calls out from behind me. My body relaxes at his words. *I am.* He knows me so well. "You need to give in," he tells me.

My head hangs in shame. This is my fault. I used to be ready for this, willing to give him my pain and it would make me feel better.

An animalistic grunt splits the air, followed by multiple lashes.

A tortured scream tears from my throat. Agony becomes my existence, my ass, thighs and lower back radiating a pain so strong my knees buckle. The hard cast iron cuffs scrape my skin as the full weight of my body pulls down toward the floor, my hands stretching out above my head as far as they'll go.

I try to silence my pain as the unforgiving metal digs into my skin. Danny's behind me, his breathing heavier and more shallow than before. I know he's getting off on this, his cock is hard as a fucking rock. It was the tradeoff. He'd take the pain of my past away in exchange for this.

The words are on my lips. I need to tell him, to let him know that I'm not okay and I can't give in like I used to. I don't want this anymore. *But what about everything he's done for you?* that annoying voice at the back of my head chimes in. *You wouldn't be here if not for him. And he knows what you need. You're only in this position because you won't listen.*

"Listen to me," Danny says softly, almost in a comforting voice as he cradles my chin in his hand. As if he knew exactly what I was thinking just now. "Give in to the pain, and it will set you free."

A feeling of guilt presses down upon my chest and I suck in a ragged breath. I hate it. I hate it even more because I know it's true. I wouldn't be here if Danny hadn't saved me. For a time, he made me forget the terrible loss I suffered. He made me feel like I'd repented in a way.

The sound of Danny moving again breaks me out of my preoccupation. I almost shake my head and tell him I can't. No. Not again. I don't think I can take anymore. I stay half-slouched. I don't have the energy to stand up straight. I just can't.

"Raise your ass," I hear Danny's deep voice command behind me. Goosebumps rise on my thighs as I tremble at the anger lacing his words. I want to tell him no. I want to tell him that I can't do this anymore. But the words stick in my throat when I try to speak them. He has my best intentions at heart. He did in the beginning, and this must be my fault. I'm the one holding back. I'm not well, and he knows it.

I try to rise and straighten my body, my legs wobbling like Jello. It's a chore to arch my back. I manage, but it's all I can do to keep myself in position. I weakly grip the chains that are holding me up, my limbs completely covered in sweat, my heart racing so fast that the room spins around me. *He saved me. He saved me. He saved me*, I chant over and over in my mind, mentally preparing myself for this. But the blow never comes. Suddenly I'm being released from the chains, Danny appearing at my side and jerking my cuffs loose. I gasp as he gently lowers me to the floor, hitting the plush carpet with a thud. My hands immediately go to my wrists. There are deep red indentations from when I strained against them, but they're not as bad as I thought. They still hurt like hell though. I look up, taking in my surroundings, my breathing ragged. We're in one of Club X's private rooms, one of Danny's favorites. It's absolute luxury, with a king-size bed in the middle of the room adorned with grey and white silk bedding, and ultra-plush pillows. A large canopy frames the sides with gossamer white curtains tied back against each post.

The walls match the colors of the bedding, grey and white, and have intricate designs, adding that much more luxury in the fine details. The floor is covered with thick, soft white carpet and the matching furniture is chic and contemporary, with a large loveseat at the foot of the bed and an oversized chair near the granite fireplace.

Then there are the toys.

A delicate glass china cabinet sits on the left side of the room, filled with whips, riding crops, and other devices. Nearby, there is a grey rack with white shackles.

And above me is the Saint Andrew's Cross that chained me to the wall. Plus, Danny.

His gaze holds nothing but disappointment. I look back at him, unable to control the anxiety I feel along with the pain. Although I'm naked, bared before him, he's dressed in grey dress pants and a white dress shirt that's unbuttoned at the chest, his dark blond hair adorned by his cold piercing hazel eyes. "What's wrong?" I dare ask, my voice sounding like a small, scared child's. And I truly am scared. I don't know what to think anymore.

"You," he says simply. "You're not behaving. You're making this harder than it has to be."

"Sir, I-

"I only want to help you. I know you need this. You aren't well, Arianna."

"I- I-," I protest, trying to put some strength in my words, but failing. He's right. I'm not okay, but I just don't know if this is the answer.

"You don't trust me as a Master. I've done so much for you." I feel tears form in my eyes at his words. "Danny please, it's not like that. It's just..."

Danny leans forward, putting his face close to mine. The hurt in his expression is nothing compared to the anger in his blazing eyes. "It's just what?" he asks.

Tell him. He needs to know.

A lump forms in my throat, but I manage to mumble, "I feel like this isn't working anymore and it hurts, but there's no... there's nothing but pain. I didn't tell you because I don't want to upset you."

"It's only because you aren't trusting me." His voice is full of conviction. "Don't you remember how freeing it is? Why are you hurting yourself?"

After a moment, he takes a step back and stands up straight. “This has been coming for a long time now.” His words are terrible. Not because they're angry, but because they're so quiet and fill me with overwhelming anxiety.

“What do you mean-”

Danny walks forward and unbuckles the thick leather collar from around my neck.

“Danny, what are you doing?” I cry in panic. I reach up to try to stop him, but he swats my hand away as easily as one would swat a fly, and pulls the collar free from my neck, leaving cold air to replace its warmth. He steps back with it clenched tightly in his hand, scowling at me with a coldness I've never seen from him before. Unconsciously my hands fly to my neck. It feels so strange, running my fingers along the bare skin there. It feels... empty. Like he's abandoning me.

“I told you so long as you didn't give up on yourself, I wouldn't give up on you.” His words are carried with pain. He's given up on me.

My heart feels like it's been pierced by a jagged spear.

His next words turn my blood to ice. “You're going up for auction.”

My jaw goes slack as what he says registers, my heart skipping several beats as I'm shocked into silence.

“You need to learn to trust me,” Danny says. “And I think handing you over to another Master is the best thing for you right now.”

I stare at him in disbelief, hardly believing what he's saying.

“I want you to know what it's like to miss me,” he says. “To realize how good you had it.”

But it's been so bad, I want to tell him, so bad that I want to leave you.

For weeks I've thought about ending this, but the fear of losing him and having no one that truly knows me kept me from doing it. To me, being with someone who doesn't know my history is terrifying.

“You can come back to me after you've learned your lesson,” Danny says.

“Maybe then you’ll truly appreciate me.”

“Danny-” I try to say.

He waves me silent. “I’m done. Prepare yourself for your auction.”

With that said, he walks out, closing the door behind him.

I sit there on the floor, my skin prickling as a torrent of emotions goes through me. Anxiety. Anger. Sadness.

I don’t know what to do. I’m so used to leaning on Danny for support to conquer my demons that I don’t know if I can survive without him.

CHAPTER 5

ZANDER

The chill of the wind whips across my face, the hairs on the back of my neck standing to attention. The thick wool overcoat I have on shields everything but my neck and cheeks. I don't move to cover them though. The crisp morning air seems fitting as I stare down at my mother's gravesite. I was only ten when she died. I wonder what kind of man I'd be if she'd never left.

My heart beats slower as another gust of wind comes, harsher this time. Again, I don't move. I stand still, my hands shoved into my coat pockets.

I have her tombstone memorized, but my eyes still flicker over the engraved message.

Marie Payne

1958 - 1994

Loving wife, doting mother.

She will be missed.

I do miss her, as odd as it may be. I hardly knew her, but I miss what could have been. She's the one who taught me to smile behind the pain. She never stopped, until the last few weeks of her life. It all crumbled around her, the affair that tore them apart. People were always watching. Always judging. It was too much for her.

I clear my throat as I straighten my stance and take in a deep breath. When I come here, the smile that's perpetually on my face is nowhere to be found. I can't do it; I can't bring myself to smile when I'm around her.

Maybe that's why I come here so much.

I don't know much about her, if I'm honest with myself. There's plenty online, so I suppose I know as much about her as a stranger would who wanted to look her up. She had no family but us. She married into wealth and gave the Payne heir a baby boy. And then she had miscarriage after miscarriage.

Her name means misery. *Marie*. I remember she told me that once, and I didn't understand what she meant at the time. It's the Latin meaning. The sadness in her pale eyes is something that haunts me even till this day. How could my father not see it?

He'll never admit it, but I know she killed herself. He wouldn't let her leave. I remember the fights, the screams. That's what I remember most, even if I always had my eyes closed tight and my small hands over my ears. I'll never forget the way they'd raise their voices until I knew it must have hurt them.

I'd hide in the closet of my room whenever it happened. I stare at the small crack in the marble slab of her tombstone.

I never understood why they hated each other so much. Why they enjoyed hurting each other with their words. They must've; fighting was all they ever did.

My eyes settle onto the line, "doting mother."

I think children have to love their mother. It's something in them that's biological. It must be so, because I know I love her. Even without a single memory of her gentle touch or soothing words. I haven't a single one. The nannies were there for me when I was young. But they came and went like a merry-go-round. They got *too attached*.

The only constant was the fighting between my parents, and when that came to a halt with her death, there was only silence for a short time. And then my father started with me.

“*One mistake and you’re ruined,*” he’d tell me all the time. I was to be perfect. Just like my mother was supposed to be.

I was good where my mother failed. I enjoyed charming people. I liked getting a reaction from them. I liked for them to see the boy I wanted to be, and not the hollow shell I became.

It’s less amusing now, but it’s vital to my survival.

Father taught me well.

My phone pings with a message at the thought and I’m slow to pull it out, even though my fingers are already wrapped around it.

When I finally take my eyes from the tombstone to look at it, a text from my father stares back at me.

Dinner on the 7th for the gala. You need to be there.

A grunt leaves me and I roll my eyes as I ignore it. I already know about the event. I’ll be there just like I always am.

“He’s still the same,” I tell my mother as if she can hear me. I don’t even remember why I came today. Some days just take me here. Usually when I’m not paying attention, or looking for a moment to think.

My father needs me now more than ever. As he grows old and his influence is waning, he’s relying on me to a greater extent. I don’t mind it. In my mind, I’ve always needed to step up. *If only I had back then.*

But this constant bitching and reminding me is unnecessary. I swipe away the text.

I nearly shove my phone back into my coat pocket, ready to shield my bare hands from the wind, but the picture of *her* is on my screen. *Arianna Owens.*

And with those gorgeous eyes staring back at me, I’m reminded of the last thing I care to remember. My mistake. Danny Brooks. I stare at my phone in my hand, the dim glow lighting the darkened sky. Isaac looked her up and gave me her information. *Arianna Owens.* I suppose in a way, she reminds me of my mother. There’s a sadness there. Something that haunts her. She makes me feel like she needs to be saved.

I pinch the bridge of my nose, feeling ridiculous. “This is your fault,” I say out loud, my voice drowned out by the harsh gusts of the wind.

She’s beautiful, but her gorgeous eyes are haunted by something, darkened by what lies behind them.

I’m still enraged that Brooks offered me a month with her in exchange for a debt of hundreds of thousands that he owes me. The only claim he has to her is the collar around her neck.

My dick hardens at the thought of her on her knees, giving herself to me, pleasing me. I’ve been tempted before at the club, though I’ve never taken part. At least not in the open like that. These men are foolish to show their cards. My good friend Lucian paid the price years ago. Although now it’s paid off for him, the burden of his past only goes to show that NDAs are nothing more than paperwork. They have no loyalty to them, merely sheets of paper; so easily shredded, so quickly forgotten.

Arianna’s haunted eyes shine through the screen, staring back at me. I’ve seen her before. I’ve watched the way he drags her through the halls and leads her to the dungeon. She’s submissive in her nature, but I don’t trust her or his offer. I don’t let anyone close for a reason.

And women make men fall.

I pull the jacket tighter around me and shove the phone back into my pocket.

I should stay away. I should take the money and let him fall on his own, carrying on with my life and ignoring the pathetic waste of life that is Danny Brooks.

But those eyes call to me. My contempt for him and what he represents make a side of me I try to keep suppressed rise to the surface.

And that’s a very dangerous thing.

CHAPTER 6

ARIANNA

You're going up for auction.

Danny's words run through my mind as I scrub at the spaghetti-stained plate vigorously, my eyes unfocused as I stare straight ahead into the wall, the rough Brillo pad digging into my soft skin. I've been at this for hours now, cleaning piles of dirty dishes after a day of hard work at the local shelter.

It was a packed house today, causing more chores to be done at closing. This job pays shit, but I don't mind. I couldn't care less about the money. It's about giving back and making my life have meaning. Coming here has always been my therapy, a way to escape my emotions. It's been cathartic for me to help people who are down on their luck, and it eases some of the guilt that plagues me.

But not today.

I scrub the plate harder, a mix of pain and anger running through my body. The whip marks are a mess of bruises along my back and thighs, and each small movement is accompanied with a hint of pain. It's a reminder that I'm alive, that I can *feel*.

I haven't been able to get my mind off Danny for more than a minute.

Even now, I can't believe what he said to me. That he's willing to put me up for auction like I'm just a commodity that can be bartered or sold at whim.

And after everything we've been through. After everything he's done for me. All because I've been unhappy with our sessions. But I am broken. Something's changed, and I know I'm unhappy. What used to work isn't helping me anymore.

I suck in a painful breath as I look down at the plate that I'm scrubbing. The red stains are clinging stubbornly to the surface. No matter how hard I try, I can't seem to get them out. Just like how dark memories cling to me, sticking in my mind no matter how hard I try to rid myself of them.

If I could just forget. I drop the plate into the suds and let it fall to the bottom of the basin. My fingertips are pruned as I stare at them, remembering everything.

The thought summons a dark specter, one that always seems to pounce whenever I'm depressed.

I always had a drink in my hand. Even as I stumbled in my heels, a drink was sure to be there. Drugs? Yep. I was down for anything. I just wanted to fit in. I wanted others to accept me. I didn't go to college; I couldn't afford it, and it damn sure wasn't something my parents cared about. But I was at every party on campus.

That's where I met Natalie, although she just talked to me, bringing me into her group. It was different when she was there. It was better, but back then I didn't know. I just wanted to feel something. I needed something in my pathetic life.

I struggle against his powerful grip, my arms held back above my head against the bedpost, my eyes glazed and unfocused. I shouldn't be here alone in this darkened room with him, but I drank too much and let him talk me into it. Now I'm regretting it big time, but the words are lost in the haze of alcohol.

Chase lowers his handsome face down close to mine as the walls shake from the bass of the music blasting through the frat house. "God, I've wanted you all night," he says kissing my neck, his breath hot against my skin. "You asked for this."

I shake my head weakly, insecurity twisting my stomach. I didn't want this.

I'm not like that. I don't want to be thought of like that. I didn't know when he led me up here. How did I not know? My head shakes and I feel so stupid, so foolish. So guilty.

I part my lips to tell him, the alcohol making my head feel so heavy. But he kisses me instead, and then pulls back to take his shirt off. No, I just need to tell him no. He'll listen. He's not trying to take advantage of me. It's my fault. "I thought you just wanted to mess around a little." My words come out muffled.

"What, baby?" he asks as he pushes my legs apart wider. I try to pull them closed, but his hips butt against mine. I was just looking to have a little fun.

His hands shove my skirt up and my arms are too heavy to push him away.

I didn't mean for it to go this far. I was reckless. It was my fault. I don't know if he heard me whispering no. It makes me feel a little better to think he didn't, and I don't know if that's more fucked up than the alternative.

My breathing is ragged as I shove the memory out of my mind and let go of the Brillo pad. There are red marks on my palm from where the pad has dug into my soft flesh, but I hardly notice it, a chill snaking down my spine. I stopped going to parties, but the reliance on drugs and alcohol didn't end. And one mistake led to another that I'll never forgive myself for. Even now, I still ache in my lower abdomen at the memory of waking up on a bloody mattress months later, my nightgown soaked with dark red blood. I didn't know I'd been pregnant until I had miscarried. More mistakes. More blame. More guilt.

That was enough to send me spiraling down into darkness; I just wanted to end it all. I had a bottle in my hand as my legs hung over the bridge. I'd drink the pain away and fall in. I was so done with making mistakes. But Danny saw me. *He saved me.*

And now... he's discarding me like none of that meant anything.

"Are you okay, dear?" a familiar voice asks, breaking me out of my dark trance. I whip my head around to see Clara, the head cook of the shelter, staring at me with concern. She's a large woman in her early fifties, with greying hair that's always arranged up high on her head in a loose bun. Her

outfit, an oversized blue dress with a white apron, only makes her appear more matronly. She has a large oval-shaped face, lined with gentle wrinkles, and her hair contains striking streaks of grey that give her a distinguished look. I flash her a modest smile I hope she thinks is real. I try my best to keep my troubles hidden whenever I'm here, or anywhere really. I don't like to spread negativity. *Give your pain to me. Only me.* Danny's words from the night he first showed me the cane come back to me. I turn my back to her and grab the dish towel, drying my hands before turning back to face her. "I'm fine. Why, what's up?"

Clara nods at the dishes. "You seemed a bit distracted. You sure you're alright?"

I huff out a humorless chuckle. "Oh no, I just zoned out."

Clara places her hands on her wide hips, giving me a knowing look. "Are you sure you're okay?"

I flash her another smile, this one easier. "I'm positive."

For a moment, Clara looks uncertain as if she wants to press the issue, but then says, "Okay, I'm here for you if you ever need someone to talk to, okay honey?"

Warmth spreads through my chest and it's hard not to let the emotions I'm feeling play across my face. It touches me that Clara cares at all about what I might be going through. But then again, she wouldn't be working at a pantry that fed the homeless if she didn't possess so much empathy. There are so many people here who need help. And not because they were careless and reckless and hurting the people around them. They didn't choose it.

"Okay," I tell her with gratitude, "I'll keep that in mind."

"Make sure that you do." Clara gives me a heartfelt smile before going off back to her chores.

I spend the next half hour finishing cleaning up the last of the dishes and then head out behind the building with a bag of trash in my hand. It's full to the brim and heavy. I have to lift it with all my weight to make sure it doesn't drag on the asphalt and tear open.

I step out into the back alley, my skin pricking from the cool air sweeping through the area, goosebumps rising up on my flesh. A ray of moonlight shines down through the crack between the buildings, illuminating the walkway. I need to clean up back here; pieces of newspaper and some rotten food are strewn about, and the smell from the nearby dumpsters assaults my nose as I make my way down the small steps onto the cold concrete path. My car is parked around the side of the building, and it's just a short walk through the alley to reach it. But I need to dump the trash bag first.

I'm in the process of closing it when suddenly, rough and firm hands grab me from behind, clamping down on my mouth to stifle my cry.

My heart pounds as panic overtakes me, and I struggle against my captor, but whoever it is is too strong. Subduing my attempts to escape, I hear a grunt as I'm picked up off my feet and pressed up against the stone wall, feeling a rock hard body press into me from behind.

"Be a good girl," a familiar voice growls into my ear.

"Danny," I gasp with surprise, my heart hammering wildly as a hundred different dreadful thoughts run through my mind. I don't understand what's going on. "What are you doing here?" I cry.

Danny doesn't immediately respond, keeping me pressed up against the wall for several more moments, his breath hot on my neck. All the while, fear runs through me. He's never done anything like this before, and I can smell whiskey on his breath. He's taking joy out of keeping me guessing on his intentions while increasing the pressure on my back.

"Danny, please," I whimper as the pain grows, my eyes darting to the back entrance of the shelter. "Sir, please." I don't know what's going on. This isn't him.

Finally, he lets me go.

I gasp as I come free, turning around to face him, my chest heaving from my ragged breaths.

Danny's scowling at me, his hazel eyes blazing with anger. He looks out of place in this trashy alley with his expensive dress pants and shirt, his hair slicked to the side. I can even smell his vintage cologne over the filthy aroma

of garbage.

“I’ve come to remind you how ungrateful you are,” he growls. His words sting with a pain so raw, I can hardly stand up straight.

“Danny-” I pause and swallow the lump growing in my throat. I’m grateful. I am. I truly am.

“Don’t you remember?” he asks me, gesturing around the grimy alley. “This is the same fucking alleyway I found you in. Before you went to the bridge. You were poor, broke, hungry and homeless. And I was the only one who was stupid enough to have pity for you.”

I shake my head, unable to understand how differently Danny’s treating me. He’s never been this cruel and hateful with me before. “Danny, please. It’s not like that.” My eyes dart from him to the door. There’s a single light shining above it, and everything in me is pleading with me to run. But it’s Danny. He saved me. He won’t hurt me. “Why are you so angry with-”

“Did you once try to call me since taking your collar?” he demands, cutting me off. “Did you once try to beg me to take you back?”

“But you said I was going up for auction-” I try to reason with him. I don’t know what to do. I’m so lost.

“I fed you, you ungrateful bitch!” Danny snarls, spittle flying from his mouth. “Helped you when no one else would. And look at you, ready to run from me the first chance you get.”

I gape at him with shock.

“I saved you!” He continues his rant. “You were nothing but a drunk degenerate when I found you. And if it weren’t for me, you’d be fucking dead!” His words cut through me, because they’re true.

Tears burn my eyes as I gaze into his rage-filled face.

“Danny please,” I beg, a huge lump choking my throat as I reach my hands out to him imploringly. “Please calm down and just listen to me...”

“No,” Danny fumes. “I’m sick of listening to your pathetic whining.”

“But-”

Danny rushes forward, grabbing me by the neck, and slams me back up against the wall. A gasp escapes my lips as pain radiates up my back and I struggle to pry his powerful hands free of my throat.

“Shut. The. Fuck. Up,” he says nastily in my face, the smell of whiskey hitting me even harder now, his eyes blazing with a hatred that tears at my heart. “Your voice is so fucking annoying. I can’t believe I listened to that shit for nearly two years. It’s like nails on a fucking chalkboard.”

Tears start streaming down my face as I choke against his grasp. His words are so biting and cruel.

“I just want to remind you that even though you’re going up for auction, I still fucking own you,” he barks. “I don’t give a fuck whose collar you have around your neck. You’re fucking mine. You got it?”

I’m unable to respond, his grip on my neck so strong that I can barely breathe.

He pulls me forward and then slams me back against the wall with enough force that it jars my teeth.

“I said you got it?” he repeats with fury. “The money is mine, and so are you. This is a fucking lesson and nothing else. I own you!”

“Yes,” I croak, my eyes stinging and my lungs refusing to fill.

Danny holds me there for a moment, applying more and more pressure to my throat until I think I’m going to pass out. He lets me go at the last possible second, and I fall away from the wall, sinking to my knees onto the grungy ground, gasping, choking and crying.

“You’ll do well to remember that,” Danny tells me, uncaring that I’m bawling my eyes out at his feet, “because if you don’t, you’re going to wish I left you for dead.”

“You’re going up for auction, and then you’re coming back to me.”

I nod my head vigorously, needing him to know I’m obeying. I’m listening. “Yes, Sir.” I croak out the words through the pain.

“There, there.” His voice softens. “I don’t know why you do this to yourself. All you have to do is listen.” I hear his words, so gentle and comforting. Just listen. But everything in me is telling me to run. This isn’t right.

“I’m sorry I’m so hard on you. I just know you aren’t well.” He crouches beside me and I flinch as he grips my chin in his hand. “You need me, you need this.”

I nod my head as much as I can, staring into his eyes. But I see through him. In a split second, I see through it all. It’s about the money. It hits me so hard, so brutally, I can’t hide my expression.

His face morphs from the gentle attitude to one of cruelty. “You’re going up there, Arianna.” His voice is low. “I know where you live. I saved your life, it belongs to me now.”

A feeling of despair washes over me as I choke on my tears, my neck throbbing.

“Just do what I say and everything will be alright.”

CHAPTER 7

ZANDER

*M*y hand has been forced in some ways. Well, not quite. I pick up the beer bottle and bring it to my lips as I sit at the table in the far right corner of the upper floor in Club X. *The auction room.*

I've never felt as if my hand's been forced. There's always a choice. However, it's undeniable that I'm backed in a corner with the knowledge that Arianna Owens will be on the stage soon. Sold to the highest bidder and if it's anyone else, that will be the money I'm paid.

"What are you going to do?" Charles asks. He's seated next to me at the small circular table. There are dozens of tables in the room that seat only two to three men at most. A mask covers his face just like most of the men here, including me. They all know who I am, but with his face completely covered by the smooth flat black mask that hides every inch of his features with the exception of his mouth, they have no idea who I'm seated with. He's lucky in that respect.

My fingers trail along my jaw, the hint of stubble rough beneath my fingertips. "I haven't decided," I answer him honestly.

He grunts a laugh and sits back in his seat, picking up the pamphlet to the auction and skimming the lines. I've done the same so many times when I didn't give a fuck about sitting here. Just doing my part to fit in and keeping my friends company while I take notes about the perversions of the other men in the room. *Always watching.*

I've never shown my cards. I've never given them an ounce of useful information to use against me if they so choose.

"I can't believe a place like this exists," Charles mutters under his breath. I turn to him, ignoring Madam Lynn, the owner of Club X, as she starts the show. I've seen these auctions a million times. I've never given a fuck about them. It's mostly a charade, no surprise at all who will end up with who.

My shoulders rise in a shrug. It's a fantasy really. Decorated and maintained to provide a false sense of a world that's temporary. Darkened rooms for men to spend their money and sate themselves, safety for women who want to give in to their dark desires. It's all an illusion, nothing more than that.

But as the first woman is sold as the hammer is dropped, I find my heart beating faster. The auction has never felt more real than in this moment.

The men are talking quietly to themselves. Arianna is next, according to the pamphlet. None of their eyes are on me. Instead they're focused on Brooks, who's seated on the far side of the room, at the table farthest away from me. His foot is tapping nervously on the floor as he leans back in his seat with a cigar, putting on a casual air. As if his very life doesn't depend on Arianna being sold to pay his debt.

I imagine most of the men here expect him to bid on her. Like it's a game between them. It wouldn't be the first time a Dominant or Master has sent his partner to the auction, some for play, others for punishment. But when he doesn't bid on her, the mood in the room will change. Each second that passes, taking me closer and closer to that moment, heightens my anxiety.

I can already feel the tense air growing as the men each decide for themselves if they're willing to take her.

She's the epitome of what a Submissive should be. Or Slave, rather. Since that's the preference she's taken at the club. She's only ever been with him, but he's put on quite a show with her before.

"How many have you come to?" Charles asks me, his voice low. So low that the clinking of the ice in his short glass of bourbon nearly drowns out his words as he brings the glass to his lips.

Again I shrug, lifting my beer bottle to my lips and taking a sip. I answer him

with a low voice, “Too many.”

“How many have you won?” he asks.

“None,” I answer him with clarity, setting my glass on the white tablecloth and looking straight ahead. The thick red curtains are pulled back and the lights focused on the stage, just how it always is.

Charles laughs a deep rough sound, and my eyes are pulled to his.

“How can you resist?” he asks with a warmth in his voice I’ve never heard before.

“Easy,” I answer and take a quick look around the darkened room. “They’re all watching.”

“Let them see. Isn’t that what this place is for?” He swirls the ice in his glass and drains the remainder of the bourbon as a waitress passes us. I eye him as he leans in her direction, ordering another. He seems more comfortable behind the mask than I’ve ever seen him before. As if it grants him a freedom he’s never had. And I suppose it does. For him and many of the other men in here.

But I know all of the men in this room, and I’m not foolish enough to think that an NDA is enough to keep loose lips from using information within the walls of Club X as blackmail. As much as I’m fond of Madam Lynn, many things are beyond her control.

The first woman is sold to her own Dominant and the second is a new girl, unclaimed and looking a bit shy. She goes for a higher sum, having multiple bidders as the waitress comes back with another drink for Charles. No surprise there, and nothing out of place. Madam Lynn’s expression reflects exactly what I’m feeling as Arianna walks out onto the stage.

The lights are focused on her, making her sun-kissed skin seem to glow. She takes in a shaky breath as she stands there, and her ankles cross and uncross as she clasps her hands in front of her. Everything slows down as her thin black dress swirls along her upper thighs. With the lights so bright, her vision is limited. It will take her a moment to adjust to the darkness in the crowd beyond the stage. But she’s not trying. *She doesn’t want to see.*

“We’ll start the bidding at fifty thousand dollars,” the auctioneer says.

Madam Lynn’s gaze is focused on Brooks. She doesn’t like surprises, and she’s not used to them either. For a woman who’s so submissive in nature, she controls every aspect of the club with an iron fist. But this is out of her control, and her resentment of that is reflected in her eyes.

The small room is quiet; a man clearing his throat and the skinny black heels shifting on the large stage ahead of us are the only sounds as the men wait to see what Brooks is up to. He takes a long and deep puff of his cigar, keeping his eyes on Arianna who’s looking straight ahead at the barren wall in front of her.

After a moment he crosses his arms, ignoring the men and looking uninterested.

“Five hundred thousand,” the auctioneer gestures to a man in the back. I take a quick look, not turning in my seat to see it’s Nathan Blanchard. He’s a simple man, vanilla in tastes, but has no knowledge of what it means to be faithful.

“Six,” a man across the room says as he raises his paddle. I recognize his voice, as do most of the men here. That’s the thing about masks. When the circles in the business world are so small, you can’t hide behind a thin piece of plastic or leather.

A third man raises his paddle, and I take another drink. Listening to the auctioneer and glancing at Brooks who’s merely smiling, confident his prized possession will buy him out of the debt he’s in.

Each bid feels like a slap to my face.

Whoever wins her will use her for his own enjoyment. However he’d like. Of course there’s a contract, set terms that Arianna will agree to. Her preferences are all laid out in the pamphlet sitting in front of me and in front of all the attendees. And she agreed to this. But I see the look in her eyes, and I know the way he treats her. *I know her past.* This isn’t right.

I’m not interested in their money. My teeth grind against one another as the paddles continue to raise, the amount increasing with each bid.

The next two bids make my back straighten. My muscles are getting more and more tense.

Arianna's shoulders are rigid, but she stands tall, looking utterly gorgeous in the thin black chemise with a black rose held in front of her. Maybe it makes me a sick fuck, but the sadness only makes me want her more.

I raise my paddle, not uttering a word. It won't be the first time I've bid. But my normal cocky grin is absent. I'm not just fucking with someone as I usually am when I bid.

I've done that before, more than a few times although I always know the man I'm screwing with. It's always been in jest and lighthearted. But the winning bidder looks over his shoulder at me with disdain, and it's hard to keep the emotions off my face.

"Don't lose your cool," I hear Charles say as he lifts the glass to his lips.

I lean back in my seat and force a smirk on my lips.

None of these men know what's going on. They can think I've finally decided to indulge, but then they'll have ammunition. They'll use it against me.

From the corner of my eye, another paddle is raised.

"One point ten," the auctioneer's voice sounds out. "One twenty." I hear his voice over the loud ringing in my ears. My eyes focus on Arianna's. My heart beats slower, louder, drowning out everything else as I watch her close her eyes.

She's not meant for this. This isn't right. There's such an innocence about her, a vulnerability. I want to save her. I really shouldn't, since winning her will taint my reputation. I need to play this right.

It's just a deal I made with a man I shouldn't have. An error on my part. How many more mistakes can I afford?

"Going once," the auctioneer yells out. The sight of Arianna's large doe eyes opening and shining with fear is what breaks me from my thoughts. The quiet of the room comes back to me. The faint sounds of men drinking and hushed

conversations fill the darkened room once again.

I can't let her pay for my sins.

I raise my paddle, and the auctioneer points in my direction.

“One point three million.”

“One point four,” I hear Brooks’ voice, and it pisses me off. I lower my paddle and notice the way the other three men who were bidding look at him. As if they’re not sure they want to press on. As if it was just a game to them. A rather expensive one.

“One point five,” the auctioneer says as one of the other bidders raises his paddle.

I don’t hesitate. “One point six million dollars.”

“You look pissed,” Charles tells me, not so quietly. It’s an effort to smirk and look over at Brooks with a smile on my face, as if I’m merely playing. As if all the world is a game to me. Playing the part of a spoiled rich boy without a care in the world.

If only they knew.

Brooks plays with his paddle as if debating upping the amount. He can. And I can choose not to bid again. I can let him hang himself, but then his poor Arianna will go back to him.

Why is she even with him?

“Going once.”

I hadn’t questioned her motives before, but as the thought hits me, she could be in on this. The corner of my lips nearly drop as the auctioneer calls out, “Going twice.”

They could be playing me for a fool. And I’ve just given them exactly what they wanted.

My blood chills as the realization washes over me. And I played into their hands because of her. Because of the thought of someone else having her.

“Sold!”

And I let them play me. I’ve never felt so fucking stupid before... but now that she’s mine, I’ll have to play this right. It’s all about appearances. That’s all it’s ever been about.

My reputation, my family name, it’s all on the line.

I’m simply a rich boy who fell for a woman and couldn’t resist her.

This can’t come back as a perversion. I crack my knuckles, one at a time. The only way to get around that is to be seen with her. Constantly. And not in fucking Club X.

CHAPTER 8

ARIANNA

The scribble of pen going across paper fills the room. *Scratch. Scratch. Scratch.* Anxiety twists my stomach as I watch Madam Lynn flip through the papers of my contract, signing where needed, her finely sculpted right brow arched in concentration. Her dark blonde hair is pulled into an elegant side ponytail and her makeup is dramatic yet flawless, her lips painted a bright shade of red. A diamond cocktail ring adorns her finger and a sparkling cuff that mimics a Submissive's adorns her right wrist, while her strong, yet simple fragrance tickles the tip of my nose.

The creak of a chair breaks me out of my reverie and I freeze, my skin pricking. I feel fucking sick.

He's watching me. It's all he's been doing since he stepped in the room. Watching me and saying nothing.

I try my best to avoid his gaze, my cheeks turning red and I readjust the hem of my dress to cover more of my legs. But his piercing blue eyes seem to draw mine to them. They're beyond gorgeous, but more than that, they're hiding secrets. *Dark secrets.*

Just like I am. Just listen to him. Do as he says. I'll figure a way out of this. I just don't know how.

The breath stills in my lungs as our eyes meet, heat flushing my throat. I've seen many handsome men here in passing, those that were bold enough to remove their masks while at play, but Zander takes the cake. His dark hair is

perfectly groomed, his chiseled jawline immaculately shaved, his prominent cheekbones sharp enough to cut glass. He's dressed in a crisp dark suit, the white dress shirt underneath the jacket unbuttoned at the front. It goes without saying that he's a man of power and wealth, but he exudes much more than that. There's an aura of enigma around him, an atmosphere so strong that it causes my pulse to race and makes me weak in the knees. Zander stares back at me with an intensity that causes my palms to feel clammy, my body temperature rising. Even while looking intense, he looks so calm and composed, his legs spread out wide as if he owns the room. As if he *owns me*. And in a way, now he does. I let Danny use me. The thought makes my gaze fall for a moment. I'm going to find a way out of this. I just need time.

My eyes reach Zander's again and his gaze entraps me, as if he knows what I'm thinking. A small voice in the back of my head tells me he can save me. Another calls me a fool, reminding me how Danny *saved* me.

After a moment, I'm forced to look away, my breathing ragged. I can't take looking at him for more than a moment without my heart skipping a beat. It's almost as bad as when I was out there on the auction stage. Disgust twists my stomach as I think about what's happening. I shouldn't be here. This shouldn't be happening.

My skin pricks as I remember seeing Danny in the audience. It took a moment for his eyes to reach mine as I walked off the stage, sold and wanting to run. His eyes seemed to tell me that I was still his, and that no matter whose collar I put on, I only have one Master. My blood chills as I remember that murderous look. It was the same look he gave me in the alley. The look that said if I defy him, I'm a dead woman.

Anxiety threatens to overwhelm me, and I bite my lower lip.

Madam Lynn seems to sense my discomfort and she looks up from my contract, setting her pen aside on the polished cherry wood desk. "Are you alright, Arianna?" she asks gently. I glance at Zander and my heart wobbles again. He's still staring at me. I tear my eyes away and look over at Madam Lynn and shake my head.

"Yes, Madam," I say, lying. "Are you sure?" she asks. "If you have any

concerns about the contract you're about to sign, please air them.” She pauses to gesture at Zander. “Don’t be afraid, you can talk freely in front of Mr. Payne. Anything at all that you want to say.”

“I’m fine,” I lie again.

Madam Lynn eyes me for a long moment. She senses something that I’m not being forthwith, but doesn’t press the issue. “Don’t worry,” she tells me gently, offering me a forced smile. “Mr. Payne will let me know if there’s anything that needs to be said.” She turns to him, waiting for an answer and something passes between them, although I’m not sure what.

“Mr. Payne, is there anything you would like to say before we commence signing?”

“No,” Zander says shortly, his eyes burning into my face.

It’s just one word. But I’m nearly consumed by the sound of his voice. It’s so deep, rich and... sexy.

My cheeks burn as I’m filled with shame. I should not be having these thoughts.

I look away from both of them, a feeling of worthlessness descending upon me, a self-loathing that almost brings tears to my eyes.

Madam Lynn looks between the both of us and then nods gently, grabbing the stacks of papers.

“If you would just look over everything before signing,” Madam Lynn says. “As we discussed before the auction, you have the option to terminate this contract whenever you wish during its term, but you will forfeit the agreed-upon settlement if you choose to do so.” She slides the papers over to me along with her pen. The money. I just need to get the money and give it to Danny. Then I’ll be done. It makes me a whore, but I’ll survive. I’ll live and start over.

I’m hardly able to concentrate as I flip through the pages and go over the details of my contract. I feel so nauseated, I want to hurl as I gaze at the dotted line, my heart pounding in my chest.

I don't have to do this, I try to convince myself. I can go to the cops.

“Arianna?” Madam Lynn says softly. “Are you alright?”

The words are on my lips. I almost tell her, “I can't do this.” Instead I say, “I'm fine,” as firmly as I can manage. I already know Danny will get to me if I don't go through with this. He has wealth and power, and I have nothing.

Sucking in a deep breath, I close my eyes and quickly scribble my signature over the dotted line.

Madam Lynn gives me a tight smile when I'm done, taking the papers and pen and then sliding them over to Zander.

Zander slowly takes the papers and pen from Madam Lynn. I watch as if I'm not really here, as if it's not real, as he signs each dotted line that requires his name.

I shift in my seat, my skin pricking, my heart racing at the fire that burns in his eyes.

And as he signs the last line that requires his signature, I feel absolutely sick to my stomach.

Like I just signed my soul away to the devil.

CHAPTER 9

ZANDER

I stare at her from across the table, the door closing with a gentle click as Madam Lynn leaves the two of us alone in the conference room. It's rather small compared to the luxury of Club X. But I suppose it's only purpose is for signing contracts, so the plain white walls and simple necessities are all that's needed. In here there's no fantasy or illusion required. It's all business.

Arianna's head falls into a bow and she stays eerily still in her chair. Her eyes are focused on the floor. A darkness in me stirs with delight at her immediate submission to me. It's wrong to think that way and I ignore it, shoving it down and pretending it doesn't exist.

"Arianna," I say her name for the first time. It feels forbidden, too sweet to taste. The syllables linger in the air as she slowly raises her chin, her head still bowed slightly and her gorgeous eyes stare into mine. Deep into me, as if she can see through me.

"What are you doing?" I ask her, taking the attention off of me and back onto her lush lips. They're on the pale side, but a soft pink. Her makeup is soft and only there to emphasize her natural beauty.

"Whatever you wish, Sir." I nearly groan at her response. I'm not into power play in the bedroom. I have enough of it throughout the day to fulfill those needs. But she tempts me. It's the look in her eyes that tells me she needs what I can give her. She needs to be dominated, but not like this.

“May I call you Sir?” she asks me in a delicate voice that begs me to take her.

Her soft voice and perfect submission call to me. But I’m not interested in rules and games. The stakes in this game are much too high to play.

It hits me then, with her question, that she’s mine. That I can do with her as I please. My dick hardens in my pants just thinking about the sweet sounds that would pour from her lips. I keep my back straight as I adjust my cock to keep it from pressing against the zipper.

I’d love to get lost in her lush curves and bury myself deep inside her. But this is business. And the desires I have aren’t right. I tear my eyes away from her and look at the clock on the far wall. The second hand moves slowly, not a single tick audible as it moves seamlessly across the face. Counting time. That’s what I’ll be doing over the next month. That’s all this is.

She’s just another woman. My right hand sitting on the table balls into a fist at the thought, knowing it’s not true. I rap my knuckles against the table. The steady tapping fills the room as I realize how fucked this situation is.

She’s not just another woman. This would be too easy if she were. I wouldn’t have come here if it were true.

“Do you know why I bid on you?” I ask her as my eyes lift to her heart-shaped face.

“Because you wanted me to obey your every wish,” she answers in a gentle voice, the last word hanging in the air as I stare at her. *Yes*, a voice in the depths of my depravity calls out, begging me to take her as she offered. To give in and simply enjoy her.

“Do you know your Master offered you to me?” I ask her, although it’s not really a question. I shouldn’t have told her, but I want her to know, I want to see her reaction even more.

“Because my Master owes you?” she asks in a voice that doesn’t show what she’s feeling. It’s all a cognitive process, with no emotion involved. She’s hiding it from me.

“Yes, because your prick of a boyfriend owes me.” I’m intentionally cold, wanting a response, and she gives it to me.

Her eyes whip to mine and her lips press into a hard line. For a moment anger rises inside of me at the thought of her defending him, but her words cut through it, silencing it.

“He’s not my boyfriend.” As soon as the words are spoken, her posture returns to what it was.

More than her submission, her anger and her determination that she doesn’t belong to him make me want her that much more. Because she doesn’t have any claim to him anymore. *Now she’s mine.*

I haven’t wanted anyone like this in a long damn time. Maybe not ever. It must be the forbidden aspect of it, the dark desires I’ve only ever observed from a distance. My eyes glance over her face, waiting for more from her, trying to determine what it is about her that’s forcing my hand and only making me want her with more desperation as every minute passes.

She’s a siren. Luring me to a depth that already has me making mistakes.

She’s the reason I’m in this mess. I *felt* for her. This business isn’t about emotions.

I rest my elbow on the table and lean forward, the legs of my chair scooting across the floor and making a screeching noise.

“Can I trust you?” I ask her, finally feeling a hint of a smile reaching my lips.

“Yes, Sir.”

“Don’t call me Sir,” I immediately say and my command comes out sharp, but she doesn’t flinch. My harsh manner doesn’t affect her in the least.

“What would you like me to call you?” she asks in an even voice, perfectly still.

I let out a heavy sigh and sit back in my chair. My ankles cross as I look back at her.

“My name is Zander, and you can call me that.”

Her lashes flutter as she nods her head and answers obediently, “Yes, Zander.”

“I don’t really like... the lifestyle,” I tell her, that smile apparent as I start to spin a beautiful web, something to distract her maybe, something to hide behind. “As a kink, I understand it. But I’m not interested in having a Slave or a twenty-four seven power exchange.”

Her posture relaxes slightly. “What do you like?” she says, and as she asks me the question, she licks her lips in a nervous manner and clears her throat, setting her clasped hands on the table. Her own mask is crumbling into pieces, and her true emotions are showing. Her voice is lowered and flat.

She’s nervous, unhappy even. I’m taken aback for a moment. I hadn’t expected this reaction.

“What do you think I like?” I ask her in return. My eyes travel over every one of her features, waiting for more information on her. Everyone has a tell, and I can spot a lie from even the most deceitful men.

“I’m not sure, to be honest.” She swallows again and stares at her hands as she fidgets and pinches her fingertips. “I know I’m here to pay a debt. And that you’ll use me,” she adds and closes her eyes and takes in an uneven breath to steady herself. The smile falls from my face completely.

“I won’t do a damn thing to you that you don’t want. Let’s make that clear right now.” My firm voice makes her open her eyes. They’re glassy with tears and something else, distrust.

“I promise you. If you don’t want me in the least, you can walk through that door and this all ends.”

“He’ll-”

“He won’t do a damn thing to you. Daniel Brooks owes me money; you don’t owe anyone.”

“I owe him,” she breathes the words her face a reflection of nothing but pain. “I do,” Arianna starts to say something, but she doesn’t finish. I feel my forehead scrunch as I try to figure out what the hell she’s getting at. And then it hits me.

“If you don’t want me, you can simply leave.” The words, *I’ll forgive the debt and you’ll be free* are on my lips, but a hiss of a whisper in the darkest

part of my mind pleads with me to wait for her reply.

“I do want you,” she says and her gorgeous eyes stare into mine again, piercing through me and threatening to learn every secret I hold.

I want to tell her to leave, to get rid of her. She already has too much power over me; she makes me weak. She makes me foolish. *But she wants me.* And I can’t deny I crave the idea of her submitting to me.

“You’re going to do everything I say.” I don’t think as I speak, another side of me taking over.

“Yes, Zander.”

“We’ll start tomorrow at six in the evening,” I tell her, looking straight ahead and past her. My eyes focus on a small dimple on the white wall. An imperfection in the otherwise spotless facade of the conference room.

“What... what will you require?” she asks with slight hesitation.

“Whatever I want,” I answer her simply. It’s not the answer she wants, but she nods her head, her eyes focused on a dark knot in the center of the hard wood table.

“Until tomorrow,” I say easily although not a damn thing in me is relaxed.

“Until tomorrow,” she repeats in merely a whisper.

As she walks away, I find myself watching the sway of her hips and imagining taking her over and over. She turns to look over her shoulder one last time, her hand gripping the edge of the door. She licks her lower lip once, drawing my eyes to that beautiful mouth of hers. She starts to say something, but I can’t hear her.

“Speak louder,” I say and my voice reverberates off the walls. She startles slightly and lowers her head.

“I just said thank you.” Her eyes don’t meet mine as she says the words with an uneven cadence. The need to comfort her makes me grip the table harder, keeping me in place.

I nod my head once, watching her face as I dismiss her. “I’ll see you

tomorrow.”

She leaves quietly this time, not looking back at me or meeting my gaze. It's only when she's left that I feel like I can breathe. It's also when I realize how fucked I am.

How Brooks paid his bills isn't any of my damn business. I never should have gone to that fucking auction.

I could have made an example of him and spared Arianna, such a sweetheart, so undeserving of this.

I made a mistake. And I know exactly why.

It's because of *her*. The temptation of having her, of owning her... I caved to it.

I don't trust her. But I'll be damned if I don't want her.

CHAPTER 10

ARIANNA

Yes, because your prick of a boyfriend owes me.

Zander's biting words run through my mind as I turn over in my bed, a stream of early morning sunlight peeking through the blinds of my window. His words make me feel like a pawn. An object to be moved around on a chessboard and discarded when no longer useful.

I wrap my arms around my chest tightly, trying to ward away that worthless feeling that keeps threatening to suffocate me.

Madam Lynn's words come back to me. *You have the option to terminate this contract whenever you wish.*

Even Zander told me that I could leave if I didn't want him. But I didn't take the out he offered, and I'm ashamed. My skin pricks from the swell of emotion in my chest.

If I leave Zander, Danny will have me back. I'm a coward for hiding behind another man. Especially in this way. But knowing I'm temporarily his, gives me time and protection. My eyes stray over to my canvas. Painting almost always gives me solace when I'm stressed or feeling down. After stretching, I roll out of bed and ready my brushes and colors. I'm not even in the mood to go get coffee. I just want to paint and get lost in the art, forget about everything. I only get a few strokes done before the door opens behind me.

"Ari?" asks Natalie tentatively. It's odd, being in an apartment around

someone normal when the reality of my life is nothing like hers. I don't fit in. I never have; I was always trying but never succeeding. I suppose it doesn't matter anymore. I turn around to see her standing in the doorway, still dressed in her pink polka dot pajamas, her hair tousled, peering at me with a grin on her face. "Yes, cavewoman?" I joke halfheartedly, mostly to try to hide my feelings, to pretend everything's alright. Natalie lets out a snort. "Cavewoman? Have you looked in the mirror lately? You're not exactly Cleopatra when you just roll out of bed either."

I huff out a mirthless chuckle. "Can't argue with that."

"Anyway, hater," Natalie says as she pulls her phone out of her pajama pocket, waving at me excitedly as she walks into the room, "you have *got* to see Sarah's ankle! She just got this tattoo done, and I love it!"

"Let me see." I wipe my hands on the cloth I use to clean up with, and take the phone from her hands to take a look. It's a picture of a black rose on her ankle. It's super realistic, but it only reminds me of the rose I held yesterday as I was sold.

Natalie grins at me as I stare at the photo. "Do you like it? I think it looks awesome." She taps her finger to her cheek, her expression turning thoughtful as I try to will the memory away and return to just pretending. "I'm thinking about getting the same one, but maybe on my wrist. And I was wondering if you wanted to be the one to do it?"

I don't immediately respond, my eyes still focused on the image of the rose.

"Ari?" Natalie presses, her voice filling with worry. "What's wrong?"

I tear my eyes away from the image to see the concern in Natalie's eyes. A part of me wants to tell her everything. About Danny. About the auction. Zander. But I ignore that part; I don't want to drag her into this, so instead I just say, "Danny and I aren't getting along right now." I'm unable to keep the frustration I feel with my situation from seeping into my voice. Natalie gazes at me with worry. "What's wrong? Did something get out of hand again?"

It sure fucking did.

It hurts me not to tell Natalie the truth. She's been my only friend for the longest time, and she's the only person I have left that I fully trust. But I

know deep down telling her will do more harm than good.

I pass back her phone. “Not really. I just think we need a break from each other.”

Natalie slips her phone back into her pocket and places her hands on her hips. “Come on, I know you’re not telling me everything. Something got out of hand again and you just don’t want to admit it.”

Oh Nat, it’s much, much worse than that, I think darkly.

“It’s fine,” I lie, hating myself for it. “I’m okay, don’t worry.”

Natalie’s frown deepens. “You’re lying to me.”

I don’t know how to respond. I can see that she cares so much about me. She knows about my troubled past and all of what I went through, and just doesn’t want to see me hurt. But I don’t know how to tell her without making things worse.

Right then, my cell buzzes on the nightstand.

I tell Natalie, “Hold on a sec,” as I walk over to it, grateful for the interruption. It’s a text message from Zander.

My driver will be at your apartment at 5:15 to pick you up.

The event is black tie. Wear a gown if you have one.

Be ready,

Z

“What was that?” Natalie asks, walking over, but I stick my phone back into my pocket before she can ask to see.

“Nothing,” I reply, walking back over to my canvas while feeling like total shit for having to lie. “Just some dumb prick texting the wrong number.”

CHAPTER 11

ZANDER

I admire punctuality. It says something about a lack of respect when a person is late. I half expected Arianna to be late for Marcus, my driver.

The cufflinks clink as I pick them up off the dresser and slip them into place, locking them and pulling down my sleeves slightly. I straighten my tie as I stare at myself in the mirror. I've always felt comfortable in a tux, but not today. Everything feels tight and suffocating.

I haven't given her a single reason to respect me, but she at least respects the contract.

It's obvious she doesn't want to do this, but I'll give her enough to desire at least a business relationship with me.

Tonight will be dinner, an interview in a way. That's all a dinner really is, just an interview.

I check my phone on the dresser, the dim light brightening the dark bedroom and see that the photographers will be there to catch a candid shot. I'll pretend I don't see them, just like I always do. I huff a humorless laugh at the ideal headlines PR is looking for.

Eligible Bachelor Falling Head Over Heels.

Love at First Sight for the Family Heir.

I can woo her. I'll get the photographs I need to create the image I want. I

don't know how much I'd like to tell Arianna. My gut tells me to be truthful, to have her in on the charade. But the very thought of trusting her makes me panic.

I trust no one. But I can give her enough to go on.

The only loose end is Daniel Brooks.

My phone pings just as I set it back on the dresser. *Charles.*

I read the text silently and then pull back, running my fingers through my hair and slicking it back some before ruffling it in a way that looks careless. I take my time with it, making sure it looks just right.

Charles will take care of Brooks. I only need him to keep an eye on things for now. To make sure he stays in place until I figure out how to handle this.

Ideally, I can convince Arianna to keep the money for herself. The thought of Brooks' face when he finds out... how his expression will fall, that cocky glint in his eye will vanish.

But first, the interview. I need to know who she is and what she really wants. A background check can only tell you so much about a person, even one as in depth as what I received. *Don't disappoint me, Miss Owens.*

"She won't," the words slip past my lips as I shrug on my jacket. They hang in the air of my dark bedroom, holding a threat. I better be right about her.

My phone pings again, causing a spike of annoyance to run through me and this time it's Marcus, right on time with Arianna in tow.

I quickly make my way to the front doors, my strides so fast that I create a breeze as I climb down the stairs.

I breathe out a heavy exhale as I unlock the door, swinging it open and preparing for another evening of playing the role I was born into.

The moment I lay eyes on Arianna, the negative air that practically smothers me day in and day out, dissipates into the chill of early spring. Marcus is holding the door open for her, one of her small hands in his as her slender legs step out of the car one at a time, her heels clicking on the driveway. It's something about her expression that catches me off guard. Maybe it's the

subtle way she brushes her gown and tucks a strand of her hair back as she stands tall as she takes in a deep breath.

She's as stunning as ever. I don't know what it is about her. She's not overly sexual, and there's not a single thing I can pinpoint that makes her exceptional. But every time I see her, my world pauses for only a moment. A single point in time where everything stands still, the air in my lungs halting and my heart slowing. There's a quality of innocence and sadness about her that makes me crave something I've never felt before.

I wish I could ignore it.

Her eyes widen when she sees me standing in the doorway staring back at her, and the smile I loathe creeps up and into place, but this time it feels different.

It's an odd thing that I've noticed. Everyone looks at me the same. Their eyes travel up and down my clothing, taking in the details. Businessmen before a board meeting, lower-level thugs at the corner of the street with information, even the vixens that wait late at night at the bars or casinos, hoping to sink their bright red nails into me for a piece of the money. They all look at me the same. Judging, assessing. I can practically see the wheels turning. Some are faster than others, but all of them have telltale signs of what they think.

Arianna is different. The expression on her face tells me she wants me, not my money. The lust turns her eyes glassy and makes her breathing come in short as her eyes linger down my body. But rather traveling back up to meet my gaze, she turns slightly away as the door closes and she thanks Marcus, her soft voice carried away by the gentle gust of the wind. It makes her hair blow, exposing more of her bare shoulder and her skirt clings to her right side.

When she looks back up, she doesn't meet my gaze.

"Miss Owens," I say loud enough for her to hear as I walk down the three steps to greet her. I make sure the charming smile is on my face as I wrap my arm around her small waist and plant a chaste kiss on her cheek. Surprise lights her eyes up and she doesn't respond for a moment. I don't know what she expected, but I'll surpass anything she's ever experienced. I'll make her want me. Want *this*. She'll play the part so well, because I'll make her

believe it.

“Mr. Payne,” her voice says my name in a sensual way that’s seemingly unintentional.

“Just a moment, Marcus,” I tell my driver as he stands by the car. Marcus nods once. He’s an older man maybe in his sixties, but lean and cut from constantly working out. He takes pride in himself and what he does. He’s always worked for me, ever since I was sixteen or so. I didn’t trust him for years though. After all, it was my father who hired him. But on several occasions, he’s proven his loyalty to me and that he can keep secrets.

Still, I’d rather him not hear what I have to tell Arianna. He may be trustworthy, but that doesn’t mean I have to take an unnecessary risk. I haven’t even confided in Charles. The less people who know, the better.

I lean in a bit closer to Arianna, whispering in her ear as I splay my hand along her lower back and lead her into the house. “We need to leave for dinner shortly, but I wanted a private word inside.”

“Yes, Si- Zander,” Arianna’s posture stiffens at her mistake, and I almost regret my plan... *almost*.

The moment we’re inside, I shut the door and turn to her, slipping my hands into my pockets.

“I’d like you to be my girlfriend,” I tell her simply.

She turns on her heels to face me, a look of not understanding on her face. “I’m sorry?” she asks.

I let out a charming chuckle, and walk the few steps to be closer to her. The house is so much warmer than outside, so much more welcoming.

“You heard me,” I say and take her hand in both of mine. “I’d like you to be my girlfriend in place of what’s written in the contract.”

A knowing look flashes in her eyes and those beautiful lips part as understanding shows in her expression. Again, she doesn’t respond like I thought she would. “A *fake* girlfriend?” she asks softly.

I pull away slightly and shrug as I reply, “I’ve never had one, so I’m not sure

if it'd be all that fake." My words are casual, but calculated. I want her to believe in it. Of course it's fake. Yet another mask to hide behind.

Those dark green eyes pierce through me, not fooled by my tone in the least.

I ignore her prying gaze and the disappointment on her expression. "You'll be my girlfriend. Starting tonight, with a dinner date." I plaster a fake-ass smile on my face and wait for her reaction.

"Yes, Zander." Her posture stiffens now that she knows the rules of this game. It's an act and she's ready to play the part. But I don't want her to just play, I need it to feel real.

"Would you talk that way to your boyfriend?" I ask her. My jaw clenches at the thought of her speaking to Brooks like that. I ignore the jealousy creeping up my spine and sending a chill over every inch of my skin.

Arianna holds her clutch in both of her hands clasped in front of her and shakes her head slightly. "No," she answers honestly.

"Well then, it's just Zander, alright?" I tell her with a feigned casualness. "None of that..." I don't finish, not sure how to word her normal submission.

"I don't know how to..."

"How to what, sweetheart?" The little nickname parts from me without my conscious decision, but the way she reacts makes me want to say a million times over. The soft curves of her face brighten, and a beautiful pink hue rises to her cheeks. She lowers her head a little, closing her eyes and sinking her teeth into her bottom lip as she shakes her head slightly.

"How to," she starts to say with her eyes still closed and then opens them slowly, those gorgeous green eyes staring straight into me. The way only she can. "How to act tonight?" she asks in a voice so genuine, so sweet. Fuck, and all because I called her sweetheart? The shift in her is addicting. I love the smile. The light that I give her.

This is why I can't deny her.

CHAPTER 12

ARIANNA

*M*y heart feels like it's going to escape out my throat as I walk up the steps to Gargano's Italiano restaurant, my heels clicking against the stamped concrete. Wonder courses through my limbs as my eyes take in the gorgeous setting, the bright backlighting illuminating the entire area with soft golden light.

I grip the railing as I walk beside Zander, his arm wrapped loosely around my waist. The stairway leads up to double doors that are surrounded by huge white Greek columns. There's a ten-foot male statue fountain halfway up the steps, the columns of water spraying high into the air. Surrounding the stairs is lush green landscaping, sprinkled with well-manicured walkways and white stone benches.

This is beautiful.

I'm so enthralled with the picturesque scenery that I only make it a couple of steps before I nearly trip over my dress. He told me to wear a gown, and this is the only one I had. The strapless chiffon fabric is forgiving and doesn't wrinkle which is a plus, but it's a bit long for my petite stature.

Shit.

Zander quickly tightens his powerful arm around my waist, saving me, pulling me against his hard body, and forcing me upright. The smell of his masculine cologne tickles my nose as I suck in a grateful breath, my skin pricking from the heat emanating from him. He smells like a fresh breeze and

sandalwood. It's both calming and intoxicating.

"I'm sorry," I apologize softly from beneath lowered lashes, my face burning red with embarrassment. "I wasn't watching where I was going."

Zander told me to act like his girlfriend, but all I'm succeeding at is being awkward. I've never done this before, and my insecurity doesn't help. I feel like I'm not worth being on his arm, like it's obvious this isn't real. But I force a smile, trying to keep up appearances.

Zander smiles back at me, moving his hand to my hip, and despite my nervousness, I can't help but notice how handsome he is. He fucking *owns* the black tux and bow tie he's wearing. I've seen many men in expensive suits at Club X, but I've never seen anyone wear one like he does. He radiates, power, wealth and sex like the sun radiates light. I'm breathless, being this close to him. Like I'm drowning. And I don't want to come up for air.

He chuckles as he says, "I've got you. I won't let you fall." It's an odd thing, seeing how charming he is. I wasn't expecting him to be like this after the signing. I didn't expect any of this. And I don't know how to react.

"This place is beautiful," I say when I catch my breath. I'm trying so hard to be polite and act normal.

"If you think this is beautiful, wait until you see inside," Zander boasts. His teeth sparkle when he smiles. It's a beautiful look on him, that gorgeous smile, but it makes me feel uneasy.

Keeping a firm hand on my waist, he leads me up the stairwell. I raise my head, trying to look regal and confident on his arm.

As soon as we walk in, my breath catches in my throat as I take in the impressive architecture. Soft music plays over unseen speakers, setting the romantic ambience. We pass under impossibly high ceilings with massive archways that are decorated with silk sheers. I can see our reflections in the gleaming marble floors, and gorgeous intricate designs are inlaid across the surfaces.

The walls are painted a soft golden color and the sconces on the wall gives off a warm, fuzzy glow, infusing the room with an angelic-like radiance.

Tables are set with pure white cloth and the china and glasses are accented with gold. *Expensive*. This place looks fucking expensive.

And the people. Everyone here is dressed in their finest.

“You’re right,” I murmur, feeling extremely insecure. I lack the confidence of the other women around me. I have to look out of place on Zander’s arm. “It is better.”

Zander winks at me as we walk up to the reservation area, his arm resting possessively on the curve above my ass. “Told you.” Seeing his playfulness eases my anxiety somewhat, though I clutch at him tightly to deal with my frazzled nerves.

Not a minute passes before a waiter dressed in uniform walks up to us.

“Do you have a reservation?” the waiter asks, his vest bunching slightly as he stands at the podium, flipping over a sheet of paper.

“Payne,” Zander replies shortly although his voice doesn’t hold an edge.

The waiter looks down at the booklet on the podium before nodding and motioning us out of the foyer. “Of course. Right this way, Mr. Payne.”

