

Brute /brūt/
(noun) 1. a vicious, unapologetic jerk.

He's a
BRUTE

LOVE'S TOUGH.

CHLOE LIESE

TOUGH LOVE | BOOK ONE



HE'S A BRUTE

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He's a Brute

Chloe Liese

The Tough Love Series – Book One

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“Do you not see how necessary a world of pains and troubles is to school an intelligence and make it a soul?”

John Keats

ONE

Nairne

Boston, Massachusetts, 2004

BACK IN MY TEENS, I had a thing for the bad boys. Rich rebels who smelled like expensive cologne and sexual experience. I'd been beautiful and a little famous. Footballers—soccer players as they're called in the States—are bloody royalty in Europe. I'd dazzled under stadium lights, in VIP lounges. Expensive liquor, music, and dancing. Attentive touches and alluring propositions. They were reckless days, carefree and careless. But as the saying goes, all good things come to an end.

It started on Hogmanay, the Scottish New Year. A tall dark man is supposed to cross your threshold with a strategic handful, and secure good luck for the year to come. An odd-sounding notion probably, but Scots are a superstitious people who observe certain rituals to shape fate, despite the abundance of science that points to life's reasons and randomness. I'd always observed the tradition, though I was a skeptic at heart. At eighteen-years-old, practically a woman, I was free to do things my own way. So, I'd followed my love of whiskey and risk-taking straight into the arms of a man who fit the description but not its hoped-for effect. A string of misfortunes materialized. Life-changing injury. Months of being followed and the ensuing paranoia. Within the span of a year, I'd lost my privacy, my sanity, and my livelihood.

I learned from that, you could say.

Now life ran like my lab experiments. Controlled variables, sterile

environment, a fixed system with limited factors. And the people in my life? One friend left in Paris. Two grandparents buried in Scotland. One sperm donor father who may or may not still exist, wherever the fuck he cared to live. One mother whose ashes had years ago drifted into the Atlantic, the bridge between her two worlds.

That was it. Anyone else made life too volatile. I probably sound absurd. Crazy Nairne, traumatized and overcompensating. Perhaps. But take for instance, table salt—sodium chloride. Harmless enough, healthy in reasonable doses. People were table salt to me. Innocuous, if left alone. Certainly not meant to be isolated, though. Chloride becomes chlorine, a deadly gas of genocidal proportions. Sodium alone is highly reactive. Cut it with a butter knife and watch it burst into flames as it meets the humblest of environments—air. So, I kept my life in a vacuum. No air, no reactivity. It made perfect sense.

It also got me exactly the results I wanted. Scientifically speaking, that was as good as it got—replicable outcomes. One of the world's best universities for bioengineering. Unparalleled research opportunities. A consulting position for one of the city's most notable nonprofits.

I looked around the board room, fighting nerves about my first meeting. Ten adults, including me. Six women, four men. An atypically progressive distribution of gender for a nonprofit board. We were short one, though. I tapped my pen, impatient with someone who couldn't start his own meeting on time. I kept those sharp thoughts to myself where they ricocheted, unchallenged by conversation or engagement with anyone else.

Until the door whipped open. Powerful oxygen flooded my system as I sat at the end of the table, watching a dark-haired, olive-skinned Adonis stride in. His presence was elementally dangerous—each gasp of stuttered air I took fueled my reaction to him. One by one, old zones of my body caught fire and brightened.

“Morning,” he gruffed. Near-black waves fell errantly along his forehead and neck. Too short to pull back. Long enough to tug. He threw down his bag and slid his fingers through that tempting hair. “Apologies for being late. Traffic was a bitch.”

Zed Salvatore was chair of the board, so no one said anything about his tardiness or his language. Everyone around the table smiled or talked among themselves. It was an easygoing group. Meaning, I was horribly out of place. I sat, back ramrod straight, fingers laced, willing the throb between my thighs

into nonexistence. He reached into his bag and I watched muscles flexing against his crisp white shirt. My breasts tingled with heat.

The chair of a nonprofit for underprivileged children and communities should not be that attractive. It didn't make sense. I'd expected someone stodgier, less satanically beautiful.

Zed was trouble wrapped in six feet of impressive muscle, stunning features, and absolute pomposity. He sighed as he sat in his seat. "I know the Sox lost *again* but Jesus, people are cranky. It's not just the freeway. The sidewalk's even a jungle."

The board murmured in agreement, and their executive director, Tony, laughed. "The plight of the Bostonian baseball fan."

"Now just think how much nicer everyone would be"—Zed flipped through papers, and while his fingers curled around the pages, everything south of my equator grew dangerously hot—"if they spent that same amount of energy and dollars on your local professional soccer team."

People groaned and his face split into a grin. As he turned back to his papers, his dark lashes fanned over his high cheekbones. From the pile, he counted and separated papers, then sent them down the table.

"Right," he said. "I'm done preaching about soccer to you masochists. You'll see on page one that I want to—"

His gaze landed on me and he froze. Eyes widened, then narrowed as they flicked over my face. Tiger eyes, rimmed in coal black. The irises were pale blue-green, flecked with gold. Fire and ice. His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed, then he glanced from Tony to me. "Who's this?"

Tony opened his mouth to answer, but I spoke for myself. "Nairne MacGregor, Mr. Salvatore. Your public health consultant."

His fingers drummed on the table as his eyes slipped down my neck to my breasts. The bastard. My nipples hardened and I hated him. I'd heard the rumors. Mafia prince, bad boy, arrogant jock. He was despicable and he was making me wet.

He turned toward Tony without acknowledging me. "*Her?*"

Tony's eyes widened. "Yes, Zed. This is Nairne. She's a senior at MIT, double majoring in biomedical engineering and public health."

He glanced at me, face hard. "You?"

I tipped my head to the side as my blood boiled. "I'm sorry, I'm struggling with the monosyllables." My voice came out smokier than normal. That would be the ache of arousal clogging my throat. I cleared it and pressed

on. “What *are* you asking?” I folded my arms, leaned on the table. I projected my strongest front. I was stable. Unreactive.

He mirrored my stance and leaned in. “I’m asking how it’s possible for a woman who hasn’t even graduated college to be a public health expert, and if she’s not, what the hell she’s doing here.”

The woman next to him sucked in a breath and kicked him under the table.

I exhaled slowly and smiled. “I’d say the unanimous decision by your board in your absence indicates that I’m qualified for the position.”

His own mother to be precise. She’d sought me out, after she saw me present on the promise for communicable disease vaccines in light of science’s recent coup—sequencing the human genome. When I met her for my interview, she’d been skin and bones and a silk head scarf. Cancer. Not long after she’d given me the position, she’d passed away. He was obviously unaware of her role in my selection, and I might be a cold-hearted bitch, and in the past, a hot-headed spitfire, but I wasn’t cruel. I didn’t throw it in his face.

Tony glanced uneasily between us and rifled through his papers. “If you still have the memo that I sent you, Zed, it has the details. Nairne’s an incredible addition to the committee. Not only are her academic accolades of the highest caliber, but she grew up in an underprivileged town outside a major city. She knows firsthand what it’s like to struggle on the outskirts, and she really wowed us with her empathy and knowledge about community revitalization.”

The gorgeous bastard’s jaw clenched, and he smiled tightly as he peered down at the paper, then back up at me. “I see that. No offense meant, Ms. MacGregor. I’m still skeptical how someone your age could have the experiential knowledge that we need, but I trust the committee, and I look forward to being proven wrong.”

His voice was low and rich, and it raised my body temperature ten degrees. I sat back and folded my arms tightly across my hard nipples. “Noted.”

Angry. I hadn’t been angry like this in a long while. My cheeks were warm, and I fantasized about slapping his face, then biting his lips with kisses that made him bleed. I was a scientist. I knew anger and arousal had a neurochemical overlap. Didn’t mean I liked how rigorously they coalesced in *my* brain, thanks to him.

It really was specifically his fault. Other men didn't irk me like this. Nice blokes. Polite fellows. With gentle smiles and deference. He was exactly what this woman didn't touch anymore—dangerous, devious, rude, and too sexually forward.

The meeting rolled on, and twice I caught his eyes on my breasts, then my mouth. He had lips that weren't full but still managed to be nearly too sensual for a man. Classically beautiful features roughened by a long nose that had a slight bump on the bridge. I watched his pointer finger swirl in a slow circle on the table, imagined it tracing my nipples, slipping down my stomach to my clit.

I cleared my throat again and looked up at him. He smirked as he stared at me too long, noticing I'm sure how easily my fair skin blushed. I was incinerating inside, and I hated my inability to hide that.

The meeting ended, mercifully, and Tony dropped next to me. "I'm sorry about him. He's a little—"

"Rude?" I offered. I opened my bag on the table and shoved my papers in.

Tony glanced toward the other end of the room, then back to me. "Well, yes. But he means well. He's got a lot on his plate, and he doesn't sugarcoat things."

"Clearly." I zipped my bag shut and smiled at Tony. Zed wasn't his fault. "Don't worry, I'm not going anywhere. I don't scare easily."

Tony ran a hand over his bald head. "Well, I appreciate that. Just know we're really glad to have you here for this project. These health clinics were the heart of Deirdre's vision. She wanted them to happen more than anything, which is why she was so adamant about you."

I smiled. "I know. I'm glad I'm here, too."

"Ms. MacGregor?" Low. Short. Demanding. His voice brought out the old impudence in me, and the fact that I was so easily baited by his simple domineering pitch sent warning signals firing in my brain.

Run far away.

As if I could.

He stood, staring at me from nearly the entire length of the conference table, like I had a transmittable pathogen he wanted to avoid. He glanced at Tony and silently told him to beat it.

Tony leaned my way. "Let me, ahead of time, just apologize for whatever he's about to say."

I sighed and stared at the man whose eyes were burning into me. “Don’t worry, Tony. I can handle trouble just fine.”

TWO

Zed

FROM WHERE I STOOD, Tony looked like he was apologizing, most likely for my behavior. I wasn't sorry for how I'd acted, but I was a little curious as to what she had to say about it.

She smiled, patting Tony's hand as he stood. His cheeks went bright pink and he giggled. He fucking giggled. I leaned against the far end of the table and hoisted my suit jacket and ream of papers higher in my arm.

"Ms. MacGregor—"

"Nairne, please," she said.

An interrupter. Just lovely. She sat back and eyed me up. Her color went a little higher and her nipples hardened underneath her white blouse. I caught the edge of a lace bra as she shifted. I wanted to rip her prim propriety with my teeth and bite the tender skin beneath. She seemed to sense my depraved thoughts, because she crossed her arms and scowled at me.

"Nairne," I conceded. "Please understand, I'm not here to insult you. I'm simply not interested in wasting anybody's time, and I want this organization to be everything my mother dreamed it would be."

I took a few careful steps toward her because something about her made me uneasy. From the other end of the table, she'd been lovely. A pretty face with a pouty frown. By the time I was one third the way down the conference table toward her, she was devastating. I stopped because she was affecting me plenty from twelve feet away. Long and glossy dark auburn hair. Ivory skin. Fine bones, a smattering of freckles, and a warm glow to her cheeks. Her eyes were the real showstopper, though. They were an unfairly high chroma green, like blades of grass darkened after rain. They glittered with

defiance and not a little contempt for me as she spoke.

“Understood, Mr. Salvatore. I look forward to showing you how misplaced your concern is. Until then, I’ll remember not to take such stingy optimism personally.”

No one spoke to me like that. I was Zedekiah Lazaro Salvatore, Deirdre O’Shea and Brando Salvatore’s firstborn. Boston fucking royalty, king of the soccer field, and prince of the city’s Italian criminal underworld. People kissed my ass and rolled out the red carpet. They bowed their heads and averted their eyes. Nobody gave me shit. Except Nairne MacGregor, apparently.

I dropped my grip on my jacket to hide the boner her sharp mouth gave me and feigned a smile. “You’ll excuse me.”

Waiting for her polite acknowledgment was out of the question. If I stuck around, she’d know exactly what her sass did to my body. I stormed out, knocked shoulders with someone and muttered an apology, then barreled toward the exit. I wasn’t normally clumsy—both of my professions were predicated on exceptional coordination and hyper-awareness—but I chalked it up to ninety-five percent of my blood gathering in my dick rather than my brain. Finally, I landed outside where I sucked in a breath and oriented myself.

Observing her during the meeting had been torture. Elbow on the table, jotting things down, then setting her pen exactly parallel to the paper’s edge. Precise. Perfectionist. She’d listened while her wide green eyes darted between people as they spoke. Nairne was neurotically observant, cunning even. Watching her gears turning had turned me on. Big time.

She hadn’t spoken much, but when she had, I’d noted her vowels were off. She had an accent, and it wasn’t Southie. I couldn’t place it, and just like her hair that wouldn’t make up its mind between mahogany and rich red, her speech was another wrinkle in my morning. I’d never been this simultaneously annoyed and aroused.

I pushed off the wall and was halfway across the sidewalk when a hand caught me and pinched my hip. My one weak spot. I hated being ticklish. I spun out of it instinctively to figure out if the touch merited fight or flight. I didn’t have the luxury of assuming my safety. Four people knew about that tickle spot. One was dead, two of them I knew for a fact were doing other things right then, which left—

It took all of half a second. My realization came out somewhere between

a laugh and a roar.

Molly, Mom's best friend and my fellow board member. The one who'd kicked me under the table when I questioned Nairne's credentials.

Her features channeled motherly disapproval. "You didn't have to be such an ass."

I shrugged and glanced at my watch. "Molly, put yourself in my shoes. You show up to run your first board meeting, and out of nowhere there's a twenty-year-old sitting at the other end of the table telling you she's got your answers for one of Boston's biggest public health challenges. I just don't buy it. This shit takes time to learn, hands-on experience."

She rolled her eyes. "You're such a man sometimes."

I laughed again and took her by the elbow. "I'd hope so. Walk with me, I have to get going."

Molly winced as we crossed traffic amidst honks and blaring horns, but cars stopped as needed, and we made it to the other side in one piece. She turned and faced me as I unlocked my car and threw my armful in the backseat.

"I'm just saying you need to stop making so many assumptions and be more open-minded. She's brilliant and competent, and I think she'll do great work if you don't scare her away." Molly smacked my arm. "Seriously, Zed. You're better than this."

I frowned and scraped my nails against my scruff. "I'm demanding, I'll give you that. I want to honor Mom's vision."

Molly leaned in and patted my cheek. "Not at the expense of your personal integrity she raised you with. You miss her. It's still new and raw."

"I'm fine."

Molly smiled sadly. "I know you are. Just be a little gentler on everyone?"

I stepped out of her comforting touch and whipped open the door. "Molly, you know who you're talking to? Gentle isn't really in my wheelhouse."

She laughed and backed away from the car as I settled in the driver's seat. "It's all relative, Zed. Less hard on yourself then, how's that?"

"I'll take it under advisement." I started the engine. "Now if you'll excuse me, I've got some aggression to take out on my teammates, and I don't want to keep them waiting."

"Go." She waved me away. "Slug somebody. Work it out of your

system.”

I pulled out with a wave back and cranked up the tunes. My brother, Teo, had last driven my car and it blared angry, thumping bass, but it fit my mood. That woman, with her odd vowels and indecisive hair, was as irritating as she was irresistible. My attraction to her was strange, out of my realm, and I didn't like that.

My body couldn't cool down. I was hard and agitated, and the thought of ripping that tasteful blouse of hers right down the front and fucking her tits played on a loop in my brain. I tried picturing myself out on the field, where all was calm and within my control, but not even that settled me. Why did I respond to her? She was the opposite of what I liked. Headstrong. Brazen. Indomitable.

“Stop.” I shook my head like I could dislodge the idea of her, and spun the volume dial, hoping the music's rage would drown out my dangerous line of thought. Some asshole was right on my tail, so I zipped around a car that apparently had nowhere to be and sped off. I loved how the Ferrari handled—so damn responsive. Exactly how I liked it. Control and routine were the fundamental gears in the mechanics of my life, not just my car. There was nothing I wanted touching them. Too bad my body had very different ideas about my wants when it came to Nairne MacGregor.

THREE

Zed

PRACTICE HAD KICKED my ass but the awareness of my dead legs and burning chest stayed peripheral. Wind sprints, long shots, and drills were the least of my worries. I threw my shit in the car, kicked on the engine, and peeled out for home. Mindless. That's what I loved about soccer. It was the one part of my life that was mindless. The sport was like breathing for me, autonomic. Dad said the day I took my first steps I'd been dribbling a ball.

Everything else in my life was a fucking mess. I was heir to a world I hated, consumed with surviving it while trying to dismantle its depraved systems. My parents were the Boston underworld's Romeo and Juliet—daughter and son of the city's two prominent Irish and Italian crime families, who'd raised almighty hell when they'd refused to step up to their roles or marry in the same gene pool. Mom never wanted anything to do with the life. As a woman, her excommunication was easier. Meaning, the Irish side mostly left me alone.

Dad, on the other hand, had a harder time extricating himself. He'd been sent here from Italy in another period of instability and had been expected to bring the family to order. But Brando Salvatore was a ballsy bastard, and somehow, he'd managed to get a free education, become a surgeon, and pass off the most sordid aspects of the mafia to his cousins. His involvement was limited to sewing up busted criminals on the sly, in exchange for his family keeping their violence from innocents as much as possible. Nicky, his first cousin, had taken over, and Dad had fought with him *constantly*, trying to convince someone without a soul to have one.

I grew up shielded from it for the most part. Teo and I got stuck in some

tiny Catholic school that Mom donated to so heavily, she practically financed it entirely, just so we had somewhere safe to learn. The plan was I'd graduate, then head to Europe and play soccer, get away from it all, before they got to me. Until circumstances changed. Mom got sick, and rather than leave her, I remained and risked the inevitability of my birthright. And, of course, the inevitable happened.

Nicky got shot in some showdown by the wharf two weeks after I graduated high school and left the syndicate a mess. His second in command, Carmen, was wildly unpopular and was the target of a hit two days later. Everybody knew Nicky's *consigliere*—his advisor—Antonio, had put it out. The capos were divided on their support of Antonio, and their indecision grew volatile. Chaos had ensued. A string of murders, foul deals, and robberies that tipped Boston's crime rate into dangerous territory for three months.

That's when everything went to shit. Mom got sicker, Teo had daily panic attacks, and Dad's despair deepened as the family pressed him to step in as boss. From my vantage point, there was only one thing to do—fix that shit. I went from a quiet, over-serious teenager to a man when I walked into the meeting that was to decide the syndicate's way forward. I crossed the threshold, claimed my place among them, and stood tall as I spoke of a vision for our family. Keep your head down. Stay out of the foulest criminal dealings. Fly under the radar. No risky business. Be a community that was a little crooked but far from committing indiscriminate violence and outright destruction. The old way.

It was a crock of bullshit in one sense. There'd always be shady happenings, illegal and untoward. But at its root, the mafia had originated as a way to make order out of sociopolitical chaos. They ate that shit up, just like I knew they would. They were sick of the instability, the disorder, the worry that every knock on the door was the cops coming to haul you away or that someone you'd called brother was about to blow your brains out.

So, that was how I played it at the meeting, knowing they'd ask me to be advisor to the Don, while Antonio would get all the fucking money and power without the risk of exposure, which was exactly what he wanted. Antonio, the aspiring boss, was a paranoid fuck, and rightly so, after he'd seen to the assassination of the man who'd stood between him and absolute power. I had my suspicions he'd been responsible for Nicky's death, too.

I'd continued painting them the full picture. Our Don would be invisible

to the authorities, as well as to his *soldatos* who wouldn't know where he was or what he was involved in. This would make selling him out or eliminating him exceptionally difficult. Capos and associates would meet in small, private settings. We'd slip into the shadows and our daily machinations would be left to people who had good standing in the community, who could keep our reputation above reproach.

When my speech was done, they'd unanimously voted me *consigliere*, and begrudgingly accepted Antonio as boss. While Antonio ran us like an angel investor, and I was the vision piece, the man who'd face the world for us, they still needed someone with experience and balls to handle the daily, dirty operations. So, in a rare but not unprecedented move, they elected a woman, Nella, as underboss, which spoke both to her terrifyingly authoritative presence, as well as the obvious financial power she held as the daughter of a dead capo who'd made ridiculous money off racketeering. And that was that.

In a cultish circle that made our Catholicism seem laughable, I swore a lie of loyalty to despicable men, many of whom were my own flesh and blood. That was the first night as a man that I noticed Nella, while she pricked my finger with a knife she'd pulled from her hair. She'd squeezed three drops of my blood onto a card bearing the Archangel Michael's face while my heart had pounded in my chest. Then my dick had swelled as she looked at me and licked her lips. Blood red, like the blood on my hand. The blood on the card that initiated me into the life, ignited into flames and danced around the room, passed hastily from one hand to another, so that not one man would be burned.

But burned they would be. I'd make sure of it. I pledged *omertà*—silence and fidelity—to men I despised, who cheated and murdered and stole and violated. And while I had no concrete plan yet for what I'd do, I only knew I hadn't meant a single foul word I promised. There was no way forward that was clear to me then, how I was going to be in the life, become a leader among them, and rip the foundation apart beneath us. I just knew I had to do it.

That night, Nella took me home, and I became a man in another way. The man I was still today. Brutal. Dominating. The bastard who snapped at pretty, smart-mouthed college women and walked around angry and disillusioned. I'd seen so much shit, and the countless efforts to expunge the worst of my world had blown up in my face.

Then there was Nairne, too damn haughty. Like life was all so sure and defined, black and white, right and wrong. She pissed me off because she embodied what I wanted for my world—clarity, goodness, and just enough room for some healthy deviance. The fun kind. That happened in bedrooms and bathrooms and cars, and—you get the idea—between two consenting hot-for-each-other adults.

And I couldn't have any of that.

My drive home from practice was fast. I stood in my blessedly quiet kitchen, chugging a shit-tasting protein shake before I'd even processed where I was. Mindless. The tiny sliver of my day where my brain went silent and nothing had to be thought about or worried over. I sighed and set the glass in the sink while I stared at the river.

A sharp ringtone pierced my serenity, and I rummaged through my bag to shut it up. I found my cell buried in my slacks and ripped it out in time to answer.

“What?” I snapped.

Traffic noises told me Bruno was outside. “You need to come down to Lupo's.”

I waited for his explanation that didn't come, which just made me want to punch something. Bruno was thick as a brick. “Why, *soldato*?”

“Joey's pulling shit again,” Bruno said, “and the narcs are here.”

“Fuck's sake. I told him—”

“I know.” I heard him hit his cig and a car alarm go off. “But he don't listen. Now he'll learn what happens when he breaks his oath. Filthy business.”

As *consigliere*, I handled disputes. I mediated, negotiated, and often got our men out of scrapes. Mostly, I tried to push deals into the less sordid echelons of criminality. It was deeply unsatisfying for someone who found it all morally repulsive.

With Joey, who'd clearly waded into the one territory we avoided—drugs—I couldn't do a damn thing. I'd talk with the narcs and hand him off, maybe offer some leads in good faith for a couple of years shaved off his sentence. Point was, Joey was screwed.

The contents of my pockets were splayed across the counter and something caught my eye amidst the keys and odd coins, as Bruno grumbled about other drama I had to handle.

He hacked a smoker's cough and exhaled heavily into the phone. “He had

it coming, Zeddo. Anybody who gambles like that is going to get burned at some point.”

A pen. It wasn't mine. Inconspicuous. Black. I picked it up, held it to the light, and turned it one hundred eighty degrees until I saw what I was looking for.

“Zeddo?”

I unscrewed the base of the cap. Goddammit. A transmitter. “I gotta go, Bruno. I'll be there in thirty.”

“But the narcs—”

“Tell the narcs they can fucking wait.” I set the pen down and backtracked to the drawer where I kept a few essential tools.

Bruno sighed. “*Bene*, okay.”

I snapped my phone shut. Set it aside. I was muscly for a footballer, not because big biceps did jack shit for a striker. I had to be able to protect myself. In the mafia, not having a solid right hook and a good one-two was a professional hazard. So, it wasn't hard to lift the hammer and accurately crush the bug with one swing.

I'd braved suspicion before. I took it in stride, waved it off. Calm face. Even voice. Legs set wide and shoulders back. I'd gone this long without anyone catching on. But Bruno's words came back. Joey wasn't the only one who'd been gambling, operating on borrowed time.

Anybody who gambles like that is going to get burned at some point.

“God, I hate it when he's right,” I grumbled to myself.

I went upstairs and showered off the grime that had settled in my skin. Scalding water, an abrasive scrape of the sponge against my spent body. I was tarnished and trapped and all I wanted was some way to rid myself of it. Some filth was just too rank to be cleansed. I was in deep. And only getting deeper.

FOUR

Nairne

“THAT RAT ARSE!” I slammed the door behind me and threw my keys on the counter.

We might live an ocean apart these days and she was only visiting, but Elodie was my best friend, and knew exactly how to proceed when I was in a temper. She stood slowly from the sofa and folded her arms. “Who?” she said.

I scrubbed my face, then yanked open the refrigerator door. I was famished, and hunger never did good things for my mood. “The bloody new board chair for that organization I applied to.” Nothing appealed so I slapped the refrigerator shut.

“The one about health-initiatives in community restoration?”

The counter had what I needed. I ripped off a piece of baguette, imagining it was Zed’s face as I smashed butter into it with a knife. “That one, yes. I got it, obviously, and I thought it would be such a brilliant way to finish my time here. A prestigious nonprofit that actually does good in a major city, and focuses on my area of research.”

She stepped warily toward the baguette and pulled off her own piece. “And you don’t like the new leadership?”

I laughed as I chewed and swallowed. “Don’t like him. What an understatement. He was pompous and proud. God, I wanted to slap him.”

Elodie buttered her bread thoughtfully and glanced over to me. “What did he do?”

While I put the kettle on and scooped tea into the pot, I told her how he’d implied I was too young to know my field and doubted my qualifications in

front of the whole table of board members. Tea steeped then poured, we split the rest of the baguette over the counter and blew over our cups. “Oh, I’m boiling mad. Then, after the meeting was over, he walked over, all terse pretension, and had the audacity to—while he further insinuated my incompetency—stare at my tits!”

Elodie sipped her tea carefully. “And?”

I glared at her. “Did you not hear me? I said he ogled my tits.”

She shrugged. “What’s so bad about that? He likes your tits. They’re nice tits.”

“You and I have different standards for men.”

Her cup clattered on its saucer as she stared me down. “We didn’t always. You used to know how to enjoy yourself! What’s that expression? *Work hard, play hard*? You might deny it, but I remember how much you liked to go out after a match. To throw on a dress and just enjoy some attention.”

Leaning back, I looked her over, cocked my head to the side, and tried to figure out how the hell her brain worked. “Perhaps, but I never enjoyed being objectified by men who were strangers.”

“Fair,” she said. “However, the moment you knew them, you wanted some pretty—”

“All right, let’s drop it.” I scrubbed my face. “That’s behind me now.”

Elodie stared at me over her teacup. “Let me ask you something. Since Paris, have you ever met a man who treated you as you say you want”—she waved her hands, butting up against the limits of her English—“*courtois, bien élevé, gentil...*”

“I get it. Gentlemanly and polite. Go on.”

She nodded. “*Précisément*, like *that*, that you actually want to fuck?”

I opened my mouth, prepared to make a stinging response, but I came up short. “Well, no.”

She threw her hands up again, which made her look as Parisian as she was. “Thank you. You blame yourself for liking a man who was your type and turned out to be psychotic. Not all men with good looks and some sexual aggression are going to be like him. You can still like that.”

“Elodie,” I said, sighing. “I’m not that psychologically tortured. He was a creep, and I know that wasn’t my fault. It’s just...Zed is not what I need right now.”

She stared at me in concern. “Did he say anything about...?”

I glanced at my lap, then met her eyes. “No. It was like he didn’t even

notice.” She waited me out as I spun my teacup on its saucer. “I suppose he was just distracted by—”

“Your tits?” she offered wryly.

I blushed at the memory. “I suppose. It was nice, for a change, not to be looked at with curiosity or pity.”

“He sounded plenty curious, but about the right thing. *You*. Your beauty and your intelligence, and all the attitude I’m sure you gave him.” She grinned.

“Perhaps.”

Elodie leaned in. “Nairne, you’re angry about his attention, but you’re smiling remembering it. It’s like you won’t allow yourself to be happy. When are you going to start living again?” She sat back and looked me over. “You’re miserable because you know what you want, you just won’t accept it. Until you deal with that, you’re going to stay very sexually frustrated, *ma fille*.”

I frowned at her and drained my tea. “That’s complete tosh. It was a phase for me, and one that I won’t indulge anymore. People change.”

She sighed and shook her head. Her chestnut curls bounced and swayed, and she shoved them back from her face. “Not you.” Teacup in the sink. Water on. She turned her back to me and squeezed out some soap. “You’re a very intense person, Nairne. That hasn’t changed. Don’t you think you still need that same kind of intensity coming your way?”

“No.”

She glanced over her shoulder. “Well, you’re stubborn, and in this case, I think you’re wrong. Consider it, and after your next meeting, see if you don’t think I know what I’m talking about.”



THE BASTARD WAS STARING at me, agitation rolling off him in waves. Arms crossed. Sleeves rolled up. And he swiveled in his chair. His forearms were a tantalizing picture of muscles and olive skin that tensed and released while he swayed. I thought I was high strung, but he was making even me want to roll out my shoulders and breathe deeply.

“You’re telling me stress is transmitted intergenerationally,” he said through clenched teeth.

When he talked, my body betrayed me. My breasts ached and my knickers were damp. *Damn him.* I cleared my throat and interlaced my fingers. “Yes.”

He kept on swiveling his seat. “Meaning that if your parents grow up in a rough neighborhood—lack of resources and healthcare, drug crime, gangs, shitty schools—pardon.” He waved it off. He had a foul mouth and seemed to have given up on trying to censor himself. “That gets...passed on. How?”

I stared him down over the boardroom conference table. “It’s complex, and no disrespect, but I doubt you have the background to understand epigenetic and neuroendocrinal changes. If you don’t believe me though, and you’d like to see for yourself, feel free to browse the tome of references I have here.” I patted a massive binder to my right. “Or call Rachel Yehuda, and any other researcher who deals with the neuroscience of PTSD and ask them.”

Tony’s gaze flicked between us while he dabbed his forehead with a handkerchief.

Zed stopped swaying abruptly and leaned his elbows on the table. “Assuming you’re right, then what?”

I bit my cheek and squeezed my hands together. By Christ, the man was patronizing. Of course, I was right.

“So, they have it even harder than we thought,” he said. “It’s not just making sure school lunches have vegetables in them, or kids get time outside at recess. You’re giving me a problem, Ms. MacGregor, not a solution.”

It was exhausting, waging this battle in my brain. His voice was even and low. It did things to me. If I blocked out *what* he said, I could enjoy *how* the sound reverberated in my chest before it landed with a thud between my thighs. Unfortunately, the arrogant content was hard to ignore.

“It’s actually a brilliant opportunity,” I countered. “We partner with medical schools and relevant university departments. Bring in funding for these neighborhood health clinics. Medical providers collaborate with researchers. We get real, local data on what we’re dealing with in terms of stress-related diseases—mental and physical—and the community gets the free healthcare your mother dreamed of.”

He stared at me curiously.

“Not to mention,” I pressed on, “a few years down the road, when we have enough data that can prove not just correlation but causation between economic disparities and poor health outcomes—”

“Even controlling for endogeneity between all the factors that impact wellbeing?” He leaned in. “Quality of life, longevity?”

Well damn, he did have a brain. I knew he’d studied economics and philosophy at Harvard. Entitlement and a fast track into corporate law was written all over him. I’d seen his litigious side plenty, but witnessing his statistically inclined mind was new, and frustratingly attractive.

I hadn’t expected him to raise the question, but I was prepared for it. “Yes. It’ll control for that. This is exactly what politicians need shoved under their noses so they can smell the stink of their complacency.”

He sat back and rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. His fingers were long and knuckled. I imagined them in rough clutches and tender strokes, depending on what the moment called for. Then I clenched my legs together and tried to rub the ache away.

He dropped his hand in a quiet fist on the table. “That sounds... promising. Thank you, Ms. MacGregor.”

He refused to call me Nairne unless I corrected him. Then he’d say it once, and afterward go right back to referring to me formally. He was like Granda’s wolfhound, Connall. Untrainable.

Zed glanced at his watch. “That’s all for today, everyone. Thanks for your time. Oh, Matt. Make some time to talk with Ms. MacGregor, get what you need for the grant application.”

People dispersed and our grant writer came by, smiling at me. He was by objective standards attractive. Blond hair, blue eyes. A lean athleticism that I’d attribute to avid outdoorsmanship, maybe marathons. Unfortunately, I found him as compelling as buttering toast or making my bed—a fixture in my schedule that elicited absolutely no emotion.

“Nairne.”

At least somebody around here was educable. I smiled as he sat next to me. “Matthew.”

“What do you say we talk this through over a sandwich? I know a great place down the street.”

The table rattled as a chair slammed into it and drew our attention. Zed’s eyes bored into me. Whereas the fellow next to me was all kindness and bright features, at the other end of the room stood Lucifer himself. Dark hair, and pale eyes that glowed harsh against his tan skin. Sin and arrogance and demand. His gaze held mine for a long moment until it moved to its next victim. “Matt, I just remembered, I had something to ask you. I need to get to

a press conference, though. Walk with me.”

Matthew sighed and muttered under his breath as he gathered his papers. “It’d kill him to say please.” He smiled at me apologetically. “Next time.”

“Next time,” I agreed. But I knew there wouldn’t be. And I wasn’t ready to admit why.

FIVE

Zed

THE ESPLANADE IS A NEARLY twenty-mile stretch of flat, picturesque land that winds along the banks of the Charles River. I grew up along the water, spent endless hours of my childhood and adolescence biking the trails. I broke my first bone when I slipped from the playground monkey bars. I dug for treasure and toads, went to concerts at the Hatch Shell, and had my first kiss under its canopy of stars.

It wasn't even sunrise, but it was August, which meant the ground held yesterday's heat, and the air was muggy. As I ran my regular ten-miler along the river, my mind wandered, and my usual hyperawareness dissolved into the thick breeze. As I passed one familiar spot after another, I saw Mom, how she loved packing picnic lunches and chasing us along the water. How she used to lean back on her hands and give her face to the sun with a smile that always made me smile with her.

She'd been gone exactly nine months. Dad said I still hadn't grieved, but he was her husband so that was all he did. Meaning, he was not an objective measurer of mourning. When she died, I'd been confronted with the limits of my control. I'd done everything I could to see her kick cancer's ass and it still hadn't worked. She was gone, and I'd been useless. It pissed me off and broke my heart that I hadn't been able to do a damn thing about it.

I had her eyes and her foul mouth. Nothing else.

She'd been messy, effusive, and always empathic. A great joke teller. She loved the smell of old books and the dirty work of gardening. She'd meant everything to us, and I'd let her die. Fuck mortality. Fuck cancer. Fuck death.

Rounding the Hatch Shell, I remembered her swaying me in her lap as we

watched the firework extravaganza. That year the sky had lit up in a rainbow of crackling spiders—that's what they'd looked like to my five-year-old mind, at least—while the Boston Pops performed patriotic tunes. She'd kissed my hair, and when I tried to snuggle close, my baby brother had kicked me in the head, his tiny feet shoving me away so he could nurse without interruption. I'd decided then that baby brothers were bullshit, because me and Mama and those fireworks, they were *mine*.

My possessive and controlling impulses showed themselves early, you could say.

More memories drifted through my mind, until I turned the corner on the trail, and those thoughts vanished. The wind off the river whipped her hair, yanking ribbon after mahogany ribbon from a long braid. It was countless gradations of auburn and it spooled thick and shiny over her shoulder. Dark-framed glasses obscured her eyes. She sat on a blanket and leaned into the wind like it was an old friend.

But that hair was a work of art. I could feel its weight in my grasp, wrapped around my fist. The wind plastered her shirt against her chest and revealed a lean body—balletic arms and long legs. My whole body woke up as I took her in. Hunger and arousal welled inside me. I needed more. Her face turned away and that was unacceptable, so I kept jogging closer until my curiosity clashed with recognition and my stomach lurched.

Jesus H. Christ.

“Nairne?” Her name left my mouth sounding pissed and confused, because I was. What the hell was she doing here?

Her head turned my way just as the sun broke over the horizon and blazed in her emerald eyes. “Zed.” She leaned back on her hands and squinted up at me.

Leggings, sports bra, some kind of flowy top. All black, except for the shirt that was falling off her shoulder and torturously sheer white. Bare face and wild hair that betrayed the time Ms. MacGregor took to coax those sexy waves into the smooth front she brought to the board meetings. Natural and unpolished, she was even more beautiful. And she was still a giant pain in my ass. Smart-mouthed. Conceited. With a ridiculously distracting body.

I stuck my hands on my hips and tried not to stare at her tits. It wasn't easy. “What are you doing here?”

There was some reclining bike thing nearby. It figured Nairne wouldn't ride a normal bike but have some ergonomic alternative bicycle.

She quirked her head to the side and frowned up at me. “It’s a public space, is it not?”

I scrubbed my face with my hands, then ran them through my hair. “Christ, MacGregor,” I growled. “I’m not awake enough for verbal sparring. Just answer the damn question.”

She snorted and sat straighter. Brushed some grass off her thigh. “I’m sitting on my arse watching the sunrise, Mr. Salvatore. That suit you?”

Arsé. Her broad vowels. That fiery hair and temper. At least one piece in the puzzle of Nairne clicked for me. She was Scottish. She’d answered my question, but it didn’t explain what she was doing *here*, when I’d never seen her before. And I ran the loop five days a week, rain or shine. I glanced out to the river where early daylight reflected off its mirrored surface. “I’ve never seen you here before.”

She shielded her eyes and peered up at me. “First time for everything. I sense I’m intruding. Some ritual of yours that I’ve thrown a wrench in.”

Damn straight, she had.

She smiled, reading me easily. “I’d offer not to come again and disturb your routine, but that’s a little too obsequious for my taste.”

My gaze snapped to her. Obsequious. *Submissive.* She didn’t have a submissive bone in her body. At least she knew herself. She was the antithesis of what worked in my life, but that didn’t change how absurdly I wanted her.

“As always, Ms. MacGregor, you speak your mind.” I backed away, giving us space because the wind had picked up and hit me with a perfume of flowers and ocean air that was definitely hers, rather than a product of our surroundings. It smelled incredible. It was going straight to my dick, and that was not all right. “I’ll leave you to it.”

She squinted at my odd retreat and dropped her hand. “Thanks.”

I spun and ran back onto the trail. The threat of seeing her again on another morning like this was enough to send my body on a dead sprint. I finished the last mile and gasped for air outside my place, hands on my knees.

“Getting old’s a bitch, ain’t it, Sal?”

Art was eighty and insisted on calling me Sal. He was my next-door neighbor, didn’t know who the hell I was, and couldn’t hear for shit. It made for a surprisingly pleasant dynamic.

“That it is, Art.” I had to practically yell the words.

He nodded and looked me over as I straightened.

“Oh, no, that’s not your problem.” Art wobbled toward me. “I know that look.”

“What?”

He grinned and poked one gnarled finger right in my chest. “A woman.”



AN INDIAN SUMMER for the books made my drive unseasonably warm and comfortable that evening. Windows down. Van Morrison blending with the wind that tangled my misbehaved hair and made me compulsively comb it out of my face. Annoying, yes, but I just couldn’t bring myself to shut out that warm breeze. There was something intoxicating about the night. I knew if I closed up my car, I’d miss the last balmy dusk until spring.

I’d told Lucas I’d meet him for a couple of rounds. He was a teammate, and one of the few guys outside the life that I had time for, or trusted. I spent my days surrounded by familiar faces, nearly all of which were strangers to me. It was best that way. But Lucas was dry-humored and smart, and we seemed to have a similar hard-headed, self-deprecating disposition. So, we worked.

He’d named the place. Some joint called Henderson’s. He was British and thus a gin man through and through, but he’d been on a scotch bender lately. And allegedly, Henderson’s had a bar that was a whiskey-drinker’s wet dream. I never liked scotch, whiskey, whatever you want to call it, but this place had trivia night and no jersey chasers. Grabby paws, fake everything, and nothing between their ears. Their absence and the ubiquity of rum and coke were enticement enough.

The place was easy to find and so was Lucas. Sandy blond and six-foot-four made him an easy target at the bar. He swung around and balked when I clapped him on the back.

“Christ, you look surly.” He glanced at me over his whiskey glass as he took a drink and sent the fumes my way. Turpentine. Gasoline. Horrible, horrible stuff.

I sat down next to him and threw off my jacket. “Nice to see you, too, sweetie.”

He laughed and waved down a bartender. “He’ll have a double rum and

coke and a burger that's so rare, it's a health code violation."

I checked my phone and pocketed it. "Knock its horns off, wipe its ass, and throw it in a meat grinder."

The bartender scrunched his nose as he made my drink. "Gross. Hey, you know who you remind me of? The soccer hot shot. What's his name?"

My fingers drummed along the bar as I watched the soda gun splash coke against the glass. I never got plastered in public, but I'd throw back a double and ride a nice buzz for a while. "I get that a lot. I forget his name. About the burger—I'll sign a waiver. I just want it practically mooing."

He set down the drink and looked at me like I was nuts. "I'll see what I can do."

Lucas watched me drain half of my low-brow cocktail as a smile grew on his face. "What's gotten into you? You're a mess."

I set the glass down and looked around. I felt antsy. Off. I hadn't fucked a woman in two weeks, since—

No, I wasn't even going to *think* her name. "I'm fine. I could use a lay."

"Ah." He set down his whiskey. Jesus, the stuff reeked. "That explains it."

Lucas knew my situation. I was a prominent face in the city who despite his mafia ties managed to keep a squeaky-clean reputation. Chair of Boston's beloved nonprofit for its underprivileged kids and their communities. Face of the local professional soccer team, their lead scorer and primary brand ambassador.

And a brutal fuck.

"Yeah." I had partners who signed a watertight NDA and were as discrete and docile as they came. But I hadn't wanted a thing to do with them since the Scottish Hellion had taken over my board meetings.

"So...what happened?" Lucas stared at the TV. Big Papi swung and missed. We watched the Sox flush another inning down the shitter while I tried to figure out what I was willing to admit.

"I don't want them anymore."

He turned to face me. "That so? Who is she?"

"Why is everyone so positive I'm wrecked over a woman?"

Lucas grinned into his drink. "Because this is what happens to a man. Men always want to fuck. Until they meet *the woman*. Then they want something more. And everything goes to hell."

The burger came and there was a pool of greasy blood surrounding the

bun. Perfection.

“That was quick,” he muttered. Lucas’ plate slid in front of him. “I ordered mine twenty minutes ago.”

I shrugged. “It’s a two-minute sear each side, that’s it. Thus, the blood.”

Lucas shuddered.

My burger smelled pretty damn good, and while I wanted to eat, I wanted to clarify my predicament more. “Back to what you’re saying. Wanting...*more*. You know I don’t work like that.”

He shook his head while he freed the silverware from his napkin. “Maybe not before.”

“Before.” I laughed, then took a bite. “You make it sound like it’s a switch that you flip. I’m wired this way. I’m not going to magically grow a soul for this shit overnight.”

Lucas cut into his medium-rare steak and took a bite. I almost gagged at the sight. Way too cooked. “No one said anything about it being overnight. But it happens—”

“Says the confirmed bachelor. Who the hell are you to talk?”

He shrugged and glanced up at the TV as he chewed. “You’re making assumptions. Longstanding bachelordom does not equate to inexperience with affection for the female sex. I’ve been exactly where you are. I know the signs. The change that comes. It’s happening to you already. For instance, you don’t want to—”

“I know. But I’m saying it’s anomalous. A momentary lapse probably. None of this doomsday crap you’re spewing.”

“Denial.” He smiled around his steak and took a swig of whiskey. “It’s not just a river in Egypt.”

Terrible. Just terrible. “Those kinds of punning jokes will get you nothing but my disrespect.”

The microphone nearby crackled, and a voice came over too loudly, announcing trivia.

“Ah, there it is. The evil smile of competitive delight.” Lucas raised an arm, and somebody handed him a paper and pencil. “Come on, Zeddy. Let the games begin.”

SIX

Nairne

I'D STRUCK out on curves. Just wasn't in the genetic cards. I had decent tits, a tiny swell of hips, and that about wrapped it up. When I stood, I was tall and willowy. Elodie was tall, too, but had an hourglass shape I'd always envied. And right then her most generous attribute was swaying in my face. I drew a hand back and smacked her on the arse.

It made a nice *crack* and she spun around. "Nairne!" she squealed.

I shrugged and took a sip of my whiskey—Lagavulin, my birthday treat to myself. Elodie stepped away from the bar, sat on my lap, and wrapped her arms around my neck. Now her tits were in my face. I tried to shove her off, but she just linked her arms tighter.

"What was that for?" she asked over the music. She poked me and winked over her shoulder at whomever she'd been teasing. "Jealous? I was doing this thing called flirting. You should try it."

I rolled my eyes and set my glass down. "There's no one worth flirting with."

She groaned. "You're such a...*un collet monté*—"

"A stick in the mud. Yes, I am."

"You're impossible! There's a dozen handsome men in here."

I shrugged. "Handsome doesn't mean they're worth the trouble."

Elodie was gazing around the pub, frowning.

"Don't, El. I don't want you playing matchmaker."

She ignored me and kept scanning the room. "There." Her chin tipped toward the bar. "You like the bruting types."

"*Brooding*. But for once, your Frenghish serves you well. That man is an

absolute brute.”

It was Zed. Of course, it was. Sitting at the bar, drinking a glass of something and laughing with another fellow whose back was to us. I’d never seen him laugh. His teeth were bright against his skin and he looked younger, less formidable, expressing something other than sexual depravity or discontent.

Elodie scowled at me. “You know him? And you haven’t fucked him?”

I pinched her arm. “Would you be quiet? He’s an influential person around here. I don’t want rumors. And no, I haven’t. Talk to him for thirty seconds and you’ll understand why.”

She stood up and made as if to do just that, but I had freakish reflexes, and I caught her arm in time. “That was rhetorical. Don’t you dare go speak to him.”

“Why?”

“Because he hasn’t seen me and I’m enjoying not being under his miserable gaze until I have to be at our next board meeting.”

Elodie gasped. “*That’s* the rat arse?”

I laughed and took a sip of my whiskey. “Indeed.”

“It all makes so much sense now.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

She was still staring at him and I yanked her hand until she turned my way and bopped me playfully on the nose. “You’re putting up those defenses of yours.”

I smacked her hand away. “Am not. He’s an egotistic bastard who I couldn’t despise more. There’s nothing to defend against.”

She smiled and stared at him again. “Whatever you say, Nairne.”

A tall shadow loomed over us and I startled. It was the grant writer. I tried to coax my racing heart toward calm as I recognized him. “Matthew, hello.”

This was a respectable specimen. Friendly. Objectively good-looking. Polite. And completely underwhelming. I needed my head checked. The sweet fellows always turned my stomach. All the same, he was good company. I invited him to join us, along with a few mates of his. We made small talk. Chatted about the Sox, which I followed and liked. Trivia began, and an hour later, Elodie and I had answered all of them but two. We’d tied for second place. Matthew and his posse were useless.

“You girls really know your shit, don’t you?” One of Matt’s blokes rubbed his neck. “It’s like the nerd brigade over here.”

Elodie rolled her eyes. She had a calculator for a brain, and I read compulsively and lived for science. You didn't go to MIT unless you practically had STEM inked on your heart.

I was about to answer him, but "Crazy in Love" started playing. Elodie jumped up from the table and circled to me.

"Come on." She grabbed my hand and tugged. "Let's dance."

Matt frowned at her. "What kind of crap thing to say is that? She obviously can't dance."

Elodie froze and turned toward him. "Excuse me. Matthew, is it?"

"That's it, yeah."

"You've known Nairne how long?"

He glanced from me to her. "A couple weeks."

She laughed and leaned over the table. "We've been best friends since we were fifteen. Youth academy for football, which I doubt you know is soccer, you ignorant American twat. Not only are we intelligent, but we're world class athletes. Nobody tells Nairne what she can or cannot do, and you need to fuck off."

Matt snapped back. "You don't have to be like that. I was just looking out for her. It seemed like an inappropriate thing to say to someone who—"

"Nairne, come on." Elodie tugged my hands again.

I was trying not to laugh as I turned toward Matt. "Don't take it personally. She's just protective. But she is right. I'm more capable than you think."

Matt stared at me in confusion. "I just assumed..."

"Next time, don't. Instead, ask."

We said our goodbyes—mine polite, Elodie's muttered French curses—and left the lads the table. The far end of the bar by the trivia table and the mic set-up was open. Tommy, who owned the place and was like a brother, always kept that corner free for me. We laughed as I dealt with Elodie's gyrations through Beyoncé, until the mic tapped and drew enough attention that the pub's volume dropped by half.

Tommy was grinning and I knew I was fucked.

"Hey everybody," he said. "Most of you know me but if you don't, I'm the owner of this little Scottish hole in the wall." A bunch of hollers and claps greeted this announcement. The man was only vaguely Scottish, but his self-deprecating streak spoke of his lineage. Everyone loved Henderson's and it was wildly profitable. Hardly a little hole in the wall.

“My baby sis,” he continued. “Well, she’s not actually, but for all the assholes eyeing her up, consider her as such.” That earned some laughs as he pointed at me. “She has a birthday today. Can I hear some noise for Nairne?”

Bloody hell. “I’m going to murder him.”

Elodie giggled and picked up her wine. “I love when you say that word. *Murrrderrrr.*” She took a long sip and shuddered. “Oh, god. This wine really is for shit.”

“Just *shit*. You just say, *it’s shit.*”

“Huh.” She shrugged. “English is so random.”

“I won’t argue with that. As for the sub-par wine, you’re a snob.” I took a sip of it out of curiosity and shuddered. “Never mind, that is awful. Order something else.”

Tommy was still blathering about me and my fucking birthday.

“So, we’re gonna play a song from the lass’s homeland and I want everyone to join in. At least a quarter of you are legit Scots, so you better make some noise!”

He wasn’t wrong. The entire Scottish population of Boston congregated at this place on the weekend.

Elodie leaned my way and put down her wine. “Come on, Nairne. May I have this dance?”

I rolled my eyes. “Fine.” I took her arms and leveraged myself up. Standing felt good but I needed a minute as blood rushed from my head. I couldn’t step very well, so we mostly swayed. “Just don’t let go of me or I’ll write you out of my will.”

Elodie held me tightly against her and pecked my cheek. “*Ma fille*, we both know that to me, that’s not much enticement. My love can’t be bought!”

I had a modest sum of life insurance and savings from three deceased relatives, plus the product of steady work studies tucked away in a bank. I’d also begun to dabble in investments, particularly a tech company that innovated like no business I’d ever seen. It was starting to do quite well. Even with that, Elodie was sole inheritor of a vast empire of wealth management. My threat was immaterial to her.

“Oh, I love this song. It always makes me cry!” She threw back her head and sang along about a lass joining her love in the heather. It was a sweet tune, and it reminded me of home, and suddenly I was melancholy. Tommy had meant well, Elodie had blown a small fortune to fly in and surprise me, even Matt and his mates were just being friendly blokes, but none of it felt

right. I was anchorless in a sea of unclear meaning. Another trip around the sun. Another year in which my legs were disobedient obstacles since my injury.

Elodie squeezed my waist. “What’s the matter?”

My head shook and, thanks to the inverse relationship between my intense emotions and my ability to voice them, all I managed was, “Nothing.”

Elodie opened her mouth, but a man’s voice spoke before she could say anything else.

“May I?”

That voice. The one that caused my headaches and the ache between my thighs.

Zed.

SEVEN

Zed

HER FRIEND with the Shirley Temple curls glanced between us. “*Oui.*”

“No,” Nairne answered at the same time.

The friend waved it off. “I have to use *le chiotte* anyway. I’ll be back in three minutes.”

That last part sounded like a warning. I nodded as Nairne and I had a stare-off. When Shirley Temple began to let go, Nairne clutched my arms like she had no choice. Air sucked in my lungs. Her grip was a vise, and she glared at me. It was unnaturally arousing. Her fire, the antipathy she held for me. Something was definitely wrong with me. Crisscrossed wires. This combative shit didn’t turn my crank. Historically.

Nairne sighed. “She’s dead to me.”

I chuckled and pulled her a little closer. A hot current surged over my skin as our bodies touched. Nairne was tall and we fit too well. Her chest pressed against mine and my cock lined right up with her center. I managed to keep myself together. “I can go if you really want me to. Believe it or not, I can be a gentleman when occasion calls.”

She laughed dryly and gripped my arm tighter as I pivoted us. “Zed.”

My body heated when she said my name. That voice was... Soft. Smoky. Impossibly sexy.

“I don’t dance well. Keep it simple.”

I frowned at her. “You dance fine. Just let me lead.”

She rolled her eyes. “It’s not that, you numpty.”

“Numpty?” My eyebrows lifted. “That’s a new one.”

She just frowned at me and sent my body temperature climbing. Her

breasts brushed against my pecs as we rotated, and she smelled like a garden by the sea again. My dick practically knocked on her entrance and there was no way I could hold her close and keep her unaware of her effect on me.

Her breath hitched as she felt it. She cleared her throat. "I'm surprised you think I can dance at all."

"Why wouldn't I?"

She stilled and her gaze went sharp as she scrutinized me. "You wouldn't be the first one tonight." Her head flicked toward the table where Matt and his friends sat. They looked like ass-hats. That's where I'd first noticed her, through a sea of people. A fiery head of hair, laughing in profile during trivia. Matt had leaned his head her way and I'd seen red.

"He said you can't dance?"

Her head tipped to the side. "I mean, it's a fair assumption to make. Doesn't mean it's polite. I'm just surprised you aren't in his naysaying camp."

I stared at her. "That's what you think of me? That I'd insult you like that?"

Her friend was wending her way through the crowd. I saw her out of the corner of my eye. That meant I didn't have much time left. I either had to beg for more of Nairne's attention—which absolutely was not in my nature—or I had to give her up. That one didn't come easily, either.

"Zed, are you joking with me?"

"No," I snapped. "Why the hell would I joke about it? Any guy who says a woman can't dance is an asshole. I'm a bit of a bastard, I know, but I'm not a jerk, Nairne. You're beautiful and fit. You're a woman. I've no doubt you have all the necessary moves."

Her gaze dropped to the ground as she bit her lip, and the deference of the gesture went straight to my already throbbing cock. The idea of watching this queen sink to her knees...I'd grab that maddening auburn mane and yank it until her gaze met mine.

Take out my cock. Flatten your tongue and open your throat. You'll breathe when I say you can.

Shirley Temple joined us. "You tired? Ready to go?"

Nairne nodded and looked at me peculiarly. Her friend left and came back with something that made my gears grind to a halt. A black wheelchair.

What? How had I never noticed?

But it wasn't one of those hospital clunkers. It was low and compact.

Nairne sat like it was a relief and lifted her legs to settle on a foot bar.

I stared at her with a mixture of shock and rage. There was nothing rational about my reaction, but I was livid with her. That she'd kept this from me. Somehow, unlike Matt and his friends, and probably everyone else on the board, everyone else in her life, I'd had no fucking clue about this.

"MacGregor," I said. She glanced up at me as my hand flicked toward the door. "Outside."

Nairne crossed her arms. "Forgetting a word?"

I ground my teeth. "Please. Outside, *please*."

She rolled her eyes and pushed herself past me. "Tell Tommy thank you, Elodie. And close my tab for me, will you?"

Shirley Temple nodded and frowned between us. Nairne yanked open the door and maneuvered past it onto the sidewalk, then spun herself around to face me. Looking down at her while speaking wasn't what I wanted. I dropped into a chair at one of the café tables outside and scraped it along the sidewalk until my legs caged hers in.

"You kept this from me."

She laughed. "Seriously, Zed? You haven't noticed? I don't believe that. And even if you somehow didn't, why would I talk to you about it?"

"Tell me."

Nairne frowned. "It's none of your business."

I growled and raked a hand through my hair. "I'll rephrase. Are you all right?"

Her face softened marginally. "I'm fine. You don't need to worry about me."

Easy for her to say. I was getting pretty good at it. She'd been taking up real estate in my head, swallowing up my thoughts like developers buying up rows of Boston's historic homes and tearing them down. Nairne's impact felt equally devastating.

How had I missed this? I wracked my brain. Both meetings she'd been sitting at the table. I hadn't seen a thing. Granted, I'd given her a wide berth because she was too attractive for my sanity. The table had hidden the wheels, then. And then at the Esplanade, that explained the unusual bike.

I leaned forward. "I've never seen it before. Why didn't you say anything?"

"We barely talk unless you're questioning my abilities and implying I'm unfit for your organization."

I reeled. “I took your advice, agreed to act on it. What do you need, a goddamn trophy?”

She glared at me. “I have plenty of those on my own, thanks. I don’t need a fucking thing from you.”

Fuck that. Yes, she did. I grabbed the back of her neck and crashed our mouths together. Her fingers raked through my hair as she tugged, then moaned against my mouth. I nibbled her lips, biting and tasting them roughly as I found that pile of auburn and fisted it. Her moans hit my bones like a tuning fork and kept reverberating. Nairne was shockingly pliable. Her mouth opened to let me kiss her how I wanted. And I did just that. For the first time in my life, whiskey tasted incredible. On Nairne’s tongue it was sweet and warm.

The door flew open and slammed shut. She pulled back and stared at me in wide-eyed horror. Then her hand flew up for what I knew was an incoming slap. My grip wrapped around her wrist before her palm could connect with my face.

“You don’t want to do that.”

“Believe me,” she seethed, “I do.”

I tugged her toward me, until our noses nearly touched, and locked eyes with her. “Then what were those last ten seconds?”

Her free hand moved to my chest to brace herself and I felt her claws sinking through my shirt. I wanted them to rake down my skin until they gripped my cock.

“A lapse in judgment. Errant hormones. You smell nice, and I’m tanked-up.”

“Thanks, it’s custom. And drunk? No, you’re not. Stop lying.”

“Let go of me.”

I did. I wanted nothing more than to possess the woman’s body, but I never took what wasn’t given freely.

She pushed back and stared at me. “You’re arrogant and conceited. You’ve downplayed my credentials and questioned my intellect, and now you kiss me like that. What the hell’s wrong with you?”

I stood. Damn good question she had. What the hell was wrong with me? She didn’t listen to me or make my life any easier. She was argumentative and defiant. I’d kissed her because that sharp tongue needed to be taught how to do something other than smart-mouth me. But I knew that answer would probably land me a punch to the nuts.

“I don’t question your intellect, Ms. MacGregor. I never have. I have... expectations is all. I wanted to ensure you were prepared to meet them, and you’ve more than proven yourself. I hold you in incredibly high regard.”

She folded her arms. “You have an odd way of showing it.”

I ran my fingers through my hair. “I apologize. It won’t happen again.”

It couldn’t. We were all kinds of wrong for each other. Oil and water. Dominating, cynical brute and a first-rate ball-busting spitfire.

She was flushed and her lips looked stung from my kisses. Hair roughed up from my fist. My body was wound tight with unmet need, and staring at her in this state wasn’t helping. I wanted to bend her over the table and fuck her until she screamed herself hoarse with pleasure.

Shirley Temple bounced out of the pub and found us. Elodie, was that her name? Nairne stared at me hard as I walked backward to the door. Elodie grabbed my shoulder as we passed each other.

“Fuck with her, and I will end you,” she hissed.

I shrugged her off. “I respect Nairne far too much to fuck with her. You can rest easy on that. Otherwise, what she and I do or don’t have is none of your damn business.”

Her eyes drifted toward Nairne who’d started away from us down the sidewalk. French wasn’t one of my languages, so her next words, whether warning or otherwise, fell on deaf ears. She skipped past me to catch up to Nairne.

I had to figure out why this woman was stuck like a poison in my system. This was absurd. Lucas stepped through the doorway, hands in his pockets, and a concerned look on his face. “All right, there, Zeddy?”

“Nope. Come on, peanut. I’ve got a problem to deal with.”

Lucas shook his head. “I don’t think I’m going to like this.”

I took his elbow and turned him with me. “I know you’re not.”

EIGHT

Zed

ROSE KENNEDY GREENWAY was mercifully empty. As we came into the North End, I heard the harbor's steady current and caught glimpses of its dark glassy water. So much foul shit hidden beneath its pristine surface. Just like where we were headed.

"You're sure that's what she said?" Lucas asked. He spoke French, and I'd tried repeating what I'd heard from the spitfire's sassy friend.

"Think so. What's it mean?"

Lucas pinched his lips. "Nothing nice. Let's leave it at that."

I laughed and turned onto Cross Street and gunned it through a yellow. Why yield when you could power through? "Figures."

"So, what's the plan?" Lucas' fingers drummed on his leg as he watched me uneasily.

"Someone I need to see. I could use some advice."

Lucas peered out the window and groaned. "I love when you're cryptic and driving me into the heart of mafia territory."

"I'm not being cryptic. I'm thinking. Nothing wrong with thinking before you speak. *In bocca chiusa non entrò mai mosca*. That's what Dad always told us as kids."

Lucas shook his head. "Few men frighten me, but your father is undoubtedly one of them. The man's too squeaky clean." Lucas knew my general background, but he was clueless about the depth of my connection to this world we were driving toward.

I laughed and flew right onto Fulton. "He's harmless. But that's all you're getting from me. I don't talk about family dynamics, Lucas. It's too

complicated. And I like you alive.”

“See, exactly that. You’re terrifying, the lot of you. You live on the other side of town in Beacon Hill, all posh and above board. But then here we are, driving up to some laughably stereotypical restaurant that is obviously a front.”

There was a spot close by and I took it. “Who said anything about a front? The Genovese were the first Italians to settle in Boston. We’ve had our hands in everything since 1860, restaurants included.” I reached across him, opened the glove compartment, and took out my gun.

“Oh, Christ.” Lucas sighed.

I checked the mag for bullets, then clicked it back in. “Just relax when we’re in there, okay? Don’t get all jumpy like you did at Teo’s birthday last year.”

He stared at me as I shoved my gun in the back of my jeans and threw open the door. “I don’t like this side of you, Zeddy. Not one bit. Where’s the good boy from Beacon Hill?” Lucas slammed the car door shut behind him and took in the three-story brick façade.

“Long gone,” I muttered. The lights were still on and *trallalero* music wafted from the front windows. “Luc, relax. The gun’s just a precaution, and this won’t take long. Just follow my lead, drink what they give you—grappa, wine, just smile and drink it—and don’t touch the women’s tits.”

He blew out a heavy breath and shoved his hands in his pockets. “If I die tonight, I’m going to haunt you for the rest of your days.”

“Sounds awful. Like having Monty Python in my head all the time.” I fucking hated British satire.

Lucas laughed. “There you are. So, remember how much you don’t want the voice of John Cleese tormenting you, and get me out of here alive, all right?”

I shouldered open the door. “Deal.”

Nella kept the place tidy. Stereotypical checkered tablecloths. Bottles stuffed with dripping candles. People with an appetite for *more* than decent Italian food. They hungered for money and unadulterated power. There was a feeling I got whenever I came here. It was toxic and brimming with the self-serving, greedy impulse that was as old as Cain killing Abel. An impulse whose nefarious implications I spent every moment I could trying to reverse.

What I was doing was suicidal. Running a mafia syndicate while piece by piece weakening its network and working with law enforcement to

undermine its prosperity. I was too dirty to stand blameless before the non-criminal world, and I was too clean to belong or confide in any of the mafia. It was lonely and exhausting, but I was nearly a decade in and so disturbingly used to it. The cycle of insanity was as normal to me as waking up and taking a shit.

Margarita stepped from behind the bar as we walked in. “Zeddo, *ciao*.” She kept her eyes down in respect, then lifted them slowly. They flicked left and up, tracking Lucas’ height. “And who’s this? *Buonasera, cicognone*.”

Popped hip. Wide smile. Rita was flirting and I didn’t have time for it. “Where’s Nella?”

She kept smiling at Lucas. “In the back. Etto’s in trouble.”

“Great.” I smacked Lucas on the arm. “Just stay here and don’t let her seduce you.”

Rita said something sassy in Italian that I ignored. She had a mouth on her, but she was Teo’s problem, not mine.

“Aye, aye, captain.” Lucas dropped on a bar stool and I left him to Rita’s devices.

Antonio was nowhere to be seen, but his aura was everywhere. My vision years ago had become our reality. You never saw the Don’s face. Nella was his arms and feet, and I was allegedly his soul, god help us. A table of capos sat in the corner and tipped their chin my way. I walked by, patted shoulders, threw around bullshit in Italian, and smiled like I didn’t hate them. We commiserated over Joey and his filthy business as if everything else that happened in our faction wasn’t just as foul, until I caught a punctuated expletive ringing from the kitchen.

I excused myself under the pretense of seeing what the volatile second in command was screaming about, then strolled back. Garlic and fresh basil hit my nose as I swung open the kitchen door and found Nella looking pissed as she ripped into Etto.

She slammed her hands on the counter. He sighed as he stood and dipped his head to me in deference while Nella cussed him out. When she was done ranting, she pressed one finger to her cheek, which Etto met with a kiss. Then he walked backward, facing her, until his ass hit the door. I didn’t get the appeal of bottoming like that, but to each their own.

The door slammed behind Etto while she stared him down. “*Stronzo*.”

“Nella.” I sat at a stool by the counter and looked her over. She was forty-five and still sexy as hell, especially when she was pissed. And she knew it.

“*Consigliere, ciao.*” She kissed me on the cheek and ruffled my hair.

I took her hips and squeezed hard. She didn’t flinch. “Poor Etto. What’d he do now?”

She smiled. “It’s part of how we play. He likes a good whipping.” One step out of my grip and she walked to the wall of glassware. “Now, you. *Che cosa è?*”

“Why do you think I have a problem?”

She pulled down two glasses, then tucked a bottle under her arm. Uncorked it with her teeth and shot it out. “Because you never come to me like this unless there’s trouble.” Blood-red wine filled each glass and sloshed as she slid mine toward me. “Talk.”

I drank half the chianti and set it down. She was right. I couldn’t betray our world as regularly as I did and keep her in close confidence. “A woman.”

“*Ovviamente.* What about her?”

Red waves swirled against the glass while I spun its stem. “She’s not my type.”

Nella frowned and set down her wine. “Sexual attraction? Fantasies? Desire? You want to fuck her, *sì?*”

I laughed into my glass. “I can’t stop thinking about it.”

“Then she’s your type.”

I froze and lowered my wine. “She’s not. She’s obstinate and sharp and maddeningly confrontational. Not to mention, a woman like that in my life is a huge liability.”

Nella leaned forward and covered my hand with hers. Crimson fingernails. Olive skin like mine. “Liability, yes, but that’s only if she *meant* something to you. They can’t break your heart if you never give it to them. Remember that.”

I didn’t need to be reminded, but the reality of what I’d admitted sat between us, that there was a woman I’d seen and felt that potential for. It scared the shit out of me.

Nella had a deep drink of her wine and set it down. “Keep your heart out of it and enjoy her. Because the fact is you respond to her, and that leaves only two possibilities, *caruccio*. The first is that she is as you say, not meant to be dominated, and you aren’t who you are sexually, as genetically factual as your papa’s hair and your mama’s eyes. That *the lifestyle* is not something you need.”

My body tensed. The thought of living without that form of sanity and

control made me nauseated. Nella stared at me and smiled slowly. “Consider how unlikely that is, as I tell you your second option.” Her nail scraped against my skin, until she drew a thin line of blood. “Or that *is* who she is. She just doesn’t know it yet. And there’s something inside of her that fits with you, that makes sense.”

I withdrew my hand and sucked the blood away, frowning at her. “She’s not. She’ll never be like that. And she’s physically...vulnerable. I could hurt her.”

Nella sat back and twirled her wine. “Pain isn’t your kink. You don’t need to hurt a woman. In fact, you prefer not to, unless she gets off to it.” Nella grinned widely. “I’d know.”

She’d taught me, trained me in the art of breaking through a woman’s mind without ruining her body, and extracting the pleasure of her release from the depths of my control. Back then, Nella had run a finger around my cat eyes. *Tigre*, she’d called me. *Fottimi come l'animale che sei*. Then she had told me to fuck her like the animal I was.

The first time I clutched Nella’s throat, slammed into her, and told her exactly how she was going to take my cock, I came so hard I couldn’t breathe. My exacting need for order clashed with the extreme chaos of my life. I’d needed relief, and that desperation spun a web of live wires that fused into one central outcome—control. Taking a woman like Nella had silenced my unquiet mind like nothing before or since. I’d been eighteen, and I hadn’t looked back. My universe, as far as I could influence it, was control. On the field. In the boardroom. In my bedroom.

I stared into my wine. Lucas and Rita laughed in the front room, and I envied Lucas for having a life where you could laugh like that. Where death didn’t follow you, where trying to do the right thing actually translated into good things happening.

Nella drank again from her glass and looked me over. “Domination is versatile. You can break her without hurting her.”

“I don’t want to break her.” That was Nella’s realm. The wine went down easy and I set the glass on the stainless steel with a soft *clink*. “I want to possess her.”

Nella stood and ran her nails through my hair. “Then do it, *gnocco*. Take her to your bed, teach her the ways. Show her how she holds the power, as much as you. Her surrender is her strength.”

I scrubbed my face. Nairne surrendering. It was comical. “Thanks,

Nella.”

“You don’t believe me, but I know you. I taught you everything, and I’ve been doing this a long time.” She stepped closer and her stilettos clacked on the tile. Her hands slid up my front and she grasped my face. “Trust me?”

I smirked. “Always.”

“Zeddo.” She sighed, as she dropped her hands. Her eyes searched mine and she looked poised to say something important.

She leaned her hip on the counter and fished her hand along the shelf for her cigs. Even in her heels, she was just short of reaching them, so I leaned up, slid the glass ashtray, Zippo, and pack of Marlboros down into her hands.

“*Grazie*,” she said.

I nodded, folded my arms, and waited.

Her exhale politely blew out the side of her mouth, away from me. “There’s talk.”

I kept my face straight. I did trust Nella...ninety-nine percent of the time. Her path was crooked, but it trended positively, toward the less despicable parts of the life. Yet, she was ambitious. Even though she was above me in rank, my influence as a man who was known and well-respected superseded hers. And sometimes, I caught her looking at me with a hunger that exceeded even our old boundaries.