As we follow the waiter and pass by rows of occupied tables, Zander tightens his grip on my waist and pulls me even closer, causing my skin to flush. It’s like he wants to show me off to the world and wants everyone to know we’re together. I even see a few women look our way, their eyes glued to Zander and traveling down his body, but then stopping at his hold on me.

I try to act confident, but I can’t keep my eyes from nervously darting about. I feel like everyone knows I don’t belong here. That I’m a worthless fraud.

“Remember to play your role,” Zander says under his breath. “Act like you know me and not like you’re a scared little doe lost in the woods.” He whispers the words, but there’s a playful smile still on his lips. His words have an immediate effect on me, and without even thinking, I gently place my hand on his stomach, feeling the hard ridges of his abs beneath his silk dress shirt.

“That’s better,” he says quietly.

I feel awkward as shit doing it, but I still like it.

We're led to a plush booth at the back of the restaurant. We pass what has to be a VIP section since the tables are more intimate, with lower lighting. I try not to look their way as Zander helps me into the booth before taking his seat.

"What will you have to drink?" the waiter asks while dropping menus in front of us and finishing up what felt like a speech about the fish of the day and something else. I can't concentrate on what he's saying with how fast my heart is beating.

"A white Zinfandel and I'll have a whiskey sour," Zander replies, not even bothering to ask me what I want.

"Of course, Mr. Payne." The waiter nods his head and walks off.

When he's gone, Zander focuses his eyes on me, the intensity of his gaze causing goosebumps to run down my arms. "You look beautiful."

My lips part with surprise as my cheeks flush. They're simple words, but they mean so much when they sound genuine.

"Thank you," I say softly when I can finally manage, lowering my lashes.

"You're welcome," Zander says, giving me that intense look that makes my skin prick.

For a moment, I get lost in his piercing blue eyes, wanting - no, wishing - that this was something more than what it really is.

"Why are we doing this again?" I blurt out suddenly. I bite my tongue after I say it. I wish I could take the words back, I only need to get the money and forget about all of this.

Zander arches an eyebrow. "Doing what?"

I gesture between us. "This... pretending..." I shift slightly in my seat, feeling so damn uncomfortable. "I just don't understand."

For the first time this night, Zander frowns and it makes me regret my outburst. "I already told you why," he says, keeping his voice low. "I don't want a Slave. It doesn't appeal to me."

And playing make-believe does? I want to ask. It's hard to believe a man like Zander not having *needs*. Sexual needs that revolve around power and domination. The thought brings a heat to my core, and I have to sit back in my seat, grabbing the napkin and delicately placing it over my lap.

"I'd rather get to know you first before having you crawl to me on your hands and knees," Zander says quietly.

His words have a clear effect on my body. I'd happily crawl to him. He must see the flicker of lust in my eyes, and the same is reflected in his. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Right then the waiter returns with our drinks, saving me from responding. He sets a sparkling wine glass down in front of me and a mixed drink down in front of Zander.

"Are you ready to order, sir?" the waiter asks.

Zander nods. "A medium rare steak with crab cakes for me, and the stuffed lobster for my sweetheart." He says it again. Sweetheart. And a blush grows on my cheeks, heating my face and making me fiddle with the napkin to soothe my nerves.

"Wonderful selections, sir," the waiter says as he scribbles down the order and leaves us.

"What if I was allergic to seafood?" I have to inquire when he's gone.

Zander shakes his head. "I know you aren't. I want to appear that I know exactly what you want, like I've known you for some time. Remember, we're playing a role." He grins. "Besides, I know you'll love what I ordered for you. Promise."

"I'll take your word for it," I say softly, flashing a fake smile as I take in his admission that he knew I wasn't allergic.

"Smart girl." Zander grins as if pleased by my behavior. He takes a sip of his drink, his penetrating eyes glued to my face. He keeps them on me, literally making me squirm in my seat before asking, "Tell me, what do you do in your free time?"

I hesitate for a moment, glancing down into my glass, a slight flush coming to my cheeks. I wonder if he already knows.

“You can tell me,” Zander says gently. “I don’t judge.” I look up at him, searching his eyes for the reason he’s asking me, but I come up emptyhanded.

“I work at a soup kitchen, doing work for the homeless,” I tell him. “When I’m not working, I like to paint.”

“And you were ashamed to tell me that?” Zander asks.

I bite my lower lip. “It doesn’t pay well.” That’s an understatement.

“But does it make you happy?”

I nod. “In some ways. I like helping people. It makes me feel... complete.”

Zander eyes twinkle as he gazes at me. “I respect that, I really do. And I’d argue, loving what you do is more important than what a job pays.”

“Do you really think so? My bills don’t.” It’s a joke, but I sound absolutely serious.

Zander chuckles. “Can’t say I can argue with that.” Zander arches a curious eyebrow. “And what about your painting?”

I hesitate. I like my artwork, but I’m not sure if Zander will, or anyone else for that matter. I don’t paint it for others; it’s only for me.

“I think I have a picture here in my cell somewhere,” I mumble.

“Can I see?” he asks, his tone filled with inquisitiveness that makes me want to show him.

I dig out my cell from my clutch and flip through the photos until I find a picture of one of my paintings. It’s on the darker side with a woman lying down on a bed while looking out of a small window. It’s not some picturesque painting. Not a classic, like a gorgeous landscape of rolling green hills and an azure blue sky. She’s haunted by something that keeps her in her room, although I don’t know what.

My throat is dry as I pass him the phone, my palm feeling sweaty and my nerves making me nearly regret showing it to him. Zander takes more than a

moment to look over it, his eyes moving slowly across the screen before passing my phone back. “That’s beautiful, Arianna,” he compliments me, a note of respect entering his voice. “You’re very talented.”

“It’s a little...” I trail off as I try to think of the right word to defend it before he can question it, but he fills in the word for me.

“Haunting,” he says and his voice is firm. “It’s in her eyes.”

I nod my head, not trusting myself to respond verbally. “It really speaks to how well you’re able to paint emotions. Not everyone can do that.”

I blush furiously at his praise, my self-confidence rising several notches. “Thank you,” I say softly.

The waiter returns with both of our plates and I’m shocked to see how quickly time has gone by. The smell of sweet butter and herbs wafts toward me, and my mouth waters.

We’re both quiet as the meals are set in front of us, although I notice Zander checking his phone.

“Is everything alright?” I ask him when we’re alone again.

He gives me a smile, picking up his utensils and answers, “It’s perfect.”

CHAPTER 13

ZANDER

I'm rewarded with a small smile as I set my hand on Arianna's thigh as I readjust in my seat in the back of the Mercedes. I wonder if she's ever been treated this way before. It's not so difficult. A sweet gesture here and there, and alone time over a nice meal.

"I had a really nice time," she says so quietly I almost don't hear her. But then she clears her throat and looks up at me through thick lashes and speaks more clearly, "It was more than I expected, thank you."

But the way she's acting, it's as if she's never been fed. Like she's never been told that she's beautiful.

It's hard to believe it's true.

"Thank you for accompanying me," I tell her as the car slows down in front of her house.

I expected dinner to be filled with uncomfortable silence, but there wasn't a moment that conversation didn't happen easily and naturally. "We have a dinner this weekend as well."

"Another?" she says and her voice brightens and forces a small laugh from me.

"Yes, you may find it hard to believe, but I eat almost every day. Sometimes several times a day." The joke comes out easily and makes her smile. That sweet one that shows she's honestly happy. It warms my chest to know I put

it there.

As Marcus stops the car, I'm quick to open my door and wait for his eyes to catch mine in the rearview mirror. I've got her from here. He stays in his seat as the car remains in park and I quickly shut my door and move to hers to help her out.

"I'm excited to do this again," she says with a sweet smile. She brushes a stray strand of hair from her face as the wind blows by and goosebumps grow along her arms. "Thank you... again," she says for at least the fifth time and this time rolls her eyes recognizing how absurd it is that she keeps thanking me. If nothing else, Arianna is full of gratitude and not afraid to show it.

"I am as well." I walk her up to her steps and stop, making sure that she knows I have no intention of going in. It's not about sex. I don't want her to feel pressured and judging by the soft look on her face, she's not in the least.

She turns on the first step, and rocks on her heels as she asks, "This weekend?"

I nod my head and answer, "Four days."

"Will I see you before then?" she asks me. There's a flash of hope in her eyes and I'm not sure if it's because she wants to see me, or if she thinks she won't have to be with me again until this weekend.

"I have a good bit of work to do," I tell her, although in the back of my mind I can't help but to think I'll have time in the evening. Late evening. She could always come and warm my bed. I brush off the thought but the hint of disappointment in her voice as she answers, "Oh, okay," makes me want to offer it to her.

Maybe not this week, but next.

"I'll be calling you. And you can do the same if you'd like. I'll message you if I think of anything," I tell her without thinking. I have no fucking reason to call her whatsoever, but just the offer brings that beautiful smile back to her face.

She tucks her hair behind her ear. "I'll call you then," she says and closes her eyes and shakes her head slightly. "Or you call me. I'll wait," she adds, then

nods her head, looking so serious. "I'll wait for you to call me."

A rough chuckle rises up my chest as I lean forward and give her a chaste kiss goodbye. "Alright then, sweetheart."

Even in the darkened night, I can see that blush on her cheeks as she turns to go upstairs.

"Oh, Miss Owens," I call out her proper name, reaching forward and grabbing her hand in mine. "I had a package delivered for you," I say and pull her closer to me, and she doesn't resist my touch. I wrap my arms around her waist, letting them rest on the lower part of her back, dangerously close to her ass.

Although her eyes dart from my cheek up to my own, she doesn't push me away. I can see how her chest is rising and falling with quicker breaths now, and I fucking love it. I'm addicted to the way I so easily affect her.

"You did?" she asks with equal amounts of surprise and delight in her voice. The streetlights shine down on her in a way that casts shadows along the soft curves of her face. She looks up at me and all I can see in her green eyes is sincerity. I could get lost in the swirls of deep jade that shine back at me.

"I did," I say before I quickly kiss her lips. The kiss is soft and easy and I need to keep it that way.

It was only one night. An evening just to get to know her, just an interview, but I can feel it turning into something more. A desire for something I shouldn't want.

The reminder of why I'm holding her in my arms, why all of this is even happening is enough to break the spell of her hopeful gaze.

She's temporary. And a mistake I'm merely trying to fix. The knowledge makes my smile slip, but it's instantly replaced by the one I hate.

"I'll see you this weekend." I deliver another small kiss to the tip of her nose and step out of her embrace. She doesn't seem to notice my change in demeanor. "If you need anything in the meantime, you'll let me know."

"Of course," she replies and bats her eyes, moving the clutch from one hand

to the other. “Really, and truly. Thank you for tonight, Zander.” Her voice is so full of happiness, that I find my reasons for leaving so quickly disappearing into the dark night. But she turns from me before I can go back to her, her hips swaying and taunting me as she walks closer to the front door and grips the railing.

As I watch her walk up the steps, those gorgeous curves tempting me as the soft sounds of the night air swish by and make her dress cling to her, I finally answer her beneath my breath. “My pleasure, sweetheart.”

CHAPTER 14

ARIANNA

My pleasure, sweetheart.

Zander's words linger in my mind as I step into my shared apartment and gently close the door behind me, feeling a heavy mix of emotions coursing through my chest. Zander has been such a gentleman. It was so unexpected; I don't know how to process it. It's hard not to feel butterflies, even knowing it's all fake.

I suck in a heavy breath, remembering how it felt to be held in his arms at the end of dinner. Zander made me feel special, like I was the only woman in the room. And even though I felt unworthy to be there with him, I wanted it to be real. I wanted desperately to think that he truly wanted me beside him.

It felt like that. It felt *real*.

I run my finger down the side of the package that was left for me. It's not hard to imagine that it's a dress for this weekend. The white box is large, yet light. My heart beats with anticipation to open it.

I spin around when I hear Natalie's shocked voice.

"Jesus Ari, what are you dressed up for?" She walks into the living room and adds, "You look beautiful!"

Natalie's in her favorite pair of pink polka dot pajamas, a half-finished cup of Greek yogurt in her hand, her jaw hanging slack. The television's on and running in the background, playing some rerun of one of the *Real*

Housewives reality TV shows she likes to watch.

She sets her yogurt down on the end table next to the couch and walks over to inspect my dress.

My tongue is tied. I don't know how to tell her the truth. It all feels... dirty. "I was out with a friend," I lie.

Natalie studies me suspiciously. "What sort of friend? And since when do you go out dressed like that for *a friend*?" Although she's practically interrogating me as she crosses her arms, she has the hint of a smile playing on her lips.

I'm unable to answer her question. The butterflies fluttering in my stomach want to tell her about tonight. About dinner and how Zander treated me, but it's not real and it'll only complicate things to involve anyone else. Plus, I'm not sure what I'm allowed to reveal given the non-disclosure agreement I signed at Club X. I really wish she would stop prying. It puts me in such an uncomfortable position. She peers closely at me when I don't answer right away. "And what's this..." her voice trails off as if she realizes something. "Wait a minute... you weren't out there with Danny, were you? Is that why you don't want to tell me what's going on? 'Cause you told me you were taking a break with him, and you're really not?" Her voice raises, and the smile vanishes.

I roll my eyes at where her mind goes, holding the package a bit closer to me. I wish it were that simple.

Natalie persists, insisting, "I know you were with someone. I can smell cologne on you."

"It wasn't with Danny," I say.

Natalie presses. "Who then?"

I grit my teeth, wishing I didn't have to do this. "I can't say. Just a friend."

Natalie scrunches her face into a frustrated scowl. "You know what? Your sudden secretive ways are really starting to get to me."

I let out a sigh. "I'm sorry, Nat. I just don't want to say anything right now."

Natalie places her hands on her hips. “Well, when will you be able to say anything then? The suspense is killing me.” She lightens the mood by exaggerating her last line and moving to snatch her cup of yogurt up again.

I remain tight-lipped. “I don’t know. Soon.”

Natalie stares at me for a long moment before letting out a resigned sigh and taking a spoonful of yogurt. “Okay. I’m going to let you off the hook for now. But can you promise me one thing?”

I’m on edge. “What?”

“Don’t see that piece of shit Danny ever again, pretty please?”

“He’s not a piece of shit,” I say reflexively. I don’t know why I say that. Everything Danny has done to me recently leading up to the auction says he is. And after what Zander told me, I should never want to see him again. But no matter how hard I try, I can’t get over what he did for me.

He saved me. I really wanted to kill myself. I would have if he hadn’t stopped me.

Natalie’s jaw drops. “Are you kidding me? He beat the hell out of you for the past couple of months, and now you’re defending him? What the hell is wrong with you?”

God, I don’t want to fight. I toss the package down feeling like I’m in a no-win situation. But it’s a tight spot that I put myself in. I seriously want to go into my room and curl up into a little ball. “Please, Nat,” I plead, “I’m tired and don’t want to talk about this right now.”

Natalie stares at me long and hard, before finally shaking her head. “Fine. But I don’t think I’ll ever understand this relationship you have with him, and I don’t think I ever want to.” My throat feels tight as I take in her words. I didn’t ask for her support and I understand that she doesn’t like it, but it still hurts. “I’m going to bed. Don’t forget to turn the lights off.”

She disappears down the hall, leaving me alone.

I suck in a heavy breath as tears sting my eyes, my gaze going down to the package sitting on the sofa. I feel like crap having to lie to Natalie, but I don’t

know what else I can do.

Sighing, I slump down on the couch, running my fingers over the package.

I tear it open and stare in shock at what's inside. It's a beautiful gown, a white sparkly number, with glittering rhinestones that shimmer like diamonds. I run my fingers over the exquisite tailoring, thinking that it's the nicest gift anyone has even given me.

But just like tonight, just like the butterflies in my stomach, it's a lie.

I cover the dress up with the thin piece of white tissue paper and let my head fall back against the sofa.

None of this is real, and I need to protect myself and remember that.

CHAPTER 15

ZANDER

I turn down the radio as I pull off of the highway heading down to Arianna's place. It's nearly eight on a Friday, but it's the only night I can make time for her.

My turn signal clicks as I turn onto her street and remember the article in the paper this morning. It's nothing huge, and I doubt Arianna's read it. The picture of her is perfect, capturing the moment and sending the message that I'm no longer on the market. She may never even know about it unless she searches her name or someone points it out to her.

I want to be the one to show her. I can't wait to see her reaction when she sees. Although it does say, "mystery woman." The next one will have her name; I made sure of that.

I pass a row of condominiums. I hate this area in the city. The brick is old and worn, and graffiti covers half the buildings. She doesn't belong here. I grip the steering wheel tighter as I park out front of her building and look up to her apartment window. The lights are on.

It's a weird feeling, something like nervousness as I pull out my phone. It doesn't make sense, and I ignore it as I text her that I'm outside. I stare up to her window, waiting for a response. I let out a small laugh as I see her pull the curtains back to look outside.

The phone pings as I open my car door and I glance at it to see what she's said as I jog up the stairs. *Come on up.*

My heart flutters as I walk into the warmth of the building and see her standing in her open doorway.

“Hi,” she says sweetly as she opens the door wider and bites her lower lip.

Her nightgown looks nothing like what I’d expect on her. It’s a simple cotton thing, so thin that I can see the outline of her nipples. It’s the colors that I don’t expect. Patches of bright and neon colors.

“It’s my roommate’s,” Arianna says, answering the unspoken question. She shrugs slightly before saying, “It’s laundry day.”

I turn to take her in, and something shifts. The flutters in my stomach turn to stone as she crosses her arms across her chest and avoids looking at me.

That smile I’ve been thinking about for the past few days, the one that’s invaded my every waking moment, is nowhere to be seen.

“How are you?” I ask her out of curiosity as I walk into her apartment.

“Fine, how are you?” she answers with a politeness I’ve come to expect from her.

“Alright,” my answer is a bit absent as I glance around her place. I’ve never seen the inside before. The walls are an off-white, typical in apartments, but there are so many photos on the wall that color the room. On the far wall of the living room there have to be at least thirty photos, all framed and hung in the shape of a heart above a lime green Ikea sofa littered with pillows in different colors. It takes me by surprise.

“Those are Natalie’s,” Arianna says and nods toward the living room.

“Ah,” I walk in a few steps and lean against the banister.

“I didn’t expect you,” Arianna says in a way that makes it obvious she’s uncomfortable with me dropping by unannounced like this. She tucks her hair behind her ear as she looks past me and back into the living room as she says quietly, “I would have cleaned up.” Her entire demeanor has changed since I saw her last. My heart feels heavy in my chest, as if it’s falling, it’s an unnatural feeling, something I’m not used to.

“I thought I would surprise you,” I tell her. “I wanted to make sure you got

your dress.”

I expect a smile, but instead she only nods and answers respectfully, “I did, and it’s beautiful. Thank you so much.”

My heart thuds once, then twice. Maybe this was a mistake. I run my hand through my hair, not knowing what the fuck to do. I don’t have a significant other for a reason.

“I’m sorry,” Arianna’s voice comes out small. “I should have texted you to thank you.”

My gaze travels over her entire body. She’s uncomfortable, but presenting herself. Just like the auction. There’s a small bit of paint on her elbow, and at first it looks like a bruise, but it’s definitely paint.

“Have you done any more artwork?” I ask her, trying to change the subject. I can’t leave her feeling like this. The gala is tomorrow and I don’t trust whatever’s going on in her head right now.

She nods her head, a bit of brightness lighting her dark green eyes. It makes my lips kick up into a smirk. “Let me see,” I tell her.

“Oh,” she takes a half a step back and bites her lip. “It’s not really done.”

My stomach drops at her confession, although she tries to back out of the excuse. “I can still show you,” she says apologetically.

“No,” I say and wave her concern away. “That’s fine. If it’s not done, I’ll wait.”

She nods her head and visibly swallows, awkwardness returning.

“I was just on my way to bed,” Arianna says quietly. “I’m just tired, really.”

“Alright then,” I tell her, taking the cue to leave and feeling like a fucking jackass. “I’ll head on out and go home.”

She’s a smart woman. She knows this isn’t real, and whatever connection we had at dinner is long gone. My blood runs cold at the thought. A frown settles on my face and refuses to budge. *How did I fuck this up?* I shake the thought away. There was nothing to fuck up. It was stupid for me to visit her.

I open the door, seeing myself out, but she's quick to follow me. I stand in the open doorway. "I'll be with Marcus around six to pick you up tomorrow."

A small smile slowly grows on her lips and I'll be damned, but my heart flutters with hope.

"Come here," I say and cup my hand around the back of her head and bring her in for a kiss. My lips press against hers gently at first as she tilts her head and holds her body close against mine.

I'm just kissing my sweetheart goodnight.

A spark ignites between us as I deepen the kiss, letting my other hand roam down to her waist and pulling her even closer to me. The tip of my tongue slips between the seam of her lips and she parts them for me, moaning softly into my mouth and gripping my shirt in her hands. Electricity runs over every inch of my skin, a dark beast inside of me coming to life, wanting to hold onto her and not let go.

This is what we had before, and I don't want to lose it. I don't want to take another step away and never have this again.

"Hey," my voice is low as I pull back from the kiss and grip her chin in my hand. Her eyes are still closed, as if she's in a daze. I know I'm not the only one that feels this. "Are you alright?" I need to know. I don't want to lose her again. "Did Brooks message you?" I ask her even though I know Danny's not bothering her. Charles is still watching him and has his phone tapped. But something's not right with her.

"I'm just not feeling well," she tells me, although her eyes don't hold my gaze.

"Is there something I can get you?"

"No," she pulls away from me, holding the edge of the door, ready to close it. "I'll be alright."

I search her eyes and almost leave it be. I almost let her get away with brushing me off, but something comes over me. I push the door open wider and step back in. Arianna's eyes open wider and she walks backward, letting me invade her space and close the door behind me.

“You’re mine, sweetheart,” I tell her with a voice I don’t recognize. “I need to take care of you.” I let the flood of images that have kept me awake at night fuel my desire to keep moving. “Do you want that?” I ask her.

“When’s the last time you got off?” I ask her, feeling my dick harden in my pants.

She turns to look behind her, swallowing and quickly answers. “My roommate is-”

“Get upstairs,” I cut her off. I know exactly what Arianna needs, and I’m not going to hold back when I can give it to her.

I follow her up the steps, that lush ass swaying as I unbutton my shirt.

Arianna talks quietly as she walks in front of me, leading me to her bedroom. “It’s just that I’m confused and I don’t know how to react to it all.” She opens her door and waits for me to walk in before closing it and locking the doorknob.

I don’t hesitate to remove my shirt as she turns around. “And…” she starts to say, but then pauses mid-sentence as her eyes take me in. My sweetheart definitely knows how to boost my ego.

“I’m your Master, aren’t I?” I ask her, taking the two strides to fill the space between us. “I do the worrying,” I say as I cup her chin. My thumb brushes along her lower lip as her green eyes search mine.

“You are?” she asks me, her breath coming up short.

“I want to be,” I say the words before I know how true they are. “Do you want me to be your Master, sweetheart?”

She nods her head once and whispers, “Yes.”

CHAPTER 16

ARIANNA

“*Y*ou need to get off,” Zander says, his voice low and husky, his thumb resting on my lips. I stare into his piercing blue eyes, desire heating my core.

“I-I-I don’t think I can,” I stammer. I’m starting to feel so very hot, the heat from his hard body causing my temperature to rise, my heart pounding in my chest.

“You can,” Zander says firmly. “And you will.”

He caresses the side of my face gently, his touch causing my skin to tingle all over. I close my eyes at the sensation, reveling in the feel of his gentle touch against my skin. I want to do as he says. I *want* to please him. But I don’t know if it’ll be easy. I’ve always used pain to get my release. And...

Danny’s words play in my mind.

No matter whose collar you put on, I’m still your Master. And the only one to bring me pleasure is him. I can only have it through pain.

“Danny-” I begin to say. I need Zander to know.

“Isn’t your Master anymore,” Zander finishes for me. “I am. And I want you to get on that bed, spread your legs wide, and rub your pussy for me.”

The intensity of his words causes my pussy to clench, my nipples pebbling against the flimsy nightgown.

Zander says, "You're wet for me already." It's not a question, but a statement of fact.

"Yes," I whisper, my pulse quickening, my breathing ragged. My body is still and tense.

Zander's fingers trail back down to my lips. He presses his thumb against them, demanding entry. I part my lips, letting him gently place his thumb on my tongue. "Suck," he commands me.

I do as he says, gently sucking on his thumb exactly how he wants me to. As if it's his cock. I don't close my eyes at first. I watch him and his reaction as I do what I'm told.

A soft groan escapes his lips and he closes his eyes briefly. When he opens them, he pulls his thumb from between my lips, leaving me wanting more, and asks softly, "Would you like to please me?"

Slowly, I nod my head, my clit throbbing. "Yes," I say, my voice barely above a whisper. Maybe I'm weak, but I desperately want to please him.

"I won't allow it," Zander says in his deep voice. My body freezes until he adds, "Not until you've made yourself cum."

I nod my head and take a step backward, the backs of my knees hitting the mattress. I haven't touched myself in... in over a year. I wasn't allowed.

Anxiety mixes with desire as I fall back on my bed and scoot myself back with my knees bent upward. Every move is deliberate and my eyes stay on Zander's, making sure that he's pleased with everything.

His breathing comes in heavier as he watches me. Zander grabs my desk chair, placing it in front of the bed. His eyes never leave me as he sits down, spreading his legs out wide. I can't help but notice the huge bulge pressing against his dark dress pants, straining to get out.

"Lift up your gown," Zander commands, his voice heavy. Husky. "Panties off."

I do as he says, pulling my gown all the way up to my upper stomach and push my underwear off. My fingers tremble as they push against my legs.

Zander inhales sharply at the sight of me. I wait for him to touch himself, but he doesn't. His hands stay on his thighs.

"Touch yourself," he orders, his voice strained.

Slowly, I run my hand down my stomach and then between my legs. Right before I touch myself, I freeze, anxiety washing over me. I'm not allowed to. I haven't been allowed in so long. *But Danny is not my Master anymore.* Still, it's hard to move forward.

I look at Zander for guidance, fear keeping me from obeying. "I haven't..." I look up at the ceiling before I continue. "I haven't in a long time," I admit.

Anger flashes in Zander's eyes. "You weren't allowed to touch yourself?"

I shake my head. "No. Or cum without... pain."

"You have my permission and that's all you need," Zander says, his voice tight. "Touch yourself."

Taking a deep breath, I place the tips of my fingers on my throbbing clit and rub a small circle against it with just a touch of pressure. Warmth flows from my belly outward, running a fire through my body all the way up to my neck. A soft moan escapes my lips as my head lolls to the side, my eyes still on Zander, my Master.

"Good girl," Zander groans.

I slowly move my hand up and down between my folds, and the touch is so foreign to me as my fingers spread the moisture back up to my clit.

"You're gorgeous like this," Zander says softly, the sexy tone of his deep voice causing my limbs to quiver. "You deserve this. Relax and just let go."

Another sigh escapes my lips as I arch my back, lifting myself up with the tips of my toes, and rubbing myself in a circular motion, faster and harder.

"Yes," Zander hisses.

His praise makes me want more. Keeping myself suspended and my back arched, the bed creaks as my ass sways, barely brushing against the bedding.

For a moment, I remember Natalie's home and I'm scared that I might be

making too much noise. The last thing I want is for her to hear, but I'm too far gone now to stop. And I don't want to disobey him.

"Fuck," Zander groans. "I'm so fucking hard for you."

"Imagine my cock deep inside you," Zander says, his voice filled with lust, "filling you up."

I moan at his words, the fire raging hotter, rubbing myself faster, all the while staring into Zander's eyes.

"I want you to cum for me," Zander demands.

His command is my undoing. My back arches, the inferno inside of my stomach reaches a crescendo, sending shockwaves of pleasure all over my body. Wave after wave hits me and makes my neck arch, forcing me to look away from Zander. The room spins above me as waves of pleasure continue to radiate from my core and I lose all sense of time.

Zander's standing at the foot of the bed when I come back down from my high.

"On your knees," he commands me even as the dull ache between my legs continues to send shockwaves through me.

I instantly obey him, slipping out of the bed and onto the floor, falling to my knees at Zander's feet. My mouth parts as my pussy pulses and a wave of pleasure spikes through me.

He grips his belt at his waist, and pulls it out with one smooth movement, letting the hiss of the leather against the silk fabric fill the room along with the sounds of our heavy breathing. Zander tosses the belt to the floor beside him, but doesn't make a move, staring down at me expectantly.

My heart pounds as I realize he's waiting for me. I reach up and undo the button of his expensive dress pants and tug on the zipper, pulling his slacks and his underwear down around his thighs with one soft jerk.

I'm nearly slapped in the face as his thick dick springs free. My mouth waters as I look at it swinging back and forth before wrapping my fingers around his shaft. His cock pulsates in my hand, beating in tandem with my pounding

heartbeat.

“Suck,” he tells me, his voice strained as his fingers spear through my hair.

Slowly, I part my lips, allowing him entry to my mouth. I have to open as wide as I can to accommodate his size as his head gently pushes against my tongue, the sweet tang of his precum making me moan.

“Fuck,” Zander murmurs, throwing his head back.

Gripping his shaft with my right hand, I swirl my tongue around his head, teasing it, before letting him go back further in my mouth.

I rock on my heels as I hollow my cheeks and take more of him into my mouth. He feels like smooth velvet over steel as I press my lips against him. Massaging, sucking, and pleasing him the best I can.

Zander moans again, placing his hands on either side of my head, taking control. He thrusts his cock all the way into my mouth, almost causing me to gag. He pulls out quickly, stroking himself once while I catch my breath. I open wide for him and wait. My hands are on my thighs, and I keep my eyes on his.

“Good girl,” he says as he pushes himself back into my mouth. It’s difficult, but I hold back my gag reflex as he thrusts deep inside of my mouth, his thick head hitting the back of my throat. Zander’s breathing quickens as he picks up his pace, holding the back of my head firmly. My eyes sting with the need to breathe, but before it’s too much he pulls out and then does it all again. It takes all my self-control to not pull away, his huge cock triggering my gag reflex with almost every thrust. But I love it. I want him to take all the pleasure he can from me.

“I’m gonna cum,” I hear him groan above me, his breath coming in ragged pants.

His thrusts are short shallow pumps, but he remains deep in me as I feel his big dick grow impossibly hard in my mouth. *One. Two. Three.*

My fingernails dig into my thighs as he cums in the back of my throat. A strangled gasp escapes Zander’s lips on his final thrust.

I swallow everything, taking it all and loving how I made him come undone. When he pulls away from me, I expect him to clean himself up, to leave me where I am and make me wait for him.

But he reaches down, gripping my chin in his hand and kisses me. I'm caught by surprise, his taste still in my mouth. It's only his lips, but still, I didn't expect it.

He pulls away, his breath still ragged as his eyes search my face.

"Did you enjoy it?" he asks me.

"Yes," I answer immediately.

He releases me and I instantly miss his warmth. I more than enjoyed it. *I need more.*



I HOPE ZANDER WILL BE PLEASED.

I glance over my appearance in the mirror, my heart skipping a beat at my reflection. It's the next day after our hot foreplay session and I'm getting ready for another date. Zander's taking me somewhere new tonight. Somewhere important. And I don't want to disappoint him.

I'm wearing the gorgeous white gown made up of sparkling rhinestones Zander gave me, my hair pulled up into an elegant French bun with wispy bangs framing my face. I had to watch a video on how to put my hair up like this, but it was worth it.

I hardly recognize myself.

With my dangling diamond earrings, dramatic makeup, and gorgeous gold bracelet I look like some wealthy debutante. Everything about my appearance says eloquence and beauty, even if the diamonds are fake. Still, I don't *feel* like I'll belong on Zander's arm. I feel like I'm just playing dress-up, hiding the flaws that lie just beneath the surface.

I don't think I can ever match up to the woman who's looking back at me in the mirror. That person I see, I don't recognize her. It's not the real me. I'm

just a fraud.

I suck in a breath as I remember his warm lips pressed against mine. I got lost in the moment. Lost in him. I never wanted it to end. Just being around him makes me feel dizzy with euphoria. It's not supposed to be this way. It's just an act. It's all fake.

But why does it feel so fucking real?

Because he's my Master, a voice whispers in the back of my mind. The instant I think the words, my body relaxes.

My pulse races as warmth flows through my chest. I can't get over the way he looks at me. Like I'm *his*. It makes me feel wanted. Even if it is only for thirty days.

I shake off the feeling of anxiety rolling through me, the questions and fear. He'll take care of me. I close my eyes and try to believe it, but I know it's foolish. *This is temporary*.

He's going to be here soon to pick me up.

And I know the moment I see him, I'm going to go weak in the knees. It's what he does to me. He makes me powerless, but I want it. I want to give it all to him.

It scares me.

It makes me feel like I'm drowning.

And I don't want anyone to save me.

CHAPTER 17

ZANDER

The moment the limo pulls up, she's at the door to the townhouse, not making me wait. I should move and get my ass out of the limo to go to her, but I'm struck for a moment. She stands out against the dark red brick of the old building, her white dress brushing against her shapely legs as the wind blows, further emphasizing her tempting curves. She's striking, gorgeous even.

She's all I've thought about since I left her.

The trees and bushes along the sidewalk and in front of her building are barren. The buildings are old and worn; history has been unkind to them. Maybe her past is dark, but I know with everything in me, she doesn't belong here. Not anymore.

The wind is harsh, blowing her shawl and exposing her bare shoulders. She lets out a gasp that I imagine I can hear as she reaches for the edge of her shawl. It's blowing in the wind with the threat of losing it clearly on her face. Although the weather is more like spring than the end of winter, with the wind I know she must feel the chill.

She grips the iron railing, steadying herself on the landing of the stone steps as Marcus opens his driver's door to the limo. It brings me back to the moment, and I'm quick to get out so I can wave him back.

As my dress shoes slap against the paved sidewalk, my blood heats. She's sure to be noticed tonight, which will bring more attention than usual. That,

combined with the news article, I'm sure will get people talking. My nerves prick at the thought. I usually enjoy blending in. The familiar is expected and also ignored.

She certainly isn't familiar, and I know damn well she won't be ignored.

I have to jog to meet her at the bottom of the steps. "You look beautiful," I compliment her as I hold out my hand. A beautiful blush rises to her cheeks as she sets her small hand in mine.

"Thank you," she says and her voice is small and full of genuine happiness. I don't know what she expects out of this, with me being her Master, but I can take care of her. And I intend to. I've almost messaged Lucian and Isaac a few times to ask what the fuck I'm supposed to do. I'm not going to let on to that fact though.

I hold her hand and open her door for her as a gentleman should. I wait for her to sit back in her seat before closing it and getting in on the other side.

It only hits me when we're alone in the back of the limo and Marcus pulls away that I'm really taking her to an event. I don't bring guests anywhere. I don't make appearances with any women, and I've never been seen with a significant other. Not that I've had them. A quick fuck to sate my appetite is all I've ever indulged in.

But tonight is different. It's a statement as well.

It's quiet for a moment, and I can see that it's getting to Arianna. Her fingers tangle with one another and more than once she parts her lips to say something, chancing a look up at me but then looks back to the floor of the cabin.

I finally break the tension. "I'd like you to do what I say tonight." She needs to be perfect. She needs to play the part well so that no one will question what we are, and my image will stay intact.

"Of course," she answers quickly, nodding her head. "I promise I'll do my best *and* it will be good enough."

I eye her and take in the conviction in her voice.

“Have you been to a gala?” I ask her, reaching across the cabin to the champagne that’s sitting on ice. I uncork it with a flourish as she answers that she hasn’t, but she’s fully aware of how she’s supposed to act and that she won’t disappoint me.

The champagne pops, and the sound of it spilling easily into the first flute is accompanied by the sound of my heart beating in my chest. She continues talking nervously, but she sounds eloquent, even with the nerves evident. She’s going to be perfect.

The glass flutes clink against each other as the limo goes over a small bump and I fill the second halfway.

“Champagne?” I offer as I set the bottle back down.

“Thank you,” she says and accepts the glass with grace although she doesn’t take a drink. I taste mine, the sweetness coating my tongue.

“You’re a smart woman, so I’m sure you’ll be fine,” I tell her as I place my hand on her knee. “You’ll be quiet for most of the night and simply stay on my arm.”

“Yes,” she answers quickly, both of her hands wrapped around the skinny stem of the glass sitting in her lap.

“As far as anyone knows, you’re my girlfriend. It’s a new relationship.” I down the rest of the champagne and set the empty glass into its place, leaning forward and continuing to talk. “We met through a mutual friend if anyone asks, although I’ll do my best to do most of the talking.”

“Absolutely,” she answers firmly.

I nod my head at her and let my eyes travel down her dress. “You really do look beautiful, sweetheart.” I don’t think about the words until they’ve left me. A pleasant sound comes from her lips. Not a gasp of surprise or a laugh, but something in-between. As if she’s flattered, but that she doesn’t believe me.

“I’m proud to have you by my side tonight. Do you know that?” I ask her.

She gazes at me for a moment, but doesn’t answer quickly which isn’t in her

nature. She finally whispers, “Thank you.” It makes me think she truly doesn’t believe it. I need to change that.

I scoot closer to her and rest my hand on her thigh as I lean in and whisper against the shell of her ear. “A lot of the women in there are going to be jealous of you tonight.”

She turns quickly in her seat to look me in the eyes. “Because they want you?” she asks softly. There’s an expression in her eyes I don’t recognize, maybe fear, but I’m not sure.

“No,” I say and I can feel my forehead pinch as I continue, “Just because you’re so beautiful.” Her cheeks stain with that beautiful red and she looks away, pushing a stray strand of hair from her face.

Time passes as we both sway slightly in the limo, the comfortable silence stretching between us. My phone dings, and I’m quick to see who it is. With these functions, there’s always someone who wants to ensure they’ll be seen talking to me.

I’ve already missed half a dozen messages and two phone calls, several of which are from my father. I sigh and lean back in my seat, leaving the warmth of her small frame and focusing on work. She scoots closer to me, resting her hand on my thigh and leaning against me. I wait for her to say something, giving her the attention she needs, but she doesn’t say a thing. I wrap my arm around her and continue to check my email as she lays her head against me and looks out of the window. She’s simply happy to be held.

The limo comes to a stop, and it’s only when Marcus opens his door that I realize we’re here already.

“Wait here,” I tell her as she reaches for the door. “I’ll get out first, then open your door. You will not slide across the seat. Instead I want you to wait for me there,” I say and nod toward her door.

“I can do that. I *will* do that.” She holds my gaze as she answers me, and something flickers between us. She wants to please me. And I know she can. A small smile grows on my face and it’s then that I realize I’ve been more of myself around her than I should have been. I’ve given her a glimpse behind the mask. Instead of feeling threatened, something else settles in my chest,

leaning against my heart for a moment until I hear the rap of knuckles at my door. Marcus is waiting, asking for permission to open my door.

I pull the handle and step out, immediately struck by the bright lights at the front entrance and the sparkle of gowns adorned in jewels from the crowd out front. Many turn to look to see who's arrived. It's show time. I recognize four men instantly, sharing a knowing look between them as they nod my way.

I fasten the middle button of my jacket and turn my back to them as I walk around the limo to open Arianna's door. The conversations continue behind me and another limo pulls up behind us. Waiting.

As I open her door and reach my hand out for her, I know many of them are watching us. My heart hammers against my chest as I question if I've done the right thing.

If I'd kept her a secret, they'd have thought the worst of me. They would have come to the conclusion that I was just like Brooks. I need them to think otherwise. To believe in the character I've created. Most shouldn't know, but I'm not a fool. All men talk, and these circles are small but well connected.

It's reasonable for them to think that I've had a crush on her. And I'll be playing up that part tonight, starting with the kiss I plant on the back of her hand as she stands on the pavement.

A warm blush travels to her cheeks and she naturally smiles at me, batting her lashes and waiting for me. She's stunning and seems shy. She's acting brilliantly. Playing the perfect role, although the idea that it's an act makes me tense.

I whisper in her ear, "Be good for me." And then I plant a small kiss on her cheek. As I pull away to look into her eyes, something changes in her expression. She's stiff as she nods her head, and I question my decision to be so open.

To me, this is an act. But to her... maybe it is something else.

I plant a kiss on her lips, ignoring the spark igniting from the instant touch and wrap my arm around her waist.

She only breathes once we've made it to the foyer and, even then, she still

looks struck with surprise. A good surprise.

If I can keep her like this all night, her presence will only make me look as though this is a genuine attraction.

I force the smile to stay on my face as my father walks toward me, a stern expression firmly in place as his eyes flicker to Arianna and then back to me.

I part with her for a moment, leaving her at the entrance of the foyer with the whispered words, “Stay here.”

She doesn’t have time to acknowledge me as I take large steps away from her to meet my father. My father is a loose cannon, and I don’t like the way he looks at my sweetheart. And whatever he has to say, it won’t be said in front of her. I won’t allow it.

My defenses rise as he stops in front of me, talking beneath his breath.

“You brought her?” he asks with an air of disbelief. My expression is like stone, fixed in place. Even the jovial glint in my eyes stays in place.

“Why wouldn’t I?” I ask him, feeling the smile on my face.

“From what I’ve heard, she should be in your bedroom... or someone else’s.” A huff of a laugh rises up my chest as I look away from my father and back to the crowd, turning to look over my shoulder and back to Arianna who’s waiting for me patiently.

“Let me get her comfortable,” I tell my father. “I’ll talk to you later tonight,” I say and pat his arm as if it was a pleasant conversation and he finally releases me. I have no intention of speaking to him again tonight. Or tomorrow.

Adrenaline races in my blood as I leave him behind me and walk toward Arianna. The entire crowd is stealing glances at her as I hold out my arm to her. Watching her. Watching *us*.

I do need to find out what he knows though, how the fuck he found out about her so quickly, and who else is aware of the situation.

And more importantly, I need to figure out where the information came from.

CHAPTER 18

ARIANNA

“*I*s it hot in here to you?” Dahlia asks, fanning herself with the fancy dinner menu that was given to all the guests in attendance. I tear my eyes away from the throng of people filling the dining room, turning them on Dahlia. I’ve been busy looking for Zander, who seems to have gotten lost in the crowd. Shortly after arriving, he led me to this table and told me to sit down after quickly introducing me to Dahlia and Lucian Stone.

It’s been ten minutes so far, and he’s still not back yet.

I pick nervously at my fingernails as I flash her a friendly smile, shaking my head, trying to hide my anxiety. This is yet another place that I feel out of place, a place where wealth and gaudy opulence is on proud display. It was easier with him here with me. All the guests are dressed in finery, and while I’m dressed similarly, I know it’s all paid for by Zander. “No, it feels fine to me,” I answer her.

Though we haven’t spoken much since Zander ran off, I like Dahlia. She’s gorgeous with a charismatic charm that makes me feel like I already know her. I’ve seen her in passing a few times at Club X, but never really talked to her before today. And I’m sure as shit not going to bring that up. I hope she doesn’t recognize me. I keep stealing glances and she doesn’t seem to make the connection. If she does, she’s not judging me.

If she knew the circumstances, I’m sure she would be.

I think it’s amazing that she’s actually married to someone that is her Dom,

although I guess it's more of a kink for them than a lifestyle. That's just an assumption though. I know he used to be her Dom. I nervously glance down to my fingers, tangling them as I remember seeing them in the club. I didn't know it was *him*, but I recognize her.

Lucian's been nothing but gracious to his wife. I glance over at him, noting how smooth he looks in his dapper tuxedo. He's a handsome man, and part of his personality reminds me of Zander's. Looking out into the crowd, he has an aura of power about him.

"Oh," Dahlia mutters, fanning herself fervently and wiping at her brow. I love the dress she's wearing, a white lace number that's provocative yet chaste. She practically glows in it. "I'm burning up."

As if summoned by her complaint, a male waiter in uniform shows up at her side with a tray of ice-cold drinks. They're made with a soda base, but that's all I can tell from the small bubbles on the glass and the ones still clinging to the crushed lemons and limes at the bottom of each.

"Would you care for a refreshment?" he asks us, offering the tray.

I expect Dahlia to down the cold beverage immediately, but she looks at the drink warily. "Is there alcohol in this?" she asks the waiter with her head tilted slightly.

The waiter, a young blond man with charming dimples, smiles and replies cheerfully, "It's the signature cocktail for this evening. Citrus vodka and Sprite."

Dahlia immediately shakes her head vigorously. "Oh no, thank you though. May I have a glass of water please?"

"Of course." The waiter nods his head before scurrying off.

Lucian places a hand on Dahlia's, rubbing it gently. "Relax, Treasure."

Despite my anxiety, a slight smile plays across my lips. I love the way Lucian calls Dahlia his Treasure. It makes me feel fuzzy inside, but also like I'm intruding on a moment when he looks at her like that.

"I'm trying," Dahlia replies, instantly at ease by her husband's touch.

Their breezy interaction stirs a longing in me.

“I’m sorry,” Dahlia says, looking over at me and I realize I’ve been staring. Shit, I hope she doesn’t think I’m being rude.

“No, no, you’re fine,” I speak quickly.

“I’m just not used to these things yet, and...” she pauses in her thought, glancing at Lucian as if looking for his consent.

He gives her a reassuring nod, lightly squeezing her hand. “You know I don’t mind, Treasure.”

A relieved smile spreads across Dahlia's face and she squeals to me, “We’re four weeks!”

It takes me a moment to understand what she means. Four weeks... pregnant!

“Oh wow,” I breathe. “Congratulations!” I can feel her excitement radiating off of her.

“Thank you,” Dahlia murmurs, shaking her head. “I still can’t believe it. I think I checked with the doctor at least five times before finally accepting it as reality.”

“It must be an amazing feeling,” I say.

“It is,” Dahlia agrees. “And I have this guy over here,” she stabs her thumb at Lucian, who chuckles, “to thank for it.”

The two exchange a few looks and I smile, trying to let them have their moment by looking away and sipping the water in my hand while I turn back to the crowd and look for Zander.

I’m about to give up when I spot him near a huge column, talking to his father. A sinking feeling tugs at my stomach as I watch the two men speak to each other. Judging by his father's stiff body language and sharp gestures, I think they’re arguing. Although with Zander’s expression, maybe not. I feel caught in their exchange.

I wonder what they’re fighting over. *Me*, a voice in the back of my head says as I take another nervous sip of my drink. I recognized Dahlia, so I wonder

how many men recognize me. And I wouldn't have a clue. They all wear masks in the club. My suspicions are only increased when the man glances my way, a scowl on his face.

For a moment, I feel the urge to jump up and leave, but before I can move, Zander turns from the man, and strides toward us. I'm quiet as Lucian says something in Dahlia's ear. I peek up and he has a look of sympathy on his face. *He knows*. I feel sick. I feel Zander next to me before I see him.

"Is everything alright?" I ask Zander as he glides down into the seat next to mine.

Zander gives me a charming smile. "Of course."

He's so smooth with his response that I almost believe him. But I know what I saw.

"So how are things going?" Lucian asks Zander, still holding Dahlia's hand. I watch as his thumb rubs soothing circles on the back of Dahlia's hand.

Their conversation fades into the background as I sit there quietly, my eyes on Dahlia. I can't stop thinking about how happy she looks as she listens to the conversation, a hand on her belly. I bet she'll make a wonderful mother. My throat feels dry as I try to swallow, and I have to bring the glass to my lips and sip the cool water slowly.

"Arianna is an artist," Zander boasts, drawing me out of my thoughts. Lucian looks at me with respect. "Really? That's wonderful."

I blush furiously. "It's nothing really," I downplay. Zander's acting as if I'm an actual painter. I'm not. "It's just a hobby."

"Nonsense," Zander says. "I saw your work. It speaks for itself."

"It's not in any galleries or anything like that," I argue.

"Good enough for me," Zander says firmly.

My cheeks redden even more as Lucian and Dahlia observe our exchange.

"Well that's wonderful," Lucian says, grinning. "I've been thinking about getting a portrait of Dahlia done when she's further along." He glances at his

wife, pride in his eyes before looking back at me to say, “Maybe you could do the honor?”

I don't have a moment to respond before Dahlia's eyes widen and she reaches across the small table to grab my hand. “I would love that,” she says and her voice is so full of hope. She looks back at Lucian as though he's just given her a wonderful surprise. “Could you do something like that?” she asks me.

“I haven't done portraits before, but I could.” I nod my head slightly although I feel anxious.

Zander reaches behind me and gently massages my back, causing sparks of electricity along wherever he touches. “I'm sure you can,” he assures me, his tone encouraging.

I turn to look at him, to thank him, feeling a warmth and relaxation flowing through me, but the moment I do, I freeze.

I didn't know Danny was going to be here.

CHAPTER 19

ZANDER

I can practically feel him the moment he enters. That fucker, Danny Brooks. It's not because of his voice laughing behind me. Or the way Lucian narrows his eyes slightly and pulls Dahlia closer to his side. It's my sweetheart's reaction. Arianna tenses immediately, sucking in a breath between her teeth and straightening her back.

Her eyes lose the brightness that I've only just brought back.

I lean in close to her, ignoring the look from Lucian and rub the tip of my nose behind her ear. "Relax," I whisper into her ear and gently kiss the tender skin on her upper neck. Her soft hair tickles my nose as I do. I'm a hypocrite for telling her to relax. Nearly a dozen of the men in this room here know I've bought her. They know who she is, and they also know she used to be his.

She hasn't noticed the way they've been looking at her. But I have.

Not a single fucker in this room has a clue that this was designed by Brooks. That he gave her to me to pay his debt, and that this is all a facade. *Unless he's told them.*

I keep the smile plastered on my face as the thought hits me. Bringing the flute to my lips, I take a swig of the sweet champagne, the bubbles tickling the roof of my mouth.

If the men here know that he's given her to me, they're also well aware that

I'm letting him pay his debts with her.

And that can't fucking happen.

I hear Brooks laugh again, although it's fainter this time and from across the room through a crowd of people. He should know better than to tell anyone about the arrangement. But he's not a smart man. I put the empty flute to my lips, the glass resting against my bottom lip.

A shiver travels down my arms as Dahlia gently touches Lucian's arm to grab his attention, completely oblivious to the entire situation. Arianna looks away, her head in the opposite direction as Brooks.

I'm struck by the sweet cadence of her voice as a waitress walking by asks for her drink. She politely tells her she's fine as I pass the empty glass to the young woman and she sets it on her silver tray.

"Would you like some fresh air?" Dahlia asks Arianna, and she obediently looks to me before answering.

Lucian speaks up before Arianna can answer, saying, "I could use a moment away from the crowds." His voice is low and only intended for his wife.

"Go ahead," I tell Arianna, nodding my head toward the French doors. She seems a bit more at ease and I think it'd be best if she got the hell out of this room.

"I need to go to the restroom; I'll meet you out there," I answer Arianna and expect her to simply obey. Her hand reaches out to grab my arm as I turn. She's quick to correct herself, shifting slightly with her expression falling and an apology on her lips.

"It's alright," I tell her softly before she can utter a single word, taking her hand in mind and rubbing soothing circles on the back of her knuckles. I stare deep into her dark green eyes and that's when her reality hits me.

I haven't even considered what she's been through. My stomach churns with a sickness. *What has he done to her?* In a room full of people, all the noises and lights dim to nothing, merely blurs in my periphery as I take in the sadness and fear behind her eyes.

“I’ve got her,” Lucian says, snapping my gaze to his and breaking the small moment of clarity. As he reaches out to her in a casual manner, I nearly rip her away from him, from everyone. In the split second of a moment, I just want to take her away.

I clear my throat, remembering where we are. I straighten my suit and give her a small peck on the cheek. My hand splays across her lower back as I guide her toward Lucian. “I’ll be right back, sweetheart.”

With a tight smile, she nods her head obediently. Always obeying.

“Don’t let her leave your sight,” I tell Lucian low enough so only he can hear me. He nods and instinctively glances back toward the crowd, to Brooks.

The smile on my face is nowhere to be seen as I watch him take her away from me, his wife on his right and Arianna on his left.



THE SOUND OF RUNNING WATER FLOODS MY EARS AS I WASH MY HANDS, STARING aimlessly at the lathered suds. The door to the bathroom opens at the same time as a stall door behind me, and it’s a reminder that I’m not alone. That I should be performing, but I need to get the fuck out of here.

My eyes finally lift to the mirror, my demeanor not at all what it should be. I can’t shake the feeling in the pit of my stomach when I realized she’s not okay.

“Payne.” The corners of my lips twitch as I hear that bastard’s voice. They beg to force my expression into a scowl, but I fight it, concentrating on the fact that a third man is in the room. Stephen Ikabal. He’s a clean-cut man with a penchant for younger women. He’s been married for three decades, and I highly doubt he’s been faithful for any of those years. But then again, she hasn’t been either. They both prefer younger company, or so I’ve heard.

“Brooks,” I say and finally tear my eyes away from Stephen in the mirror as he washes his hands in the basin two down from mine.

“How are you?” Brooks cocks an eyebrow, leaning against the granite counter and facing me. Stephen doesn’t react, but he’s a coy old man. I’m

sure he's listening. Everyone's always listening. Always watching for a weakness. When you're on top, it's so easy to fall.

I force a charming smile onto my face as I dry my hands, my eyes on Brooks. He fooled me. I had no idea gambling was his vice. I thought it was sadism. The thought chills my blood and for a moment the charm, dimples and all, slips as I think about my sweetheart. It doesn't make sense how they fit. It just doesn't add up.

"Well, and you?" I answer him. Although I'm relaxed and engaging Brooks, I'm highly aware of Stephen's presence as he turns off the faucet and dries his own hands. I need him to get the fuck out of here. I want nothing more than to grab this asshole by the collar and shove him against the wall. I need to know what he's done to her to put that fear in her eyes.

Brooks nods his head, a smile on his face that looks cocky as his eyes flicker to Stephen as he passes us to get to the door. "Just missing my Arianna a bit." His voice is chipper as he shrugs his shoulders. Every hair stands on end as Stephen pauses by the trashcan before tossing in the balled-up paper towel.

A chill sweeps across every inch of my skin. I can only imagine what they think of her if he's been running his mouth. And I fucking hate it.

"I hope you're getting your money's worth," Brooks says beneath his breath, but loud enough for Stephen to hear on his way out. The creak of the door opening and then falling closed easily is the only noise in the room as my hand balls into a fist, the skin tightening around my knuckles to the point where I'm convinced it will split.

I don't wait for the door to close all the way; I don't even lock it like I know I should. I can't hold back the rage any longer.

I hit his jaw first, taking him by surprise. Maybe he expected me to act the part in this environment. After all, we're not all alone in his office. The soft classical music spills through the bottom of the door as I grip his collar and hit him again with my right fist, knocking his head backward.

This time he expects it at least and he hits me back square on the nose, the pain radiating outward up my cheeks and to the back of my head. It nearly makes me lose my grip on him, but I hold on. White noise rings in my ears as

I quickly push him backward.

“She’s not yours anymore,” I sneer into his face as my hands clench, and I slam his back against the tiled wall. I hear a crack, but it does nothing to stop me. “You gave her to me, remember?”

My teeth slam against one another so hard that I swear they’ll crack. He merely grins back at me, blood coating his teeth on the right side of his crooked smile.

As I talk, I can feel warm blood trickle from under my nose. My instant reaction is to slam him back against the wall, and I do it just to get the aggression out. “You owe me, and you’ll pay me by the twenty-fifth.” I decide then that even if I can’t convince her not to give him the money, I won’t accept it. I’ll wait to pay her, I’ll refuse to do it until after Brooks has paid me.

“Sure,” he says with a glint in his eyes.

“I won’t be paying Arianna, so you’ll need to come up with that money some other way,” I speak without thinking, holding his gaze and watching the arrogant expression morph into fear. It doesn’t matter if or when I transfer the money to Arianna, I won’t let him steal from her. I won’t let him use her. Not anymore.

I let go of him when the fear is so strong that his body is stiff. I glance at myself in the mirror and see a black eye already forming, blood on my face and also my dress shirt. *Fuck!*

“And then what? What are you really going to do about it?” he asks as I grab a few paper towels and wipe the blood from under my nose. He doesn’t move off the wall as he hisses, “I don’t have the fucking money.”

I don’t answer him. I won’t ever say it out loud. *I’ll kill him.* Not for the debt, but for what he’s done to her.

“We had a deal,” he pushes the words through clenched teeth. “You have her and you can’t go back on that!”

It hits me then what I’ve done. How I’ve lost control. I’ve provided evidence. Security cameras are littered in this building. *Fuck!*

“Payne?” Brooks calls out to me, but I ignore him. He means for it to come out strong as he stays behind me, standing tall and putting on a front, but his voice cracks with fear.

Tossing the paper towel into the trash, I open the door and almost make a quick right turn. I hesitate in the doorway. I need to get the fuck out of here; I can’t be seen like this. But I need to get Arianna. The sound of another man coming down the small hallway makes me move. I have five minutes. If I don’t have her in my grasp in five minutes, I’m coming back.

I keep my hand up, my fingers pinching the bridge of my nose and covering my face. To any onlookers, I hope it looks as if I have a headache. The cool air from the outside breezes by me as I get closer to the exit and a couple walks in.

I ignore them, I can’t even see who they are and I don’t give a fuck.

As soon as I get outside, I spot my limo and walk straight to it. I keep my strides wide and my pace fast. It’s on the far left of the parking lot and the valet and a few guests are on my right, the sounds of them chatting and the brighter lights of the entrance dimming as I walk farther into the darkened lot.

I notice Marcus look up and see me, a surprised look on his face as I finally lower my hand and wipe under my nose. Dark red blood smears across the arm of my jacket.

That fucker. My steps are hard as I stalk toward the limo, my blood fueled with the desire to go back. I clench and unclench my hands before reaching for my phone. *My sweetheart.*

Thank fuck for Lucian.

As Marcus opens the door, not daring to look me in the eyes, I slip the phone from my pocket, only then realizing my knuckles are cracked and there’s blood on them, too.

My blood runs cold as I settle into the seat. The door closes shut with a loud click and silences the cabin of the limo as I dial his number.

“Lucian,” I say and press the phone close to my ear as I stare at the entrance, the light from the large glass doors and windows spilling out into the night.

“Zander?” he says and his voice is filled with surprise. Which is a good thing. It calms my racing heart.

“Arianna’s still with you?” I ask as the driver’s door opens and Marcus slips in. His eyes flash to mine for a moment in the rearview mirror.

“She is. Is everything-”

“Bring her to the front... please,” I ask him quickly, grabbing a few tissues from the side compartment as I feel a bit of blood trickle from my nose. I resist the urge to slam my fist against the door. Against anything. The anger is coming back. I shouldn’t have left him like that. *He deserves so much worse.*

“Of course,” Lucian is quick to agree, a serious note in his tone.

“Thank you,” I barely get the words out, feeling in that moment that I’ve failed her.

Every muscle in me is wound tight, my heart beating chaotically. I’ve never done something so fucking stupid before in my life.

“To the entrance, Sir?” Marcus asks and I clench my jaw, nodding my head as his eyes meet mine again in the rearview mirror. My heart slows, and I reach for the whiskey as the limo pulls out slowly. I grab the glass and ice out of habit and pour two fingers into the glass. I sway slightly as we drive around to the front.

I’m able to down the glass before he stops the car and gets out, the cold ice clashing against my teeth. I don’t even realize she’s waiting for us until Marcus gets out and opens her door.

I run a hand down my face and put the cup back as she climbs in, her dress bunched in her hands.

My chest feels tight and my heart clenches as I watch her step carefully in and settle next to me. I’ve made a fool of myself. And her. All because of Brooks.

Next time, she doesn’t leave my side. Not for a moment.

“I’m sorry,” I choke the words out, reaching for her with my left hand, the

one without the torn knuckles as Marcus closes the door. I'm so fucking ashamed. She deserves better than this.

She shakes her head easily, her brows pinched and her mouth parting as she takes in the sight of me. "Zander," she says and my name is barely a whisper on her lips.

She reaches up in an attempt to touch my face. From the look in her eyes, it must be bad. They're full of questions. But she doesn't ask them. She already knows the answers. I snatch her hand in mine before she can touch me.

"Don't," I tell her. At first, hurt flashes in her eyes, but I'm quick to add, "Just..." I trail off and take in a long inhale, not knowing what to say, or what to tell her. But I don't have to. She lays down, not waiting for me to finish as the limo pulls ahead. Her hair spills over my leg as she rests her head in my lap. Laying her cheek against the designer pants.

I slowly pet her hair, moving it from her face and smoothing it out. She lets out a comfortable sigh. As she nestles her head into my lap, looking aimlessly into the cabin of the limo, her small hand wraps around my knee. Her thumb rubs small circles. "Was it Danny?" she asks me.

"Yes," I answer her easily.

"Are you okay?" she asks me in a cautious breath.

"Fine," I reply and I'm short with her, my voice hard as I continue. "You'll never go back to him." Her finger halts in its rhythmic path as I say the words with authority, as if I can command her. For now, she may be in a contract, but I'm not a fool, I can't force her after the thirty days are done. She doesn't owe me a damn thing, and what's more is that I don't want to force her.

She doesn't answer me, and her body is stiff, but I continue to pet her hair and then run my fingers down her shoulder to the dip of her waist and back up.

"I don't want you to."

Her cheek rubs against my leg as she nods her head, but she still doesn't answer me.

She has no idea what I feel for her. She may think she's still just a pawn and a bargaining chip.

But I'll be damned if she ever sees that asshole again.

I'm never letting her go.

CHAPTER 20

ARIANNA

“*Y*ou should really let me take a look at your eye,” I say to Zander once we step inside his estate and make our way to his bedroom. I’m following behind him, not even taking in his house as he leads me up the stairs.

My heart is still reeling, twisting in my chest with a mix of emotions, my mind running with a million questions.

I don’t know what Danny did to him, but I feel caught in the middle. I feel like I’m the one to blame. He was there because of me. Had to be. Now Zander is paying for it.