“Care to elaborate, *vipera*?” Viper. It was our joke. She’d been the one to strike and make me bleed on the night I fell into this upside-down world where everything that I called evil was pronounced good.

“That you broke *omertà*. You’re pushing too much, too soon.”

I rolled my eyes. “They were practically busted already. I’m trying to make sure people clean up their shit before the feds throw us all in jail and forget about the key.”

I was good at lying. I’d been doing it for years. Nella’s eyes narrowed. “You should be more careful.”

I rolled my shoulders and tried not to connect her warning to whomever had planted the bug in my pocket. Thank god I hadn’t spoken with any of my contacts. I was careful. I covered my time with soccer practice and used burner phones. But if I’d had that damn thing in my pocket, a burner phone would have been fucking useless. Somebody was upping the ante, no denying it.

“Nella,” I spoke her name low, with promise. We hadn’t fucked in years, because I didn’t bottom, and each year that passed, she turned into more of an

alarmingly brutal top. But my effect was still there. I could distract her. Her eyes half-shut and she sighed as I slid my hand into her hair. “Thank you for your concern. But it’s unwarranted.”

Her cigarette ash was an inch deep and it fell, a cloud of dying embers that drifted to the floor. Her caramel eyes snapped open as she dragged on her cig once again and blew a dragon’s plume of smoke out her nose, this time right in my face. “Of course, Zeddo. Of course.”

I dropped my hand as she stared at me. She was tricky to read but something was behind her gaze. Warning. Confusion.

I nodded and left the kitchen. Through the front door. Lucas by the elbow. Outside.

The sounds of the harbor and sparse midnight traffic soothed my racing mind. Slow pulls of air brought my breathing to a survivable speed.

“Hang on,” Lucas said. He peered over his shoulder as the door shut behind him. “I was about to—”

I faced him, and he stopped in his tracks.

“Christ, what’s the matter?”

I ripped open the Ferrari and turned on the ignition. “Nothing. Time to go.”

So many parallel thoughts were flying through my head. I was compromised, I was stuck, and I had no long-term sensible plan for dealing with it. That was true for both the world we were driving away from, and the woman I couldn’t stop driving toward.

Lucas stared at me uneasily. “Now what?”

I pulled onto Fulton and floored it out of this godforsaken part of town. “If I only fucking knew.”

NINE

Nairne

IN AN EARLY GENETICS ELECTIVE, I learned that humans select their mate based on how they smell. Typically, the scientific explanation for people's behavior was thrilling. But this one scared the living piss out of me. You're telling me my nose picks the man I'm going to promise my life to? Not that I had any such plans, but still.

It came down to pheromones, which your major histocompatibility complex (a sort of fancy immune system that's analyzing gene compatibility) screens for genetic difference. The greater the difference, the more intense the response—an evolutionary trick to avoid inbreeding and poor genetic pairings.

“Here again,” my professor had said, *“we see science demonstrating the truth of a pre-modern adage—opposites do attract.”*

Bloody pheromones. I tried to forget how he tasted. The scent of him. Like that intoxicating smell after rain. Ozone and wet earth. Clear, electrified air that makes you breathe deep. It's called petrichor. Petrichor, expensive soap, and warm earthy male—that was Zed's essence. When he'd kissed me, those stealthy olfactory saboteurs made me forgot every principle I had about snogging arseholes who made me want to bash their brains in with my arm crutches. I was a helpless victim of my animal brain, and no amount of rationalizing with myself changed the fact that I wanted him.

“Ms. MacGregor?”

My gaze snapped to his. “Yes?”

He'd gone all out today, probably to punish me. To test me. For saying I didn't want him, for saying that kissing him had been an error in judgment

rather than the only thing I could think about when I wasn't distracting myself with lab work and annotating my research thesis.

Charcoal trousers hugged his muscular arse and stretched down his powerful legs. Crisp white shirt strained against built shoulders and a trim waist where ridges of abs pressed against the material. Impressively built, in beautiful proportion to his height and stature. His hair was dark as bitter chocolate and its thick waves looked wet.

He smiled slowly, and I fantasized about slapping that smirk right off his gorgeous face.

Damn him.

"I said I was hoping for your thoughts on how Matt wrote the research component. Does it reflect what you recommended?"

I'd read the final draft of the proposal that morning, so this time I could save face. I had no idea what he'd been saying before because I'd been too distracted, bouncing between hatred and hunger.

"Yes. It's broad enough to invite a diverse set of interests, and specific enough to indicate what we're willing to incorporate in terms of research and medical care."

Zed's mouth twisted as if I'd irritated him. Like he'd wanted to catch me unawares.

"Good." He swiveled his seat—a habit of his apparently—and I imagined his thighs flexing as he did. A rush of arousal flooded my knickers. "That's all we need then, unless anybody has anything else?"

Somebody did, of course. I tried to focus on the papers, flipping through my portion to triple check it was exactly how I wanted it, while one of the older fellows blathered on about the socioeconomic writeup. I felt Zed watching me and glanced up to meet his gaze. He didn't blink, eyes locked on me as he answered his coworker.

Too intense. I looked away first, gaze down on the proposal once more. Papers shuffled and chairs scraped as people filed out. I tried to be as nondescript as possible and blend in with the exodus, but failed.

"Ms. MacGregor." His voice had an edge that made it impossible not to stop and turn his way.

"Mr. Salvatore."

He leaned in, palms splayed on the table, staring into me. "Have dinner with me tonight."

I laughed. Loudly. His face didn't change, but for his striking eyes that

blinked slowly like an unamused jungle cat.

“Why?” I asked.

“Because you’re a foodie. And I know all of Boston’s best kept culinary secrets. You won’t be disappointed.”

I clicked on the brakes and folded my arms. “You know nothing about me. Why would you—”

“I know what you taste like. I know that you’re freakishly smart and you’ve got a body that I can’t stop thinking about fucking. That you liked when I kissed you. That’s enough to start.”

My swallow echoed in the room. “I don’t think it’s wise. We’re not well-suited.”

Not what the pheromones say.

Sod off to the fucking pheromones. We were terrible for each other.

He pushed off the table, stalked toward me. Pressed a hand on each of my push rims and slid his nose along my jaw. “Bullshit.”

I was throbbing and I couldn’t breathe right. This wasn’t sane. And it wasn’t simple neurochemistry at work. It was something infinitely more complex, more dangerous.

“We’re pheromonally compatible,” I conceded. “But that’s the extent of it. We’re going to kill each other if we try to have a civilized conversation.”

“Who said anything about conversation?” He was teasing. His lips whispered against my neck and heat danced over my skin.

“I did. I don’t eat in silence.” I breathed in unsteadily. “You’re European, *signore*. You understand. The meal is...well, it’s an important part of the day.”

One faint kiss against my skin and I gasped. He stood before I could formulate words. “Okay then, it’s decided. We’ll take our time, eat, and I’ll make you come.”

I shook my head. “I didn’t agree to any of it.”

“Seven o’clock, unless that’s too late.”

I frowned.

He stood back. Eyed me analytically. “You’re an early bird. Six, then. I’ll pick you up.”

I rubbed my face, warring with myself. New Nairne should turn him down and seal the breach he’d created. But Old Nairne reared her fiery head and loved the fresh air and vitality his persistence ushered in.

I meant to say no but instead I said, “You don’t even know where I live.”

He laughed. “You obviously don’t know enough about me, *fragolina*. Do some Googling. You’ll be glad you did. And keep your phone on you this afternoon.”

He swept up his messenger bag and strode toward the door. I was about to tell him he didn’t have my number either but thought better of it. Obviously, he did. Or he would. The man had resources and a frightening in on personal information.

“This afternoon?” I asked. “What for?”

He paused at the door. “If I tell you that, it ruins the fun. Six o’clock, MacGregor.”

The door slammed behind him and I sank in my chair. “For fuck’s sake.”



AS PROMISED, he’d made use of my mobile.

Zed: *Dress for upscale but not fine dining.*

Blouse and jeans is what you’re getting, Salvatore.

Zed: *No jeans, MacGregor.*

Leggings then?

Zed: *I’ll clarify. No denim. No pants. Dress or skirt.*

“High-handed twat.” I folded my mobile shut and squirmed in my seat. He talked like he expected obedience. Well, he was in for a treat then. I smoothed my pleated skirt that ran midcalf and cuffed my jean jacket. I wasn’t wearing denim on my *legs*, but I was wearing it somewhere. Bastard needed to be put in his place.

My quiet little neighborhood of Brookline was growing still with the evening. I waited outside the front door of my flat, watching the sun set over Amory Woods. Burnished gold kissed a horizon of fading leaves and whispered the promise of change.

When I’d left Europe, I knew I couldn’t live somewhere without seasons. I needed frozen earth, fiery autumns, lush summers, and blue-sky springs. Surroundings that spoke to seasons of existence. My new life’s unfolding felt somehow tied to this wooded sanctuary and its changing beauty.

I’d come here fresh off a winter’s months of agony and surgeries, to a spring of relearning the most fundamental aspects of autonomous living. Then my summer, killing university, loving my career trajectory, seeing the

fruit of my future ripen from the shit of my past. Now fall, the time to harvest all I'd worked for and earned.

Amidst all that was good, I still grieved sometimes, even as I took actual steps toward my old body's ability. Even if I walked independently one day, it would never be the same. *I* would never be the same. I could amble a short distance. Feel heat and pressure. Managed not to piss myself most days, and I could crawl across a room. Progress, they said. It's monumental progress.

Fuck progress. I wanted my legs in a dead sprint. I wanted my old body tearing up the pitch. My body had broken. That had been hard to accept. But at some point, I had to see the value in who I was from here on out, pressurized by the carbon of circumstance, the tensile wonder of steel. I was sheer bloody strength. I'd been broken but now I felt unbreakable.

A black Ferrari ripped through the twilight and slowed to a quiet purr in front of me. When Zed got out and circled the car, my hands went white around my push rims. Tensile. I was strong and agile. I could handle him.

He sighed as he took in my presence. "What part of 'I'll call you to come out when I'm here' did you miss?"

Maybe not. My palm already itched to slap him.

"None." I moved forward and bumped his shins on purpose. "I like watching sunsets. And I don't like being told what to do."

His mouth pursed and he glared at me. "That much is obvious. Despite your best efforts to irritate me, you look lovely."

I brushed lint off my jean jacket and smiled. "Thanks." He stood tall and straight. Dark jeans—the hypocrite—slate button up, black blazer. My mouth went dry. "So do you. Especially the denim."

He opened my door without taking his eyes off me. "Come on, wiseass. Let's go."

I transferred over, pulled my legs in, and reached for my wheelchair, but it was up in his arms already, one tire being popped off.

"How did you...?" He disassembled it faster than I did.

"There's this thing called the internet. I looked it up." He tucked my chair in the bonnet and dropped into the driver's side. "Speaking of, did you do your homework, too?"

The engine roared to life and a rush of adrenaline flooded my system. I loved a fast ride. My little hand-controlled car was a sad replacement for what I'd driven in Paris.

"I did." He didn't need to know I'd already looked him up weeks ago,

though today's search had uncovered some new gems of information. "Quite the world you hail from. I'd never heard of the Winter Hill Gang before. Who knew the Irish and Italians could get along so well?"

Zed laughed. "My parents."

I stared at him in profile. Long nose with a bump on the bridge that tipped his appearance from refined into rugged. Lips that weren't too full. Dark, thick lashes. Cheekbones with a drop-off sharper than the bluffs back in Scotland. He smelled like some kind of sexy soap and rain again, and I wanted to lean into him like a hot bath.

"The politics of your life must be complex." That was understating it. I'd read everything from conspiracy theories that he led his family's territory of the New England Mafia, to op-eds about his golden image public service, and everything in between. He held an edge of danger, but when I was around him, I never sensed evil. Danger was one thing—the potential to do violence, the ability to enact harm. But the impulse for it? The blackness in a soul to violate the soul of another? My instinct said he didn't have it. And since the Dark Days, my whole debacle with a psychopathic man in Europe, I had a pretty keen radar for these things.

He glanced my way, then back to the road. His body was forever calm, no movement undeliberate. A jungle cat, shoulders rolling as it stalks through the grass. "They are. I've figured it out fine, though."

I stared at him. "You don't seem to court danger. Everything about you is above board. At least that's appearances."

Zed smirked and drove us toward the harbor. "I'll say this. My path's a little sticky, and sometimes there's more to circumstances than meet the eye. Now, what about you? Why are you here?"

My fingers laced together while I stared out the window. "MIT's the best for my studies. And I needed out of Europe for a while." Another understatement. I'd fled the place, and the Dark Days were the last thing I wanted to talk about.

His fingers drummed the steering wheel and he stared intensely at the road, like it might give him the information I hadn't. We stopped in front of some place where the scent of wine and herbs infused the air. My stomach growled.

He smiled as he pulled the keys out of the ignition. "You approve then."

I went to smack his arm, but he caught my hand and interlaced our fingers. The restaurant door opened, and light poured out abruptly like the

flash of a camera.

“Will there be press?” I hadn’t even ticked off my usual list of worries as we drove here. The man was a PR hot commodity. Of course, there’d be press.

“Would it matter?” His thumb dragged along my palm and I wanted that touch elsewhere. Further south where I ached, since he’d ripped open my self-containment.

“A little. I don’t like paparazzi. Had a bad experience when I lived in France.” I tried to withdraw my hand.

He frowned. Squeezed it tightly. “This place is off their radar. It’s one of the reasons I chose it. You’re safe here. Whenever you’re with me, don’t doubt that.”

He let go of my hand and threw open the door. Tossed the valet his keys and popped open the bonnet. He promised safety like he had control over the indiscriminate forces of life. Like he could shield me from whatever might come. He was arrogant and his pledge was preposterous. I shouldn’t even entertain believing him.

For some odd reason, I wished I could.

TEN

Zed

HER EYES CAUGHT candlelight like gemstones. Jade. Emerald. Glittering dark. She drank her whiskey and hummed while she scanned the menu. We needed to talk about her body's mechanics, because I'd told myself I wasn't touching her until I knew more, and I couldn't go much longer without contact.

"I ordered ahead," I said. "*Prix Fixe.*"

She glanced up at me. "You just ordered without my input? What if I don't like what you chose?"

I shifted in my seat until our knees knocked. Better. "Without your input, yes. But I certainly considered what I thought you'd like."

She stared at me like I'd told her the moon was purple.

"Humor me," I said. "Try what I picked, and we can go from there."

Her head tilted to the side. "Are you...are you always like this?"

"Like what?" My jaw clenched as I braced myself for her contempt.

She leaned her elbows on the table. "Controlling doesn't seem adequate." Her tone was observational. Curious. A scientist poking around her environment. Judgment suspended, for now.

I picked up my wine and spoke into the glass. "Dominant."

She froze, then leaned closer. "I'm sorry, what did you say?"

Even the littlest things that obeyed my need for order and regularity satisfied me. It scratched an itch, setting the base of the glass on its circular imprint on the tablecloth. "You heard me."

She glanced around and dropped her voice. "Like whips and chains and ___"

“You don’t have to whisper. This place is safe. And no. I don’t need props or any of that bullshit. I can use them, but they’re not necessary. It’s more about the lifestyle.”

She swallowed. “You’re a sadist?”

“No.” I drummed my fingers on the table and looked her over. “I tend to fuck rough, but I don’t want to hurt you. What I *need* is control. That’s it, really.”

Nairne’s eyes went to the ceiling as she threw back the rest of her whiskey. “That’s it really,” she muttered. “You’ve got to be joking me. Do I look like controllable material?”

“Not one fucking bit, which is why you’re presenting a real problem for me.” I leaned an elbow on the table and slid my other hand beneath it, up her skirt. So much for having a talk before I touched her. She was too tempting. I knew she wouldn’t speak freely here, so I did things old school—read her as I went.

Her eyes shut and then blinked slowly open. She liked it. My hand went higher and grasped her lean thigh. Her skin was impossibly smooth. Touching her made my cock stone.

“What’s the problem?” Her voice had gotten fainter. Smokier. Aroused.

“I have to have you, Nairne. And you want me, too.” She didn’t even bother denying it this time, which was nice. “But you’re the antithesis of what works in my life.”

I watched her throat as she swallowed again, and imagined how it would feel to clasp her windpipe, drill into her with those long legs draped over my shoulders.

“Then why do you want me?” She shifted her leg slightly so that my thumb grazed the edge of her panties. Even while surrendering herself, she vied for control. Topping from the bottom. Saw that one coming from a mile away.

“I haven’t figured that out yet,” I admitted. “Neither have you.”

Her breath stuttered. “Meaning, this is a very bad idea,” she rasped.

I couldn’t stop staring at her lips.

“Pretty much. But against my better judgment, I’m taking you anyway.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “Taking me? As if I’m yours to possess.”

Dinner was set down and I kept my hand right where it was. I wasn’t dignifying her doubt with a spoken response. Nonverbals held more power.

I ate and drank one-handed, as she sat there devouring *lapin a la cocotte*

and keeping the kind of composure no woman should have when a thumbnail stroked her clit over the fabric of her panties. Pure serenity, as I played with her in a trendy Provençale restaurant. She had to have some kind of kink to her. No straight-laced, vanilla woman would sit in public, silently, as she dissolved into a puddle of soaking arousal under my touch. Outside Henderson's she'd said her response to me was anomalous—poor judgment, traitorous hormones. Anomalous, my ass.

I took a bite of food and chewed methodically. Swallowed. Sipped my wine. This had to be a dream. I touched her because I wanted to, but I'd been prepared for a war of words. Instead, this. I was baffled.

“Like it?” I asked.

She kept her eyes down and nodded. “Yes. You chose well, thank you.”

Eyes downcast. Composed. Like I wasn't torturing her on the edge of orgasm.

The pad of my thumb increased its pressure and swept back and forth against her swollen little bud. I could do this all night. Like a fucking metronome. She was fascinatingly disciplined. Her panties went from politely damp to drenched and she bit her lip when I slipped my finger beneath the soft material. She felt incredible—bare and hot. Silken. Wet.

She chewed her bite and took a sip of water. When she set down the glass, I picked up my pace, making her arch forward. She hid it behind a gentle stretching of her neck. Left. Then right. Nothing else. She kept her eyes down on her food and her mouth shut. I expected a lot of things for trying a stunt like this on her, but her silence was not one of them.

Nella's words echoed in my head. *There's something inside of her that fits with you, that makes sense.*

Her cheeks grew flushed, and she couldn't keep her breath steady anymore. Her fingers curled around the napkin as her eyes sunk closed. A deep inhale through her nose halted before it left her mouth in a silent rush of air.

She'd come right against my hand and hadn't made a fucking sound. My cock was in hell, and my balls were so tight that sitting was torture. Her smile was a study in oxytocin release as she took another sip of water. I'd never seen a woman surrender and look so regal every second of the way.

“I think there's something you're not telling me,” I said. “You took that too well.”

She grinned and set down her glass. “I thought about telling you to piss

off, but you know what the hell you're doing. I figured I'd rather enjoy myself."

I brought my thumb to my mouth and sucked her juice. Tasted the honey tang of her cunt. I could have come just from that.

Her eyes widened and her cheeks grew darker as she watched me.

"Enjoyment's the whole point, Nairne. Yours. Mine. That's it right there."

"That so?" She cleared her throat and set her silverware down. "Can't say that's what I've gleaned from the reputation of *the lifestyle*."

I tossed my napkin over my plate and sat back. "That's because you've probably never met someone who's actually in it."

"Like you."

"Like me, yes."

Her eyes narrowed and she folded her arms. "What's wrong with just being with me the...normal way? Getting to know each other. Regular sex."

I exhaled heavily and signaled for the check. "We'd get to know each other plenty. I'd have to know things about you that no one else knows, not your mother, your best friend, former inadequate lovers."

She stiffened at that. I understood, it sounded radical. That's because it was. You had to know each other inside out—triggers, history, limits, no-go zones.

"As for the physical aspect, *normal*...it's not satisfying. Take a gay guy fucking a woman. Some can get it up and follow through. Doesn't mean he derives pleasure from it. And frankly, based on how you just responded, I'm going to call into question whether you've actually ever found standard-fare fucking that pleasurable either."

Her cheeks reddened as she shook her head. "I've enjoyed pleasure plenty, thank you very much. I tend to value things like egalitarianism and consent."

I leaned in and tucked an errant mahogany strand behind her ear. "Value them, yes. Doesn't mean you get off on them. Plenty of sex can happen that doesn't look like consent but foundationally relies on it."

"What do you mean?"

I was going to blow my load if we sat here much longer talking about bedroom games and anything that reminded my cock how much it wanted to be balls-deep inside her. "I'll explain later."

"Zed." She looked impatient, frustrated.

“Nairne.” My thumb grazed her jaw. Her chin. Her skin was porcelain. Flawless. Breakable.

I don't want to break her. I want to possess her.

“Tell me something,” I whispered. “Have you done this before? Let a man touch you in public, unprompted? Make you come while you drink your wine and watch the sun set over the harbor?”

She rolled her eyes.

Roll your eyes at me again and see where it gets you.

“Not exactly,” she hissed. “All right? No. Doesn't mean I'm some sexual deviant.”

“Precisely.” I smiled and slid my thumb down her throat. It landed in the divot at the base, where her pulse tripped. “You're a scientist. Tell me what we are?”

“Who?” she whispered.

“Us. Humans.”

Nairne cleared her throat and straightened as if talking science was incompatible with arousal. “Bipedal stance. Complex reasoning. Highly evolved animals, in essence.”

“Exactly.” I nodded. “Some of us are just a bit more in touch with our roots. You ever seen a stallion mount a mare? The tigress surrender to the big cat?” My lips ghosted along the shell of her ear as I leaned in. “Teeth sink into necks, claws into skin. Eyes soften, bodies open. A blissful flood of hormones that induce one thing—pleasure. They give in. And it's good. That's who we are. Animals. Some of us fuck like it.”

“Christ, man.” She sat back and shook her head at me.

“You're not fooling me. You're freakier than you let on.”

She stared at me and bit her lip. Hard. “Perhaps, but not like you.”

I would have bet you my Ferrari I couldn't get harder, but I did. “Okay, we're leaving.”

The check slid onto our table. I didn't have time for a card. I threw down a handful of hundreds and stood.

Nairne backed out and I followed her, watching the muscles in her arms flex as she spun the wheels forward. She had a long, willowy body and arms that looked like a dancer's. A million fantasies of how I'd take that beautiful physique, tease and build her to desperation, swarmed my thoughts.

The valet pulled up, traded me keys for a fifty, and left us alone. As I opened her door, Nairne frowned and stared into my car like it was the gate

to hell.

“What am I doing?” she muttered.

I crouched down because I needed to look into her eyes, and my hand slid to where her heart thundered in her chest. “Exactly what you want to do.”

She glanced from me to the car, then transferred in.

I stood and grinned down at her. “Time to test my theory, madam scientist, that you are a kinky freak. Way more than you let on. Tell me, Ms. MacGregor, how one tests a theory.”

Her auburn hair hit the headrest and she glanced over to me. “Experimentation, Mr. Salvatore. And god help me as I do.”

I pushed her door shut, set her folded wheelchair in the car, and walked on air to my side. Door closed, engine on. Window cracked, because she smelled too damn good and made staying level-headed ridiculously difficult. “God’s got nothing to do with it, MacGregor. And for the record, when you come, he doesn’t get the credit, either.”

I floored it onto Atlantic Avenue and sent us on a centripetal swing along the water’s edge. Nairne laughed and threw her head back. When I shifted two more gears, she was clutching my wrist, her eyes dancing with adrenaline. She looked exhilarated. Alive.

I’d given her that thrill. Her high and her joy were mine. *Mine.*

ELEVEN

Nairne

ZED PULLED in front of my flat and stepped out, smooth and silent, into the night. He seemed to look around, eyes sharp as he scanned the night. When he seemed satisfied, my door opened, and he caged me in.

“I’d like to come inside. Discuss some things. But I don’t know what’s too late for you. This shouldn’t be talked over when you’re tired or buzzed.”

I was neither. I was high on adrenaline from the drive and a number of other neurochemicals that had lots to do with erogenous zones. “You can come in.”

My flat was the bottom half of the house, so we went right in through the front door. Elodie had left for France on Sunday, so the place was back to its usual, unexciting quietness. I tossed my keys on the counter and headed straight to the kitchen for water. Leveraged the counter and stood. My legs were tired, and I had to lock my elbows so I wouldn’t drop, but I steadied myself and reached for the cabinet.

The only warning I had was an intake of breath before Zed’s body moved unnaturally fast. He was behind me, hands on my hips, and he looked both frightened and angry.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“*What’s the matter?* You almost fell on your ass just now. Scared the shit out of me.”

I laughed. “That was smooth. You should see me first thing in the morning.” I hated any form of preferential treatment. But for some reason, I knew he respected me too much for his concern to be tinged with pity. I liked his hands around my waist, his unfiltered worry over my unreliable legs.

“I’m all right,” I whispered. “Sit, why don’t you?”

His arms reached over mine, grabbed the glasses, and shut the cabinet. “Let me.”

He was close. And he smelled like sex in a thunderstorm. I leaned back into him and felt his cock flush against my arse. His nose dipped to my hair and slid against my cheek. “*Innamorata*, please, sit. Let me do this.”

His lips trailed along my neck and settled against my shoulder. One faint kiss. I wanted thousands more.

“Fine.” I sighed. “But only because you bribed me with that mouth. Kisses and Italian.” I didn’t understand the word he’d used, but I was a scientist who knew her Latin so I could guess. *Enamored? Lover?*

He laughed against my skin and swatted my arse. Gently. He was obviously capable of more, but I liked that he’d been cautious. He didn’t know my body yet. He barely knew me. I let him take over because he was clearly a man you picked your battles with. I curled up on my sofa while Zed joined with two waters. He set them down and cuffed his sleeves while staring at me.

His gaze was too much. It belonged to the intensity I’d lived for in my old life. Verbal sparring. Rough, belligerent sex. The friction and sparks of iron sharpening iron.

I drank a sip of my water and set it down. “What do you want to discuss?”

He shook his head. “You first. You like this, but you’re wary. I want to know why.”

My head quirked to the side as it so often did with him. He chronically skipped the first three steps in polite conversation. I liked his directness, but it still caught me off guard.

“I’ve had...bad experiences with being sexually impetuous. I want to get to know each other before we get intense. Take it slow.”

He stared at me. “Elaborate.”

I sighed, folded my arms. “No.”

He scrubbed his hair. “Fine, for now. But I need more from you at some point on that. Next.”

“No anal.”

A nod. “Keep going.”

“You’re very high-handed. When you talked about being animals...” I swallowed thickly. “I don’t like the idea of surrendering power.”

He waved his hand like shooing a fly. “I’m pushy, but you can always push back. I don’t want to control *you*. I simply demand a heavy hand in our dynamic. I need cooperation to keep my environment ordered. That make sense?”

I couldn’t figure out if it did or not. He drank his entire water in three slow gulps, and the bobbing of his Adam’s apple was more erotic than it should have been. The glass landed silently on the table and he peered up at me. “You have just as much power as me. It’s expressed in the bedroom differently.”

If he meant passively, the idea made no sense, but this was the point of going slow. I’d have time to figure out what he meant, if it was a crock of shit or just a complicated world that I was ignorant of.

“I have an important condition,” I said. “No falling in love.”

He grinned at me. “Something we can agree on. Though, I’m curious. You think people *choose* who they fall in love with?”

“I think you can choose what you do with your feelings for someone. What about you?”

Zed stretched his arm along the sofa. Hand splayed over my tartan throw. “I think the heart wants what it wants. I can’t promise not to fall in love with you, but I can promise that your smart mouth is plenty disincentive. And if not even that works, and I do fall hard and fast, I won’t tell you. How’s that?”

I stared into his eyes. “That’s not a very clear answer.”

He grinned again and revealed a dimple in his left cheek. “Persuasion and evasion are gifts of mine.” His smile disappeared as he leaned in and whispered over my lips, “No falling in love.”

One kiss, a chaste pledge. I pulled away first and tried to distance myself from his gravitational pull. “Now, sir, your turn. Let’s hear it.”

Zed sat back, eyed me carefully. “I need a partner who lets me do what I want to her, and does what I say when I touch her.”

I snorted into my water, but he went straight on.

“When we start having sex, I own your pleasure and when you come. If you need pain, I own that, too. I give you what you need, and your trust and compliance give me everything I need. I’ll be attentive to you. Make sure you take good care of yourself. And I’ll be demanding.”

My glass landed on the coffee table with a soft *thunk*. “Why do you need to own it all? Why can’t you just enjoy it with me?”

Zed quirked his head to the side. “That’s how I enjoy it. That I can elicit

responses and pleasure from you, that I know you that well. That I can trust you'll obey my directives as a means of ensuring safety and order. It...calms me. Makes my mind quieter."

"You need it."

"Yes." His eyes held mine. "It's not a choice for me."

"Zed, I...I'm my own person. I'm highly self-reliant."

He gently pulled my legs onto his lap. Started kneading my muscles like he knew their spastic witching hour was coming. "You're on your own?"

I nodded. "I don't count on others easily."

Those hands. Flexing as they loosened my muscles. Strength and gentleness conjoined. He pursed his lips, nodded, like he was deliberating over my words, weighing their implications. "Try with me. See how it feels. Let me think about things, take care of you. You just have to be flexible. Do some of what I ask without giving me shit about it."

My nipples hardened and I was wet. I liked giving him shit. "I'll consider it."

He rolled his eyes. "We're off to a brilliant start then." His hands paused. "I need to know what happened. What hurts."

"You mean, my spinal injury?"

"It's your spine?" His hands stilled entirely now.

"Yes. I'm paralyzed. Incomplete at my lumbar region. I have uneven sensation. Don't fold me backward or flog my scar, and I'll probably be fine."

He didn't laugh.

"I was joking about the flogging."

"Noted." His hands slid up my legs and ghosted my knickers again. "Discussing your body is more complicated than that. But we'll talk it out as we go, learn along the way."

"Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"You're not...you don't want me *because* I'm paralyzed, do you?"

He stared at me, didn't blink. "You think I have some kind of fetish for you? That I get off on a woman being in your situation?" He swallowed and his face darkened. "You're really asking me that?"

I shrugged. "You don't seem at all perturbed by my situation. You're not weirded out by having this kind of dynamic with a crip."

He flinched when I said that word. Most people did. Fuck other people's

sensitivities. It was my word for my reality. Reclaiming language signified power in the resilience of my disability. I used the word when I wanted, and I tended to click with others in my boat who did, too.

“I hate that word.”

“I love it. Get used to hearing it from me. Back to my point. You’re not fazed by this, so it gives me pause. I think most men would be.”

He took my jaw. “I’m not most men. And you’re certainly not most women. You’re a warrior, a queen. Unrelenting, powerful, tenacious. Fucking gorgeous. When I saw you, I had no idea you were in a wheelchair. And when I realized you were, it didn’t make a damn difference. Your intellect. Your beautiful body. That wiseass mouth. I wanted that. I want it all. Mine, entirely. But if you ever accuse me of objectifying you like that again, sexualizing your body’s trauma, you and I will be done. Am I understood?”

I blinked and swallowed. He still had my jaw in his grasp as I searched his eyes. He wasn’t lying. He didn’t like that I had to live this way. He didn’t pity it or get off on it either. He wanted me, and my paralysis happened to be part of who I was.

“Understood.” My voice was thin from the sharp angle at which he held my face. Slowly, his grip shifted. His thumb slid along my lips and the hand that had stopped on my thigh now drifted higher once more. I sighed as his fingers teased my slit. I couldn’t feel it all entirely, but I saw his hand move, watched his eyes darken.

“I don’t want to talk about it anymore,” I said.

“Then we won’t.” He kissed my neck, the base of my throat, the top of my breast. “In fact…” His finger dipped inside me and I gasped. “Right now we’re not going to talk at all.”



I LIKED my water so hot that the steam almost choked me. The powerful sensation of heat overrode pain for a brief time in my day. I sat on the bench in the shower and tried to psych myself up for getting out. My hair dropped water in a steady tattoo on the shower floor.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

My mobile rang. I kept it on the ledge of the shower and spun it to read the screen. *Zed.*

I tapped the speaker button and leaned back against the shower wall. “Good morning, sir.”

A heavy pause. The noise of traffic on the streets. “You said that ironically, but it still made me hard.”

I laughed, snapped a towel off the ledge, and threw it over my hair. “I dunno. I was raised with manners. *Sir* comes easily enough.”

“See, this is what I mean. You’re a natural in denial.”

I wasn’t submissive. We both knew that. I was too strong-willed. Opinionated. Independent. And I liked rowing with him too much to ever be the dominated type. Yet when his voice dropped, when he said what was being done...that was that. My mind might object, but my body sang. I liked some parts of his high-handedness, and not others. He’d just have to deal with my preferential contradictions then.

“What do you want, Salvatore?”

He laughed. “There she is. Spitfire and sass. I want you. Tonight.”

I frowned. “It’s game one. Wherever we are, I want to be watching.”

“You think I’d miss it? I like you. A lot. But I’m not missing the Sox in the World Series for anything.”

I smiled. “Excellent. I’m all yours then.”

“That you are.”

That note of possession. *That* I didn’t understand—how possession made him feel in control. To me, such a responsibility was the antithesis of control—*attachment* to someone who could be ripped away from you.

I could die. I could reject him. I could disappear. Why yoke himself to that vulnerability? If I could help it, I would never do it in my whole life.

Over the phone I heard the lock of his Ferrari chirp and the hum of water nearby, most likely the harbor. “Wear jeans and don’t forget a sweater. The temps dip below fifty, and you shiver like it’s your job. Save your appetite, and I’ll get you at five o’clock.”

“Now, Mr. Salvatore. However will you manage to have your fingers in my coot when I’m wearing the dreaded denim?” I transferred over to my chair.

He let out a burst of air that was either a laugh of amusement or exasperation. In the background, men’s voices echoed in lilting Italian.

“*Innamorata*,” he said on a sigh. “It’s a cunt.”

That word on his mouth was sin. I shivered and it wasn’t because I was cold from the end of my shower.

“And don’t underestimate me, Ms. MacGregor. I have my ways.”

TWELVE

Zed

I REALLY TRIED to avoid patronizing my family's restaurants because my relationship to them was complex to say the least. But when you have as many cousins as I did, it was pretty hard. Especially when Mike, first cousin on my mom's side, made the best fucking burgers.

Grease dripped down my wrists while I chewed and watched Nairne slide a French fry right between her lips and grin. We'd just had the conversation about her birth control and swapped clean bills of health. So naturally, every possible way that my bare cock could be in or on some portion of her beautiful body was blinding my thoughts from much else. And she certainly wasn't helping that. Dragging a thick, long fry against her lips was damned provocative and one hundred percent intentional on her part.

I glared at the fry as she rimmed her lips with it. "Enough of that."

She tipped the last of it in her mouth and chewed without acknowledging me. "When are we going to talk about the fact that you eat burgers practically raw?"

I tipped a shoulder and took another bite. "Nothing to talk about," I said around a mouthful.

She picked up her milkshake and took it with her as she shimmied deeper into the booth. A long pull from the straw had my cock throbbing, and she smiled as she licked her lips. It was either throw her over my knee and spank her little ass red right there, or ignore her. The first would land me in prison, and if I was going to prison for anything, it sure as shit wasn't that. I took the high road and had a swig of my beer.

She wore a blue Sox cap that made her hair look shockingly red, and her

emerald eyes sparkled in the shadow of the brim like two gems hidden in a cave. I'd liked her all polished in her boardroom outfits. Soft blouses and tight black pants. And I liked her dinner-out skirt and sheer jade top last time. But casual Nairne, chowing down bar food, smiling as she played footsie with me and threw baseball stats in my face, was an intersection of too many points of pleasure. Standing in the middle of them made it impossible to know what was safe to respond to, or what led down dangerous roads. She was hot chaos flying a hundred and twenty miles per hour straight at me, and I couldn't make myself dodge her impact.

"So, this place." She glanced around the restaurant, then speared her salad with a fork. "A relative's? O'Shea is your mother's family name, isn't it?"

I nodded. "They keep the paps away."

Her eyebrow quirked. "In exchange for?"

She was too quick with this shit. She'd already deduced that I walked a crooked path. Now she seemed on the cusp of deciphering exactly how I navigated it. Dad's way of dealing with the life had given me a rough roadmap. You accepted that you'd never be able to fix it as much as you wanted, and then you used your strengths as leverage to improve what you could. Mine was a reputation—respectable, direct, straight-laced. I held rapport with the cops because I covertly helped them bust the nastiest shit going down. I maintained *Cosa Nostra's* trust because I redirected them toward avenues that garnered law enforcement's slap on the wrist rather than a life-sentence, and made sure their bottom lines stayed healthy. I wielded power from a place of principle and enforced obedience that fell within the lines of my morality.

I almost explained it to her because she was a nerd for science, and this was always the metaphor that came to mind: My M.O. was the only way I'd found to change corruption from within the nucleus of evil's atom. Even if all I ended up with was a slightly less malignant mutation, it was better than pure toxicity. At least that's what I had to tell myself.

For example, this place laundered money. When I confronted Mike about it two years ago, I'd threatened retribution if they didn't terminate their business with sex traffickers. Hard fucking limit right there. Anybody else, they would have just blown my brains out and chucked my body parts into the harbor. But nobody was going to do that to me. I had powerful connections, a moral threshold that wasn't budging, and the position to enforce them both. Mike had cleaned his act up, and while the place was still far from above-

board, it was a hell of a lot better than it had been.

It helped that the place was already on the feds' radar. I didn't rat on Mikey, but I also didn't disabuse law enforcement that he was up to some shady shit when they came a-callin' a few months back. Two of the guys at the bar currently were undercover cops. The bouncer was, too. He sat by the door, emptying pockets and purses, and turned anyone with a gun or a camera right back onto the street.

I smiled at Nairne and stole one of her fries. Hers looked better than mine for some reason. "I can't really talk about it."

Nairne shook her head and jabbed her salad again. "I feel like I'm in the Sopranos when you talk like that."

Her leg began wiggling under the table and I lifted it onto my lap, flexed her foot, and started in on her calf. *Spasticity* she'd said. Painful muscle cramps that happened because her nerves were shit communicators now.

"I'm clean as a whistle. Always will be."

She chewed her food and eyed me up with a stare that felt like an x-ray. "I believe you."

"Good," I said.

It mattered to me that she had faith in me, that she didn't look at me and see the smear of my family's name, the cosmic weight of their corruption. Even if, when I caught my own reflection, I couldn't help but see it myself. After a few minutes, her leg settled, and I eased it down.

"How old are you, Zed?"

"Twenty-six. Why, too big an age difference?" I'd never asked her, but I knew hers. College senior. Twenty-one.

She frowned and I wanted to kiss that concerned look right off her face. It wasn't her job to worry. It was mine.

"You seem older than that," she said. "Like you carry more."

I shrugged and adjusted my ball cap. "I've always been an uptight asshole, if that's what you mean."

She knocked her knee against mine under the table. "I don't. You seem burdened for someone so relatively young. Where's your passion? Your joy?"

I drummed my fingers on the table. Nairne was jiggling the handle of a door I pretended didn't exist, shielding a room that no one had access to, including myself. "I'm content living here. Doing what I can. Playing the beautiful game."

She leaned forward. “How beautiful is it, really? No offense, but you’re playing in the States. You’ve no business here. I Googled you, remember? You were destined for the highest level of footie out there. What are you doing wasting your time here?”

I took her hand in mine and massaged her fingers because it gave me something to do while I told a truth that was a lie by omission. “I have responsibilities I can’t abandon. Staying here isn’t wasting my time.”

Her hand started to pull away, but I snapped it closed in my grip.

“Zed,” she said. A minute of silence sat between us, but I waited. “I get pissed about this because I know what you’re missing. I played footie in Europe. That’s how I got injured.”

Her words didn’t compute. “What did you just say?”

“I played for a professional team in Paris.”

I tugged at my hair, trying to make what she’d said seep into my brain. “You said you played professionally? Got *injured* on a field? A spinal injury? How?”

She nodded and spun her coaster on the table. “I have lumbar spinal stenosis. I’d been diagnosed by then. You familiar?”

I shook my head.

“Means I had compression around my vertebra. I got epidurals a few times when it got really painful, and I took more NSAIDs than most people do in their entire life. But it was manageable. And it was also a risk. It increased the chances that impact would irrevocably injure my spinal cord.”

My elbows hit the table. “You played, knowing that could happen?”

She shrugged. “It could have also happened if I was bumped by a car. If I’d taken a fall while hiking. If I’d slipped down a bank in the snow. I couldn’t not live my life because of the possibility that my life might change. I’d have an intact spine, but I’d hardly be living.”

I swallowed and squeezed her hands again. She was fearless. I respected her infinitely more and at the same time itched to throttle her for being so intrepid with her one body. “I can’t believe that happened. I’m sorry, Nairne.”

She waved it away. “We can talk more about it another time. I just wanted you to know...”

“You haven’t wanted to talk about it before. Why now?”

Nairne blushed and pulled her hands away. “I don’t generally like to get into it with a bloke until things get...”

I grinned. “Go on.”

She rolled her eyes. “You know what I’m saying. I’m not stroking your ego. It’s big enough.”

I sat back and smirked. “What you’re saying is you like me. Enough to tell me more about yourself.”

She blushed a deeper shade, cleared her throat, and redirected us. “I simply wanted you to know my background as a professional athlete. That I understand a bit more than you think about this life. The press. The pressure. The isolation that it engenders. And I really get hating the paps.”

My heart thundered in my chest. I’d said it teasingly, but her confession had impacted me. Her implicit trust, her empathy, they were a drill spinning deeper into my sternum. I didn’t invite understanding. I was terse to keep people away, or I smiled and kept my answers surface-level. Yet here she was, pushing a wall of buttons, sweeping past doors I’d blocked off and ignored, and showing me how perfectly she fit among and made sense of my insanity. Most of all, she was reaching out, meaning she felt safe with me. The woman was as closed-off as I was, if not more so. And she’d offered this little window into her past, a vulnerability I hadn’t seen coming one bit.

“Thank you,” I said. “For telling me.”

She smiled. My chest tightened as panic set in. Because Nairne wasn’t the only who’d made her way into my deranged inner sanctum. I’d followed her there, and I really didn’t like it. There, I had to examine the long game of my life. The years I was going to spend a slave to this unsatisfying world, without a wife or children, because fuck if I was bringing anyone else into this hell. I was stuck fending off murder while enabling fraud. Fucking women I didn’t care about. And living my entire existence in a city whose criminal history was as old as its founding. Nairne sat there and made me glimpse at a life I would never have.

I needed an exit. An escape route. She was dangerous. Crossing more wires, intersecting parts of my life that never overlapped. She got me thinking about realities I couldn’t stomach, asking me about vocation and life values, instead of accepting my deflections.

My throat had a wad of unease lodged in it, and I cleared it roughly. “Speaking of the paps, we need to talk about our next stop.”

Her water glass was halfway to her mouth. She stopped and looked at me warily. “All right.”

I caught and twirled a long red wave of hers between my fingers.

“*Fragolina*, you have two options tonight. One is...safer. You sit in a nice box with heaters and whiskey. Watch a certain ballgame from the cozy confines of upper crust comfort.”

Her eyes widened and I had to fight a grin. I’d surprised her. She didn’t seem like the easily surprised type.

“Or, you could sit in dugout seats—”

“Shut the fuck up!”

Fook. I loved how she said it. She slapped my shoulder and I let her because it was pure effusive joy.

“There’ll be cameras. You’d be seen with me. It’ll be colder, and you’ll have to settle for hot chocolate or Sam Adams. Your choice.”

Her hand slid down my arm and I let her touch me how *she* wanted. An unsolicited, spontaneous gesture of tenderness. The last woman I’d let touch me like that was my mother, maybe Molly at the funeral, and their impact was thankfully worlds away from Nairne’s.

“Zed, it’s too much. I can’t...” She slid her hand to my fingers, then interlocked them.

I linked them tighter as I stared at her. “Remember the deal? I get to do nice things for you. In exchange for being an asshole.”

She laughed. The sound broke the thin ice of the moment like a hot blade as our eyes settled on each other. I needed inside her, yesterday, the moment I saw her. For the time being, I’d settle for anything that stripped the layers of impossibility between us and shut up my buzzing mind. A broom closet and tasting her sweet cunt. That would do just fine.

“Well?” I prodded.

“The dugout, of course!”

I pulled out my wallet and threw down enough to cover the meal twice over and keep Mikey’s mouth shut about Zed bringing a female friend to the pub. We were in the back and I brought her wheelchair next to the booth. “Let’s hit the restroom before we go.”

She was mid-scooch when she processed my words and looked up at me. “Sounds wise,” she said slowly.

I kept my face unreadable and jerked my head toward the hallway.

“Private one’s down this way.” I had a key for the bathroom that Mike kept for personal use. If I remembered right, there was a loveseat outside the restroom area. A little enclave where a lady could powder her nose or snort a line of coke, depending on the caliber of woman Mikey decided to dip his

wick in that night.

Nairne paused her rims. “You’re up to something.”

I gently tugged another strand that looked amber under the pub’s warm lights, then released it. “Don’t read into it, *innamorata*. Come on.”

THIRTEEN

Nairne

WHEN I CROSSED THE THRESHOLD, he bolted the door behind us, lifting the brim of his ball cap enough that I could see his eyes. “I’ll wait,” he said.

I pissed and washed my hands. Took my cap off and stared at myself in the mirror. My hair was a mass of wild auburn, and I looked wary and flushed. Anticipation of the unknown had my heart pounding and a throb of arousal pulsing between my thighs. Why did I like it? The order. His low voice.

You like it because he’s exactly what you’ve always liked, just better. Rough. Passionate. An adversary in the battle for power.

The old me had been a junkie for that. I didn’t trust my judgment after I’d followed those crumbs of lust so idiotically they nearly got me assaulted. Here I was again, an addict poised to break sobriety.

One time won’t hurt.

I stared at my reflection. “That’s bollocks, and you know it,” I told myself.

Zed’s voice came from the outer room, muffled and low like he was on a call. The thought of his body waiting for mine was enough to undo the last of my resistance. I unlatched the door and came out as he snapped his phone shut and pocketed it.

His eyes flared as he looked me over and held his hands in his pockets, but it did nothing to hide his erection. Man had a hell of a cock if that’s what it looked like trapped beneath jeans and briefs.

“Get on the couch,” he ordered. “Upright, legs spread.”

I felt a surge of defiance inside me as desire flooded my sex. I might've been a bit of a wild child before, but nothing had made me feel like this. Fight or flight kicked in.

Don't do it. It won't end well.

Try it. Trust him.

I did what I was told.

He sighed like I'd lifted a weight off his shoulders. "Undo your jeans and leave them just past your knees."

Again, I followed his words. I was wearing plain cotton knickers. White. With a nice damp spot plastering the fabric to my cleft. I blushed and tried to breathe evenly. It was embarrassing at first, but then oddly empowering to be unornamental, in plain denim and a shirt, knickers that were as unprovocative as they got. And still, Zed was staring at me like he could die from lust.

He stepped toward me until our toes touched. Then he knelt and pressed his palms flat over my hands, which were white-knuckling the fabric of the sofa.

"What's your word?" he said. His voice danced over my skin and gave me goosebumps.

I stared at him. "Gadzooks."

He fought a grin. "You're impossible. *Gadzooks.*"

"What? You said to pick a word I wouldn't normally say."

His eyes searched mine. "Fine." They flicked down to where I was achingly aroused, then up again and glowed. "Now be still."

I watched his hands leave mine and slide across my stomach. How he bunched the fabric of my knickers and tugged them down. He stared where I was now naked, then bent to whisper against my skin, "Beautiful."

He lifted my shirt and kissed a line between my hip bones. His palms flattened my hands while his lips made ten slow connections from one prominence to the next. Triangulated down to my sex as he breathed deeply.

My hands flinched underneath his. I wanted my fingers in his hair, to knock off his hat and fist his dark waves while he licked me to orgasm. But he held his weight over my hands easily. My arms had to make up for my legs' weakness, and though they weren't built by any means, they were strong. Just not nearly as strong as his.

"Zed—"

"Hush." His lips trailed back up to my hip where he bit gently and sucked. "Breathe."

I did. A shaky exhale as he kissed the hypotenuse down to my mound. Then suddenly he speared me with his tongue, and I gasped. It was incredible—his whole mouth kissing me, that tongue sucking and fucking like I was all he wanted.

My hands flexed again. When he looked up, he nosed my clit, then bit it. I swore and bucked beneath him.

“Be still,” he growled. “Breathe, Nairne.”

I nodded, fighting nerves about my body’s response. When he’d fingered me in the restaurant the other week, it had been impulsive and hidden. A tease with no expectation, that ended up being shockingly powerful. But this was overt. What he was doing now was supposed to make me come, fantastically. What if I didn’t? We’d talked, so he knew it might take me a while, since what I sensed was uneven. He hadn’t seemed a bit daunted. Orgasm happened in the mind, Zed said. And though my mind was mine, not his, in that moment, his words and touch made my thoughts drift, nebulous and thin. I didn’t have to work to become aroused or trick my mind as I lay there watching him nibble my clit in a gentle rhythm. I wanted him to sink his fingers into me, and apparently, I’d said that out loud.

“Lucky for you, I was just about to tell you. I’m going to fuck you with my fingers.”

“Yes.” It rushed out of me. “Please.”

Who the hell was I, begging? It was the only thought I had—how to get what I wanted from him. An orgasm that shattered my mind and left me ringing in the aftershock.

“Your hands have to stay down. You lift them, I stop. Understood?”

God, he was a bastard, demanding that. I wanted to yank his hair and fuck his face. And yet, I loved a good challenge, and I wanted to come.

“I promise,” I whispered.

He let go and plunged two fingers straight into me. I was soaked, and he found my g-spot like a homing beacon. He sucked my clit and fucked me with two, then three fingers. I was going to come fast—a burning, flaring burst of release barreling toward expression.

“Zed,” I gasped. My breasts arched up and he tortured me, leaving them untouched.

“Don’t come.”

My eyes snapped open. I squinted to try to focus on him. “What?” He had to be joking.

He slowed his strokes. Edged me like an evil master at it. My eyes widened in disbelief as I felt the precipice of pleasure slip a little out of my grasp.

He grinned.

Sick bastard, he lived for it. Stretching the moment until he got to throw me off the cliff.

“You come when I say you can.”

He curled his fingers, testing me. An involuntary *ungh* left me and I banged my hands against the sofa. “I can’t. I’m right there. Oh, Jesus.”

He kissed my clit tenderly, then suctioned it and popped off. His breath whispered over my skin as he locked eyes with me and lowered his mouth to my entrance. “Now.”

A brutal thrust of his fingers, his mouth kissing my whole cunt with a drag of teeth, and I tumbled over, jerking back against the seat in a silent scream. He kept at it, pulling a soft, echoing second orgasm from me until I all but strong-armed his face off, begging for a break.

He stood, unzipped himself, and before he could tell me some pompous shit about opening my gorgeous mouth, I snapped forward and fisted him, pumping fast before taking him into my mouth. There was absolutely nothing rational about how much I enjoyed him. Thick and iron hard. Salty and manly and endlessly fuckable. I moaned around his cock and sucked him rough.

“Fuck,” he hissed. He hadn’t expected that.

I smiled and swirled my tongue around his tip. When he fisted my hair, I couldn’t keep my eyes open. My legs pressed together. I’d just come but sucking him off had me aching for another.

“You take my cock perfectly, *fragolina*.” He dragged me against him slowly, sliding himself down my throat. I breathed deeply through my nose. Smelled his musk and soap and fantasized about sucking him off in the shower.

When he pulled my head back, he caught me sliding a hand between my thighs.

“I’m being a horrible dominant,” he muttered, but it morphed to a groan as I took him deep again. “Should have told you what you could do the moment I caught those thighs wiggling.” He watched my hand and smiled. “Go on, touch yourself, but don’t come until I say.”

I nodded against his stomach and felt his bollocks tight and heavy in my grasp. Since the day he’d strolled into the boardroom and grinned that

arrogant smile, I'd wanted this, to watch him fall to pieces in my hands. I flattened my tongue even more and gripped his base hard. He curled around me, fucked my throat twice more before I could feel he was right there.

"Pinch your clit," he ordered. "Hard."

I did, saw stars behind my eyelids, and lost track of my tongue as I gasped in pleasure.

"Look at me." His eyes glowed with lust. "You're going to come now, and it's mine."

I shattered the moment his cum poured onto my tongue. His whole torso flexed, and he grunted forcefully. Another thrust, then he pulled back, sucking in air, and thumbed a drip of cum off my chin.

Our breaths matched. Erratic. Satisfied.

He tucked himself back in and shook his head. "Goddamn, you're perfect."

I laughed when he said it, as he clasped my jaw and kissed the hell out of me. I tasted him and me together and sighed. He knelt and shimmied my knickers and jeans up to mid-thigh. Pulled a hankie out of his pocket and cleaned me, reverently, quietly, before planting a final chaste kiss against my curls. I sank into the sofa.

We laughed like you do after that kind of insane sexual release, as he slid my clothes up the rest of the way, and I wiggled my hips to make it possible. He splayed my legs and cupped my face, kissed me again and muttered against my lips.

"For the first time in my life, I'm thinking missing a few innings of the Sox wouldn't be an atrocity. We could stay here." He kissed me again. "Make you sit on my face while I torture your tits."

"Zed." I slipped my fingers through his hair.

"Mm?" He turned his face to kiss my wrist, then bit it.

I sucked in a breath and pressed my knees into his sides.

"Are the seats accessible? I don't like being a spectacle."

"Nairne."

"Yes?"

"Do you think I'd let that happen? That I wouldn't consider that?"

I shook my head. "Right. Let you do the planning."

He kissed me once more and stood. "Damn straight. Now come on, woman. We've got a game to watch."

FOURTEEN

Nairne

LAST TIME I'd been under the lights, on a field of manicured green, my life had changed forever. It was eerie. Hearing the familiar noises of athletes warming up. Cleats skidding through grass and dirt. Feet pounding against the earth in wind sprints. I closed my eyes and allowed myself a moment of grief for my lost life of competitive athletics. Bittersweet gratitude twisted around my heart and squeezed. I breathed through the sharp pain of memory.

Zed typed on his phone one-handed while his free fingers drifted over my shoulder in a lulling figure eight. One of the outfielders winked at me just as Zed's phone snapped shut. His eyes flicked to the field and narrowed.

"I saw that. He loves fucking with me. And you're a knockout. I can't blame him."

I ignored the flirt, smiled at Zed, and patted his leg. "This is unreal. Madness, really."

He grinned and tipped his head back, glancing at the stadium that was starting to fill with people.

Earlier, we'd entered through some VIP entrance with a ramp, and I'd met a handful of players who were friends of his. One was the outfielder. I didn't freak. Maybe it was because I'd been on their side of the relationship between fan and professional athlete before. I'd sat back, crossed my arms, and talked shop until their coach told them to stop flirting with Big Red and get their arses on the pitch.

We'd passed the dugout seats, which seemed odd, but I figured it was just a matter of getting to an accessible entrance. Until we came to a door with a sign that didn't make sense. It just couldn't be that.

“Nairne?”

“Huh?”

He’d smiled. “*Ladies first.*”

The fucking owners’ box, people. The fucking owners’ box. Flat, accessible, and right next to the player dugout. I’d managed not to gape as I shook hands with some of Boston’s elite and watched Zed in his element, signing an autograph for someone’s little girl and shaking hands with the owners.

“Yeah.” His voice snapped me back to the present. The stadium had become packed. He was staring at me as he slid his hand through my ponytail and cupped the base of my neck. “It is madness. But I’d say it’s worth it.”

I kissed him, bit his bottom lip, and earned a growl as well as a squeeze to my neck. Someone broke the moment when they showed up with a fleece blanket and a thermos of something steaming for me. After a thank you, I draped the blanket over my legs and took a sip of the drink. I had a hot toddy in my hands.

“I thought you said I had to choose between warmth and whiskey, and the hard life in the dugout.”

Zed smiled, then glanced out to the field and set an ankle on his knee. “I had a theory I wanted to test.”

I took a sip and the hot liquid lit up my throat before landing warm in my belly. “What’s that?”

“Just how hardcore you are about the things you love.”

“What’s the verdict then?”

He leaned to kiss behind my ear, and a shiver wracked me that had nothing to do with the chilly air. “Absolute devotion.”



“YOU WERE IN THE FUCKING OWNERS’ box, Nairne!” Tommy bellowed. “And you didn’t tell me? I saw you on TV and choked on my food so bad, Jess thought I needed the Heimlich.”

I wiggled my finger in my ear to dislodge the ringing caused by Tommy’s voice. “It was a surprise! I didn’t know it was coming either.”

“And not just the owners’ box, but with Zed Salvatore. I knew it was him when he came in the other week, but he shrugged it off when I asked, and

then I was doubting myself.” Tommy shot water from the soda gun into a glass and glared at me. “Your ass is grass, MacGregor.”

“My arse is useless, Tommy. All it does is sit. Threatening it will get you nowhere.”

He chuckled because he was used to my strain of jokes. “So...you two. You’re dating?”

I shrugged and had a spoonful of my soup. “I guess so. I’m not seeing anyone else, and he...” How did one describe Zed’s neurotic and sexual particularity? He hadn’t told me he wasn’t seeing anyone else, but I just knew what we had was exclusive. “He’s a one-woman man.”

Tommy frowned at me. “But he hasn’t asked you.”

“No.” I gripped my whiskey and frowned at it. “I just assumed.”

“I’d clarify things if I were you. The guy’s got a reputation.”

I straightened. “As what?”

He tipped his head side to side as he filled another drink order. “Mobster. Player. And somehow in between that, Mr. Philanthropy and a poster boy for the soccer team. Like the squeaky-clean, high school jock, president of student council, and the bad boy fused into one. Jess has a huge crush on him. Asshole.”

I smirked as I swirled a piece of bread in my soup.

Tommy sighed. “In summary, despite his do-goodness, he’s allegedly tied up in some deep shit and he gets a lot of ass. He’s never got the same woman on his arm for events.”

I couldn’t speak to the complexities of Zed’s mafia ties, beyond the fact that I trusted that when I was with him, I was safe, both physically and morally. What I could address, I did. “That doesn’t mean anything. PR is a bunch of posturing nonsense.”

“I don’t know, Nairne.”

My mobile buzzed and I silenced it. Tommy’s words made me bristle. “No offense, but I have a bit more experience in this arena than you.”

He lifted his hands in surrender. “All I’m saying is that if I were you, I’d make sure I had an understanding with him.”

My phone skittered across the bar top as it buzzed again, and I once again ignored it. “And *I’m* saying that I trust his character. He wouldn’t do what we’re doing with just anyone.”

He frowned. “What’s that mean?”

I waved it off. “I’m not getting into it. Here’s the thing, I don’t

particularly care if he wants to fuck another woman. It's early days, and I'm not here forever. All I'm saying is, he'd tell me if he was. He's very communicative, and he values honesty."

Tommy was picking open the scab of my wariness that had just healed over. I'd enjoyed the game, and Zed's and my antics in the restroom beforehand. I felt like I was getting to understand Zed a little more, and while we certainly weren't going to be a long-term relationship, I was looking forward to what we'd have while we could. With Zed I could settle into being a little less planned and rigid without exposing myself like I had in my past. I could open myself to enjoying sex and men once more. But now Tommy was raising my old, rational doubts and fears, and throwing them in my face.

My phone buzzed a third time and I took my irritation out on it. I snapped it open and answered in kind. "What?"

"When I call, you answer." His voice was low and short. "You're available to me. Why the hell do I need to remind you of that?"

I felt my face flush with anger. The whole conversation with Tommy had pissed me off, and now Zed's high-handed presumption was just the fucking cherry on top. "Fuck you. I'm not your call girl. I have a bloody life. I was in the middle of a conversation."

A long pause. "Where are you?"

"None of your fucking business," I snapped.

"Oh, MacGregor, the list of grievances I have with you is building. To take care of you is to keep you safe. To do that, I need to know where you are. So, fucking tell me right now, *innamorata*, or I swear to god I'll use resources you'd prefer to think I don't have to locate your smart little ass."

"For fuck's sake. I'm at Henderson's." I slapped the phone shut, then slammed it on the counter. A few people glanced my way and Tommy stared at me in surprise.

"I have never seen you that angry," he said.

I threw back my whiskey. "Yes, well, he's a brute who brings out the best in me."

My soup went down quickly, but I didn't taste it. I knew Zed would be here in no time. I used the lavvy and zipped up my jacket, then went outside to wait in the cold just because I knew it would piss him off. Never mind that I was paying for my stubbornness as my body went from its normal cool—thanks to poor circulation—to painfully frigid.

The Ferrari screeched to a stop and Zed threw open the door and glared at

me. “By yourself, out in the fucking cold.” He glanced around as anger darkened his features. “You’re trying to piss me off, aren’t you?”

I shrugged and tried to hide a shiver as I did. “You’re being a pig. I’m not your possession.”

“Wrong. When you’re with me, you’re my responsibility.” He threw open the passenger door. “Get in.”

“Fuck. Off.” I pointed a shaking finger at him. “I’m my own woman. I’m no one’s but my own.”

He slammed the door shut and stalked toward me. “Why do you talk about it like it’s shameful? Do I mistreat you? Do I do anything but demonstrate how much I want to protect and—”

“Control and own me.” My hands tugged my hair and dropped in exasperation. “You can’t own me, Zed!”

His jaw ticked. “Get in the car. We’ll talk about this at my place.”

“My car’s here,” I snapped. “I want to be able to go home.”

He scrubbed his face with his hands. “I’ll have someone drive it over to my house.”

I swallowed back the urge to ask him who the hell would do that. There was no point. Zed had minions.

“Fine.”

The car ride was painfully silent, and my first time at Zed’s place wasn’t nearly as cheery as I’d imagined. The moon was the sliver of a Cheshire grin, leaving the building in almost total darkness. I caught brick and tall windows. Inside, the faint outline of paintings on the wall and clean lines of furniture.

I threw the brakes on and set my hands in my lap. Zed walked past me and switched on a lamp that bathed us in faint yellow light. I saw a tufted leather sofa. Abstract charcoals. Oil painted landscapes of seaside vistas. Paned glass doors leading to a patio with a view of the Charles River. The bastard had a nice place.

“Talk to me. What are you upset about?” His voice was even, his body calm.

I felt like elements in a combustion reaction about to meet and explode. “I can’t take these extreme demands. You want this ownership of me, and I don’t understand it, Zed. I liked what we did before the game. It felt bloody good. Obviously, I like being tossed around a bit and having a rough fuck, but why does it have to come with this whole lifestyle of control and possession?”

Zed sat, elbows on his knees, hands laced together, and stared at me. “Because that’s how I’m able to have intimacy with you. It’s the only way it works for me. Anything outside that is pure chaos in my world, in my head. I care for what’s mine. I ensure your protection and well-being. I do everything I can to preserve and cherish what I’m pouring myself into.”

He ran a hand through his hair and stood. Hands on his hips, he stared out the glass doors. His body was beautiful, bulkier than most footballers, strong yet graceful in its strength. I remembered how he felt. The heat he radiated, and that maddeningly good smell of rainstorm air. I remembered his hard thighs pressed against my shoulders, the taste of his cock as I took him down my throat. The way he grasped my hair and wrapped himself around me as he came.

I wanted the dominating intensity of our sexuality together without the domination in our relationship. Was that too much to ask for?

“Zed?”

He gave me his profile, like he was warring between facing me and looking away again. “I don’t know what to tell you,” he muttered. “I want to say I can be someone different for you, but my world, *fragolina*...”

I’d looked it up. *Little Strawberry*. My hair. That he loved to tug and touch.

“My world doesn’t allow for it.” He scrubbed his face.

I moved toward him and took his hand. He sank into a chair next to me and stared into my eyes.

“Why do you need this?” I asked. “Is there something I could do that would help you—”

“Relax? Chill out? Be less intense?” He sat back and set his hands on the armrests like a king on his throne. “No. It has nothing to do with you and everything to do with the insanity of my life. Dealing with the vulnerability of those I care for makes it bearable for me. And that’s all I’m going to say.”

He stood and walked to the mantle of his fireplace. Fidgeted with a photo there and looked over his shoulder at me. “It’s not you. And if it’s not something... I would never want to corner you, Nairne, into something you don’t want.”

“I don’t know what I want.” The words left me in a whisper and my chest ached as I said them.

Zed brought out the old me, the wild, fiery Nairne. The one who took what she wanted and didn’t apologize. Who was confident and a little daring,

and always got what she set her mind to. I knew what I wanted. But Tommy was right to caution me. Where would it lead? Zed felt safe, but so many factors influencing us were still outside my control. How could I risk myself again?

His eyes slid shut and he sighed. “Then we shouldn’t be together.”

FIFTEEN

Zed

THE SOX WON the World Series and Boston threw a city-wide rager for a solid week. My own team still had until spring to prove itself in the world of soccer, so no rest for the weary. I sat on a plane trying to untangle the knot of facts I had before me. I was miserable. I still didn't want to fuck my standing subs. Nairne's voice, the taste of her cunt, the feel of her breasts, her rapid-fire intelligence—none of it would leave my head. And more disturbingly, someone in the faction was trying to either out me or eliminate me. I was in a foul mood, and not even the Sox breaking a losing streak that had outlived my grandparents could snap me out of it.

“Hello, muffin.” Lucas ruffled my hair as he stepped over me, squeezed his lanky frame into the window seat, and dropped back. “That loo is even tinier than usual. My head was practically in the vent.”

Lucas was on the freakish side of tall, which was an asset as a goalkeeper. But it made daily life logistically challenging for him.

“Good to see you survived.”

He rolled his eyes and turned toward me in his seat. “All right, sad arse. Out with it.”

I shook my head and checked my phone one last time before powering it down. Still nothing from her. “I'm fine.”

“Bollocks you are.”

“Luc. Drop it.”

He frowned and sat back. “It's the woman, isn't it? From the pub.”

I opened my book and lifted out my place marker. “Who?”

He snorted. “Oh, let's see. The gorgeous bird with hair like polished

chestnut, jade eyes, and tits that make you want to—”

I slammed the book against his chest. “Stop.”

He smiled in triumph. “So easily baited. What happened, mate? Come on, let’s have it out. It’s better to say it and move on.”

“I’m sorry, pot, but fuck you. Love, the kettle.” I pulled my book away and flipped it back open.

Hands up in surrender, he laughed. “Listen, I didn’t say I practice what I preach, though I’m trying to improve myself. I’ve certainly not done it very well thus far in my life. Men aren’t taught to speak their feelings, especially on my side of the pond. But you, you’re particularly atrocious. You’re too controlled. Too self-contained. You need to get gazeboed and just fucking let it out.”

I shook my head. My book was open, but I had no idea what I’d been reading. “That’s the last thing I need, to get shitfaced and publicly embarrass myself. We didn’t work. We’re too different. We’re not a good...fit.”

Lucas’ eyebrow lifted. “She wasn’t keen on your ways.”

“Oh, she liked them plenty when it came to some.”

“Let me guess, in the biblical sense.”

“Indeed.”

He sighed. “Typical woman. Loves a brute in the bedroom, but so much as breathe a directive at her outside those walls and your arse is on the curb.” Lucas wasn’t as exacting as me, nor did his life demand protection and order as mine did, but he liked his shit a certain way and a lady friend who wasn’t constantly trying to subvert that. “So, it was your overbearing demands that put her over the edge.”

My eyes snapped to his. “I know it’s a lot to ask of someone.” I went back to my book. “Obviously, it was too much for her. It’s not who she is.”

“Oh, I don’t know, Zeddy.” His hand landed as a hard slap on my thigh. “Give her time to be underwhelmed by others out there, and I think you’ll find her back at your doorstep soon enough.”

I sighed and threw the book down. Reading wasn’t happening. “I’m pretty sure she thinks I’m a neurotic asshole who wants to stick a tracker on her and gets off on bossing her around.”

Lucas laughed and crossed his arms. “If she’s wise, she’ll recognize that there’s much more to you than that. And if she’s not, then she’s not for you, Zed. And that’s that.”

The plane taxied, and my stomach clenched as it always did.

Relinquishing total control to two strangers with hundreds of buttons and dials to steer me in a metal tube three thousand miles in the sky did not come naturally.

“Yeah, that’s nice of you, but I think it’s over,” I said.

Lucas glanced at me in sympathy.

“I’ll be fine.”

If I told myself that enough, it’d be true. It had to be.



“YOU’RE a sad sack of shit if ever I saw one.” Teo dropped into his seat at the dinner table and gave me a piercing stare. “Bruno was right, you’re extra moody. What the hell’s wrong with you?”

Dad was in the kitchen on his phone, and from the sounds of it, talking some surgical newbie through a procedure. I tried not to listen because I had a weak stomach for that shit.

I poured a hefty glass of Zia Maria’s chianti—which may have been one of the contraband imports I didn’t bust my Italian side of the family for—and shrugged. “I’m tired. My internal clock is off from a weekend in sunny fucking LA.”

I poured Teo’s wine, too, and spun the bottle without losing a drop.

He watched me through a scowl. “Uh-huh.”

Salad served on plates, Dad leaned into the room long enough to hand us a bowl of pasta. He mouthed something I was supposed to understand and waved his hands, then disappeared back in the kitchen.

“I don’t know how many times I’ve told him I don’t read lips,” I said, “but he insists on doing it.”

“I think it was *go on without me*, but I’m shit at it, too.”

Teo and I ate in silence, but I caught him boring those hazel eyes, same as Dad’s, right into me. The guy was dangerously intuitive, and I didn’t want him reading anything I wasn’t prepared to discuss, so I kept my eyes down and gave my food undue attention.

“*Fratu*,” he said.

“Hm?”

“Talk to me. I’m sick of this shit. We’re brothers. You can tell me anything.”

I wiped my mouth with my napkin, threw it on the table, and folded my arms. “You’re my baby brother. I protect you. I don’t dump on you.”

Teo craned his head to the side until his neck made a gross *crack*. “See, this is where you’re wrong. You threw me the party last summer, Zed. I figured you’d remember I’m twenty-fucking-one. I’m a man. I can handle your problems.”

My hands scrubbed my face. Fuck coming to Sunday dinner. I should have lied that my return flight was delayed.

“Fine. I accept that. You’re getting older. You’re a man. I will try to be more open with you.” A dinner roll took the brunt of my frustration as I ripped it in half. “Just not about this.”