Zander doesn’t answer me as he pushes open his bedroom door and walks over to the mirror to peer at his face. Even roughed up, he looks sexy as fuck, his bloodstained dress shirt torn open at the front, his hard, tanned flesh on display.

“I’m fine,” he mutters. But it’s not reflected in his voice.

“Well let me-,” I start to say, coming up behind him.

“I’m good,” Zander cuts in. My forehead’s pinched and I’m silent for a moment as he takes off his suit jacket, tossing it to the side, and then removes his ruined dress shirt, tugging it over his head. He takes it off and lets it drop to the floor, seemingly ignoring my presence.

I can't help my frown and need to back away from him, feeling slightly

dejected. He's blowing me off when I want to know what happened. I let out a heavy but silent breath of frustration as my gaze drops to the floor and I chew on my bottom lip. I wish he'd just talk to me. I need to know what's going on. I feel guilty, like Zander's bruised face is all my fault. And this is only making me feel worse.

"Hey," Zander says, getting my attention before he lifts my chin up so my eyes meet his. "It's okay." He says the words with conviction, and I almost believe it. "I promise you."

I nod my head slightly and my voice cracks as I answer him, "Okay."

"I'm still pissed. At Danny, and at myself." He drops his hand as he adds, "But I promise you that everything is alright." His eyes search mine and I finally let his words sink in. I believe him. I trust him.

"I'm just glad you're okay," I say quietly.

"I'll always be okay," Zander replies with confidence, his hand cupping my cheek again. "It's you I'm worried about."

"Me?" I ask.

Zander nods, gently stroking the side of my face. My skin warms with his gentle strokes, my pulse quickening.

"I'm fine," I answer him. "Really, I'm fine." His eyes search mine for a long moment.

"You've been denied so much. I want to give you... more."

His words leave me with a pain in my heart that I don't quite understand and I feel as if I'm in a trance staring into his eyes. I wish I had words, but I don't. I step closer to him, just wanting to feel him. All I know is that I need his touch.

"You looked so beautiful tonight," he says softly.

A flush comes to my cheeks as I breathe, "Thank you."

"And I've been waiting all night for this." He kisses me, pressing his lips softly against mine. It's sweet and short, but it leaves me wanting more when

he pulls away.

“I need you,” he says, his voice low and heavy.

I don't even think about the words as they leave me. “Take me,” I moan, my heart pounding in my chest, hungry for more.

Zander spears his fingers through my hair, cradling the back of my head, and gives me a deeper kiss, this one filled with swirling tongue and unbridled passion. I melt into his hard body, feeling weak in the knees, but he holds me up with his powerful arms.

I moan into his mouth, fire heating my core, my skin blazing from the heat of his hard body. He sucks on my tongue in response, pulling me closer to him. Down below, I can feel his hardening cock against my stomach.

He breaks away from our kiss, his lips finding my neck, his hands sliding down my back to cup my ass. I moan, throwing my head back, his lips burning into my flesh.

“Fuck,” he groans, his lips near my ears as he smothers my neck with passionate kisses. “I want that sweet tight pussy on my cock.” I go limp in his arms, weak from his passion, and he picks me up, carrying me to the bed.

He lays me down gently, his breathing ragged, his eyes on my face and shining with lust as he climbs into the bed, making it creak as he places his hands to either side of my head.

“You're so fucking beautiful,” he tells me, his voice low and hoarse, his breath hot on my face.

“I want you, too,” I answer him quickly. I do. I've never wanted something so much.

Zander's lips find my neck again, pecking, kissing, licking, causing me to throw my head back, my nipples pebbling and my body burning up in flames.

He makes way down my neck, pausing briefly to pull my gown above my shoulders, and then tossing it carelessly onto the bedroom floor. Next off comes my bra, Zander practically tearing it off and slinging it across the room. His eyes immediately feast on my hard nipples, his chest heaving as he

moves in and takes a nipple into his mouth. He swirls his tongue around it at first, teasing, tweaking it, before sucking on it with great force as my back arches in response.

I buck slightly at the sensation, biting down on my lip as I grab onto the bedding. He gives both nipples equal attention, alternating from one to another before moving down my stomach, his lips kissing every inch of my sensitive skin along the way.

When he reaches my hips, he grabs my panties and pulls them off, baring my glistening sex to him. Below, I hear him inhale deeply and bury his face between my legs before taking a languid lick of my pussy.

“Oh,” I moan as his tongue flicks against my clit back and forth.

I try to keep still as he tastes me and sucks my clit, pleasure stirring in my belly. But before I reach my peak, he moves in closer, causing the bed to creak as he hoists both of my legs around his shoulders, burying his face into my pussy, clamping his mouth down on my clit as hard as he can.

“Oh God!” I yell as he has his way with me, savagely tasting me and sucking on my clit until the pleasure is too much.

A fire builds in my core as he goes to town on me, and I grip the bedding with both hands, digging my nails into the plush comforter. His keen blue eyes look up at me but it's so hard to look back, my neck wanting to arch away, my body begging me for both an escape but also for more.

Keeping his eyes locked with mine, Zander plunges two thick fingers into my pussy while keeping his mouth clamped down on my clit with great force.

His forceful touch, his relentless sucking, and intense gaze are all I can handle, the fiery storm exploding with fury from my core, ripping through my body like a level six tornado.

“Fuck!” I scream as my body is rocked by explosions of insane pleasure. All the while, Zander keeps me in place, his eyes locked on my face, his mouth clamped on my pussy as my limbs convulse violently from orgasm after orgasm. “Zander!”

I don't know when he lets me go, I'm so overwhelmed with ecstasy, but

suddenly he's stripping in front of me, pulling off his pants and underwear, letting his cock spring free as he tosses his clothes onto the floor.

"Now it's my turn," he growls hungrily, lining his thick cock up between my legs and thrusting inside of me without hesitation.

I gasp as he enters me, feeling him fill me, stretching my walls, while he groans with utter rapture.

"Fuck," he says, his deep voice low and heavy, "You're so fucking tight."

He places his hands to either side of me to balance himself, getting into position to pound harder into me, while my hands drift instinctively down to his chiseled ass, my fingernails digging into his flesh.

His breathing is ragged as he steadies himself, all the while keeping up his ruthless pace. When he gets his balance, he fucks me harder and deeper, rocking the bed back and forth, the headboard starting to bang against the wall.

The smack of flesh hitting flesh fills the room, mixing in along with the sounds of the banging headboard. *Smack. Smack. Smack. Bang. Bang. Bang.* I can't scream. I want to scream out my pleasure, but my body feels paralyzed from the intensity of it all. I feel another storm brewing as I moan out his name in what feels like a whispered plea, barely able to take his entire length, his cock going so deep I almost think it's almost too much.

Zander picks up his pace, his chiseled hips thrusting violently inward, faster, harder, his moaning becoming louder as I feel his cock grow impossibly hard inside of me. It's coming. I know it. And I want it. *All of it.*

His powerful thrusts slow down to deep, rhythmic ones, the bed indenting each time his body smashes into me with such force that I fear the box spring might break.

"Fuck, I'm gonna cum," I hear Zander moan while the fire inside of my core ignites again.

One. Two. Three. Four. Each thrust is deeper and harder than before, and on the fourth, Zander throws back his head as he goes balls deep inside of me, and cums violently.

My thighs are quivering and shaking like an earthquake as a tidal wave of pleasure hits me and I moan his name over and over.

“Zander!” I cry, feeling his dick still contracting inside of me while my walls squeeze every last drop out of him.

Finally, he pulls out of me and falls onto the bed on my right side, his chest heaving from exertion, his body covered in sweat. Both of us need to catch our breath.

As he walks away from me, I'm struck by the realization that my body is shaking with an intensity I've never felt before. Every emotion feels as if it's overwhelming me.

I've had sex before. I've had other partners and came before.

But this is different.

It's so strong, so powerful, it's... too intense. I place a hand over my racing heart as he flicks on the light to the bathroom.

The shockwaves pulse through me as I try to calm down and try to ignore what my heart is telling me.

CHAPTER 21

ZANDER

My light blue gaze stares back at me in the mirror of the dresser. A dark ring is around my left eye. This isn't a good look. My eyes travel to Arianna's form on the bed behind me as I slip the Rolex around my wrist and tighten the band. I don't even need to look as I do it, it's been the same every morning. But there's never been a woman behind me.

In my room, on my bed.

Her gorgeous body is nothing but a small lump on the bed, hidden beneath the thick grey comforter. She's getting to me. I'm breaking rules for her. A deep inhale makes my back crack slightly as I close my eyes, wincing slightly from the bruise on my face. Last night... things are changing. Fast. And it's hard to admit it.

I got into a fucking bathroom brawl over her. *It was worth it.*

Work is calling me. I'm already late. I button the top of my dress shirt, not knowing what to do about my sweetheart.

Right now... and later. Once all of this is done. I'm sure as fuck not kicking her out, but I don't like that she'll be in here. Alone.

With cold blood running through my veins I quietly walk to the end of the bed, my jacket and shoes waiting for me.

The clock on the nightstand reads 6:40. Late for me, but Arianna's still asleep. A genuine smile curves my lips up when I hear her soft snoring. It's

adorable. *She's* adorable.

With her mouth parted slightly, the soft sound is accompanied by her shoulders rising slightly, her dark hair a messy halo around her angelic face.

She's so beautiful. So innocent.

I rip my gaze away, slipping the first shoe on and tying the laces tight.

My daily routine. Nothing has changed. I almost roll my eyes at the thought, pulling the lace even tighter.

Everything's changed.

It's not because of Arianna. I refuse to think that she's the reason I'm slipping, making one mistake after the other. It's Danny Brooks. I keep making errors in my judgment when it comes to him.

The thin laces dig into my fingers as I tie the second shoe and rise from the bench at the end of the bed, picking up my coat and walking quietly to the nightstand where I tossed my keys last night.

I have to close my eyes when I catch her sweet scent. It's like citrus with a hint of honeysuckle. I wonder if she knows how alluring she is. Lying there so beautifully, her body so soft and warm with curves that only tempt me that much more.

A dark voice in the back of my head whispers, in nearly a hiss, *you can take her. She's yours. You own her.*

But the stolen moments we've had are because she wanted me. Because she needed me.

I don't want her to think I'm the kind of partner Brooks was. The thought disgusts me. My nose wrinkles and I turn sharply away from her, hating the vile image of that prick. If that's what last night was for her, I'll never forgive myself. She's not a whore for me to use. Not to me. My heart beats faster, slamming against my chest.

The keys jingle against one another as I snatch them quickly off the dresser. I can be a Master worthy of her. Not a sick fuck who uses pain as a threat. I don't ever want to cause her pain, and I know she doesn't need it. Even if she

thinks she does. Holding the car keys in my hand I walk away from her, intent on leaving both her and my thoughts behind me.

I'm halfway across the room when her soft voice calls out. "Zander?" My name is soft, but also scratchy, the morning evident in her tone.

I stop in my tracks, the floorboards beneath the thick carpet creaking slightly. My body tenses, realizing I have to address her now. She knows I heard her.

I turn slightly, relaxing my body and treating her the same way I treat everyone else. With a facade of ease. It comes naturally.

"Good morning," I greet her and feel the fake smile on my face without consenting to it.

She props her small body up on her elbow and shoves the hair away from her face. Blinking several times, each time seeming more and more awake, she stifles a yawn and rises slowly into a sitting position gripping the comforter in her hands and bringing it up over her naked body. I'm not sure if it's because she's self-conscious or if she doesn't want me seeing her.

In the soft yellow morning light spilling in between the thick curtains, she looks radiant. *I want to see her, every last inch of her, just like I did last night. But it's only fair that she hides herself behind a blanket, while I hide behind this smile.*

Her dark green eyes dart to the bedroom door and then back to me as she asks, "Do you want me to get ready?" Another yawn creeps up on her, and from the look in her eyes she's obviously embarrassed by her exhaustion.

"You don't have to," I say and my voice is strong, slightly harsh perhaps.

"Are you sure?" she asks me sweetly. "I don't mind... I know you probably don't want me in here..." Her voice trails off as she picks at the comforter and then laughs a little, this sweet little sound that's so pure.

My smile softens and I'm moving toward her before I even realize it, my strides easy and comfortable. I have the urge to sit on the bed, she even scoots slightly, making room and straightening a little, although the comforter sags slightly in front of her. Just a glimpse of her cleavage is showing, modest, but tempting. Just like my sweetheart.

I almost sit with her, but then I remember. *Her gift.*

It was meant to be a thank you for attending last night.

“I got you something,” I tell her without thinking. Instantly, her expression softens. Those sweet lips slowly turn up and her eyes sparkle. I run my hand through my hair, wondering if it’s stupid. All the while I’m going to the closet and gathering the small bag to give to my sweetheart. Her eyes flicker to the empty side of the bed, a warm red hue filling her cheeks. My spot that she made for me.

Utterly gorgeous. A huff of air leaves me as I look at her. She really doesn’t get how tempting she is. How a woman like her could ruin a man like me. Losing control, coming undone all because of her. It’s already happening. And she doesn’t even know it. My feet remain planted where they are, even though my body wills me to sit next to her. I have to hold back.

I clear my throat as I hold the bag out to her. At the faint sound, Arianna finally looks at me. I watch her face as her slender fingers pull the paper away.

The thick wrapping paper crinkles as she pulls the package out of the bag and tears it open from the seams.

The moment she realizes what they are, her eyes brighten and a wide smile makes my chest fill with confidence. She’s so true to her feelings, her reactions so natural.

And she loves the gift.

“Brushes?” she asks me with that smile still on her face. Her eyes aren’t on me though; she’s peeling the last bit of tape from the package of paintbrushes. I had no idea such a thing could cost so much.

“I thought you’d like them,” I answer her simply.

She tilts her head, focusing all of her attention on me as she puts it all to the side and rises to her knees, pulling the comforter with her and planting a small, chaste kiss on my lips.

My eyes stay open the entire time and although her lips are pursed, I swear

she doesn't stop smiling. She pulls back quickly, that beautiful red flush all over her skin and says softly, "Thank you. I love them."

I stare at her a long moment, realizing how genuinely happy she is with such a small gift. But the clock from the nightstand calls my attention with the faint click of the hand.

Late. I'm late.

Reality sets in, and I give her a nod. "I'm happy you like them. I've got to be going now."

An awkward tension settles between us.

"Do you want me to go?" she asks, the warm color fading and a wall of armor slowly rising around her. The small moment is over, enjoyable though it was.

"No," I say, but even I can hear the hesitation in my voice. I strengthen it as I add, "You can stay for as long as you like."

I lean forward, my legs pushing against the bed making it groan and a hand bracing myself on the bed. I cup her jaw with my other hand to kiss her quickly, pulling back slightly and staring at her lips for just a moment. She doesn't open her eyes until I let her go.

CHAPTER 22

ARIANNA

I run my fingers over the paintbrushes, my gift from Zander. They're the most beautiful brushes I've ever seen, with high quality mahogany handles, exquisite markings and fine, durable bristles. I press them to my chest, a fuzzy feeling swirling in the pit of my stomach. I feel like a stupid little girl, but I don't care. It's nice to be given something that means so much. Even if it didn't mean much to him.

These are even better than the gown Zander gifted me. And I can see myself putting them to good use, already thinking about the masterpieces I'll paint. I'll cherish them long after this contract is over.

When this is over.

The thought makes me sick to my stomach. I'm getting used to Zander and his charming personality, and I feel like I'm just starting to get to know him.

But do you really know him? says that annoying voice in the back of my head. *This is all supposed to be fake, a make-believe courtship. You can't really know a man who is hiding behind a facade.*

I chew my lower lip, dropping the brushes into my lap.

I don't want to believe that everything Zander says or does is inauthentic. When he looks at me, fire burning in his eyes, it looks real. Each time I'm with him, I can *feel* the emotion emanating from him. I *feel* the connection we have between each other. It can't be fake, can it? Why would he ask me to

stay as long as I like, if it was make-believe?

Because he wants you to believe it's real.

I don't know what to believe at this point. I feel so many conflicting emotions. I want Zander. And I want him to truly want me, too. But I know less about him than I do about Danny. And that doesn't sit well with me.

The voice resurfaces with, *Well, you have the whole house to yourself, why don't you find out?*

For once, I agree with the voice. I set the brushes aside and roll out of bed, my feet causing the floor to creak as I slip on one of his shirts and walk out of the bedroom and into the hall.

I take a tour of the house, going room from room looking around for anything untoward, taken in by the opulence. I'm really impressed with the house, every room filled with expensive furniture and superbly decorated. It's large, luxurious and beautiful. But after a while, it starts to feel empty. There are too many rooms for just one man. Zander has to be lonely living here.

But he has me now.

I huff out a chuckle at my wishful thinking as I run my hand over a painted glass vase in one of the extra bedrooms. I bet it costs more than what I make in a month. For how long will he have me? A month? Two? I shake my head. It might be not much longer than that.

I make my way back into the hallway, my bare feet padding along the gleaming hardwood floors. I try to get rid of the overwhelming feeling that I don't belong here, but with each step the gnawing feeling in the pit of my stomach grows and grows. I'm about to turn around and go back to the room to grab the gown and my purse to get out of here, when I see a picture frame on a small dark stand near the entryway to one of the common areas of the house.

I pick it up out of instinct. It doesn't belong here either. I already know it. While everything else in Zander's house is expensive and each item holds an air of luxury, this picture frame is common. And the photo inside it, just a snapshot.

It's an old family picture with Zander, maybe ten years old, with his father and a lady who I presume to be his mother. She's a beautiful woman, with long, flowing blonde hair and a shapely figure. I can definitely see where Zander got some of his looks from.

But what attracts me most to her is the way she looks at Zander. It's the way all mothers look at their children. A heavy feeling settles on my chest as I stare at his mother's face.

It takes me a moment to realize that I've met Zander's father, but not his mother. I find it odd that he's never mentioned her before at all. The idea hits me that I should Google Zander's family. I bet there's at least some dirt on his father... maybe some on Zander, too.

I'm so dumb. I should've done this the moment I found out about Zander.

I'm quick to go back to the bedroom and take out my cell. I bring up the web browser, tapping in Zander Payne. The first few results yield nothing. I go several pages without seeing anything actually related to Zander or his family. It's all business news. I let out a sigh of relief when I don't really find anything. At least Zander doesn't have a sinister past.

I'm about to search for something more specific when one headline grabs my attention

Rich Socialite takes her own life after husband's affair.

Marie Payne, forty-eight-year-old wife of wealthy hedge fund investor Thomas Payne jumped to her death after learning of her husband's years-long affair with his mistress. Sources say in the week leading up to her death, Marie was so distraught she locked herself away in her room for days at a time, refusing to come out for food or drink.

Marie leaves behind a young son, Zander Payne...

"Oh," I breathe, tearing my eyes away from the article, tears filling my eyes. My body seems to go cold all at once, the large bed feeling like an abyss as I bring the comforter up and around me. I check the date on the article and think back to how old Zander was.

He was just a boy. I wipe under my eyes as the sting of the tears hits me out

of nowhere.

NO WONDER WHY HE KEEPS SECRETS, I SAY TO MYSELF, SHAKING MY HEAD AND holding my tears at bay. No wonder why Zander doesn't trust people.

I thought I had a painful life, but at least I'm still alive. A lot of my issues, I caused myself. Being a problem child, being wild and partying. But his mother's death? Zander had no control over that. No control over the betrayal that led to such an earth-shattering loss.

Letting out a deep, trembling sigh, I turn my phone off and settle into the comforter, imagining how hard that had to be on him. I'm no longer in the mood to go snooping around. After finding that out, a part of me is content in letting Zander keep whatever secrets he has close to his chest. It probably gives him comfort, more control over his life. And who am I to say that he owes me complete access?

I look toward the door to his bedroom, feeling a swell of emotion. I need a release. I need to do something that'll make me feel better.

There's only one thing that I know will do that.

I throw the covers off of me and go back through his house looking for his office. After finding pen and paper, I make my way to the piano room, sprawling out on the floor.

And I begin to draw.

CHAPTER 23

ZANDER

My hand tightens on the leather shifter as I park my Mercedes in the garage. I lean back in my seat after turning the keys and pulling them out. My forehead is pinched as I stare at the garage door to my home.

She's still inside.

I didn't expect it. There are monitors and cameras set up throughout my home. I'd be a fucking idiot not to have them with the sheer number of people who come in and out. From the housekeeping service, to caterers and business associates.

I wasn't surprised when she started looking through my things. I rest my head back against the leather, staring at the door and remembering how I watched her on the computer screen rather than actually working today. I'd already decided phone conferences would have to substitute for my normal meetings, considering the faint darkness under my left eye. I canceled three of them though so I could focus on watching her. During the fourth and fifth she stayed on my screen, lying on the floor, sprawled out and tempting me to come back to her. To pull her tempting body into mine, but also to see her drawing.

My sweetheart is a beautiful distraction.

And she's still here.

Or at least she was when I left the office nearly fifteen minutes ago. The

realization that she could be done with her art makes me exit the car in haste. Shoving the keys into my pocket, I open the door and kick it shut behind me. The garage is at the side of the house, and I'm well aware that my pace is much faster than it usually is. I'm curious to see if she's still sprawled there on the floor of the piano room, waiting for me.

My dick hardens in my pants as the mental images of me lying on the ground next to her and slowly teasing her shoulder with my fingertips until she shivers plays in my mind. But when I get to the foyer and see her spot empty, my steps slow and my heart pauses in my chest. She's been here for hours. Taunting me to come home.

I stare at the gleaming hardwood floor. How the fuck have I missed her? How cruel would it be for her to leave just as I've come home when I've been wanting her all day? The seconds split and time moves slower as anger seeps in. *She's mine*. She should be here. Waiting for me.

I know it's unreasonable. Even as my jaw clenches, I know I shouldn't think that way. This is *pretend*. It's fake and merely a result of my poor judgment, but nonetheless, *I want her*. And she was fucking here all this time.

"Oh!" the small sound of her gasp from behind me grips my attention. I school my expression, turning slowly to see her standing in the kitchen. I haven't missed her. The adrenaline stops pumping in my blood. My heartbeat settles, and my body instantly relaxes at the sight of her in the middle of the kitchen. My sweetheart didn't slip through my fingers. She's right where she belongs.

Her dark green eyes are wide and she shuffles her feet as she stares back at me. She pulls her hair around her shoulder, her fingers nervously twirling the ends. "I wasn't sure-" she starts to say something, but stops as I walk toward her in the open kitchen, my strides slow and deliberate.

"I'm surprised you're still here," I say and the lie comes out with an unnatural tone in my voice that I don't recognize.

Arianna doesn't notice as she clasps her hands and shakes her head. "I'm sorry. I didn't have work today, and I got caught up." Her hands fly outward as she blurts out an excuse, and the paper she's been working on waves in the air as she moves her hands.

“What’s that?” I ask her, nodding to the sketch. I resist the urge to take the few remaining steps forward and snatch it from her. I want her to *want* to show me.

“Oh,” she says and looks at the paper as if it’s the first time she’s seen it. As if it didn’t encompass the last few hours of her time.

“May I see?” I ask, but the words come out as a hard command instead of a question and I wish I could stop them. I wish I could soften for her. But that’s not who I am. “Please,” I add and clear my throat.

She doesn’t react to the harsh tone, instead she obediently hands me the paper and the thrill of her listening to me makes my blood heat with desire. Such a small thing. So insignificant really. But she makes me feel powerful in a way I haven’t felt before. She makes me want to command her; it’s a dangerous thing for her to play with me like this. To tempt me, but she doesn’t realize she’s doing it.

She bites down on her bottom lip as I take the paper from her. I’m gentle with the edges, and I make sure not to touch any of the marks. Her eyes watch where I touch the paper, and her fingertips are covered in ink of some sort. I shake the paper slightly, finally getting to see what she’s been working on all this time.

And it’s beautiful. I knew she wouldn’t disappoint me.

It’s just a sketch of the room. Of the piano, really. But the way it’s done romanticizes the barren room. Something about the subtlety of the lines, the delicate details and shading. There’s a softness to it that I’ve never felt in that room myself. But it’s what she sees. What she *feels* being there. It makes me see it in a different light.

“You have such talent, sweetheart.” I lift my eyes from the sketch to her eyes and love how much light shines back at me.

“Thank you,” she says in a whisper, a blush coloring her chest and moving up to her cheeks.

“You should do this... for a living.” Her long lashes whip up as she stares back at me. “It’s a crime that you do anything other than this.”

I expect a smile in return, but instead she answers kindly, but firmly, “I can’t. I have work, and... I just can’t.”

“I’ll get you a studio tomorrow,” I say out loud without thinking. It was a fleeting thought in my office, but hearing her now, I know I need to get her one.

“A studio?” she asks me with disbelief.

I nod my head, my brow furrowing as I second-guess what it’s called. “For your art,” I state and gesture to the paper in her hand.

There’s still a look of confusion on her face. Her soft lips part, but no words come out. She clears her throat, looking away from me.

“What’s wrong?” I ask her, taking another step closer but standing an arm’s length away. The warmth from this morning is gone. The girl I held in my arms last night isn’t the same one standing in front of me.

“It just seems... a bit much?” she responds after a moment.

I can tell she’s trying to distance herself. She’s already waiting for this contract to be over maybe, so she can stop playing the part. So she can just go back to being herself. *To being Brooks’ possession to barter off when he sees fit.* The second the thought comes to my mind; jealousy ravages my thoughts.

And for the first time in years, I show it, my expression, my stance, everything shows what I’m feeling and thinking. I can’t stop it. Arianna takes a small step back, fear clearly evident as she reacts to my anger.

I shake my head slightly, letting out a heavy exhale and pinch the bridge of my nose, hating that I’ve scared her. I don’t want to hide anymore, but my anger isn’t for her. None of it. But this is why I hide it.

“You’re playing the part of my girlfriend.” I start speaking without thinking. Convincing both of us that a studio is necessary for this... game. “They’ll expect me to pamper you,” I finally open my eyes and chance a look at her. “I would do anything for someone I want to impress.” *For you*, that dark voice in my head whispers. *For someone I want to love me.*

I ignore the thought, a chill traveling down my spine as Arianna slowly nods

her head. She visibly swallows, still a bit unsure of herself.

But she answers with the words I want to hear. “Okay,” she says and her voice is soft, meant to appease me. “Thank you.”

My eyes search hers, but she isn’t looking at me. I chance a step toward her and cup her jaw like I did this morning. Her posture softens and she pushes her cheek against my palm, her small hand cupping the back of mine and her eyes shining back at me with vulnerability. “Let me spoil you, sweetheart,” I speak slowly. “Just for the rest of the contract.”

I’ve told many lies in my life. So many deceitful things have left my lips. And I know full well the words that just slipped past my lips are nothing but a deception.

I said them only to get her to cave to me. I want her to submit to me. I can feel that darkness in me rising. A possessive side is controlling me. And I don’t stop it. I don’t even want to suppress it.

She’s making me weak. And for the first time in my life, I don’t give a fuck.

CHAPTER 24

ARIANNA

*L*et me spoil you, sweetheart.

Zander's words run through my mind, causing warmth to flow through my chest. I told him yes, only for the contract. *But that was a lie.* I want to get lost in his world and become his plaything. I want to fulfill his every desire; all while being spoiled by him. It's a fantasy and it's dangerous to get lost in it, but I am. I'm becoming consumed with the thought of being *his* and losing sight on what the reality of this situation is.

Each day that passes I feel more at ease, wanting more and more of what he has to offer.

I suck in a deep breath as I gaze out the floor-to-ceiling windows, remembering the way he looked at me the other day. There was something in his eyes. Something that told me what we have feels real. I want to believe it. But it's too good to be true. And like most things that are too good to be true, it's easy to be fooled. I don't want to be that girl, hoping and wishing for something that can never be, all while ignoring the truth. Everyone knows that in real life there are no Prince Charmings and no knights in shining armor. Still, I'm drawn to him like a moth to a flame.

"There you are," says Zander's deep voice behind me.

I turn around with my eyes closed, wanting to believe in the fantasy. And when I open them, I'm lost in the world I want. In the make-believe. He's leaning against the doorjamb in the doorway, wearing dress pants and a

matching dress shirt, looking classically handsome and sexy as fuck. My breath halts in my lungs, refusing to leave the moment. This is real. If only I could hold onto it.

“Here I am,” I say, flashing a light smile, ignoring my racing heart, the fear and every other thing that’s going to rip us apart and leave me shredded into nothingness. I can pretend. For him.

Zander grins at me, walking over to deliver a warm kiss on my lips. I like this smile. There’s something different about it than the way he smiles at everyone else. This one is just for me. I think it's the way his eyes brighten and the skin around them wrinkles. I nearly melt into his hard body, my knees going weak from *that* look.

When he pulls away, I’m breathless and feeling drunk on lust. If he wanted to take me right here, right now, I wouldn’t dare object.

“Are you ready to go see the studio?” he asks me, gently rubbing my arm and causing sparks to flow through my body.

I gaze up into his eyes, seeing the caring warmth reflected there.

All the questions are right there, on the tip of my tongue. Is he going to keep me afterward? Does this feel the same to him? I’m falling into a dark abyss and I’m terrified; I just want to know that he’ll catch me. But closing my eyes and imagining he will makes the fall that much easier, that much more enjoyable. Even if there’s nothing but the hard, cold unforgiving ground there to meet me when this is all over.

His eyes stare back at me as the questions makes my stomach flutter, but my lips stay closed tight. My heart is clenching in agony because I already know the answers, I already know the truth.

And I refuse to appear ungrateful. He’s gone through the trouble to rent a studio for me. I won’t ruin the moment.

Besides, I want to live in the fantasy.

Before I can reply, my cell goes off in my pocket.

“Sorry,” I tell Zander, fishing it out, my fingers fumbling with the tight jeans.

Zander's low, rough chuckle makes my cheeks heat. How does he do this to me? All that warmth leaves me in a sharp wave as I check the screen, my blood running cold.

Seeing the look on my face, Zander asks, "Who is it?" I hear his words, but I don't want to answer. He moves closer to me, invading my space. I feel caught between the two of them. Caught between my past and what could be. It's falling away from me, slipping past my fingertips as the phone rings again in my hand and Zander leans forward.

"Danny," I whisper even though me responding at this point isn't necessary, Zander can see for himself.

"Answer it," Zander says firmly.

"But-" I protest, not wanting this to happen. I don't want to be a part of this anymore.

"Answer it." His words are like stone, hardened by his resolve.

Dread pressing down on my chest, I tap the answer button and put it on speaker.

"Hello?" I ask weakly, although I'm staring at Zander. His eyes aren't on me; his focus is on Danny. I'm lost in the battle between the two of them, back to being nothing but a pawn.

"Where are you?" Danny asks coldly.

I swallow back a nervous lump in my throat. "I'm at home," I answer without thinking, my voice devoid of life.

"Don't lie to me."

I clear my throat and straighten my back. I can't hide from him, or my past. "I'm out." He doesn't own me. He's not my Master. *No one is.*

"You're with him," Danny says matter-of-factly. "And you must really think I'm a fucking idiot if you think I think otherwise."

I don't bother arguing.

"I need you to leave him now," Danny tells me firmly, in a voice I recognize

all too well. One that makes me want to obey. A voice that *made* me obey once upon a time. “Right now. You’re no longer his property.”

My mouth is dry as I reply, “Danny, I-” Deep down inside of me, I feel the need to tell him no, but as the word climbs up my throat, it’s as if I’m being strangled. The word refuses to leave my lips, to be heard by the man who saved me, by the man who beat me. I’m at war with myself and stuck in the middle of a battle between two men.

“I said leave!” Danny screams on the other end of the line, the dark side of him he showed me in the alley coming to the surface. “Or you’re as good as fucking dead!”

His jaw clenched tightly, Zander snatches the phone out of my hand, leaving my body trembling on its own.

“Brooks,” Zander growls, his voice dropping so low that my skin pricks with more fear than I thought possible at the sound. “You ever threaten Arianna again; it’ll be the last thing you’ll ever do. She’s not going anywhere. She’s mine. And you’re going to pay me the money you owe me. Every. Fucking. Penny. Or you’re going to wish I would’ve killed you back at your office.”

Zander hangs up the phone, his eyes blazing with murderous rage. “You’ll never speak to him again. He isn’t going to touch you.”

I don’t say a word as a dozen different emotions course through my body. The threat is very real. My body sways as the shock of what’s transpired hits me. *You’re as good as fucking dead.* Over and over his words repeat in my head.

“You’re never going back to him,” Zander tells me firmly. “Ever.”

“What’s going to happen?” I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

“I’m going to make sure he pays,” Zander practically growls, tossing the phone onto the end table. It takes him a moment for him to look at me, and when he does his demeanor changes. “You’re safe.”

He reaches out to me, gripping both of my shoulders and lowering his eyes to mine. “Look at me, sweetheart.” I instantly obey him, but I question my instincts. “You’re alright, and everything is going to be alright.” His words

are like a soothing balm, but the wound too deep.

The only thing I'm truly aware of is that nothing is alright.

CHAPTER 25

ZANDER

There's a gentle breeze outside; it blows the light dusting of snow as it falls, twirling before coating the hard ground. It's April and the cold should be moving along, winter done and over, but the chill has lasted longer than it should. I rest my hand against the window, it's cold as ice against my heated body.

He's done.

They're the words I texted Charles. It's long past due for Brooks to be put in his place. Come Monday, there will be nothing left of him.

I turn, looking over my shoulder at Arianna as she wraps her arms around her knees. She's staring into the fire, listening to the crackling as the billows of soft grey smoke spill from between the split logs.

She hasn't been the same. I hate how much control he has over her. How weak he's made her. She keeps saying he saved her, but she has no idea how wrong she is.

"Sweetheart," I call out to her and she lifts her head from resting on her knees and stares back at me with the desire to be commanded in her eyes. She's lost and scared, just like she was before Brooks got his hands on her. He kept her that way, molded her to believe something else. To believe she was better when he only made her suffer that much more.

I'm going to fix her. It's the only thing I give a damn about anymore.

“I want you to come here,” I tell her as I walk to the edge of the rug. She’s still on her ass, curled beneath the heat of the fire, but she makes a move to come to me. She nearly crawls. For the split second that she’s on all fours, I want her to. The idea of her crawling the few feet and waiting on her knees to please me makes my dick twitch with need. *Soon*. I’m ready to give in, but only once she fully submits. And that starts tonight.

She slowly rises and I can see in her eyes that she questions if she should have crawled to me. If she wanted to, she should have. It’s as simple as that. She’ll learn. I’ll learn with her. And together we’ll enjoy that depraved darkness we both desire.

“Do you want me?” I ask her. Her eyes spark with fear, the green flecks mixing with a light gold and shining back with panic.

“I... Yes... I-” she doesn’t answer with confidence. Her eyes look down at the plush rug beneath her bare feet.

“You need to know what you want, sweetheart. If you can tell me, I’ll give it to you.”

“But for how long?” she finally asks the question that’s been holding her back. My lips turn up into that smile, the one I love. The one that reflects the happiness she gives me. I brush the stray hairs from her face with the back of my knuckles and lean forward, my hand cupping her chin.

I whisper, my lips nearly touching hers. “However long you’ll let me have you.”

“I don’t want to leave,” she tells me with her eyes open, but there’s a pain in her voice caused by her confession. Our hot breath mingles as she says, “You make me weak.”

The words are like a knife to my heart. If only she knew. I’m the weak one. Only for her.

I press my lips to hers and let my hands roam her body. My fingers trail down to the dip in her waist before I pull back, leaving her to stand on her own, although she almost stumbles.

“Undress for me,” I tell her as I grip the ends of my shirt, forcing myself to

hold anything other than her. She doesn't hesitate, although her eyes spark with a hint of anger for leaving her in the heat of the moment. The fire crackles and sparks behind her, lighting her with shadows dancing over her slender body as she slowly strips, dropping her clothes to the floor in a puddle at her feet. I do the same, mimicking her movements until we're both naked before each other, bathed in the glow of the fire and nothing else.

"I want you," she whispers, and her simple words contain so much power. They're so raw and full of a truth that's undeniable.

I step forward, closing the space between us as my toes dig into the plush rug and confess, "I want you, too."

Her lips crash with mine and her fingers spear through my hair as she moans into my mouth. Yes! This, this is exactly what I want.

My blunt nails dig into the flesh of her ass as I lift her up, parting her thighs and nestling my dick between her legs as I lower her to the floor beneath us, sinking into the rug in front of the fire.

The soft fur of the rug is nothing like the feel of her skin. So delicate, so easily bruised and broken. But I want her like this. Every part of her moving with me, wanting me just as much as I want her.

I leave open-mouth kisses along her body, over every inch. My hot breath trails along her skin. Her hips buck and those moans of desperate need fill the air as I toy with her, teasing her just as she's teased me.

"Please," she moans my name. "Zander, please."

She'll never know how much power she gives me when she calls for me like that. When she shows me how much she needs me. How much she craves my touch.

"On all fours," I breathe the command and she's quick to obey, turning over her body, her hair swishing over her shoulder. I let my teeth scrape along her neck before sucking gently at the tender skin in the crook of her neck.

Her plush ass grinds against my cock, begging me to take her and claim her as mine. But this is for her. For her to claim me.

“Take from me, sweetheart.” I place my hand on the small of her back as I line my dick up between her hot folds. She’s already slick, already wanting me. “Take what you want.”

The way she looks at me from over her shoulder teases me to slam into her. To take everything from her and overpower this beautiful creature who’s submitted to me.

But there’s so much more power in having her take from me.

Her back arches beautifully, her ass rising slightly as she reaches between her legs and grabs a hold of me. A rough groan vibrates up my chest and soothes me as she slowly eases herself backward, her hot cunt taking all of me achingly slowly.

Her hips push back until she’s pressed against my groin, her hot cunt filled with my cock. Her forearms brace herself and she leans forward, her head thrashing from side to side as she moves on and off my dick.

My head falls back and my fingers dig into the flesh of her hips. They itch for me to hold her still and fuck her like I want to. But I hold back. Waiting for her.

She rocks herself on and off my dick, her tight cunt sucking me in and making me regret the decision to give her control. My fingers dig deeper, wanting more. Her soft moans turn to ragged breaths as she picks up her pace.

I have to let go of her, warring with the need to take over and pin her down. I fall forward, my hands gripping the rug as her pussy clamps down on my dick. I kiss along her spine, traveling upward and letting her hair tickle my nose as she cums violently, urging me to spill myself deep inside of her as her body trembles with the shock of her orgasm.

A cold sweat breaks out over my body, and I finally feel like I can breathe. Her body sags on the floor, limp and sated, but I’m not done with her.

“Good girl,” I tell her before nipping her earlobe and propping her back up and onto all fours. She turns to look at me over her shoulder, her breathing frantic.

My hands are gentle as I trail them down her back, catching my breath and positioning my knees so I can take her hard and fast. I only give her a moment, only waiting to see her lower her front to the floor to steady herself and then look back at me with her mouth parted.

I slam into her, buried to the hilt without any mercy as she screams out. I piston my hips, taking her over and over with a relentless pace.

I'm already close to cumming. The sight of her taking pleasure from me was enough to be my undoing. Her fingers dig into the carpet and her pussy spasms on my cock. "Zander!" she screams out my name as I pound into her over and over. My toes curl and the very bottom of my spine tingles as I thrust my hips once, twice, and one last time before cumming deep inside of her.

My body falls forward as she shakes beneath me, the waves of her own release racing through her. My hand grips hers as my body covers hers, and I kiss her shoulder tenderly.

"Never question if I want you," I tell her softly. "Never question if you're mine."

She breathes out heavily, strands of hair falling in her face. Her gorgeous eyes stare back at me and she answers, "Yes, Zander," as I kiss her shoulder one last time.

CHAPTER 26

ARIANNA

The crackle of spent logs and the scent of wood smoke fill the room as Zander slips on his dark blazer over his white dress shirt and adjusts his cufflinks in one smooth flourish. I bite my lower lip as I watch him check out his freshly shaven appearance in the bedroom mirror. He has to know that he looks good. This is just habit.

After adjusting his black tie, he turns around, his piercing blue eyes focusing on me.

My skin pricks as the intensity of his stare summons a dull ache between my thighs, a reminder of the passionate night before.

“You’ll be fine while I’m gone?” Zander asks me, giving me his boyish grin that makes my heart skip a beat.

I grip the grey silk bathrobe in my hands, pulling it tighter around my chest. “I think so,” I say. I pause, not knowing if I should pry, but hesitantly ask, “Where are you going?”

Zander’s grin quietly fades. “I have some business to take care of.”

I want to ask him what kind, but I stop myself. There’s a reason he keeps his secrets, and maybe he doesn’t trust me with them yet. But he can’t keep them from me forever.

He can too, says an annoying voice at the back of my head, *this is all pretend.*

Fuck you, I want to tell the voice. I don't need any negativity shitting on my rainbow right now. I just want to be happy for once.

I shove down my anxiety and ask, "Do you know when you'll be back?"

Zander raises his right hand to glance down at his platinum Rolex. "I think around six. I'll bring back dinner."

Damn, that's a long time. What the hell will I do until then?

I try to keep my disappointment from showing, but I barely manage. "Okay."

Zander crosses the space between us, hooking his hand beneath my chin and tilting my head back to force me to look into his eyes. "Don't be sad, sweetheart," he says softly. "I have something for you to do while I'm gone."

"What?" I ask, my mind racing with what it could be.

His boyish grin grows wider. "I bought an easel and painting supplies for you so you could work here when you're not in the studio. I set it all up in the piano room."

A feeling of warmth goes through my chest and I stand on my tiptoes to give him a kiss on the lips. "Thank you," I breathe with gratitude when I pull away. My cheeks hurt from the wide smile on my face, but I don't even try to hide it.

Zander winks at me. "I thought you might like it." He gives me several more kisses that leave me wanting more before pulling away. There's a look of regret on his face as he gazes at me, as if he wishes he could stay. "Don't go anywhere while I'm gone, and do not answer your phone if you don't know who it is. I don't want you in contact with *him*."

I nod my head slowly, my anxiety slightly rising at his serious tone. "I won't." I promise. It's not like Danny's threat feels real, it doesn't. But I feel safer here with Zander. I don't want to see Danny at all. Just the thought makes a chill run through my body. I don't want to talk to him. I don't want anything to do with him, and I trust Zander when he says he's taking care of it.

Zander gives me one more quick kiss on the lips. "Later then, sweetheart."

He walks over to the door but before he can leave, I call out, "Wait."

Zander turns, arching an eyebrow in question.

"What am I supposed to paint while you're gone?"

His brow furrows in thought for a moment and then he gives me that boyish grin. "I don't know. Surprise me."

With a wink he's gone, leaving me alone in the room. I listen to the sound of his footsteps receding down the hallway until they fade into the distance. After a minute, I hear the roar of the engine of one of his cars start up outside as he drives away.

I chew on my lip, wondering what I could paint for Zander. Looking around the room, I feel like he has expensive taste. Hmm... An item of wealth, maybe? Power? I shake my head. No, I don't think he'd like that.

I got it! Remembering his reaction to my painting of the woman, suddenly I have an idea and my face breaks out into an excited grin. My fingers itching with excitement, I rush out into the hall toward the piano room. I stop just outside of it, grabbing the picture frame off the stand just outside the door.

When I walk into the room, the breath catches in my throat.

"Ohhh," I say softly, butterflies in my stomach.

Zander's set up a chair and easel on the dais with the piano, pointing it toward the floor-to-ceiling windows so I could paint with the breathtaking backdrop in front of me. He even went to the trouble to have the painting supplies set out and ready. All I have to do is sit down and start painting.

This is so sweet of him. So unexpected.

Tears pricking my eyes, I walk up the dais and set the frame upright on the piano. I take a seat at the easel and look at the brushes. When I choose the right one, I dip it into a deep earth tone shade of brown and begin painting.

Over the next several hours, I lose all sense of time as I work on the painting, frequently casting glances at the picture frame, trying to get every detail and nuance right. I don't take any breaks and I get so lost in my art, not even getting up to go to the bathroom. And by the time I'm close to done, my back

is aching and my right hand feels nearly numb.

“Almost there,” I whisper, setting a brush down into a small cup of water on the stand next to me. There’s a bit of paint on Zander’s shirt I’m wearing, but I’m sure he won’t mind. I fucking hope not. “It’s missing something,” I murmur, staring hard at the painting, a replica of Zander’s mother, Marie.

I stare at it long and hard, trying to figure out what it is. Finally, I snap my fingers.

Her smile. A feeling of joy sweeps through me, a rush of euphoria I always get when I’m close to finishing a work of art. It’s not quite right. There’s life to the smile I see in the photo. A tenderness that shows her love for Zander. And it’s missing from this canvas.

“Once I get that done,” I say happily, loving how it all looks, “it’ll be perfect.”

And I hope Zander will love it.

I’m about to pick up a paintbrush and apply the finishing touches, when I hear a faint ringing sound. I pause, frowning, straining my ears. I can’t tell exactly where the sound is coming from, but it sounds like it’s in the other room.

I pick the paintbrush back up, but now that I’ve heard the sound, I can’t unhear it. I’ve got to know what it is. Sighing, I place the paintbrush down and walk into the adjoining room, one of Zander’s studies.

Ding. Ding. Ding.

It’s my cell, laying on his desk.

When I see the messages on the screen, my heart leaps up my throat.

It’s Natalie. Fuck!

I’ve been so worried about Danny that I forgot to call her.

That’s not true, says the annoying voice at the back of my head. You were too wrapped up with your lover Zander to care.

I’m really starting to hate that fucking voice right now, especially because it

reminds me how much of a shitty friend I've been.

Sucking in a deep breath, I pick up the phone, reading through some of the messages.

Nattybatty95: Hey Ari! I got some crazy shit to tell you! I can't wait to get home to talk to you about it :P

Nattybatty95: Where you at, chica?

Nattybatty95: Is something wrong? :(

Nattybatty95: Why aren't you home yet?

Nattybatty95: WTF

Nattybatty95: I'm filing a missing persons report if I don't hear from you within the next day

The last message sends me into a panic and my fingers are flying across the keys before I even have time to process.

Artistchick96: Hey nat! Don't go filing a police report!!! I'm totally fine! Don't worry. I just took a mini vacation that's all

My cell chimes with an immediate *ding*.

Nattybatty95: Ari! Thank God you're alright! I was just about to file that report on you

Thank fuck she didn't. Jesus.

Artistchick96: No need! I'm okay.

Nattybatty95: Holy shit, you scared me to death! I thought you'd been kidnapped or something

My fingers fly across the touch screen.

Artistchick96: Nope. You're still stuck with me.

Nattybatty95: Wait, where are you? And where the hell have you been!?

I pause before responding, biting my lower lip while I think. I feel awful

about the worry and panic I've caused Natalie. And I can't believe I haven't thought to send her a message while I've been staying over here with Zander. But deep down, I know a part of me didn't want to contact Natalie because... I knew she'd be trouble.

If I told her I was staying somewhere, she would've pestered me with endless questions.

God, I feel awful.

Sucking in a deep breath, I type out a quick message, ignoring her last message.

Artistchick96: hey... are you home?

Nattybatty95: No, but I will be in about a half hour.

Nattybatty95: Why what's up?

I hesitate, my heart pounding in my chest. As bad as I feel about keeping Nat in the dark, I'm not sure if I want to do this. *But if I don't give her at least something, she might grow suspicious.*

ARTISTCHICK96: I WANT TO MEET UP. TO TALK ABOUT SOMETHING.

I'm barely done pressing send when the screen lights up with another *ding*.

Nattybatty95: I'd definitely be down for that. Burning rubber to get home.

Artistchick96: See u there

Another *ding*.

Nattybatty95: What's this all about? Is it Danny?

I turn off the phone instead of answering. It'll take too much to type to tell my story, and I'd rather think about what I'm going to tell her on the way over. I still haven't decided if I'm going to tell her the truth yet, or make up some story.

But whatever I'm gonna do, I need to go there quick so I can get back before

Zander's home. Glancing at the clock on the wall it's almost one, so I don't have too long, but it's still plenty of time.

Don't leave here without telling me. His words echo in my mind before I can take a single step.

For a moment, I'm frozen with indecision, not sure what to do. Zander was explicit about not going anywhere without asking for his permission.

But Natalie's my friend. And she needs to see me to feel secure. I can't leave her worrying about me like that.

Deciding that Zander will have to get over it if he finds out, I quickly get dressed and take off without looking back. He'll get over it. I glance at my purse a few times, wondering if I should text him. But I don't. Instead, I turn up the radio and try to relax, but it's impossible.

A heavy weight settles on my chest just thinking about opening up to Natalie. I don't know what I should do. Tell the truth. Or lie.

There are no pros to either one. I tell the truth and Natalie goes nuts, wanting to call the police. I tell a lie, and I feel like a shit face asshole.

I lose either way.

Whatever I do, I'm still going to apologize for being an absentee friend these past few months. It's really not fair how I've treated her after all she's done for me.

When I pull into my usual parking space at the apartments, I don't see Natalie's car anywhere, but I figure she'll show up any minute as I step out of the car and head up inside. The familiar scent of Natalie's perfume hits me as I step through the doorway and I feel a sense of nostalgia.

I've been so wrapped up with Zander, I forgot how much I've missed my friends these past few days.

I walk down the hallway and go into my room. I toss the keys on my dresser and head over to the closet to grab some more canvas, but before I can open the doors, my eyes are drawn to a note on my bed.

My stomach drops in my chest when I pick it up and read it:

Ari

I know I haven't been the best friend to you lately, always bugging you about the problems you're having with Danny, but I'd just like to tell you I'm just concerned about your well-being. I don't mean to be intrusive when I'm trying to figure out what's going on. I just care about you and want what's best for you. I really do hope that you'll tell me about your problems one day.

Until then,

Love always,

Crazy Nat

Tears sting the back of my eyes as I read the message.

“Oh Nat,” I say softly, swallowing back a large lump in my throat, “Why do you have to make this so damn hard?” Now I’m *really* dreading our conversation. A part of me wants to leave now before she comes back, so I don’t have to deal with the situation. But I’m not going to take the easy way out. I’m going to wait until she’s here to decide which action I take.

I reread the message several more times before placing it on my nightstand and walking back into the living room to wait for Nat.

I flip through channels on the TV, thinking Nat is going to walk through the door any minute. But almost thirty minutes later, she's still not here. I glance at the time, my anxiety growing. Zander said he'd be back at six, and it's almost two.

I turn back on my phone to text Nat to see what's going on. Before I can type a letter, the last message she sent before I turned my cell off pops up.

Nattybatty95: Hey I'm going to stop by A.C. Moore to get some supplies so we can chat while we paint. I have a feeling this is gonna be a juicy talk. ;)

Artistchick96: Okay. I'm here at the apt already... but can you hurry? I need to leave here by 5:30.

No sooner than I'm done texting, there's a knock at the door.

My heart jumps in my chest, my hand gripping at my shirt. *It's Natalie.* It has to be. She's probably back with her hands full of painting supplies. I let out a breath and try to shake off the dread.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

"Coming," I call, slowly getting up, and moving as fast as I can.

I take a deep breath when I place my hand on the door handle. Muttering a quick prayer, I swing the door open and put on a cheery smile, "Hey Nat-"

My heart freezes as I see Danny standing only a foot away with a demented grin on his face. He's dressed in his usual dress pants and dress shirt, except his eyes are bloodshot, his hair isn't finely coiffed as usual and his clothes look rumpled.

"Expecting someone else?" he sneers. A whiff of alcohol hits me and I immediately know he's been drinking.

"Danny?" I gasp. "What are you doing here?" It's hard not to tremble and keep my voice even. I wasn't expecting this at all. Zander's words come to me unbidden.

Don't leave the house without telling me.

"I've come to collect my debt," he growls, his eyes boring into me with a hatred that causes my skin to prick.

"What? What are you talking about?" I try to move, to slam the door in his face, but my body feels frozen, paralyzed with fear. He takes enough of a step in that I can't slam the door. *I can run though.*

"I followed you here," he says, his voice low and dangerous. "You know what?" I ask after swallowing the lump growing in my throat and being as firm as I can manage. "You're making me feel uncomfortable. I think you should leave." It's hard, standing up for myself. But I don't have to take this kind of abuse from Danny. Not anymore. My hand feels hot as I push slightly on the door.

"You're really asking me to leave?" Danny demands in disbelief, his nostrils flaring as he splays his hand on the door, keeping it from shutting.

“You’ve been drinking,” I say, “and don’t look well. It’s for the best.” My heart beats chaotically. If I just act like everything’s fine, it’ll be okay. I’m in control. “Please leave.” I hold his gaze, straightening my back and willing him to go and leave me alone.

For a moment, I think Danny is going to comply with my wishes, his head bowing. But when he looks back up at me, my blood runs cold.

“I don’t think so,” he says, his voice dark and deadly. Without warning, he rushes forward.

Crying out in alarm, I try to slam the door, but it smacks against his foot and he forces it open with a feral grunt. The door hits me straight on and I stumble, falling onto the floor. Heart pounding like a hammer, I scramble forward on my hands and knees while simultaneously reaching for my cell in my pocket.

I open my mouth, preparing to scream as loud as I can. But cold, powerful hands clamp down on my mouth from behind, muffling my cries. His hard body falls on top of me, knocking the phone out of my hand, but I grab it, forcing it into my blouse to hold onto it.

Kicking and bucking, I struggle violently, but I’m no match for Danny’s strength. He presses down hard on my neck, cutting off my air supply. I strain against his grasp, my heart pounding so hard I think it will burst. Danny increases the pressure, growling in my ear like the monster he is.

I grow weak, my vision dimming black around the edges.

It only takes about five seconds for me to go limp.

“I gave you to him,” I hear Danny’s voice growl from somewhere far away as I fade off into darkness. “But now I’m taking you back.”

CHAPTER 27

ZANDER

“*Y*ou look like shit.”

I look up at Charles and see him smile. Grunting a humorless laugh, I lean forward and toss the papers back to him.

“I guess that’s what happens when you get your hands dirty,” he says with a glint in his eyes.

“You couldn’t be happier, could you?” I ask him.

“Just surprised you risked your pretty boy face,” he says with a smirk.

“You’re not the only one,” I mutter beneath my breath. My father hasn’t let it go. *Everyone knows*. I’m a disgrace. Or so my father tells me. I haven’t responded to him, and I won’t. He’ll never understand. She’s worth more than anything. She’s worth far more than my reputation. If my father could understand that, my mother may still be breathing.

“What’s going on with her?” Charles asks me, catching my attention with his tone.

“What do you mean?” My heart races a little faster with him questioning me about her. I don’t want anyone to question it.

“The money-” he starts to ask, and I cut him off. I’m so fucking sick of talking about money. So much fucking money runs through my hands. I don’t need it. I’m tired of chasing it. I just want to live a full life. One with her.

“I’ll give her the money, but it’s not going to him. It’s just for her.” My voice is flat, but firm.

“So it’s just the month?” Charles asks.

My stomach drops at his question. She said she doesn’t want to leave me and I believe her, but only time will tell if she’s actually happy. If I can give her enough. “I’d rather it not be.”

His brow raises as he leans back in his seat, the leather groaning. “It seems... expensive.”

I shrug, not knowing what to say.

“How do the contracts work?” Charles asks.

“It’s just a month,” I explain, and my voice is flat. “After that, I’m keeping her.”

“Paying?” he asks, resting his ankle on his knee and tapping his foot.

“No.” I’m harsh with my answer, narrowing my eyes. He raises his hands defensively. “She’s not a whore,” I say and I practically spit the words. Is it too much to think she’d want me without my money? I don’t entertain the thought. I refuse to think she’d leave me. She’s not in it for the money. She’ll stay when the contract is over. I’ll make sure of it. Whatever she desires, I’ll give it to her. I’ll spend every cent of my wealth on her to keep her happy.

“I’m just asking out of curiosity.”

I’m about to tell him to mind his own business when he adds, “They’re an interesting thing, the auctions.”

I glance at the screen on the computer as he talks. The living room is empty, the house quiet and cold without her in it.

“I imagine a woman would put herself up for auction... if she knew about it.”

I check the cameras to the house again, but Arianna’s not home yet. She knows to be home when I get back. My only request is that she greet me when I get home. If I had it my way, she’d never leave, but I’m not so selfish to think that’s possible.

“Your sweetheart isn’t home yet?” Charles asks me, and there’s a slight mocking tone in his voice. I just give him a sharp look and don't say anything.

“It’s different, seeing you like this,” he says.

“Like what?” Weak. I’ve never felt as though Charles was an enemy, but his tone makes me question.

His answer surprises me. “Like you give a fuck.”

I stare at him, searching his face for his intentions, but I don’t have to guess.

“I’m jealous,” Charles admits and then looks away, staring past me and out to the window behind me. The dark night of the city sky playing shadows across his face.

“Jealous?” I ask him, a smile creeping onto my lips.

“Not jealous of your face,” Charles answers with a smirk. I huff a laugh and lean back in my seat.

“It’s good to see you happy,” Charles says with a lowered voice. I meet his eyes and I know with everything in me he’s being genuine.

I prefer not to let the emotions dictate my response. I shake them off, leaning back in my seat and resting my chin in my hand. “I’ll be happy when Brooks is out of the picture.”

“Changing the subject,” Charles says, the grin fading from his lips. It’s quiet a moment until he answers, “Soon.”

“When is it happening?” I ask him as I pick up the slate block, and the edges seem sharper to me than they ever have before.

Charles shrugs, “It all depends on what you’d like.” He takes out his phone, tapping the screen and bringing up Brooks’ information. “He’s predictable. If you’d like it to look natural, that can be arranged. I suppose it just depends on when and where.”

I nod my head once, debating on what to respond, but Charles interrupts me, “We have a problem.”

There's an urgency in his voice that makes me sit up straighter. I wait for him to continue as he watches the phone, his body stiff.

"Where's Arianna?" he asks me.

"She should be at my place s--"

"He was at her place. He changed his routine. He went to her house."

My hands grip the edge of the desk. "He's on Fourth Street?" There's only one reason that Brooks would go there. I take out my own phone and message Arianna to text me back and stare at the screen. Willing her to text me, but nothing comes.

I can't wait. "When was he there?" I ask Charles, my voice fighting to hold back the panic I feel. She's been gone for hours. My thumb taps across my phone and I call her. The phone rings and rings, but there's no answer. Everything in me stills, he's gotten to her.

Charles nods his head as he taps on the screen of his phone. "Three hours ago." I hang up the phone and realize that's right when she left. *He was watching her.* I call her again. Ring. Ring. Ring.

"Where is he now?" I ask him as my ice-cold blood slowly pumps through my veins.

"His place."

"On Andrews?" I confirm, already grabbing my keys off the desk and leaving for the door.

"Yeah," Charles says as he grabs his coat and comes up behind me.

"He has her. I know it."

Charles nods his head, throwing on his coat as I open the door.

"You're coming?" I ask him.

He nods his head once, the mask of indifference on his face morphing as he smiles at me. "I can't let you have all the fun." His humor does nothing to ease me. Right now nothing will make me feel as though I haven't already lost her.

“We’ll get her back, Zander,” he tells me as he places a hand on my shoulder.

I don’t answer him. The door closes behind us as I stalk to the elevator with purposeful strides. I’m not letting him take her. I’ll kill him first.

CHAPTER 28

ARIANNA

Whoosh!

The sound of the whip sings through the air before lashing against my bare back. *Crack!*

A strangled scream rips from my throat, echoing in the hollow basement as blazing pain shoots up and down my flesh. I weakly struggle against my binds, sweat beading my brow. I'm suspended, naked, held up by chains hanging from the ceiling.

It's useless to fight. My head lolls to the side as my aching body screams at me to do something, yet I'm too weak. I never had a chance. I woke up in this position, and every ounce of my body is sore from fighting.

Despair consumes me.

The only thing I feel is pain.

I scream and scream again until my voice is raw and cracking, shaking against my binds, my back on fire. After several agonizing moments, my head drops forward and I hang limp against my bindings, my limbs trembling as a cold sweat breaks out all over my body. I don't know if he's going to hit me again, but I don't even know if I'll even feel it, my vision blackening around the edges.

"I gave you everything," Danny says behind me, his boots thudding against the cement floor as he paces behind me, his voice filled with utter contempt.

My eyelids open at the sound of his voice. He hasn't spoken since I woke up. My voice is sore from screaming, from begging and pleading. I can feel the cool air blowing over the open lashes and it stings with a pain that's indescribable, but even that isn't enough to scream over. The only movements, the only sounds I have the energy for are those that are instinctual. And even then, it's dulled by exhaustion.

I lick my dry, cracked lips. "Danny... please," my voice croaks as I cry weakly, tears streaming down my hot face. "You don't have to do this." I think I say the words, but my eyes are so heavy, my body so weak and the pain so unbearable, I'm not certain of anything.

"He wants to keep you?" Danny asks angrily.

I swallow back the lump of fear in my throat as I try to think of a response. I clench my sweaty hands, my fingers brushing against the rough metal and the raw cuts at the sharp cuffs shoot a pain down my arms that makes me wince.

"And you want him too, don't you?" Danny's words are just a whisper. His voice is eerily calm. I try to pick my head up, my throat too dry to answer.

I hear him drop the whip. My heart slams in my chest, and my body stiffens. I think that's what I heard. Please God, please. I can't take any more.

"Well he can have you back," Danny whispers next to my ear. His breath feels so cold. Everything feels so cold. "As soon as I'm done with you," Danny says as he wraps my hair around his wrist and pulls my head back too sharply, a scream tears through me as my neck is ripped to the side.

The moment he lets go, I hear him pick the whip back up and somehow, I'm able to cry again. Not that it will do me any good. I can't save myself. I'm powerless and pathetic.

Dread presses down on my chest as his whip sings through the air and I cringe. *Whoosh! Crack!*

Whoosh!

Crack!

Whoosh!

Crack!

My mouth opens wide in agony, saliva dripping from my lips, but I have no voice left to scream with. I buck, shudder, and strain against my bindings, my back feeling like it's being flayed to the bone.

With each painful lash, the room spins around me, my breathing becoming shallow, ragged.

My heart is becoming sluggishly slow.

When the darkness finally claims me, I'm incredibly grateful. I only pray it will swallow me whole.

CHAPTER 29

ZANDER

*I*f the cops had seen—" He won't fucking let it go. I spend the whole way here. He's had her for nearly four hours. Four fucking hours.

"Enough," I snap at Charles. He won't shut the fuck up. I get out of my car which I've parked a block down from Brooks' house and slam the door.

"You need to be quiet," Charles says and grabs me, gripping my shoulder and slamming me against the car.

All I can see is red.

I push against him, but he pushes me back.

"He has her!" I scream at him, but he doesn't relent, slamming my head into the car and pushing his face against mine.

"Calm the fuck down," he says through clenched teeth. I wish he hadn't come with me.

I use all of my weight and push him off of me. He stumbles backward and nearly falls on his ass.

"He's going to see you coming."

"Let him!" I scream, my voice hoarse and my skin so fucking hot I can barely stand it. I just need her back. I turn from him and take quick strides, my eyes focused on the house at the end of the barren street.

“He could kill her,” Charles calls out to me, and it’s only then that I pause. My heart freezes in my chest. No. I clench my teeth and move my hand to the gun at my waistband. I hear Charles’ footsteps walk up behind me slowly, with determined steps. “If you barge in, he could kill her.”

I’m silent as I stand there, feeling a wave of nausea threatening to come up.

“We both know he didn’t take her for a chat.”

“Stop it,” I tell him with my eyes closed. All I can see is her face, her smile. I can practically hear her laugh.

“You need to listen to me. You need to restrain yourself.”

My hands ball into fists and my blunt nails dig into the fleshy part of my palm. “Just go then. Lead the way, but no more waiting. I need her.”

Charles slaps a hand on my back, and it’s hard and firm. He moves ahead of me and I lift my eyes to watch his back as he moves off the sidewalk and hides in the shadows of the trees along the large estates.

He looks over his shoulder and I’m quick to move, my heart pounding so hard it’s the only thing I can hear.

Thud. Thud. Thud. Each beat is another second she’s in there with him.

I can’t hear a damn thing, a loud ringing in my ears is the only thing I can focus on as Charles leads me through the scattered trees to the side of Brooks’ house.

I don’t even realize he’s picking the lock until I try to shove him away. I just need to get to her.

I can feel it in the pit of my stomach. He’s hurting her. He has for years, but now it’s personal. I stand there watching Charles shoving the pick into the lock and twist it slightly before I hear a muffled scream.

The blood drains from my face, and ice replaces my blood as Charles’ eyes meet mine.

“Open it,” I mouth the words to him. My hand slowly travels to the cold steel of my gun. My reddened vision becomes focused. Adrenaline is bringing life

to the hatred burning inside of me.

The door clicks and slowly opens, and I move in front of Charles. He doesn't stop me as I move through the house. The floorboards are creaking loudly under my weight. I don't stop, all I can hear is that scream, her pain. It compels me to go to her, a pull so strong, so violent that nothing can stop me. Nothing will keep me from her or save him from death.

She screams again as I come to a stop in the narrow hallway to a heavy door with an old steel knob. I test it and the knob turns easily, her scream louder as I creak it open.

My heart pounds in my chest as I hear the swish of a whip and the crack of it against her skin. The lights are dim as I move down the stairs, my gun held out in front of me.

Time slows as I see her, hanging there from the chains with him behind her. Pure hatred shines in his eyes as he pulls the heavy whip back over her shoulder, ready to strike her again.

It only takes two shots. *Bang! Bang!*

He wavers on his feet, staring down at his chest where the small holes in his chest seem to vanish, but quickly blood seeps through the fabric and spreads along the woven threads.

I keep my arm up, the kick of the gun still traveling up my arm as he falls to his knees first, his head tilting back up to me, his forehead pinching and his hands moving to his chest. It's not long before he falls forward, his face slamming against the ground, his body lifeless.

My feet move down the steps, going closer to him. I don't take my eyes off of him as I empty the gun into his skull. *Bang! Bang! Bang!*

I keep pulling the trigger even after it's empty. His dead eyes are open and staring back at me as blood pools around his disfigured face.

It's only the sound of her whimper that tears me away from him.

"Don't touch her!" I scream at Charles, making him flinch as he puts both his hands up.

There's so much blood. Lashes mar her back, her shoulders, her thighs. Everywhere. He tore her flesh open. I don't hesitate to pick her small body up, relieving the weight that's pulling her wrists against the metal cuffs.

"Zander," she says and her voice is so weak as her head droops to the side.

"It's alright," I tell her quickly as Charles works on the locks at her wrist. He must've found the key somewhere, because they're off in an instant. Her arms are falling like dead weight and making her face twist in pain.

She cries out as I turn her body, cradling it and feeling the warmth of her blood soaking into my shirt and against my arms.

"Here," Charles says and passes me a white sheet. I question using it for only a moment before wrapping it around her body, not tightly. Every small movement makes her wince with pain.

"Talk to me, Arianna," I tell her. Her eyes look as if she's staring far off into the distance. "Arianna," my voice cracks as I say her name.

I'm too late.

"We need to get out of here," Charles says as he looks around the cellar. My shoes have traveled through the blood, tracking footprints wherever I've been. "I need to call for clean up."

My heart races as I realize what's happened. What I've done.

"Hopefully there's time," Charles says so softly I'm not sure if I was meant to hear him.

My body shakes as I hold her closer to me, carrying her weak body up the steps and letting Charles lead the way. "I've got you," I whisper, kissing her hair. "It's alright," I tell her even though I'm not sure it is. My body is so cold, so numb.

Sirens scream in the background as we walk away from the house.

"We should have gotten the silencer," Charles mutters beneath his breath, opening the car door for me.

We would have time to clean up. Time to hide the evidence if we had stopped

to get his equipment like he'd told me to.

Arianna groans with pain in my arms, the blood seeping through the thin white sheet.

But then my sweetheart might not have survived.

CHAPTER 30

ARIANNA

I groan softly with the twinge of pain as the doctor works on mending my back. My hands fist the comforter and my head thrashes from side to side. I'm on pain meds, but the prodding and stitches bring sharp pains that won't go away. I'm alive though. "Zander," I croak, barely able to force the words from my lips. I try to be still, feeling the cool air sting my open wounds, but it's hard. It just *hurts*. I've never felt so much pain in my life.

In the background, I hear heavy footsteps softened by plush carpet, coming toward the bed. As the footsteps get closer, I lift my head to see Zander, his face a tortured mask. But my movement proves to be a mistake as horrible pain runs up and down my back. I suck in a sharp breath through clenched teeth, trying my best not to cry out. I don't want him to see me like this, but I need him here. I just want him to hold me.

A large but gentle hand touches my shoulder where there aren't any wounds.

"Don't move," Zander says, his voice low and sounding like a soft rebuke.

It hurts me to hear that tone in his voice. "I'm sorry," I tell Zander quietly, my face pressed against the mattress, my lips mashed together. I'm sorry I ever left. I'm sorry I couldn't fight harder. I'm ashamed. I brought all this on Zander. And now Danny's blood is on Zander's hands. Guilt mixes with anxiety in my stomach, making me feel sick.

"It's alright," I hear Zander reply, his voice softer now. Even through my pain, a warmth flows through my chest.

“I should’ve listened to you,” I say remorsefully. *And none of this would’ve happened.*

“It’s going to be alright,” Zander repeats. He crouches down so his eyes are level with mine.

My heart skips a beat at his handsome face so close to mine, his masculine scent calming me. His gaze pierces through me, his heavenly blue eyes clouded with emotion.

I attempt a smile as Zander leans in, pressing his lips against mine, his hand cupping my jaw while his thumb rubs soothing circles on my cheek, causing my skin to warm from just his touch alone. But he murdered someone. I heard what Charles said. There wasn’t time to hide anything. They’re going to know. They’re going to come for him. I’ll tell them everything. They can’t blame Zander. They can’t... I can hardly breathe, and the reality makes me dizzy with agony. “Is it going to be okay?” I whisper against Zander’s lips, my heart in my throat, my eyes shut from the pain. *Please tell me that it is. Please tell me that everything is going to be okay.*

“Everything’s going to be fine,” he says softly.

My eyes flutter open and I see his piercing blue eyes gazing at me. His jaw is clenched, his expression conflicted.

I look back at him, my heart still in my throat. I have the sudden urge to tell him that I love him. That I want to be with him forever. He really saved me. I truly owe him my life.

But I can’t find the strength to speak the words as I watch the look in his eyes change.

Deep down, I know that he’s lying to me.

Everything isn’t going to be okay. And it’s all because of me.

CHAPTER 31

ZANDER

I wish I could just pause time. If only it were possible. The soft sounds of Arianna sleeping peacefully are the only sounds I concentrate on. If I don't, all I can hear is the bang of my gun. The thud of his body hitting the floor. The sound of her scream.

I close my eyes, wishing the image would go away. It's not the blood from the bullet holes spilling onto the floor that makes my stomach turn with sickness, it's Ariana's blood stained on the cement under her and caked on her back.

I grit my teeth, my hands fisting the sheets as I try to contain the anger.

A soft moan makes me open my eyes as Arianna twists on the bed, nestling closer to me and giving me a warmth I'm in desperate need of.

Her small hand meets my chest, and instantly her body relaxes and she moves closer in her sleep as I put my arms over her waist.

Her simple touch calms the anger inside of me. I feel raw and powerless with her next to me. I'd do anything for her. She turns me away from everything I've ever known. It means nothing compared to her touch.

I've sacrificed it all; I already know I'm going down for this. Charles messaged me this morning, there's too much evidence. Video surveillance from the gala, her blood, his blood.

We both knew it as I stood over Brooks' dead body. There was no going

back. No hiding it. I'm only biding my time until they come for me.

If only I could pause this moment and stay with her forever.

"Mmm," Arianna's soft voice brings my eyes to hers. They flutter open and she yawns, covering her mouth with her hand. As she moves her arm, she winces, a reminder of the pain from the wounds on her back.

I wish I could do more for her. I feel like I failed her. *In so many ways I have.*

"How do you feel?" I ask but my voice croaks and I have to clear my throat. I haven't slept, and that's evident in my voice. My eyes feel heavy and my body is begging for me to let go, but I can't. I know I only have a few moments left with her. I won't waste them sleeping.

"Okay," Arianna answers me, her hand moving to the stubble on my jaw. I take her hand in mine and kiss her palm, making that sweet smile form on her face. I love that smile. It should always be there. She deserves that happiness.

"Do you need any more meds?" I ask her, my eyes automatically flashing to the clock. It's nearly eight, she can't have another dose for two more hours.

"I'm fine," she says with the soft smile still there. "Really," she leans forward and hides the pain that's clearly there to kiss me on the lips.

I don't waste the moment, I pull her closer to me, holding on to her small body carefully and gently and deepening the kiss. I part her lips with my tongue, slipping it along the seam and then stroking her tongue with mine. Our tongues mingle in a dark dance of desperate need. Her moans fill my hot mouth as she pushes herself against me. Her breasts press against my chest, and her leg brushes over my knee.

I nip her bottom lip and look down at her. Her dark eyes look up through her thick lashes and her lips part. Our hot breath fills the air between us.

A moment passes with a spark igniting between us. Not lust, something stronger. *So much stronger.* Her lips part and she almost has a chance to say the words, but I don't let her. I push my lips against hers, muffling anything she could say and putting every ounce of passion and need into my touch.

I can't bear to say it, knowing how this ends, but I hope she can feel it. That's

all I need. As long as she can feel it, it'll stay with her forever.

As I break the kiss, I hear the banging on the front door. My heart freezes, but it's not from knowing that I'm done. That I'll be in jail soon and on the stand for murder. It's not the threat of life behind bars, or the death penalty that makes my heart stop. It's the look in Arianna's eyes and the way her nails dig into my arm as I pull away from her.

"No," Arianna whispers, her head shaking as I move off the bed, ignoring her attempt to keep me with her in the safety and warmth of the comforter.

"I have to," I tell her with my back to her. I'm not going to run. I know that's not an option. I take in a breath as the bed groans and Arianna grabs her sweater off the floor, throwing it on and ignoring the pain she must be feeling and running through the hall to catch up to me. Her bare feet pad on the floor as a voice says through the door, "Zander Payne, open up! We have a warrant!"

"Go back to bed, Arianna," I command her, but she doesn't listen.

I clench my teeth as the banging of a fist on the other side of the door echoes in the foyer.

"Zander," Arianna pulls on my arm, begging me to look at her. She swallows thickly, looking at the door as the banging continues.

"Sweetheart," I tell her with the semblance of a smile on my face. "It's okay," I lie to her. It hurts to do it. "Just go back to bed," I say and my voice cracks. I brush the hair away from her face and cup her chin.

Bang! The knock at the door sounds so much louder.

"Coming!" I call out and at my voice, Arianna hunches forward, tears falling down her cheeks.

I lean down and kiss her lips, tasting the salt before resting the tip of my nose against hers. "You'll be alright," I tell her in a soft voice. It's meant to comfort her, but it only forces a sob from her throat.

She cries quietly behind me in the middle of the foyer as I unlock the door and open it, stepping aside. Each beat of my heart seems slower.

Four cops stand at my doorstep, the first pushing the door open wider as he steps through.

“Zander Payne?” the man asks. He has dark skin and dark eyes to match. Tall and broad shouldered, his voice doesn’t match the intimidation of his presence. The man is deadly, that much is obvious, but his voice is calm and level. Professional even. “I’m Officer Richter, and this is Officer Lawson.”

I nod my head, meeting his eyes and waiting for the arrest.

The man behind him, Officer Lawson, comes in with cuffs already out. “Turn around sir, we have a warrant for your arrest.” The second officer speaks this time, a much shorter man, with tanned skin but lacking the same forceful presence as the first man. His voice still echoes authority though. And I listen, turning around and putting my hands behind my back.

I don’t ask what I’m being arrested for, maybe I should. I should have prepared this better. But the truth is, she was never a part of my plans. None of this was supposed to happen.

“Zander,” Ariana’s voice is full of pain as the metal brushes against my skin. It’s cold and the clinking of the cuffs is loud as the metal closes around my wrists. A strong hand rests on my shoulders as I’m pushed against the wall. My cheek is flat against the drywall as the man pats me down.

“You have the right to remain silent. If you do say anything, it can be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to have a lawyer present during any-”

“I did it!” Arianna calls out. I can’t see her with my face still pressed against the wall. My eyes pop open, and my heart races as her words hit me. I try pushing back against the man holding me, but his hold is unforgiving.

“I killed Daniel Brooks. I did it!” Ariana shrieks and runs forward, toward the cops. I can hear the commotion behind me. I push against the man holding me, and this time I’m forceful. “I shot him. I can tell you everything. Please don’t take him.”

“Keep quiet!” I yell at Arianna, whipping my body around. I’m so off-balance I fall over, tripping over the cop’s boot as Arianna’s being turned around by Officer Richter.

“Don’t say anything!” I wrench my head around, craning my neck as I lie awkward on the floor with the cuffs tight on my wrists, the cold metal digging into my flesh and shooting sparks of pain up my shoulder, begging her to look at me as I scream out. “Arianna!”

“Take 'em both,” Officer Richter tells the other cops.

I stare at Arianna’s back, watching as they cuff her.

“Don’t touch her!” I scream out so loud my throat hurts. “She didn’t do it!” I shout at them.

“If I were you, I’d wait for your lawyer,” Officer Richter tells me as one of the cops ushers her away. My heart is beating so loud; the sound is deafening.

“Arianna!” I scream for her as I’m heaved off the floor and shoved against the wall as I try to run to her. “Stop!” I scream out. My face is shoved against the wall, and the harsh crack bruises my cheekbone.

“She didn’t do it,” I breathe out the words. “Leave her alone!” The sounds of them walking her out of the house mixes with the blood rushing in my ears. “Arianna!” I scream again, but she doesn’t answer me, instead I’m left with silence. Only the two officers and myself remain, alone in my foyer.

“She confessed to a murder, we have to take her in,” Officer Lawson says close to my ear. His breathing is ragged from dragging me up and keeping me still against the wall.

“I’ll repeat what I said, Mr. Payne.” Officer Richter comes into view. His tall frame hovers over me as he tells me, “You should wait for your lawyer.”

“She didn’t do it.” I look him in the eyes, letting him feel my conviction and the truth in my words. She never should have said anything. What was she thinking? My heart twists with a pain that’s indescribable.

“She’s hurt,” I tell them as the man behind me spreads my legs. “She’s-”

“She’ll be alright, Mr. Payne.”

“She didn’t do it,” I tell him again. I plead with him to let her go, she can’t take the fall for this. I won’t let her. “She’s not feeling well, and she-”

“It doesn’t matter. You need to let the law handle this.”

The fight that’s been absent since I brought my sweetheart home comes back. I won’t fight for myself. I’ll take the punishment I deserve. But I won’t let them touch her. She’s innocent. She’s always been innocent.

I look him square in the eyes as I tell him, “I need to call my lawyer.”

CHAPTER 32

ARIANNA

I rest my head on the interrogation table, letting out a heavy exhale. *I won't tell them anything.* I don't care what they say. Or what they do. I refuse to talk. The table is so cold. It makes me want to sleep. I'm so tired. So exhausted. Anxiety twists my stomach as my heart pounds. I assumed they would lock me up right away, toss me in a cell, and throw away the key. But instead I've been left in a room. I don't know how much time has passed. There isn't a clock in here. Nothing. I'm just alone.

I resist the urge to look behind me. I know they're on the other side of that one-way mirror, looking in. Watching me. I told them I shot him. I don't know how many times. When they asked me why, the answer was easy. But then they asked questions I couldn't answer. Where I got the gun. Why a man's shoe prints were found at the scene. I went silent. I won't say anything that can implicate him in murder. I'm trapped and alone. I turn my head to the other side, letting the chill calm my heated skin.

All for Zander.

I lift my head, sitting back in the metal chair as I remember the look in his eyes when he laid me on the bed. It touched me in ways I couldn't imagine. Made me feel like I was the most precious thing. Like I was *his*.

A tear threatens to fall down my cheek, but I fight it back. I can't break down. Not here. Not *now*.

There's no way I can let Zander take the fall for me. Danny is dead because

of me. He killed him to save me. I'm not going to let Zander pay for my mistake. Just the thought of him going to prison for the rest of his life fills me with so much guilt and shame.

No matter what they do or say, I can't let them break me. I pick at my nails, wishing for some miracle. Hoping that telling them what he did to me is enough. *It should be.* Shouldn't it?

I keep my neck stiff, staring straight ahead when the door to the interrogation room opens and booted feet smack across this floor. I even keep my head down as the two hardened detectives sit down at the table across from me.

"Are you ready to speak with us, Miss Owens?" Detective Richter asks harshly, a thirty-something tall man with a chiseled jawline and a receding hairline, his deep voice filling the small hollow room like a bass. Out of the side of my eye, I can see him staring at me with an irritated scowl, his muscular arms folded across his chest. Dressed in a plain white dress shirt and blue jeans, he's not wearing a badge, his gun holstered at his waist.

"I already told you I did it."

The two men share a glance before Detective Richter replies, "You need to give us more than that."

I don't say a word.

"You don't have to be afraid to speak," his partner, Detective Lawson, says more gently, resting his elbows on the table and leaning forward with his hands clasped. He seems the more levelheaded of the two, with short dark hair, broad shoulders and a large nose. Unlike Detective Richter, he has a badge, a large golden ornament, proudly on display on his right breast. He doesn't have a gun. "You're away from prying ears now and can speak freely." He waits for a moment to see if I'll respond before saying, "We promise you, we're just trying to do our best to help you."

I nearly snort out a laugh at the bullshit. Though I'm not well-versed in law or cop tactics, I at least know that they are not my friends and they are not trying to help. I would be a fool to trust them.

I keep my head down, clenching my jaw. If they're expecting they'll get me to talk, they'll be waiting a damn long time. I'm not saying shit other than

what I've already told them.

The sound of the clock ticking on the wall fills the silence. *Tick tock, tick tock.*

"Look up when Detective Lawson is speaking to you," Detective Richter says irritably, suddenly.

Go fuck yourself, I want to growl, but don't.

I know Detective Richter is only doing his job, but he has no idea what I've been through. And if he thinks being firm with me will get him what he wants then he's sadly mistaken.

"Don't make this hard on yourself. We all know you're lying."

I freeze, wondering if they really do. I almost part my lips to say, "How?" but then remember the tactics the cops use. No matter what they say to me, I need to stay quiet. It's better that way. I'll be quiet, I'll get a lawyer. They can blame me for killing him when they see what he did to me. I'll claim self-defense, or maybe insanity. I pick at my nails, the fear and anxiety weighing heavily against my heart.

"Do you honestly expect us to believe a woman like you killed Danny Brooks when he had so many enemies?" Detective Richter demands.

I remain silent.

Detective Richter snorts when he sees I don't react. "Or let me put it better for you; do you honestly expect us to believe that a woman in your condition, a woman who'd just been beaten within the inch of her life, was in any position to kill her lover?"

Again, I don't respond, keeping my face stoic and pointed downward against the table, even though the word lover throws me off.

Just a little while longer, I tell myself.

"You're making this hard for yourself," Detective Lawson says in a way more calming tone. "We don't want to see you locked up for a crime you didn't do. All you have to do is tell us why your new boyfriend killed him."

I stay still, clenching my jaw, my eyes closed tightly.

Silence descends upon the room.

Detective Richter starts to say something, but he's interrupted by a knock at the door.

A young man sticks his head in, opening the door just enough and says, "Someone here to see you, Detective Richter."

Detective Richter glances at me, his jaw clenching. "Can it wait?"

The man glances outside the door and then shakes his head.

Detective Richter sighs and gets up from his seat and nods to Detective Lawson before leaving the room.

It's quiet when he's gone and I stay in the same position, feeling sharp pricks along my back. I shudder at the thought of having to sleep on a hard bed with my aching wounds.

"Don't be unnerved by Richter," Detective Lawson says, breaking the silence. "He tries to get a rise out of all our interviewees, to put them off guard."

I ignore him. He can try to be nice all he wants, but he's not getting anything out of me.

"You can talk to me," Detective Lawson presses. "I'm on your side here."

I continue to sit there, not saying a word. I just want this all to end.

Detective Lawson inhales as if to say more when the door opens, and in walks Detective Richter with an impeccably dressed woman in a business suit, her shiny blonde hair finely coiffed.

"Up, Miss Owens," Richter practically barks.

For the first time since coming into the interrogation room, I lift my head up, wondering what the hell is going on.

"Why?" I demand, my voice sounding hoarse and raw from screaming the other night. "Is it time for me to go to jail?"

Before he can answer, the woman next to him says, “Hello Miss Owens, I’m Dana Mills, the lawyer that’s been hired to represent you.”

“What?” I ask, my face twisting in confusion. “I didn’t hire-”

“Mr. Payne hired me as your counsel,” Dana says.

I try to keep my hands from trembling. “I’m guilty. I’ve already admitted that I’m the one who killed Danny Brooks. I’m going to jail.”

Dana has a sad expression on her face as she gazes at me, but it quickly turns professional once again. “Please come with me. We’ve got to get you prepared for your pretrial hearing.”

CHAPTER 33

ZANDER

*M*y hands are white-knuckled as I grip onto the back of the wooden row of seats in front of me. This isn't real. It can't be. This isn't how it's supposed to go down.

"Just stay quiet," my father says from my right and it's a damn good thing my grasp is on the bench. The need to beat the shit out of him is riding me hard. He got me out. He pulled his strings and got me out. *But she's still in custody.*

"She didn't do it," I tell him again. My voice is raw, my eyes stinging and bloodshot. I haven't slept, eaten. I look and feel the same.

"Get yourself together," my father says through clenched teeth as if anyone in here could hear him.

There's hardly a soul in the courtroom. The judge isn't here yet, but the defense, Miss Mills, and prosecution are at their benches as is the court reporter and a few people occupying several seats of the benches where my father and I are. Although we're alone in the row.

"She didn't do it," I tell him again, this time turning my head to face him. He's clean-shaven and his suit is crisp. If anything, he looks better today than he has in years. I'm slumped forward and next to him I imagine I look the opposite. Unkempt, although my suit is at least clean and pressed.

I let out a shaky breath as the back door opens in front of me, just to the left

of the witness stand and a cop ushers my sweetheart in.

My heart crumples in my chest as I lean forward. She doesn't look at me. Her eyes are on her hands as she walks in.

I hate my father. I hate trusting him. He promised me she'd be alright. But this is too much.

Please don't say anything, Arianna.

They couldn't charge me with her confession. My father's spinning stories in the press and coming up with plans and deals. But all of them leave her here in the courtroom to face the charges. I only need to hear the bail amount so I can pay it and take her away.

We can run. I'll run forever with her. I have enough money. I'll take her wherever we can hide.

"All rise," the bailiff says in a commanding voice and I lift my heavy body, but I don't move my eyes away from my sweetheart.

Her hair sways as she stands, and I get a glimpse of her profile as she turns her head to watch the judge come through the heavy double doors on the right. Her cheeks are reddened and tearstained. The sight of her in an orange jumpsuit shreds me.

My father's hand rests on my shoulder and I slowly pull my eyes away from her to look into his gaze. The same eyes as mine.

"She'll be fine," he tells me beneath his breath. The bail hearing continues as I search his face for something to give me confidence in him, trying to settle the disdain rising to the surface.

"And what are the allegations against the defendant?" I hear the judge's heavy voice call out.

"Murder in the second degree," the prosecution answers the judge.

"I need her out of here," I tell my father, my body trembling with the need to go to her. The skin over my knuckles feels as though it will split if I grip the bench any harder.

“She shouldn’t be there-” I tell him, but he cuts me off.

“Quiet,” my father hisses, the admonishment clear in his voice. I’ve never needed him. Not for one goddamned thing in my life. But right now I do.

“She’s not a flight risk,” I hear my attorney say. Dana’s the best there is. She’ll get her out. But I need it to happen now. Today.

“On the contrary, it’s evident that she has access to financial means. Enough to flee the country.”

“What access?” Miss Mills asks with disbelief. The room spins around me as I take in the words, white noise drowning out parts of the conversation as I turn back to Arianna. She’s staring ahead just as she was on the stage at the auction. *Accepting her fate.*

“She’s involved with an individual with enough money and means, and reason might I add, to carry her out of the country.” My heart sinks in my chest. No. No. They can’t keep her.

“The charges against my client, make it clear that no one else is in danger of-” my attorney rebuts.

“She confessed to murder,” the prosecution cuts off my attorney.

“What was said is inadmissible, she was under duress at the time and the prosecution is well aware of the circumstances.”

“I did it!” The words are ripped from my throat as I stand there, staring at the judge. I can feel her eyes on me as I step out into the aisle, finally letting go of the bench.

My father reaches for me, grabbing my arm and shoving his hand over my mouth. I turn in his grasp and land my fist against his jaw, the stinging pain ringing through my numb body.

“Zander,” my father looks back at me with his hand over his jaw. There’s a bit of blood covering his teeth and spilling out onto his hand. His face isn’t one of anger, there’s no hate. His expression is simply one of denial.

“I shot Daniel Brooks twice.” I turn and face the judge, only then aware of the sounds of the people around me and the flash of a camera.

“Zander, no!” Arianna’s soft voice travels to me, her words full of pain. I close my eyes, ignoring her plea. She never should have tried to pull this shit. I won’t let her. I swallow thickly and continue.

“I came to his home and saw the defendant there. I knew she was there.” My father tries to cut me off, but I continue. “I came with my gun and I shot him.” The words leave my hollow chest, each one ripping and clawing at my throat on the way out, begging to take the memories with them. “I killed him, and I’d do it again.”

“This is a stunt, your Honor,” the prosecution calls out, his voice high and carrying an air of disbelief.

I catch sight of my attorney but she’s looking at my father, her lips pressed together.

Through all the banging of the gavel, the chatter of the people behind me, the attorneys arguing and judge speaking over everyone, all I can hear is Arianna. “Zander, no,” and her small cry breaks my heart.

I hear the footsteps of the cop’s shoes against the thin carpet of the courtroom before his hands are on me.

CHAPTER 34

ARIANNA

“*Y*ou’re a free woman, Miss Owens,” Dana tells me as we pull up to my shared apartment with Natalie, the smooth hum of the Mercedes engine running.

Her words bring me no joy. I don’t want to be free. I shouldn’t be here.

I suck in a sharp breath as Zander’s words ring in my mind. *I did it! I shot Daniel Brooks twice.*

I shake my head at the memory, filled with despair. He should’ve kept quiet. He should’ve let me take the fall.

Seeing him dragged from the courtroom nearly brought me to my knees.

Noting the anguish on my face, Dana gently pats me on the knee. “That’s a brave thing you did, trying to take the fall for Mr. Payne.”

I make a face. “Brave? Or stupid?” The question is rhetorical. What I did wasn’t smart, but smart doesn’t matter in this case.

A wistful, empathetic expression comes over Dana. “I think we’ve all done something not so wise in the name of love, Miss Owens.”

I inhale deeply at the word *love*. It’s true. And something I’ve known for a while now. I love Zander. And I don’t want to see him rot in a jail cell on my behalf no matter what he did.

“Don’t worry,” Dana assures me at my distant, pained expression.

“Everything is going to work out fine.”

“Do you think so?” I ask, feeling a small glimmer of hope.

Dana gives me a confident nod. “Mr. Payne is a resourceful man. And so is his father. If anyone can figure a way out of this mess, they can.”

I know she’s trying to comfort me, but she can’t know that for sure. Zander committed murder. Even confessed to it. I want to believe that things are going to be okay, but right now, I’m not seeing a way out.

“Thank you,” I say to Dana, giving a nod and flashing a weak smile. “I really appreciate all your help.”

“You’re very welcome, Miss Owens,” Dana replies. “Take care.”

I open the door and step out of the vehicle and watch as she drives off in her gleaming chrome Mercedes-Benz. After a moment I turn around and take in the apartment building, noting the cream-colored stucco walls and the units that are almost too close together.

It feels strange coming back here after everything I’ve gone through. And I dread having to go inside, knowing the questions that await me there. But I have to do it. I need someone to confide in.

My heart races as I make my way up the stairs and to my apartment with Natalie. By the time I reach the door, my breathing is heavy and ragged, a little from climbing the stairs and some from the crushing anxiety that I feel.

“What the hell is going on, Ari?” Natalie demands as soon as I step through the door.

My chest fills with warmth slightly at the sight of her. I haven’t seen her in days and I’m grateful to finally lay eyes on her face. She looks beside herself, her hair’s a mess, and it looks like she’s lost a few pounds in the little time since I last saw her.

“Your mug has been plastered all over the news!” Natalie hisses when I don’t answer right away. “It’s crazy!” She shakes her head in anger. “I tried getting into the courthouse to see you, but I couldn’t get inside.” She pauses, peering at me with concern. “Is it really true?”

“Is what true?” I ask.

“Did that Zander... Zander Payne... Did he really murder Danny to save you?” Natalie asks with intensity.

I stare at her for a long time, setting my keys down on the counter and recounting the last few weeks. It hurts to take in a breath as I look back at her wide, pleading eyes. Slowly, I nod my head. “He did... if he hadn’t...” my voice trails off as pain pulses my back. My wounds have been healing, but they still hurt like hell. I don’t know when the pain will stop. If it will *ever* stop. I’ll have scars for the rest of my life, but none of that matters compared to what Zander’s facing.

“Jesus,” Natalie mutters, shaking her head. “I can’t believe it.” She looks up at me, her eyes shining with relief. “Thank God you’re still alive.” She comes forward to give me a hug.

I hold her at arm's length. “Please don’t touch me.”

She covers her mouth quickly, pain reflected in her eyes. “I’m sorry,” she breathes the words. She visibly swallows as I lower my arms. “He hit you? Right?” Danny did?” Her words are slow, said with a lowered voice.

I turn around and lift my shirt slightly up my back for a brief moment. Natalie recoils as I turn back around, her face twisting in disgusted disbelief.

Silence falls over the room for a moment.

“I need you to tell me everything,” Natalie says, finally breaking the silence. She looks shaken to the core, visibly trembling.

“I don’t want to talk, Nat.” My voice is soft. I don’t want to do anything except wait for Zander to be released. Tears leak from the corners of my eyes. He can’t go to jail for me for the rest of my life. I don’t think I could live with the guilt.

“Please, Ari?” she asks as I brush the tears away. “I’ve been worried sick about you since this all started. I don’t think I can go another minute without knowing what happened.” She shakes her head, tears filling her eyes. “Not after...” she pauses and swallows thickly, “seeing that.”

I suck in a trembling breath, more tears threatening to spill from my eyes. The pain in Natalie's voice causes my knees to go weak and I feel like crumpling to the floor. I stumble over to the couch and sink down into the cushions, wanting to curl up into a tiny ball. Crossing my arms across my chest, I bite my lower lip and lower my head. The shame, guilt and anxiety are almost too much for me to take.

I've been a shitty friend, keeping secrets and leaving Natalie in the dark.

A moment later I feel the space beside me dip as Natalie takes a seat and a warm hand gently touches my shoulder.

"Please don't do this," Natalie begs, her heart in her voice. "Please don't push me away right now."

The pain in her words lances my chest.

"Ari?" she presses. "Please. My heart is aching."

When I can manage over the lump in my throat, I tell her, "I'm so, so sorry for keeping things from you. I never meant to hurt you."

"Oh honey," Natalie says, her voice filled with unshed tears, aching with sympathy. "You don't have to be sorry for me. I'll be fine. I'm just happy that you're okay."

I try to respond, but I can't get any words out.

Natalie keeps rubbing my shoulders until I'm all cried out, softly whispering soothing comfort in my ears. "Can you forgive me?" I ask hoarsely when I finally recover, looking at her with red-rimmed eyes. Natalie grabs a tissue from the end table and dabs at the tears on my face. "Oh, Ari... there's nothing to forgive. I love you, and am here for you no matter what."

Her words are almost enough to send me into another bout of tears, but I swallow them back.

"I just need to know what happened," Natalie says softly.

I stare at her long and hard. Her eyes are puffy and swollen. I didn't notice it when I came through the door.

Sucking in a deep, trembling breath, I tell her everything. About Danny and his abusive, manipulative ways, his debts, him owing Zander, using me as collateral for the auction, Zander's confession. *Everything*.

"Shit, Ari," Natalie whispers when I'm done, her eyes filled with tears and horror as she shakes her head. "I never knew."

"It's awful," I say weakly.

There's pain in Natalie's face. And it's hard for me not to avert my gaze. "Why didn't you tell me?"

I pick nervously at my blouse. "I don't know. I felt like... I was trapped. The club, it has NDAs. I'm not supposed to talk to other people about it unless I've been permitted."

"You could've still told me," Natalie said, looking hurt. "I would've never told anyone."

I let out a distressed sigh. "I know, Nat. I just didn't know what to do and I didn't want to disappoint you. I'm sorry." Nat grabs my hand and squeezes it. "Don't be." She gives my hand another gentle squeeze. "I'm just glad you're alive."

I close my eyes, remembering the brutal lashes Danny gave me and whisper, "Me, too."

"And I'm glad that bastard Danny is dead," Natalie says with venom as though my thoughts summoned him to her mind.

I part my lips out of habit to defend him, but then close them. For the first time I can remember, I have no urge to come to Danny's defense. It used to come so easily to me, like a reflex, but now I owe him nothing.

"I'm glad he's gone too," I agree, and mean it.

There's a moment of silence and I can only hear the sound of my heartbeat.

"So what happens now?" Natalie asks. "What's going to happen to Zander?"

It's the question that's been on my mind the moment I saw him dragged out of the courtroom. I like to believe with all his money and power, Zander

could somehow find a way out of this. He's too smart, charming and cunning to let himself be locked away for the rest of his life.

But deep down, I know his chances are slim. He confessed. They have all the evidence they need to put him away. And no amount of money he has is going to save him.

A heavy sigh escapes my lips and I grip Natalie's hand tightly as I reply, "I really hope so, Nat. I really do."

CHAPTER 35

ZANDER

*O*ne slip, and your world crumbles around you. My elbows rest on my knees in the large cell. The holding area is quiet, the only sounds coming from a vent above my head and occasionally a door opening or closing. I lift my head to stare at the steel bars.

I'm fucked. I take in a deep breath, exhaustion weighing me down. There's nothing I can do or say to protect me. Judgment day has come. I let out a shaky laugh that echoes off the empty walls.

How ironic. All the shitty things I've done, the laws I've broken and corrupt deals I've made, and yet I'm going to be sentenced for the one good thing I ever did.

The smile fades as I see the look in Arianna's eyes. The fear. The realization of what was happening.

I run my hands through my hair, my eyes glassing with tears. The hardest thing is walking away from her. *My sweetheart.*

It's only been hours since the hearing. Hours since they cuffed me and took me here.

I was silent in the interrogation room. I'm smart enough to shut up when I'm alone.

A long sigh leaves me as I slump against the cold brick wall, staring aimlessly ahead. It's odd how much relief I feel that it's all over. No more

deals and corruption, no more hiding in the shadows and watching, but smiling when the lights are on me. No more pretending and playing their game.

Even if I somehow get out of here, I'm done. I'm through with all this shit.

I want more from life. I want a real life. One with Arianna.

Women make men fall to their knees

I wouldn't change a thing. But now I'm not there for her.

I close my eyes slowly, picturing her sweet smile. Genuine happiness. She gave that to me and I'll be damned, but I want more.

My eyes open and the vision of her disappears. If only I could go back and somehow hide it. No. I'd need to go back to before. To when he gave her to me. I'd go back then if I could and hire Charles to end him.

I should have. I made so many mistakes, tripping and stumbling all the while my eyes were only on Arianna.

She made me fall, and now I only want to get up for her.

The sound of the large door at the end of the hall opening, snaps me back to the moment.

Several sets of shoes slap against the hard floor as they make their way closer to me.

I stay still, my heart beating slowly and my blood chilling. I know how this all ends, but I can't help to wish for an out. Someone who owes me, someone I've helped in the past who can pull strings. But there's not a single name I can think of. None connected to Judge Pierce. And I've confessed in a room of eyes and ears.

I should have played this smarter, but I couldn't think. Not with her taking the fall for me.

The warden doesn't look at me as he slips a key into the lock, opening the large cell door by pulling on the first bar. Behind him are two men.

The first I recognize as my father's lawyer. Not my own. Nathanael

Goldman.

My father's behind him. Immediately I stand up, rising to meet them. The warden closes the door behind them as anxiety races in my blood. I can hardly look my father in the eyes, but somehow I do. I may have killed Brooks, but he deserved to die.

"I know you didn't do it." My father's voice is full of pride and confidence.

"I did," I look him in the eyes as I answer. My father's jaw clenches and he looks to his right, to the lawyer he's brought with him.

"I didn't hear anything," Goldman answers, leaning against the bricked cell wall, with his eyes focused through the bars and on the door at the end of the hall.

I look back to my father, staring into his eyes that reflect disbelief and something else. Disappointment. Never in my life have I seen him look at me like that. I have to tear my eyes away from him. Shame seeping into my blood. My father's done a lot of wrongs in his life.

But I murdered a man.

"He hit her," I say the words and my bastard emotions come through, making my voice crack. "He beat her so hard, so violently, she couldn't even move. There was so much blood."

"Zander..." my father's voice is nearly a whisper.

"I'm sorry, but I don't take it back." My eyes close tight as I sit back on the bench, the image of her on the floor refusing to leave me.

I jump back at the feel of a strong hand on my shoulder. My eyes fly up to meet my father's. His eyes are glazed as he nods my head. "I can understand that."

He starts to sit next to me, but stands tall instead, running a hand down his face. "I just," he takes in a deep breath, looking at the wall and lowering his head. "I don't want to believe it," he says in a low voice.

"I couldn't help myself," I tell him as I stare at my hands, feeling the anger pouring out of me as I killed him. Stealing the life from him and making sure

he'd never strike her again.

"You'll never speak of this." My father turns to face me again, his voice coming in stronger. "Ever. To anyone."

I stare at him, not understanding. "I can't lie on the stand," I tell him.

His brow furrows for a moment and then he shakes his head before he says, "There won't be a trial."

I'm dumbfounded, still not understanding. "You aren't the only one who didn't like Daniel Brooks. And your Arianna wasn't the first woman he struck." My father shares a look with Goldman before continuing. "If you'd just been quiet, she would have gotten off." Anger flashes in his eyes for a moment as he continues, "If you'd just listened to me and kept quiet—"

I rise from my seat, meeting my father eye to eye. "I couldn't risk her," my voice comes out firm and barely hiding a threat. "I'll never risk her. I won't ever let her pay for my sins."

It's quiet for a long moment. My chest rises and falls with sporadic breaths, remembering how she took the fall for me. I wish she hadn't. I wish she'd never said a word.

"It doesn't matter. You're still my son. I'm not letting you sit behind bars."

"It'll be out in the papers."

My father scoffs. "It's already out!"

I lower my head, my blood heating. My reputation is ruined.

"Payments have been sent," Goldman says softly from the far side of the cell.

"Right, right," my father says, pacing the room. "We can romanticize it?" my father asks Goldman.

The lawyer nods once, his eyes flickering to my father's before turning back to outside the cell.

"So what's going to happen?" I ask, for the first time feeling as though there's hope.

“You’ll be free from charges based on inconsistent evidence. And the papers will paint it as if it’s a tragedy and Daniel Brooks was a monster-”

“It’s the truth,” my voice is hard as I cut him off. “What he did to her,” I say and my hands shake as they clench into fists.

“What’s important is the fact that you’ll be fine,” my father says with a hard edge as he walks to the far wall, the wheels turning in his head. A bit of a breath leaves me, and I nearly fall forward.

“It’s done then?” I ask with disbelief.

My father turns sharply toward me and says, “So long as you fucking listen.” I stare into his eyes, but I don’t see a hint of anger, only fear. I nod my head once, swallowing the lump in my throat. I’m stunned; I’ve only ever felt a sense of competition between the two of us. But all I have for him in this moment is gratitude. He’s sending me back to her. The thought makes me close my eyes, and her beautiful smile comes back to me.

“You love her?” my father asks, taking me by surprise. I don’t answer him. I know with everything in me that I do. But a man like him wouldn’t understand.

“I loved your mother,” he says as if reading my mind.

My father motions toward Goldman.

“Just make sure she loves you back, Zander.” My father’s voice wavers as he starts to leave the cell.

“She does,” I answer him quickly, making him halt in his steps. I may be a fool in many ways. But there’s no doubt in my mind that she loves me as much as I love her.

My father turns to look at me, a genuine concern in his eyes.

“I know she does,” I tell him before he can say whatever’s on his mind. “I know she does,” I repeat and my voice is low, but the conviction is there. I don’t need to prove anything to anyone, but for whatever fucked up reason, I need my father to know that she does.

He nods his head once, his eyes on the floor of the cell. His lips part again,

but no words come out. He pats his hand against the bars and Goldman gestures to whoever's waiting. The sound of heavy boots coming closer down the cement hall echoes off the walls.

"I hope you're right, son," my father says in a low voice. A small bit of doubt creeps into the back of my mind. She's never said the words. And neither have I. She has no idea. She's never known.

"You'll be out within the hour. Just don't say anything," Goldman tells me as the warden opens the cell and the two of them leave me alone. My thoughts are consumed with what will happen to Arianna now that Brooks is dead.

I have a contract to keep her, but she doesn't have to stay.

I'll do anything I can to keep her.

CHAPTER 36

ARIANNA

*T*hey look so happy. Standing in the hallway of Zander's estate, I grip the picture frame in my hands, a solo tear rolling down my right cheek. They look like the perfect family. Zander, with his gorgeous smile. And his two parents looking on as if they're so proud of their son.

My heart aches as I stare at the portrait, my eyes on Zander's mother. She's gone now. And if she knew what was going to happen to her son, she'd probably be devastated. Guilt presses down on my chest as another tear rolls down my cheek.

This is all my fault.

I wish I could tell him that I'm sorry. That I didn't mean for any of this to happen. That I wish I could take it all back. I wish I could go back to the very beginning. When all of this started. I wish I'd killed Danny myself.

A huge lump forms in my throat as try to hold back the tide of tears that threaten to fall from my eyes.

The guilt is almost enough to choke on.

It wasn't supposed to end up this way.

I squeeze the picture frame against my chest, despair and anger coursing through me.

"You okay, sweetheart?" asks a deep, sexy voice.

I look up and cover my mouth with my hand, nearly collapsing on the floor.

“Zander!” I cry, setting down the picture frame on the oak wood stand with shaky hands. It falls over, but I don’t care. I have to run to him. To feel him. I bury my face into his chest and hold him with everything I have in me. *I’ll never let him go.*

“How did you...” my voice trails off as I’m at a loss for words when I lean back to look at him.

He smiles weakly down at me, his eyes focusing on a stray strand of hair in my face as he brushes it away and leans forward to kiss me. The simple touch melts me. My body relaxing into him, finally feeling the warmth of his body. “I’m not going to be charged.”

His words hit me slowly, taking their time before I fully comprehend what he’s saying. I pull away from him out of shock, but he holds my lower waist close to him as I stare into his eyes.

I can’t speak. My voice is robbed from me from the shock. I shake my head slightly and ask, “No charges?”

“Nothing.”

“How?” I finally manage softly.

Zander's eyes go dark momentarily, his body tensing. “My father has his connections,” he replies, his voice low. “He’s still owed a lot of favors.”

“Is everything...,” I breathe when I get over my shock. “Is everything okay? It’s over?”

I can barely breathe as he pulls me into his chest. His hand is gentle on my back, but still it stings to the touch. “Sorry,” he breathes into my hair as I settle against his chest. I don’t give a fuck about my back. Not right now. I bury my face into his shirt, just breathing him in. “It’s all over.”

I don’t want to let go.

I’m afraid if I do, I’ll lose him forever. And I’ll never have a chance to hold him again.

“I’ve got you,” Zander whispers as he kisses my hair. “And I’m not letting you go.”

I close my eyes, and nestle deeper into him. *Don’t, please don’t ever let me go.* “There’s something I’ve been wanting to let you know for a while now. Something that I’ve wanted to say but haven’t had the courage.” I talk with my eyes closed, but he pulls back to look into my face and I have to stare into his eyes to tell him.

Zander arches an eyebrow with curiosity. “What’s that?”

A large lump forms in my throat.

“I love you, Zander Payne,” I tell him, my voice aching with emotion.

Zander doesn’t respond immediately, causing my heart to skip as I wait for his response. It’s beating so fast and hard I’m sure he can feel it pumping against his chest. But when he breaks out into a handsome grin, I know I have nothing to worry about.

“And I love you too, Arianna Owens,” Zander says softly, coming in for a deep, passionate kiss. “And I always will.”

EPILOGUE

ZANDER

“They’ll be expecting you,” my father’s voice comes out clear on the phone.

“I understand that,” I answer him simply, walking out of the kitchen, with the phone to my ear. It’s the *Gala of the Year*, the third one with that title so far.

Veronica Marsett is hosting it for her charity, and over four hundred attendees will be there. Most of whom I know firsthand, and half of them will be expecting me to address them. To notice them publicly and pose for photo ops. To rub elbows, as my father used to say when I was younger.

These are the scenes that matter most. It’s all about who you’re seen with.

But with my Arianna, my sweetheart hardly sleeping, I doubt she’s going to want to go. And if she’s not with me, I’m not going.

I don’t want to be anywhere without her by my side. Because my father’s right. It’s all about who you’re seen with. That’s who matters. And right now, she’s the only one who matters to me.

Even if he saved me. He can wait. Business will always wait from now on.

“You’re really going to snub them?” Oddly enough, my father’s voice holds only a trace of admonishment.

“It’s not a snub, she’s not feeling well.”

My father’s silent on the phone for a moment. The glow from the fire in the

back of the library lights the dim room. The floor-to-ceiling curtains are closed tight on the far end, but the ones closest to me are open, just enough for someone to peek through.

I keep the phone to my ear as I peek out and see the snow settling on the ground. Early February has brought enough snow to lock us in for weeks, but I'm fine with that.

I turn around to face the large leather sofa as my father starts talking. It groans as Arianna shifts her weight on it to get comfortable. Her hand rests on her swollen belly, but she's sleeping soundly.

I hate that she can't fall asleep in bed with me; I guess I'll have to start sleeping out here.

"There are deals to finalize and if you're seen with the right investors, that will make their bids rise." He tells me things I already know, but I simply don't care anymore. There's so much more than money. More than power. There's love.

Arianna's belly rises with a deep breath as she slowly rolls onto her side, dragging a cream chenille throw with her as she goes.

There's a feeling of being complete. Of not wanting anything more than what you already have.

A soft sigh of satisfaction falls from her sweet lips.

"I'm sure they'll understand," I speak softly into the phone, but Arianna's eyes flutter open. A small smile spreads on her face when she sees me.

It's a genuine smile, one that makes me reciprocate.

My feet move of their own accord, drawn to her. I crouch down to the floor beside her and plant a kiss on the tip of her nose.

"I have to go," I tell my father, cutting off whatever reason he's trying to convince me of to go.

"Wait!" I'm surprised from my father's sharp voice, it takes me aback and I flinch, pulling the phone away slightly.

Arianna rises on her elbow, wiping the sleep from her eyes and staring at the phone. She's not used to my father's temper and to be honest, it's been a long time since I've had to deal with it. I won't let her witness this. I rise to my feet, straightening my shoulders and preparing to tell my father off.

He's been agitated lately with me leaving more and more work in his hands, or simply to let go. There are plenty of investors, and I'm not interested in certain deals anymore. Not when I have so much to protect now.

My lips part as I suck in a breath, prepared for the worst, but I wasn't anticipating the words that come from the other end of the phone.

"The baby shower, that's next month?" my father asks me, clearing his throat and waiting for a response.

A deep crease settles in my forehead as I turn back to look at Arianna over my shoulder.

"It's next month, yes." I wait for a moment, still feeling tense and on edge as Arianna stands up, holding her stomach as though it will fall if she lets go. She's so beautiful, carrying my child. There's been a glow about her since she found out.

"I'd like to go," my father says with firm conviction.

"It's not for men," I say and the words spill out of my mouth with disbelief.

"Sure it is, we'll go at the end... Your mother loved that." I'm taken back by his confession. "You go at the end with a gift for her and help load all the things. It's what you do," he says matter-of-factly. "It's probably the last thing I did right with your mother. But I know it's a good thing to do... and I want to help you."

My body's frozen in place as Arianna walks toward me, one hand rubbing soothing circles over her swollen bump and the other bracing a hand on her back.

"Sure," I answer my father. The vision of what he must've looked like back then plays in my mind. Maybe they were happy then, all those years ago.

"It's settled then. I'm sure I'll see you before then?" The words come out as a

question.

“Sure,” I say again, wrapping an arm around Arianna’s waist as she leans into me, her eyes wide with questions, but her body relaxed.

“Very well then, I’ll talk to you soon.” There’s a silence between us for a moment, and for the first time in years, I feel the urge to tell him I love him. As though it’s real, but I don’t. Maybe another time. The line goes dead, and I pull the phone away from my ear to stare at it in my hand.

“Are you alright?” she asks and her voice is soft, tinged with concern.

I toss the phone down onto the sofa a few feet away and turn her in my arms. Her belly rubs against mine as I pull her in close. “Of course.”

She eyes me warily, her one eyebrow lifting with skepticism.

“Everything is wonderful.”

That sweet smile plays at her lips again and she nods as she says, “It is, isn’t it?”

I kiss her lips softly, but she deepens it. My greedy sweetheart. I’m more than happy to give her more. I’d hand her over the world in exchange for what she’s given me.

When she breaks the kiss, I whisper between us, “I love you.”

“I love you too, Zander.”

GOOD GIRL: A BAD BOY MAFIA ROMANCE

BY WILLOW WINTERS

PROLOGUE

Ava
Kane

I WAS THE MAFIA PRINCESS. I THOUGHT I WAS SAFE.

I was the muscle and moneymaker. I was supposed to be untouchable.

I STILL REMEMBER SMOOTHING MY DRESS AND PUTTING ON MY EARRINGS THE DAY IT all happened.

I remember wiping the blood off my face and feeling the heat of the fire the night it all went down.

I PULL AT THE CHAIN AROUND MY NECK AND HATE WHAT I'VE BECOME.

I wrap my knuckles with tape before laying hit after hit, hating what I have to do.

THEY'RE ALL DEAD. NOW I HAVE NO ONE.

They're all dead. Now I have no one.

I FEEL SO ALONE, BUT I WON'T STOP FIGHTING.

I feel so alone, but I won't stop fighting.

THEY WANT ME TO BE SCARED OF THEM, SO I'LL PLAY THE PART. I CAN USE THAT TO my advantage.

They're terrified of me, and that's good. I'm going to need that fear to survive this.

THE PLANE DESCENDS AND LANDS WITH A LOUD THUMP THAT SHAKES THE CARGO hold, but I keep the sick feelings at bay. I hope that bastard's here.

I hear the plane land and I know it's almost time. I hope it's him this time and not just another shipment.

HE'S THE REASON I'M SHACKLED AND BEATEN. USED AND DEGRADED. I WON'T STOP fighting to breathe until I have my revenge.

He's my chance at redemption and a new life. I'm not gonna lay down and die; I'm making a name for myself.

THEY KEEP SAYING I'M A GOOD GIRL.

They think I'm a bad boy.

NONE OF THEM REALLY KNOW WHO I AM.

None of them really know who I am.

THEY CAN KEEP CALLING ME A GOOD GIRL THOUGH, RIGHT UP UNTIL THE MOMENT I slit their throats.

CHAPTER 1

KANE

*M*y fist slams against the bag. I see my uncle's face. I throw a right hook. Next, a left jab. Over and over I slam my fists into the leather until my muscles scream with pain. And then I push myself harder. I feel my knuckles crack under the weight of my hits. The sound of my fists making contact with the heavy bag doesn't do anything to relieve this tension, though. I want to hear the crunch of his jaw. Fucking rat. That coward destroyed my family, and ruined my life. And I can't do shit about it. I can't turn back time.

I hit the bag again and again, trying to get this weight that's crushing my chest to leave me. I hear my father's voice, the screech of the tires. The gunshots. I grab the bag and slow my racing heart. A deep breath fills my lungs, but it only serves to fuel my anger further. They hunted us all down because of my fucking coward uncle. And I can't do shit to change any of that.

"Kane!" Marco shouts; his voice echoes in the empty room. I hear the door swing shut and his boots smack against the concrete floor of the warehouse. I wipe the sweat off my face.

I needed to get out some aggression, but I have to be presentable for the meet, so I grab the towel on the pile of boxes next to me and wipe down quickly. I hear Marco walk toward me as I pick up my shirt and slip it on. I button it up, concentrating on keeping my anger at bay. Aggression would not be good right now. Not when I'm on my own, completely outnumbered, and about to

meet the new boss of the Marzano Cartel.

Abram Petrov. He's become notorious for taking over the industry quickly, and with lethal force. Recently he's acquired the lead cartel in Mexico as well as heavy hitters in France and Russia, where he's from. He's a new force that's not scared to play dirty, and now he's on my doorstep.

"I'm ready!" I yell over my shoulder, and stalk toward him. Time to meet the new *famila*, or Bratva as the Russian fucks keep calling it. Or whatever the fuck he calls his crew. I have to try to earn a position with a mob that's willing to take in the nephew of a rat. I swallow thickly. I've been waiting for a few weeks for this meet-up, staying in the warehouse and lying low with a target on my back. This place used to be a safe house for my family. Now it's my bargaining chip to get the attention of Petrov.

His crew came and set up yesterday, but I kept my distance. They know it's my place and they came to do business here, which is great. But I'm not a part of their crew. I'd rather give them the space they want and a warm welcome without getting involved in their shit. I can't fuck this up.

"This is gonna be great. I know it will." Marco grins at me and slaps his hand on my back. His arm has to reach up to hit me square on my shoulders. I'm six-foot-five and all muscle. Next to Marco I look like a fucking beast. I was the top earner in the *famila* for a reason. I'm a terrifying fucker to go up against. People tend to pay up rather than piss me off. But even with all the money I was bringing in, they tried to have me killed. They tried, and they failed.

"Boss's already impressed with everything you did to those pussies." My gut twists and my chest tightens with pain. They should've known better than to come for me. That shit with my uncle had nothing to do with me. Or my father. And they sure as fuck knew my sister and my mother didn't have shit to do with any of it. They fucking came for us all the same, though. They should've made sure we were all dead. Those fuckers left me alive. And they paid the price. Even if they were the only people I had in this world.

I grin at him and huff a laugh. I need the boss to like me. I need somewhere to go, someone to be. I grew up in this life. And everyone I knew turned their backs on me. If I hadn't been so fucked up, I could've started the business

myself. I have contacts. A few I still trust. But I made this call too soon. Now I need to go through with it.

I breathe in deep and walk through the hall to the hangar. The meeting's going down here. I'm ready for this. It's not an ambush, but they could easily kill me. It's just me against all of them. They're not here for that. No one's touching me after what I did. Revenge will make a man crazy. Unstoppable. Untouchable. But it's also left me alone. I'm ready to move on and get back to work.

There are a few small planes in the relatively empty hangar. Stacks of cocaine bricks wrapped in plastic are sitting on a folding table. It's not what I'm used to. I'm more of a blackmail-the-politician type. But shipping and selling will have to do in the beginning, I suppose. Onward and upward or some shit like that. I'll prove my worth.

Four men in black and grey suits surround the table, watching the two workers weigh and bag the product. As they hear our footsteps, they turn to face us. The boss, Abram, walks toward me. His underboss walks next to him, but a step or two behind. The other two men with them are obviously soldiers, judging from their broad shoulders. One has a scar across his face. It looks like it came from a slash that should've taken his eye out. The other has a tattoo scrolling up his neck. Both of the soldiers read as highly dangerous, nothing like Abram himself. Their dark eyes stare back at me as they put their arms behind their backs and square their shoulders, waiting for orders. Marco walks behind them and back to the table. He's just a soldier. And he's completely happy with that. He's a dumb fucker.

"Kane," Abram greets, as he extends his hand to me. He's a tall, slender man, with black hair that's slicked back with oil. I shake his hand firmly and stare into his eyes; they're so dark, they appear black as well.

Abram's a deadly boss. I heard about what he did to the cartel in Mazatlan. I'm not all that happy seeing how he cut ties purely for business reasons. And by cut ties, I mean demolished their businesses, stole everything they had, and murdered them. To call him ruthless would be putting it lightly, but beggars can't be choosers. I know there's a target on my back. I need to find a place and lie low. And this is the only option I have right now. So I'm making a deal with the devil.

“Abram. Or should I call you Boss?” I ask, with the hint of a grin on my face.

He smiles back broadly. “Boss, I think.” Hearing that allows me to breathe, but I don’t show my relief. He turns and wraps his arm around my shoulders, guiding me to the group of men. It’s an awkward hold on me, because I’m so much taller than him, but I allow it. “Thank you again, for making this transition easier on us. I appreciate the gesture.”

“No problem.” I nod my head and take a look at the product lined up on the table. That’s a lot of coke. No doubt using my hangar was a decent option for them. And a sign of trust that they accepted my offer.

“I’d like you to meet Vadik, my second-in-command,” Abram says. I reach out my hand to the underboss and he’s quick to take it with a smile. Another good sign. This man is older. Vadik looks to be somewhere around my father’s age, whereas Abram can’t be any older than 35. Abram’s face has the hint of wrinkles around his eyes. This man, however, has earned his age. Grey hair that’s slicked back the same way as Abram’s and deep-set wrinkles on his face. His pale blue eyes are like ice. So fucking cold. This man reads as deadly. Abram could easily fool you into thinking he’s less dangerous than he is, lulling you into a false sense of security. Based on everything I’ve heard about him, he’s succeeded in doing that multiple times in the past with former rivals. But this man, Vadik, looks like a killer.

“Nice to meet you.” I shake his hand. He puts his other hand on top of mine.

“It is indeed, Kane. I’ve been anxious to meet the man who took down the entire Armeno family in one night.” He smiles wickedly as he says, “You’ve made quite an impression.”

“I’m happy to hear that.” I say the words, but I’m not happy at all. I did what I had to do. I didn’t want to. I had to.

“I’ve considered your proposal to join me,” Abram begins, while looking me in the eyes. I can feel a “but” coming, and I don’t like it. I keep my expression impassive as he continues. “I like it. I like it a lot. I think we’ll work well together.” My brows raise slightly and he registers my surprise.

“We’re going to have some more guests in a moment,” Abram says, motioning with his hand and guiding me to the front of the hangar. The doors

are open, and the sun is shining through. It's a bright, beautiful day. The breeze is refreshing. Too fucking bad there's so much adrenaline pumping in my blood that I can barely breathe.

"More guests?" I ask, with a bit of curiosity in my voice. I'm not curious though--I'm pissed. I offered my place to him to use for entry into the US. Not for him to use as a base for his operations. And definitely not so he could invite more people. But I'm sure as shit not going to tell him that. Not right now, anyway. I may be fueled by anger, but I'm not a hothead.

"Now that our competitor is no more, we have a few business meetings to conduct." He stops in the open tarmac, looking toward the road. "Have you heard of the Valettis?"