Teo threw up his hands. “Jesus Christ.”

Dad took that moment to stroll through the door. “Eh, Teo! *Bada a come parli.*”

The guy was old school and told himself his boys weren’t abject blaspheming potty mouths. We all have those lies we need to tell ourselves to sleep at night.

“Sorry, Papa.” Teo rolled his eyes and took a good swig of his wine.

“Zeddo, you look like shit. *Che cosa è?*” Dad sat at the head of the table and frowned as he glanced between us. “Trouble in paradise?”

Teo laughed into his glass. “Something like that. Zed’s got a larger than normal stick up his ass and doesn’t want to talk about it.”

Dad nodded and scooped in his chair. “Well, that’s typical. Pass the *vino*, Teo.”

I sighed and sat back in my seat. “I’m fine. Can we please move on?”

“Yes.” Dad nodded. “What’s going on in the family?”

That was Dad’s way of asking if I was all right. His face pinched with poorly concealed worry as he poured himself a glass and started in on his pasta.

“Someone’s trying to catch me two-timing. I had to have my place swept after someone dropped a bugged pen in my pocket a few weeks ago. Thankfully, my house was clear.”

Dad froze and dropped his fork to his plate. “This is what I’m talking about. You’re gambling with your life, and for people who would kill you in cold blood, *mimmo.*”

I shrugged and speared a shrimp in my pasta. “I’m not doing it for them. I’m doing it because if I don’t, it all goes to shit. It’s about everyone that

would get fucked over and hurt, and you know it.”

Dad sighed. “You need to leave.”

I turned toward him. “Besides the fact that I can’t stomach the moral implications of my leaving, what the hell would happen to you two? Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum, big fat sitting ducks. You’re telling me they don’t pull Teo into it, exactly where I was?”

Dad threw up his hands. “We’ll all leave.”

“Oh, okay. Real easy,” I snapped. “Sell the house, move our entire life to another country, secure visas, ’cause we Americans are real popular in Europe these days. Get new jobs. And still, you think that shit wouldn’t follow us?”

“We wouldn’t go to Italy,” Dad countered. “Somewhere new. A fresh start, where you don’t waste your life, and I don’t wake up to every on-call page worrying if it’s to hear you died—”

“Stop,” Teo barked. “Zed’s not dying. He’s careful, Papa. He knows how to handle himself. Zed, to Papa’s point, you need a plan, an exit strategy.”

I sighed. “If I could see a way out that wouldn’t ruin everything I’ve worked for, that wouldn’t destabilize our world, and wouldn’t leave it poised for an explosive criminal regression, I would.”

It was Dad’s turn to sigh. “I regret it, every day, that I didn’t just take us away when you were born. If I’d known you’d step in place of me—”

“Dad.” I glared at him. “It’s not your fault. Let’s move on for now.” Teo opened his mouth to argue but I pushed past him “We’ll talk about it again another time. Anyway, I had this place swept yesterday, too. You’re clean.”

“Jesus.” Teo groaned. “When did this all become a mess?”

I laughed bitterly. “It’s been a mess from the start, Theodore.” The rest of my wine went down easily, and I poured myself a second glass. “You’re just finally seeing it.”

SIXTEEN

Nairne

IT WAS FOR THE BEST-ENDING things between us. He was too complex a character for my story. Dubious ties to the mob. An iron will that was just as rigid as mine. His blunt force communication style and raw physicality that troublingly echoed my former life.

Dispassion was my anchor. Life was ordered and safe if I followed my plan, stayed within the boundaries I'd created. Focus on your studies. Learn to walk again. Avoid men who pull you anywhere off that path. Technically, Zed didn't thwart my goals. He supported my intensity, applauded my intellect. Yet at his core, he was an animal that brought out my basest impulses. And that was dangerous. Risky living had made me pay a hefty price already. I couldn't afford it again.

Two weeks. Each night, I woke wet and gasping, my hands stroking skin that wavered between numbness and shocking hypersensitivity. I missed the heat of his touch, the warm cadence of his voice. Days without texts demanding knowledge of my whereabouts or the state of my knickers. Board meetings were brutal. He was too functional, offering me a terse nod hello, looking handsome and composed as ever. And I was crumbling inside. Part of me wanted to throw off caution and let risk take me where it willed, begged, and screamed.

In the past, when I felt unsettled like that, I'd go for a run, or grab Elodie by the elbow and demand we head to some club so I could drink my mind into silence. Running and drunkenness were both casualties of my injury, neither of them plausible or safe for me anymore. So, I'd had to find a new outlet.

In my driveway, I dribbled the ball across the pavement and rode an arc that approximated the three-point line. November air stung my cheeks, which were warm from exertion as I lifted the ball and took a shot.

I was sweaty and tired, but an hour of shooting hoops, spinning around, and chasing the ball had finally quieted my racing thoughts. I backed up to take a long shot and bumped into something. My head whipped over my shoulder as panic tightened my throat.

“Easy.” Zed’s voice was gravelly and as sensual as ever. “That’s my livelihood you’re rolling over.”

Anxiety released its grip as my gaze slowly traveled from his shoes, up the length of muscular legs in fitted jeans, ending on a dark, long sleeve shirt that left nothing about his physique to the imagination. Then those eyes. Every shade of the sea and sunlight striking its waves. He was unfairly handsome.

His face twisted from a smirk to concern. “What’s the matter with you? You’re white as a sheet.”

I rubbed my thundering heart and exhaled slowly. “I don’t like being snuck up on. You startled me.”

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t trying to catch you off guard.” He frowned and crossed his arms. “You’re upset. Did something happen?”

I dribbled the ball tentatively and watched its bouncing path. “No.”

He stepped closer and swiped the ball away. “I don’t believe you, and that pisses me off. If someone’s bothered you, I need to know. Do you understand me?”

I glanced up at him and ripped the ball back out of his grasp. I hugged it and scrubbed my face. “Nothing’s happened recently. Nothing here, all right? Now let it go, Zed.”

His eyes searched mine. “Fine.”

“Thank you.” I dribbled, shot, and sunk a deep two. When I turned to look at him, he was watching me intently.

I spun the ball on my finger and caught it as it tipped off. “Why are you here?”

He toed some gravel, stared at the pavement, then peered up at me. “I was in the neighborhood. Figured I’d check in on you.”

My hands found the push rims of my wheels and wiggled me side to side. I stared at him. “All right. Well, you’ve checked in. You see I’m fine.”

I couldn’t do this. Couldn’t be in proximity to him. He smelled like rain

and ozone and sex. He made my body burn, brought out the insane passion and intensity that had marked my past. He made me want things I didn't get to have anymore.

His jaw clenched. "I wanted to talk about...us. Our understanding."

I wiped my nose that dripped in the cold, pivoted, and shot again. The ball made a satisfying *thwack* as it dropped through the net. "We never had any."

"We did, we just hit a road bump and I—" He sighed and raked a hand through his hair. "We talk better over food. Come get something to eat with me."

I shook my head as the ball rolled back to my feet. "I'm not done." I resumed dribbling.

Zed stood for a long minute, hands in pockets, watching me dribble. The neighborhood turned two dimensional as the sun slanted lower. Homes nearby drifted into abstract shadows, trees became rough charcoal lines against a backdrop of blue-grey, and Zed's dark waves were swallowed up in the flattening reach of dusk.

"I'll wait," he said.

I drew up, released the shot. Watched the ball arc away from hands. It fell through the net with a happy *thwack*.

"You're going to be waiting a while then, Mr. Salvatore."

He rebounded the ball and passed it back to me. "I'm a patient man."

I smiled as I shot.

He caught the ball as it bounced off the rim and set it on his hip. "A wager. We have a shoot off. I win, you come home with me tonight. Give me twenty-four hours."

I narrowed my eyes at him and picked up my water bottle. My teeth ripped open the lid and I chugged. "Dinner instead."

"Dinner, then my place," he countered.

His place would end badly. Or very spectacularly, depending on how you looked at it. I'd let him fuck me, which would be incredible. We'd get tangled up together again, and I'd wake up regretting the mess I'd gotten myself into. "Dinner's all you're getting."

He frowned. "Damn, you're stubborn." He took a shot that slipped through the net with a perfect *swish*. "Drink up, buttercup. You're gonna need it when I wipe the floor with you."

I smoothed back my hair, which was drenched with sweat. "I'm warning

you, I'm about to embarrass you. You prepared to have your arse handed to you, Salvatore?"

An imperceptible quirk of his mouth, but those eyes danced. He liked it when I gave him hell. "Bring it on, MacGregor. Bring it on."

SEVENTEEN

Zed

CONTRARY TO WHAT the tabloids would tell you, I'd never dated a female athlete. Never looked at one covered in sweat, with a competitive glint in her eye, and fantasized about tossing her on my bed and fucking her good old missionary style. Just so she'd have to look into my eyes and remember who was top dog.

Until Nairne. She leaned her hands on her legs and laughed as she breathed heavily, winded from all our shooting. She'd just beat me, and that meant I'd lost the bet. That meant no dinner.

That wasn't happening.

"One more," I demanded.

Her arms folded. Emerald eyes glittered with menace or arousal, maybe a little bit of both. "No."

"Why." It wasn't a question. It was a fucking command. *Answer me. Explain why this exists between us, when you despise how I am, and I can't stop wanting everything about you that makes me crazy.*

"Because I'm going to win anyway. No point in getting your hopes up." She sped by me, dribbling the basketball, and I got hard just watching her. Lean arms, that smirk on her rosy lips. Jesus, I was so fucked in the head over her.

"What do you want from me, Zed?" She turned and sunk a long two. "I'm trying to figure it out. I'm not one for being dictated to. I seem to drive you mad with my independent streak. Why exhaust yourself on someone like me?"

I wanted to tell her everything. How I couldn't make sense of why I liked

her so much when she made me want to rip my hair out half the time. Why her ocean air and flower scent made my dick stone, and why her clipped accent and sharp tongue heated my blood. Or why the temporary nature of us fit so well into the sad fact that my life could never involve *forever*. I settled for a dialed down but largely honest answer.

“Long term isn’t in the cards for me, Nairne. You and I have good chemistry. I think we’ll fuck like pros. I like your intelligence and your body, and you piss me off, but not in ways that make me want to forego all the good stuff. That enough for you?”

She stared at me, ball in her lap, analyzing each sentence I’d given her. “Fine. Then we form an agreement. Clear boundaries. Expectations. And an end date. A contract of sorts.”

That was all she needed? I could kick myself. I’d been coming at it all wrong, treating her like women in my past—appealing to her emotions, trying to ply her sexually, overwhelming her with what she wanted, so she wouldn’t overthink what she didn’t.

Nairne was practical to a fault and smarter than all that. She’d signed a contract before, as a professional athlete. She wanted terms and clauses. I could do that.

“That’s it?” I asked.

Her hair looked mahogany tonight, wet with sweat and shining in the streetlights. Her head tipped to the side. Then her eyes trained over my shoulder.

A new voice startled me. “You mean to miss that last one?”

My head whipped around. Teo. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

“Wow.” Teo smiled at Nairne and I wanted to throttle him. “Where’d she come from?”

“Nairne, this is my soon-to-be-dead baby brother, Teo. Teo, this is Nairne MacGregor.” My body tensed while Nairne smiled and offered her hand.

Teo took it and held it two seconds too long.

“Nice to meet you,” she said.

Teo smiled wider. “Same here.”

I cleared my throat. “Back to what the hell you’re doing here?”

Teo grinned at Nairne and back to me. “I went for a run, just ended up—”

“In the middle of residential Brookline, Theodore?”

He shrugged, stole the ball off Nairne, and took a shot. “I might have followed you.”

“God help me.” I scrubbed my face.

Nairne laughed and took a pass from Teo at around the three-point distance, dribbled, and shot. She made it and Teo whistled.

“You could teach Zed a thing or two,” he quipped. “All his talent got stuck in his feet.”

“All right.” I clapped my hands on his shoulders and squeezed. I was two inches south of him, but my biceps were double his. “Time for you to leave.”

“Fuck, Zed.” He spun out of my grip. “You’re gonna snap my clavicles one of these days.”

Nairne glanced between us and smiled. “I could watch you two all night.”

“I thought we were having dinner,” Teo said from behind me.

I turned slowly toward him. “She and I were. You were leaving.”

“Actually, we weren’t, because I beat you,” Nairne said as she grinned at Teo. “But I’ll make an exception, provided he comes along.”

Teo pointed her way. “I like her.”

“Fuck both of you.”

Nairne laughed and that smoky sound made my whole body ache. “I’m going to go freshen up,” she said. “Give me twenty minutes.”

Nairne went inside and Teo put an arm around my shoulder. “Number one, holy hotness.” I swatted him upside the head, and he grinned like it was nothing. “Number two, where are we going to eat?”

“Teo,” I said, “I don’t really care where we eat, but I need you to understand something.”

“Yes, *fratu*.”

“If you ruin this for me, I will beat you to within an inch of your life.”

Teo scooped up the ball from the driveway and dribbled toward the net. “Empty threats like that don’t scare me, Zed.” He made the layup and turned to face me. “But I’ll admit, I had no plans on making it harder for you.” He did a reverse layup and smiled at me as he caught the ball. “In fact, I was thinking just the opposite.”

I caught the outline of Nairne’s silhouette as her bathroom light flicked on. Her shadow was long and dramatic, stretched by the distortion of darkness. I sighed. “That’s what I was afraid you were gonna say.”

EIGHTEEN

Zed

“WHAT?” Nairne blinked at me while she chewed.

She had a massive bite of sacrilegiously overcooked cheeseburger filling her cheeks. I wanted to grab her face in one hand and kiss the hell out of her.

“Never seen you eat like this.”

Her eyebrows quirked as she set the burger down and dusted crumbs off her fingers. “You’ve never seen me exercise, really. I could eat a bloody horse after a match.”

I took a bite of my own burger. “Fair.”

Teo slurped the last of his milkshake and stared between us. “So, how’d you two meet?”

Nairne drank from her own Styrofoam cup. “I’m on the board until end of spring semester, facilitating planning for the health clinics they’re trying to establish.” She glanced at me and smiled. “He’s kept me rather secret, hasn’t he?”

Teo nodded. “Which is what tipped me off,” he said around a huge wad of burger in his mouth.

“To what?” she asked. She picked up her burger, paused, and licked a dollop of ketchup off her finger. I almost came in my pants as she sucked that digit.

Teo grinned at me and helped himself to my milkshake. “That he really likes you.”

I shook my head. “This is hell, for the record. Pure, unadulterated hell.”

Nairne knocked knees with me under the table. “I like him, too. We just drive each other a little crazy, I’m afraid. And I’ve one sad foot out the door.”

“Oh?”

“I’m returning to the UK after graduation,” said Nairne. “In time for whatever fellowship I can land.”

I froze mid-chew. Swallowed that sentence and my food whole. “This spring?”

“I told you no falling in love.” She looked at me. “Did you not think why?”

My burger hit my plate with a splat. I sat back, folded my arms. “I assumed it was dispositional. Inability. You’re a virtual loner, obsessed with your work. About as repressed as they come. Not exactly a recipe for romance.”

She slapped her hands on the table and leaned forward. “I could love if I wanted, thank you very much. I just don’t *choose* to right now. It’s not the right time. I’m young. I’ve got my whole life ahead of me.”

“Well,” Teo interjected, “conveniently, Zed’s heading to Europe, too.”

Nairne glared at me. “What?”

“We’re very proud. He’s destined for soccer greatness.”

My gaze snapped to his. “I’m not going anywhere, and you know it.”

Nairne’s eyes darted between us.

“The fuck you aren’t,” Teo grumbled.

“Drop it, Teo.”

“Jesus, you’re stubborn.”

“What—” Nairne sighed. “What the fuck are you two talking about?” She looked at me pointedly. “Zed?”

I rubbed my face. “Teo *wants* me to go to Europe to play. Doesn’t mean I will, or that I can.”

“Why can’t you?”

I looked around. “That is a conversation for another night and a much less public space.”

Teo sighed. “He’s in denial, Nairne. I’ve made it my personal mission to get his sad ass to that side of the Atlantic within the year.”

Nairne smiled but stared at me curiously as she took another bite of her food.

Teo was a conversationalist and his chatty ways often irritated me. But at the moment, they helped smooth over the rough patch that he’d created. “So, Nairne, may I ask why you aren’t staying stateside?”

She shook her head sadly. “On the one hand, I want to stay and try to fix

what's broken in terms of this country's public health policy. Here, you hemorrhage money when you have my medical needs. You're fucked up, the lot of you. Impoverishing people because they were born into difficult circumstance, because they weren't lucky to live free of disease or debilitating injury."

It was her passion—the intersection of social conscience and public health, and I could listen to her talk about it all day. She wrote better about it than our tool bag grant writer. Because she spoke as much from her heart as from her head.

"On the other hand," she continued, "I need to be practical about my own needs. European healthcare is better for me. I can take care of myself better in the UK while trying to solve public health challenges than I could in the States."

She was right. This place wasn't a good fit for her. Europe had better healthcare, and fantastic opportunities for her research interests. And I wanted that for her, more than I could want her for myself.

Even though I knew it would never happen, I fantasized about what having her might be like. How I'd wrap myself around her and shield her from the shit of the world. Keep her safe. Possess her body, draw the lines and contours of a life that would make hers effortless. I had let my mind wander plenty lately, to the dream world where I left the States and we somehow managed to live in the same country. She'd study, research mutated microbes, and solve world hunger. I'd play with peers, never looking over my shoulder. I'd be free.

It was a fucking pipe dream.

Even if I somehow got out of the life one day, I couldn't love someone who fought my protective impulsive so powerfully, forced me to leave them exposed to the elements of the world. That's how regular relationships looked to me, like leaving an exotic flower out in the snow and saying, *well, if it's meant to be, she'll make it*. Nairne wasn't delicate, and she wasn't helpless, but she was vulnerable. The universe was capricious and ripped away innocent life. Especially given the horrible mess I waded through daily. If something happened to someone I loved and I hadn't died trying to stop it, I couldn't live with myself.

Teo sighed. "Yeah, you're not wrong. I'm looking into the medical field, and when I think about how American private interests capitalize off of illness and pharmacopeia, it pisses me off. Europe's got it right. Universal

healthcare.”

Nairne smiled faintly, then shoved her foot at me under the table. “Zed.”

“Mm?” I snapped out of my thoughts and stared at her.

“What is it?”

“Nothing.” I turned toward Teo. “Can you give us a minute?”

He laughed and stood. “Yeah, yeah. I have to take a leak anyway.”

I watched him walk off, then turned to Nairne. “I want you to consider something.” I set a standard dom/sub contract in front of her.

“Where the hell did that come from?” She fell back against the bench and looked at me warily.

I’d had Bruno print a copy and run it by while Teo and I waited for Nairne. But she didn’t need to know that, because it made me look desperate and a little crazy. Which I was. She didn’t need to know that either.

“It’s a general agreement between two consenting adults who want to do power play, essentially. There’s a lot of shit in there that at face value might freak you out, but if you let me explain them...” She ripped the papers her way and I watched her eyes scan them rapidly. Left. Right. Left. Right. I raked a hand through my hair. “You can ask me anything. And you can redline things. It’s a starting point for discussion.”

Her cheeks darkened when she got to nipple play. I could read it upside down. I had the thing memorized. When she flipped the page and read about spanking, flogging, and caning, she squirmed in her seat and exhaled unsteadily.

The thing was, plenty of those things, I didn’t need. As Nella said, pain wasn’t my kink. Those items were for me to know what would get my partner off. I didn’t love a woman sitting at my feet like a pet, resting her head on my lap, and awaiting my pleasure. But if it made her calm, freed her, aroused her, I could make a scene of that just fine.

Next page. All things anal. “Uh-uh.” She flipped it. I’d known that already. Then came lifestyle. Whereabouts. Directives. Availability. I’d take her where and when I wanted. Submission.

Her hands shook as she stared up at me. I couldn’t read her. Those eyes were dark green and boring into me. Her pupils were dilated. Her cheeks were high with color still. She was aroused, in spite of herself. And she hated me for it.

“This isn’t right.”

“That’s judgmental. People need different things. I don’t do this to a

woman who doesn't want it, Nairne. It's consensual."

"Consensual?" she hissed. "Power play, choking, crawling, collars, lying with her arse in the air for you to fuck as you please. You're telling me there's a woman who *likes* that?"

I leaned in, folded my hands, and spoke evenly. "You tell me. Are you wet?"

She grimaced and shook her head. "It doesn't matter what I am, it's the principle—"

"Are. You. Wet."

She swallowed.

"You're flushed," I said. "Your pupils are so dilated I can barely tell what color your eyes are. You started breathing unevenly when you read about nipple play and you wiggled that little ass the moment you thought about me spanking you until you came on my hand, didn't you?"

She shook her head violently. "Stop it."

"No," I seethed. Dropped my voice. "*You* stop. You're lying to yourself and to me, and I'm sick of it."

"Fine." She extracted a pen from her messy bun that I hadn't known was there, like a bizarre magic trick. Black ink dragged, line after line. She was emotional. Pissed.

I stilled her hand with mine. "*Fragolina*, you're upset. Just—"

"Fucking right," she snapped and dragged her pen down another page.

"Enough." I crumpled the papers in my fist and dragged them away. Shoved them in my pocket and put my hands up. "There's something you don't understand about this world. It's about honest, clear communication. It's about trust and exposure and the intimacy required for two people to give each other release, without shame or judgment."

I leaned in and dropped my voice to a rough whisper. "I don't inflict pain on women who don't derive intense pleasure from it. I learn them. I *devote* myself to them. My complete focus is orchestrating my time with a partner to make her body fucking sing. Does it involve alternative methods to three-minute missionary or the oh-so-edgy shower fuck? Yes. But that's what some people need. And admit it or not, Nairne, you're one of them.

"We're not freaks," I continued, "and I'm done having you imply as much. If it isn't clear to you by now that I'm asking you to consider a deeper exploration of your sexuality, to open yourself to the kind of mind-blowing fucking you and I could have, not cornering you into some sadistic trap to

cage and torture you, then you don't know me, and you have no interest in it."

I slid out of the bench and threw on my jacket. "Your car's here. I'm out."

Shoulder to the door, face-first into a bitch slap of frigid November wind. Exactly what I needed. Teo came out a minute later, hiking his jacket collar up and staring over at me.

"Sooo, that went well."

My laugh was a blast of hot vapor in the night air. "Yeah, it went exactly how I knew it was going to."

I started toward my car. Teo jogged and caught up. "Where're we going?"

"I'm going home. Lacing up my sneakers and running the river. You're welcome to join, but fair warning, I'm running until I'm too exhausted to be pissed anymore." About how misunderstood I felt. How disappointed I was in her that she resisted it. She was intelligent. Curious. Fucking feral. She bit and scratched. She'd sucked me off in a public restroom and let me finger her under a restaurant table, and she'd loved it all. Nairne was an unconventional, wildly sexual woman and she couldn't acknowledge that. It drove me nuts. She was unapologetic about every other aspect of her life. Her nerdiness, her independence. Her ambitious goals and brilliant trajectory. Why couldn't she see that how we ticked sexually wasn't something to be sorry for, either?

Fuck that shit. I was done apologizing, spending myself on a woman who didn't want to challenge her prejudices long enough to embrace her sensuality.

I had let her crack my armor. I'd softened up. I'd tried to let her in so she could see who I was, which I'd never done before. And as experience demonstrated, there'd been good reason for it. Damn good reason.

NINETEEN

Nairne

“ELODIE?” I leaned closer to the screen. The video call picture was blurry, but it looked like she was frowning. Why would she be frowning?

“Nairne, you confuse me.”

“I’m sorry?”

“You were so judgmental.” She sighed. “He risked himself, told you what he needs, which is not far off from how you are—”

“Were,” I corrected.

She rolled her eyes. “And you told him he’s perverted.”

My cheeks flamed. “I did not call him perverted!”

“*Not right* is what you told me you called his lifestyle. I know English isn’t my first language, but that’s comparable to perverted. You implied his sexuality was somehow wrong.”

I sat back in my seat and ran a hand along my throat. Had I botched it? I’d looked at those words, all of those degrading acts that at face value lowered a woman to no more than chattel, and I couldn’t stop seeing red. Rage had hit my body. How could a woman want that? Women were strong, intelligent, and powerful, and we’d been oppressed throughout history. Why would any woman desire that kind of subjugation? Why did I?

“It frightened me,” I muttered. “I don’t like what I can’t make sense of.”

Elodie nodded. “Understandable. But you could tell him what happened, explain why you have trouble with the idea, especially now.”

I shook my head as I stared up at the ceiling.

“Why haven’t you told him?” she pressed. “If you did, I’m sure he’d understand. Make some concessions. You could explain what you like—”

“Liked.”

I glanced down to catch her rolling her eyes. “You’re being obtuse.”

“Yes, I am, but Elodie, it’s a disaster waiting to happen if I go down this road again.”

She leaned closer. “That’s not true. Not to mention, what if this is the only road that you can ever be on, Nairne? What if this is how you are, and denying yourself that means all that’s left is no road at all? You really want that?”

He’d given me that list, and then the bastard had asked me if I was wet. And I had been. I hated what he’d made me see. My old self, the idiotic girl who’d played with fire and gotten burned.

I’d come home from dinner after looking at that list, throbbing, and tried not to touch myself as I sat in the shower, wondering how the fuck we’d ended up where we had, Zed and me. My clit had had a pulse and I’d tried to ignore it. But as my body relaxed, one hand had slid between my thighs, the other pinched my nipple until I shook with orgasm. That edge of pain and pleasure had always heightened my release.

Back then, I hadn’t known the labels and lifestyles out there. I’d known what I liked, and I’d found and taken it. And then I’d paid for it. But now, Zed was asking me to embrace an identity. Nairne, the masochist.

I couldn’t stomach it, that I even liked his domineering side. I liked when he came with an agenda. Invited me to answer yes or no, not generate ideas. My mind was crammed with plans and pivot tables and pages of research notes already. When he chose the diner and ordered burgers, I liked it, because I didn’t give a shit. Explaining that made me sound apathetic to some, depressed to others. But to Zed, it made sense.

Not that I fucking cared what other people thought. I cared about what they did with that information. How they could use it against me. How that weakened and exposed me.

“Nairne?”

I refocused on the screen. “What?”

Elodie’s nose scrunched. “You were rambling.”

“I said all that out loud?”

She nodded thoughtfully. “You need to separate what happened when we were younger from what you’re contemplating as an adult. So, let’s try this. Tell me what your ideal relationship is.”

“Not having one.”

She sighed. “Seriously? You don’t want a man to curl around you at night? To talk over life’s questions and make important decisions together? To cook you eggs and toast, to make you come and kiss you like you’re the center of his world? Who cares for and protects you? None of that appeals?”

I groaned and scrubbed my face. “I’d rather do it myself. I can protect myself fine, meet my needs, and have none of the risk that will come with being in a relationship like that.”

Elodie squinted, tilted her head. “I don’t think you can go the rest of your life playing it safe, Nairne. It’s not who you are. Zed sees that and you don’t like it. Give yourself some time to acclimate to it, *ma belle*.” She sighed once more. “Hopefully, you won’t lose him before you do.”



IT WAS STRAIGHT OUT of the Sopranos, but creepier because it felt too real. For once, being alone, parking, and taking as much time as it did for me to assemble my wheelchair, transferring, and moving down the empty sidewalk, had me feeling small and exposed. Like the shell-less crabs I’d chased as a child along the sand, as they skittered feverishly toward shelter.

The internet had told me his birthday. December 2. The air was frosty, and my breath puffed ahead of me in billows of steam. Teo must have lifted my number from Zed because he’d texted me to tell me where they’d be. A restaurant in the North End, Boston’s Little Italy. Lupo’s. I stopped in front of the façade. Old brick. Black awnings. Twinkling lights strung about. An ornate and rather beastly logo of a wolf encircled in a sphere of blood red.

“Si dice sempre il lupo più grande che non è.”

I jumped in my seat and glanced over my shoulder.

Teo smiled and flicked what smelled like a blunt to the curb. “It’s an old saying. Means *a little lie makes the story better*.”

I swallowed and took in the place again. Heard laughter and that ubiquitous Italian guitar music. “True enough. We have similar expressions in Scotland.”

“I’m surprised you came. Zed won’t talk about you. He exercises compulsively and sulks like a cranky old man at Sunday dinner. Which meant, I deduced, that you two were still on the outs.”

My hands went along my push-rims. Forty-five degrees right, back to

zero. Forty-five degrees left, back once more. “I owe him an apology.”

“Why?”

“That’s between us.”

Teo smiled, shoved his hands in his jeans, and shook his head. “Not how our family works. If you hurt him, you’re answerable to me.”

“Well, I don’t know what to tell you, Teo. He tried to talk to me about the...*lifestyle*, and I lost it on him.”

Teo frowned, crossed his arms. “He told you?”

I scrunched my nose. “Why wouldn’t he tell me?”

His laugh echoed in the empty night, and when his chin dropped, his eyes were hard. “He barely talks to *anyone* about it. A few friends and I know. No one else but for the partners he trusts. Thing is, he hasn’t touched them since you. And before them, he didn’t mix public dates and his private life. You’re his first.”

“First what?”

The door burst open and Zed came out, cigar in hand, tumbler in the other. Black suit. White button up. His hair was disheveled, a sexy mess of curls and waves, and his shirt was unbuttoned three. Olive skin. A dusting of dark hair. The curve and shadows of his pecs. He stumbled a little and frowned at me.

“Ah, Jesus. Not you.”

He sounded drunk. A woman came outside and wrapped her arms around his waist. Patted his flat stomach with beautiful hands and fire-red nails. Bile crawled up my throat and my fingers itched. She was stunning. Sophia Loren in midlife. Big brown eyes, dramatic black liner. Flawless golden skin. Tits to her chin, sinful hourglass body, and four-inch red stilettos. I hated her. Because she touched him. Because he leaned on her and he was vulnerable in her arms.

“Nella, why don’t you go back in?” Teo was staring at me curiously. “I’ve got him.”

Zed stepped forward and walked slowly. Ashed the cigar onto the pavement, then took a deep hit while he stared at me. The ember glowed and lit his eyes. There were deep purple circles beneath them, and their normal sunlight glint was missing. He looked even more like shit than the last time I’d seen him, at our previous board meeting. He’d kept his gaze from me at both meetings. Answered brisk, and matter-of-factly. I’d felt my insides curdle and ache, and known then I couldn’t do this, keep myself from him.

Losing his eyes had been like losing the sun.

“What are you doing here?” His voice was flat, hoarse from smoking the foul-smelling cigar.

I shifted in my seat. The woman—Nella—was glaring at me, hands on her hips. “*Questa è la puttana?*”

“Nella.” Zed bit her name into the air.

She spat on the ground, threw open the door, and turned into the restaurant.

“I’ll be right inside,” Teo said.

Zed and I stared at each other.

I broke the silence. “Zed—”

“Answer me.” He stepped closer, drank deeply from his glass, and held it loosely in his fingertips. “Tell me why you’re here.”

“I came to say I’m sorry. I was hasty. It was...a lot to take in, and I lost my temper.”

He sniffed and finished his drink. Sucked deeply from the cigar again. Didn’t say a damn word.

Two weeks I’d spent searching myself, trying to come up with a justification for my resistance to him. Other than irrational fear given the Dark Days, and prejudice toward a kind of sexuality I had to admit to myself I desperately wanted, I had no fucking reason. Zed was right. It was consensual. He respected me. I respected him. We’d be brilliant together. And for bloody once since my life had fallen apart in Europe, I felt safe to loosen up and be happy again.

I rolled until my feet hit his shins. Stared up at him because he was someone worth craning my neck for. “I didn’t mean what I said, to judge you like I did. You...intimidated me. Confused me. I felt conflicted, even though you’re right about me. I didn’t like that.”

He stared at me, still smoking. But he still said nothing, so I pressed on.

“I came because I owed you an apology, and I felt you deserved it in person. I’m...my life is on the move, as you know, and I’m in a poor position to offer myself to someone who’s firmly rooted in one place. But I wanted to say that if you want me, while I’m here...I’m yours.”

His fingers tightened around the empty glass, but it was his only tell. Face unreadable. Body still. He was a model in restraint.

“It’s tempting.”

But. That was the word that hung silently between us. *But* I wasn’t worth

it. Wasn't worth the headache. The fight. I'd pushed him away. Hurt him too much. I didn't blame him. "I understand. I'll go." I turned and moved down the sidewalk.

"Nairne," he called.

I glanced over my shoulder.

"If you do this, you're mine. I won't battle you about it any further, and I won't share you."

I smiled and shrugged. "Doesn't sound so bad."

He grinned and hid it behind the cigar. "My place, tomorrow. Be there by noon."

I nodded and turned to go.

"Oh, and *innamorata*?" He exhaled a wide ring of smoke into the air. "Don't bother packing any panties. You won't need them."

TWENTY

Zed

SHE SHOWED up wearing head to toe black, and a bare face that had my cock aching the moment she smirked and rolled over my toe in her signature greeting.

“Your place is really lovely.”

“Thanks. Please, get comfortable. Something to drink?”

She waved off the offer, staring at the painting of Mom. “Thank you, no. Zed, who did this?”

I walked a few feet to her right, sidestepping both her and a direct answer. “It’s my mother.”

“I know that.”

I balked. “How?”

She smiled, gaze still trained on the painting. “You have her eyes. The first thing I noticed about her, too. She was beautiful.”

I shook my head. The day of the board meeting, Nairne had thrown it in my face that she’d been chosen unanimously. I’d reasoned Mom had to have signed off on her, at least on paper. “You talk like you met her.”

“I did. She came in for my final interview. You were traveling for a game, and she sat in your place, made the executive decision.”

“What?” My voice was strained. I couldn’t process the idea that my mom had met Nairne. Looked at her. Approved. It was another intersection of too many internal roads.

Nairne finally turned and looked at me. “She was a lovely woman. I liked her. She told some joke that made me feel at ease. Said my wheels were fancier than hers.”

Mom had been weak at the end. She didn't walk the last month of her life. "What did she say to you?" I wanted every moment. Every word she said. Memories slid through my sieve of a mind like fine sand. I hated how much I'd lost already.

Nairne smiled at the painting again. "She said patience was required for the position. Compassion for those whose life had charted a different course than mine. If I was willing to learn as I went, open my heart..." Nairne cleared her throat. "*Your world will never be the same.* That's what she said."

Mom had been intense about her intuition. Believed she had the Sight—a sense of what was to come, an ability to see deep into others. She said she'd been shown her death when she was thirteen, known her name meant *sorrow* for a reason. I hated it. I hated it when she'd been proven right.

"Since I met you," Nairne said, "sometimes I've wondered if she wasn't just talking about the board."

I tugged my hair. "Yeah, she tended to have that effect on people. She liked to stir up unease and leave you with more questions than when you started."

Nairne nodded. "Who painted her? It's rendered...brilliantly."

My hand slid over my mouth, scraped against my scruff. "Me."

She did a double take at me. "Sweet lord, man. Oil painting Zed, really?"

I nodded toward the charcoals. "I like to sketch, too, but yeah, oils mostly."

Nairne snorted. "Right. Well, I'm duly impressed. And I feel like a roaster."

"A what?"