I nod my head at his question. The Valettis are a tight pack. They're nearly the only *famila* left that has an actual family related by blood heading up their organization. At least around these parts. I've heard good things about them, promising things. But we've never met personally. They stayed in their territory and we stayed in ours.

"Well, they did business with our former competitor and now they're coming to meet us regarding our new terms."

"New terms?" I question. I'm surprised to hear that. I know they *can* raise their prices now that they're the lead exporter. But I'm not sure it's the wisest to do that at the beginning of a business relationship.

"You'll see," Vadik says from my left side with a crooked grin and a twinkle in his cold eyes. I don't like the way he says it, but again, I don't give them anything. Instead, I nod my head and stare at the two black Range Rovers driving up the dirt road to the landing strip. My heart beats faster in my chest and it's harder to keep the anger from showing.

I don't appreciate the secrets. Nor the sudden company. I don't like being at the bottom and not knowing shit. Not controlling shit. But I have to remind myself that I'm in a tight spot. I need to take it easy and make myself valuable. I'm not valuable to anyone right now, and that's not good for my chances of survival.

The Valettis park and get out quickly. I want to walk to them and meet them

halfway, but Abram's feet are planted. I take notice; I stand and act appropriately. It's a rude gesture if you ask me. But what the fuck do I know? If I'm going to be working for him, I'll have to put up with this shit. Regret is already pumping through my blood. I grit my teeth and wish I could take out this anger on something. On someone. I fucking hate the position I'm in.

"Abram Petrov," Vince says, as he stops in front of us. I recognize him immediately. He's the new Don of his *famila*. His father retired and word got around fast that Vince had taken his place. Three more men come up behind him and then two more exit the second vehicle.

"Vincent Valetti. Nice to finally meet you." Abram smiles and extends his hand in greeting. Vince is calm and collected as he accepts the gesture, but he doesn't return the smile.

"It's quite a drive to get out here, Abram. I've heard you're a man who gets these sorts of business arrangements done quickly. Is that so?" An asymmetric grin pulls at my lips. I like how quickly Vince gets to the point. I would also like to get this shit done promptly. The two men standing behind Vince and the others from his *famila* are armed and showing it. Which isn't that big of a deal since the men behind me, the two I've yet to be introduced to, each have a hand on their guns, too. It's not a display of a threat, or of violence. It's simply business. It's how things are done in this life.

I'll still feel better when it's over. I don't particularly enjoy being surrounded by men I don't know who are all armed. I have to start somewhere, though.

Abram laughs from deep within his chest and nods his head. "Quick works for me, Vince." He walks forward with a smile and gestures with his arm to a plane that landed an hour or so ago.

More shipments.

The pilot stands outside of the cargo hold smoking a cigarette. He's in jeans and a black tee shirt. Tattoos cover both of his arms and his brow is pierced. He's got a Mexican look to him. I imagine he was the contact Abram must've had in Javier's cartel. Someone was a traitor. But no one knows for sure who it was. Maybe it's wrong of me to assume. Not that it matters anyway.

"I'm ready to do business, and I'd like for things to go smoothly. So, the

prices are exactly what they were for you before. Everything the same. The only difference is you'll be going through me, rather than your former contact." Abram talks as we walk closer to the plane. Sickness churns in my gut. I don't know why, but I know I'm not going to like what I see.

"That makes me a very happy business partner," Vince says, but there's hesitation in his voice. He's skeptical. And so am I. There are reasons for meets. But keeping terms the same is not one of them.

"We need your docks for other business ventures. So I'd like to add more to our arrangement," Abram says, as we stop in front of the plane.

"What are you looking to export?" Vince asks, with his eyes narrowed.

"Felipe, bring it out here," Marco says to the pilot. Felipe tosses the cigarette on the ground and walks to the very back of the plane.

I watch with wide eyes as a woman is dragged out from the cargo hold. She's quiet the entire time. Not fighting, simply moving as fast and as best she can to keep up with the man. I'd like to kill that fucker. I struggle to keep my exhalation even. There's a metal collar with a chain around her throat, but he's pulling her along by her hair.

Blood rushes loud in my ears and my body heats with anger. Sex slave trafficking. I had no fucking idea they were into this shit. And judging by Vince's face and the matching looks on his crew's faces, neither did they. When I made contact with Marco, I thought I knew what I was getting into. This wasn't it. This is new, and I don't fucking like it.

The woman doesn't make a sound as she's forced out. Her blue eyes stare at the ground. Her wrists are bound. She isn't wearing shoes, just a filthy and tattered dress. Her pale skin is bruised, but clean. Her brunette hair is a mess around her face, but I can see a red mark from recently being slapped. She walks with her lips firmly pressed together as though she's trying to remain expressionless, although she's showing a hint of pain. The man pushes her onto her knees in front of us and she doesn't react. I know it fucking hurt, and I want to break his fucking kneecaps for pushing her around like that. But she doesn't make a sound, doesn't show that hurt. Instead she maintains the pose he put her in.

“We’ll need half a dozen or so to go through the docks every month. We’ll have them all coded and chipped so they’re easily accounted for.” Vadik reaches down and grips the woman’s wrist. She doesn’t fight him. She stays still and allows him to twist her arm so we can all see a tattooed barcode on the underside of her forearm, just below her wrist. His fingers point to a reddened bump on her skin. I assume that’s where they implanted the chip.

My fists clench by my sides and my breathing threatens to pick up. But there are too many fuckers here. I don’t have a gun on me. I’d be dead if I tore him apart like I want to.

“They’ll be fairly broken in, although not all respond as well as Ava here has. She was the Russian princess when her father had the territory. She was a keepsake and a bit of a trial run for how to handle this product. So we’ve had a few weeks to teach her proper behavior.” The woman, Ava, doesn’t flinch or react as he drops her arm and kicks her legs. She merely bows and lies flat on the ground with her arms at her side. Her face is turned with her cheek lying against the concrete.

“That’s where my associate, Kane, is going to come in.” My skin prickles, and a chill runs down my spine as Vadik slaps my back. I’m supposed to do this shit. That’s not what I signed up for. I stare straight ahead and grind my teeth rather than responding. I can’t say no. I’m dead if I do.

“He’ll have the product ready and ensure they’re packaged nicely for shipment.” I glance down at the woman and look into her eyes. I’m surprised to see a flash of defiance in them that leaves so quickly I almost start to think I imagined it. Her body tenses, as though she’s preparing to take a hit. I swallow the lump in my throat and force myself to look away. I can barely stomach this shit.

“We don’t partake in this area of business,” Vince finally responds. He’s firm in his words, but there’s no emotion behind them. None of his men seem to hold an attitude toward the fact that a woman is bowing on the ground in chains. Part of me wishes they’d act on the disgust I saw on their faces earlier, but they don’t. So I’m left standing here with no fucking options.

“I understand this would be a new venture.” Abram walks forward as he talks to Vince, leaving Vadik and me standing next to the girl. Next to Ava. “I’d

like to give you some time to consider the amendments to this business opportunity.” He gestures back at me and adds, “Kane will stay on your territory and get a feel for your operation.”

Vince clenches his fists and interrupts Abram. “We don’t allow that.”

“You *didn’t* allow that.” Abram corrects him with a grin. “Just know that I don’t do partial orders. It’s all or none, and all on my terms.”

Vince narrows his eyes at this. He seems to weigh his options and then looks back over his shoulder toward the men behind him. “I need a minute to discuss this over with my men.”

“Take two weeks. We’ll need that long to gather the first shipment. And Kane will need time to learn your protocols and how to handle this particularly *fragile* product.”

Vince’s eyes flash toward me and I want to punch that judgmental look off his face. I don’t do this shit. More than ever I feel backed into a corner. I don’t mind being a prick to assholes. I think of it as part of the bad karma they have coming their way. But this shit? I don’t fucking like this.

“Kane De Rocca?” Vince asks, and I nod my head. His eyes flash with surprise and then he gives me a knowing look. Just as I knew about him, I’m sure he knows all about me and the shit I’ve been through.

“Kane,” Abram turns to me, effectively dismissing Vince and his crew. “Take this one and head on down with them. I’m sure they have somewhere you can stay.” He motions toward the girl on the ground next to me. “Hold on to this one until the others are collected.” He points to my hangar as he says, “This will be perfect for housing them.” He speaks loud enough for everyone to hear as Vadik walks behind him, ushering Vince and his men back to their vehicles. He’s thanking them and talking about how great this business will be for everyone involved. His voice gets lost as I watch them walk down the landing.

Abram leans forward and grips my shoulder tightly, forcing me to awkwardly bend at the waist to his level so he can speak directly into my ear. “Learn everything. I expect a full report.” He leans away from my ear, still gripping my shoulder. I meet his eyes and give him a tight nod in return. “Consider it

your first test.” He pats my shoulder. “We’ll be back in a few days to see how you’re handling this one. Don’t disappoint me.”

I can’t respond verbally, and I don’t even try. He walks away, back to the hangar, as I stand on the tarmac next to the woman bowed at my feet. The rest of Petrov’s crew walks back inside. The Valettis get in their cars. I meet Vince’s gaze and I know there’s trouble waiting for me in his territory.

The pilot in the black tee shirt walks over to me and reaches down, yanking the chain around the poor woman’s neck. She lifts her head quickly and stands before the chain can force her movements. She’s used to this. She knows how to avoid the pain.

He looks down at her and huffs a quick laugh. The wicked glint in his eyes makes my stomach revolt and my muscles coil. “I’ll doubt she’ll give you much trouble.” He smiles, revealing his stained teeth. “Shame, really. I enjoyed the fight.”

He hands me the chain and I reluctantly take it. The woman stands quietly at my side, her hands clasped in front of her and her head slightly bowed.

“We’ll be back to make sure you’ve got a good handle on her.” He nods with a smirk and walks toward the hangar.

My body is tensed and ready to fight, but I have no choice. I’ll be dead if I do anything other than what I’ve been ordered to do. I grit my teeth. I’m really not fucking liking the position I’m in. As the Valettis leave, the cars kick up dust and vanish in the distance.

I look down at the chain in my hand and follow it up to her throat with my gaze. The chain is locked on her and that pisses me off. They didn’t give me a key, but I don’t fucking care.

I’m breaking it off as soon as I have her alone.

CHAPTER 2

AVA

“Come.” I walk quickly, expecting him to pull the chain. I still have a raw cut on the nape of my neck from the last prick who yanked it just to get a reaction from me. I was as quick as I could be. But that didn’t matter. It wouldn’t have mattered if I’d been fast enough. He would’ve found a way. For him, it wasn’t about being obeyed; he just wanted to hurt me. He got pleasure from tormenting me.

I’ve learned there are two types. The first type just wants to inflict pain. They’re the worst, because even if I do everything right, they’ll find a way to trap me. They just want to punish me. Then there’s the type that wants perfection. It’s difficult to live up to their expectations, but I try so fucking hard. I have to if I don’t want to be beaten.

In the beginning I fought. And I paid the price. I couldn’t help but to fight against them. They held me down and brutalized me in front of my father. He was an asshole and a vile human being. But still, it hurt to have him watch. I close my eyes and try to will away the image. Everything hurt. So much so that I’m sure parts of me are dead. I’m only slightly aware that I hardly bear any resemblance to the strong woman I used to be.

They raped me, took my innocence. There was no way I couldn’t fight. But then I realized how much of a waste it was. I needed to play the part. I needed to fool them into thinking I’m broken. That they’ve trained me to be the perfect pet. I’m just waiting. I’ll bide my time until I can have my revenge, although there are moments. Moments where I forget why I still want to live.

Why I have to be good and try to continue to live.

This new arrangement throws me off. Not that I had much of a plan, other than to survive. I'd hoped when we landed that there would be fewer men. I just need for there to be fewer, so I can pick them off one at a time as they come for me. There are three I keep being given to. I'm recognizing their pattern now. Or I was. But now I'm all thrown off.

I need to get my hands on a gun. I'll wait. There's always been something stopping me. I almost had a chance before we left. But I didn't take it. Abram and Vadik were gone. I want them there. I need to make sure that bastard pays the price for what he did to me and everyone I loved. I want him to die last. I want him to truly suffer.

I'll have my revenge, at any cost. I won't be sold off. That's not their plan for me. That'd be too easy for the mafia princess. I hope their guard will be down. Just one moment is all I need. My body begs me to rest and a small voice whispers, *but you need the strength to do it.*

"In." The hard word dropped from Kane's lips brings me back to reality. Kane De Rocca. I recognize the last name, but I'm not sure why.

This isn't going as I planned. I don't like this. Fear makes my knees go weak. His large hand steadies on the small of my back and my body tenses in anticipation of the blow. I close my eyes and bow my head waiting for it. I've earned it. I wasn't paying attention. I was stuck in my head. What's wrong with me? I can't do that.

It gets me punished. I don't want to be punished. I want to be a good girl. I need to be good.

I need to pay attention and follow orders.

"In," he commands louder and my shoulders shudder, but my body is quick to move. I open my eyes and realize I'm in the back of his car. Not in a trunk or a crate. He shuts the door and I look around, although my head stays forward. I'm careful not to actually move. I can't show my surprise either. No emotions. I sit silently. My back is ramrod straight and won't relax against the leather.

It's been days since anyone has laid a hand on me or even seen me. Traveling

is a blessing. But now I'm back to being given to someone else. A new master or keeper or sir. I'm terrified and my gut fills with a wretched acid that creeps up my throat. Tears threaten to well up in my eyes, but they don't. I won't let them. Maybe I've forgotten how to cry. I'm not sure. But I know crying will get me punished. My face is set in stone. Expressionless, just as they like. Well, as the second type desires. The first type wishes for something else.

I have to remind myself what I overheard Abram say earlier. He said they'd be back. I'll have another chance at him and Vadik. I just need one chance. This is only temporary. Just like the other times.

I want to turn in my seat and look at the man. At Kane. But my heart hammers in fear. I'm expected to sit, so I will. I stay still and wait. I'm careful to keep my breathing low and my body still. I've learned that's the best way to handle it. It's as though I've disappeared. If only I could.

My eyes close and my body begs to sleep, but I can't. I'm exhausted from staying awake during the flight, though. I was worried that they would dump me at any point. That their threats weren't hollow and they were truly going to kill me this time. I couldn't sleep. I haven't been able to sleep soundly since I was taken.

My body shudders, and it makes my eyes widen with fear. I moved. I made a movement. It's bad. I want to look around, but I don't. I listen, and after a long moment, I hear nothing. It's silent in the car. He still isn't here. He isn't waiting behind me to punish me. I wonder which of the two types he'll be. I hope it's the second type. They're easier to survive.

My heart slows, and my head yearns to fall against my chest. My body craves rest. But I resist. Until he comes back and gives me an order, I won't do anything that will give him a reason to punish me.

As my heavy eyelids slowly close, I hear the door open. I lift my head to attention, my eyes staring fixedly at the floor. I can feel his eyes on me. I know he's looking at me, maybe deciding what to do with me. But I stay still and wait for his orders.

"I need you to lie down." I quickly obey, and fall to my side. My wrists immediately feel the comfort of the position. The heavy weight of the

shackles is relieved as my body sags into the seat. The shackles don't irritate me as much as they used to. I've grown used to them. But I still look forward to the relief when I'm given it. I see a movement in my periphery and I almost react. But instead I only tense slightly for the blow I'm sure is coming.

The soft fabric lays on my body in a gentle wave. I expect it to cover my head, but instead he tucks it under my chin, covering the collar. I close my eyes as it moves against my neck. The collar digs into the cut, but I don't say anything. I don't react. I'm not sure if he's aware, but it doesn't matter. I can't do anything that would anger him.

I won't put myself in a position to be punished. I don't know this man, but I'd rather stay obedient than risk his irritation. I tuck up my legs, knowing he's going to shut the door, but beyond that I make no other movements. After a moment, he stands at the door, watching me. Waiting for something; I don't know what.

But after that long moment, he shuts the door and I finally let out a breath I didn't know I was holding. And then the driver's side door opens and the car roars to life. I don't know where he's taking me and I don't ask.

But I know they'll be back for me. And I'll be ready for them.

I won't break until I've had my revenge.



I WAKE UP, PINNED AGAINST A ROCK HARD CHEST. MY EYES POP OPEN AND MY breathing stalls. But I don't move. I stay still and pretend to be asleep. I can hear his steady heartbeat and his shoes crunching on gravel. I inhale his scent and resist the urge to bury myself into his shirt. A masculine woodsy pine fills my lungs. His strong arms are wrapped around my back and under my legs. I peek past him and see nothing but a field. A flat field.

I rock in his arms as we climb up a step, one and then another, and then a door opens with a creak. We're on a porch. There's even a porch swing out here in the middle of fucking nowhere. He turns his body and to the left I make out what appear to be endless woods before he carries me into the

house.

“I tried not to wake you.” His deep voice jolts my body slightly. I don’t know how to respond. I’m quick to answer with an apology. Apologies have never stopped the beatings in the past, but I know I have to respond. Being quiet is much, much worse than saying the wrong thing.

“I’m sorry.” I speak clearly. I know I must. When I started to pretend, when I decided submitting was the best way to survive until I had the opportunity to escape, I learned that whispers and mumbles are often accompanied by blows to the face. I’d like to avoid that as best as I can. *If* I can. I’m still not sure which type this man is.

He sets me down on the sofa and I’m not certain if I should lie down or sit. When I switch owners it’s the worst in the beginning. Their expectations always change. He walks across the foyer and hallway to an open living room. It adjoins a large kitchen and dining room. Modern and clean. This place is dark. It looks like it hasn’t been used in years. I settle down on my side, facing the room.

I want to ask if this is his home. But that would be stupid of me. I know better. I won’t be foolish like I used to be. Instead I lie still and simply wait for instructions.

“Stay there,” he says, as he turns his back and leaves the room. My heart beats wildly in my chest. It’s horrible when they leave. It terrifies me. They always seem to come back with more anger and ammunition. The faces of my previous owners flash before my eyes. I’ll never forget them. If I can, I’ll kill each one of them.

But *his* face is the one that persists in my mind. The leader. The one who made sure that my father saw everything. He will die a slow death. The memory is vivid. I can still see the way my father looked as they came from behind me. It must have been hours before they finally beat him to death. I’d hoped they were going to kill me after. But that wasn’t enough for *him*.

Tears don’t even threaten to fall from my eyes. I can’t feel them. My eyes almost feel itchy with dryness at this point. Crying is pointless and only gets me beaten. The more I cry, the harder the blows. So I hide the sadness; I hide every emotion, because it’s safer that way.

It was one thing to be beaten, raped, and humiliated in front of my father and then have to watch as they murdered him. The image of his throat being slit is still clear in my mind. It was one thing to have that happen just before my death. I was waiting for it. Praying for it. It was another thing entirely to live through that nightmare and then be taken by my father's enemy. Someone who wants to make sure I suffer.

I'll make sure he suffers as well.

My eyes dart to the hallway Kane left through. I'm not chained to the ground. I'm not tied to anything, or locked away. I can see the front door. *I could run.* I bet I could even get the door partially opened before he gets back to me. The old me would've taken the risk. The old me would've ended up scarred and bruised. Now, I'm a good girl. I'll wait.

Why am I a good girl? Because it may be a test. I've failed so many times before. I won't fail. I won't disappoint him. At least not in this way.

Even if it's not a test, if I leave now, I may never find *him* again. And I can't let that happen. I won't run. I'll simply wait. My chance will come. I only need one chance.

I hear Kane's heavy steps coming down the hallway and I focus my eyes forward. I would school my expression to be impassive, but it's already set. I haven't dared to show emotion in so long. I don't know how long it's been actually. Now that I think of it, it's a strange feeling to realize I have no idea how much time has passed. I spent a very long time in a basement and then even longer in *his* bedroom. Learning proper technique.

I can tell Kane's entered the room, but I force my eyes to stay straight ahead and my body to be still. It's only when he comes closer that I want to move away. Only when I see the pliers in his hands do I want to run, hide, or show fear. But I resist. I can't do that.

I can only imagine what he's going to do with the pliers. I remember their threats, to cut me up and ship parts of me one by one to different family members. But I thought they were all dead. I know some are. They showed me pictures. Or simply took me with them as they hunted them down. Maybe this is just for enjoyment though? My eyes want to close, but I force them open. I know if I try to hide, he'll force me to look. I can practically feel him

fisting my hair and shaking me until my eyes are wide open. It's happened before. I've learned.

I wait for orders as he stands above me. The large pliers are in his right hand; his muscles corded. His left hand reaches down and he firmly lifts my hands up to the pliers. They're bound by a shackle. It's the same type as the one on my neck. The leash has always been on the collar though, so there's not much bruising on my wrists. I want to close my eyes as he opens the pliers, but I don't.

I stare straight ahead and expect the cold metal to clip around my finger. That would make sense. Maybe I still have family alive. Maybe I've angered Felipe more than I thought and this is the price to pay. I thought I was more valuable whole, though. That's an argument I've heard before, when they wanted to leave more marks. But they weren't allowed to do anything permanent.

Perhaps after all this time I no longer hold that value. I hear the snap of the pliers and feel my right arm fall. Snap! The metal clicks again and then my left arm falls as well. The muscles in my arm scream. It's been so long since they've had the freedom to move at this angle.

I steady my breathing and try to make sense of what's happening. I wish I could ask, but I can't.

"Hold still," he says, as he moves the pliers to my neck. I don't want to, but my eyes close. I try to resist, but I pray he's only cutting the lock on the collar. My heart hammers in my chest, and when I hear the loud snap and feel the metal give from around my throat, I can't help the emotions that wash over me. I hear the chains clinking and open my eyes. I watch his back as he leaves the room and walks into the kitchen. I shouldn't, though. I know better. As he drops the chains into the trash and turns, my eyes snap forward. I stare straight ahead and resist the desire to put my hands to my throat. He walks back to me and stands over my body.

I wish I knew what he wanted. I wish I knew how to react.

His hand slowly lowers to my neck and he squats down in front of me. His finger brushes along a cut on the side of my throat. I try not to, but I wince from the pain. I know better! I shouldn't have winced. I knew the pain was

coming. I school my expression and wait. He lays his hand on my shoulder and lets his eyes travel down my body. I wish I could hide. I used to be beautiful. Now I'm thin and bones poke through where they shouldn't. I'm scarred, although they did try to keep the whips on skin that's normally hidden by clothing. Most of the bruises have faded and not many are new.

He stands up slowly and continues to watch me. "I want you to look at me." At his command, my eyes reach his. My heart stops and for a moment, the world tilts on its side.

Kane De Rocca. I heard his name earlier. I make sure to listen. I know I shouldn't, but I do. And I know that's this man's name. Kane. He's stunning. His jaw is stubbled and hard against the sharp lines of his high cheekbones. His shoulders are broad and his chiseled chest pulls the crisp, white dress shirt he's wearing taut against his body. His dark eyes stare into mine with such passion and emotion that I feel a pull to look away.

But he commanded me to look at him. And I'm a good girl. I will obey him. For now.

I wish I knew what the look in his eyes means. But I don't.

"What's your last name, Ava?" he asks.

I'm quick to respond, "Ivanov." I will never forget. That name is why I'm here. Why all of this has happened to me. I didn't choose this life. I didn't want it.

"I see. You're Alec's daughter?" he asks. Hearing my father's name causes a stir of emotions in the pit of my stomach. I've heard his name before, over and over. Accompanied by hateful slurs, or laughter and cheers of his death. But not like this. Hearing his name spoken calmly. With respect. That's something I haven't heard in a long time.

"Yes," I answer, still holding his gaze.

"Ava Ivanov," he says, with reverence in his tone. He repeats it in a murmur I almost don't hear.

"Come, Ava," he says, and turns his back to me. I stand quickly to obey.

As I watch him move with dominance and power through the hallway, I feel a stir of emotions I haven't felt in some time. I feel hope.

I know I shouldn't, though. Hope will destroy me.

CHAPTER 3

KANE

I don't know shit about this house. I fucking hate this. Vince sent me here. This is where I can stay on *his* territory. I feel like this is a fucking trap. Like this place is wired and they're watching me. I know a safe house when I see one. And this is definitely the Valetti safe house. I looked for bugs when I got here, but I couldn't find shit.

Ava was passed out, but I still didn't want to leave her alone for too long though. If I lost her... fuck. That'd be bad. Who the hell am I kidding? This is all fucked. I'm not a member of Petrov's crew. I don't belong on Valetti soil, and I know I'm not fucking wanted here. Even worse, this job is a fucking nightmare. I don't want to do this shit. I can't stand the fact that this is what I'll be doing.

Anxiety races through my blood. I don't like this insecurity. I never should've gotten myself into this shit.

Fuck it. It's not going to happen. I'm not doing it. I'll hold on to her until they come back. But I'm not doing this shit. It's not what I did for my *famila*. This is fucked up and wrong.

The thoughts fly through my head, but I know better.

If I tell Petrov no, I'm a dead man.

I need to figure something out. The Valettis didn't look so keen on doing business. Not this kind of business, anyway. Maybe I can get in with them.

My gut churns. Would they take in the nephew of a rat? I can hear it now. The disrespect. The dismissal. No one takes in the last member of a tainted name. I'm on my own and that means I'm at the mercy of these fucks.

I climb the stairs and listen for her footsteps. For *Ava Ivanov's* footsteps. She was practically royalty. Untouchable. And now she's in chains and being sold as a slave. Passed around. She's so fucking scared. I know she's trying not to show it. She's doing everything she can to obey and disappear into the background. I can sense it though, deep down.

She's terrified.

There are so many scars on her body. Multiple small scratches over her hip and her shoulders. There are bruises of all different colors on her thighs and arms. A silvery bite mark on her shoulder. The sight of it infuriates me. Worse is the large cut on the nape of her neck. The metal dug in and rubbed her skin raw. It has to have been like that for a while to look so fucking bad.

I need to stay calm and think of this as just another job until I can get through it.

I stop at the top of the stairs. I look to the left and there's a small hallway with a large door at the end. To the right is a hallway with more doors. The left has the largest room, so we'll stay there.

I don't care what they say about the chains being gone. I know they're going to be pissed about it. I don't give a fuck though. I'm not doing that shit. She's in my care, so she's mine for now. I'll do what I want with her. A shudder runs through my body and I'm sickened by the thought that ran through my mind. She's gorgeous, but it's wrong to imagine her as mine.

I open the door and walk into a fairly barren room with a decently sized bed and a dresser. The closet doors are open and the closets are empty. The room is light and airy, with a soft pale blue paint on the walls and a grey bedspread. There are black and white abstract paintings scattered around the walls of the room. It's not too bad for a safe house. There's a door to the right and I'd guess that's the bathroom. Good. She'll have everything she needs in here.

I start thinking about how I have to go and get supplies, and then I curse under my breath. I've got nothing to make sure she stays put. I just cut off the

chains and it's not like I have anything on me to make sure she stays here. If I was her I'd take off the second I could. And if she does that, I'm fucked.

Fuck! How did I already mess this shit up? I sigh heavily and walk farther into the room. There's gotta be something in here. Maybe I can use the closet. I can put something in front of the door. My heart sinks in my chest. I don't want to do that. That's so fucking shitty. But I have to make sure she doesn't leave.

I don't know how to do this shit. I turn around and run a hand down my face as I shut my eyes briefly in exasperation. "Ava?"

"Yes?" she answers quickly. When I open my eyes, her light blues stare back at me. Thank fuck. I couldn't stand her looking at nothing, avoiding my gaze and looking as though she's trying to fade from existence. I'm glad she listened.

"How does this normally work for you?" I ask, and cross my arms across my chest. I don't really give a shit that I'm asking her. I'm sure as hell not calling up one of those sick fucks and asking them. I know a bit about this. I'm not proud to know, but I do. I can be her caretaker for a few days. I can do that. But I'm not fucking training women. Breaking them into submission. That shit's not for me. I don't want any part of that. But for now, I have to deal with Ava.

I'm not giving her the upper hand and giving her an option to take off. I can't let that shit happen. I can't piss off Petrov by losing her, even if I fucking hate what he's doing. I'll figure this shit out. If worse comes to worst, there's the option of the closet.

Her mouth opens, but then closes quickly. Her eyes dart to the floor and then back to my face. Her fingers wrap around each other nervously. "I'm not sure how to answer," she says in a calm voice that doesn't match the anxiety she's showing at all. Fear and apprehension wash off of her in waves.

I don't like it. I fucking hate how hurt she is. "How about we take a seat?" I cock a brow at her and walk forward. I keep my movements slow. I half expect her to take a step back, to flinch. But she doesn't move. She lets me place my hand on the small of her back and guide her to the bed.

I pat the comforter with my right hand. “Hop on up.” I sit my ass down and the bed dips with my weight as she climbs on and settles herself. Her shoulders turn inward, but she looks back at me expectantly, waiting for another order.

Jesus. I hate this shit. I know they trained her to behave like this. But I can’t handle this shit.

I’m staying far away from her. I can’t get attached. Can’t lose her, either. I’ll do what I have to so I can survive this, and then I’m cutting my ties. This shit isn’t for me.

“I need to head out and grab some things. I want you to stay here.”

“I understand,” she answers immediately. Like it’s that fucking easy.

“I’m thinking I should tie you up or put you in a room.” I don’t say it like a question, but that’s exactly what it is.

She nods her head slightly. “I understand,” she repeats. I take a deep breath.

“Which would you prefer?” I ask. I guess that’s the least I can do.

Her hand wraps around her wrist and a sad look crosses her face. “I would rather be locked in a room.”

“It’ll have to be the closet.” Her face falls at my words. I’d put her ass in the bathroom, but I can only imagine the trouble she’d get herself into. I could see her shattering the mirror and trying to stab me with a shard of glass. I’ve seen a lot of shit over the years. I’m keeping her ass away from anything that could be used as a weapon. And that means it’ll be the closet.

“I think I’d rather be tied up, if you’d allow it,” she responds. She swallows thickly and adds, “Please, sir.”

“I don’t like you calling me sir.” The words fly out of my mouth before I can stop them. They come out hard, but she doesn’t flinch. I probably shouldn’t have done that. I don’t know if they trained her to do that or not.

“I understand. I’ll call you whatever you wish,” she’s quick to respond.

I search her face, but I find nothing. “When they get here, call me sir. If

anyone comes over, you call me sir. But for now, just call me Kane.” It’s probably a bad idea. All of this is a bad idea though.

She nods her head again and answers, “Yes, Kane.” Hearing her say my name makes me feel more at peace than it should.

I take a moment to absorb everything. She’s so obedient. It’s surreal. My brow furrows, and I have to wonder what all she’s been through. My chest hurts thinking about how much she has to be hurting. I swallow the lump growing in my throat and get off the bed.

I can’t think about it. I can’t go soft. I can’t help her. I’m only one man and she doesn’t belong to me. They’ll be here soon enough and then I won’t have to deal with this.

Guilt weighs heavily on my chest at that thought. I know she doesn’t deserve this. No one does. I pinch the bridge of my nose and try to get out of my head.

This is a job.

My phone goes off in my pocket and I’m quick to answer it. Not because I really give a fuck who’s on the other line; I just need to think about something else.

“This is Kane.” I answer like I always do, and I fucking regret picking up the phone when I hear the voice at the other end.

“And this is Abram.” I’m surprised he called, but I’m also pissed. I fucking hate that I got myself in this mess. Why is he calling me though? I would think he has more important things to do.

“What can I do for you?” I ask. It’s hard to keep the irritation out of my voice. I’m so fucking pissed off that I even thought about working for this prick. I’ve felt regret before. But this is something else. I need to figure out how to get out of this situation and keep my ass alive.

My eyes drift to Ava. If I can...No. I stop that train of thought. It’ll just get both of us killed. She’s not mine. I’m doing a job.

“I wanted to make sure the Valettis are playing nice.”

“They set me up in a safe house. I have my first meet with them tomorrow.”

“Good. And the girl?” he asks.

“What about her?” I feel defensive and protective. I don’t like it. But more than that, I don’t like that he’s asking about her. She’s in my possession right now.

“Are you enjoying her company?” he asks, and I can practically see his sick smile. I don’t know how I want to answer him. He expects me to fuck her. To degrade her. To enjoy *owning* her. He’s going to have to learn to manage his expectations. I suppose it’s better to lay the groundwork for that now.

“No. This isn’t my thing, Abram. I didn’t anticipate this either.” I should watch my mouth. I should be smart about this. I’m having a hard time with that as I look at Ava. Her head is bowed. Her eyes are on her hands, which are resting on her thighs. I fucking hate how she tries to hide like that.

She was untouchable. And now she’s been reduced to this. I don’t fucking like it.

“I see.” His answer is short and I can sense that he’s unhappy with me. “Is she not being good for you? She has her shots and she’s clean.” There’s a pause, but I don’t respond. I’m sick to my stomach. “She’s been trained extensively.” The sickness in my gut threatens to climb up my throat.

“She’s been very obedient.”

“I’m happy to hear that. You’ll grow to enjoy your new role, Kane. I’m sure you’ll be very good at it.”

“I’m not sure I’m cut out for this, Abram. It’s not what I had in mind.” I’m careful not to tell him no. I know I’m pushing my limits with him. If I piss him off, I could be dead come morning. I don’t have a fucking death wish, so I keep most of my thoughts to myself. This is business, after all. *Supposed* to be business.

“Tomorrow, someone with more experience will come down to help you handle her. Get some information about the export procedures. We’ll need the names of the workers and the space limitations. We’ll need to ship this type of cargo in large containers. Make sure they have them. If they don’t,

they'll need to be ordered." He's talking about shipping off women in metal boxes like they're nothing. I bite down on the inside of my cheek so hard I taste blood.

"I'll be sure to get the details." I clench my teeth after pushing the words out. I have to remind myself that I want to live. That I can't fuck with a man like Abram.

"Wonderful. I'll see you soon, Kane." I don't answer. I just hit end and shove the phone back in my pocket.

I haven't had a fucking moment to even think about any of this shit. I need to tie her ass up and get out of here. Then I'll really figure out what I need to do. How I'm going to handle this shit. I turn my back to her and walk to the door.

"Alright Ava, stay right there." I don't turn around to look at her. I can't. The reality of the situation is coming down hard on me.

Abram's man is coming tomorrow.

I'm going to have to treat Ava like a submissive, like a slave. Whether I like it or not.

CHAPTER 4

AVA

The bed is so comfortable. So warm. And Kane covered me with a blanket and gave me a pillow to rest against. It feels so good. It's been a long time since he left. There's no clock in the room, but I think it's been hours. My muscles relax, but then I remember who I am. I remember why I'm here. My body tenses and I sit up and push my back against the headboard. I can't let my guard down.

I thought of Kane while he's been away. My new owner. Temporary owner. Bad thoughts, things I shouldn't be thinking. I don't know if it's because of what I've been through or something else. But I want him to take me. My thighs clench together and a wave of arousal heats my center. I've been a good girl. And when I'm good, they're nice to me. They're still rough, and sometimes it hurts. But they make sure it feels good for me, too. When I'm good.

But Kane hasn't.

I wonder if I haven't been good enough. If I haven't earned my reward. Usually they establish it quickly. I shake my head. This isn't right. "No." The word slips past my lips as a mere breath. Something's wrong. I shouldn't be thinking these things. I shouldn't be fantasizing about him pinning me against the wall. My back arches at the thought.

I can't help it.

I crave his touch. I need to know I'm being good. I've worked hard to be a

good girl.

At least I know I haven't angered him. I would definitely know if I had. The thought sends a chill down my spine. The warmth in my core and my heated thoughts vanish.

I still don't understand Kane. I don't know what to think about him.

He's not like the others. Not yet, anyway. I don't remember what's normal and what isn't. I used to think they'd be nice, they'd be different. But they're all the same.

Except Kane. This is very, very different.

I want to believe he's a kind person. He doesn't seem so bad. He's not rough with me. Not at all. And he's given me freedom from that fucking collar that kept digging into my neck. But I'm afraid to think that. I'm afraid that he's merely setting me up. He wants to test me. That must be it. This is all an act. He's waiting for me to be bad.

I look down at my wrists at the shitty knot that's binding my hands together. I could get out of this. I'm sure I could. I haven't tried, but I know I could. He's either not used to this, or he's testing me. I'm not sure which one it is, and either way I would end up with the same result.

I settle my back against the headboard and square my shoulders. I will be right here when he returns. I close my eyes and picture *his* face. I will not do anything to compromise my opportunity. I know I'll see him again soon. He'll come to check on me. He said he would. I need to be good. I need to make sure I live to see him again. Memories flash before my eyes that harden my heart and strengthen my resolve.

My eyes pop open at the sound of the door opening. I have to remind myself Kane is the enemy. His comforting touch makes my body weak. The cravings I have are from the sick way I've been conditioned.

Kane is not good. I'm just fucked in the head. I need to remember that. I've already forgotten so much about myself. But I have to remember that. None of these men will help me. None of them are good.

He walks through the door with fistfuls of bags. I feel a pull to go help him.

But I stay seated. After all, I'm tied to the bed. *Kane* tied me to the bed.

He drops the bags on the floor in the center of the room. He looks tired. He turns to me and gives me a tight smile before walking closer. I stay still and make sure to look at him. I've only had one other owner who wanted my attention. And he only kept me for a day.

"Sorry it took so long," he says, as he starts untying the binds. He must see how easily they come undone, but he doesn't say anything. Instead his face displays a quick look of worry and then confusion. But then it's gone.

He doesn't look back at me. He avoids eye contact altogether and that makes me worry. My heart sinks in my chest and I start to think I've upset him. My heart races and adrenaline flows through my veins. I stay still and wait. I need an order. Some kind of a command that I can obey.

He walks back to the bags and finally looks at me as he says, "I need you to go through these things and put them away."

I move quickly to get off the bed and to the bags. "Yes, Kane. I understand," I answer as I kneel on the ground. I open the first bag and I hesitate. It's full of women's clothes.

"Make me a list of the shit I forgot," he says, as he walks toward the door on the other side of the room. I turn my head to face him, but all I can see is his back. I don't have a pen and paper. I also don't want to assume that I know everything he wanted. I go through each bag, pulling out the clothes and try not to assume they're for me. A few bags are white plastic; Walgreens is written on the side of those. A few of the other bags are from department stores I recognize.

I hear him put a few bags down on the counter in the bathroom and he walks back into the room, avoiding my gaze once again. He told me to look at him. Didn't he? My heart falls in my chest. I'm sure of it. I continue to move as doubt creeps in. Kane walks back into the bathroom and I hear the water running as he washes his hands.

I'm being good. I'm listening. I stack the clothes neatly next to me on the floor. There's another bag with Advil and warm and cold compresses. There's a tube of ointment and bandages. My heart swells in my chest

thinking they may be for me. I push it down. I can't get my hopes up. No one has ever offered me comfort like this. Even if he is, he's not good. He's working for *him*.

He walks out of the bathroom and looks down at the pile of clothes. My body tenses for a moment, but I continue my work. I haven't finished. I'll go quicker though. I can be faster if he'd like.

"I'll get the rest," he says, bringing my attention to him. "Is there anything you didn't see that you'll need?"

Yes. There's no underwear that I've seen. I don't have a hairbrush, but I can use my fingers. No deodorant or toiletries. But I'm not sure if I need them. I don't want to make an assumption, but I don't want to give the wrong answer either. I feel like he's testing me on what my expectations are maybe. I'm not sure and anxiety starts creeping in.

I set down the bag I was emptying and swallow before answering, "I didn't see anything to wash with. If that's something you'd like me to do."

He looks at me for a moment and then down at the bags with his brow furrowed. "Must've left it in the car," he mutters after a moment. He starts to walk to the door, but then turns around. He looks at me and then the bathroom door, like he's not sure about something. I feel frozen in place, waiting for an order. I give him my attention, but every second that passes without me unpacking a bag or doing *something* makes my anxiety peak. After a moment he finally says, "Stay here and be a good girl for me."

I feel a weight lift off my shoulders. I nod eagerly and put my palms on my thighs. "Yes, Kane." I know how to be a good girl.

CHAPTER 5

KANE

If she breaks that mirror or something else and tries to attack me, so be it. Rightfully, I fucking deserve it. I could've tied her up again, but I don't like it. I walk up the stairs feeling a bit apprehensive. It was fucking stupid to leave her alone and give her a chance to arm herself. But at this point I'm feeling lower than low. I fucking hate this. If it was anyone else, I would've told them to fuck off.

Abram's been known to slice a man's throat for merely looking at him the wrong way. I never should've gotten involved with him. If I'd fucking known that's who Marco was talking about, I would've thought twice.

Her handler, Felipe, called me while I was out. Apparently he thought I needed pointers about how to keep her in line. I don't like being micromanaged. I know Abram's behind this. I don't fucking like it. I know this is a test. And I'm not willing to fail because failure is the equivalent to death, but I'm doing this my way now. They want me to take her, fine, but she's mine and I'm doing this shit how I want.

I stop outside the door and place my free hand on the butt of my gun. The plastic bags I'm holding in my left hand shift and crinkle. She knows I'm coming. If she's gonna put up a fight, now would be a good time.

The door opens and I find her in the corner of the room, neatly stacking a pile of clothes on top of the dark stained wood dresser. She drops quickly to her knees and pulls her hair forward, exposing her back. Her wrists cross in front of her and she stays still although her hips are slightly raised. I breathe in

deep and calm my racing heart.

I only know a little about this sort of shit. And what I do know, I'm not comfortable with.

I need to figure out something though. I can't have her keeper come here tomorrow thinking I don't have a handle on the situation. I don't need Abram to have me on his hit list, but I also don't want her going back to him or in someone else's hands. And he'll take her from me if she's not being "handled properly".

I have everything I need to handle her now. Including a proper collar and leash that won't hurt her. I don't want to put it on her, but I can't fuck this up.

I'm going to have to do this, but at least I can do it my way. She's mine now.

I walk closer to her and she stays perfectly still. I put the bags on the dresser and run a hand down my face. I need to do this. I breathe out heavily and then regret it when I see her thigh start to tremble.

I lean down and pet her hair. "Good girl." Her body relaxes slightly at my praise. Thank fuck she's so damn obedient. I couldn't stomach the shit I'd have to do if she wasn't. If she can be this good the entire time, then everything will be fine.

My heart clenches and sinks in my hollow chest. I don't know what will happen to her once they take her from me. I don't want to think about all the possibilities. I close my eyes and focus on the present. For now, she's with me. And that's all that I need to focus on.

"You need to shower." I put my hand under her chin and lift up her head to face me. Her beautiful blue eyes meet mine and for a moment, I forget it all. I forget she's a slave. I forget she's not mine. The world seems to tilt and I lose all sense of reasoning. My thumb gently brushes against her jaw and her eyes close as a small sigh of contentment leaves her plump lips. I feel a pull to draw her into my arms.

And then I snap out of it. My hand falls, and her head drops a bit from the loss of my touch. I pull back and turn around, facing the bathroom door. I don't know what the fuck that was, but it can't happen. What kind of sick fuck would that make me? She's obviously beautiful, but she's hurting. She's

been used and degraded, and I have no right to let a fantasy like that run through my head.

I walk to the bathroom and listen for her behind me. She's quick to get up and walks at a steady pace to follow me. I walk straight to the shower and turn it on. I peek out of the corner of my eyes to the mirror. My back is still facing her as I put a hand under the cascade of water, waiting for it to warm for her. She stands facing me with her legs shoulder width apart, and slips one strap off her shoulder and then the other. The scrap of a dress falls to the floor, exposing her skin. Her breasts are firm and plump. Her nipples are small, pale pink buds. They harden as the air touches her tender flesh.

I close my eyes and try to will away my erection. This was not something I planned on when I decided to man the fuck up and take on this role so I didn't get my ass killed. If I acted on my body's urges, I'd be taking advantage of her. I won't fucking do it. I may be a prick, and I may be a criminal. But I would never do that. I don't give a fuck what Abram expects from me.

I hear her walk closer to me. Her small feet pad softly against the tiled floor. That and the sound of the water cascading into the shower stall are the only sounds. I lick my lips and turn to face her. I'm her keeper and I need to act like it.

I move out of her way and watch as she enters. I could leave her, but that wouldn't be intelligent. My eyes look back at the mirror. If I was her, I'd shatter it and try to slice my throat with the largest piece I could get my hands on. I've seen it before. If you're lucky, there's not much glue holding it up, so large chunks will fall. If I was her, I wouldn't even hesitate. I peek at her from the corner of my eyes as the sound of the water changes. She's washing herself quickly with a nervous look on her face.

"You can take your time. No need to rush." I say the words calmly, hoping to ease some of the tension I can see coming off of her. She's been worried from the second I saw her. I don't like it. She doesn't need to worry. So long as she stays in line and obeys me, she'll be safe.

For as long as she's mine, anyway. I clench my jaw not liking the thought, and decide to walk over and lean against the edge of the counter.

“Ava?” I ask, to get her attention. My eyes stay on the floor, but I monitor her in my periphery.

“Yes, Kane?” she’s quick to ask, pausing her movements. Her muscles are coiled. She’s waiting for an order.

“I don’t like this, Ava.” I just want to get this shit off my chest. I’ll be honest with her. As much as I can be, anyway. “I don’t know if you can tell,” I begin to say as my eyes find hers, “but this isn’t what I usually do.” I wait to hear her response, but I don’t get one. She’s still waiting. I take a deep breath and grip the counter while looking back down at the floor.

“I’m your keeper for a while, and I know things are going to be different with me than they’ve been with your other...” I trail off and pause. I don’t fucking know what to call them.

“Masters.” She says the word for me. Masters are what they call them. Masters and Slaves.

“I don’t want you to think of me as a master, Ava. That’s not what I am.”

“Are--” she starts to ask a question, but then she seems to jolt and stills in the shower. I look up at her and nod.

“I want you to ask me questions. I want you to listen to me.” I point a finger at her to emphasize what I say next. “But talk to me.” I almost say, *it hasn’t been that long, you must remember what it’s like to be normal*. But instead I bite my tongue and feel like a fucking asshole. Yeah, it’s only been weeks of torture and countless times being passed around, used and degraded. I’m such a fucking dick. She’s obviously fucked up from all of this. How could she not be? I grip my hair and lean back against the counter with my eyes closed. I have no fucking right to ask her to do a God damn thing.

What the fuck am I even doing? She’s gonna be gone in a week or two. I’ll never see her again, and not treating her like a... like a *slave* could get her hurt when she goes back to them. “*She’s been trained extensively.*” Abram’s words echo in my head. I fucking hate him. I hate him for telling me to do this. I hate him even more for hurting her.

“Are you my new keeper?” Ava asks, and it breaks me from my thoughts.

I look back at her, not knowing how to answer. I don't want any part of this shit. But I don't have a fucking choice.

I say the only words I know that are true. "You're mine. I'm going to take care of you."

Her eyes widen slightly in shock, and her bottom lip trembles. She asks with a shaky breath, "Are you going to save me?"

My heart sinks in my chest. I want to save her. I feel a pull to protect her...and I will, for as long as I can. But I don't know how long that will be. And I won't lie to her and give her false hope. I press my lips together and shake my head no.

Her head drops as she noticeably swallows and fights the urge to cry. Her shoulders turn inward as she pulls at her fingers. I feel like absolute shit. I've never questioned being a part of the family. Never in my life. It was the way I grew up, and the way we got shit done. Yeah we did some fucked up things, but in the long term, everything made sense.

But this? Fuck this. I don't want any part of it. There's not a damn thing okay with this shit.

But I can't save her. Abram hunted her family down. He did that with all his competitors. They fucking took off and went into hiding, but he found them. If he wants you dead, you're dead. There's no other way around it. Right now she's alive at least. But if we took off? If I decided to be her knight in shining armor? We'd both be dead. It would only be a matter of time. Shit. I might be dead regardless. I'm not looking forward to turning his job offer down. I rub the back of my neck and let out a heavy sigh as she straightens her shoulders and tries to compose herself.

"Finish up. It's getting late," I tell her, once she seems to have settled some.

My eyes travel down her body, not at all in a sexual way. She's beautiful, but she's not well. She's thin and the light shines off of several small scars on her body. One is noticeably larger though, and looks like a bite mark on her shoulder. There are more small scratches on her hips and shoulders, and some look like they were left by fingernails--from digging in and piercing her skin while holding her down.

I have to close my eyes and look back to the floor. I can't imagine everything she's gone through. I can't imagine what she expects from me. But I'll do everything I can to make this easy for her. I want to protect her from that shit and take away the pain she's in. I don't know if I can, but I'll at least try.

There's no doubt in my mind. If I could save her, I would.

CHAPTER 6

AVA

I look at the cuff on my hand and then back to Kane. He locked one cuff around my wrist, and the other around the bedpost before going into the bathroom to shower. He takes another step into the bedroom, drying off his hair with a towel. Boxers hang low on his hips and my eyes stare at the deep “V” carved from his rock hard abs that taunts me. His muscles are still faintly covered with droplets of water and my fingers itch to feel his body. To run my hands along the smooth lines. If there’s no other truth in this world, Kane is the epitome of man candy. My cheeks flare with a blush and I have to look back down at the bed, then to the cuff.

I’m not sure why I have these feelings toward him. I shouldn’t. I haven’t had them before with the others. But the thought of being his--the idea that he can protect me? It has my body aching for his touch. The need to please him is stronger than I’ve ever felt before.

But he can’t save me.

My eyes close as I hear him walk to the dresser.

No one can save me.

But for now, I’m his. And the thought sends a warmth through my body. First from a sense of security, but then I feel something else entirely deeper in my body. Lower. Heating my core. I feel so ashamed. I must really be broken, to feel this desire for someone I should loathe. I should fear him. I do, in a way. But not like the others.

There were five. First him. And then Felipe finished my training, as they called it. And then there were three more. He gave me to them. He used me as a bargaining chip. I was nothing more than a temporary toy to be used and given back once they were finished.

And now Kane.

But Kane isn't like them. He's not like any of them. I believe everything he said earlier. Maybe I shouldn't. Perhaps it's all lies. But something inside of me craves him in a way I've never felt before. Something is telling me to trust him. A soft voice buried deep in my chest whispers that he will save me. I need only be his.

There's no doubt in my mind that I'm a fool to believe it. But the very thought that it could be true makes me want to give him all of me.

My eyes widen, and fear quickly drowns out all the other feelings. That's not what I'm supposed to be thinking. That's not what my focus should be.

Revenge is my purpose. I can't forget. I won't let the past lay in silence. I will make them all pay. And this man, whoever the fuck he is, he's only a temporary stay. I can't lose sight of where I'm going.

My eyes snap up at him as he walks closer. He has a stern look on his face that's been there ever since our conversation ended. I never should have asked questions. He said he wants me to, but I shouldn't have. It didn't do me any favors. Instead my focus is distant and my mind is fogged with thoughts I shouldn't be having.

I asked him if he was going to save me. A shudder runs through my body as I close my eyes and try to keep myself composed. As if this man could be my savior. Shame and disgust run through me.

No one is going to help me. I thought I'd come to terms with that, back when I decided I'd fight to live solely for the chance to kill them. *Him* first. He needs to die. So long as I watch the life leave him, I'll die with contentment in my heart.

My body stiffens as Kane walks over to me. I'm clothed at least. I don't think he's going to want to fuck me. He doesn't look at me like the others do. He hasn't taken from me. But I'm still on high alert. I don't know if I believe

him. I shouldn't. I shouldn't trust anyone that works for *him*.

I hate that I did for a moment. It was a mistake. I won't do it again.

He stands over me as I sit on my heels on the bed.

He leans over and unlocks the cuff with a tiny key, and then places both of them on the nightstand. It's so quiet. The only sound is the clinking and loud clunk of the metal handcuffs. I swallow thickly and look up at him. Waiting for his orders. Waiting for him to use me. I have to work hard to keep my eyes open and stay still.

"Don't make me regret uncuffing you," he says with a low, threatening tone to his voice.

"I won't." I'm quick to respond.

"You're going to have to lie with me though." He walks to the other side of the bed and lifts the covers. "I'm a light sleeper. Just know that." He stares at me as he gets in and lies down. "Lie down, Ava. It's alright; I'm not going to hurt you."

I release a breath I didn't know I was holding. My heart swells and shatters in my chest and tears prick at the back of my eyes. But they don't surface. They never do. Even though this is the first time in a long time that the tears are from a man's kindness and not his cruelty.

"Thank you," I whisper. My body stiffens as I realize I haven't spoken clearly. I clear my throat and look him in the eyes, as he told me to. "Thank you." I repeat the words with confidence and slowly slide under the sheets. I lie on my back, staring at the ceiling, although I can feel his eyes on me.

I lie still and close my eyes, focusing on my breathing. It's coming in ragged breaths as I try to calm myself. How odd that my breath is failing me when I believe I may be safe from harm. At least for the moment. The other times, when they rape me, beat me, humiliate me or leave me to starve or lay in filth--those times my breathing is just fine. It's as it should be. But right now, I don't know what to think. I'm frightened of the unknown.

My body jolts as a heavy arm settles across my lower belly. Kane drags my body across the bed and into his arms. I struggle to move, to speak, to

breathe. I thought he said he wouldn't hurt me. My body trembles as he kisses my jaw. I keep my eyes closed, although I shouldn't.

"Sleep well, Ava. I'm here. I won't let anyone hurt you." He speaks quietly into my ear, his lips close enough that they just barely touch my skin. His hot breath sends a warmth through my body. As he settles along my side, my entire body relaxes.

An overwhelming urge to sleep suddenly makes everything heavy. For a long while, I listen to Kane's breathing. It's steady. The grip his fingers have on my waist loosens. I think he's fallen asleep.

My eyes slowly open. I don't dare turn my head. Instead I look at the ceiling, at every imperfection. Time ticks by. I can't sleep. The bed is heaven on my sore and aching back; the sheets are warm and welcoming. It's the first time I've been allowed to sleep in relative comfort.

But I can't.

I've been given an opportunity. I could run, although I probably wouldn't get far. Kane could wake up and come find me. But I could kill him. He's asleep. I'd do it quick. It'd be relatively painless.

Once that's over I'd have to cut the tracker out of my arm. I thought about doing it before. But they'd know. They'll know the instant the temperature changes, and then they'll come for me. I'd have a little time to get a head start, but that might be all I'd need. I could run and hide. My body lifts slowly off the bed without my consent. Kane's arm drops onto the bed beside me and my eyes dart to his.

He's still asleep; his breathing is steady and his eyes are closed.

I scoot slowly to the end of the bed and gently lift my body up. I shouldn't be doing this. This is bad. It's wrong. I close my eyes as anxiety and fear weigh down my limbs. But I move against them. I hear my feet pad across the wooden floor.

I open my eyes and find myself at the dresser. Staring at his gun. I saw him leave it here earlier. I don't know why I've walked here. I didn't want to. But maybe I did? I'm so confused. So terrified. But I slowly raise my hand and let my fingers wrap around the metal. My head whips around as I hear Kane

move against the sheets. I wait a long while, watching him, anticipating that he'll wake. He moves to lie on his back, but other than that, he's still. I watch his chest as I lift the gun, bracing the butt of it and holding it steady as I walk back to the bed.

I look back at Kane with the cold gun in my hand and my finger on the trigger. His broad chest rises and falls in a steady rhythm. He's at peace. I study his face. His hard jaw is covered in stubble. His plump lips are slightly parted. My heart pangs in my chest. I feel a pull to him, a desire to be at his side. I must be fucked up from everything that's happened. It's not right to feel this way, to want to be with someone whose purpose is to torment me. Someone who's only going to ship me off to someone new. Or worse, give me back to them.

I swallow the lump growing in my throat and lift the gun. My finger barely reaches the trigger. I have to steady the cold metal with both of my hands. I look past it at Kane's sleeping form and breathe in and out. Time passes as I stand there, trying to pull the trigger. Trying to set myself free.

I can't. I can't do it. I won't hurt him when he hasn't hurt me. I can't bring myself to run from him either. I need to stay. My resolve hardens. I can't run now. I need to stay and face *him*. Otherwise I'll never be able to stop running. I'll never be able to rest until I watch him die. I drop the gun and breathe in deep.

I won't leave Kane. Even if he's one of them. Even if he can't save me. I'll save myself. But I won't be able to do that by running.

I return the gun to the dresser, then I walk back silently to the bed and carefully lie just as I was. The bed dips slightly and I make my movements slower. I ease my way back down, right where I was earlier and breathe a little easier once my body has settled back onto the bed.

My breath stops short with panic when Kane moves next to me.

"You made the right decision, Ava." My body stiffens and my eyes pop open. My breath stills in my lungs. "I thought you'd be alright without the cuffs at night." The bed dips as he leans over my body. The intensity of his large frame hovering over my small body makes a knot form in my throat.

“I’m sorry, Kane.” I’m barely able to speak. Fear paralyzes my body. I’m not okay. I wasn’t good. I’m not okay. He takes my wrist in his hand and I let him. My body is weakened and I know I need to obey. I need to be a good girl. I shouldn’t have done that.

“I understand.” He clicks a cuff shut around the bedpost and then the other around my wrist and runs his hand along my arm and down my body. “But you must know that I have to do this now.” His breath tickles my ear and sends a chill down my body as he speaks. “I didn’t want to.”

I nod my head slowly, hating what I’ve done. I’ve caused myself pain. I ruined it. I’ve upset him. I’ve disobeyed him. My body trembles knowing what’s coming. I swallow the lump growing in my throat and say, “I’m sorry, sir.” I choke out the words. He was going to let me sleep, and I destroyed that.

My body jumps at his hard response. “Don’t call me that.” He’s angry, and I need to make this right.

“I--” I try to speak, but my throat closes and I struggle to respond.

“Shh. Shh. I’m sorry.” He strokes my hair and pulls me close to his body, gentle enough that he doesn’t pull the cuff against my wrist too much. “It’s alright, Ava.”

“I’m sorry.” I heave a deep breath and push out my apology. “I’m so sorry, Kane.”

“It’s alright, Ava. I would have done it, too. It’s okay.” I shake my head, but he pushes me into his chest. My left arm twists slightly, nearly to the point of pain and makes me wince.

“Fuck,” he curses under his breath. “God damn it!” he yells, as he gets up and leans across my body. I hear him pick up the key and struggle with the lock.

He pulls the cuff apart and I slowly rest my arm down by my waist. I lie on my side, curled inward. I’m frightened and unsure of what he wants.

“I don’t know what to do with you, Ava.”

“I’m sorry, Kane.” I speak with my eyes closed and my chin tucked to my

chest.

“I know why you’re fighting me, but please,” he holds me tighter to him, “please be a good girl for me. I don’t want to hurt you. I don’t like this.”

“I’m sorry, Kane.”

“I don’t want you to be sorry.” He kisses my neck and sighs. “I’m sorry too, Ava.”

I cuddle into his chest. His arms wrap tighter around me. I’m so confused, but for the first time since all this happened, since I lost everyone I loved...for the first time I don’t feel alone. I close my eyes and lean into him as he kisses my forehead. I’ll be good for him. I can do that.

As my body calms and he continues to shush me, all I can think is that this isn’t going to last. I’ve behaved badly. Very badly. Yet he’s holding me and consoling me. I could’ve tried to kill him, but he’s not punishing me in the least. I nestle deeper into his chest and clench my fists into tight balls to keep from gripping onto him. I’m afraid to hope that he can hold me forever. But it’s too late.

I wish he would keep me. Maybe if I’m good for him, he will.

I take a ragged breath in as my body heats with anxiety.

“It’s alright. I’m not going to hurt you.” He kisses the top of my head. I believe him. I trust him. My lungs fill with the hot air between us.

It’s a mistake, but I can’t help but hope that he’ll save me. Even though he said he won’t. Some dark part of me wants me to believe that he will. So I close my eyes and I let that part consume me. It may be the last wish I ever have. But with everything in me, I pray that he’ll keep me.

CHAPTER 7

KANE

I didn't sleep. Not for one fucking minute. I couldn't cuff her back to the bed, not with the way she is. But I sure as fuck wasn't going to let my guard down. Even if the gun wasn't loaded, she had it pointed at me for a long fucking time. Part of me wanted her to run. I don't know if Abram's going to let me live when I reject his offer. If she had run, at least one of us would have gotten away.

But she didn't try to run. Instead she decided she'd try to kill me. I'm not sure why she didn't pull the trigger. But I'm sure as fuck happy that she didn't. Not because I want to live. I was never in any real danger. Some twisted part of me wants her to want me. The fact that she thought about killing me is like a bullet to my chest.

I understand it. I'd do it too if I were in her position, but that doesn't ease the pain. I take a look at her from the corner of my eye as we pull up to the red light.

She was surprised when I told her to sit in the front seat. I wish she'd fucking act normal. Her hands won't stop shaking and I fucking hate it.

If I keep pretending that everything's alright, maybe she'll settle down. I hope she will. She's so fucking broken. She's so scared that I'm going to hurt her.

I had to bring her with me. I didn't trust leaving her alone. Not after I came back yesterday and saw what a shitty job I did tying her up. I'm used to zip

ties. But I'm not tying her up like that. I've seen it go wrong too many times. I don't want to risk hurting her.

She's staying with me. Every waking moment, I want her right next to me. But I don't want her to be the shell of a human she was when I first saw her. I know I can bring her out and help her heal.

My hands grip the steering wheel tighter, making my knuckles turn white. I fucking hate how she tries to fade into the background or trembles with fear. I loosen my grip and ease up off the gas as we make our way closer to the docks.

I gently lay a hand on the console, getting a bit closer to her, but not touching her.

"Just relax, and everything will be fine." I repeat the words I told her when we left and she acknowledges me with a nod.

"I will. Thank you, Kane." I don't know why the fuck she's thanking me, but I shove my annoyance down. I don't want to yell at her, not like I did last night. She doesn't deserve that. I need to go easy on her. After everything she's been through, it's a miracle that she's as functional as she is.