"A roaster. Means I made an arse of myself. I just...I feel poorly, for my words to you still. People are more complicated than I like them to be, and what I said—"

"Nairne." I sank down to a crouch and ran my hand up her thigh. Touching her was taking a hit of my favorite drug. "I get it. I was asking you not just to accept me, but also to accept what you recognized in yourself."

"Yes," she muttered. "So, here I am, a masochist at your pleasure." Her hands went through my hair as her eyes went from emerald to dark evergreen. "Am I allowed to kiss you?"

I smiled, pressed my lips to the pulse in her wrist. "That you are."

She tasted like cool water and mint toothpaste. Her tongue and her mouth were endlessly fascinating to me. I took over the kiss, fisted her hair, pulled

her close. Her arms wrapped around my neck and she hummed against my teeth.

I broke away, breathing unsteadily, and set my forehead against hers. “There’s a room past the kitchen. Use the restroom if you have to first, then strip to nothing and lie on the bed, however is comfortable for you. I’ll give you twenty minutes.”

“Twenty?” She looked at me uneasily.

“Something unclear about the number?”

She shrugged and bit her lip. “Seems like a while.”

Anticipation turned her crank. I had to start with what I already knew, then learn her as we went.

“Yep.” I kissed her on the corner of her mouth and stood. “See you then.”



I TOOK twenty-five because I was a bastard, and because I could. I wanted that cunt throbbing for me. I wanted her so wet, the sheets were damp. I closed the door behind me, mildly surprised she’d done as I asked.

The space looked like a sunroom. Thick glass insulated the room with floor to ceiling windows that overlooked the river. In the warm months, people sailed in their boats, ran along the trail. But in the colder season, there was just a spare hardcore cyclist here and there, flying past despite the frigid temps.

I kept the temperature at eighty degrees, since if you were in this room, you were naked. The glass was treated, so no one could see in. I had a little exhibitionist streak in me that didn’t jibe with my inability to share. No one saw what was mine, but playing the fantasy was a powerful indulgence. She lay there on her side, legs bent, with a pillow between her knees. Her legs were thin but still muscular. She likely had to work her ass off in PT to keep that much tone. I knew enough about the injury from growing up a neurosurgeon’s son to understand that with paralysis, muscle atrophy was inevitable.

Her hair was dark auburn against the white sheets, and her ivory skin glowed in the filtered light that spilled in. My cock already pressed against my jeans. I had to get my shit together. Be in control. One step at a time.

“I’ve been trying to figure out how you treat the glass, keep it so light yet

opaque from the outside.”

I rolled my eyes. Of course, she was weighing the chemistry involved. And she'd known I wouldn't leave her for prying eyes to consume. I was too possessive.

Her eyes slid to me and she smiled. I had a nice view of her cunt and it was fucking gorgeous. Pink and smooth and swollen. Definitely aroused. She liked this waiting. The peace and quiet of the room. Her breasts rested softly to her side and I had plans for those full tits.

“You know your word.”

“Yes. Gadzooks.”

We both smiled and I shook my head. “That one. That's your safe word. You say that, I stop immediately. As we go, I'll ask you questions. Questions you should be able to answer—your birthday, your name, the color of the sky. That's my way of checking in without breaking the moment. If you don't answer soon enough or I'm concerned with how you sound, I'll slow down or stop.”

She nodded slowly, shifted to her back, and I had to bite my cheek. Her knees fell apart as she lay totally open for me—wet sex and waves of mahogany hair against white pillows. Rosy nipples and flushed skin. Her chest rose unevenly, and she licked her lips. “I understand.”

I sat on the side of the bed, drifted my fingers down her belly.

She shuddered.

“What positions hurt your back?”

She turned to face me. “Flat like this is a wee bit uncomfortable. It's better when I'm elevated. On my side feels good. On my stomach. Bending over, though I just need to go slowly, give my muscles time to stretch.”

I nodded as my fingers slid down to her slit and traced her entrance. Wet. Warm. Fucking perfect. “Okay. Turn on your stomach.”

She did, hooking an arm under her knee to rotate her leg, and shifting until she looked like a starfish. My hand drifted across her gorgeous little ass. Another part of her that was smaller than it would have been before the injury, but still beautiful. Soft yet firm. “What do you feel?”

She shifted. “It's uneven. You can be rough. It won't hurt more than it would anyone else. May feel odd until I get used to it. Just not my scar. That's a bed of raw nerves.”

I stared at the line that went from her lower back to tailbone. Traced my fingers around it, giving the raised white skin a wide berth. “How's that?”

I'd read a little. That point of injury with SCI could turn erogenous. It was worth exploring at least. The back was a significant part of play, chock full of nerves that could convey loads of heady pain and pleasure. I didn't want to rule it out until I had to.

"Um." She squirmed a little, shifted her head. "Weird. Kind of good." I trailed a little closer and she groaned. "Intense." She sighed. "But good. Really good."

That was enough. I swatted her bum softly and kissed where I'd just traced around her scar. She arched into the bed and bit her lip. It was a damn good start.

"Time to pop your kink cherry, *fragolina*."

She smiled and shut her eyes. "Yes, sir."

TWENTY-ONE

Nairne

HIS HANDS KNEW what they were doing. My skin burned where he'd touched and woken up my nerves. He retrieved a foam wedge from the closet, slid it under the sheets, and helped me adjust myself onto it. I watched his face as he concentrated on gently tying my wrists and ankles to the bedposts. He sat back and looked me over.

“Man. Never thought I'd see the day.”

I glanced down at the rope, black and dramatic against my snowy skin, and smiled. I felt nervous but also content. My eyes grew heavy as he stood there and took his time staring at me. He was still clothed in black joggers and a simple white undershirt. His skin looked more bronze, and his eyes stood out.

“Relax, *innamorata*. Breathe.”

I did. Unevenly. His hands drifted up my legs and he cupped my cunt, slipped two fingers inside. “What made you wet? The waiting?”

“Yes.”

His voice dropped. “Being tied up?”

“Yes,” I whispered.

“You know why you're tied up?”

I bit my lip. “No.”

“Because I'm going to make you writhe. You're going to want to curl in on yourself because what I'm doing to you is too much good that you'll take it anyway. But your pleasure's mine to give.”

My throat stuck together, and I sounded hoarse when I answered. “All right.”

He didn't say another word, just watched me as he fucked me with his fingers. Until he pulled something out of his pocket and pinched it between his thumb and pointer. It looked like a clothespin, but thinner.

I tensed. He tilted his head. Smiled. "Relax. Trust me?"

I nodded and swallowed hard. He set one around my nipple and I bit my lip, stifling a groan. The second around my other nipple made something happen to my body's circuitry. A hot current traveled in a feverish triangle, one breast to the other, down to my throbbing clit that he scrubbed with a calloused thumb.

"You're beautiful like this. Surrendered. Open. Taking your pleasure. Your cunt is soaked, *fragolina*. You're going to come soon."

I gasped as he added another finger and curled against my g-spot. "Please."

"Hush." He tugged the clamps. Everything grew hot and aching.

"Don't fight it." He paused. "And don't you dare come until I say."

I groaned and felt my sex throbbing. "I can't stop it."

"You can. You're a disciplined woman, Nairne. Delay it. Breathe." He took his fingers away and I cried out. I'd been so fucking close. I skittered on the edge of ecstasy.

He tugged the nipple clamps again and I did just like he said I would. I reflexed as the silk ropes held me steady. All sensation was stuck right at its origin—my breasts, my sex. My body started to feel distant from me, the steady pain in my lower back far away and dull. My tits burned, my cunt ached.

I wanted to stay there forever.

"Beautiful. You're doing beautifully." Suddenly, blood and heat rushed to my nipples as the clamps came off, and pain crashed powerfully to the surface of my skin. I moaned and he slapped right over my cunt. "Focus. Feel it."

I gasped at the impact. No one had ever done that, and the level of pleasure it generated was stunning. He did it again and I swore forcefully.

"What color is the sky?"

I blinked at him. The answer was harder to come by than it should be, but I found it. "Blue."

"Why?" Another slap.

"Because blue light waves are shortest. When they hit molecules in the air, they scatter more than other colors of light."

“Huh.” His thumb roughed my clit again. “I never knew that. See, I’m not the only one getting a lesson today.”

He slapped my cunt again and the first rush of an orgasm hit me. “Oh god, I’m going to—”

“I know. You think I don’t know?” He leaned in and kissed my mouth, plunging his tongue into me like it was his cock. “I’m going to fuck you with my fingers and you’re going to come.”

I nodded furiously against his lips. I wanted to grab his hair, wrap my legs around his waist. They were both impossible for different circumstantial reasons, and I groaned in frustration. Until rough fingers plunged into me and I came with a hoarse scream as my breasts throbbed and my entire cunt pulsed in the most powerful orgasm of my life.

“Oh, god.” I banged my head on the pillow.

“I told you, god doesn’t get credit.” Zed smiled and kissed my lips once more. “I do.” He was untying me, leaning over me as he did, and the scent of him had my sex clenching for more. I wanted his cock. I wanted his naked body over me.

“Fuck me, Zed.”

He kept untying knots like I’d asked him about something trivial like the weather and I could wait. “I’ll take you when I want.”

I sighed, both satisfied and deeply frustrated. My body was so heavy I couldn’t lift a finger, but arousal jackhammered inside me and held me on edge. “What the hell is the point of this? You going to tease me with your fingers until I’m old and grey? Christ, man.”

He slapped my arse. Hard. Twice more, then two fingers deep in my cunt.

“In this room, you don’t talk to me like that. I call the shots. I fuck you when I’m ready. You don’t challenge me, and if you do”—three fast slaps right near my cunt—“there are consequences, understood?”

Another orgasm was close, and I couldn’t get my mind around it. Since my injury, the project of coming involved thirty minutes with a vibrator and some elaborate fantasies in my head, none of which had been adequately depraved, apparently. The present dictated that all along I’d needed a brute with a deep, arrogant voice and a propensity for spanking to get off. Who knew?

You did. Touché, subconscious.

A sharp *thwack* where he’d slapped already. It was raw and deliciously hot. His voice was low and even. “I said, understood?”

“Yes. God, yes.”

“No god here, *innamorata*.”

“Yes, *Zed*.” I gasped and wanted to curl in because he was teasing the rim of my arse with his thumb and it felt too good for me to remind him of one of my few hard limits.

“Relax, I won’t touch it beyond this.” He kissed hot skin on my arse and bit. “Trust me.”

I nodded, riding an edge of near-orgasm that made me want to grind against the sheets.

Zed held my hip and traced his fingers up my back, near my scar. I gasped as he did another loop around the sensitive skin, while his other hand fucked me.

“Close,” I whispered.

He laughed quietly. “One day you’ll learn that I don’t need to be told. I’ve got three fingers in your cunt and one on your clit, and the other on your ass, *Nairne*. I know what’s going on.”

I was too deep into whatever dream world he’d put me in to laugh at his cocksure attitude. The way he slowed and tortured me and held me on the edge. I was about to beg when he leaned down, hot breath right in my ear, and bit. “So fucking beautiful. Your cunt is mine. This pleasure right now is mine. You may come now, *fragolina*. Right on my hand.”

I tipped over on a wail so loud, the birds skittered off the tree outside. The room might be visually private, but it wasn’t soundproof.

I felt his smile against my skin. Cool lips caressing my neck. “Perfect. Absolutely perfect.”



“I FEEL BLOOTERED.”

Zed laughed and kissed my hair. “I either need a translation or more context.”

“Sozzled. Rat-arsed. Drunk.”

He turned sideways through the doorway with me in his arms and set me gently on the toilet. I had a large, fuzzy robe around me that had made the transition from the sunroom’s sauna temps to the rest of the house bearable.

Zed leaned to turn on the tub and I caught a glimpse of tan skin and the

black waistband of his briefs. If my arms didn't feel like deadweights, I would've reached for him, tried for a few strokes on his cock, but I was exhausted and sated. He dumped something from a glass bottle in the huge soaker tub and the air took on the scent of wildflowers and pungent herbs. My eyes felt heavy and I lulled forward.

"Hey, easy there." His arm came around me and I leaned into his shoulder. All muscles and warm skin. Solid. Safe. I breathed in deeply.

"You smell like rain."

"Mm?" he asked. The water pouring into the tub was loud, and I was hoarse from screaming through orgasms.

"Pheromones. Rain."

"You're out of it. It's normal. After this bath, you'll nap, then wake up feeling like a million bucks." He kissed my hair again. "Promise."

TWENTY-TWO

Zed

THE GOOD DOMINANT DID AFTERCARE, then let her sleep it off. Gave her some space from all your touching and barking orders. Even if she'd begged for every moment of it, came more times than you could count, anybody who'd gone through that needed solitude and silence to recoup. It was a demanding and gratifying cycle between agony and ecstasy. And it required rest.

I'd taken it easy on Nairne, especially her ass, because she had to sit on it all the time. I'd had some subs who stood the whole next day rather than put a lick of body weight on their raw backsides. Not my thing, but they'd asked for it. Explicitly.

The woman may well deny it to her dying day, but Nairne liked it more than just rough. She liked a sharp touch, and my dominant voice, words kept minimal and direct. When I told her to hush, she'd bit her lip and swelled like a fucking balloon. I was learning her, mapping the network of her mind and body. Finding where I could push her tolerance, sustain pain for a high of pleasure, and where it was best to simply tease out timing, withdraw then come back suddenly, for a shock of reward and sensation.

Nairne was fun because she was uninhibited. I didn't enforce silence with her, and she was responsive as it got vocal, enjoying it. Maybe one day, the challenge of silence would be good for play, but right now her voice was an important cue for figuring out her kink. I didn't need her quiet. I needed to know her, to shape and conduct the arc of her release.

I wanted her to lean into me like she had in the bathroom. A freefall of trust in my arms. To let me hold her and spank her ass then call her

endearments in Italian and serve her tea.

At first, I hadn't thought too far into why my possessiveness toward Nairne came out so strongly, because it fell squarely within the realm of the lifestyle. Possessiveness and domination went hand in hand.

But after this, I couldn't deny there was a difference. Like a seed that had begun in native soil, sprouted familiar, and flowered into some one-of-a-kind hybrid, my need to protect and claim Nairne now felt more complex. What did that signify? Fuck if it even mattered. She was going, I was staying. Better to just enjoy her while I had her and leave the philosophizing alone.

She slept in my arms, on her side with a pillow between her knees because they knocked against each other otherwise. My fingers slid through her damp hair that smelled like heaven.

The same perfumer who made my cologne made a bubble bath that smelled like Nairne, as I'd requested. *A garden by the sea* I'd told her. She'd nailed it.

Nairne shifted and her ass grazed my cock, which hadn't dropped from half-mast the whole day. It had taken herculean will not to sink into her the moment she turned and laid herself bare for me, but that wasn't what this dynamic was about. It was about denial and delay, power play, withholding then lavishing, and how deeply satisfying that was to both of us.

"Zed?"

Her voice. Smoky. Warm. Like the whiskey she loved. "Yes, *innamorata*."

"Would you please fuck me?" She was half asleep and her throat sounded shredded from yelling. I'd given her two screamers and I had plans for a third here soon.

"No." I kissed her neck and she groaned. "When it's time, I'll tell you."

She wiggled again. "You're torturing me. Punishment for not jumping your bones the moment you propositioned me."

I pulled her close and bit her ear. "I didn't proposition you. You're not a whore. You're my partner. My lover. *Innamorata*. That's what that means. It's a title of admiration, not scorn."

"Then what is it? You don't want to have sex?" She glanced over her shoulder and blinked slowly. "You just like the bondage and control?"

I shook my head and kissed her. "Nairne, sinking my cock into you is pretty much all I think about. But it's not how this goes. You surrender that decision of how and when we fuck because it pleases me, and it pleases you,

too, whether you admit it or not.”

“Maybe it does, but I don’t like it,” she whispered. She turned to get a better look at me. “The inequality. I want to feel like I affect you the way you affect me.”

I tried to figure out how to word it. “You do affect me deeply, Nairne. It’s not that at all. Just because I’m exhibiting self-control doesn’t mean you’re not ripping me apart inside. Believe me.”

She sighed and turned back, looking thoughtful. “All right.”

I laughed. “Write it down, ladies and gents. She took an answer without a lick of sass.”

“That’s because you finger fucked the sass right out of me.” She squirmed against me again and held my arm. “And now I’m going to nap some more because apparently you finger fucked all energy out of me, too.”

Palm splayed low over her belly, I pressed her tightly against me. Imagined driving into her from behind and strumming her clit. “I’m a man of my word. I told you that you’d be boneless.”

“True, Mr. Salvatore.” She smiled as her eyes drifted shut. “That you did.”



“YOU KNOW ABOUT MY FAMILY,” I said. “You’ve unfortunately met Teo. But I don’t know anything about yours.”

She paused mid-chew, resumed slowly, then swallowed. I’d had her help me make meatballs. And after I stuck them in the oven, I’d set her on the counter and ate her out, edging her over and over until she sent the birds flying from the branches again.

She twirled her pasta three hundred and sixty degrees, seven twenty. She was making me dizzy with that damn fork. “Nairne.”

“I’m trying to think about where to start. I don’t talk about it often.”

Her fork fell to the plate with a clatter and she looked up at me. “I don’t know my father. Mam never told me his name. She was married to her work and rarely social, so I assume I was an accident, the product of an atypical night.” She shrugged, went back to twirling her pasta.

“She had me, hired my *au paire*, Claudette, which is how I learned French, and continued her surgical residency. I remember asking her when I

was around three or so where my father was. She told me he lived far away, and even though he wasn't here, didn't mean he didn't love me. That people who love you can't always be there to tell you, but they never stop loving you.

"Sort of a self-fulfilling prophecy. After a hospital shift, she was coming home from meeting a friend for dinner and got hit by a freight-truck. It ran a light at an intersection. She died instantly."

I squeezed her hand, rubbed my thumb against her soft skin. "I'm sorry."

She smiled and squeezed my hand back. "So, Granda and Nan came for me, and brought me to Prestonpans. It's a small fishing village northeast of Edinburgh. It was a simple, quiet upbringing. I was happy for the most part, read my books and played footie. Nan died when I was fourteen. Granda passed the summer after I graduated school, while I was off at training."

"Jesus, Nairne." She'd lost everybody. "So, soccer was your world."

"Yes, for a time. I met Elodie and gained a sister. Had some wild years..." Her face sobered. "And then the rest, well, you know how it goes."

I stared at her, seeing the parallels and divergences between how we coped with our losses. I'd watched my mom fight a losing battle with an indiscriminately ravaging disease, and I'd sworn myself to a life that was a lie, because it protected the people I loved. I'd felt completely trapped by my circumstances. And I wasn't idiotic enough not to connect my sexuality to that traumatic helplessness coinciding with my adolescence.

As for Nairne? She'd lost them all, and she'd built a fortress around herself for protection. Then here I'd been, demanding her unflinching trust and total dependence on me. I'd held her reluctance against her and made it about me and some perceived character assassination, rather than considered she may have had good reason for holding back.

She tipped her head to the side. "You look deep in thought."

"You give me lots to think about, Ms. MacGregor."

"Ah, back to peers, are we?" She smiled and speared a meatball.

Yeah, we were. Because outside that sunroom, she was a strong-willed woman who did shit her own way and told me to shove my demands up my ass. I had to pick my battles with her. Honor her independence and autonomy in ways that didn't make me insane.

I jerked my chin toward the meatballs. "How'd they turn out?"

"Fucking brilliant." She shook her head side to side like she was jamming to good tunes. It made me wonder what music she liked. "Your father's

recipe? A neurosurgeon who cooks like this doesn't seem fair. You're Renaissance men, you Salvatores."

A laugh burst from me. "Don't give Teo too much credit. He's a pretty shitty cook so far. I learned to do it because Dad worked, and Mom got nauseated from the smell of everything when she had chemo. Teo was just too young at that point."

Nairne's face got serious. "He was a boy still."

I nodded. "Yeah. It was hard for him with Mom. He's impulsive, always been a little daredevil, but he kind of went crazy for a while when she got bad. Outright recklessness. Drugs. Kink that makes me look tame. Zio—*Uncle*—Gianno could talk to him sometimes. He's more Teo's speed."

She slipped her leg between mine. "Your uncle? Is he here in Boston, too?"

I lifted her foot and rubbed gently along the arch. She sighed and her eyes drifted shut for a moment. "Not anymore. He coached me most of my teenage soccer career before I went professional, though. After he retired, he stayed for a few years while Mom was really sick. But mostly he's in Genoa now. That's where he and Dad grew up. Until Dad was sent over here..." I let that thought die off and took a bite of food.

"Zed." Nairne dropped her foot from me and propped her elbows on the table. She held her wine glass with the tips of her long, slim fingers. "What are your ties to the mafia? It was one thing to have a few dinners and a bathroom tryst, but if we're going to be exclusive to each other, even for a brief time, I need to know the truth. That is, if you want exclusivity."

I leaned toward her, my voice quiet. "That whole part outside Lupo's where I said I don't share? Neither do you. Ever. Only us."

She nodded and hid her smile behind her wine. "Right then. So, onto the whole organized crime question?"

I didn't want to lie to her. But hell if I was going to fold her into it either. "It's complicated."

Her eyes flickered with irritation. Nairne liked direct speech, honesty. I thought in general that she saw me as a straight shooter and respected me for it. I couldn't stand the idea of losing her respect by lying to her, but I was guaranteed to lose it if I told her the truth.

"Not good enough, Zed. I need more than that."

I glared at my plate and forked my meatball to a decimated heap. "I'm a part of it, in an...unconventional capacity."

“You’re in it.” She sipped her wine and set it down, then leaned back in her chair. “And it’s unconventional? Meaning what? You can’t condone their criminality, I know you. You’re no angel, but you don’t delight in evil. So, what are you doing?”

I wanted to laugh. If she only knew all that I’d permitted, the foul doings that soured my stomach. Perhaps she’d view it charitably, give me the benefit of the doubt. But most days even I barely could. I just held onto hope that she’d never find out in the first place.

But Nairne liked puzzles. No, *liked* was inadequate. She *lived* for them. She spun thousands of pieces of observations around in her labs and research until they clicked and snapped into clarity. I was fucked, because she’d set her mind to figuring this out, and there was no telling her otherwise. I cleared my throat and drained my glass of wine. When I set it down, her eyes were drilling into me.

“Jesus, man. You’re two-timing, aren’t you?” She smacked her hand against the table and stared up at the ceiling. “Lighting the bloody house on fire while you’re standing in it.”

“It’s more complex than that, but more or less. That said, I need you to understand right now, you cannot—”

“Zed, I wouldn’t—”

“Damn it, Nairne,” I snapped. “Listen to me. Don’t interrupt.” This was life or death. I was pissed she’d seen through me, pissed that I was relieved that she knew, and pissed that I was endangering her, when I already spun my wheels plenty about how best to keep her safe. “You have to stay far away from any of this shit. Never talk about it. Never refer to it. That part of my life doesn’t exist with us.”

She stared at me, then nodded solemnly. “I won’t, Zed. I’ll be prudent.”

An exhale of relief left me. “Thank you. Now let’s move the conversation along to less unappetizing topics.”

Nairne’s gears were turning, and she ignored me. “Right then... What about Zio Gianni then? Your father was made to come over, you’ve said. Why not Gianni. How was he safe?”

I scrubbed my face. “We were changing topics.”

“*You* were,” she corrected.

I sighed and started picking up plates and silverware to dump in the sink. “He was never on their radar. He played soccer for Juventus, a striker.”

Nairne whistled, momentarily distracted. “Now there’s a worthy club.

You should be playing for the likes of them.”

I froze, hands full of dishes, then went into the kitchen.

“Why don’t you, Zed?” she pressed. “Why not get away from it all? If you left, what could they do, an ocean between you?”

If it were anyone else talking, I would bark at her to drop it, bite the hand that was trying to lovingly coax me toward reevaluating my life. Everybody was telling me the same thing—Dad, Teo, Gianno, even Lucas, though he didn’t know the details of why I really stayed. Bottom line, I couldn’t leave them. I was needed. I kept shit in line with our families and their underhanded dealings. I got Teo out of scrapes. I held Dad when he cried and missed Mom so badly, he sounded like his heart had been ripped out of his chest. How could I possibly extricate myself from any of that?

“Because getting out isn’t simple, Nairne. This is where I belong.”

Nairne quirked her head to the side with an expression of polite curiosity. I didn’t like that look, because when Nairne played it cool, it meant inside her head was a hot engine of analysis. Nairne was up to something.

TWENTY-THREE

Nairne

TWO THINGS: One, I was surprised Zed hadn't deflected more about his role in the mafia. I'd brought it together gradually, and when I'd snapped the last puzzle piece into place over dinner, he hadn't denied it. He'd trusted me. We might not have longevity or dispositional compatibility or even the capacity to speak longer than ten minutes without arguing, but we had trust.

Two, my life was surreal. I'd crossed an ocean to get away from the sexually assertive strain of men and poor choices, to heal and keep to the straight and narrow for a few years while I got a world-class education. Yet I'd managed to find the one kinky bastard in the city who not only brought out my old proclivities, but cranked them up to a whole new, albeit highly pleasurable, level.

"Mac." My head turned Rob's way. I got my physiotherapist's usual smile with an added quirk of an eyebrow. "Little distracted today?"

"Sorry, yes." Typically, I was ruthless in therapy, but I couldn't keep my mind off what had happened. How different I felt. And unsettlingly the same.

"It's all right." He looked me over and frowned. "We can sit. Take five."

I shook my head and gripped the parallel bars tighter. "No. I'm ready."

I focused on each step, moved steadily while Rob rolled backward on his stool, guiding my knees as needed. I had enough sensation that I didn't feel like I was floating, but it was odd, knowing my feet were striking down and there wasn't much I could perceive as I moved. Months of standing in a sling, watching my legs snap up and down along a treadmill, teaching my body to do something I'd done since I was eleven-months-old. I couldn't think about it too long or I got fucking pissed.

Rob was kind and friendly. I think he liked our appointments because I came with a brutal determination to walk again that made his job easier. He could concentrate on the mechanics and lay aside the motivational speaker role that other patients seemed to require. I'd been on the mat plenty of times, working on crawling or other such infuriatingly fundamental exercises, and I'd overhear him trying to convince a patient they could try at all. That they were capable.

No one had to tell me I was capable. I knew I could do anything I set my mind to. Even after I'd woken up, all sensation south of my navel was weird fuzzy disorientation of half-touch, blinding pain, and intermittent perceptions of pressure and heat. It didn't progress as rapidly as I wanted. I couldn't do everything I hoped yet. But I wouldn't give up one single goal. My new normal required patience, but I held to the potential of my ability, one slow step at a time.

"Want to talk about it?" said Rob.

"Not really. I just..." I rolled my shoulders and took a few good steps "Have you ever realized something about yourself, but not known what to make of it?"

Rob gave it some thought. "Can't say I have. I'm a simple guy, though." He laughed and continued guiding me. "Why?"

I shook my head and sensed my hips tilting back. Pulling them forward, I fought to find my center of gravity, but they swung back again. Rob pressed my arse and brought it forward. He touched me more than pretty much any man had except for Zed, but it was clinical and completely practical. I finally found my balance and continued. Left. Right.

"It's nothing."

"Your anniversary's soon. It have something to do with that?"

I froze. "I completely lost track of time. It is coming. That's why I'm emotional about everything right now."

Rob's hand stilled on my knee, then gripped my thigh as it spasmed. "It's okay to have feelings, Mac. Your life got turned upside down three years ago. Anyone who's experienced what you have has feelings about that, and it's not for lack of strength or resilience."

Tears pricked and I dabbed my nose on my shoulder. "Thanks, Robbie." I pushed forward and did a double take when I glanced toward the hallway.

Sox ball cap pulled low. Black jacket. Olive skin. Burning tiger eyes. And a scowl as sinister as the blizzard that was brewing outside.

Zed.

He whipped open the door. Strolled in. Smacked up his ball cap enough that he could kiss me, controlled and chaste. Turning toward Rob, Zed shot a hand forward and Rob shook it. “Zed Salvatore.” He turned to me. “We should go soon. Weather’s getting shitty.”

Rob glanced between us. “So, you two...? Wow. She’s discrete.” He patted my leg, coaxed my knee forward, and Zed’s eyes burned into Rob’s clinical touch. “Hasn’t said a word about you.”

Zed shoved his hands in his pockets, which was his tell for irritation. He looked calm as he watched me walk. “She’s a class act.”

“She’s also here,” I said, “and you’re talking about her like she’s not. Zed, I’ll be done in five minutes.”

A nasty winter storm was coming, and he’d insisted on driving me back. I hadn’t felt like fighting him. After one spinal injury, if someone wanted to drive me in a tank of a car with four-wheel drive and give me the safest ride home possible in this mess, I wasn’t going to argue.

“I’ll bring her out,” Rob said. “We’re going to practice with the arm crutches, right, Mac?” He smiled up at me and coaxed my knee forward again.

Zed’s jaw ticked as he nodded once. “I’ll be at the front.”

The door slammed and Rob whistled. “That dude is even more intense than I’ve heard. Jesus.” He shook his head and handed me an arm crutch for each hand.

I steadied myself, then took a few slow steps.

“He’s a good person.”

Rob glanced toward the door where Zed had left. “Seems like a real ray of sunshine.”

I laughed. Because to me, oddly enough, he was.



THE BLIZZARD that began while I was in physiotherapy ran through Boston and was quickly tidied up by an infrastructure built for snow. Trivia night went ahead as planned since it was turning into a bit of a ritual, and this time Lucas and some of the team had joined.

“Zed won’t shut up about you.” Lucas smiled at me over his beer and

shook his head. “The man’s wrecked. Though I’ll grant him, you’re as lovely as he said you were.”

I laughed and had a sip of my whiskey. “I don’t know how to take that kind of a compliment from a man whose poster I had in my bedroom as a girl.”

Lucas blushed and looked toward the bar. “Don’t let Zeddy hear you say that. He’ll castrate me in a heartbeat.”

My whiskey caught in my throat and I coughed. Lucas patted me gently on the back.

Zed stood cornered by someone at the bar and glanced regularly toward us. Hunger raged in his tiger eyes, maybe even a little jealousy. It wasn’t a trait I’d expected in him. He seemed too controlled for such an impulsive emotion.

I turned back to Lucas, who was incredibly handsome in person with those Nordic looks some English fellows have. Ridiculously tall. Dirty blond hair, eyes that danced between slate and sage. He was all easy banter and warmth, self-deprecating humor, and sweet compliments. He was also a fucking star in the footie world, and I was having a little moment.

I cleared my throat again and set down my whiskey. “When did you come to the States? You were with United for an eternity, if I remember.”

He nodded and swallowed. “Yes, over a decade. Then I came here three years ago, is it? Yes. Three years. Met that hothead, and a few other lads.” He gestured around the table where a few teammates sat and enjoyed abundant female attention. “And now I’m thinking of returning home. Calling it quits on footie finally.”

I leaned forward. “You’re a bit young for that, aren’t you? You can’t be past thirty.”

Lucas snorted into his beer and shook his head. “Flattery will get you nowhere. I’m thirty-five, dearest. Old as god in the football world, and you know it.”

I shrugged. “I wish Zed would go with you. He’s in his prime. He’s incredible. He could have the time of his life abroad.”

Lucas nodded. “I wholeheartedly agree, but you know the man’s stubborn, and he has reasons for staying that I’m not privy to.”

I was just as confused and frustrated with Zed’s intractability, but Lucas and I weren’t going to solve that mystery any time soon.

“So, you’ll go back to...where do you hail from?” I asked. “Outside

London, is that it?"

He nodded. "Exactly. My family owns a financial consultancy that's branched into strategy, mergers, that sort of dull nonsense. Dad's an old man now and ready to be done, wants to pass it on to me. I figure it'll give me something to do. Keep my brain sharp while my body declines." He winked but there seemed something grim underneath it.

"Declines? Even if you are thirty-five, you're still a little young for that talk."

He shrugged. "You know us Brits. We joke about death, sex, and government. An unoriginal lot."

I laughed.

"I tried to do a little reading on you," he continued. "Madam striker. You were rather hard to find anything on."

I glanced down at my whiskey. "Yes, I...I wanted privacy, so I used my middle name and my Nan's maiden name when I played. My actual name isn't connected to my career."

Lucas' face softened. "I'm sorry, I've made you uncomfortable."

"No," I said. I smiled up at him. "It's just...part of the past, and I haven't talked with Zed about it. Could you—"

"My lips are sealed, dove." Lucas shouldered me genially.

"Back off." Zed set down a handful of drinks on the table and dragged his chair practically on top of me.

Lucas rolled his eyes. "You're more territorial than my old Labrador."

Zed smiled and stared at me as he answered. "Loud and proud, baby."

Live music played in the background until trivia began. I glanced around at my company. A bunch of professionals from my old world, while I sat in a wheelchair and held only faint memories of my footie days that were fast collecting dust, softening around the edges, and dimming.

"You're quiet tonight," Zed said. His thumb stroked along my arm. "Talk."

I set my head on his shoulder. "Some days you're just melancholy, Zed."

He nodded and his chin grazed my head. "Yeah, but that's not all there is to it. I don't beg for information, *fragolina*. I can't help you if you don't tell me."

I sighed. Like he could help with any of my problems. My disappointments and challenges. Disability was isolating. And some days you just couldn't shake yourself out of that feeling that shit was hard, and you

were on your own with it.

I patted his hand as I sipped my whiskey. "I know."

TWENTY-FOUR

Zed

I SCREECHED a right onto Carlton from Beacon Street and gunned it until I ripped a left over to Churchill. She lived on a quiet street with a bunch of families, but it was winter, so I had no worries about kids riding their bikes in the middle of the road. I wasn't going to hit anybody, but I wanted to hit *something*, that was for sure. It was all thanks to the woman who'd gone MIA on me in the past forty-eight hours.

She'd seemed off at trivia, and even before at PT. I'd been too distracted by her handsy therapist—goddamn, I'd had to restrain myself when he gripped her ass—who of course had to be a hunk. My door didn't swing that way, but I knew how women worked, what turned them on. He was built kind of like me, and I knew Nairne liked that. He had a friendly face. And he smiled at her. A lot.

Fucking pissed me off. I took my irritation out on slamming my car door and tromped up her walkway.

I didn't do jealousy. My exclusivity with my partner was only for our time together, and unquestionable. It didn't matter who they were with or how. I didn't socialize with subs. We met, scened, and got off. Socially, I took non-fuck buddy females out for the occasional dinner because they were friends, or to do requisite PR. Otherwise, I went out with the guys or hung out with Teo and the Italian conglomerate over in the North End.

Then Lucas, leaning toward her. Talking to her. I knew he'd never try a thing, but he was tender in ways I wasn't—older and gentler with a woman's feelings. He seemed to read something in her that I couldn't, and that was bullshit. She was mine. To cherish and understand, to protect and take care

of.

To love.

I shook it off. Not love. She was leaving, I was staying. Loving her would be a disaster.

Doesn't mean it hasn't happened.

“Shut up,” I snapped at myself. Then I banged a fist on her door.

I counted to five and told myself to breathe. Banged three times.

“Who is it?” Her voice sounded like a croak. Unused. Clogged with emotion.

“*Innamorata*, open up.” My dominant voice. I wanted obedience, damn it.

I heard her forehead thump softly against the door. “Not today, Zed.”