I move my hand down to her thigh, just below her jean shorts and give her thigh a gentle squeeze. Her skin is so soft. "Everything's going to be fine, Ava." I turn my head to meet her eyes. "No one's going to hurt you." I'll fucking kill anyone who tries to fuck with her. I'm not playing around. Right now she's mine. It may not be the smartest thing for me to be handling her like this, though. The thought makes me grind my teeth and I turn to look out of the window. I don't want her to sense my anger at all. She's mine, and I want her relaxed and to be able to blend in. Not some trembling slave, chained away and devoid of life.

I know I can get her there. I will get her there.

So long as everyone stays out of my fucking way.

They better not fucking hurt her. I got a call from Vince this morning with the address for the meet-up. I've never liked the docks. That's where we dumped the bodies. I've seen plenty of men led to the docks, only to be shot on-site and discarded. But that's where the shipping containers are, so it

makes sense that we'd meet there.

I take another look at Ava. She's nervous still, but at least she's looking around a little. A small smile plays at my lips. I wonder if she knows she's not staring straight ahead, looking at nothing. I fucking hate that, so if I've broken that habit I'll be happy with that little bit of progress.

"You ever hear of the Valettis?" I ask her, as I follow the directions from the GPS and turn into a gravel driveway right off the bay and drive to the far end. There's a large building and then a smaller one that looks like it's obviously comprised of offices. Undoubtedly that's where Vince told me to meet him. My eyes travel to Ava and I question bringing her along. It's an impossible situation, leaving her alone versus bringing her with me.

"I haven't." She shakes her head and her large blue eyes shine with sincerity. "My father didn't talk much about business." Her eyes stay on me, waiting for an answer.

"I'm sorry about your father." She visibly flinches from my words and it makes me feel like an asshole. I put the car in park and turn in my seat to look at her. "I really am, Ava. I know what it's like to lose someone you love."

"Thank you, Kane." The way she says the words seems different than before. The words are softer and have more meaning. I reach into the backseat and grab the bag with her collar and leash. I imagine I need her collared when everyone's around, just like I need her to call me sir. I want the collar on her neck, too. I want to cover the bandage over her cut. It's a large fucking cut, too. The fact that they didn't do shit to help it heal pisses me off. I lean over and push the edges of the Band-Aid down.

"This'll cover that up." I have to lean across the console to put the thin leather band around her neck. It looks good on her. It's an off-white color and makes her skin look brighter around it. The leather should feel good compared to the metal. There's a loop at the front, for a tag or a leash.

I adjust the collar so it fits nicely and covers the bandage. Most of it, anyway; a small bit peeks out. It makes me scowl. I don't like seeing it. I hate the evidence of what those fuckers did to her. My eyes involuntarily travel to the large, silvery scar on her shoulder. The indentation of each tooth from the

bite is visible. I have to force myself to look away and calm my breathing.

“That feel alright?” She nods her head at my question and I shove the bag into the backseat. I’m not putting a fucking leash on her. I won’t need it.

“You’ll stay to my right. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Kane.”

“If anything happens, you stand behind me.” She hesitates as her eyes widen slightly; it’s the first time she’s ever waited even a second to answer. I raise my eyebrows, waiting for her to acknowledge what I said. If guns come up, we’re probably fucked. But I still want her behind me. I need to know she’s alright.

“Yes, Kane,” she replies as she nods her head, keeping those beautiful blue eyes on mine.

“Kane?” she asks.

“Yeah, Ava?” I meet her kind gaze and it takes me by surprise. Her eyes have such life in them.

“I’m sorry for your loss as well.” I’m shocked to hear that from her. My eyes search her face. If her father didn’t talk about business, then Abram and whoever else had her must’ve been running their mouths. Adrenaline courses through my blood and I struggle to keep the anger from my expression. Not because they were talking about my family, but because they had her.

I open my mouth to ask her more about what she heard, but also about the shit they put her through. Before I get a word out though, a knock on my window surprises the shit out of me.

Fuck! Fucking sloppy of me to let a Valetti sneak up on me like that. I should fucking know better. I open the door and step out. The man who knocked on the window takes a step back with a smirk. Behind him is another man. Both are dressed casually, sporting jeans and tee shirts. They resemble each other quite a bit--both Italian with dark hair, and dark eyes. Most likely they’re true-blooded Valettis.

The smaller one, toned and broad-chested, but not nearly as muscular as the

fucker to my right, smiles up at me like it's a big fucking joke that they walked up on me. His hand is on the butt of his gun and as my eyes settle on it, he pulls his shirt out a bit and hides it away. I've got mine, too. But I'm not fucking ready to pull it out. Not without reason.

"Just a precaution," he says with a smirk.

"I'm Tommy, and this is my brother Anthony," says the one closest to me. I nod my head. I was right. Valettis. I know a bit about them. I know Anthony is the fucker who gets people to talk. His methods are known to be extreme, but effective. Looking at Tommy I don't have to wonder what his job is. He's almost as tall as I am, with just as much muscle. His shirt is stretched almost too tight across his chest. He should start investing in some that actually fit.

"Nice to meet you two." Not fucking really. I lean into the car with the door still open. I put my back to them. It's a deliberate move on my part. I want them to know I'm not scared of them, although I'd be a fucking liar if I said I wasn't the least bit anxious. I also want them to know I trust them not to fuck with me with my back turned.

I look into the car and give Ava a small smile. I fucking hope she's alright being here. I don't know when was the last time she was around anyone without being in chains. She's still sitting there, wide-eyed and looking like she's waiting for a shootout to start any second.

"You ready?" I ask in a soft voice. "Just stay by my side and everything will be fine." I hope that she's reassured, but if she's smart, then she knows I can't guarantee a damn thing. Judging by the look on her face, she's definitely doubting my words. I reach out my hand and cup her chin. "Just be a good girl and stay with me. I'll protect you."

Her shoulders relax slightly and her eyes soften as she replies, "Yes, Kane." My heart warms at her words. It shouldn't, but it does. I like that she trusts me and that she's associating me with safety. My heart twists in my chest. I won't be able to give her safety for long. But as long as she's mine, I will.

CHAPTER 8

KANE

“Stay. I’ll come around and get you.” I give her the order then quickly shut the door. I don’t turn around to face the Valettis, but instead I immediately walk around the car to get her. I had her slightly relaxed, so I want to make sure I keep her that way.

When I open the door, she stands gracefully. My hand rests on the small of her back to steady her, but also to give her guidance. I rub my hand in small soothing circles as we walk around the car to face Tommy and his brother. I fucking wish I had her in Kevlar, too. It’s standard attire for me now, after all that shit that happened. It’s the only reason I lived.

I clench my jaw and try to settle the churning in my gut. She’ll stand behind me if anything happens. It’ll be alright.

“This is Ava.” I introduce her and give them a hard stare. I know they saw her before back at the hangar. Back when she was in that dirty dress, bowing on the ground in shackles. But this is different.

Anthony gives her a tight smile and a nod. Tommy’s eyes stare at her collar, at the little bit of bandage peeking out from underneath as he gives a curt hello. I fucking hate them for it. She shifts slightly as she swallows and quietly, yet confidently responds, “It’s nice to meet you.”

I pull her waist closer to me and put my lips to her ear to whisper, “Good girl.”

Tommy and Anthony walk ahead of me, with their backs to us and it gives me a little security. Ava's walking with her hands clasped in front of her and I know it's because she's used to the chains around her wrists. My arm slips off the small of her waist and I take her left hand in my right. Her footsteps falter slightly, and Tommy must hear it because he turns to look back at us and I watch as his eyes stare at our hands.

A jolt of anger races through my blood. He doesn't fucking know anything, yet he's judging me. I can see all the shitty emotions on his face. He's judging *us*. I don't have a fucking choice in this, and neither does she. What the fuck does he expect from me? At least she's not in chains and crawling on the ground like Abram would want.

A quick panic washes through me. If they told Abram about this, I don't know what he'd say. I push that shit down. I don't fucking care. I'm doing this my way and he gave her to me. He'll have to get over it if he doesn't like it.

We get to the front of the building and Anthony pulls open the large glass door and holds it for us. I press my lips into a slight smile and nod.

"Thank you," Ava says, stepping in front of me to walk through the door, but not letting go of my hand. It's such a natural move. It makes my smile turn more sincere. As she steps into the large waiting area she seems to realize something and stops in her tracks. She looks back at me with a flash of fear on her face. Her wide eyes stare at mine as she waits for a reaction from me.

"Good girl." I'm quick to give her praise. A look of relief washes over her, but my eyes travel to Tommy who continues to walk in front of her, but shoots me daggers. My nostrils flare with anger and I grip her hand a little tighter. Her eyes fall to the floor as we walk behind Tommy and I wish I could take it back.

That's strike two as far as I'm concerned. One more shitty look like that and that fucker is getting what he has coming to him. I stare at the back of his head as we walk down a narrow hall, trying to will my anger down but doing a shit job of it.

He opens the door to an office on the right and waits for us to enter. He braces the door fully open with his foot, and I want to push it open farther to

crush his foot with it and punch his fucking face in. She may be a sex slave and I may have to watch over her, but she doesn't need those fucking looks from him. Every look is a reminder and I don't fucking want that for her.

"Ava." Vince gets up from his desk with a wary smile, looking at me and then back to her. He holds out a hand for her in welcome. That's better. That's the greeting I want for her. She quickly but unsteadily places her hand in his, and looks up to me quickly. Her constant need for reassurance makes me sick, but I give her a small nod.

"Hello," she greets Vince as she visibly swallows, and looks back up to me as she takes her hand away.

Vince looks at me although he speaks to Ava when he says, "Women don't usually come to these meetings." He gives her another smile and looks at her face, and then her neck. His eyes focus on the bandage like Tommy's did. "I wasn't anticipating you being here."

On one hand, I'm happy he's speaking to her. I want her to interact with people. But on the other hand, I'm the one he should be talking to about this shit.

I speak up, getting his attention. "I want her with me."

He narrows his eyes as he replies, "Women usually stay at home."

"Forgive me, but I don't want to leave her somewhere I don't know is secure." He seems shocked by my answer. What the fuck did he expect? I don't know him or his *famila*. And I don't trust the safe house we've been staying in. He must be able to read that from my hard expression.

"We'd never hurt her." Ava takes a small step backward, away from him and moves closer to my side. Her hand brushes against mine and I'm quick to take it. The tension in the room is thick. I rub soothing circles on the back of her hand with my thumb.

"I don't know you, Vince. So you'll understand that I'd like to have her with me."

"Yes," his eyes dart to her neck again before meeting mine, "I imagine Abram would be upset if anything were to happen to her." Ava noticeably

cowers at this and scoots closer to me. It pisses me the fuck off.

The hot air seems to suffocate me, and the only thing I can hear is the blood rushing in my ears. I'm surrounded by three armed men with Ava at my side, and all I want to do is take out my anger by beating some fucking sense into them. I focus on my breathing instead.

"Let's get to business, Vince." I bite out the words with only the tiniest bit of aggression apparent. His eyebrows raise and he exchanges a glance with someone behind me. I don't turn, I just stare back at the asshole with a hard look.

"What is it that you'd like to know?" he asks, walking back around to his desk and gesturing to a chair to my left. There's only one chair there. I look to the far corner of the room where Tommy's standing and there's a chair behind him. I think about moving it over so she can sit with me, but then I think twice about it.

I don't feel like sitting anyway. I guide her to the chair with my hand on the small of her back and motion for her to sit. I move to stand behind her and grip the chair. She looks uneasy and she has every right to be. I do my best to comfort her by placing my hands on her shoulders so she can feel me there.

"Would you like the other chair?" Vince asks, as Tommy pulls the chair across the floor. There's an awkward tension in the room and I don't know how to get rid of it. It's making Ava tense, it's pissing me off, and if I turn down the seat it's only going to get worse. I turn around and look at Anthony who's standing behind me and in front of the door.

Regret settles in my chest as I clench my fists. I wish I hadn't brought her. I wish I had somewhere safe to take her. But I don't have anyone. I turn back to Vince and give him a quick nod before gripping the chair and pushing it to butt up next to Ava's.

I take a seat and hold out my hand for her. She's quick to take it and turn her body toward me.

"We don't deal with this aspect of the industry, so you'll have to excuse me, but I find this..." Vince looks between the two of us, "...odd."

I crack my neck to the left and stare back at him debating what all to tell him.

Fuck it. I might as well lay it all out there. “I don’t do this shit, and I won’t be the one working between you and Petrov.” I take a steady breath knowing I may have just triggered my death sentence. When this gets back to Abram, he’s not going to be happy. But I’m sure as shit not going to be doing this. “I’m here to learn the ins and outs of your business and report back.”

Vince narrows his eyes at me. “That’s not the impression I was under. I thought you were in charge of this...” he trails off, looking at Ava and then quickly averts his gaze as he concludes, “...this kind of handling.”

“I’m not, and I won’t.” My words come out hard and I’m glad they do.

His brows raise in surprise before he schools his expression. “Is there anything else I should know?”

My brow furrows in confusion. I don’t know what he’s hinting at. “Subtlety isn’t a strength of mine, Vince.” I lean forward, but keep my hand back so Ava doesn’t have to change positions. “If you want to know something, you should just come on out and ask it.”

“Is she yours, then?” Vince asks, and I swallow thickly as I settle my back against the seat.

I don’t know how to answer that. If I could take her away, I would. It’s one thing to turn down Abram, I’m probably already dead for that. But to steal from him, that would most certainly put me six feet under.

“For now.” I answer as honestly as possible. All eyes dart to Ava as she takes a ragged breath in. When she notices how much attention she brought on herself, she cowers in her seat and looks to me with a sad expression. Her lips part, but I quickly shake my head, stopping her. I don’t want to hear her say she’s sorry. She’s said it too much already.

I brush my thumb along the back of her hand. “It’s alright, Ava.” I try to reassure her quietly before turning back to Vince. “The circumstances are different today than they will be in the future. I just need to get a handle on how you run this operation.” The questioning look on his face vanishes and is replaced with a hard, no-fucking-nonsense look. He gives a nod and rises from his seat. I do the same and Ava quickly follows suit. Her other hand covers the back of mine and she walks closer to be by my side.

She's scared and obviously unwell. I would give anything to ease her pain. I wish I could say she was mine and that I was taking her away from this shit. But I can't. And I won't lie to her.

"I have a shipment coming in any time now. We'll wait outside." He walks around the front of the desk and meets my eyes, before walking toward the doors. "I'm not sure what all could possibly be different on our front that Abram would need to know. But I'll let you have a look." I give him a tight nod as my muscles coil.

He's right. It's a simple operation. I don't know what Abram has planned, but I can't imagine there's anything the Valettis do that would be a surprise to him.

I walk behind him with Ava gripping onto my hand like she's afraid I'll let go. I won't. I pull her closer to me and just barely resist the urge to kiss the temple of her forehead.

Abram already knows everything except simple numbers. He must want something else.

I hadn't thought of it before, but now that the realization has hit me, I don't fucking like it.

CHAPTER 9

KANE

I watch as the last forklift moves across the ramp with the container secured. I've seen this shit a million times. The waves crash against the dock and beyond that it's relatively quiet. A few men are shouting in the distance. Vince is quiet next to me with his hands shoved into his pockets. Ava is somewhat settled in a folding chair a few yards from us. It took her a while to feel comfortable after the shit that happened in the office, but she seems to be okay now. Although, her eyes have lost the bit of vibrancy I saw this morning, and a small frown mars her beautiful face. I wish I could take her unhappiness away.

"She's fine, Kane." Vince's words distract me from my thoughts and I turn to face him. "She's not gonna fucking dive in."

My face contorts with anger, and I have to bite my tongue.

"What? Is that not what you were thinking?" He huffs a humorless laugh and looks over the bay. "I'd fucking jump before I'd go back to that fucker." My heart stops beating and my throat closes. It's so fucked up, but it's true. She's such a sweetheart, such a good girl, and the fate she has is such fucking shit. It's a nightmare.

I feel tears pricking at the backs of my eyes thinking about the hell she's been through. It's not fucking right. My jaw tics as I stare off into the distance and watch the waves form and crash along the beach. I want to save her from that shit. But I don't want us both to wind up dead.

I open my mouth, ready to tell Vince what a fucked up position I'm in. I might as well. Maybe I'll die for it, but something about him makes me think I can trust him, even if I don't fucking like him. The sound of fast-paced, heavy footsteps coming closer makes me turn away from Vince and toward the men walking toward us.

I practically growl in anger when I see that bastard Felipe stalking toward us with his gaze firmly locked on to my good girl. That fucker shouldn't even be allowed to look at her. I clench my teeth tighter to stop myself from saying shit that'll get me killed. I have to remind myself that I'm on my own, and I'm the only thing standing between all these fucking pricks and Ava. I can't do something stupid.

"You got this one, or is it on me?" Vince asks, with a touch of humor in his voice. If I was in a better position I'd find it funny, but I don't.

"What the fuck is she doing here?" Felipe yells out loud enough so Ava can hear as he stomps closer to us and it pisses me off.

I don't like that he knew where I was. My eyes drift to Ava. He was tracking her with that fucking GPS chip in her arm. My jaw clenches and my hands ball up into fists.

Like he fucking owns her. She's mine.

"She's right where I told her to sit." I keep my voice low and even, then cock a brow at him. "What the fuck are you doing here?" I ask.

Vince stares Felipe down with daggers in his eyes. All traces of the humor that was there previously are gone now. Felipe doesn't seem to give a fuck. He's acting like he's untouchable. And in a lot of ways he is. But I don't give a fuck. Ava was finally settling down, but now that he's here and his eyes are on her, she's all fucked up again. The men trailing Felipe are Vince's, which means this prick came alone.

She looked nervous and a bit sad before, but now there's nothing on her face. She's staring at the ground with her hands on her trembling thighs. On her face is that blank expression that I fucking hate. I can tell she's debating on whether or not she should get down from the chair and bow on the ground.

"Stay right where you are, Ava!" My command comes out hard as I yell, and

I almost regret it. But she doesn't belong to Felipe, and I'm not going to let him turn her back into the shell she was when I got her.

Her eyes dart up to meet mine, although her body remains tense and still. Her shoulders rise as she takes in a heavy breath.

"Answer me," I yell out to her. I fucking hate that I'm giving her a command, but I want the fact that she's mine and only mine to be made very fucking clear. I'm not going to let her think Felipe's in control here.

"Yes, sir," she calls out. My teeth grind against each other and I can feel the eyes of every man out here on me. I know I told her to call me sir when other people were present, but I changed my mind.

I shake my head slowly as I walk closer to her, and her eyes widen with fear. "Be a good girl. Call me Kane." At my words, tension leaves her shoulders and her eyes soften.

It soothes my heart that the mention of my name can have such a profound effect on her. "Yes, Kane," she says, with a soft touch in her voice.

I walk up to her and cup her chin in my hand. "Stay here while I handle this." She nods slightly and closes her eyes as I rub my thumb along her jaw. I can sense her trust in me. I only hope I don't fail her.

"Good girl," I say to her, and then stare at Felipe who looks pissed off. His eyes are on her, but her eyes are on me. I smirk at him. He thinks he can control her, but he can't. I won't let her be used like that.

"What do you need, Felipe?" I ask, and walk closer to stand between him and Ava. It's not really a question though, since I'm more or less telling him to get the fuck out. I know it. He knows it. And Vince and his *familia* know it.

Finally, the fucker looks back at me. He narrows his eyes and smirks as he says, "I saw the bitch had moved and I was informed that you may not have a firm grasp on her."

"Everything's under control here, as you can see."

"Where the fuck's her collar?" I watch as his fists clench and he leans to one side to look around me. I turn my head to find Ava looking out at the waves

like she was earlier, ignoring us. A smile widens on my face. That's my girl.

"I like the one I got her better," I say lightheartedly. I watch as Anthony and Tommy walk toward one another with their hands on their guns and their eyes on Felipe. I don't like this shit, because behind Felipe and me is Ava. I don't want this to turn violent. I just need her to get the fuck out.

"It wasn't yours," he bites back.

"Wrong. She's mine, and everything on her is mine."

He cocks a grin and takes a step closer to me. "Not for long," he says with a smile. Every bit of confidence and happiness leaves me. My heart drops in my chest, leaving it hollow.

"She's mine right now, and she'll do as I say."

He just smirks at me and turns to look at Vince as he clucks his tongue. He looks back at me with his eyes traveling up and down my body like he's sizing me up. "I guess I'll be seeing you shortly. We have a meeting arranged for tomorrow. I'll check in with Abram about your *unique* handling methods." His words make my stomach churn with sickness. I can't fucking stand it.

He brushes by me and I almost turn around and knock the fucker out, but Vince grabs my arm and silently shakes his head. I debate on doing it anyway. I know what he must've done to her. The thoughts flash before my eyes and I see red. All I fucking see is red.

As Felipe continues to walk off, Vince starts talking business again. Trying to diffuse the situation, I guess. But it's not working. I watch Felipe as he veers off his path to make a sharp turn, heading for the exit behind Ava. I don't like how close the fucker is to her.

"As long as he doesn't touch her," Vince speaks quietly so no one else can hear, "don't fucking make a move."

I don't acknowledge him. I keep my eyes steady on that prick as he walks by Ava, slowing his steps and staring at her. She cowers in her seat with her eyes staring straight ahead.

I don't give a damn about the docks, or the shipments. I couldn't fucking care less. Instead I'm watching as Felipe walks even closer to her. He stands a few feet away, but just by him being there her entire body is stiff and she's not okay. I know she's not.

The water splashing against the docks is drowning out what he's saying. I know he's talking to her though. And I don't like her reaction. Her face is mostly expressionless, save for the slight frown on her lips and the flash of fear in her eyes. And then I just barely hear him say, "You're going to regret it, you fucking cunt."

Every ounce of control inside of me snaps. My poor Ava goes pale, and I fucking lose it. He's not going to do that shit to her. I'll make sure he never fucking touches her again. I'm quick to pull out my gun and shoot him right in his fucking kneecap. Before I'm aware that I've even moved, I'm on him, standing over his body as he's clutching his leg and cussing rather than reaching for his own gun. Fucking stupid shit.

"Motherfucker!" he screams, as blood covers his hands and pools in the dirt under his knee.

"You'll fucking die for this, Kane." I smirk back at him as I hear the Valetts come to stand around us. I'm sure they have their guns drawn and pointed at me, but I don't look. I won't take my eyes off this fucker until he's dead.

"Not before you." He makes a move for his gun and I shoot his hand as it reaches his belt. I'm a good shot. The bullet goes right through his hand. Blood pours from the wound as he curls inward and covers it with his left hand.

"Fuck!" He screams and winces as blood soaks his clothes and pools around him. It's gushing from his hand, but also his knee now that he isn't keeping pressure on it.

Everyone around us is silent and still. I can feel all eyes on me. Waiting for my next move.

A small gasp and slight movement in my periphery bring me back to why this prick needs to die right now.

"Ava. Come here." I keep my eyes on Felipe and he flashes me a nasty look.

He reaches toward his belt, and I shake my head. “Don’t fucking think about it.”

“I got it.” A man’s voice to my right sounds out and I watch as Tommy leans in and takes Felipe’s gun away from him. Felipe lets go of his injured hand to grab Tommy’s wrist, but Tommy shakes him off and pulls away. Felipe sneers at him as he’s dragged across the dirt, struggling to retrieve his gun before finally giving up and letting go. He curls up on his side, still cussing and grabbing his hand. His face is distorted in rage and pain, but then he sees my face. He swallows and looks around me. I don’t follow his eyes. I know we’re surrounded.

Felipe goes pale, all blood drained from his face and his expression shows the realization that he’s about to fucking die. Good. I’m glad he knows it.

Ava skirts around Felipe slowly and he stares at her with daggers in his eyes. “*Puto coño*,” he cusses under his breath and then spits on the ground.

Ava’s eyes are closed and her shoulders are trembling as she stands to my left. She’s terrified. I feel like a fucking asshole for not ending him the second I came over here. But I want to give this to her. I think she *needs* this.

“Ava, baby, open your eyes.” She doesn’t hesitate. Her blue eyes stare up at me, pleading with me to make this stop. “Take his gun.” I tilt my head toward Tommy, although my eyes are still on Felipe. His nostrils flare and he’s cursing in Spanish under his breath. I can’t hear whatever he’s saying due to the loud crash of the waves.

I see Tommy hesitate to give her the gun. I look to him with impatience and he relents, passing her the gun in front of me. She takes it in both hands and points it at Felipe. She steadies her stance and squares her shoulders as though she’s at the gun range. I imagine with her father being the boss, that she should know how to shoot. But she’s probably never actually killed anyone before.

“What did he tell you, Ava?” I ask her. I want her to know this is what happens to men who threaten her. I want to give her this power.

She closes her eyes and I see hope flash on Felipe’s face as he leans forward. I’ll make sure he never orders her around again. I point my gun at his other

leg and fire off a shot. Bang!

It hits his shin, and judging from the sound of impact, the bullet is lodged in the bone. “Fuck!” he screams out, grabbing his leg. He leans on his side, whining like a little bitch.

“Eyes open, Ava.” She opens her eyes and takes in a ragged breath.

“Did he say he’d hurt you?”

“Yes,” she speaks, barely above a whisper.

I lean closer to her and whisper in her ear. “He’s never going to hurt you again.” I see her fingers tremble on the trigger. She’s reluctant to pull it. I remember my first time. I was only 17. The prick had raped a *comare*. He had it coming. I wanted him dead, but I still couldn’t do it. My father put his hand over mine and helped me. It was the only time I needed that support. Maybe she needs that now.

I stand behind her and keep my movements slow. I brace her arms with mine and rest my chin on her shoulder, staring down the barrel of the gun with her. I place my hand on top of hers and steady my fingers on hers, holding her hands loosely.

Felipe tries to move, but Vince points his gun at him, followed by the rest of the Valettis. The corner of my lips kick up into a smile. Felipe’s phone goes off in his pocket. An annoying ringtone is the only sound other than the waves and Ava’s ragged breathing.

Just as Felipe opens his mouth to yell out to her, her finger pulls the trigger. The bullet hits his right pec, shoving him violently onto the ground. She points the gun down, with shaking hands, but I help to steady it and she fires again. Bang! It hits his throat and blood bubbles out as his hands fly up, reaching for the wound. And again, bang! His head falls back forcefully and his body goes limp. Blood seeps into the dirt, turning black. The phone stops ringing as I slowly lower Ava’s arms and take the gun out of her hands.

It’s Felipe’s, so I’m gonna need to dispose of it. Tommy walks up to me as I debate on what to do with it. He holds out his hand and I’m happy to pass it to him. I don’t feel like dealing with this shit. We used to put them in acid. Along with people’s fingertips and teeth. I turn to look at Vince, with an arm

still wrapped around Ava. I need to square this up with him. I know I fucked up. I directly disobeyed him. It only hits me right now how fucked this is. Felipe is one of Abram's close men. This isn't good. And it went down on Valetti property, with witnesses.

"You sure do make a mess for someone who doesn't have backing." I turn to face Vince, letting go of my hold on Ava. I stand between the two of them and take a look around. There are at least 10 men standing around, with everyone looking at the two of us.

I take a deep breath in through my nose. I feel like I've got their support, but I didn't have the go-ahead. I know for a fucking fact I didn't. I noticeably swallow and square my shoulders. "I'm sorry, Vince. I know better." I return my gun to the holster on my belt and run a hand down my face. As soon as the gun is tucked away several men shift and put theirs away, too. "I fucked up." Vince gives me a hard look. It's real quiet for a moment, except for Ava, who's heaving in air. I clench my fists and resist the urge to go to her. Not until he gives me the go ahead. I already directly disobeyed him in front of his *famila*. I can't disrespect him like that again.

"Yeah, you did. You're lucky I didn't like that fucker." He turns to his right and calls out, "Tommy!"

"Yeah, boss?" Tommy walks up to my right with a grin.

"Get the cleanup crew." Vince looks over his shoulder at the rest of the men. "Get back to work. You didn't see shit here."

"I can clean it up, Vince. It's my mess."

"No offense Kane, but I like to do shit my way. And where the fuck are you planning on taking the body?" His eyebrows raise, and I press my lips into a line.

"I'd figure it out. I won't get you into any shit."

He smirks at me. "You killed Abram's man on my turf in front of me." Fuck, I fucking hate that he's laying into me. I have it coming, though. "You already got me into shit."

I keep my eye contact with him as I state, "Just let me know what to do." I'll

make this right. I always do.

He looks at me for a long while, searching for something, and then he looks over my shoulder. I hear Ava take in a deep, ragged breath and it breaks my heart.

“Just take care of your girl.” As Vince says the words, his phone goes off.

Ava’s right behind me, staring at Felipe’s body. Her hands are clasped in front of her. She doesn’t look like she’s doing alright. She’s pale and trembling, like the fucker’s still alive and going to beat her.

I hear Vince answer his phone as I pull her into my arms and against my chest, turning her so she can’t see Felipe’s body. “It’s going to be alright.”

“Abram, nice to hear from you so soon.” I hear Vince talking behind me and I turn around with her in my arms. His eyes lock with mine as he speaks. “Yeah, he was just here, looking for the girl.” My heart drops and my blood chills. This is bad. Real fucking bad. He’s quiet a moment. I can’t hear what Abram’s saying on the other end, but judging from the look on Vince’s face, it’s not good. “Kane’s got a good handle on her...Felipe just left. Kane? No, he took off a few minutes after Felipe did.”

I feel the faintest bit of relief. Vince covered for me. He nods at me and then tilts his head to the parking lot. I give him a stern nod in return and start walking in that direction.

I pass Tommy and Anthony on the way out. They both look smug and happy. Probably because their family has me under their thumb now.

I open Ava’s door and gently push on the small of her back for her to get in, but her grip on me tightens. She looks up at me through her lashes like she’s waiting for something.

“You alright?” I ask, and kiss her hair.

She nods her head and asks, “Am I still a good girl?” She’s tense, and waves of anxiety are rolling off of her. It takes me by surprise. I can tell she needs reassurance. She’s worried, and I don’t like that. I’d hoped that Felipe’s death at her hands would help her, but the only vibe I’m getting from her is that she’s scared.

“Of course you are. And he’ll never hurt you again.”

She’s still a bit tense but gives me a small smile and says, “Thank you, Kane.” Her fingers twist in her hands and she gets into her seat.

It leaves me with an uneasy feeling in my gut. Something is very wrong. Maybe I shouldn’t have done that. I should’ve just shot him myself. I spear my fingers through my hair and stand outside of my door, looking back over to the docks. A few men are shoveling dirt into a wheelbarrow right where his ass was lying when I shot him. They’re cleaning up my mess.

Maybe it was wrong of me. Maybe I shouldn’t have made her kill him. Fuck. I did that. I *made* her kill him. I didn’t give her a choice. I made her a murderer. It never occurred to me that she wouldn’t take it like I did. She’s a woman, a sweet girl. She’s not like me. Fuck. I don’t know if I made things better or worse for her.

I finally open the door and sit in the seat. My hands twist on the steering wheel as I look straight ahead and ask, “Are you sure you’re alright?”

“Yes, Kane.” She’s quick to answer and it’s in that tone she used to use. I turn to face her. “Tell me what’s wrong.” I stare into her eyes, willing the truth from her. I don’t want her to wall herself off. I need this to be beneficial for us both.

“Abram’s going to kill you if he finds out.” She chokes on the last word.

“Baby, you don’t have to worry about me.” My lips pull into an asymmetric grin. “He has no idea.”

“He’ll find out. I’ve seen what they do.” She struggles to breathe, and I reach across the console and wrap my arms around her. I pull her into my lap. She pulls up her knees and lays her cheek against my chest. Her eyes are closed and she’s shaking her head. I wrap my arms around her and rock her gently. After a moment, she calms. I keep rubbing her back to soothe her.

“Ava, sweetheart, everything is going to be alright.” I pull back a bit to look at her and brush the hair away from her face. I tilt up her chin and she opens her eyes to look back at me. She’s not crying, but she’s obviously not okay. “I want you to forget about this. I don’t want you to worry, alright?” She nods her head and parts her lips to say something, but I press a finger against

them.

The move is more intimate than I intended. A heated spark lights in her eyes, and her lips stay slightly parted. Her chest rises and falls, and the air between us changes. I pull my hand away and resist the urge to kiss her. I search her eyes for a moment, trying to calm my own needs. My dick is hardening in my pants and the urge to fuck her is riding me hard. I push it down.

“Ava, forget about this.” I clear my throat and add, “All of this. I want you to disregard everything that happened today.” She nods her head once and pulls away slightly, the meaning of my words sinking in. My heart falls as she pulls away from me completely, righting herself. I help her move back to her seat and ignore the fact that my dick is digging into my zipper.

I put my hands on the wheel, but before we take off, I have to apologize. “I’m sorry about that, Ava. I shouldn’t have made you do that.”

She slowly shakes her head. “Please, don’t be.”

“I shouldn’t have made you do something you didn’t want to.”

She looks straight at me as she says, “You have no idea how much I’ve wanted to do that.” She looks forward and adds, “He’s only one of many.”

CHAPTER 10

AVA

I can't get over this sick feeling I have, like I'm going to heave up the tiniest bit of water I'm able to swallow. I need to force it down, but it's hard. The food smells amazing. Chicken carbonara, with fresh Parmesan. I want to devour it. My stomach rumbles for it. But as soon as it touches my lips, I have the urge to throw it up. Kane keeps looking at me. He wants me to eat and I want to eat too, but I'm going to be sick. I've felt like this ever since the ride home. Kane was silent; he didn't even look at me once.

I don't know what's wrong with me. I killed him. And I'm so fucking happy I did. At the same time, I'm scared to death that it's not real. That it's fake. I'm convinced it's a setup, and he's going to walk in here any minute and punish me. I keep picturing him over and over, clutching his throat and then nothing. Completely gone.

Is it possible? I saw them kill so many people. But I never had this feeling. The feeling it wasn't real. I'm terrified he's going to come back.

I also want to do it again. I need to do it again. I've never killed before, but he was only the first. I'll handle this sick feeling every day for the rest of my life in exchange for the rest of them lying in the dirt with bullet holes in their heads. An image of him flashes before my eyes. His face covered in dirt, his hair a mess. Laying lifeless with his eyes open and a neat hole right in the center.

Kane sets the fork down on his plate and the clinking of metal on ceramic makes me jump in my seat.

“I need you to talk to me,” he says from across the table.

I nod my head and swallow the lump growing in my throat. “What would you like to know?” I gently set my own fork down and stare at him with my hands clasped on my lap. I need to be sure I give him my full attention.

He’s angry. I don’t think he’ll hurt me, but with the others, the slightest thing set them off when they were angry.

“I hate it when you do that,” he says, and it makes chills go down my spine. My breath falters, and I struggle to respond. I don’t know what I’ve done. “Fuck!” he says under his breath, as he pushes the chair back, and the legs drag loudly across the floor. He walks over to me with determined strides, and I resist the urge to cower.

I don’t know what I’ve done, but I’ve obviously displeased him.

“We were doing good earlier. Before it all happened.” Is this a test? He told me to forget. I don’t know how to respond.

I open my mouth to respond, but I have to cover it. Sickness climbs my throat and I just barely push it down. A wave of heat rolls over my body. I’m vaguely aware that I’m in his arms as he moves through the house to get to the nearest bathroom. He sets me down on the cold tile floor and pulls my hair back as I lean against the toilet. I focus on pushing the urge down. I don’t want to be sick. I hate the feeling of throwing up. He stands behind me holding my hair, and patiently waits while the nausea settles.

After a long while, I try to move.

“Are you okay?” he asks quietly behind me.

I nod my head and apologize, “I’m sorry.” He lets go of my hair and holds me against his chest. My face still feels hot, and every bit of energy has left me. I brace my hands on his chest, but I don’t push away. I lean into him instead. His arms wrap around me and he rubs my back.

“Are you sure?” he asks.

“Yes, Kane.” I answer as I should, even though everything feels different between us. Lines have blurred and I’m not sure what’s expected of me. I like

answering him though. I want him to know I am alright. I swallow and push away slightly.

“Do you want to go lie down?” His dark eyes look down at me, and I find myself mesmerized. I shake my head no and then force myself to look away. I bring a shaky hand to the back of my neck and then we both look down as my stomach growls.

“Can you eat?” he asks.

I’m quick to answer, “Yes.” I’m starving, and I really do want something. I’m not sure I can handle what he’s served me, but I’ll try.

“Maybe soup?” he suggests.

My eyes itch with the need to cry. I feel so overwhelmed with emotion. “Please,” I answer.

“I saw some in a cabinet in the kitchen. I’ll heat some up for you. Head upstairs, and I’ll be up in a minute. Alright?” He pushes the hair out of my face and I lean in as he cups the side of my head.

He leans in and kisses my forehead. I find myself wanting more. But I’m grateful with what he’s given me. “Go upstairs and lie in bed. I’ll be up soon.” I nod my head, but as I start to say “Yes, Kane,” his lips brush against mine in a soft kiss. I close my eyes, needing more. But I feel the air shift and hear him walk away. When I open my eyes, I’m alone.

It’s a long walk up the stairs. I brace myself on the railing. I feel slightly sick and lethargic. I’ve never felt like this before. I’m just so tired. It must be everything weighing down on me.

I felt something like this before, although it was different, the first few weeks of this new life. My life of imprisonment. I crawl onto the bed and lie down. I can’t help remembering how everything was supposed to be that day.

I was going to help Marie with her calculus. Summer break was nice, but that’s only because I didn’t take summer semester classes. My sister did, though. She had to retake it. It was a Thursday, her final was the next day, and then we were going to celebrate. I can still hear myself scolding her for not studying like she should have. My dry eyes itch with the need to cry, but

the tears don't come. *Do you want to fail? 'Cause you sure as fuck aren't acting like you care!* I was so pissed. So angry that she wasn't trying.

I know we were handed a life of luxury. We'd never have to work a day for the rest of our lives if we didn't want to. But I was so angry that she'd pissed away another semester. I mean, fuck calculus, but don't sign up and then waste it. My heart thuds painfully in my chest. It never mattered. I never should have yelled at her. I swallow thickly as I see her face down on the table, bullet holes in her back. I hear myself screaming as the men surround me. At first I wished they'd killed me instead. But after all this time, I'm grateful.

I never would have wanted her to go through this. I would have rather died than go through what Felipe did to me.

He was the first, while Felipe held me down. They tied me to a chair and each did what they wanted to me. I close my eyes remembering how much it hurt. Remembering the pain on my father's face.

At first I blamed him. He did this. He's a bad man, and they came for us because of him. But that's not true. I spent weeks watching them hunt down my family. But then there were more. Innocent people who they took just for their own pleasure. Other families who were afraid to say yes equally as much as they were afraid to say no.

They're horrible men who deserve to die a thousand agonizing deaths. I hate them with everything in me. My fists clench at my side. The three of them need to die. A small, wicked smile grows on my face. One down, two to go.

I was never this person. I would have never felt happiness at another's misfortune. But there's nothing about me that's remotely the same as before. I was their prize. A gift to lend out to help seal deals.

They've made me a different person.

And they'll die because of the monster they created.

Anger lights inside of me. It's been so long since I've felt this need. My forehead creases with confusion. Why does it feel like it's been so long? This is my one goal. My one reason to live. As the thought registers, I hear the door open.

The anger dissipates and a soothing balm runs through me.

Kane.

He's going to make me better. I just need to be his good girl. He'll make everything better.

CHAPTER 11

KANE

*A*nxiety races through my body as I climb the stairs. I feel like a sitting duck staying here. But I'm fucked if I leave. I shove my nerves aside. I killed a man today. Not just any man. I've killed before and felt next to nothing. All of them were bastards who deserved to die. Each time I pulled the trigger and never looked back, unless it was to make sure he wasn't still breathing.

But today I killed a man that could haunt me. A man who Abram's going to be pissed about losing. It's only a matter of time before he finds out. Or before the Valettis tell him. I'm almost certain they won't, but it'd only take a single man to tell. Just one lowly soldier in their *famila* could bring about my death sentence.

Between the two of them, the Petrovs and the Valettis, I trust the Valettis more. But I'm not fucking stupid. I've trusted men before and gotten shot at from behind. I need to figure something out. I half expected a call by now from Abram. If Vince was going to make a move, he would've by now. He could've easily taken a shot today. He didn't though, and I'm not exactly sure why. I imagine they're displeased with the current business arrangement, but I need to find out exactly what's going through his head.

Right now I feel the need to run.

I need to get the fuck away from Petrov and all that shit. I'm not going to do this shit for him, and I know that telling him no isn't going to go over well. I could run on my own and take Ava with me. But I fucking hate that idea. I'm

not a little bitch. I didn't run when my own *famila* came after me, but back then I was fueled by anger. I'm using my fucking head with this one. And going in there by myself against his powerhouse; that'd be fucking stupid.

If I had the backing of the Valettis though...That's a different story. Right now I don't know what to think about Vince and the rest of them, but I'm going to find out. I need to do it quick before Petrov gets wind of what happened. I'm sure it's only a matter of time. When he finds out, I'm fucked.

All because of Ava. And it was fucking worth it.

She's quiet when I open the door, lying on her side and curled up like her stomach is hurting her. Her back is to me. My eyes travel the length of her small body as I walk into the room.

I feel like shit that she's sick over this. I know she said she's happy that he's dead, but I still shouldn't have told her to do that. She would have done anything I told her to do. And I had her kill a man.

Felipe was her keeper though. He was her tormentor. I can only imagine the fucked up shit he did to her. I'd want to see him dead if he'd done that shit to me. I set the bowl down gently on the nightstand and sit on the edge of the bed. It creaks and dips with my weight. She starts to get up, but I place my hand on her hip to stop her. She needs to rest.

I need to know. It's killing me to not know what she went through. I want to understand. I need to help her.

I clear my throat and ask, "You feeling any better?"

"Much," she answers with a small smile. She looks so sweet and innocent. Her face is still pale though. I was afraid she was having a panic attack at the table. This is too much for her. I'm a fucking prick for putting her through that.

"I'm sorry, Ava." I take her hand in mine as she scoots closer to me, giving me her full attention. She shakes her head, but I don't give her the opportunity to make excuses for me.

"I never should've told you to take the gun." I press my lips into a straight line as I remember standing behind her, steadying her hands. "I thought it

would help you. I didn't think you'd get sick over it."

"I'm alright," she states, as though everything is perfectly fine. It's not.

"You almost had a fucking heart attack at the table." I squeeze her hand tighter. "You're just a woman. You shouldn't even see things like that."

Her eyes flash with anger so briefly, I question it. I can see she wants to say something, but she's holding it in. I fucking hate that. "Tell me."

"It was because you told me to forget everything that happened. I wasn't sure if you were testing me or not." Her eyes dart to the door and then back to me. "I didn't know what to say."

My forehead wrinkles with confusion. And then it hits me. She thought I was testing her? "Did you think I was going to hurt you, Ava?" My blood boils, and I resist the urge to show how angry I am. Not at her, but at the fact that she expected that shit from me.

Her lips part and her eyes fall as she admits, "I wasn't sure." Her tone is so sad. It fucking breaks my heart.

"I wouldn't do that to you. I wouldn't set you up." I cup her chin in my hand and tilt her head. "I'm not like them." I fucking hope I'm not. I don't know what she's been through. But I hate that she thinks I'm some sick prick like the fuckers who got their hands on her before me.

I have to change the subject. I'm getting too fucking worked up. "Can you eat?" I ask, as I drop my hand.

She nods her head and answers with a confident, "Yes."

That makes me happy. She needs to eat. I give her a small smile and reach over for the bowl as she sits up.

"I'm glad you're eating. Did they feed you?" I need to know. After seeing her reaction to killing that prick, I want to know what all that fucker did to her. I wish that bastard were still alive, so I could take out this anger on him and make him suffer for what he did.

"Yes. I was always fed something." She says it simply. But it's a veiled answer.

“Something? Be more specific?”

“Some fed me whatever it was they were eating.” Some. My throat closes and my eyes fall. How many men have hurt her? I swallow thickly and turn to her with the spoon held out. I want to feed her. She doesn’t hesitate to lean forward slightly and part her lips.

“Good girl.” She swallows and smiles with a small blush. The color looks beautiful on her cheeks. I like seeing it. But I know my next question is going to take her happiness away. I need to know, though. “Tell me what happened, Ava.” I dip the spoon into the hot broth and keep my eyes on it as I add, “I want to know.” I bring another spoonful to her lips.

There’s not a trace of a smile on her lips. Or any other emotion. A bit of disappointment, maybe.

“What would you like to know?” she asks warily.

“I want to know the names of the men who hurt you. All of them.” I raise the spoon again, but she shakes her head with a small frown.

“I’m sorry; I can’t.” Her answer pisses me off. I know she owes me nothing. I grit my teeth knowing I’m still waffling on what I’m going to do when I finally see Abram again. But a very large part of me doesn’t want to let him ever see her again. I’d rather lie and say she was dead. I need to think of something and let her know.

“I don’t know their names. Not all of them.” I give her my attention and try to control my anger.

“How many? Tell me what you can.” I clench my jaw realizing I’ve given her a command. Just like I did earlier with Felipe. What the hell is wrong with me? I set the bowl on the nightstand and get off the bed with my back toward her. “I’m sorry. You don’t have to tell me anything.” She doesn’t owe me anything, and if she doesn’t want to talk about it, she doesn’t have to.

“I think I’d like to talk.” I turn to look at her and stare into her blue eyes. I nod and clench my fists. I look at the bowl and then the bed. I don’t think it’s smart of me to sit next to her. This shit is getting to me, and she doesn’t need my aggression. But when I look back into her eyes, she’s begging me for comfort. She leans forward slightly and adds, “If it’s alright, I want to talk.”

She noticeably swallows and looks back at the bowl of soup on the nightstand.

“Do you want more?” I ask. I quickly reach for it and climb on the bed to give it back to her.

“There’s more downstairs if you like it.” It’s just a can of homestyle chicken noodle. But it does smell good.

She takes the bowl eagerly and smiles. “I do like it. My mother made us chicken noodle when we were sick, too.” She spoons out the broth and blows on it before taking it into her mouth.

She seems happy with the memory, but the mention of her mother makes me sick. It reminds me of my own mother. Both our mothers were slaughtered.

“My mother did, too. Never from a can though.” I grin at the memory. “My mother loved cooking,” I say matter-of-factly, and settle on the bed next to her. This is better, I think. Besides, I’d rather talk about this.

She chuckles into the spoon and takes it greedily into her mouth. “My mother hated cooking. We had a chef. But not when I was little. Back then it was different.”

I try to recall what I know of her father, but it’s not much. I suppose her *famila* made more money later on in her life and that’s why things changed for her. With the right setup and connections, there’s a shit-ton of money to be made.

“A chef sounds nice.” She shrugs her shoulders and takes another bite.

“I like cooking. But it’s nice every once in a while.”

I huff a humorless laugh. “I can grill, and I can bake, but I tend to burn shit on the stove.”

She looks at me with a wide smile as she asks, “But it’s harder to bake, isn’t it?”

“Nah,” I lean farther back and rest my back against the headboard, “Baking is just mixing up a simple recipe and you pop it in the oven.”

“Oh, do you mean like Betty Crocker?” she asks, and I look at her with confusion.

“Of course, what did you think I meant?”

She sets the empty bowl down and tries to cover her mouth with her arm as she laughs while shaking her head. As I watch her shoulders rise and fall slightly with the sweet sounds of soft laughter, I realize how easy the atmosphere is between us.

This is Ava. I like this side to her.

“What kind of baking do you do?” I ask. I just want to keep the conversation going. I want this feeling to last.

“Like, fresh morning biscuits--” She looks reminiscent, and I interrupt to be an ass.

“They have those in a can. They’re called Pillsbury.” She outright laughs and swings her hand at me, playfully smacking me on the arm.

It triggers her, though. Her face falls and all sense of humor is gone. It’s as though I had the real Ava to myself, if only for a small moment. But now she’s gone. Replaced by the shell of a woman.

“Ava,” I say, as I reach out to her. Her eyes dart to mine, but her body is tense and I can feel waves of anxiety pouring off of her. My hand lands on her thigh and I decide to keep things light. “You have to know what Pillsbury biscuits are, don’t you?”

She quickly responds, “Yes. I’ve seen them before.” Her body stays tense as though she’s expecting a harsh reaction. It brings me back to reality. She’s so fucking hurt.

It breaks my heart. I clear my throat and lean back against the headboard, patting the seat next to me. She obediently scoots closer.

“You’re hurting. I want to help you,” I say simply. I know the only way to help her is to make sure she never goes back to them. I know that. And I want to make sure that happens. I question if she’ll ever be alright, but a feeling deep in my gut tells me I can heal her. I can take away her pain and make

everything alright.

“Tell me what I can do, Ava.” It’s a command. It may be fucked up to take advantage of her submission. I don’t feel comfortable pushing her to talk. But I have no problems pushing to find out how I can help her.

Her sad blue eyes look up at me as the corners of her plump lips tilt down. Her lips part and then close as her eyes fall. This is my Ava. I know this is her because she’s giving me emotion, even if it is sadness. I pull her small body into my lap, wrapping my arms around her waist and she melts in my arms. Her hands grip my back, and she holds onto me tighter as I run my hand down her back with soothing strokes.

I hear her say something, but I’m not sure what she says since she’s so quiet. I pull back to look at her, but she keeps the side of her head pressed to my chest and her fingertips dig into my back.

“I’ve got you, baby. Just tell me what to do.” I run my hand along her back, hoping this is helping her. I was wrong before, with Felipe, but this can’t be anything but good for her.

“Please,” she barely whispers, “keep holding me.” Hearing her plea breaks my heart. I kiss her hair and rest my chin on her head. I hold her close and keep rubbing her back.

If she wants, I’ll do this all night.

Feeling her in my arms reminds me of the last time I held my mother. She didn’t hold me back, though. They’d already killed her. The memory flashes before my eyes.

The car slams into another vehicle. The bullets fly past me, barely missing me. But my father clutches his chest, each bullet jolting his body as they pierce his back even through the thick seat. It happened so fast. We were driving to the drop, and then all of a sudden we weren’t. The acrid smell of gas is still vivid in my memory. So is the sound of the bullets. My father’s eyes stayed open even as he stopped breathing. I can hear my own voice screaming.

I remember reaching for my gun. I only got one shot off as the tires screeched, and I saw them drive off. I saw Paul and Cory in the back. They

didn't see me stand back up as they slapped the front seats, urging whoever was driving to go faster. Unlike my father, I'd been wearing Kevlar, and it had saved my life.

I saw red. Nothing but red. But fear crippled me. I was barely coherent. I stood in the middle of the road as a car drove toward me. I walked toward it, forcing the driver to stop. My hand hit the hot hood. The thud sounded so loud.

"Are you alright?" the woman asked, as she clutched her chest. Panic was written all over her face. I remember how pale she looked, how frightened she was for me, but also *of* me. She wanted to help. Her eyes darted from me to our car. I saw them grow larger as she registered the bullet holes. I still feel like a fucker for pushing her to the right and getting in her car. She didn't try to fight, just backed away as I stole her car and took off.

It took fucking forever to drive home. It was only 15 minutes away. I drove like hell, laying on my horn and running red lights. It was surreal. I knew they would be headed there next. All I could do was try to get there first.

But I didn't. I couldn't save them. I got there too late.

My mother wasn't breathing. I remember holding her, waiting for her to react. Instead she was limp in my arms. I held her close, just wishing she would breathe. I rocked her just like this. Waiting for a breath. Some sign of life.

Ava pulls herself even closer to my chest and I realize I've stopped rubbing her back. I tilt my head down to kiss her forehead and whisper, "Good girl."

CHAPTER 12

AVA

I lean against the table with both hands braced and my elbows locked. I stare at Marie with daggers in my eyes. I know she didn't study. She smells like coconut rum. She never takes things seriously. She's only two years younger than I am, but she's so fucking immature. She takes everything for granted. She doesn't remember what it was like before Dad got in with the mob and took over. She doesn't remember how hard it was. Fuck her arrogance. I can't stand it.

She's going to go through life wanting for nothing. Taking advantage of everything. Even if she fails, it doesn't matter. They'll still hand her a degree with smiles on their faces. All because of her last name and how deep our pockets go. And she's happy with that. She's completely content with her ultimate life goals amounting to nothing more than having an hourglass figure, long blonde hair and long legs that she's more than happy to spread.

Everything about her pisses me off. I fucking love my sister, but the person she's become her freshman year of college is horrific. She needs to get the fuck over this phase. My anger boils at the surface.

I open my mouth to lay into her again. But I can't. Her body jolts, and the wicked grin on her face vanishes. Then she's shot again. This time the bullet hits her chin. I see her head whip to the side. There's blood everywhere. I still don't register what's happened. I don't believe it. Not until I feel their hands on me. Even then I can't take my eyes away from her. Her face is flat on the table. Blood is slowly soaking into her hair.

No! It's not real!

But it is.

Thick, heavy arms wrap around me. I don't struggle. It's not real.

"What about this one, boss?" Felipe asks, with his sick, hot breath trailing down my neck. I struggle and try to scream out as I realize what's happening. I scream, but they don't hear me. I kick, but they don't flinch. I fight, but it's useless.

A hand wraps around my throat and squeezes. I can't breathe. I try to reach my throat, but I can't. My face turns hot as I struggle. I need to breathe.

"No, don't," I hear him say. The hand around my throat loosens, and my body sags forward in Felipe's arms as I heave in a gasping breath. "Let's get some use out of her."



"AVA!" HANDS HOLD DOWN MY SHOULDERS, AND I STRUGGLE TO MOVE AGAINST them.

"No!" I scream out. I plead with them. My body tries to push them away.

But they'll only hurt you more when you do that, I hear the small voice say.

"Ava, wake up!"

I should listen to that voice. I don't want to be hurt. They're nicer when I listen. I go limp, letting him pin me down.

If you behave, he'll make it good for you. I gasp for breath and try to forget. It's wrong to feel this way. I need to listen, though. I need to live.

Why? Why do I need to live?

"Ava, please!" My shoulders shake and it makes my head slam against the pillow. Fingers dig into my skin.

Why do I want to live? What was the reason?

"Ava, wake up!" I hear Kane cry out so loud it hurts my head. I wince and

slowly open my eyes. I feel dazed and my head hurts.

What have I done? He's upset with me. Kane's dark eyes stare down at me. His large shoulders cage me in. He's shirtless, and his breathing is heavy. I stay still and try to think. I don't know what happened.

"Are you alright?" He speaks softer than I expect. His eyes soften as his hand gently cups my face. I close my eyes, loving his touch, his affection. I just want him to hold me. I need him.

I lean forward and press my lips to his. *Please. Please touch me.* His lips are hard at first, since I caught him by surprise, but they quickly mold to mine. He leans into my kiss and I slowly lay my head back down. I reach my arms around his muscular body and pull him toward me. My blunt fingernails dig into his shoulders. I part my legs as his body comes closer to me. I need him.

He pulls away, breaking our kiss and leaving me wanting more. I don't know why I need his comforting touch. But I do. I need this pain to go away, this hurt in my chest. And Kane can do that for me. I need him.

"Please," I whisper. My chest heaves as his lustful eyes look down at me. He tries to back away, and tears threaten to burn my eyes. He doesn't want me. Why would he? I'm tainted. I've never been touched by a man before, other than raped. They took my innocence. Tears prick at the back of my eyes, and I have to close my eyes to stop them from falling. They took everything from me. But I could give my body to him. I want to. I want to feel what it's supposed to be like.

I risk his anger and plead again, "Please." I don't know how I'll be able to live if he denies me. I can't stand this pain. It feels like my chest is caving in on me. My throat closes, and I swallow the lump in my throat as he sits up and shakes his head.

"I won't take advantage of you." His denial chills my body. My arms cross and I turn to the side. I struggle to breathe.

What's wrong with me?

I'm ruined.

"Please, please," I whisper into the pillows. My eyes burn, but the tears don't

come. I need to feel something other than this. I'm ashamed and humiliated to beg like this and be denied. But I should've expected it. If he wanted me that way, he would've had me already.

A shadow covers my body as Kane moves to lie behind me. He pulls me to his chest, but I stiffen. He feels sorry for me. But that's all he feels. He pities me, but there's no attachment. I tense as he kisses my neck.

And like a fool, I beg again. "Please, Kane."

"I don't want to hurt you." His lips tickle my neck as he breathes his words.

I roll over and brace my hands on his chest as I lean against him. His dark eyes are a storm of sadness, but I can still see a spark of desire. I push myself into his chest and crush my lips against his.

Please don't deny me. I moan as he kisses me back with passion. Yes! He rolls me onto my back and hovers over me.

I break the kiss and reach lower, needing to feel him. His hand catches my wrist, stopping me. "Please, Kane. I need you." His gaze is haunted, but I see that same spark of desire growing stronger. "I need you to take their touch away."

As soon as the words leave my lips his hands grip my hips, pinning me down. His lips push against mine. My hands tangle in his hair as I deepen my kiss. His fingers tickle my skin as they slide up under my shirt. A shudder runs through my body as his fingers just barely graze the sides of my breasts. I break our embrace as he pulls my shirt over my head.

I open my eyes and take in the sight of him, and see him doing the same with me. His muscular body ripples as he leans forward and takes my nipple into his mouth. His hands roam my body and stop at my hips. He gently bites my nipple and pulls back before letting it go. My pussy heats and my back arches, loving his touch. He pushes the pajama bottoms down my hips and kisses my lower belly as he takes them off of me completely.

He slowly pushes his own pants down with his eyes focused on my body. His plump lips are parted. His breathing is heavy. And the only thing sparking in his dark eyes is lust. His cock springs free and my eyes are drawn to it as he strokes it once.

Fuck. He's big. Holy hell. My thoughts must be evident on my face, because I hear him chuckle as he moves forward. He crawls toward me on the bed and I part my legs for him. My pussy clamps in anticipation. But the feeling of nothing makes me roll my hips and moan with need.

As he hovers over me, the rough pad of his thumb gently strokes my throbbing clit. My eyes widen, and my lips part in a silent scream. Fuck yes! My head thrashes to the side as waves of building pleasure threaten to crash down on me. Fuck. I breathe out heavily. I'm so close already.

"Cum for me." He whispers his command as his deft fingers pinch around the hardened nub. And I obey.

His lips push against mine and trap my scream of ecstasy. My body heats and tingles. The pleasure is almost paralyzing.

He pulls back as he lines up the head of his dick at my hot entrance. "Good girl." My body cools as my pussy tries to clamp around the tiniest bit of his large erection. I can feel how smooth and velvety the skin of his dick is as he slides it up my folds and pushes it against my sensitive clit.

I push my hips forward. I want him in me. I need him.

My lips part as he pushes in, stretching my walls. Absolute pleasure mixes with a slightly painful feeling as his dick moves deeper inside of me, pushing against my cervix. I breathe in through my nose as my mouth hangs open. It feels so good. I want more. At the same time, I feel the need to get away.

A cold sweat breaks out along every inch of my skin as he pushes in even deeper. "Fuck," I moan into the hot air, as my head falls back. He pulls out slightly and my head whips forward, my eyes locked on his.

"More." I push the word out, needing to feel that again. He bites his lip and leans forward, settling his forearm next to my head. His chest brushes against my sensitive nipples, and I want to move from the heated sensation that's directly connected to my clit, but his hand grips my hip and pins me down.

His lips brush against mine in a passionate but quick kiss. He takes my bottom lip between his teeth and gives me what I want, rocking into my heat slowly and pushing the head of his dick deep into my pussy. Filling every inch. Every nerve ending sparks with need. My body heats and cools too

quickly.

“More,” I moan, tilting my head to the side. He takes my lips with his and does the same. Over and over he thrusts into me with a slow, torturous, steady pace. My release rises higher and higher. The building sensation is so intense. I nearly fear the crash of my imminent orgasm threatening to consume me.

“Harder,” I beg. “Faster.” The words escape my lips in a desperate murmur.

But he hears them.

And he gives me what I ask.

His hips thrust hard against mine and he buries himself to the hilt. My nails claw at the sheets as I scream my pleasure. Again and again. Faster and faster he thrusts into me. His hand pushes against my leg, opening me up to him even more.

Pushing his hard length deep inside of me, his lips barely touch mine as he says, “Cum for me.” His hand smacks hard against my clit, and my pussy spasms around his dick. Wave after wave of pleasure rocks through my body as he kneels back on his shins and grips my hips with both of his hands as he pumps in and out of me relentlessly.

Every inch of my skin is alive and tingling with infinite pleasure. He pounds into me, ripping through my orgasm. He pistons his hips all the way in and almost all the way out, over and over. My breasts bounce with each pounding fuck and my mouth opens with a silent scream.

I watch his muscles ripple with each thrust. The dim light shining through the windows leaves a contrast of shadows on his rigid, muscular chest. His dark eyes look down at me as he fucks me like he owns my body. The thought makes my pussy soak with arousal. He is the definition of power and lust. And I am his.

Fuck! Heat swirls deep in my belly. My body seems to ignite, and the tips of my toes and fingers go numb.

“Good girl.” He continues to pound into me. “Cum on my dick again.” His low baritone voice commands me as he mercilessly thrusts into me. I lose all

sense of feeling. And then everything crashes down on me. My body thrashes beneath him and he thrusts all of himself deep inside of me. Hot waves of cum fill me as my body tenses with the overwhelming sensation.

I struggle to breathe as my orgasm hits me with near violence. My fingers dig deep into the sheets and mattress, and my heels dig into his ass, holding him there. I'm loving the intense pleasure.

His strong arms wrap around my sensitive body as he pulls out of me. He lies on his side and pulls me close to him. My body shivers without my consent as he kisses my hair. He pulls the covers around me and then kisses my cheek. I look up into his eyes and breathe slowly. He closes his eyes and leans down, pressing his lips to mine.

My heart clenches in my chest. A different kind of pain I've never felt before rises to the surface as his thumb gently brushes against my jaw. I feel the tears coming, so I break away and bury my head into his chest.

Just as quick as the unfamiliar emotion came, it leaves me. And I'm left only with exhaustion. I tilt my head and kiss Kane's jaw and then his lips, keeping my eyes closed. I can't look into his eyes. Fear nearly cripples me. There was something there--a spark. It gives me hope. And I can't have that.

Reality threatens to bring me down, but I push it away and wrap my arms around Kane. Whatever this is, I want to keep it. I don't want to lose this.

But I know I will. I can't hold on to hope. I won't.

CHAPTER 13

KANE

I brush her hair away from her face. Ava's still asleep. She looks so sweet. So innocent. Guilt and regret make my chest hurt and my heart sink. I shouldn't have taken advantage of her. I'm holding her against her will. She's forced to stay with me.

And yet, she begged me for it.

It took everything in me to turn her down, every ounce of control I had. But I couldn't resist when she asked like that. I clench my jaw remembering her plea. "Take their touch away." The desire to kill every one of those fuckers rides me hard. I'm up against all odds, but there's no fucking way I'll ever let them touch her again.

She stirs in my arms and it brings me back to the moment. I held her all night, her back to my chest. I fucking love the feel of her soft skin against me. My fingers itch to trail along the dip of her waist. As my eyes travel her body I see her ribs and my desire falters.

She's still hurt, still suffering. I need to make this right for her.

The sound of my phone ringing on the dresser makes my eyes dart across the room. Ava stiffens in my arms, and it fucking kills me. She's scared. She's so used to waking up in fear that even after the night we shared, she still wakes up tense and full of apprehension. I quickly pull her body to mine and kiss her shoulder. My lips linger on her skin.

“Good morning, my good girl.” I know that little pet name makes her relax, and it does the trick once again. Her body molds to mine as the phone rings again. I look from the phone down to her and see her baby blues looking at me, and a soft, small smile is on her lips. I give her a quick kiss and leave her warmth to walk across the room to my phone.

It stops ringing just as I get there, and I grind my teeth when I see the name. Abram.

Fuck.

It’s not a good sign that he’s calling. It doesn’t have to be about Felipe, though. I fucking hope it’s not, anyway. I breathe in deep and hit “call back”. I put the phone to my ear and watch as Ava sits up in bed, covering herself with the blanket.

She’s so fucking beautiful.

“Kane,” Abram says flatly as he answers.

I don’t want to respond as he expects, but I should. He needs to think everything is just fine while I figure out what my next move is. I can’t let him onto anything. I don’t have a plan, and I don’t know who I can trust. I can’t fuck this up and let him in on anything, so I answer like he wants me to, “Boss. Sorry I missed the call. What do you need?”

Ava stills on the bed as she realizes who I’m talking to. I make eye contact with her and put a finger over my lips. I look to the door thinking maybe I should get out of here so she can’t hear what’s going on. She’s not going to like this conversation. But I want her to know everything. I want her to know what I’m telling Abram, and then I’ll let her know what’s going on once the call is over. I need to tell her she’s never going back to him. I’ll die before I let him take her from me.

“I’m not going to lie, Kane. I was worried for a minute. You’re always quick with your phone.” There’s a moment of silence. He’s waiting for me to answer and I don’t fucking like it. I feel like I’m being tested. Something’s up. Maybe he’s heard about Felipe.

“Sorry boss, it was across the room and I was a bit busy.”

“Is that so?” he answers, with a bit of humor in his voice, but that could be to throw me off. “Busy with my gift, I presume?” I fucking hate how he says that. She’s not an object to be given.

Pain radiates in my chest as I answer, “Yeah, I won’t lie. I’ve been enjoying this role.” I enjoyed watching Felipe meet his death, so it’s not a complete lie. He laughs on the other end. It’s a short, robust laugh that comes deep from his chest. Ava’s eyes fall. I fucking hate it. I walk closer to the bed and stand at the side next to her. She’s motionless and looking unsure of herself. I grip her chin gently and tilt her to look at me. “It’s okay,” I mouth to her. I lean down and plant a kiss on her plush lips.

“Good. I was worried I’d made a mistake bringing you on,” he says.

I smirk as I talk into the phone. “No mistake there, boss.”

“You know you don’t get to keep that one. But I’m willing to let you have whichever you want from each shipment. As long as you leave no permanent damage, of course.” His words make me sick to my stomach, but I push it down.

“Of course. That’s very generous of you.” I decide to suck up to him like the little bitch he wants me to be. “I appreciate that.”

“That’s good news. Very good news, Kane. But we need to get back to business.” He clears his throat and I straighten my back preparing for whatever’s about to come through on the other line. It hasn’t even been 12 hours since Felipe’s been killed, but I have a bad feeling that this is exactly what the call is about.

“Have you spoken with the Valettis?”

“I had a meeting with them yesterday, boss. I think you’ll be happy.” I take a deep breath, ready to rattle off the shipping times that would be best to send the larger crates. I have to pretend it’s for a different reason than sex trafficking. I can’t stomach the thought of what’s really going to be in those crates. “So there are--” I start to speak, but he cuts me off.

“I don’t need to know any of that just yet,” he says.

“Alright. Whenever you’re ready.”

“What I want to know is if Vince is fully on board with this?” I know I need to be smart about that answer. He saw Vince’s face. He knows Vince was less than happy about this shit.

“I’ll give it to you straight, boss. I think it’s hard for him to stomach this shit. But...” I pause so he gets the feeling I’m working on his side of things for this. “...I think there’s a way to make it a bit easier on him.”

“I’m listening,” he answers. I take a deep breath and look back at Ava, who’s wide-eyed on the bed, listening. I don’t want her to hear this. I’ll have to tell her this is all horse shit. I’m sure she’ll believe me, though. She has to know that everything I did yesterday was for her.

“I brought Ava along with me yesterday. I had to tone it down a bit for him, but I think he just doesn’t enjoy seeing it. We’ll just have to keep them out of sight, I think.”

“You brought her out in public?” he asks disbelievingly. His voice is raised, and Ava can hear his words. Her eyes widen with fear, but I’m quick to pet her back and calm her.

“I think you underestimate me, Abram.” It kills me to say the next words, but I have to. “She’s very well-behaved. Vince was impressed, but I could tell he was still uncomfortable, so keeping it on the quiet side would suit him better.”

“Was Felipe there yesterday?” he asks, with a hint of distrust in his voice. I know what Vince told him yesterday at the docks, that Felipe had just left, so I answer honestly.

“He was. He wasn’t happy about her new collar.”

Abram’s voice carries a hint of relief. “Yes, I can imagine. He’s rather fond of those.” He clears his throat. “You do realize that Ava is special? The others won’t be as trained as her. They’ll be newer, and not broken in.”

Fucking sick bastard. I have to bite back my disgust. “I figured that much.”

“We’ll keep them drugged though, so they’ll be easy to handle.” I want to ask him about Ava. About his plans for her, but he cuts me off.

“I haven’t heard from Felipe since he told me that he was going to the Valettis’ shipyard.” He states it simply, without a hint of emotion.

“I haven’t either boss, but if you’d like me to give him a call, I will.”

“No. I’m certain he’s dead, Kane.”

His words chill me to the core. “The Valettis?” I ask.

“I can’t imagine it would be anyone else. We’ll have a meeting tomorrow.”

“A meeting?” I have a real fucking bad feeling about that. “Is this staying between me and you, boss?” What I’m really asking is, is this an ambush?

“No. I need you to set it up. Let’s do it at the docks so I can have a good look around.”

“You really think they took him out, boss? That’s not at all a good sign.”

“I agree, Kane. But I’ve had better men killed for no reason. He’s replaceable.” He pauses and I think he’s finished, but then he adds, “And so are the Valettis.”

“I see.” I answer simply, unsure of what he’s looking from me.

“I’ll decide tomorrow. I’ll bring enough men to make sure that if I decide we’d rather go forward without them, it’ll be easy to handle right then and there.” I nod my head imagining the fucking bloodbath it would be. I can see it happening, and I don’t fucking want it to.

“So you think it will work, then?” he asks, and I’m completely thrown off by the question.

“Taking them out? Of course, boss, there aren’t many of them there at a time. Maybe six total yesterday.” I’m sure as fuck giving the Valettis a heads-up. I’m not letting this shit go down like that.

“No, no. Working with them. I’m not certain I’m ready to take them out just yet.”

“I do,” I answer quickly and confidently. “Also, I think everything will be ready soon. If you decide to do business with them, that is.”

“Even if I don’t, we’ll continue as planned.”

“How many do you have ready?” I ask.

“Nine right now, but we’re gathering the other three tomorrow.” No. I need to stop that shit. I can’t let that happen.

“Oh, boss.” I have to think fast. “The boxes may not be able to carry more than eight.” I’m met with silence.

“The other end can do 12. There’s no reason the Valettis shouldn’t be able to meet the same requirements.”

“We can’t do the large crate, boss. They’d only be able to fit the large crate one day a week. But that’s not going to work ‘cause of the guards that day.” That’s absolutely true. Or at least it’s what Vince told me.

“Ah, shit.” He sounds pissed. He starts cussing in Russian and I have no fucking clue what he’s saying beyond the basic profanity. Part of me is worried Vince did lie to me and that he’s in deep shit now with Abram because Abram knows better. Another part is freaking the fuck out that Abram can tell I’m trying to save those other girls. I just need a little time until I can figure out what I have to do to stop this shit. I can’t let it happen. I won’t.

“There’s no way, Kane?” he asks, after a moment of calming his shit down.

“We could split the shipments,” I offer. I need this to sound unappealing. “We could do eight on Monday, and then try for the other four the following Thursday.”

“Only twice a month.” I grit my teeth wishing I could lie and say yes. But I can’t. He’d know. I’m sure he already knows this answer.

“Technically there are four. But like I said, the one is the verification day. I wouldn’t risk that, boss.”

“What about the fourth?” he asks.

“It’s a longer trip, two stops before hitting Russia. It has more risks in getting caught, but also in losing some of the shipment.” Some of the shipment. By that I mean the women will die. Being trapped in a box, sleeping in your own

filth. Jesus, the others are only 10 hours. But even that thought makes me fucking sick.

“Losing?” He wants me to clarify. As if he doesn’t understand how horrific that would be.

“It’ll be days with no water,” I say simply.

“Hmm. And they’ll need another dose.” He seems to be weighing the risk in his head, and it pisses me off. I look down at Ava. Her eyes on the blanket. She looks hopeless. I fucking hate it. I wish he’d let me get off the phone so I can talk to her. I need her to know I’m not going to let this happen.

“Alright, Kane. We’ll go with your plan for now, but we’re going to have to shake things up and get more women sooner. The timetable has changed. I’ll have to dump one of the girls before Monday.”

Chills run down my skin and I speak without thinking. “Bring them.”

“What’s that?” he asks, with irritation in his voice. He doesn’t like that I made it a statement and not a request.

“I can take one with me. To practice.” I clench my fists and restrain the sickness threatening to climb up my throat. “And we should test the Valettis on how they’ll handle them. I think that will be a good gauge on whether or not this will really work with them.”

“Smart thinking, Kane. And to think I wasn’t sure you’d do well with this role.” I press my lips into a thin line. “I’m proud of you, Kane.”

“Thank you, boss. I want to make sure you know how seriously I’m taking this position.”

“I can tell. And Kane?” he asks.

“Yeah, boss?”

“Don’t fuck up this meet tomorrow.” His words come out hard.

“Of course not.” Anxiety shoots through me.

“If they aren’t on board with the shipment, we’ll simply end the relationship there. So make sure you’re ready for that.”

“Got it. I’ll be ready.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow, then. I’m looking forward to it.” I can practically see the wicked grin on his face.

“Me, too,” I answer, as I hear the click on the other end.

Tomorrow. It’s going down tomorrow.

CHAPTER 14

KANE

My fist bangs on the front door with a hard knock that echoes in my head. Anxiety and adrenaline are coursing through me. It was different on the phone. I was calm. I was calculated. Now I need to figure shit out. This setup is fucked. I have no one. My best bet is to trust the Valettis.

I need someone. I need backing. I can't go in there guns blazing and take out Petrov's entire crew by myself. That's a fucking death wish. I'm not stupid. I'm going to need help, but I have no one.

I kept thinking on the drive over, what if I'm reading Vince wrong? What if he's set with doing business and Felipe was a one-off? Like maybe he gets his kicks from randomly knocking off pricks. He could have the same feelings as Abram. That same nonchalant attitude that fuckers are gonna die in this business, so it doesn't matter.

I'm not sure how Vince is going to react. I'm not sure how much I should tell him, either. I guess I'm about to find out.

As I hear someone walking toward the door, I take a glance at Ava. Her shoulders are squared and her eyes are forward. I reach down and take her small hand in mine. She faces me with a small smile, but I can see she's worried. I lean down and give her a small kiss. I know the conversation this morning was upsetting for her. I told her everything, though. And I promised I'd get her out of this shit.

She's a smart girl though. There's no doubt in my mind she's questioning

whether I'll be able to make it happen or not.

I debated on whether or not I should bring her with me. But I want her to hear. I want her in on this. It's not good to have women involved. But she's a part of this, and she deserves to know.

Besides, this is just me and Vince. Maybe another man or two. If they try anything, if I think anything is going to happen to her, they're fucking dead. I can't take out 20 men on guard, but I can sure as fuck kill two or three pricks if I have to. I told her to just stay behind me if she's not feeling safe.

I'll protect her. As far as I'm concerned, she's mine.

The door swings open and a man I recognize from the initial meet at my hangar answers. He's a bit taller than Vince. Looks just like him though. If I had to guess I'd say he's Vince's brother, but I don't have to. He introduces himself right away.

He smirks as he says, "I'm Dom, Vince's brother and the bookie."

"Nice to finally be introduced to you, Dom." I give a tight smile back.

"Come on in." He opens the door wider and takes a look at Ava. She's wearing the collar I got her, and I watch the smile on his face falter as he sees it. I wasn't going to put it on her, but the thought of running into one of Petrov's men without something that displays what she is to them...well, that shit wouldn't end well.

"Ava, come on in." His eyes soften some as she smiles up at him.

"Thank you, Dom," she says in a soft, sweet voice. I place my hand on the small of her back and lead her in front of me. Dom's eyes harden and narrow as he watches me. I know he's wondering what the fuck is going on. Quite frankly I'm wondering, too. There's something between us. Given the situation, it wouldn't be right of me to say she's my girl. But that's exactly how I feel. She's mine.

We walk in relative silence through a large foyer and down a hall to an office. The first thing I do is count how many men are in the room as Dom shuts the door behind us.

All eyes are on me when I walk in. Dom's behind me. Vince is at the desk. I recognize Tommy to the right, leaning against the wall, and I assume the older man in the chair to my left is Mr. Dante Valetti, the former Don, and Dom and Vince's father. I give them each a nod in greeting.

"Mr. Valetti," I say, extending my hand to Dante.

His brows raise and he shakes my hand firmly. "Kane. It's nice to have you here. I'm sorry for your loss."

My chest tightens with pain. I respond with a small, "Thank you." I walk Ava over to the chair and settle her in the seat. They're the only two, but I don't mind standing.

"You want Ava to stay?" Dante asks. Before I respond, he addresses Ava directly. "No disrespect, Miss Ivanov. We usually try to keep women away from business matters." It gives me pride that they're talking to her, but she goes still at the question, and looks to me rather than answering.

"She's involved to an extent that I feel she deserves to know everything." I gently place my hand on her shoulder. I look down at her as I add, "But only if you want to, Ava." I should've asked. I feel like an asshole for assuming she'd want to know. Shit. I need to stop doing that.

She turns her eyes to Dante and answers, "I'd like to stay, if that's alright." She looks so small and vulnerable sitting beneath me.

"Let me grab another chair," Dom says, as he opens the door behind us.

"If that's what you want, that's fine with me," Vince says, exchanging a look with his father and then giving Ava a sad smile. "I'm sorry you're in this situation, Ava."

He looks at me and starts to speak, but the noise of the door opening and Dom carrying in another chair stops him. I'm quick to take it, but it makes me feel weak. Both hands are on the chair, and I'm in a room with four men who could kill me at any time. I quickly set it down to the right of Ava and take a seat. My heart beats heavy and fast in my chest.

I clear my throat a bit and take a deep breath. "Vince, I need to know where your head's at."

His eyes search mine as he places his elbows on the table and forms a steeple with his fingers. His chin rests on his hands and he deliberately looks at Ava's collar. My fists clench, but I give him a moment to fucking say whatever's on his fucking mind.

"I think I'd like to know where your head is first, Kane."

"Fair enough." I push out the words and lean forward in my seat. "I told you I won't be the go-between for you and Abram. I told you before I don't handle this sort of business."

"What is that you did for the Armenos?" he asks, interrupting my train of thought.

"I was in charge of..." I trail off, and look to my left at Ava before answering. I don't want her to know. I don't need her to know this shit. I don't want her to look down on me either, so I choose my words carefully. "I did the collecting mostly. Occasionally I had to help with assisting people with their memories." I fucked people up when they didn't pay, and when they didn't talk. That's the truth.

A corner of Vince's lips kicks up into an asymmetric smirk. His eyes dart to Ava and then back to me. "You sure you want her here for all of this?" he asks.

"No." I settle back in my seat and run a hand down my face. "But she said she wants to stay, so I kinda fucked myself over there, huh?"

The men in the room laugh but Ava looks at me nervously and sets her small hand down on my forearm. She lowers her voice and leans in to talk to me, "I don't have to."

I lean over the chair and give her a quick kiss. I know she likes it when I do that. "Stay right where you are. I want you to know what's going on."

"I'd like to know, too," Vince says, as I turn back to him and take Ava's hand in mine.

I give her hand a squeeze and get to the point. "Abram wants a meeting tomorrow."

“Tomorrow,” he says, but it’s more of a question.

Before I can tell him it’s a setup, Tommy speaks up. “Told you he’d fuck us over.”

“Becca’s gonna be pissed. She knows there’s no class tomorrow.” I hear Dom’s voice from behind me, and I have to turn around to look at him.

“So it’s a setup then, Kane? Abram doesn’t want to do business? Or is this about Felipe?” Ava grips onto my hand at the mention of Felipe.

My thumb rubs soothing circles on the back of her hand as I speak. “More than likely. If I had to guess, I’d say he’s leaning toward taking over.”

“How many men do you think will be there?”

“More than a dozen. He’s bringing the new women, too.” I have to push out the last part and readjust in my seat. “I told him to.”

“You like women bringing into this shit, don’t you?”

I force myself to stay calm. “I don’t.” Fuck. That came out sounding pissed off, and I didn’t mean it to. “He was going to collect more...” I pause, fucking hating talking about this shit. “But I told him we could only take eight and to bring the nine he already has there so...” I take a breath and try to keep my shit calm with what I’m about to say next. “So I could pick one to keep for when he takes Ava back.”

It’s quiet and awkward for a moment. All eyes are on me and they’re searching for answers to questions that are obvious. They aren’t going to budge. They aren’t speaking first. Fine. I’ll man the fuck up and lay out the plans for them. “I don’t intend on going through with Abram’s plan for tomorrow.”

“What was it that you’re planning, then?” Tommy asks. Vince’s eyes stay on me. What I say next is going to determine whether or not I live or die tomorrow.

“I’m planning on killing as many of Petrov’s men as I can.”

“That’s suicide,” Vince says calmly, with a brow raised.

“It’s that, or go through with what Petrov has planned. And I’d rather die.” I take a moment to let that sink in. A cold sweat breaks out along my skin. “It’d be easier if I had someone backing me.”

“Someone?” Vince asks, with a cocky smile.

Dom laughs from behind me and smacks my back as he walks forward to stand at his father’s side. “You coming too, Pops?”

“Of course.” The old man has grey hair and tough skin with wrinkles around his eyes. But he’s still toned muscle and there’s no doubt in my mind that he couldn’t take down a man as well as I could. He only stepped down a few months ago.

“So I can count on you, Vince?” I would feel more confident hearing him say the words.

“Petrov thinks he can make deals and then stab backs,” he says, as he stands up from behind the desk. “I know all about that rat and the shit they’ve pulled.” He walks around the desk and stands in front of me, leaning back against the front of the desk. “I knew this was coming. I just wasn’t sure whether or not I’d have to kill you, too.”

A smile grows on my face. “I’d appreciate it if you didn’t.” Vince’s smile widens and Tommy lets out a laugh.

“You have my word, Kane.” Vince extends his hand and I stand up to take it with my own in a firm shake.

“Can you shoot, Ava?” Dante asks to my left, taking my attention away from Vince.

“I can,” she answers confidently. I remember Felipe though, and how she held the gun with shaky hands. They’d shoot her first. They’d kill her before she got a shot off.

“I don’t want to bring her.” Even as the words leave my lips, I know I have to. I can’t react on my emotions. I have to be smart. I thought about removing her chip and giving her a head start. But according to her, they’d know. And judging by how fast Felipe was on her, having her go off with it in her wouldn’t be wise either. I have no fucking clue who else is tracking her.

“You need to. You’ll fuck it up if you don’t.” I grit my teeth and try to come to terms with this. I can’t risk putting her in danger though. When shit goes down, I’m going to be on Abram’s side of things. I’ll be an easy target. With me gone, I don’t know how Ava will make it through this.

“Promise me that she never goes back to them.” I look him straight in the eyes. I need to know he’ll take her if Abram takes me down before I can get her to safety.

“You have my word.” Vince puts a hand on my shoulder. “I’ll make sure she’s safe.”

CHAPTER 15

AVA

“*I*t’s gonna be alright, baby. I promise you.” I straighten my shirt and then look back into the mirror. It’s only been three days with Kane, but the change is so significant. I’m no longer in a raggedy and soiled dress with shackles around my wrists, and a metal collar digging into my neck.

I reach up and touch the small bandage peeking out from underneath the thin leather collar. The nasty cut it's covering has almost healed, but not quite. My fingers travel along my collarbone. I can still see the bones sticking out just beneath it, but not nearly as much as before. My skin looks more vibrant now that I’ve slept.

I’m not the person I was before this nightmare began, but I’m healing. Slowly. My eyes spot the silvery scar of *his* bite mark on my shoulder. Some things will never heal.

My eyes catch sight of Kane in the mirror, and all the anxiety rising in the pit of my stomach settles. He did this to me. But we’re getting ready to leave. I’ll either leave with him, or I’m going to die. I won’t let them take me back. Today is my chance. I won’t risk not taking it. My fingers rest on the butt of the gun under my shirt. You can’t even see it there because of the way the blouse hangs.

“Stop thinking about it. I’m sure you won’t even need it.” He has no idea. I know he’ll be angry with me. He doesn’t want me to do anything but hide behind him. I can’t tell him what I have planned. I nod my head and act like I’ll obey. But I have every intention of putting a bullet in Vadik’s head.

After I kill Vadik though, I may not be Kane's good girl anymore. The thought makes my heart clench with agony. He may be angry with me. Even worse, he may not want me anymore.

“Just one more time, Kane. Please.” I need this. I need to feel him once more. It may be the last time I ever feel his touch. I hope we live through this. But if we don't, I just want one more time with him.

He walks up behind me and wraps his arms around my waist. He pulls my body into his, and I can feel his erection digging into my back. I want to drop to my knees in front of him. I want to please him. I want him to know I can still be his good girl.

“I do want you again baby, but we have to go.” His full, plump lips leave an open-mouth kiss on my neck. I close my eyes, loving his warmth. And then it's gone. He takes my hand in his.

“We need to go.” I want to resist. I want to tell him no. I don't want to go. But this needs to happen. I need to end this nightmare one way or another.

I nod my head and swallow thickly.

“It's gonna be alright,” he whispers, and kisses my forehead. “Just stay behind me, stay close.”

I look him directly in the eyes and lie, even though it hurts me. “I will, Kane.” I stop myself before more words tumble out. Three words that seem so natural to say. My heart twists and aches. I'm not sure if it's because I didn't tell him the truth just now, or because I really do love him.



THE SOUND OF OUR SHOES AND THE BLOOD RUSHING IN MY EARS ARE ALL I HEAR AS I walk next to Kane on his right side, slightly behind him. A lump grows in my throat, but I do what I've done to survive since this nightmare began. I hide away. I bury myself deep down, and pretend it's not real. The pain goes away, and all the noise vanishes. My heart calms. This is all just pretend.

Kane grips my hands and I obediently respond as I know he'd like me to. I squeeze back. And then he releases me. My heart thumps painfully in my

chest as he opens the door to the large warehouse. It groans and reveals the location of what I imagine will be my death. I've resigned myself to that fate. I can only hope that *he* dies first.

Everyone is already inside. A natural division separates two groups of men. I don't count the numbers, but it seems relatively even. On the left are Petrov's men. I recognize most of their faces. Shame overwhelms me as memories flash before my eyes. Their sick, twisted smiles, their stale breath in my face. Their hands on me. And then that shame is replaced by rage. My fingers itch to touch the gun. But drawing attention to it would be useless.

It's relatively quiet, save for the soft laughter from Petrov's lips over something one of the men behind him said. There are a few other laughs that echo in the large storage room of the hall.

"Are all of them there?" Abram calls out from behind him to someone else entering the large space. The walls are made from drab cinder blocks, and the ceiling is at least two stories high. I don't look around more than that though, I keep my head forward and my eyes on the floor.

We walk closer, keeping between the two groups of men. I'm closer to the right side, where the Valettis are, and doing my best to stay close to Kane like he told me to.

"Yeah, all nine of them," someone calls out to my left. I can see Vince out of the corner of my eye. He's talking to someone I've seen before in a low voice, but his body is positioned toward the rest of the men.

"Good," a deep Russian voice says. I know it instantly. My eyes whip up to find Vadik, standing directly next to Abram. He always is. He likes to pretend Abram's the one making the moves. But I know better. I've seen the way Vadik orders him around when I'm chained to the floor, being as still as possible so they forget I exist.

This is my chance. I don't waste a second. The moment I see *him*, my hand is on the gun. I know Kane told me to stand behind him, but I can't. I have to do this. I have to free myself of him.

"Fuck!" I hear Vince call out to my right just as I grip the gun and point it at Abram. One shot. Bang! I don't waste any time I move the gun slightly as

Vadik tries to grab Abram to shield himself.

Bang! The second shot grazes Vadik's arm, and other shots and screams ring out. I hit the arm he had wrapped around Abram. Abram's limp body falls to the floor as two shots from someone else hit his chest.

Bang! Bullets whip past me, but I get off my shot and hit Abram in the chest as he aims his gun at me. Bang! A bullet skims past my thigh, slicing it. Maybe worse, but I don't look. I don't care. I'm prepared to die.

I run past Kane as he yells out for me to stay behind him. "No!" he screams, but his voice sounds distant. I'm faster than him, though. Both his hands are on his gun when he yells as I pass him, but he quickly reaches out a hand for me. He nearly grabs hold of my shirt to pull me back. But he misses. Bang! Bang! The bullets fly through the air as I get closer to my target.

I see everything in a blur. And then I only see him. He's gripping his arm on the ground and reaching for a gun nearly two feet away from him. Bang!

His body jolts and he screams out as his hand flies to his chest. Bang! A bullet flies through the center of his throat. Bang! A headshot, and he lies motionless on the ground.

I fire again, but there's no bang. Only a click. I watch as blood flows from the neat hole in his throat. It spills onto the concrete and pools around his neck. Again I pull the trigger. And again there's only a click. Again. Again. Tears sting at the back of my eyes.

I need to kill him. But I'm out of bullets. His dark eyes stare back at me unmoving, threatening me. Like they did that night that he took me. After they'd all had their turn. After he'd killed my father. When I thought he'd end my life, instead he took me. He took Viagra so he could make sure he got everything he wanted from me. He tortured me. He trained me to be nothing but a toy for him. He used me to broker deals. He made sure I felt like a whore. Like I was nothing but a slave to him. Like I owed him for not taking my life.

Those eyes stare back at me. I point the gun, but nothing happens. Click. Click. Click. I hear screaming and bullets flying around me. Men run past me in a blur. Click. Click.

I can't let him live. I drop to the ground. My knees slam hard into his chest as I smash the butt of the gun against his face. I do it as hard as I can. The gun stings my hand as the metal crunches bone. I raise my arm higher and slam it into his face again. And again. Hot blood splashes against my chest. I do it again, and instead of crunching bone I'm met with the sick sounds of soft flesh.

I look down at what I've done. I'm breathing heavily. My hand is covered in blood, still gripping the gun. My face and chest are splattered with blood. I look for his eyes in the mess beneath me. I gasp and hardly take in the sight before strong arms grip me from behind and pull me into him.

"Don't look," a voice whispers in my ear. *Kane*. The gun falls from my hand and I turn in his grasp.

"Kane." I hold onto him. My fingers dig into his back. Kane. He'll save me. He'll fix this. Shock and horror grip my heart, stilling it and freezing my blood. "I'm sorry." I pull away from him and look him in the eyes. My bottom lip trembles as I apologize again. "I'm so sorry."

"Shhh. It's alright. It's alright."

"Am I still your good girl?" I ask. He looks at me with a pained expression. I'm still good. I can be his good girl. It was only once. I'm still good. I can still be good. I need him to forgive me. I need to be his good girl. If I'm not, then I'm nothing. Images of Vadik's eyes and his yellow teeth flash before my eyes. I hear his voice taunting me in my head. "You're nothing but mine." I bury my head in Kane's chest and shake my head, willing the images to go away.

No. I'm not his. I'm not his. I'm Kane's. I'm Kane's good girl. I'm his good girl. I'm still good. "Please," I whisper into his hard chest. Tears sting at the back of my eyes, threatening to fall, but not coming. "Am I still your good girl?" My voice cracks, and my throat dries with a harsh scratch on each word.

"Shh. You're still my good girl." His hand comes down on my back and runs soothing strokes over my tense body.

Everything's alright. I lean into his embrace and breathe in deep. I take

comfort in his warmth. I'm Kane's now. The thought soothes a sick part of me. A darkness within me wanes, but it's still there.

CHAPTER 16

KANE

“*Y*ou’re alright, baby.” I kiss her hair and look around the room. I can’t fucking believe she’s the one who fired first. She put herself in danger. She put the rest of us in danger. To be fair though, we all knew. Every fucking one of us was wearing Kevlar. They weren’t. Cocky fuckers.

Dead bodies are still lying on the ground. Two have been removed. Their blood left streaks across the floor as they were dragged out of the room. Valettis. It fucking hurts my chest. Two lost. But that’s two too many. The cleanup crew sprays something on the ground. They’re almost done cleaning up the evidence they don’t want found.

One’s a young boy, maybe in his early 20s. He wasn’t here when this shit started. He’s not one of the group that flew in here when bullets started flying. Vince was smart. The numbers were stacked in his favor, but they were hidden.

I need to take her out of here. I walk us to the back quickly and spot an open door with soft voices coming from beyond the jamb. At this distance I can only make out incoherent murmurs. I know it’s the women, though. The shipment. I walk to the open doorway and take a look inside.

Nine women are lying on their sides in the middle of the room. They’re strung out on something so fucked, they couldn’t even sit in the chairs. They’re normal women. Wearing I’m guessing whatever clothes they were taken in. The entire room smells like piss. Most have scratches or bruises

somewhere on their bodies.

One woman is leaning against the wall. Her eyes are vacant and her body is swaying. Two men are beside her. One is holding her up, while the other is kneeling on the floor. The one kneeling digs through a small black bag. When he looks up at her, I recognize him as Anthony. He stands up, opens her eyes, and flashes a small light into them.

Fuck. That poor woman. All of them.

I force myself to look away. They're safe now. But they wouldn't have been. I wish I could've done something more. I wish I'd done something sooner, before any of this shit happened. Maybe this sick feeling is why my uncle turned to the feds. Regret consumes me. I know I'd be dead if I had acted earlier, though. And then where would those women be? I hold Ava tighter and keep walking.

Vince is straight ahead. I have to ask to make sure. "You call them yet?"

"Not yet." We're just waiting on Anthony to give the okay to leave them so we're gone when the LEOs get here.

"They need to remain in the room." His eyes dart to Ava. "Just so they'll be easily found." My grip on her tightens.

"I understand." I say it simply, but my tone is hard.

"We're all set, boss. She's gonna make it," Anthony announces from behind me. He walks past me to Vince. As he stands at his boss's side, he also looks at Ava and then at me.

I won't fucking do it. She needs me. I won't leave her with the Valettis. And they aren't taking me away from her either. I struggle to come up with an excuse. I know she's not okay. The way she looked after she fucking mutilated Vadik. I know she's not alright. But I can help her. I need to be there for her. I know they won't let her go when she knows as much as she does. She's a mafia princess. She should be respected and she knows the rules to keep her mouth shut. But I don't know if they'll live up to the unspoken rules. I'm not letting her go. Not with them. Not with anyone.

Vince stares at me as he answers Anthony. "Alright, time to call 'em." He

finally looks at Anthony and says, “Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

The two of them walk past me and Vince glances over his shoulder. “You’ll hear from me later tonight.”

I nod my head and stay right there, holding onto my girl. The thought warms my chest. That’s exactly who she is. My girl.

I hear the men yell as Vince turns the corner and tells them to get the fuck out. I take that as my cue and walk her out of the back. I quicken my steps to get to my car as fast as fucking possible and get her in the passenger side. The other cars are in front of me, but the Valettis aren't there yet. I look to my right and there’s no one there. As I walk around the car to my side I look to my right, still no one.

And then I open my door and slide in, my heart beating wildly in my chest. I feel like a fucking thief. I need to get her out of here. I put the car in reverse and look in the rear view mirror.

Vince looks at my car, and I swear he makes eye contact with me. But then he turns around and walks to a black Range Rover in the back.

I know he saw us.

I don’t know what he’s going to do about it.

But I don’t fucking care. She’s mine.

CHAPTER 17

AVA

“*I*’m sorry, baby,” Kane says, as the blade slips out and blood runs down my arm. I wince at the sight, and seethe through my teeth. I turn away as he uses the tweezers to get the tracker out before wrapping a towel around my arm. It doesn’t hurt right now because of the drugs I’m on, but I know it’s going to catch up with me later. Fear grips me, but then I remember. They’re all dead. No one is going to know it’s out of me. Even if they do, they don’t have the backing to come for me. All of them are fucked with the data Tony found and sent to the police.

I’m happy and grateful that Kane told me. I want to believe I have no reason to be scared anymore, and knowing that helps. But I’m still terrified. We have no one. It’s just the two of us hiding out in an abandoned safe house. If the Valettis are planning on screwing us over, we’re fucked.

I look back at my arm as the towel grazes my hand. He takes the towel away and I’m surprised to find only a small and neat cut where the tracker used to be. He’s quick to put a small bandage over it. His hand travels the length of my arm and stops at my wrist where a small barcode is tattooed. Instinctively, I itch to touch the scar on my shoulder. These are two marks that will forever stay with me, and they’ll never let me forget.

He stands with the bloodied tracker wrapped in the towel and walks to the front door. He grabs the hammer that’s sitting on the stairway banister before going outside. I close my eyes and listen as he smashes the tracker to nothing.

I wait in the silence for him to tell me what to do. There’s no plan; I’m not

certain he'll keep me. If he doesn't want me, I'll have nowhere to go. I grew up in the States, before we moved back to Russia, but I have no family here. I have no family at all anymore.

My chest feels hollow and rings with pain. If Kane doesn't want me, I have no one. I have nothing. I hear Vadik's vicious words in my head as he sneers, "You are nothing."

I shake my head and close my eyes tightly, denying it. I can't be nothing. I cross my arms and grab my shoulders, needing to be held. I don't want to be nothing.

"Ava, baby, what's wrong?" I open my eyes and see Kane. His arms open and wrap around me, bringing me into his chest.

I'm not nothing. I'm *his*.

I hold onto him and bury my head in his chest. I need to hear him say it. I need that, but I don't dare ask. I'm too afraid to hear the answer.

"It's all going to be alright. I'm so sorry you had to go through that. I'm sorry I even brought you along." My eyes open at his words, but he can't see that. I'm not sorry I was there. I'm fucking happy I killed them. But he wouldn't be happy with that.

What kind of person am I that I revel in the fact that *I'm* the one who killed *him*?

"Ava, I'm going to ask you this once. Do you want to stay with me?" I pull away from him, eager to answer. But before I can, he puts a finger over my lips to shush me.

"Just hear me out first." I nod my head as his finger leaves my lips. I don't care what he has to say though. My answer is already decided.

"I have enough money to take us wherever we need to go. I was smart about shit, and we can get by for a long fucking time. But I don't have anything else lined up. I don't know where we'll go." His eyes look past me, and his face turns stern. "Before we leave, I have to have a chat with Vince, too." He swallows hard before looking back at me.

He cups my chin in his hand, and tilts my head to face him. He leans in with his nose brushing mine, and plants a small kiss on my lips. “But this is real for me. What we shared. I’ve never felt that before, and I want it, Ava. More than anything else.”

His words melt my heart. A warmth floods through me. Security, desire, and something else. Something I’m afraid to admit.

“I want it too, Kane. Please.” I look up at him through my thick lashes and see a sexy-as-fuck grin growing on his face.

“I’m all yours then. I’ll take care of us, baby.”

“Yes, Kane,” I say diligently. He backs away slightly, and I have to force my expression to remain as he likes it.

“You okay, Ava?” he asks, with a slightly worried tone in his voice.

No, I’m not. I know I’m not okay. But he won’t want this fucked-up version of me.

I press my lips together to keep the automatic response of “Yes, Kane” from coming through. He doesn’t like that. Or he at least doesn’t want it right now. So I nod my head instead and offer him a sweet smile.

He smirks at me and leans in for another kiss before saying, “Good girl.”

It soothes the broken part of me. That’s all I need right now. I just need to keep being his good girl.

CHAPTER 18

KANE

*M*y nerves are getting the best of me. I like Vince. I like the other fuckers sitting in the room--Tommy, Anthony, and Dom. But I know he's pissed at me. I directly disobeyed him again. He's fucking pissed. I just got here. And Dom brought me back here without saying a word. We're in the same office as before. I'm sure they aren't planning on getting rid of me here, though. Mostly because there's a nice carpet beneath my feet and not a plastic tarp.

"What are you doing, Kane?" Vince finally asks. His fists are clenched and laying on the table. Pretty sure this isn't going to come to blows, but if it does, I'm gonna be pissed. He's the Don, and he has every right to beat the shit out of me. I'm not going to be able to fight back. That'd be a serious infraction. But I won't fucking like it. Technically I could fight back, but I don't want to be an enemy of the Valettis. That, and there are three other men in the room that could hold me down. Maybe it's a compliment that so many men are present.

"I have feelings for her, Vince. She needs me. I'm not going to lose her." I push the words out. I don't know if he'll understand, but he's going to have to get used to it.

She's mine. And it's staying that way.

"And how are you going to take care of her? You've got a target on your back, and no family behind you." He narrows his eyes and leans forward before adding, "What are you going to do about that?"

Is this fucker serious? Is he really questioning my ability to take care of Ava? That motherfucker. I bite my tongue and try real fucking hard not to turn my hands into white-knuckled fists. But I fail miserably.

I watch as his eyes travel to my fists and he smirks. “You don’t like that, do you?”

“No, I don’t fucking like what you’re implying.”

“The fact that she’d be better off without you.” He leans back and shrugs as he says, “All of our women would be better off without us. We know it. They know it.” He points a finger at me. “You know it, too.”

A tightening pain spreads through my chest. I know she would be better off without me. But I’m a fucking bastard, and she said yes. That’s all I need to keep her. I stare back at him with the air between us crackling.

“I’m not letting her go,” I bite out, making sure he knows we’re going to have problems if he tries to take her from me.

“That’s fine.” His eyebrows raise. “But that’s not what I asked. What are you going to do, Kane? Where are you going to go?”

I try to relax some. I take a moment to think of an answer. I could go anywhere, and do anything. But I’m fucking good at being in the mob. I’m damn good at what I do. That, and Vince is right; there’s a huge fucking target on my back. Now I’ve taken out two families that were big names. It’s not good to be too well-known.

People tend to disappear when they reach a certain level of visibility. They’re a threat, they’re also a competitor. I don’t need every fucking guy out there thinking he can prove something by getting the best of me. And that’s a very real possibility at this point.

“I’m asking you what your plan is, because I need someone I can trust, and I’m not sure if that person is you.” The last line comes out hard. His anger is coming back in full force.

“What can I do for you?” For the first time in a long time, hope starts to creep up on me. If I can get into Vince’s good graces, things may turn out to be just fine. People don’t fuck with the Valettis. It’d be a dream come true to get in

tight with them. Maybe I could become a made man if I can prove my loyalty to them. My blood spikes with doubt. Ava. I doubt Vince would make me a made man for constantly going rogue.

But I can fucking try.

“Tommy’s being watched. He’s out on bail.”

My eyes dart to Tommy in the corner of the room. I thought the stale air and tension in the room were solely because of me. I hadn’t picked up on the different emotions. Vince and Anthony are pissed. Dom looks anxious as fuck. But Tommy, he just looks defeated.

“What do they have on you?” I ask him.

“My prints at the scene, on one of the women’s shoes...” He pauses and looks at the ceiling before continuing. “And one of them said she recognized me.” Fuck. That’s so fucking bad. But they were all drugged up, so I can’t imagine it’s going to stick.

“So the women, and all of Petrov’s dead men.” His voice is flat.

“They’re pinning all that on you?” Holy fuck! Tommy is screwed.

“The evidence is minimal, which is why he’s out.” Vince cuts in. “Well that, and we have the judge in our pocket.” Even with a judge on their side, those charges aren’t going to be easy to beat.

“They want him to talk more than anything. Those fuckers will pin anything they can on us to fuck us over.” Vince is getting worked up again, so I stop him and get back to the conversation at hand.

“So what do you need, boss?” I ask him, leaning forward in my chair.

He gives me a small, crooked smile. “I’m gonna need for you to take over Tommy’s route in the meantime. I believe you would be a good fit.”

Pride fills my chest and I nod slowly, although I’m eager to take this opportunity.

“I’m happy to help however I can.”

“Good,” Vince says, smacking his hand on the desk.

“I won’t disappoint you guys,” I say, looking at each of them.

“I know you won’t.” Vince smirks. “That’s why I asked you.”

I smile back at him and get ready to take down all the information I’m gonna need from Tommy. But before I can open my mouth Vince adds, “You’re not off the hook just yet, though. We’re watching your girl.”

“Watching?”

“Just to make sure you’re the kind of man I think you are. We don’t tolerate certain things like other families do.”

“I’ve never smacked a woman around before, if that’s what you’re getting at.”

He looks at me for a minute before taking a deep breath and finally answering, “I just wanna make sure you’re the man I think you are.”

I give him a stern nod. I hear the clause in there that’s not said aloud. If I’m not that man, he’s going to have to take me out. I hear it loud and fucking clear. But I’m not worried. Ava and I are solid.

I’m not worried about a damn thing.

CHAPTER 19

AVA

This is going to hurt, but not nearly as much as the pain I felt when they held me down and tattooed the barcode on.

“You ready, baby?” Kane asks, as he gently rubs my back. My ass is firmly planted on what looks like an exam bed from a doctor’s office. I take a deep breath and look down at the quote I picked out. It’s in a beautiful scroll with my sister’s initials added to the end made to look like a small heart and it reads *forever in my heart*. The way the artist drew it, it should cover the barcode so it’s not even noticeable.

At least I hope it won’t be.

I bite my lip and then nod. “I’m ready.” I let out a deep breath and hold out my wrist.

The tattoo artist, Aaron, is a big man made of lean muscle. Tattoos cover his entire neck and, from what I can see, both of his arms. I wouldn’t be surprised if his chest and back were covered, too. But there’s an air of professionalism about him. As he wipes down my wrist I can tell there are questions in his eyes, but he doesn’t ask.

I’m grateful for that. I just want to forget. I want to forget all of it.

As Aaron turns on the machine and it comes to life with a loud hum, Kane takes my other hand in his and squeezes.

“Talk to me.” The words tumble out of my mouth. I just want something to

distract me so I can ignore the pain. The needle touches my skin and I wince, but stay still. “Please,” I add.

“Did you decide on one for your shoulder?” he asks. It chills me to the bone.

I don’t want one there, but he does. He thinks it would be good to cover it up. But it’s already fading. I don’t want to draw any more attention to it. I just shake my head. There’s no point in trying to cover every scar.

I have too many scars. They’ll never be gone.

He can sense I’m upset, and I know he doesn’t like it. I need to stop it. He leans down and kisses my temple.

I have to be his good girl. He needs me to be happy. I’m so far from happy, though.

“I’ll think of something,” I finally answer, and put a smile on my face.

“Whatever you decide, baby, I’m sure it’ll be beautiful.” He grabs my chin between his fingers and tilts my chin up to him. He plants a soft kiss on my lips and it soothes me.

He’s happy with me. I want him to be happy.



“YOU SURE YOU DON’T WANT A SHOWER?” KANE ASKS, AS I CRAWL INTO BED. There are a few boxes in the center of the bedroom. They’re mostly just packed with my clothes that Kane bought me. We’re leaving tomorrow to get a place he picked out downtown. It’s really homey, and I kinda love it. I know he was waiting for a reaction from me, and I’m happy I found one. I was worried I wouldn’t like any of the five places he was considering. But I instantly fell in love with the fourth one.

I shake my head no and yawn before I can get the word out. He chuckles as he climbs into bed with me. My eyelids feel so heavy.

“You too tired for me, baby?” he asks in a low voice as his arms wrap around my waist. I giggle in his arms and nestle into his hold. Before I can answer, I yawn again.

“In the morning, you’re all mine,” he says, kissing my neck and laying me down at his side. My eyes widen with anxiety. I wasn't turning him down just now.

Everything feels normal between us, like a new couple exploring each other. Most of the time, when he’s with me, I forget. Sometimes it comes back, though. Hatred and sadness. I glance down at the bandage around my wrist. Sometimes I remember the worst things, and the nightmare feels so real.

But not when I’m with Kane. He wards off all of my demons. I feel so safe with Kane, but I’m still terrified of him being upset with me. A dark voice whispers deep inside, *it’s because you’re broken*.

“We can--” I start to suggest, but he cuts me off.

“You’re tired, baby. You’re gonna pass out on me.” He yawns and puts one arm behind his head.

It has been a really long day. After we picked out the apartment we had to buy everything to fill it. Tomorrow’s going to be a long ass day, too. But at least the morning will be off to a good start. I cover my mouth as another yawn takes control and shows itself without my consent.

“Get some sleep, baby. Tomorrow night I gotta run out and do some things, but we’ll still celebrate and break in the new apartment together.” He rocks his dick into me and forces a small giggle from me. I’m excited to move in with him. My heart swells in my chest. It feels like a huge step forward for us. I lower my eyes and rest my head against the pillow as his arm wraps around me.

Confusion stirs in me as I start to think about us as a couple. He was my captor, and then my savior. And I’ve been nothing but a victim. At least to him. *Broken*, the dark voice whispers. I close my eyes and force the voice away. I’m not broken. I’m his. I can’t be broken.



SMASH! THE GUN FALLS DOWN AND CRASHES AGAINST HIS SKULL. SMASH! I HIT THE BUTT of the gun against his teeth, cracking them. They break off and the jagged edges scrape and cut the skin of my hand.

I pull my hand back and examine my wound. Small drops of blood fall from the cuts and I follow them as they land on Vadik's broken and bloodied face.

As my eyes land on his, they open and stare back at me.

I scream out, "Help me!" Terror strikes my heart. My blood runs cold. I scream out for Kane. He'll save me. But my voice is broken. I can't speak his name. My hand grips my throat as I try again. Kane! I want to yell, but there's only silence.

"He'll never love you. You're just playing a part. What do you think he'll do to you when he finds out who you really are?" Vadik sneers, with a wicked smile.

I shake my head in denial. "Kane loves me," I whisper, feeling as though the words are true.

"If he loved you, he'd tell you that. He doesn't even know you and your sick thoughts."

I shake my head and back away as he rises from the ground, following me. Getting closer to me. I scoot back on my ass, shoving myself against the wall. Vadik cages me in, his face just an inch from mine.

"He'd never love a whore like you. A worthless little bitch who lied to him. He wouldn't be able to stand the sight of you. You're nothing!" he screams at me, and pulls his hand back to strike me. My hands fly up to cover my face.

Kane's hovering over me as a scream is torn from my throat. He has a grip on both of my wrists as they fly through the air.

"It's okay. Ava, I'm here. It's okay." He keeps repeating himself as my breathing comes in frantic, desperate gasps, and my heart threatens to leave my chest. I try to steady myself, but I can't. It was so real. It was too real.

"Baby, what's wrong? What's wrong?" His eyes search my face with worry. I can't make him worry. I can't lose him.

I shake my head and place a hand over my beating heart. I remember the dream. I remember Vadik's words. I won't let that happen. I won't let Kane know how ruined I am.

“Just a bad dream,” I whisper. His shoulders stay tense and his mouth parts slightly. He doesn’t believe me. “Will you hold me?” I ask him. He likes it when I ask him to comfort me. And I like it, too. I need it. I feel so safe in his arms.

“Of course, baby.” He kisses my lips and pulls me closer to him. “I’ve got you, baby.”

I close my eyes, but I’m very much awake. He doesn’t have me. He hardly even knows me. And if he did, I’d be nothing to him.

CHAPTER 20

AVA

“*Y*ou look beautiful, baby,” Kane says, and then kisses the crook of my neck. “But I think you need a little something extra.” I turn in his arms, and stand on my tiptoes to give him a peck on the lips. He grins at me as he reaches in his back pocket.

My heart sputters in my chest. Could it possibly be a ring? No. I shove down that hope even though it’s clawing its way up my chest. These last two weeks have been a dream come true. We have a cute little apartment I’m making into a home. I just got accepted into the university. All the little things on my wishlist are getting checked off.

And it’s all because of Kane. He’s my everything, and I feel like he loves me. I feel like we’re meant to be together. The doubt I had seems to dim each day. Most of the time I think we’re perfectly happy, perfectly fit for one another. I almost feel whole with him.

But a ring?

He’d be committing his life to me. *To a liar*. The dark voice that’s gone quiet for so long speaks up, and depression shatters the fantasy in my head.

“These.” He opens the box to reveal a pair of drop dangle sapphire earrings. “I think they’d really bring out your eyes.” My heart slows, and my world seems to stop. They’re beautiful. He gently pries one from the box and I quickly hold out my hand, waiting with bated breath.

I put them on one at a time and then face myself in the mirror. The silver boatneck dress I'm wearing clings to my curves. It sparkles in the mirror. My skin looks radiant. I've certainly gained weight. My hand rests on my lower tummy. Maybe a little too much weight. I clear my throat as Kane's eyes catch mine in the mirror.

Déjà vu hits me. I remember what I looked like that day. My eyes drift to my neck, where the collar used to be. Where Kane's collar was that day. I look to the small jewelry box on top of the dresser. He thinks I threw it away, but I didn't. I don't want to. It reminds me of that day and who I really am. I feel the blood drain from my face as the day plays fast-forward before my eyes.

"Do you like them?"

"I love them." I force out a peppy voice and try to show him my sincerest gratitude.

I feel like a fraud. I don't know what I've been doing all these days playing house with Kane. That's what it feels like now that I'm reminded who I am. It's fake. It's all pretend.

I close my eyes and try to will away the feelings, but instead I see a flash of his face. My eyes open quickly and I instantly catch Kane's questioning expression in the mirror.

"Are you alright, baby?"

"Yeah." I force a casual smile onto my face and then look back in the mirror. My fingers touch the sapphires and I watch as they sparkle in the mirror. They're beautiful.

But I don't deserve them.



WHITE TABLECLOTHS COVER EVERY TABLE. SOME HAVE PALE PINK OVERLAYS, WHILE others have a soft lavender. There are at least 20 tables in the hall, although most are empty now. Most guests are on the dance floor, leaving the tables empty. My ass has remained firmly in this chair ever since Kane sat me down. I don't know anyone here. He at least knows a handful of the men.

It's Vince's uncle's godson's wedding. So, no one I fucking know. The only people I do recognize are the few from a time in my life I'm doing my best to forget. I loved how Kane put his arm around me during dinner. He made me feel more welcomed, and more comfortable. But I still couldn't manage to contribute to the conversation.

Becca and Dom have a newborn, a son. I love babies, but I couldn't speak up. Elle is pregnant now and she looks so beautiful, but I didn't even compliment her.

This wedding is just like every other wedding. Only every wedding I've ever gone to in the past was for family.

I remember the last wedding I went to with my family. I went with my mother, father, and sister. We were the first table. Naturally. My father always got the first and best of everything. Alec Ivanov, the Pakhan of the Russian mafia, the Bratva. My father was an immigrant in the States when he met my mother. He was there on family business, but elected to stay behind when she got pregnant with me.

When I was eight, my grandfather died. We were only supposed to go there for the funeral, but that's when things changed. My father went on the warpath. He was out for blood. And he got it. He quickly became known as a threat, but instead of fighting him, they made him the Pakhan, the boss.

It didn't take long for things to spiral out of control. I don't know whether my mother and sister didn't see, didn't care, or just didn't want to admit it was true. The men my father associated with in his line of business were strange, and touched my sister and I more than they should have. I know my parents saw, but they didn't do anything to stop it. It's like my father paraded us around, saying we were untouchables, but he never did anything to actually enforce that. I never felt safe with any of the men he'd bring around, but he'd leave us alone with them and practically dare them to disobey him.

He taunted them.

He started coming home late and drugged up or drunk most nights. One night I watched as he beat my mother until her head hit the wall so hard she went unconscious. I watched as he kicked her, thinking she was faking it. Once, then again. He looked genuinely sorry he'd hurt her when he realized she

wasn't faking. He got down on his knees and held her. And then he passed out.

I'd never wanted to hurt someone so much in my life. He was there, helpless. But I didn't. Not then.

I never saw him try to hit her again, but I was ready. He did leave me alone with his men again, well he tried, anyway. I was only 16. And Marie, only 14. But I knew better, and I wasn't going to stand for it again.

"You're a sick fuck!" I yelled at him as he turned his back on me. Our own father. Marie grabbed my wrist to pull me back, but I wasn't going to let him do this to us. Leaving us with men who could hurt me, men who wanted to hurt me. Tears streamed down my cheeks, but they were from anger. I remember the faces of the men in the room.

"Excuse me?" he sneered, stomping toward me. "What the fuck did you just say to me?" His face was so red, and his eyes the darkest they'd ever been. His fists were clenched at his sides.

But I stood my ground.

"You know what you're doing." I looked to my right at the three men watching me with nervous glances. "How could you do this to us?"

His eyebrows raised, and a sick smile formed on his face. It was then that I realized I no longer truly knew him. He was a monster.

"Maybe I should just leave you here." He nodded to the men in the room. "I'm sure they could teach you what this mouth is for." He gripped my face and shook my head. My eyes burned, and my heart hurt.

When he let me go, the force made me stumble back. "You wouldn't," I said, looking up at him with daggers in my eyes. "It wouldn't be as much fun to you." I sneered at the ground, not bothering to look my father, the bastard he was, in the eyes. I grabbed my sister's hand and dragged her out of the room with me. It was silent. I'd never been so scared in my life as we hid in my room. Waiting for him to come home.

I was too ashamed to tell my mother.

When he finally walked through the doors and my mother called us to dinner, it was as though nothing had happened.

As though we were the same family, not one of us broken.

I couldn't swallow a single bite; I kept waiting. But nothing ever happened, and he never brought either of us around his businesses again.

That was my family.

And now they're all dead.

I take a sip of water and try to calm myself. I need to stop with all these negative memories. I'm doing a miserable job of fitting in. The men took off a bit ago to let the women chat. I'm finding it hard to click with them, though. They seem like wonderful people; women I'd love to be friends with. But I'm holding myself back.

At least Kane doesn't seem to notice. And everyone seems to think I'm just shy.

"Oh, she's so shy," they all say. And, "You're so sweet." I've heard it over and over today. I'm not sure why. I feel awkward and like I'm failing Kane. He just keeps kissing my cheek and running his hand up and down my back.

But now he's gone.

Elle and Becca have been talking about kids and I know they don't mean to, but I feel a little excluded. Even though every time they ask me a question, I give them a one-word answer. Maybe it's better this way.

My heart sinks a little. I don't want it to be this way. I take a deep breath and notice a pause in their conversation, so I cut in.

"Where did you two meet your husbands?" I keep my tone peppy and give them a bright smile. I lean forward to show them they have my full attention.

Becca answers first. "Work." She looks to her right as if she's searching Dom out in the crowd, and adjusts the napkin on her lap. But after a second she turns back to me with a small smile. "Sort of through my ex-husband."

"Oh! I didn't know you were divorced."

“He passed away.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I respond quickly, and with a lowered voice. Dead. Death follows me everywhere.

“Where did you two meet?” Elle asks.

I blink once, then twice at them. “I was sort of lost...” I start to say, and Becca raises her eyebrows, almost comically. “In the States, I mean. I’m from here originally, but we moved to Russia when I was young. I bumped into Kane and he helped me find my footing here.” I make up a bullshit answer.

“Oh! So that’s where that hint of an accent comes from!” Elle says.

“Accent?” Becca looks at Elle like she just said something truly perverted.

“I think I may have a tiny accent on some words. But I was older when we moved,” I answer.

Elle starts to ask the obvious question. And I can practically see the wheels turning in her head as her mouth slams shut. I wonder how much she knows. How quickly she’ll be able to put two and two together.

“I have to say, you two are an adorable couple. I’m so happy we finally got a chance to meet you,” Becca says, and Elle nods in agreement.

I feel a slight smile pull at my lips and say thank you, but my chest hurts.

How did they meet? At a bar and through work. Like normal people.

“I have to pee. Again,” Elle says, holding her swollen belly and it’s funny, but I don’t laugh.

“Do you have to go, too?” Becca asks.

I do. But I’d rather not right now.

“No, you two go ahead. I’ll wait right here for you.” I smile back at them.

“Are you sure?” Becca asks.

“Of course, I’ll keep an eye out for the dessert tray for us.” I force out a happy tone. But I’m feeling more insecure than ever.

“You’re so sweet,” Elle answers, and turns to her right as someone calls out her name. She leans closer to me with a smile and says, “We’ll be right back to talk more.” She squeals at the end and it forces a smile from me.

But it’s forced nonetheless.

Everyone keeps calling me a sweet girl. Kane thinks I’m a good girl, but I’m not. None of them know me. Not the real me.

I’m not like these women. They’re strong, and obviously in love with their men. But they’re also normal. They aren’t ruined and broken beyond repair. My eyes fall, and I reach for the tall glass of champagne in front of me and put it to my lips. I taste the smallest bit on my tongue, but nausea keeps me from taking more into my mouth.

And they may already know who I am. What I’ve been through. They could be talking about it in hushed whispers in the bathroom right now.

Everyone at the wedding may know. They’ve been sweet to my face, but behind my back, what are they saying?

I’m sick of who I am. I’m sick of hiding it. I’ll never be okay. I’ll never heal. My eyes search the room and I find Kane by the bar. Talking and laughing. It’s genuine, not forced like me.

He deserves so much more.

Shame and guilt consume me.

He’s done so much for me; how can I treat him like this? All I do is lie to him and pretend to be someone I’m not. I can’t keep doing this. I set the glass down and lift the white linen napkin off my lap. As I place it on the table, I see the knife.

I casually slip the knife into my clutch and stand up.

No one will notice me leaving.

My heart clenches at the thought of Kane finding out. But it’ll be better this way. He deserves so much more than me. I’m so fucking selfish. I’ll keep lying to keep him. It’s wrong. I’m ruined and broken.

I'm not his good girl.

CHAPTER 21

KANE

Where the hell is Ava going? I watch as a sliver of her dress vanishes behind the door. It closes slowly and I give it a moment before opening it as quietly as possible so she doesn't hear me sneaking up on her.

I can't imagine what she's up to. She's not from around here, so I don't think she'd be doing anything but taking a look around. Still, it's not wise. She should know that. You don't go snooping around on mafia territory. It's just not smart. I hear her heels clicking down the hall as I walk slowly to the corner. And then the noise is gone, replaced by the patter of her feet smacking against the tiled floor.

Maybe her feet are hurting her and she just needs some fresh air? My forehead wrinkles in confusion. She has to know I'd give them a little rubdown for her. I clench my jaw as I turn the corner. Something twists in my gut. This is off. Something's just not right.

Ava's my good girl. She never leaves to go anywhere without telling me. I clench my fists as I hear the large doors to the back entrance of the hall open with a soft creak. As my pace picks up, so does my heartbeat.

Adrenaline races through my blood. I catch the door just before it closes shut and open it as silently as I can. I peek out and see her walking into the edge of a line of trees to the left. I clench and unclench my hands. I want to pretend she's going to be happy to see me when I get to her, but I'm not fucking stupid. That's not going to happen.

Ava wouldn't have gone off by herself like this if everything was okay.

I just need to find out what the fuck is going on.

I take a look to my left and then look to my right. No one's out here. The night's dark except for the light from the full moon. The air is crisp and feels cool against my skin. I can faintly hear her steps and the crunching of leaves and branches under her feet just beneath the sounds of the night. The crickets are loud as fuck.

I walk quickly and decide I don't give a shit if she hears me as I enter the woods. I'm not gonna tiptoe through the trees to find out what my baby's doing. As a branch cracks beneath my heavy steps, I catch a glimpse of Ava.

I see her silver dress sparkle with the barest hint of moonlight. I see her raise her wrist. Then I see a bright light. A reflection, just above her wrist. I don't stop as my forehead creases in confusion. It doesn't register as I speed up my pace to get to her.