“You don’t get to choose. It’s one of the four fucking things you *didn’t* redline. Available at my demand. Whenever, wherever. So, open the goddamn door, Nairne.”

She groaned and the door creaked as it pulled away from the frame. I walked in and shut out the frigid air. She used a rolling walker that I hadn’t seen before and dropped down onto the sofa. Tucked her legs up with her, stuffed a pillow between them, and stared at the TV.

I glanced at it and froze.

A professional soccer field. Bright green and expansive. With a bunch of female athletes suspended in recorded time. I lowered to the edge of the sofa and ran a hand up her leg. She wiped her nose and hit the button to resume the video.

It took me a minute to find her because her hair was lighter and pulled taut in a short ponytail that bounced while she ran the field. I found her soon enough though, at the top. The lone striker. She was the Nairne I knew, just with twenty pounds more muscle and the classic soccer physique. Powerful quads, defined arms, and a long-distance leanness to her frame.

Her body moved on the field like she and physics had had a talk and decided she could have a pass. Gravity was Nairne’s bitch. Inertia didn’t touch her, but it landed anyone defending her on their asses. Small leads of her foot tricked her opposition to commit, then she’d cut the other direction and blast by. Friction and torque obeyed her every command, each touch sure and effortless, and her shots bent with terrifying accuracy. She was better than most professionals I’d ever seen play, unquestionably better than anyone I’d shared the field with. Pride filled my chest.

Nairne sniffed and wiped her nose with her sleeve and burrowed deeper

into her pillow. I held my hand on her hip, gentling it with circular touches. I couldn't say anything. Nothing I could do to fix it or make what she lost less so. So, I sat there in her reality and admired the hell out of her, absorbed in every move that striker pulled up top. I couldn't get over how scrappy she was, fighting for possession at each moment.

I recognized the sheer determination that infused her every day. Nairne lived like that no matter where she was. It was who she was at her core—tenacious, unrelenting, and wildly talented at whatever she set her mind to.

One of Nairne's defenders—probably the next best player, who looked a lot like Elodie—stripped the other team's offense and cleared a beautiful long ball down the field to Nairne. Nairne flicked it with her head, spun off, and left her opponent rolling on her ass. She streaked up the field, drawing out the keeper, who looked nervous about who was barreling toward her.

Nairne feigned right around the thirty-yard line and the goalie took the bait. Then she cut and fucking nutmegged the keep, zipped the ball through the exact space between the diving keeper and cut around. One-touched it with her left foot, chipping it in the air, and dropped it gracefully in the middle of the goal. She spun at a velocity that should have caused a centripetal tip and turned away from the ball before it was completely in the net.

Nairne sniffed again and hit the fast forward button. "I was cocky."

"You had every reason to be. You were insanely good, *fragolina*." I scooped her way and lifted her legs on top of my lap, started kneading them how she liked. "I'm glad I never met you in youth academies. You would have handed me my ass. Crushed my dreams."

Her eyes slid toward me and she smiled faintly. Then she tilted her head back toward the TV and hit play. Nairne's team was positioned for a corner kick. A well-placed ball from her friend sailed into the box. Nairne leapt with an impressive vertical jump, her athleticism and agility on full display. She was the tallest woman on the field, and her head made contact above the swarm of players, then flicked the ball toward the goal.

The keeper punched the air and missed as the ball careened into the net. But the moment for celebrating was preempted instantly when Nairne's body began its descent. Behind her, a player crashed backward, catapulting into Nairne's legs. At the same moment, another defender barreled over top, slamming her torso violently back over the player beneath her. Her legs were pinned down, and Nairne's upper body hyperextended, her back bending in a

horribly unnatural contortion.

My body shook in revulsion at the pain she had experienced, and I grimaced, dropping my head down as a wave of nausea came.

“Hyperflexion. Usually happens to rugby players.” She reached for a tissue and blew, then chucked it on the floor. “Coaches always said I played too physical.”

We both knew it was a fluke. A terrible, life-altering fluke that epitomized how extensive and arbitrary suffering could be. I’d watched the moment in which her human susceptibility to life-changing chance transmuted from abstract to concrete. Where bad luck became broken bones and lost dreams, and never going back. I wanted to crush that moment to dust in my palms and send it back into the nebula. To reach into the construct of time and give her everything that might have protected her.

But I couldn’t. And if I had, we probably never would have met, and who knows what kind of life she’d be leading. I could un-wish her circumstances for her sake, but I’d never wish her different. “I’m sorry, Nairne.”

She nodded as tears tracked down her face. I’d never seen her cry and its physical impact on my body was white hot pain stabbing my chest. I scooped her up and pulled her in my arms while she soaked my shirt with silent tears.

“Today’s the anniversary,” I whispered. It wasn’t a question. I was telling her that I knew. That she didn’t have to explain to be understood. That was part of how we worked.

She nodded against my shoulder. “Some days, Zed, I just can’t...I can’t...” She was silent as more tears formed tributaries down her cheeks and slipped along her chin.

I hugged her tightly and kissed her hair.

“You’re going to have bad days. It’s okay.”

Her tears didn’t stop, and I rocked her, letting her slowly drift off.

“You know, sometimes,” she muttered, half-asleep, “I get angry at you, for wasting your talent. I’d give anything to play the game again. And you’re here throwing away your best years, your perfect legs on US footie.”

America wasn’t known for its soccer, but we weren’t *that* bad. Nairne just held the extra-European prejudice against it. She wasn’t wrong in the sense that the best players did play in Europe, but it still almost made me chuckle, how disapproving she sounded. “I understand what you’re saying, but it’s not a waste, Nairne. It’s just...prioritizing.”

It sat on the edge of my tongue, to explain myself. I didn’t talk about it,

because I didn't want my rationale challenged. I'd made my decision, and I was committed to my family, to this world. Yet, with Nairne, I had a rare impulse to dissect it, to break down the structure of my choices and actually reconsider how I might build my future.

“Sleep, *innamorata*. We'll talk more when you're rested.”

Emerald eyes shut, and she was peaceful in my arms.

TWENTY-FIVE

Zed

I WOKE up when she did, with a crick in my neck from letting my head fall back onto the sofa while I held her. She squirmed in my lap as she stretched and looked me over. Sharp green eyes. Milky skin. A pretty bird's nest of auburn hair. Absolutely fuckable.

She shifted again and sat up slowly. "I need the lavvy."

I nodded, helped her swing her legs off me, and watched her use the walker to move gingerly toward the bathroom. It looked like her back hurt like a bitch. Because it probably did. She hadn't napped in a good position and I was an asshole for letting that happen.

While she was gone, I looked around her place, which hit that sweet spot of historic charm and modern upgrades. Tall windows and ceilings, everything painted a fresh, luminous white. Walls covered with a miscellany of framed art prints and sci-fi posters. It was bright as hell, late-morning sun bouncing off the walls and burning your retinas. Not really the environment I'd imagined for our first time. I'd had visions of candlelight and nighttime in my bed. Taking her slow and just edging her until she threatened to kill me.

But the art of this lifestyle was adaptability, creativity, and trusting the intuition of the moment. The timing felt right—raw, confessional, open. The exact moment to bring it home.

She came back, sank slowly down to the sofa, and shoved the walker away like it had personally offended her. "Piece of geriatric trash." She was grumbly and sore in her soul and her bones. Time to fix that.

"Lower your pants to your ankles and spread your legs for me so I can see that beautiful cunt."

Nairne's head snapped to me and her eyes widened. "Now?"

"Whenever, wherever, *innamorata*. I shouldn't have to tell you that. Pants. Down." God, I loved that I could say that. That she *wanted* me to say that because it got her soaked.

She seemed to deliberate a minute—head tilted, eyes narrowed—until the faintest smile broke over her face. First one I'd seen in days. She swallowed and squirmed as she tugged down her leggings, until the stretchy fabric landed with a *snap*, tight at her ankles.

I swallowed as I stood, feeling my cock strain against my joggers, throbbing with a pulse as I watched her. I threw off my ball cap and raked a hand through my hair. Grabbed my hoodie and shirt by the back and yanked them off.

Her cheeks flushed. She pulled her thighs apart until they were a generous, obtuse angle, and I had an easy view of her glistening cunt.

"Good."

I walked toward her, and her eyes went straight to my cock, which jutted at her from my sweats. She licked her lips.

"Touch yourself."

Her hands went straight down to her wet seam. She circled her clit, glancing down at herself, then back up to me. I palmed myself, rubbed up and down, and a sound caught in her throat. Her fingers dipped inside.

"You want my cock, *fragolina*?"

"Fuck, yes."

I *tsked*, reached inside my sweats, and fisted myself. "Is that how you were taught to speak?"

"Yes, please." She said it instantly, softly. Nairne was there. Done fighting me, done telling me to piss off or go fuck myself. She wanted me, *us*, just how we were. My balls ached with the satisfaction of it.

"Lie down."

She did. I stuffed pillows under her back and scooted her higher, until her head rested on the arm of the couch. Her breath came in shallow, shaky bursts and her eyes searched mine. I climbed over her and ran my hand along her slit. "Drenched. Your body will never lie, Nairne. You love this."

She groaned and writhed. Nairne loved and hated how much my assholery got to her. "Yes."

I ripped off her leggings and splayed her legs wide. Teased her clit, shoved her t-shirt up her ribcage, then sucked hard on each nipple before

releasing them with a *pop*.

She bucked underneath me. “Please,” she whispered.

“You’ll wait.” Delay was crucial. Anticipation got her seventy percent there. Orgasm was harder for her body. She needed the mindfuck, the build-up, so that by the time I speared her with my cock, she was rounding third base.

“Feel how ready you are?”

She nodded silently, eyes scrunched as I fucked her with my fingers and roughed her clit with my thumb. “This is surrender. You’re mine, to torture and please, *innamorata*.”

“Zed.” She groaned my name as I curled my fingers against her g-spot. I was going to pound into that in just a minute, and the anticipation of it had my balls tight. She bit her lip as I teased her, slow and steady. She was panting and her face scrunched in the agony-tinged pleasure of edging.

“Open your eyes and watch me fuck you.”

Her gaze snapped open. She stared down as I shoved my pants to my knees and fisted my dick. I was painfully hard. A few more tugs and I’d be done. I let go, slid a hand down her entrance, and covered myself in her arousal.

Her eyes widened. “Oh, god.”

I slid along her wet seam “Who?”

She stared down at us and swallowed. “Zed.”

“That’s right.” I lined myself up and impaled her in one thrust. A vowel of pleasure stuck in her throat. She moaned it out, then grabbed my shoulders. She was swollen and slick. I drew back and saw stars. “What color are your eyes?”

“Green,” she gasped as I drove in again. I bit her breast and sucked on the smarting skin.

“Beautiful,” I said. “So beautiful.”

She was. Splayed open for me, auburn hair against the sofa’s midnight blue. Emerald eyes clouded with the haze of need. I thrust, slow and hard into her, savoring every clench of her walls, the way air rushed out of her every time I drove in.

The room had great acoustics (no carpets to trip her up), so our sounds echoed in the space. The involuntary grunt that left me every time I drilled into her, the bursts of air from her lungs, and her quiet cries as she got closer. I found some place of control that held back my orgasm, as heat surged up

my legs and tingled in the base of my spine.

I sank into her, held myself to the root, and ground against her clit.

She keened. “Oh, g—”

I lifted her leg enough to smack her ass. *Crack*. “I give you pleasure, not him.”

“Zed!” she cried. Her body shook, and her cunt started clenching around me.

I spanked her again. “You’ll come for me.”

Crack.

“And it’s mine.”

Crack.

“Understood?”

Her head flew back, and I clasped her jaw, dragged it down until her eyes met mine. “You watch while I make you come.”

“Yes!”

I squeezed her hip in my grasp and rutted into her. She exploded around me, and her eyes didn’t leave mine. They widened as she screamed, as a cry of ecstasy morphed into raw emotion.

I’d expected it. She’d been bottling it up, and this kind of release was a valve for depressurizing. She sobbed as I carefully pulled her toward me on her side, and held her to me while I was still seated inside of her. My palm rounded her ass and gentled her while I kissed her lips and her tears. “Shh, *fragolina*.”

Her arms wrapped around me hard and she buried her head in my neck. Cried a few more sobs until she took a deep breath and blew out slowly.

I kissed her hair and pulled her tighter to me. “Talk to me.”

She exhaled shakily again. “I don’t have words. I’m just...that day, remembering it. Seeing where I am. It’s a lot of emotions.”

I nodded, smoothed her hair back from her face. “You’re an incredible human being, Nairne. You’re resilient and insanely strong. Look at the life you’ve made from your pain. You’re allowed to grieve, but I want you to be proud, too.”

She shook her head slowly. “You can be very sweet sometimes. I’m not sure what to do with it.”

I ignored that and kissed her hard. “You’re also a fantastically raunchy fuck.”

She laughed. “Yes, I am, aren’t I?”

I pulled out slowly, kissed her, enjoyed her mouth. Ran my hands along her long body and told her a lot of filthy things she made me think as she laughed some more and wiped her eyes.

“Zed. I want to tell you something.” She tried to pull away, but I held her to me. “It’s obvious by now that how I am with you sexually isn’t a new preference of mine.” She swallowed and searched my eyes. “I never knew it was so ingrained in people. When I discovered it about myself, I was young. I just knew what made me come.”

I waited and watched her.

“And I didn’t want it to be that fundamental to my sexuality. Because...” She cleared her throat. “I had a bad experience with a man. It put me off it.”

I held her tightly. “Did someone hurt you?”

She smiled sadly. “Tried to. Elodie rescued me. But...it was complicated for a while after that. I don’t want to get into the Dark Days, but I wanted you to know, I’ve been battling over what it means to embrace this again. I know telling you sooner would have clarified some misunderstandings...it’s just something I preferred to leave in the past.”

I had to shelve the anger that welled up inside me when I thought about a man trying to hurt Nairne. I tucked a stray hair behind her ear. “I’m sorry that what I asked of you was triggering. And you’re right, I want to know more when you’re ready to talk.”

She shrugged. “It wasn’t triggering so much as confusing. You wanted that with me, but so much more, too. The emotional and relational component of it. It feels different, and I like it, surprisingly.”

“Different people need different things to get their mind somewhere unencumbered, Nairne—open to pleasure. It’s just hardwiring.”

Her head tilted. “I actually read something about that, recently.”

I frowned jokingly. “No. You read?”

She rolled her eyes and otherwise ignored me. “A neuroscience publication. I wanted to try to make sense of why I have this response.” She shook her head, pulled away enough to look me in the eye and run her fingers through my hair. “I used to run myself to the ground—”

“I’d argue you still do,” I interjected. “Nobody goes to MIT in three years for biomedical engineering, Nairne.”

She nodded. “Right. Well, I think my brain’s happiest when I’m pushing myself. Like after training when I played, I’d go for another run. I needed to feel boneless, just like you say about...this thing we do. It’s the

hippocampus. It kicks in, shoots nature's narcotic through my system—adrenaline, dopamine—and overrides the pain signal, until it's all—

“Pleasure.”

“Yeah.” She smiled. Then she scraped her nails into my scalp and bit me with her kiss.

“God, we're in trouble.” I kissed her back and let her bite me again. I was hard, and I pressed myself against her.

She smiled and tilted herself toward me.

“How is it like this?” she whispered. “Why is something so bad so good?”

I pinched her nipple and she hissed through a wide smile. Then I sat up and gently turned her, so she lay on her stomach. My hands slid along her back, careful of her scar, and kneaded the muscles that tensed. “False premise. In sex, there's no bad or good, only consensual pain or pleasure. And we have that down to a science, Nairne.”

I bit back the words that wanted to tumble out—what she meant to me, what I wanted from her—and directed their force into my touch, as I took a handful of that fine little ass, lifted her hips, and sank into her. “Now, *innamorata*, time for you to hold on tight.”

TWENTY-SIX

Nairne

IT TOOK a lot for me to compare a rain system in the States to one in Scotland, but this day was up to the task. Umbrella in hand, I sat on the training field for Zed's team as the lads practiced, wishing I had better circulation and less of a stubborn streak. He'd been so angry when I wouldn't watch from the car.

Thanks to the rain, their ball flew across the pitch faster than normal, a white blur as it pinged between sprinting feet. Lucas punted it and I watched the ball soar in a parabola whose end point was Zed. He was painfully better than all of them. Lethal speed, and muscular strength that won him challenges and gained him power behind his shot.

I'd concluded two things: There was a reason that eclipsed his own happiness that made him stay here, entrenched in a world of violence and crime that he hated. And there was a reason he didn't tell me what it was. I didn't like what either of them implied. And I didn't like that I was expected to offer myself to him, naked and needy, when he wouldn't trust me with it. If I thought about it too long, my blood boiled.

If I confronted him, it would be a row for the ages. He was a thick-headed arse who thought he always knew best, and my pushing him would just set him off. I weighed the benefit of arguing over it, when our relationship had an expiration date that wasn't far off. I graduated in spring. My student visa would be up. I hated American healthcare. I needed Elodie to not be an ocean away. She was my family, and I wanted weekend train rides and quick flights to knit us together again.

Zed took a shot that cracked in the air like thunder, and a pang ran

through my chest. There was no way I'd ever play footie again, never burst down the field and make a keeper roll on her arse. That stung. I wasn't yet practiced in staying on that thought long, because I hated problems that didn't have a clear solution.

Us being a perfect example. I knew I had to leave, and I also knew I couldn't conceptualize saying goodbye. Wrenching myself out of orbit from that body and soul that had their own gravitational field. No clean answer for that one. So, I leaned into the practical, divorced emotion from reason, and rationally accepted that in a few months, I'd leave, and he wouldn't follow, feelings be damned.

Damn him for staying. I wanted Zed to leave this world that was his prison, for his sake. And in weak moments, for mine as well. Picturing us together long-term was a rare indulgence, but I let myself, knowing how absurd the notion was. We bickered and clashed. I wasn't an easy woman to share life with. I was complicated, compulsively analytical, ambitious. But something about us also clicked and worked. He was maddeningly honorable and loyal. He'd settled for an unfulfilling career because it fulfilled his obligation to those who relied on him. Zed was noble, unwilling to turn away from what he perceived as his moral duty.

I admired that in him, because I was the same way. But while he sacrificed himself on the battlefield he'd been born to, my nobility was different. It had a trajectory beyond my original circumstance—forward, at the speed of fucking light. Research. Discovery. *Change*. Change meant disruption. And disruption meant chaos. I sought it, while he did everything in his power to bring the world to order. We shared the same ethic, but our methods were antipodal.

Zed made the shot, then turned and found me. His eyes pierced mine from across the field and he smiled. I watched him jog. White training shorts soaked from the downpour and left little to the imagination. Defined quads flexed as he ran, the bulge at his groin tucked away in compression shorts, still definable and causing an ache between my thighs.

I knew leaving would hurt. That something about us fit well, like two jigsaw pieces that came together with a satisfying *snap*. With Zed, I belonged like I hadn't before. When we were *us*, there was room for my paradoxes. I could deep throat his cock, then sit around and explain the public health implications of genomic sequencing. Follow his every order in bed, then tell him to piss off when he gave me hell about the rigors of my schedule or

sitting out in the rain.

The whistle blew and they huddled in. I shivered. I was used to a damp drizzle—I was Scottish after all—but it didn't change that I was perpetually cold since my injury. I had a blanket over my lap that kept my legs slightly above freezing, and a massive umbrella that mostly shielded the rain. It was a decent solution, given the circumstances. But Zed was frowning as he got close.

“This is shit weather for someone with a broken thermostat to be sitting in.”

I shrugged. “It's a *dreich* day, I'll give you that. I'm fine though.”

Dark waves turned black in the rain. Water droplets slid from his temples down the ridge of his cheekbones, obeyed the angular contours straight to his lips. I took his hand and pulled him toward me. Then I kissed the rain from his cool face, before finding his mouth and sliding my hot tongue inside.

Zed groaned and took my mouth possessively, fisting my hair as I cradled his warm face in between my chilly hands.

“Whoa, Nairne, easy.” He pulled away to adjust himself and gave me a stern stare.

I answered with a smile and nothing more. Then I slid my hand between his legs and up his thigh. His whole body was wet, all muscles on display, and I was supposed to keep my hands to myself? My fingers got just south of a rapidly thickening part of his anatomy before his hand snapped to my wrist. His face held warning but his mouth bit down a smile. “Nairne.”

“Och, fine.” I dropped my hand. “I'll stop.”

He leaned to kiss me once more, then gestured ahead. “This way.”

Inside was a maze of double doors and linoleum that led to a weight room where Zed and Lucas did their standard post-practice routine. I'd heard it was entertaining, and I liked Lucas, so I decided to join. Zed promised he'd be right back, after he changed out of his soggy practice gear, and left me alone between the free-weights and a wall of mirrors.

I stared at the woman in the reflection. Damp from the rain. Lean legs and arms. I sniffed and wiped a drop of water from my nose, unable to break my eyes from my reflection. It wasn't the body I came into womanhood with, but it was me and I was trying to love it.

Lucas and Zed burst in and startled me.

“Well, dove, have you come to your senses yet?” Lucas pushed ahead of Zed and grinned. “I just want you to know, I'm here whenever you change

your mind about him.”

Zed smacked him upside the head as he passed. “Fuck off. She’s not into oversized Brits.”

He hopped up on the pull-up bar and flew. Muscles contracting beneath bronzed skin as he dropped and rose fluidly. The man had damn fine arms. Big for a footballer’s, cut and developed while not imbalanced from the rest of him. He managed nineteen reps while Lucas and I chatted, Lucas often throwing insults and jabs that made Zed shake his head but not break his rhythm.

“Prepare yourself, the lot of you.” Lucas strutted over to the bar once Zed dropped down and stood back to stretch his arms.

Then he widened his legs to stretch them, too, and stage whispered, “Every week he tries. He never wins.”

“Well, there’s a first time for everything, and you’re due for an arse-whipping, Salvatore.” Lucas glared at the pull-up bar as if willing it to work in his favor. He hardly had to jump, given his towering height, and started in, making cracks as he went, before he began to slow at fifteen.

He groaned, made it up for one more, and dropped down with a thud at sixteen reps. “One of these days, Zed, I swear it. You’re bloody due.”

Zed was in a half-fold, stretching his hamstrings, and laughed from inside his arms. “Whatever you say.”

Lucas wiped the sweat off his brow with his shoulder, then deftly shoved his foot into Zed’s hip and tipped him over. “Bastard,” he muttered, before it became a cry of surprise as Zed did a leg sweep, sending Lucas flying in the air and landing on the mat with a thud.

“You completely deserved that, you ass-hat.” Zed sprang up and laughed. “What do you Brits call a fall like that? Oh, yes, arse over teakettle.” He neatly stepped out of reach as Lucas made a vain swipe at his legs.

Zed came over to me and massaged the base of my neck like he often did. “I told you it was entertaining.”

I laughed. “You weren’t wrong.” My eyes trailed back to the pull-up bar. I did pull-ups at physiotherapy, used my arms for everything. I could match Zed, probably.

“Zed, can you do me a favor?”

His hands paused. “Of course.”

“Would you lift me to the pull-up bar? I want to see if I still have a few in me.”

He turned my chin his way and gave me a complicated stare. “Nairne...”

I dipped my lips to kiss his palm and moved myself to beneath the bar, then locked the brakes.

Squatting down in front of me, Zed leaned in close. “I mean no offense, but this seems dangerous. Can I spot you at least?”

I bent over, tying my ankles together gently with a resistance band I kept in my bag. I didn’t like them flailing about and it helped me feel more centered when I’d done them at PT.

“Not necessary. I’ll tell you when I need you, all right?” I looked up from my task to see concern etched in his features. I squeezed his hand and smiled. “I’ll be sensible, promise.”

Zed lifted me easily, hands around my waist, until I got a solid grip.

“Right then, let go,” I murmured down to him, taking in his tiger eyes. “Go on now.” I nodded.

Zed gasped sharply as he released me. “Hey! Eyes up!”

“What?” Lucas snapped as I started my reps with a view of their altercation in the mirror before me.

One. Two.

“I’m not blind, fuckface. I saw where you were looking,” Zed snarled.

Three.

Lucas rolled his eyes. “Hardly.”

Four.

“You’re lucky your visual accuracy is indispensable to your position on the field—”

Five.

Zed shoved him.

Six.

“Or you’d be sporting two black eyes.”

Seven. Eight.

My body surrendered to the burning pain, slipped into that blissful mindless space as endorphins flooded my system.

Nine.

“Muffin,” Lucas said.

Ten.

“I know it’s easy to feel insecure when you’re seeing a woman so clearly out of your league—”

Eleven. Twelve.

“But you’ve got to settle down. You’re being a wanker.”

Thirteen. Fourteen.

“And frankly, no amount of chest thumping is going to keep a bird like that around forever.”

Fifteen.

“You motherfucker,” Zed started in on him.

Sixteen.

Lucas stopped Zed’s mouth with one of his big hands. Zed smacked it off.

Seventeen.

“Bloody hell,” Lucas muttered. “Your bird just beat me.”

“*Eighteen,*” I grunted, continuing my count.

“Jesus, you’re right.” Zed’s eyes went wide.

“*Nineteen,*” I squeaked. My arms were shaking. One more. I wanted one more.

Lucas sounded gleeful. “Oh, Zeddy, I told you, you were due.”

Every muscle in my arms protested, but I hoisted myself up fully and barely whispered, “*Twenty.*”

“Your bird just beat you!” Lucas crowed.

Zed stared in disbelief. “Fuck me.”

I couldn’t land myself and realized I was about to fall. “I’d love to but, not now, Zed. Hurry!” I yelled, feeling my palms struggling to hold their grip any longer.

He caught me around the waist just as my hands began to slip off, his breath exploding in panic across my face. “Fuck’s sake, Nairne.” His tone was sharp, but his face was bewildered admiration as he swayed me.

“A veritable ironwoman is before us!” Lucas kissed me soundly on the cheek before Zed easily held me one-armed and used his free hand to shove Lucas away. “Somebody finally fucking beat Zed! Well that calls for a pint, does it not?”

At the door, Lucas turned back and ceremoniously saluted me, then directed himself toward Zed. “You, sir, have finally met your match.”



I SAT IN MY FLAT, trying to do multivariate calculus while a thudding ache between my legs distracted me. It had showed up two days ago, after Zed left,

traveling for a game and then some sponsorship photo op. I missed him, and not just with my body.

What about in spring, when you're an ocean apart?

I blew out a breath and pushed that thought away. I wouldn't change my life's course for a man who was intractable on moving, especially when we'd only been together for a short time. Once the novelty of our amazing sex wore off, we'd probably drive each other insane and end things. We'd end it before time ended us, because Zed liked to call the shots, and I hated riddles with no rejoinder. We'd be over before I was handed my diploma.

The doorbell rang as I landed on that tidy answer, and I used the arm crutches to walk toward it. When I opened the door, a small package sat halfway down the walkway, which seemed odd. I wasn't terribly strong on the crutches yet, but I had a goal of walking commencement and receiving my diploma that way. That meant I needed as much practice building my coordination and strength as I could. I moved down the pavement, careful of the ice and my pace, aware of my balance. But when I got to the package, I realized I didn't know how I'd necessarily bend to retrieve it and get up. We hadn't gotten that far in therapy.

I cobbled together an effort that involved letting one knee drop while keeping my arm through the sleeve of the crutch and pushing off. Then I realized I didn't have a hand free to move well with the arm crutch. I set down the package and stood to go back in for my chair.

"Do you need a hand with that?" It was a man's voice and not one I knew.

Adrenaline surged through my system, and as I spun, I tumbled backward. Then everything went dark, until the world came back blurry, with a deafening ringing in my ears that was finally cut by the man's voice once again.

"Ma'am?"

I groaned and hot pain shot up the base of my neck, into my head.

"Ma'am," he said again.

My head was pounding, and I couldn't see well.

"You took a spill and gave your head a good smack. I think I startled you."

My vision focused slightly. The bloody delivery man. I'd lost my shit on a delivery man just trying to be friendly.

"I'm so sorry," he said. "EMS are on their way."

His face was kind, and though he was much younger, his eyes reminded me of my Granda's. I sniffled and blinked back tears.

“Does anything hurt, ma'am?”

I laughed through an involuntary sob. “I've hurt worse, don't worry.”

Sirens wailed as he talked to me while I lay on the cold pavement, shivering. I started shaking harder as they put the collar around my neck and heaved my body onto the stretcher. I relived it. The flash of the stadium. The smell of fresh cut grass. How odd it felt not to feel anything below my hip. The sound of my spine snapping that echoed in my ears.

I panicked because my head couldn't turn, and I needed to retch. They turned me so I wouldn't choke as I vomited, and I fought tears. Shearing aches shot through my body, so violent I knew I was going to pass out. Consciousness left me as past and present converged into one salient point—pain.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Zed

TEO SAID I could do with practicing more gratitude. I'd told him to shove it up his ass. He didn't see the dirtiest parts of my life. I made sure of it. While he was protected, I made more enemies daily and looked over my shoulder like my life depended on it. Because it did.

No, in my mind, gratitude was for idealists who weren't wise enough to see the world for the shithole that it usually was. Don't get me wrong. I was a man who appreciated plenty. Tangerine streaks over the Charles River at sunrise, the unnatural perfection of fresh snow, the beauty of a woman's body in the throes of her pleasure, the taste of a rare burger and a cold beer. I could savor what came to me. But thankfulness for what didn't exist was too much to ask.

I couldn't fake my feelings, gratitude, or otherwise, but I was practiced in masking them. At the moment, I was pissed, worried, horny, aggravated, and hungry. But you wouldn't know it because currently I was smiling while posed in my country's team paraphernalia and holding a soccer ball at my hip like a fucking idiot. Goddamn press.

Lucas had hung back because he loved watching me squirm under the camera lens. "You're adorable, Zeddy."

I launched the ball at his nuts the moment they called a wrap. "Fuck you."

She hadn't answered for nearly twenty-four hours. If I wasn't about to get on a plane from New York to Boston, I would have been very tempted to send some of my minions to her place again. But this time, to do a little breaking and entering to make sure she was alive. I'd be there in an hour and a half, tops, and then her little ass was getting the spanking of its life. For

making me worry. For clutching my heart in a vise of panic and pain that didn't feel one bit reasonable.

Although she had done this before, I just couldn't figure out why she wouldn't answer this time, unless something was seriously wrong. It didn't make sense. We'd left on great terms. Hell, I'd swear she was still orgasming when I kissed that sweet cunt one last time, then her lips, and sprinted to my car to make my flight.

"Still nothing?" Lucas wheezed. He was classy, asking about my lady, while he was bent over his brutalized nuts.

"Nothing." I pocketed my phone.

And naturally, the moment I did, it buzzed. It was Bruno, who I'd tasked with finding her. Poor Nairne, her Sopranos suspicions were more on the nose than she thought.

His message said, *Massachusetts General. Admitted last night.*

I typed furiously. *Details. I need more than that.*

His reply, *Can't get department information but confirmed she's still there.*

"Shit."

Lucas watched me cautiously. "What's the matter?"

I threw my bag on my shoulder and headed toward the snow squall waiting outside. If they grounded our flight because of a few fucking snow flurries, I wouldn't be responsible for my actions.

"I have no clue, Lucas. But you bet your ass I'm going to find out."



"HI MARCIA, THIS IS ZED."

Marcia was one of Dad's nurses at the hospital. "How are you, honey?"

"Thank you, I'm fine. I'm sorry to be short, but can you get my dad on the phone?"

"One moment, dear."

I paced outside Logan as I held the line. Lucas followed me not far behind. It was unethical to leverage my dad's connection in the hospital, but I had zero remorse about it. I needed information.

Marcia's voice clicked back on the line. "Zed, I'm sorry but he's in the middle of numerous patient rounds. Is it a true emergency?"

I almost did the selfish thing and said yes, but I was a well-trained surgeon's son, so I didn't. After I thanked Marcia, my phone took my anger as I slammed it shut and pocketed it. The parking lot was packed, and my car wasn't responding to my fob.

Lucas caught up to me and gripped my shoulder.

"Come on, this way. You're in no state to drive."

"I'm fine," I grumbled.

I was fine to drive, but I was tight on time. The car wasn't giving itself up in the sea of vehicles, and walking the rows would take forever. While I deliberated, Lucas hooked his arm around my neck and dragged me to his Aston that was twenty feet away. After he slammed the door shut, and threw our bags in the back, he leveled me with a severe stare from the driver's seat.

"You need to learn that sometimes, Zeddy, like you, I can be an obstinate arse. I'm driving you. End of. I'll get you there just as fast as your little Italian putt-putt would."

I was too worried about Nairne to even get pissed at him for knocking the Ferrari, and Lucas wisely took that as a signal to drive us in silence. The harbor was half-frozen, a sludgy palette of dark water and grey ice. Traffic was for once not its typical, terrible self, and we were there in not even ten minutes.

Lucas stepped out and chucked his keys at someone, telling them to take care of it as he stuffed a wad of cash in their hand.

I sprang out of the car and into high gear to get inside.

Dad's floor. That made the most sense. I'd sweet talk the nurses, say I'd lost my cousin's room number. I'd smile and they'd give it up. Easy.

Lucas caught up, covered his grin of amusement while I spun my web of lies with the neurology front desk, and got what I needed. She was actually on this floor.

I left Lucas in the waiting area and jogged on, my thoughts spinning tires of worry. A cluster of doctors were down the hallway, heading in the same direction, and I picked up the pace. If they were coming for her, I wanted in that room before they got there. I kept my head down, because plenty of those guys would know me, and I didn't want to get hung up with small talk.

I got to her door and collided in the threshold with another man.

"Dad?"

He frowned at me. "Zeddo, what the hell are you doing? I'm seeing a patient. You can't be chasing me down while I'm on rotations."

“Dad, I—”

“We have reputations to maintain, *mimmo*. I know you’ve been low lately, and you’re struggling, but this crosses professional lines, and—”

“Dad!” I snapped. “I’m here for *her*.”

Dad frowned at me and adjusted his glasses. “*La fragola?*”

I scowled. I hadn’t told him anything about her. “How the fuck would you know?”

He shrugged and stepped back to let me through the doorway. “Teo can’t keep a secret to save his life.”

“Figures.” My hands raked through my hair. “That’s my...” I glanced around. “My...*la mia ragazza*. You’re treating her?”

Dad was neurology. Spines and brains. Scary shit. I wanted none of that to be wrong with Nairne.

Dad was smiling widely. He was such an Italian mama, pushing me about marriage and grandbabies. He hadn’t seen me with a girlfriend since high school and I think he’d started to despair. “A woman, eh? About time.” He patted me on the shoulder. “She’s fine. Took a good knock to the head, but her spine looks as excellent as...well it’s all relative. It looks good, given her history.”

I sighed. On the one hand, she was all right. Whatever she was dealing with, Dad was confident she’d make it through. That was an enormous relief. On the other hand, the thought of her damaged spine and Dad’s cavalier tone about it turned my stomach. “Comforting, Dad. Real comforting.”

“You all right, *mimmo*? Did I nauseate you? You look green. Always an easy puker. Go in there. Sit down.” He chuckled, knocking on the door.

A woman answered but it wasn’t Nairne.

“Sorry to be such a disappointment,” I grumbled. “No second-generation surgical wonders following in your footsteps.”

Dad logged onto a computer outside the curtain and typed some shit at a million miles an hour. “It’s all right, Zeddo. I like you just the way you are. And there is promise after all, because then came Teo, who handles cadavers like it’s Christmas morning.”