Not until her eyes catch sight of me, which is the same moment that I snatch her wrist and yank it away. Her eyes widen and fill with fear. Her other arm lowers to her side and something drops to the ground with a loud thud. Her face pales and her eyes look at the ground.

My breath catches in my throat as I pull her body closer to me. She trembles in my embrace.

No. The reality hits me slowly.

No. This isn't real. It can't be.

"Ava?" She's not looking at me. Her shoulders rise and fall as she takes in a ragged breath. "Baby, what are you doing?" Even as I ask the question though, I know. There's a serrated knife on the ground by her feet. My heart twists in my chest with agony.

No. I close my eyes and brace myself against the tree next to her. My head feels light and dizzy. She was going to slit her wrist.

"Tell me this isn't what it looks like," I say with my eyes closed. I'm answered with silence. My chest hollows and my heart refuses to beat. My

lungs refuse to fill.

“Why?” I ask, as I open my eyes and see her looking back at me with regret. “Why would you do--?” My voice cracks and my throat goes dry. I can’t finish it. The thought is just too fucked up. Why would she do that to herself?

She shakes her head and opens her mouth, but no words come out. I grip her shoulders in my hands and rest my forehead against hers.

This isn’t real. I keep my eyes closed, waiting for something. For anything to happen that wakes me from this horrific shit.

I love her. I would give her anything.

I thought she was happy.

I thought she loved me, too.

“I’m sorry.” Her breath hitches and her arms wrap around me.

Her touch is all I need. I wrap my arms around her and pull her close to me. I kiss her hair, her forehead. I cup her jaw in my hand and tilt her head so I can push my lips against hers. I need to feel her. I need to know she’s still with me.

At first there’s passion, but then she pulls back.

No. No. I can’t let her. She needs me.

Don’t pull away from me, Ava.

Her lips leave mine as her body moves away, and I’m greeted by the chill of the night.

“I’m sorry, Kane,” she says as she wraps her arms around her shoulders. I quickly rip off my jacket and wrap it around her slender frame. At first she resists, but she caves. She always caves to me.

“This is my fault, but I’ll fix this, Ava. I can make it better. Whatever it is.” I grip onto her hips under my jacket that’s draped over her shoulders. I pull her toward me and whisper, “I can fix this.” I can, and I will. Whatever happened, whatever triggered this...I’ll make it better.

Her eyes turn sad and I see the answer on her face, before she starts shaking her head.

“I’m too broken. No one can fix me.”

“Just tell me what’s wrong. What happened?”

“Nothing. I’m just not normal anymore; I’ll never be normal again.” I don’t understand. Where is my Ava? This isn’t her.

“Fuck, normal? Who fucking cares about normal?” I try to blow it off, like there’s nothing to this. But she’s not okay. I can help her though.

“I’m not okay, Kane. I’m happy I killed them!” she yells out, and I find myself covering her mouth and holding her close to me. You never fucking know who’s listening to this shit. This is a public place, and the fucking cops know it’s a family wedding.

“Shh. Don’t say that shit, Ava,” I whisper in her ear, and she starts fighting my hold on her. I fucking hate it. I hate her fighting me. She never has before. Not once. She struggles in my arms, and it fucking destroys me.

I let her go to try to calm her down. I’m not helping this situation. And I fucking need to figure it out fast.

“I’m not the woman you think I am, Kane,” she finally says in a calmer voice than I expected. It’s a voice with resolve. I shake my head as an uneasy feeling settles in my gut.

She tried to kill herself to get away from me.

“I thought you wanted to be with me,” I say. I know she did. I gave her a chance to go. She said this was real for her, too.

“You’ll never love me.” She whispers her words.

I shake my head and hold onto her hips, forcing her closer to me. “I love you, Ava.” I search her eyes for a reaction, but there’s nothing. “Is that what you need to hear, baby? I love you so fucking much. I’m so damn proud to have you as my girl. I’ll make you my wife.” Tears prick at my eyes. I almost bought a ring to go with those earrings. The only thing holding me back was I wasn’t sure what design she would have liked. I’m so fucking ready to have it

all with her.

But I can see it in her face that she's leaving me.

Her mind is already made up.

"I can't be with you. If you love me, you'll let me go." My heart sinks in my chest as I watch tears stream down her face. "I can't be with anyone right now." She heaves in a breath and wipes her eyes, smearing her mascara. Her tear-stained cheeks and wide, glassy eyes only make her more beautiful. Everything in me pushes me to comfort her. I know she needs me. If only she'd let me help her.

I take a step forward to pull her into my arms and calm her down. She's just worked up over something. This is all a mistake.

But she steps back.

She pulls out of my arms.

I stare at her with disbelief as she wipes away her tears and bends down to pick up her clutch.

"I'm sorry, Kane," she whispers, and then sobs into her hands.

She's leaving me.

She doesn't love me. It doesn't stop me from pulling her into my arms and rocking her. I try my best to soothe her. This time she lets me, but I know as soon as I let go, she's not going to be mine anymore.

CHAPTER 22

KANE

*I*t's fucking silent in the car. Vince is next to me and he doesn't like what I'm asking him to do. He's either going to help me, or I'm doing it on my own.

"What do you mean, 'for her'?" he asks with what seems like disbelief. I haven't told anyone. Last night I made her stay with me. No fucking way was I going to let her go in the state she was in. I took off with her and didn't leave her alone till just now. No one else knows and I want to keep it that way, but I know it's going to get out.

"I mean, I need you to set her up with a place and a job."

"You have a place." He looks at me dumbfounded.

"I mean for her. Without me." It fucking kills me to say the words. My heart hardens and my eyes narrow. I speak clearly and look him dead in the eyes. "I need eyes on her, Vince. She needs space, but that's all she's getting."

"She's leaving you?" he asks, and I want to knock him the fuck out. She *thinks* she's leaving me. And I'll let her think that until she's feeling better.

Doubt creeps in on me. I'm the one who made her kill Felipe. I brought her to that massacre. Even worse. My stomach churns with sickness. I took advantage of her. I never should've touched her when she was so vulnerable.

I'd take it all back if I could. I fucking wish I could.

I don't answer his question. I refuse to believe she's really leaving me. "I need cameras in there, Vince."

"Are you out of your fucking mind?" Vince asks, with his anger coming right through. I know I need to tell him, but I don't fucking want to. I don't want him to think less of her. She just needs time to heal. I thought she was, though. What kind of asshole am I that I didn't know?

I'll do everything I can to make it right. Starting with her getting her freedom back. Freedom away from me. I fucking pray she comes back to me. She just needs a little time.

"She's not alright, Vince." I run my hand through my hair and look up at our apartment. Fuck. She loves that apartment. I told her I'd go, and she could keep it. My heart feels like it's breaking in two. She said she couldn't stay there though, not with all the memories of the two of us together. She wants to erase me. She wants to forget it all. Including me and what we had together.

I push my bitch emotions down and give my full attention to Vince. "She's not alright, she just needs some time to heal. She tried to hurt herself. I can't let her go without knowing she's okay."

"What happened that set her off?" he asks, and I wish I had something with weight to tell him.

"Nothing." I shake my head and I fucking hate the answer. "She said she'd just occasionally remember things and it hurt her. She said she wants to deal with it, and that I can't be a part of it." My bitch emotions come back as I remember her telling me I deserve better. Better than her? No fucking way. She's it for me.

I'm a lucky bastard to have her. I'm not letting her go. I'd be a dumb fuck to do that. I'd be reckless to let her have space without watching her, too. I'm worried she's going to hurt herself. I can't let that happen.

"So you want eyes in the apartment?" he asks.

"Yeah," I say, as I take another look up to our apartment. She's sleeping now. My poor girl cried all night in my arms. I kept begging her for another chance or to think of another way that we could still stay together. It just made her

cry harder.

The sick feeling in my stomach is the same one I had when I took out everyone I ever knew as family. It's not a feeling of revenge, it's a feeling of being utterly alone.

I remember thinking, it'll be alright, when Vino set me up. I was wrong. It was a mistake. Vino was my best friend. We grew up together. We were so close, we were practically brothers. But he didn't tell me to run, didn't give me a heads-up. He's the one who told me that my father and I were needed for the drop. I had this twisting hollowness in the pit of my gut that it was wrong. That everything was wrong, and it was going to end badly. But I ignored it. I couldn't imagine Vino would set me up.

But he did.

And everything changed for the worse that day.

He was the first one I killed. I went straight to his house. He was there with his girl. He tried to play it off for her, like we needed bro time, but he knew what was going to happen before he even saw the gun I had pointed at him in my jacket.

I couldn't look her in the face as she left. He didn't even kiss her goodbye. I know he loved her, so maybe he thought it was better that way. If the last time she saw him he was a dick, maybe it'd be easier for her to get over him.

I kept waiting for him to reach for a gun, to plead for his life, or to at least deny everything. But when he shut the door and turned to me, he just shook his head and said he was sorry.

It fucking sucked pulling the trigger on him. The others, not so much. They didn't see it coming. They didn't even know I was still alive. It didn't feel like much of anything for them. But for Vino, it felt like the end.

And that's how it feels right now for us. But I won't let it be the end.

I can fix this. I can give her what she needs to get better.

"I know she needs this. She's got to have a little time to deal with what she's been through."

“She needs more than just a new place to live, Kane.” Vince tilts his head and cocks his brow. I know that, really I do. With all the shit she’s been through-- it’s a miracle she made it out as well as she did. I should’ve known something was off. I fucking hate myself for not realizing how hurt she was.

“I know that. That’s why I want you to get her a job. She needs a normal routine.” I pause before adding, “I got her the psychiatrist too. Anthony told me to call Mae.” I had to get someone who knows what’s what and is trusted. She’s the familia shrink according to Anthony. I think it’s the only thing that will help and she was really receptive to it. I already scheduled an appointment for today. I told her I’d take her, but she didn’t want that. She wants to go by herself.

“What if,” Vince pauses, “What if when she’s better, she doesn’t wanna stay?”

I know what he’s really asking is: if once she’s better and she doesn’t want me, how am I going to react. What am I going to do once she comes to her senses and realizes she’s the one who deserves better?

“I don’t want to think about that, Vince,” I tell him simply.

“It’s a possibility, Kane. I like you and all. And I like her, so I’m going to do what I can to help. But when she’s doing better, if she wants out, I’m out.”

I nod my head and look back up at our place.

I fucking hope she still wants me after this.

I know I’ll still want her.

CHAPTER 23

AVA

“*M*y eyes are killing me.” I push the palms of my hands against my burning eyes. Fuck. The tears finally came back, with a vengeance.

“We can take a break if you need.” I hear Dr. Mae pull another tissue out of the box and I roll my eyes. I need to woman up and stop crying. I know it doesn’t do anything to help.

I reach for the tissue and try to calm my ass down.

“Let’s switch gears,” she says, as she picks up her pen to scribble something in the tiny pad on her lap.

In my head I call her the shrink, even though Doctor Amelia Mae doesn’t like to be called that. It doesn’t matter what I call her, she’s a doctor for people with mental issues. For the crazies. For me.

I feel comfortable in her office. She has a no shoe policy. It makes me feel more relaxed. I flex my toes into the plush carpet beneath my feet. My nose scrunches as I wonder how many other people do that. I pull up my legs to sit cross-legged on the leather couch. It’s a pretty dove grey and has a modern feel. Everything in the office looks modern and clean. And open. It has a very airy vibe. It makes me feel comfortable enough to talk at least. And I’m doing my best to do just that.

I fucking snapped. Out of nowhere. Well, that’s not true. I had triggers, and I did nothing about them. But I snapped, and I didn’t come to until Kane’s

arms were around me.

If he hadn't come to me...If he hadn't seen me leave...

I don't like to think of it. But I'm fairly certain I would've done it. I had the blade to my wrist. I remember thinking, just one quick move and it's all over. But then I thought, I should just impale myself through the chest. It would be quicker.

Thank God that Kane grabbed me just then. He saved me. Again.

Dr. Mae pushes the thin, metal frame of her glasses higher up on her nose, quickly reading through her notes before looking up at me. "It's been a week of big changes. How are you feeling?"

It's been weeks of big changes, but I don't correct her. That'd just be bitchy of me. This week seems just like the last one. Empty and boring.

"These meds are much better." I start off with a positive. And it's true. Whatever she has me on now is a shit-ton better than the first cocktail. It's been two weeks since I left Kane to try and deal with my shit. I'm blaming the fucking meds on how god damned depressed I was the entire first week. I didn't do a thing but sob uncontrollably into my pillow.

Every time I'd cry out his name, Kane would come running through the door within 15 minutes. He has to have my place bugged. I should be offended or angry, but I'm not. Maybe that makes me more sick than I thought I was. But I feel safe knowing he's watching over me. My chest hurts, and I have to take a deep breath to calm myself.

I'd ask Kane to just hold me, and he would. No questions asked. It happened nearly every night for the first few nights. But on the fifth day without him, I cried myself to sleep alone. Waking up without him hurt so fucking much. But I need to take care of myself.

I need to do this on my own. I can't rely on him.

"So no more negative thoughts?" the doctor asks.

"Of suicide, you mean?" I just want to be sure I know what she's asking.

"Yes, or any thoughts of self-harm. Your nightmares increased on the other

meds, but you didn't say anything about any desire to hurt yourself."

I nod my head as she takes off her glasses and folds them, holding them in her hands. "Right. Not since the wedding night. And the night terrors are gone now that I'm off the other meds."

"That's great to hear." She puts the glasses back on and looks back down at the pad in her lap. "Now, how are you feeling on this prescription?"

"Normal. Just like before."

"But before you were having occasional lapses? Have you had any this week?" she asks.

I shake my head. "None yet. I usually would have had a reminder or two by now." That's what I'm calling them, *reminders*.

"And how would you have reacted to those reminders in the past?"

"I would've thought I was a horrible person; thought I was undeserving. A lot of self-doubt." My heart twists in my chest.

I didn't deserve that. I wasn't okay though. I don't think I'm okay now, either. "I don't feel like that now, but..." I trail off, twisting the tissue in my hands and start picking at the ends. I look out of the bright office window and wonder how I should word this.

"I'm afraid." I swallow the lump growing in my throat. "I'm afraid that something is going to remind me about everything, and I'm going to snap again."

"That's what the meds are for."

"So I'll have to be on antidepressants for the rest of my life?"

"We could try to wean you off of them if you'd like." I'm surprised how casually she responds.

"Is that dangerous?" I ask.

"Not if you're honest with yourself and with me. You had triggers that day, but you did nothing about them. You're aware now of what could happen."

“I am. And I won’t let that happen again.” I won’t. I don’t want to die. I didn’t live through all of that to end my own life.

“I’m very proud of you, Ava. Not many people are able to get a good look at themselves the way that you have.”

“Thank you,” I respond, although I feel awkward. I’m not proud. I’m ashamed.

“How’s your scar?” she asks, as her eyes dart to my shoulder. It’s a warm day outside, so my skin is exposed.

“One more treatment left to go, but I can’t even see it.” The surgeon said there was a small amount of scar tissue still, but I can’t see a damn thing. It makes me smile. I’m happy I never got the tattoo. It would have been a constant reminder. This is so much better.

“That’s wonderful.” She jots something down before looking back up at me. “And your weight? Is that back to normal now?”

“I’m still finding it difficult to eat.” It’s been hard for me to gain weight.

She purses her lips and writes some more. I hate it when she does that. Usually I know what she’s writing. But her pen keeps going and I find myself trying to read the fucking novel she’s writing.

“You’re looking well though, Ava. Are you feeling better as a whole?”

“I am.” I started jogging again. I used to fucking hate it. My sister used to make me go with her. It’s nice though. I can see why she liked it. I don’t know why she dragged my ass out along with her though. I don’t want company when I’m running. I just like the music, the feeling of being free. The burn of my muscles.

It wears my ass out though.

“Good. Let’s move on. How about work? How has it been integrating with your coworkers?”

I fucking hate my coworkers. I need to find something other than working as a clerk at the hardware store. I can’t wait for classes to start up.

I take a deep breath and think about Mindy. She's the only one I freaking talk to because of our shifts. She's a little firecracker, and I like her. But she's also a ho. She's currently sleeping with Jeremy, who's the store manager. And also the boyfriend of Tammy who works in the stockroom and orders supplies.

"It's just like any other retail job," I finally answer. I'm pretty sure that's not true. But I don't want this to become a bitch session.

Kane got me a job at a restaurant, but I turned it down. I was going to withdraw from the university too, before classes even started; he convinced me not to, though. I'm grateful for that. I'm really looking forward to it.

I pushed the chance at going back to school away at first, because Kane was paying for it. But one of Vince's men, Tony I think, tracked down my father's money and wired it to me. I half wondered if it's really my father's, but I stopped putting effort into thinking about it.

I got the money a few days ago and I want to quit this shit job, but I feel like I need to be a part of the real world again. I really fucking hate that petty drama though.

Kane told me once that I could get a job at the restaurant whenever I wanted. He also said I could move back in with him and not have to work, or do whatever the fuck I wanted.

It's so tempting, but I keep pushing him away.

I thought I needed to be apart from him. But I miss him so damn much.

I haven't cried for him in over a week. I haven't called him. I haven't even seen him in over a week. Sometimes when I'm walking to a nearby café on my lunch break, I swear I feel his eyes on me. But when I turn around, no one's there. It breaks my fucking heart every time.

"What are you thinking now?" Dr. Mae asks, and it pulls me from my thoughts.

I don't want to admit it, but I tell the truth. That's the only way I'll get better.

"About Kane." I swallow. "I miss him."

She nods her head and scribbles something in her notebook. “Any more late night calls?”

“No. I haven’t seen him in over a week now.” She cocks a brow as she writes more in that damn book.

“I see. And have you thought about seeing him?” she asks as though she thinks it would be alright.

The word falls out of my mouth easily. “Yes.” I’ve thought of him holding me. Almost every night I try to remember our nights together so I can focus on a bit of happiness. The sweet moments of passion. I know he loves me. I think he loves me.

“Is it wrong that I care for him so much?” I ask her.

“You’ve asked me that before.” She places her glasses onto the table and reaches for her cup of coffee. “I think it’s reasonable to idolize him. I think it’s natural that you developed feelings for him. The question is, why do you think it’s so wrong?”

“I started having feelings for him before I was capable of leaving on my own.”

She nods her head. “And after?”

“After what?” I ask.

“After you left him? The feelings are still there, yes?”

“Yes.” My hand flies to my heart as an ache radiates through my chest. Every moment I remember I left him, it hurts. It hurts so fucking much. I know I hurt him. He saved me, and I fucking killed him by leaving him.

“What would you do if you could see him right now?”

Fuck him. I would hold him, I would kiss him, I would beg him to fuck me. I purse my lips and the good doctor smirks at me. Am I that obvious?

“Do you still think he deserves better?” she asks. I don’t know the answer. I don’t know if I’ll ever be completely whole again. I may forever be haunted. And he deserves better than that. He’s a good man.

She leans forward and looks me in the eyes. “Or maybe a better question to ask is, do you think *you* deserve happiness?”

CHAPTER 24

KANE

“*H*ow’s she doing?” I hear Anthony ask. I turn on my barstool to look at him. He’s a lean fucker compared to me, not real bulky, but I’ve learned over the past few weeks that he’s not someone you wanna fuck with. If you’re doing shit you aren’t supposed to be doing, having Anthony knocking on your door at night is a bad fucking omen.

But I like him. When he’s not working, he’s sitting down and having a beer. He’s pretty chill. Everyone’s still on edge about Tommy though. As I think his name, he walks through the doors of the bar with Vince. We watch as they come up to our right and sit on Anthony’s side.

The bar goes quiet as they take a seat. Everyone’s waiting for something to happen with this case. But it’s gonna take time. There’s only so much postponing and bribing will get him.

“She’s alright.” I answer Anthony as Tommy orders a beer. It’s on the bar before he even finishes, along with Vince’s Jack.

“Ava?” Vince calls out, from the far end of our row. It’s a curved bar so I’ve got a good view of him.

“Yeah.” I don’t volunteer more info. I don’t want to talk about it. I watch my phone every time there’s an alert that she’s home. I know her appointments and work schedules, too. I feel like a fucking creep at this point. In the beginning I was worried about her. We all were. But the better she is, the less she seems to be thinking about me.

I keep waiting to hear her call out for me. I prayed that I'd have a reason to help her. But for over a week, it's been nothing.

"I don't like that manager fucker either. He likes to get around," Vince says from across the bar. They think it's funny. I lost my shit the other night and they keep holding it over my head.

I grit my teeth. If that bastard makes another pass at Ava, I'm gonna knock his fucking teeth out. She's such a good girl though, she doesn't even realize it.

The guys laugh when they see my reaction. But there's no humor in it for me. I think it's time I came to grips with reality.

She doesn't want me. Why would she?

"I never should've touched her," I bite out, and grab the neck of my beer. I take a swig and then another.

"I don't think it's like that, Kane," Vince says. Tommy and Anthony nod their heads.

"I should've waited." I put the bottle down feeling like a fucking failure. Like an asshole. She wasn't okay, and I was so wrapped up in her that I didn't even see it. I took advantage of her. I don't deserve her.

That's why I'm giving her the space she needs. She genuinely needs me to be gone to get through this. Fuck. It fucking kills me that seeing my face, feeling my hands on her, or hearing my voice would remind her of that hell. I took her pain away, or at least I thought I did. I wonder if I just made it worse. I fell for her too soon. I loved her when she couldn't possibly love me. Not in a healthy way at least.

Every time I start to think she's mine and I need to go get her, I have to remind myself that it's too much like what they did to her. I need to wait until she's better. And then she'll come back to me. We'll work through this together. I'm not giving up though. I know she felt something for me. I just have to wait until it's the right time. I need some sort of sign.

"Stop pouting like a little bitch," Tommy groans out. "Jesus, I'm the one getting 50 to life."

I glare at him. I'm not a Valetti. I shouldn't even be in this bar. But I'm gonna beat the fucking piss out of him if he keeps it up.

"Just go get her, Kane," Tommy says.

"Her shrink says it's alright, right?" Anthony asks. Shame washes over me, along with a little guilt. I may have bugged Ava's purse. And I may have deliberately listened to her first few sessions. But I've been better about giving her space. I was just worried since I hadn't seen her.

But she was fine. She just didn't want me.

"The doc isn't why she's not seeing me." I roll the empty bottle between my palms and nod when the bartender asks if I want another.

"You want her?" Vince asks.

I stare at him dead in the eyes. "Fuck yeah, I want her."

"Go get her."

"What if I'm the reason for that shit?" That's what it all boils down to, really. If I'm the one triggering all her pain, how can I expect her to stay with me?

"What if you're not?" he asks back. "What if you let her go, and you never find out?"

"Look at you," Anthony says, elbowing Tommy as they snicker at Vince. "We've got a fucking romantic over here."

"Shut the fuck up!" Vince spits back with a grin. "I'm just saying, I think she'd make a great addition to the family. Mostly 'cause my wife likes her."

"What do you mean 'addition'?" I question him.

"You're not a made man yet, Kane. It's gonna take time to put in your dues." He points his finger at me and raises his voice. "But you sure as fuck are a Valetti." I hear a few guys let out a cheer and one asshole claps. Poor fucker, everyone looks at him, but he just picks up his beer and smiles.

"Thanks, Vince." I push out the words. It means a lot to be a member of the Valettis and have a family around me again. But it's all worth nothing if Ava won't be a part of it with me.

“She will,” Anthony says, as if he read my mind. “Just go get her.”

He says it like it’s that easy. In the past it was. If I wanted something, I just went and got it.

But this is different. If she says no, then nothing else matters.

CHAPTER 25

AVA

“*I*’ll see you in a month, unless you need me sooner,” Dr. Mae says, as I walk to the door. I give her a tight smile and nod. I still don’t know how I feel about it. Over the past month our meetings have been fewer and fewer. Now it’ll be a month before I see her again. Unless I have a relapse. I haven’t though, since switching meds. Nothing other than normal emotional reactions, as the doctor says.

I feel insecure, but I suppose it’s normal. There aren’t any guarantees in life. My eyes fall to the floor as I shut the door behind me. Like Kane. I haven’t gathered up the courage to call him. I haven’t spoken a word to him in weeks. When I did talk to him before, it was just sobs and pleas to hold me or leave me.

I can’t imagine what his reaction would be if I called him now. If I said I was better and asked him to take me back.

He said he loved me. I feel an unbearable pain in my heart as a thought occurs to me.

I never said it back. I never told him how I felt.

As I walk down the stairs to leave the office building, I pass the clinic. I purse my lips remembering what Dr. Mae said about the nausea. I may have a stubborn bug.

Whatever it is, I need this shit taken care of. I want to eat. I’m hungry all the

fucking time now. I pull the doors open and feel relief wash over me. Not a soul in the waiting room. Good, I can get in and I can get out.

I walk straight to the counter and see a young woman with blonde hair pulled into a sleek ponytail and coral painted nails tapping on the keys of her laptop. After a short moment, she looks up at me with a bright smile and asks, “Can I help you?”

“Hi there, I think I have the flu or something, and I just wanted a checkup.”

“Absolutely, I just need you to fill out these forms first, please.” She chomps on a piece of gum in her mouth and hands me a clipboard with a pen clamped at the top. I forgot about this shit. I just want to walk back there and get a prescription. Instead I give her a small smile and walk back to the waiting area to take a seat. I scroll through the lines and fill out the bare minimum.

I stare at the emergency contacts section for a long time. I want to put Kane down; I have no one else.

I want to call him, but I’m scared. I don’t know what I’d do if he’s moved on. I take in a shaky breath and calm my emotions.

I fucking love him. I can’t deny it anymore. Whether it’s right or wrong, I don’t know.

But I do love him. I just need to gather up the courage to tell him. I pick up my phone and click it on and then off. Not now. Right now I need to get some meds to get rid of this fucking bug.

I fill out five fucking pages of the same thing and wait an ungodly amount of time before I’m called back. At least the doctor is there in the hall waiting for me.

“Miss Ivanov. Nice to meet you.” He ushers me through the door to an exam room and then says, “Have a seat.”

I hop up onto the exam table with crinkly paper on top. It still feels unsanitary to me, though.

“So what brings you in today, Ava?” The doctor is an old man. He has to be in his 60s, if not older. The lines around his eyes make him seem

approachable and kind. He has the palest blue eyes; they remind me of my father. My heart swells with cheerful memories and then the happiness dims.

I push the thoughts away and return to the present. “I think I have a bug. I’ve been having a difficult time holding food down for a month or so now.”

“I see. Any other symptoms with your nausea? Sore throat? Indigestion?”

I shake my head no. He takes a quick look down at my tummy and asks, “Is there a chance that you could be pregnant?”

His question steals the life from me. Everything stills and my breath halts in my chest. Those fuckers gave me so many shots, the assholes who drugged me, tattooed me and chipped me, but I know they said one was birth control. I know they did. They weren’t talking to me, but it would make sense.

“Would you like to take a test?” he asks, snapping me out of the painful memory.

“Please,” I answer without thinking. He reaches over to a cupboard above a small sink and grabs a small plastic cup. He’s a short man so he has to stretch to reach. I hesitantly take it and exit the room absentmindedly.

Why the fuck didn’t this cross my mind before? Mid-walk I’m struck with horror.

“Pills!” I yell in the hallway, like a fucking lunatic. The doctor exits the exam room and stares at me with his eyebrows raised. I dig in my purse and pull out the prescription bottle. I shove them into his hands like they’re poison.

He stares at the bottle for the longest fucking time. He rotates it and takes his time reading every last fucking word.

My heart won’t beat until I hear him tell me something. I need to know if I hurt my baby. If my own fucking problems hurt my child before he was even born.

Finally, the doctor gives me a smile and hands the bottle back as he reassures me. “You’ll be fine. And so will the baby, *if* you’re pregnant.” He walks a few steps and gestures to an open door.

“Thank you,” I say just above a murmur. My hand rests subconsciously on

my belly.

I close the door and take a single breath before my skirt's around my ankles.

The stream hits my hand and I cuss before getting as much urine as I can into the tiny cup. My nerves are getting the best of me, but I know it's true. It all makes sense.

I wipe down and wash my hands before wiping the outside of the cup and staring at it. It's a tiny cup of pee and it could tell me that my world is about to change forever.

It only takes a minute once I'm back into the room for the colors to start showing.

Two lines.

"Congratulations! We've found the source of your nausea. It usually eases up around the second trimester." The old man gives me a smile.

"How far along am I?" I ask. That matters. That really fucking matters.

"Well, that's hard to say. You'll have to make an appointment with your gynecologist for an ultrasound for more specificity."

I nearly cringe. Technically I have one now. But I haven't gone to see them for anything other than to pee in a cup and take blood. I had to make sure I was healthy after everything I'd been through, after all. But they never said a damn thing about being pregnant.

Maybe it didn't show up at the time. Maybe I was too newly pregnant and that's why.

I fucking hope that's why.

Anxiety creeps up on me. I'm pregnant. My hands hover over my growing baby. I'm going to be a mother. Warmth and happiness flow through me. I lean back against the wall.

Everything is going to be okay. I'm going to do everything I can to give this baby the best possible life.

I don't know how Kane will react. Tears prick at my eyes. He may not want

me, and he may not want this baby. There's a small chance this baby isn't even his.

I don't care.

I brush my tears away and square my shoulders. I'm not going to put this off. I'm going to make that appointment as soon as I get home.

I won't be *that* woman. I won't be weak. I won't be scared. And I'm sure as fuck not going to let Kane's reaction do anything to stop me from being the best mother I can be.

I won't let the past ruin my future. I won't do it.

I'm not broken. I'm a survivor. I splay my hand on my lower belly. I'll be strong for this baby. I'm going to give him everything I can.

CHAPTER 26

KANE

She's taking a really long fucking time to get out of her appointment. I know her schedule, and she should've been done almost an hour ago. I don't want to startle her by showing up unexpectedly, but calling her on the phone just didn't seem right.

I walk through the tall glass doors to the office building just in time to see her walking out of the clinic. What the fuck is she doing in there? She's got a little baggie in her hand that she's stuffing into her purse.

She looks up from her purse and stops as she sees me.

My heart skips a beat. She's so fucking beautiful. But the sight of me has her looking like a ghost. I can see the anxiety in her eyes.

Fuck. This isn't good. My heart clenches, but I walk forward.

She's going to deny me.

I know it.

"I just wanted to see you." I don't know why they're the first words out of my mouth. Not hi, how are you? None of that. I'm granted a small amount of happiness as her eyes soften and a gentle smile plays at her lips.

There's a chance. I hold onto it with a fucking death grip. If there's a chance, I'm taking it.

"Are you feeling okay?" I look up past her and she turns to look at the clinic

doors, too.

“Yeah,” she answers after a moment. And then she says, “No. But I will be.”

“Is there anything I can do?” I ask.

Her bottom lip trembles and her eyes water. Fuck. Fuck! This isn't good. I take a step forward to comfort her, but I stop in my tracks. I can't take these kinds of liberties. I need to make sure this is what she wants.

“Can I hold you?” I ask.

She nods her head and practically runs into my arms. My heart swells with pride that I can give her this, and I run my hand up and down her back.

“It's gonna be alright, baby. Whatever it is, it's gonna be alright.” I try soothing her. I hear the door open behind us and I turn to see an older man walking up the steps. I break away from her for a moment. I need to get her ass somewhere private so I can calm her down. So we can talk.

I press my lips into a hard line and see a door on the left. It's unmarked, so I turn the knob and it opens. It's an empty office with paper lining the windows. There's not one fucking thing in this room and there's hardly any light coming through, but it's quiet and she can cry in peace with privacy.

I pull her in and bring her back into my arms, but she pulls away and wipes her eyes. It's just like that night in the woods. Fear creeps up on me, but I don't say a fucking word.

If this is it, if it's the end, I'll take it like I should and leave her alone so she can find someone better. But I'll be fucking watching, and I'll destroy any fucker not good enough for her.

“Kane,” she says in a pained voice. “Do you still love me?” Her voice breaks and her shoulders hunch forward. I can tell she's scared to ask, but I'm going to put that shit to bed right now.

“Of course I do. I'll always love you, Ava. Even if you don't want me, I'll always love you.”

“I love you, too.” She breathes out the words and wraps her arms around my shoulders. She pulls me into her small body with a force I didn't know she

had. I hold her for a few minutes as she calms herself, just taking in her words. *She loves me.* I fucking knew it.

I swear to fucking God if she follows this up with a “But I can’t be with you,” or “But I’m not in love with you,” it will rip me into fucking pieces. But judging by how she’s hanging onto me, I don’t think she will.

She’s mine. I kiss her hair and she lifts her head back and takes my head in her hands to kiss me. It’s a soft kiss and I try to deepen it. I’m rock fucking hard for her. It’s been a month since I’ve been inside her and I fucking need to feel her cumming on my dick. *We need this.*

But she pulls away from me. She needs to stop fucking doing that. Each time it hurts.

“Kane, I have something I have to tell you.” She looks at the ground and then wipes under her eyes.

I put my hands on her hips and give them a small squeeze. “Go for it, baby, whatever it is. Just tell me.”

“I just...I have to tell you.” She looks at me with wide, glassy eyes and then whispers, “I’m pregnant.”

My entire world stops. She’s pregnant.

“How long have you known?” I ask. It fucking hurts that she kept this from me.

She gives me a weak smile. “About five minutes.” Worry clouds her eyes as I stand there dumbfounded.

She’s pregnant; we’re going to have a baby.

We’re going to be parents.

Two minutes ago I thought I might never see her again.

Now she’s telling me she’s pregnant.

“Say something, please.” She looks scared, and I fucking hate it. I don’t want her to be scared.

“Are you feeling okay?” It’s the first thing that comes to mind. I hear pregnancy can be a bitch.

“I’m okay,” she says in a small voice.

“Are we having a boy or a girl?” I ask. That’s fucking important there. What the hell am I going to do with a baby girl?

She huffs a humorless laugh and cries at the same time. “I don’t know, Kane.” Her hand rests on her tummy and she looks down with tears in her eyes. “I don’t know how far along I am.”

I let the meaning of her words hit me. My eyes watch her hand rub along her small bump. “Is he healthy?” That’s what really matters. She’s mine, and that means her baby’s mine.

“I don’t know. I think so.” Her voice is slightly sad. “I have to make an appointment.”

“I’ll come with you.” She finally smiles, but it’s small.

I’ll be there every step of the way for our little one. I splay my hand over her belly. That’s my baby in there. I know it. Sure enough, there’s a small bump that wasn’t there when she left me.

“I want you to come home with me.” I’m not going to order her around, not like before. But I’m going to make sure she knows what I want. “I wanna be with you, Ava. I want you back. I want you forever.”

Her hands cup my chin and she stands on her tiptoes to plant a small kiss on my lips. She nods with her eyes closed as I wrap my hands around her waist.

“Yes, Kane.” Hearing her say those words reminds me how fucking hard my dick is.

“Do you still love me?” she asks, her voice laced with worry.

“Of course I do. Don’t ever question it.” I fucking hate that she has to ask.

“I won’t. I love you so much, Kane.” The sincerity in her voice and in her eyes gives me security. She pushes her body against me and kisses me with passion.

I love her touch.

I *need* her touch.

I know she needs me, too.

I pull back from her kiss and stare into her baby blue eyes that are drowning with lust. “Tell me you want me, Ava.”

She doesn’t waste a second. Her voice is breathy. “I want you, Kane.”

“Tell me you’re never going to leave me again.” I need to hear it.

“Never.” She shakes her head.

“Tell me you love me.” I wanna hear it again. Every fucking day.

“I love you, Kane, I love you so much. Please forgive--” I crush her lips with mine, stopping that shit in its tracks.

“Good girl.” I suck on her lip, but she pulls back.

“I’m sorry, Kane.” She gets the words out and I wish she hadn’t.

“Nothing to forgive. Nothing to be sorry over. I love you. This was supposed to happen like this.” My hand rests on her belly, and I lean down to give her a sweet kiss.

She deepens it and I moan into her mouth.

Enough apologies. Enough of this sorry bullshit. We’ve been through hell and back, but what matters is that we have each other.

“I’m never losing you again, Ava. You’re mine now.” I back her up against the wall and lift her ass up to the perfect height for me to slip inside her. She nods her head and answers, “Yes, Kane.”

I don’t care if it’s fucked up. She’s my good girl. I push her panties to the side and undo my zipper. “Keep your eyes on me, baby,” I tell her, as I slip my rigid cock deep into her heat. Feeling her tight cunt wrap around my cock makes me want to bury my head in the crook of her neck and fuck the shit out of her.

But not in this moment.

I need her with me every step of the way. I pull out and fucking love the whimper from her lips. I slam into her and catch her moan in my kiss.

My good girl is loud as hell. This is going to have to be quick.

“Hold onto me, baby.” She wraps her arms around my shoulders, all the while keeping her eyes on mine. My hands grip her ass and I move her easily on and off my dick, never pulling all the way out.

I match the downward stroke with a hard thrust of my hips, making sure I hit her throbbing clit. She bites her bottom lip to keep in the moans of pleasure as I increase my pace.

“I’ll give you more when we get home, baby.” I can already feel my balls drawing up.

She feels so fucking good. And it’s been so long. Her back arches, and her heels dig into my ass.

I know she’s close and I can’t fucking wait to feel her pussy milk my dick. I slam into her faster and harder, pushing her against the wall.

“This is where I belong, Ava. With my arms wrapped around you.” I crush my lips onto hers. She moans into my mouth as I part her lips with my tongue and kiss her with all the passion I have.

I thrust myself deep into her heat and feel her pussy clamp down. Her heels dig into my ass, wanting even more. I silence her moan with my kiss and pull back. My fingers rub around her swollen nub; she’s so fucking close. “And you belong right here. Impaled on my dick.”

Her back arches at my dirty words. Her thighs tremble. She fucking loves this. She loves *me* and what I do to her. I know she does. “Cum for me, Ava,” I whisper in her ear, my lips barely touching her tender skin.

My lips catch her screams as I pinch her clit and send her over the edge. The feeling of her hot, tight pussy spasming around my dick causes a tingling sensation to shoot up my spine and I fucking lose it. I cum violently inside her. A cold sweat breaks out over my body as waves of pleasure go through

me. I keep up short, shallow pumps until both of our orgasms have subsided.

Our breath comes in pants as I plant small, open-mouth kisses on her shoulder. She grabs my face in her hands and kisses me like she needs the oxygen in my lungs to breathe. When our frantic breathing calms I pull back and give her one more kiss.

“Good girl.”

CHAPTER 27

AVA

I scrunch my nose and purse my lips as I say, “I look like a whale.” Tears prick at my eyes and I know it’s from the hormones but damn it, I really wanted today to be fun.

“You look beautiful,” Elle says from the bench in the gallery of the bridal shop. She’s literally said that for every dress I’ve put on. She’s hormonal too though, so I can’t call her out on it. She rubs her very swollen belly.

“It’s the dress, not you.” Becca stands up, keeping her eyes on the mirror, and starts walking over to me. The dress is a ball gown style, meant to hide my baby bump, but it’s making me look like a balloon and with my face a little swollen from this baby...I’m feeling genuinely awful.

“Okay, first of all, your hair is going to be up, so let’s do that.” She hands me a scrunchie and I take it reluctantly. I’ve learned that Becca knows her shit, so I trust her, but I’m hesitant to believe a scrunchie is supposed to make this better. I fasten a quick ponytail and take a look. I guess my face looks a little less fat, but the dress is still horrible.

As if reading my mind, Becca says, “Okay. Now I think we should emphasize your bump all the way down to your hips.” She tugs the dress from the back of it and grabs a handful of giant ass clips from the ottoman to my right. I’ve needed them for the other dresses too, but not like this. She pulls the fabric tight around my body. I smile as soon as I see the outline of my swollen belly. My baby. My heart fills and I let out a small sigh.

“Better?” Becca asks, and I have to blink a few times to get back into bridal dress shopping. I stare at myself in the mirror and I have to say I’m shocked.

“Say it,” Becca says, with a cocky grin on her face.

“You were right,” I huff, and return to looking in the mirror.

“Ha! Mermaid gown for the win! There are plenty of options.” Elle cracks up and a smile forms on my face. That is, until I hear the woman from around the corner.

“Sir, you really shouldn’t,” I hear a timid voice say as loud as possible while still being polite.

“Shit! It’s Kane.” I hop off the little platform and run to a dressing room as the clips fly off the back of my dress and land on the floor.

“Kane De Rocca! Get your ass out of here!” I yell from the slightly ajar door. “It’s bad luck to see me in my dress!” I sound like a little brat, but I want this to be perfect. I don’t want anything to go wrong. It might be stupid to be superstitious, but I’m doing it all. Something borrowed, blue, old and new. And there’s no way he’s seeing me in my dress.

“So you found one?” I hear him ask in a voice clear enough that it must be coming from only a few feet away.

“Kane, really?” I hear Elle as she waddles on over. A giggle is forced from me when I see her stand in front of the door with her arms crossed.

“You are not seeing her, and that is final.” She even nods her head at the end.

“In her dress,” Kane tacks on. “I won’t see her in her dress, but I have something I need to tell her; it can’t wait.”

My eyes widen and my heart sputters in my chest. I push the door open and ask in a worried voice, “Is everything okay?”

His eyes look down my dress and I can tell he’s having the same reaction I was. Now that the clips are gone, I’m a little...puffy.

“Yeah, baby.” His brow furrows. “Uh. That dress is just beautiful.” He couldn’t sound more unsure if he tried. I give him an asymmetric grin.

“This is only one of them. I’m getting another with more tulle for the reception. I thought I should get that one in pink, too.” He blinks at me a few times and then purses his lips.

“Is my good girl being a little naughty?” he asks in a lowered voice.

“Oh, God. Get a room.” Becca rolls her eyes and plops down on the ottoman while Elle and I just laugh. Kane looks over his shoulder with a wide grin.

“No worries. We’ve got one right here.” He walks forward and I instinctively take a step back as he enters the fitting room with me.

I push my hands on his chest but he moves in enough to shut the door. “Not here.” I am so not fucking him with them in earshot.

He huffs a laugh. “Don’t worry, I’ll take care of that needy pussy of yours when you get home.” He wraps his arms around my waist and pulls me in. The tulle crinkles and my shoulders shake with my laughter.

“Good news?” I ask. My heart swells as he gives me a broad smile and a quick kiss.

“I’m in, baby. We’re gonna stay.”

“In, in?” I ask. I can’t believe it. He wanted this so badly.

“Valetti through and through.” I give him a hug and he picks me up gently, hugging me back. It’s a little awkward with my belly and the dress, but it feels so right. I’m so happy, happier than I’ve ever been. Everything is just perfect.

He sets me down and gives me a sweet, open-mouth kiss that instantly ignites my core. When he pulls back to look at me, he chuckles. “Not here, baby. You’re going to have to be a good girl and wait.”

I feel a violent blush color my cheeks and I stand on my tiptoes to kiss him.

“Yes, Kane.” I say with a smile.

EPILOGUE

AVA

I spear my fingers through his hair and arch my back. "Yes!" I moan and arch my back. I rock my pussy in his face, needing more. He takes a languid lick then sucks my clit into his mouth. "Fuck! Yes!" My body bows as he pushes two fingers into my heat. He curves them and strokes my G-spot.

Heat overwhelms my entire body, and an intense pleasure radiates from my core before exploding through my entire body. My breathing comes in pants as I look down my body and see Kane rise between my legs.

His broad shoulders spread my legs as he licks his lips and then wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. His eyes are half-lidded and filled with desire.

His large hands push my thighs apart as he crawls up my body, keeping eye contact. "You need to be a good girl and keep quiet."

My pussy clenches around nothing at his words. "Yes, Kane." My response comes out breathy and he smirks at me as his large frame cages me in. I love telling him yes, just to see the spark of desire in his eyes from my submission. He grins at me and I smile back at him.

He rests a forearm by my head and reaches below him to push the head of his cock against my wet pussy lips.

"Mmm," I moan, as my head tilts back and his hand grips my hip. Just before

he's able to push into me, the baby monitor goes off.

Our little girl is quite literally the world's worst cockblock.

"Ah, no. No, no, baby girl." Kane climbs over me, leaving my heat and ignores the giggles coming from my mouth without my consent. His hard dick bobs as he grabs the baby monitor and clicks the top button so the video will come to life. His wedding band clicks against the monitor, and it triggers me to look down at my rings. Almost a year, and I never tire of looking at them. It never ceases to amaze me. I'm so fucking lucky.

"I'm sorry, babe," I say with a sarcastic pout. I really do need to be more quiet. The look on his face makes me suppress a laugh. Our little girl shrieks with joy on the monitor. She's just found her feet and apparently that's the most exciting thing in the world. Especially when she can fit her little toes into her mouth.

"You and your big mouth," he mutters good-naturedly as he stands, and snatches his pajama pants off the floor of the bedroom.

"Technically it was your mouth," I say as though it's an admonishment, with a wide smile on my face.

He walks over to the bed with a handsome grin and puts his hand on my hip. "Two minutes," he says before reaching down to give me a kiss. He's not lying either, he's a pro at getting our little one back to sleep. She's daddy's girl and he has the magic touch to get her to sleep. She looks just like him, too. She has her father's eyes. We named her after his mother, and my sister. Rebecca Marie. She's a perfect little angel.

Everyone says the next one is going to be a demon because she's so easy. I'm more than happy to find out.

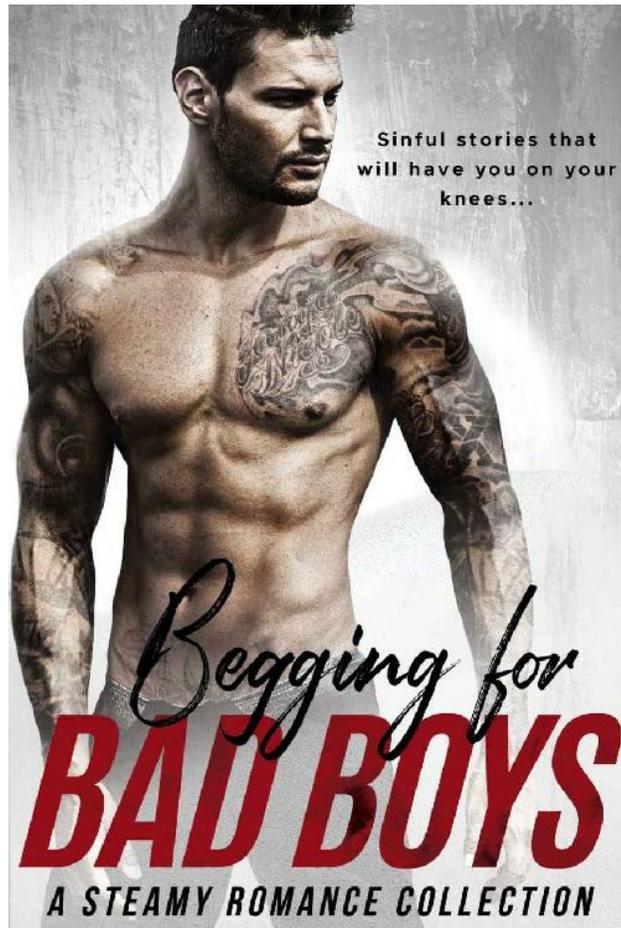
"Two minutes," I say just barely above a murmur as his lips leave mine. I open my eyes to see his dark, heated gaze staring back at me with absolute devotion.

As he turns to leave, to go to our babbling little girl, I grab his wrist and pull him back to me. I crush my lips against his and pour my passion into it. Tears prick my eyes and leak from the corners. I'm so full of love that it hurts. "I love you so much, Kane."

He sucks my bottom lip into his mouth and leans back. A deep chuckle rumbles from his chest. "I know you do. I love you, too."

There's not an ounce of doubt in those words. He loves me just as much as I love him.

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Burned Promises by Willow Winters

My world is caving in on itself; the scars of my past threatening to consume me. I was ready to fall from the top of my empire and I didn't give a damn.

But then she showed up; falling back into my life and into my bed. My sweetheart. I should let her walk away again; I'm a bad man, but I'm too selfish. This time, I'm keeping her.

Dirty Debt by Lauren Landish

It's time to collect on the biggest debt anyone in the city owes me. Jacob Waters, the bastard that killed my father. He's an abusive prick and he'll pay the ultimate price. But before I take him down, I'm taking his most prized possession. *His precious Sarah.*

BOUGHT: HIGHEST BIDDER

PROLOGUE

Lucian

I slowly pace the room, letting the sound of my shoes clacking against the floor startle her. My eyes are on Dahlia, watching her every movement. Her breathing picks up as she realizes I've come back for her. With her blindfold on and her wrists and ankles tied to the bed while she lies on her belly, she's at my complete mercy, and she knows it.

The sight of her bound and waiting for me is so tempting. I force my groan back.

Her pale, milky skin is on full display as she waits for me. I've left her like this deliberately, in this specific position. She knows now not to move, not to struggle. She knows to wait for me obediently, and what's more, *she enjoys it.*

The wooden paddle gently grazes along her skin, leaving goosebumps down her thigh in its wake. They trail up the curve of her ass, and her shoulders rise as she sucks in a breath. Her body tenses and her lips part, spilling a soft moan. She knows what's coming.

She's *earned* this.

She lied to me.

And she's going to be punished.

She doesn't know this is for her own good. She should, but she hasn't realized it yet.

I'm only doing this for her. She *needs* this.

She needs to heal, and I know just how to help her. The paddle whips through the air and smacks her lush ass, leaving a bright red mark as she gasps, her hands gripping the binds at her wrists. I watch as her pussy clenches around nothing, making my dick that much harder.

Soon.

I barely maintain my control and gently knead her ass, soothing the pulsing pain I know she's feeling. "Tell me why you lied to me, treasure," I whisper at the shell of her ear, my lips barely touching her sensitive skin.

"I'm sorry," she whimpers with lust. I don't want her apology. I want her to realize what she's done. I want to know why she hid it from me all this time. She'll learn she can't lie to me. There's no reason she should.

Smack! I bring the paddle down on the other cheek and her body jolts as a strangled cry leaves her lips, her pussy glistening with arousal.

"That's not what I asked, treasure." My tone is taunting. She needs to realize what I already know. She needs to admit it. To me, but mostly to herself.

I pull away from her, just for a moment, leaving her to writhe on the bed from the sting of the paddle.

I didn't anticipate our relationship reaching this point.

In the beginning, I thought this would be fun. Just a form of stress relief for me.

But things changed.

I bought her at auction, and now she can't leave. She's mine for an entire month. But the days have flown by, and the contract is almost over.

I need more time.

I'm going to make this right. I'm going to heal my treasure.

If it's the last thing I do, I'll give her what she needs. What we both need.

She parts those beautiful lips, and hope blooms in my chest.

Say it, tell me what you desperately need to say.

But her mouth closes, and she shifts slightly on the sheets before stilling and waiting patiently for more.

I pull my arm back and steady myself.

Soon, she'll realize it. My broken treasure. Soon she'll be *healed*, but that won't be enough for me anymore. I want more.

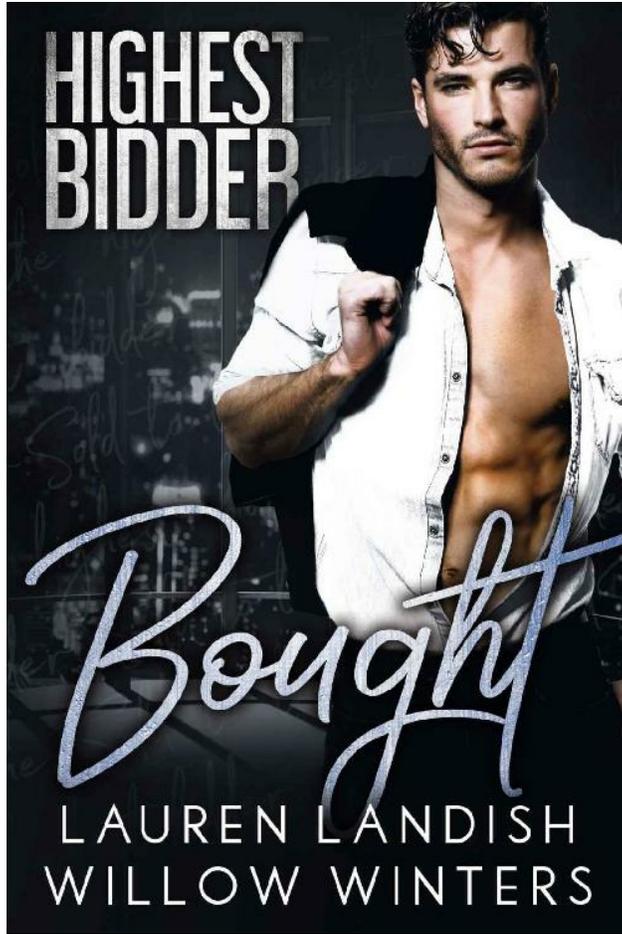
Smack!

Want to read the rest? Get Bought [HERE](#).

HIGHEST
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LAUREN LANDISH
WILLOW WINTERS



SOLD: HIGHEST BIDDER BOOK 2

BY LAUREN LANDISH & WILLOW WINTERS

Isaac

IT'S BEEN SO LONG SINCE I'VE WANTED SOMETHING SO INTENSELY; SHE'S DEVOURING my every waking moment. Katia, my kitten. Even when I close my eyes, she's there. I'm practically obsessed.

The scars on her back only partially show her pain. I can help her. She needs a master to show her what she's worth, and I can be that person. A dark part of me craves it. But she only gives me a taste. She lets me take her at the club, but nowhere else. She gives me only a small part of her. She's refused my collar, but I know why.

The last one she wore wasn't by choice.

She's frightened and broken.

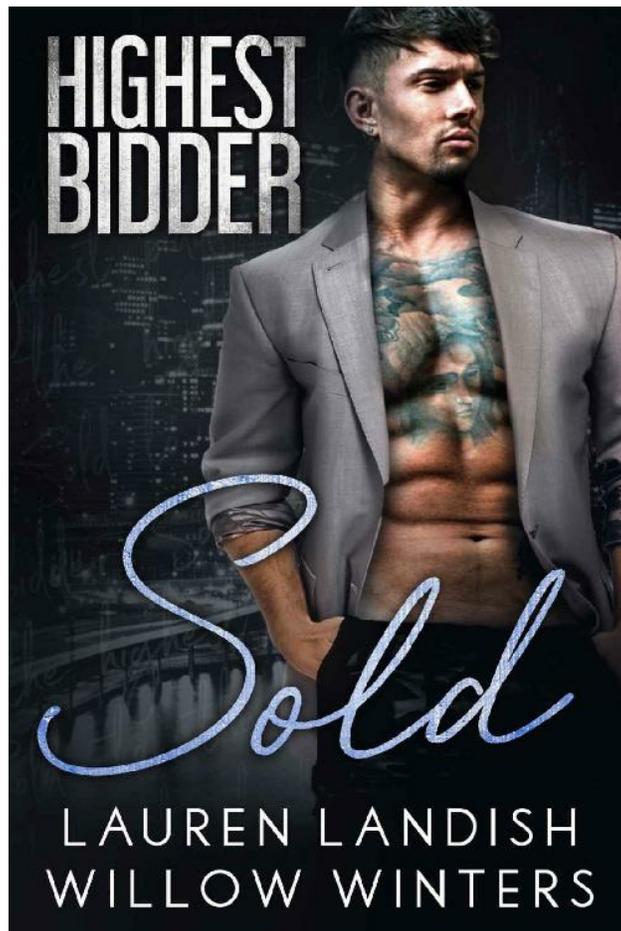
She craves the trust and the bond between a Dominant and Submissive. But she needs the relationship of a Master and Slave. I only need her to give me a chance.

I know she feels incomplete. I understand why she's pushing me away. But I have a plan. I know she'll go up on that stage if I can convince Madam Lynn to talk to her.

She needs to let go; we all know she does. I just need one chance to buy her so we can help each other as Master and Slave. A 24/7 power exchange. I can prove to her that she can trust again, and she can sate my obsessive desire for complete control.

The moment she agrees and steps on that stage, *she's mine*.

Isaac's book, *Sold*, is **NOW LIVE**.



OWNED: HIGHEST BIDDER BOOK 3

JOSEPH

I'm quiet as I walk into my bedroom, hoping to get a look at Lilly without her knowing. But those doe-eyed baby blues are shining back at me the second I enter.

Hating me. They pierce into me, giving me a look that could kill a lesser man.

I've been given more hateful glares. From deadly men who intended on killing me, who despise me and my very existence. I've never been effected.

But the look in her eyes guts me.

Because I know she's hiding pain behind the hate.

"Let me out," she says in a low voice as she wraps her fingers around the silver steel bars. Her voice lacking the strength and conviction she'd rather I hear. She adjusts slightly and as she does she winces. My eyes follow her movements, the grates of the cage have left an imprint on her knees. It's only been a few hours since she's been given her punishment. And I'm already regretting it.

I have to remind myself that this is for her own good. She's being punished for a reason.

She *wanted* this.

She *asked* for this.

And now she wants to leave?

I won't allow it.

My hands ball into fists as I stalk forward, my bare feet sinking into the lush carpet with each heavy step. The cage is large, much taller than her own height and she rises to meet me although she's still on her knees.

Here's a side to her I've never seen. The fierce woman who was always there, hiding behind the facade of obedient eyes.

She liked to *play* the submissive. She thought this was a game.

She thought wrong.

Lilly looks back at me with daggers in her eyes as I crouch lower, leveling my gaze with hers. Even with the anger swirling in her blue eyes, piercing into me, she gives off an air of purity, or innocence. She's so delicate, so sweet. *My flower.*

Her rage only makes me want her more.

"Are you ready to *obey*?" I ask her, tilting my head slightly. My words piss her off. And I fucking love it. The comprehension of her predicament making her eyes narrow for a moment. I watch as her hands attempt to ball into fists, but she corrects herself, warring with what she craves to do and what she feels she's expected to do.

She clenches her teeth, but her eyes water. Tears forming in her eyes as her lush lips part, but then quickly close without a sound being uttered.

I question everything in that small moment.

"Fuck you," she finally responds in a sneer, but then instantly lowers her gaze. She's strong, courageous even, but she's a true submissive. I have yet to earn that side of her. But I will.

"You want to," I answer with a sharp smirk that curves my lips up and that brings her glare back. It's a tit for tat. If she'd give in, so would I, but she's fighting it.

She didn't realize how intense this would be when she signed that contract.

Giving her freedom over to me. Neither did I.

She doesn't respond but I see her thighs clench ever so slightly. The small action makes my dick instantly harden with desire. She loves what I do to her. She still wants me, even when she hates me.

"All you need to do is obey, my flower." I restore my strict composure, waiting for her answer.

My nickname for her makes her lips part just the tiniest bit with lust. It makes me lean into her that much closer. Wanting more. My fingers wrap around the bars just above hers, barely touching her, but feeling the heated tingle I always do when I'm with her.

She knew I wasn't a good man.

That's part of what drew her to me. I know it is.

"Fine," she says in merely a whisper. I cock a brow at her answer, daring her to continue with that disrespectful attitude.

Our days are numbered and if I let her, she may leave me the moment she can and never look back.

But she craved this for a reason. The same darkness that drives my desires is in her. Stirring low in the pit of her stomach, fueling her hatred for me, but making her want me so much more.

"You know that's not the way I'd like you to address me."

"Yes, sir." She says obediently, her voice the proper tone as she squares her shoulders. She's still eye level with me, there's still a fierceness to her, but she's willing to play. *That's just how I want her.*

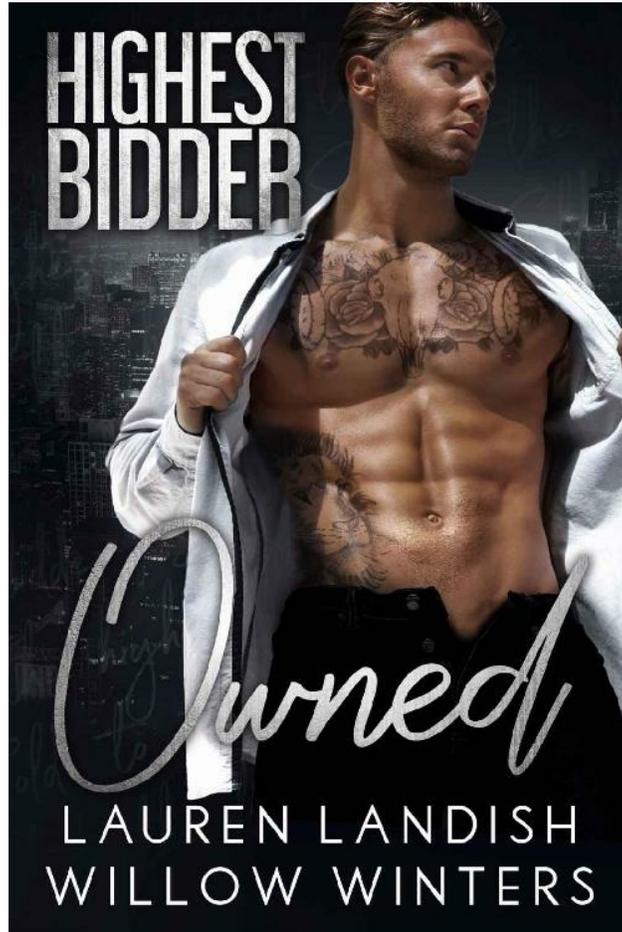
I'll show her how good this can be.

But first, she needs to be truly punished. The cage door opens slightly with a gentle creak. I need to leave a lasting impression.

She may be angry with me, but she's still mine.

I own her. And I'm not letting her go.

Joe's book, *Owned*, is **NOW LIVE**.



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