I stared at him. “When has Teo had access to cadavers?” My brother wasn’t in medical school, but he was at Harvard for pre-med, and I knew Dad was crossing his fingers he would head there. Teo had that unique combination of intellectual and emotional intelligence, a keen sense of the relationship between body and mind. He’d be a great doctor.

Dad waved his hand in the air. “Don’t you worry about that.”

Sometimes my dad had me concerned there were still more twilight dealings in his life than he led me to believe. “I don’t wanna know,” I mumbled.

He smiled before a nurse came in and stole his attention. I snapped the curtain back and felt the bands of anxiety around my chest loosen. Nairne didn’t look too bad. A little pale.

“Hey.” I kept my voice soft, stuck my hands in my pockets. All I wanted was to touch her, but she was asleep, or at least really out of it. I didn’t want to disturb her.

“*Allô, Zed,*” Shirley Temple chirped.

“Elodie, right?”

She stood and pulled me into a hug, which I returned sparingly. I didn’t really hug much, and Shirley Temple was a squeezer.

“She’s in and out of it. Her fall caused some severe neuropathic pain. So, they raised her narcotics.”

Nairne fidgeted in her sleep and I had to touch her. Smooth back her hair that looked as strawberry as it got under the cool fluorescents. Deep red. Those tiny little fruits that are tart as hell, but you can’t help but pop them in your mouth. The first signs of spring and life returning.

I glanced up at Elodie. “Don’t you live in Paris?”

She frowned at me and crossed her arms. “Yes.”

Nairne stirred and I traced the line of her cheekbones, then over the bridge of her nose. Down to her mouth. I wanted to kiss it. I wanted it talking back to me and giving me hell. “You flew here, at a moment’s notice. That’s...very loyal.”

“She’s the sister I never had. I’d do anything for her. I also have more money than god, so might as well use it for very expensive last-minute flights when my dearest friend needs me.

Nairne slowly opened her eyes.

Elodie moved to her side, squeezed Nairne’s hand, then released it. “I’ll give you two time alone.”

Nairne blinked at me for a minute before she frowned. Then her eyes drifted over my shoulder and she smiled. “Hello again, Dr. Silver Fox.”

I glared at Dad over my shoulder as he raised his hands in surrender. “She’s on a pretty stiff cocktail, Zeddo. I can’t help it.”

I sighed. “Fucking fantastic.”

“Eh, you sort of look like me. Take it as a compliment.” Dad stepped up to her and shone a small light in her eyes. He had her full attention.

“Nairne, how are you feeling? Any more nausea? Headaches?”

She swung her head side to side, nice and slow. “I feel...great.” The woman was high as a fucking kite.

The nurse stepped up. “She hasn’t said anything about her head hurting. Hasn’t thrown up. Drank some juice, ate crackers.”

“Good, good.” Dad held his finger in front of her eyes, did some kind of bilateral tracking. She seemed to pass with flying colors because he straightened and smiled. “I’m satisfied. Nairne you’ll need to be woken every few hours for one more night, just as a precaution. But after that, a follow-up in a few months, and let us know if there are any sudden changes in vision, or recurring headaches.”

Nairne smiled at my dad, then turned to stare seriously at me again. “He’s not bad looking either.”

TWENTY-EIGHT

Zed

NAIRNE DEALT WITH CHRONIC PAIN. Since her spine had cracked, and sheared halfway across her spinal column, her nerves were all fucked and sent the wrong messages. But her recent fall had seen her old pain threshold and raised it double.

When I went to weddings—with over thirty cousins, I was *always* going to weddings—I sat there judging the hell out of that one line, *in sickness and in health*. How could you ever abandon someone you'd promised your life to, just because they became sick or injured? You really had to promise not to hit the road when shit hit the fan? What kind of fuckface would do that?

I'd watched my father nurse my mother for the better part of a decade. Watched him hold her hair while she puked, rub her down when her bones ached from chemo. I'd heard them talk in hushed tones as she bathed, while he kept her company and made sure the water stayed hot. He'd brushed her hair before it fell out. He wasn't a hero. She wasn't a deadweight. They were partners, facing what life had dealt them. That's what you fucking did.

But up until now, I'd missed something from the inner workings of their marriage. The emotional extremes, the tension of changing dynamics as one person increased their need for help while the other provided more care. The real pledge *in sickness and in health* wasn't about not quitting when it got hard to watch someone you love suffer. It was about not letting one partner's physical frailty in juxtaposition to their partner's health define the relationship. It meant reframing your interactions, understanding that you cared for each other in different yet equally meaningful ways.

Problem was, Nairne didn't see it that way. And she'd so far stubbornly

refused any physical help on the principle that I was not, in her words, her “fucking caregiver.”

Ten minutes. I’d watched the clock. After doing her PT exercises, she’d been down on the floor trying to transfer up into her chair, and it wasn’t happening. It just wasn’t. Her arms were weak from pain, and her legs were extra uncooperative because the fall had exacerbated the inflammation around her injury site.

I walked over, gripped her under the arms, and lifted her light frame up to her seat. She surprisingly didn’t say anything, just sighed and stared out the window like it had answers to life’s fundamental questions.

I backtracked to the toaster and caught the bread as it popped up.

“This is why I don’t want a relationship,” she muttered. “Marriage. Love.”

Bread in hand, I froze while the butter sat on my knife. “What?”

She glared at the window. “I *hate* being babied.”

I went back to buttering. That sound was mesmerizing, metal scraping while little crumbs bounced in its wake. “No one’s babying you. You’re dealing with nonstop, agonizing pain. *Help is always given at Hogwarts to those who ask.*”

Her hand slammed on her push rims. “Don’t throw Harry Potter at me right now.”

I shrugged. Guy had to try. If the Boy Wizard didn’t lighten her up, nothing was going to.

“I didna ask for help.”

Her accent got thicker when she was emotional. She didn’t cry, or yell. But her idioms changed, and her tone got desperate, like she was miserable and just wanted out. That worried me. Which was why I came over any time I wasn’t working, training, or traveling. When I was doing those things, I had Bruno make sure she left her house every morning for classes and came back at night.

“You did. You were just high on narcotics and hitting on my dad.”

She didn’t laugh at that either.

“I *want* to help and care for you, Nairne. That’s what we are. You let me be an overbearing, demanding asshole, and I take care of you. Just give yourself a little patience while your nerves quiet down—”

“I’ve lost so much,” she whispered. “I was making progress walking.”

I grumbled about handsy therapists and she didn’t even spare me a

glance.

“My research had to stop since I can’t do shite in the lab when I can’t think past pain. All because I had some stupid stress response to a stranger. What a fucking *eejit*.”

“Hey.” Dominant voice. My knife clattered to the counter. I was done with this shit. She was hating on someone I loved—

Loved. It was there, front and center in my thoughts. But I wasn’t dealing with that at the moment.

“This stops now. Berating yourself. Beating yourself up.” I stalked around her counter through the dining room and crouched down, took her face in my hands. “Look at me. You’re going to be okay. It’s hard right now, and it’s all right to be pissed that it’s hard. But you *have* to stop blaming yourself.”

Her eyes were glassy and unfocused. She wasn’t with me. “Nairne,” I said.

They trained on me, gradually. “What?” Her voice sounded empty.

“It’s okay to not be okay.”

She snorted and straightened in her seat, pulling her face from my grasp. “Says the man who insists on making everything okay.”

Was that what I was doing? I thought I was being there for her, but maybe she perceived pressure. Expectation that she felt she was failing to meet, by not being happy or feeling better.

“I’m trying to be there for you. Just be your partner as you heal. You mean a lot to me. I’m not going to get scarce because you took a spill and then a turn down ornery lane. It sucks. You’re frustrated. It won’t always be like this. But I’ll have been there while it was. With you.”

She sighed, rubbed her face. Then her hands dropped. That despondency was back.

Fuck that. “Spread your legs.”

A small spark shone in her eyes. She shook her head slowly. “I don’t want to.”

“Wrong answer, cupcake. We have an agreement.” A completely unenforceable agreement that would kill my public image if it ever leaked, but an agreement, nonetheless. It was the game, the play. When she wanted to pull away or give up, I pushed and demanded. If at that point she told me to fuck off, I would. “Whenever, wherever.”

She shimmied a little like she was thinking about it. Her fingers drummed

on her legs.

“I’m not asking, *innamorata*. Do it.”

She did. Slid her hands to her thighs and pried them apart.

“Good. Touch yourself.”

Her hands dipped inside her leggings. I watched the outline of her fingers as they drifted south and slid along her seam. I could smell her arousal and my cock went from zero to ninety instantly. “Outside only. Your cunt is mine. You may touch your clit and entrance, nothing else.”

She bit her lip and scowled. She loved fingering herself. Imagining it was my cock. She didn’t get that. Not yet.

I lifted her shirt and cupped her breasts. Round. Soft. Fucking heaven in my hands. I bit her nipples hard, once each, scraped my teeth as I dragged away. She hissed as she bucked her hips.

“This shit stops today, Nairne MacGregor. Overthinking it. Withdrawing. You’re mine, you understand? Your pain doesn’t get to take you away from me.”

Her breath hitched as I bit my way down her flat stomach. “Zed.”

That despair. Her heartache. I wanted it *out* of her. An exorcism of her giving up. She surrendered to me, and not a damn thing else. Because Nairne was a fighter, a warrior, a fucking queen on the field of adversity. She didn’t sit back and let life’s battles be fought for her.

“You don’t give up. One day at a time, you hear me?”

She nodded.

I tugged her leggings down. My god, what a cunt. Swollen. Pink. I kissed her open-mouthed and fucked her with my tongue, clawed her little ass with my palms. Ate her like the feast that she was.

Her hand went to my hair, and I ripped it out, held it immobile against her side. She needed to be restrained. Reminded of her place amidst my strength. Safe. Protected. I took my sweet time, building her up—because I could—and denial was the expressway to Nairne’s masochistic pleasure.

“I’m gonna—”

“Hush.” I bit her clit and watched her fingers white knuckle the seat of her chair. “Don’t even try to tell me about what’s mine. I know your cunt. I know your body. I know your mind, Nairne. Now you’ll wait until I tell you that you can come.”

She was panting, head thrown back, a waterfall of auburn hair spilling behind her. The column of her throat was long and pale. I grasped it, drew

her head to look at me. She watched as I ate her out, tortured her, kept her on that edge for as long as I could.

God, she was good. She held off like a champ. Breathed through her mouth, relaxed her muscles. While I tortured her, did everything I could that would make her scramble on the edge.

Then I gave her a nod and she fell toward me, covering us in the crashing waves of her hair and heaving ribcage.

She gasped, catching her breath while I kissed her neck and rubbed my hand along her back, careful of her scar. When her breathing steadied, I helped her slowly sit up, then dragged her pants up her legs.

She sighed, ran a finger along my lips, confusion etched on her features. “I don’t get you.”

I slid my hands along her thighs. “You don’t have to. For what it’s worth, I don’t get you much either. But I like you, and the part of you that I do get is pretty important. I think the same goes for you with me.”

She tilted her head and scraped her nails along my stubble. “Sometimes, the past few weeks, I’ve looked at you and I think—I know him, his heart. The way his mind works. What’s going to worry him or settle him down. Then there are other times where...I don’t know. I feel like you’re keeping a huge part of yourself locked away from me. And you ask me for *everything*, Zed. You want to know when my leg cramps and my arse hurts. When I’m thinking dark thoughts, and when I’m dreaming about my future. I’ve told you more than I’ve told anyone, except maybe Elodie.”

I gripped her waist. Stared her in the eye. I gave her an answer, just not one that spoke to the heart of her problem. “I’m here.”

She sat back and her hand dropped. “You’re here, but you’re not mine, not the way I’m yours. It’s part of why the whole dominance thing works for you, because that inequality is allowable. And by now, you know I’m amenable to it in some situations. But I want more, too.”

My chest felt like it was in a vise. I couldn’t breathe enough. “What is it that you want?”

She shook her head. “I want your honesty. Your trust. I want equality in that.”

She wanted my walls lowered. My answers straight, not diagonal. It wasn’t part of the deal, and she knew it. “I trust you,” I said.

Nairne shook her head. “But you don’t *entrust* everything to me, the way you ask me to entrust it to you.”

“That’s the nature of our relationship, *innamorata*. That’s the dynamic.” I rolled my shoulders. Tried to stave off the pinch of panic in my trapezoids and neck. She and I weren’t long-term material. My life was a train wreck, in no way hospitable to a partner who would just become a target for enemies. She had a life in front of her, dreams to chase, and none of them needed to involve looking over her shoulder and being a pawn for retribution.

She sighed and moved back. I stood, shoved my hands in my pockets. I couldn’t tell her what she wanted, couldn’t promise her that kind of exposure. That wasn’t how I operated. I didn’t have the luxury, and it wasn’t where my strength came from. So, I blew by it entirely, because I was a master at persuasive evasion.

“Come spend Christmas with me and my family.”

Her eyebrows arched. “Hell of a deflection, Zed. Thanks, but I keep Christmas best on my own.”

I toed her foot bar and dragged her closer. “What, drinking Lagavulin and watching the *Doctor Who* marathon?”

“Precisely. I’m crabbit on Christmas. Bah humbug.”

“Nairne.”

“Zed.”

I sighed, scrubbed my face with my hands. Her sitting alone drunk on her couch for the only Christmas I’d have her was bullshit. It wasn’t happening. “It’ll only be my dad and Teo, and maybe Zio Gianni. Dad keeps it low key. Makes a bunch of seafood, then we just sit around and get tipsy and play Trivial Pursuit after mass.”

“Hm.” She hid her mouth behind a hand, and I watched her gears turn. “That’s why you want me. You’re dying to win.”

“I wouldn’t mind crushing the old man for once. You’d think thirty years practicing surgical medicine would keep the guy too busy to accrue that much trivial knowledge, but no dice.”

Her eyes had a little of their old light, and when her hand fell, I caught a glimpse of a smile. “All right,” she said. “I’ll come.”

TWENTY-NINE

Nairne

I KNEW it was a bad idea. That sharing a holiday like Christmas would only tangle us tighter, make our eventual unraveling even more painful. I watched three heads of dark waves huddled over a Trivial Pursuit board, profiles a study in the dominance of Brando Salvatore's genetics. Dark lashes, sharp cheekbones, lips that pouted as they thought and bickered. All that fine beauty roughened by long noses with a slight bump. I'd ascribed that bump to Teo and Zed beating the piss out of each other in childhood, but apparently it was all Brando's Y chromosome at work.

I sat uncharacteristically warm, in a chair right next to the fire. Flames snapped as it roared, the sound echoing around the vaulted ceiling of their family room. It faced the river, which I could see clearly, thanks to a pearl of a moon that hung low in the sky.

Brando cleared his throat and played the trombone with his card until it focused for him. "Zed and Nairne." He commandeered my name with his Italian accent, adding an upswing at the end. *Nairnah*. "In 49 BC, Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon, and began his military campaign to rule the Roman Republic, saying these words. Is it—"

"*Alea iacta est.*" Zed deftly pinched a yellow pie and dropped it into place. "The die has been cast."

"Show off," Teo grumbled. "And you didn't even consult your partner."

I waved it away and sipped my whiskey. "We agreed to allow each other unanimous answering if we were confident."

Zed smiled to himself and drew a card to read.

Brando laughed. "*Bene fatto, mimmo.* See, you *do* appreciate my lessons

on your heritage and its history. Teo, *dov'è il Rubicone?*”

Teo rolled his eyes as he took a healthy drink of his red wine. “*Cesena. Flows to the Adriatic.*”

“*Bene. Molto bene.*” Brando stood with hands slapped on his thighs. “Now, I make dinner.”

I smiled my thanks, then went back to staring at Zed as he stood and joined his father. It wasn't hard to track his steady movement. His profile as he bent his head to a task, as hands that had tied me in knots and unknotted every resistance inside me went to work. A blade's flash as he filleted the fish, chopped herbs and spices, palm leveraging his knife as he worked. Lips pursed, brows furrowed. Just beautiful.

The die is cast. Crossing the Rubicon. The point of no return. Unless you believed in time travel—and much as I loved *Doctor Who*, I didn't—you had to concede that the past was unreturnable. Why, then, were some moments so impossibly hard to leave behind? I watched Zed and cursed myself for doing exactly what I told myself I wouldn't—letting him sink deeper than surface level, a place where he couldn't be brushed off and forgotten when I had to go.

When had our chance meeting in the quantitative minutes of my existence become qualitatively singular? We were more than the strategic chemistry of two opposites that had attracted. Elements that could dissolve and break away. We were alchemy, something ancient that bound and tied the material to the immaterial.

Zed caught me staring and smiled, then dropped his eyes back to his cooking. I'd crossed the bloody Rubicon all right, and hell if I knew how to get back.



BRANDO AND ZED bickered in the kitchen. Two deep voices lobbing Italian, hands on hips when they weren't flying in the air. The content was lost on me but not its tension.

“They're cute, aren't they?” Teo grinned over his shoulder as he stoked the fire. “Two peas in a cranky pod.”

I turned my whiskey on my knee and glanced him over. He looked more like Brando than Zed, but he didn't feel like him. “They do seem quite alike.”

I sipped my whiskey, then set it down. “Are you more like her?”

Teo faced the fire. “I think so. She was independent and intuitive, also insanely messy, all of which made Papa crazy. I’m more like her than Zed, for sure. Papa and Zed are disciplined and principled. Still waters, but below the surface, if you get deep enough...” He tipped his head. Thought about it. “Raging current.”

I grinned and sipped again from my glass.

“Teo!” Brando clapped his hands. “Come help your papa. Zeddo did the cooking with me, now you help me serve.”

Their house was blissfully free of carpets but for a few flat oriental rugs that I didn’t have too much trouble negotiating. I sat at the table, trying seven different kinds of seafood dishes and watching the Salvatore men repeatedly dip into Italian before remembering their audience.

“Nairne, you don’t eat much.” Brando leaned his elbows on the table and pointed a butter knife my way. “Do you not like *i pesci*?”

I laughed. “I grew up along the North Sea. All we eat is *i pesci*. I like it very much.”

“But?” Brando tilted his head. Examined me. It reminded me of Zed.

Fidgeting came naturally with three pairs of eyes on me. “I’m just...” Zed’s eyes on mine were different than the others. His gaze had a molecular weight—heavy and warm, sunlight on a cold day.

“Christmas is odd for me. When I’m not eating my feelings, I tend to starve them. That make any sense?”

Zed’s eyes fell from mine. I watched his throat as he swallowed a sip of wine, and wondered how I could convince him to fuck me later. I’d already asked and been put off.

“*You’re not quiet at all,*” he’d said with a laugh. Then I’d promised him I’d be as quiet as a gene silencing. That had just made him laugh harder. “*My beautiful nerd. We’ll see, innamorata. We’ll see.*”

Brando sipped his wine. “Zed says you have no family, *fragolina*. That must be hard. But here with us, you have family, *capisce*?”

Feelings welled up inside me at his kind words and their short-lived applicability. I cleared my throat and drank some water. “Thank you, Brando.”

He nodded, smiled as he spun his glass. Zed had been quiet, eating with singular focus. Brando’s eyes flicked from him to me. “So, what are your plans after you graduate, Nairne?”

“Papa, it’s not an interview,” Teo muttered. He glanced uneasily between Zed and his father.

Brando waved his hand. “I’m getting to know *la bella fragola*.”

Zed’s eyes were down on his food still, and I didn’t like not having them. “I’m applying to fellowships right now, mostly around genetic research. I’d like to have a bit more experience before I move into full-time consultancy or instruction.”

Brando threw up a hand. “Thank you. Someone who actually wants to do the work to learn her field before she starts shaping policy. This country could use more of that.”

“She won’t be here.” Zed speared his fish and bit it off.

Brando glanced between us. “Oh? *Perchè?*”

Zed chewed and didn’t answer. I gave my standard explanation. “Lots of reasons. Mostly that I feel the greatest affinity for Europe. The UK, specifically. Not to mention my healthcare is prohibitively expensive here, and I have a dear friend who’s like my sister in France. I’d like to be closer to her again.”

Brando sat back and ran a hand over his mouth. “All good reasons.” You could cut the tension with a knife. “Well, *fragolina*, I wish you well. Wherever you go, you’ll be an invaluable asset.”

“That’s kind of you. I’m hopeful I can do my part to advance the causes that matter to me.” I felt guilty as I sat there, speaking of my ambitions. But why should I feel shame for my dreams? Zed had choices that he wouldn’t acknowledge, as far as I could tell. I knew he’d involved himself in a corrupt system that he somehow managed to try to make less terrible from the inside out, and I could imagine that would be hard to leave, but not impossible. Not if you wanted to desperately enough.

Brando smiled. “A worthy pursuit. Nobility is hard to come by these days.” He reached out and gripped Zed’s shoulder. “But sometimes it distorts our lives. I hope you won’t lose sight of who you are, as you pursue your values. The life of loyalty that holds no room for one’s own heart is an empty existence.”

Zed stood abruptly and sent his chair scraping back. “The pans need to soak.” He spun out and shouldered the swinging kitchen door.

“Papa.” Teo scrubbed his face with his hands.

“What?” Brando shrugged. “He needs a nudge. He’s stubborn as an ox.”

I glanced between them. “Excuse me, I think I should go talk to him.”

“Yes, please do.” Brando sighed. “And while you’re at it, talk some sense *into* him.”

I pushed the door ahead of myself and made it through. Zed stood at the sink, arms wide. A pyramid of dark waves and fingertips white against the counter’s edge.

I stopped by his side, locked the brakes, and leveraged myself up. Normally he’d thread an arm around my waist, since he still didn’t trust me not to fall on my arse. But he just stared out the window at the river.

“Zed?”

“Hm?”

I braced a hand over his. “Talk to me.”

His face turned my way slowly, eyes a storm of emotions I couldn’t read. “It’s nothing, Nairne. An old argument between my dad and me. I don’t want to talk about it.”

I itched to press him, to let me share his burden. What Brando had said made it sound like Zed was tangled in something he couldn’t get out of. What if I could help him?

But who was I to make such a demand? To invite him to lend me his heart, just to hand it back to him when I left? So, I accepted his silence and set my head on his shoulder, watching the moonlight weave a lace of snowflakes before us. The river swallowed each one that fell from the sky. I always marveled that something so fleeting and tiny—each microscopic snowflake—was structurally one-of-a-kind, never to be seen again.

Like this moment. Zed. How my heart burned as I stared into the storm and contemplated my path without him.

Zed was an explosive variable, an outlier I could have never predicted. When we’d collided, I’d done everything I could to diminish his effect. And judging by how I felt in that moment, I’d failed miserably. He sighed and I leaned deeper into his solid arm. Strength and warmth. Power and passion.

I couldn’t love him.

What if you already do?

THIRTY

Nairne

ZED SHUT the bedroom door behind him, then tugged off his shirt from the back how men do. Hard pecs. A solid eight pack. Yes, eight pack. He did exercise for a living after all. Those divots at his hips pointed toward a cock I spent an unadvisable amount of time thinking about. Bronzed skin that never faded with the lack of sunshine. I shifted in bed because there was a planetary weight of need between my legs and his surliness was a turn-on rather than a deterrent.

There was a fireplace in the bedroom, roaring with heat, and it had to be twenty-five Celsius, easy. The house's sauna temperature had nothing to do with offsetting winter weather, and everything to do with their thoughtfulness about my poor circulation.

Zed dropped on the bed and ran a hand along my legs. Glanced out the window. "Sorry about earlier. My dad took over the mothering when my mom got too sick for it. He hasn't stopped since."

I knuckled fists into the bed and sat higher. "You don't need to apologize, Zed. He cares about you. He's concerned."

He nodded as he leaned back to tug off his jeans, then briefs, and a sea of muscles in his back rippled. "Yeah. I know." His eyes finally met mine and he smiled halfheartedly. "Nice shirt."

I glanced down at my Harry Potter tee, then back up. Ripped it off and left myself topless before him. "Nice, and accurate. *I solemnly swear I am up to no good.*"

His eyes narrowed and his jaw ticked. "Topping from the bottom, and I'm not even pissed. I must be coming down with something." He crawled my

way, slid a hand between my breasts, to the base of my throat. One rough thumb pressed against my pulse. "I want to defile you right now."

"Do it." God, it was all I could think about.

That dark brow furrowed, lips pursed in concern. "No. I'm emotional, and I don't trust myself to be in control. You're still healing. I should be gentler."

"Fuck, no. Take me like always, Zed. I won't break."

"Not true," he whispered. His hands moved along my waist, then cupped my breasts. He twisted my nipples hard and I hissed as pain Venn-diagrammed with pleasure, two circles of intensity converged. Then his hands left me. He sat back and ran fingers through his hair.

Bastard. I stuck a hand under the sheets and shoved three fingers in my sex, rough like he would. Not even two strokes in, his hand gripped my wrist.

"Stop," he warned.

"You won't do it? I'll take care of myself."

He groaned, shook his head. "You're pushing me, Nairne. Don't push me."

"I want you, and you're telling me no. So, I'll get myself off if I want to."

It happened very quickly. Sheets whipped back, pillows thrown aside. Flat on my back with absolute gentleness, then I was looking up at him.

Glowing eyes, a dark Adonis of muscles and power. That cock. Thick, the head dark and glistening with arousal.

"Tell me if it hurts." He rammed into me and I gasped. "Your back, not your cunt. That, I'm brutalizing."

"Yes," I moaned. The headboard rammed into the wall and my eyes flicked up it. "They'll hear us."

"Yeah," he grunted as he drove into me. "They fucking will. And they'll know exactly what we're doing. That a problem?"

"No." My nipples hardened. Arousal flooded between us.

"Jesus, you're soaked. You like it, that they'll know that I'm taking you, and you're mine."

I bit my lip as he ground against my clit. "Yes, damn you."

He bent and bit my breast, sucked, and kissed, then bit some more. Gave each tit their adoring punishment. My clit was a pulsing point of light that was dangerously bright. The circuit lit up deep inside as he stretched me with each thrust. Either this was turning him on more than usual, or I was tighter.

"It hurts," he said. A statement, not a question.

I groaned my answer, because it felt brilliant. I wanted it even harder. I

tried to press my weak hips toward him.

“You want more.”

“Please.” There I was. In the depth of my depravity. Begging. Throbbing for his brutality. Drenched for the brute who cared deeper, saw more, than anyone had. Who bent my pain into a beautiful shape and melded it with pleasure, an alloy of pure, sweet relief.

He lifted my leg and I knew what was coming. I got wetter, my walls clenched. My whole body grew hot. One big flush of debased need. I wanted him to break me open. To hit the core of it all and reclaim the pain that plagued my nerves and gripped my heart.

His hand landed with an expert slap low on my arse. Right next to my cunt, just how I loved. “Look at me,” he said. I did. Another *crack*. “I love you.”

A cry shot out of me at the words and the strike of his cock into my womb. He loved me. And as much as I wanted to deny it, I loved him. We were fucked. Tears were inevitable but they were still unacceptable. I jerked my head, trying to lose them to the sheets.

“Don’t shake your head at me. You think I want to?” *Crack*. Another brutal drive that lit up my cunt to a solar flare. “It wasn’t supposed to happen. I did everything right. It still—” *Crack*. “Fucking—” *Crack*. “Happened.”

“Zed!” I couldn’t hear it. Couldn’t feel all of this. Couldn’t come this hard. I was a dying star, burning as I capsized, hung on the edge of obliteration.

“I can’t think straight. I can’t control it.” He gripped my shoulder and drilled into me, fast and ruthless. “And you’ll be gone.”

“Come with me,” I begged against his skin. “Please.”

“God, Nairne.” His voice cracked. That powerful body dropped over me as we shattered into each other, and his voice landed soft in my hair. “In another life, *innamorata*, I would follow you to the end.”

Tears slipped down my cheeks. I wrapped my arms around his broad back and squeezed mercilessly. “Zed.” All I had was his name and the visceral pain I felt.

“Shh, *fragolina*. No crying for this.”

He kissed me. Slow, hard, and tinged with the bitterness of endings. I watched those eyes. Stark blues and greens of a stormy sea, gold flecks of the sun piercing the clouds.

“What do we do?” I whispered.

He heard the words I wasn't saying. That I loved him, too, and hated myself for letting it happen. He sighed, dropped to his elbows as he smoothed my hair from my sweaty face. "We enjoy the hell out of each other until the day you leave, then do the hard thing. The right thing." He kissed me as our foreheads met. "We say goodbye."



ZED SLEPT HEAVY BESIDE ME, arm draped around my middle. I lifted it and slipped out, quietly transferred to my chair, and did my morning routine. We had the back first-floor bedroom, so all it took was a roll down the hallway until I found the kitchen, buzzing with the hum of idle appliances. He'd left everything out for me. Small tray for my lap, delicate china cup, and my favorite kind of granola bar next to the coffee maker.

I went into the living room loaded up with my treats and found Teo sitting there. Long limbs stretched out from his chair, coffee cup cradled in hand as he stared into a fresh fire. In profile, he looked a lot like Zed. Though unlike Zed, he still held on to the vestiges of adolescence, a pup not quite grown into his paws.

In a few years, he'd be a stunning man. A little leaner and taller. Less sharp-featured than Zed's powerful, striking form, tiger eyes, and beautiful roughness. But I could see Teo had a big heart that carried even bigger pain. Despite his happy demeanor, he wore his grief for his mother openly, with a weight that Zed compartmentalized too well. I wanted to cradle Teo in my arms and mother the hell out of him.

He caught me watching as he turned from the fire and smiled over his cup. "Good morning. You're an early riser, too?"

I nodded as I stopped myself in front of the fire across from him. "Do you mind if I join?"

"Please, of course." We sat in a few minutes of easy silence while I sipped my coffee, broke off my granola piece by piece, and ate.

As he continued staring off, Teo looked bleaker than a twenty-one-year-old should. Lost.

"How long was your mother sick?"

He dragged his eyes from the fire and stared at me intently. Sitting up in the chair, he rubbed his jaw. "She was diagnosed early in '96. Underwent

treatment and went into remission, but that didn't last long..." He sighed. "He still hasn't talked to you about her, has he?"

I shook my head. "Since 1996, you say?" I wasn't Elodie, but I could do that mental math just fine. Eight years ago. Zed had been eighteen. On the cusp of adulthood, the beginning of what should have been a stunning, world-class career.

There it was. So, fucking obvious. Why hadn't I seen it? I understood his odd mixture of loyalty and sabotage to his underworld because he was a natural leader, and he was good. Of course, he'd want to make the best of a terrible reality—that he was the prince of this horrible web of corruption and violence—and do something to destabilize his own predecessor's vicious empire. But that was based on him having chosen his life to be in Boston, and I could never understand *that*. What had kept him here in the first place, when the world had been at his doorstep?

"He didn't leave, because he wanted to be home. It was because he wanted to be near her while she was ill," I said as I faced the fire. I wasn't asking. I was giving the flame of my knowledge the oxygen it needed.

Teo stared at me, then peered down into his coffee. "He should be telling you this."

"He's protecting me." Elbows on my knees, I sought the flames' warmth for my shaking hands. "It's one thing for him to *choose* this world because it suits him best. For me, I can walk away from it—well, roll really. Sometimes walk, slowly."

Teo shook his head. "Your jokes."

I smiled faintly into the fire. "It's a clear choice for me that way. But not for him..." I shifted in my seat. "Zed staying meant it was simply a matter of time before he was sucked into the fucking miscreant quicksand. He was cornered and made the best out of a horrible situation, using his position to combat your families' poison, and now he's in too deep to get out. He knows I'll feel conflicted about leaving him when *that's* the reality."

Teo sighed and denied none of it. "I told him to go. Mama begged him to, said she saw what would happen. But he wouldn't listen. Said it wasn't right." Teo rubbed a hand over his face. "Such a stubborn fuck. He needs to take his hands out of it."

"But innocents might get hurt. Tensions will mount. Truces will vanish. Ordered systems will destabilize." I understood it perfectly. Zed held things together. If he let go, it would crumble.

“Who fucking cares?” Teo snapped. He ran a hand viciously through his hair. “He’s done enough. The feds and cops can deal with them fine. I’m so sick of worrying about him.”

I couldn’t hear that possibility. “He’s safe. He said you’re both untouchable.” The words caught in my throat, came out thin and whispered. Fearful.

Teo raised an eyebrow that spoke of withering impatience. “I am. I’m... neutral. I don’t have my hands in any of it. But Zed is...he’s in deep shit. He’s answerable to the boss and Nella, and also holds significant power as *consigliere*—”

I choked on my coffee and gasped for air. “What the hell did you just say?”

Teo stared at me. “What?”

“*Consigliere*?” I wheezed. And the striking woman, who’d spat at my feet, she was his superior? “Christ. I had this idea of him trying to destabilize things from the periphery, but not from the control center.”

“That’s the problem, Nairne,” Teo said. “He’s in the heart of it, and if he gets caught... The men respect him, but they’d kill him the moment they could.”

He took a poker and jabbed the fire with force that had everything to do with what he was saying. “I’ll tell you one thing. I’m getting the fuck out of here, soon. He’s not staying here on my account. I’m working on convincing Dad, too, but he says he won’t leave Zed.” He shook his heads. “Idiots, both of them.”

Pain, like I hadn’t felt in so long, crept through my chest and choked my throat. Pain injected with a desperate urgency to act. To enforce change in the future’s seeming inevitabilities. I spun my coffee cup and turned over the possible solutions. “Zed needs a path that he can morally stomach, wherein he can get out without it all falling apart and unduly hurting others.”

Teo watched me with sharp eyes. “Yeah, that about sums it up.”

“So, we make one.”

“Nairne.” Teo sighed. “What are you gonna do? Chat about it with the boss over tea and biscuits? These people are brutal. Unscrupulous and deadly.”

I waved it away, rubbed my forehead in thought. “I’ll figure it out. There’s got to be a way. Just give me some time.”

A seed of an idea took root. I hid it in the dark, behind an expression of

ongoing consideration. I didn't have it all figured out, but I knew I had to go to the source of the trouble and make a case for my plan. Zed wouldn't like it. He'd hate it, actually.

That's why he wasn't going to know.

THIRTY-ONE

Nairne

ZED STROLLED DOWN THE HALL, black sweatpants low on his hips and one of his old Harvard shirts hugging tan skin and hard muscles. He walked straight over to me, took my jaw and brought my lips to his for a kiss. Ownership. Blunt touch smoothed by affection. Like we hadn't made a hot mess of our feelings last night. The ones that were supposed to be cool and contained by clear expectations and a timestamp.

“Merry Christmas, *la mia regina*,” he mumbled against my lips.

I breathed in deeply. Petrichor. Fresh rainstorm air. Earthy musk. I wanted to bathe in it.

Teo choked on his coffee. “Did you just call her your queen?”

“Fuck off, Teo,” Zed mumbled as he kissed me again. “Mind your own beeswax.”

“Beeswax,” Teo muttered into his mug. “Real mature.”

“Good morning.” I stroked his stubble, gave him eyes that said what I wanted. Him. Fucking me brainless.

He thumbed my chin. Kissed me once more. “Later, I’m wrecking you,” he whispered.

I smiled. “It’s a date.”

Teo groaned. “Guys. I’m still here. Choking down vomit.”

Zed rolled his eyes and straightened. He grinned at me and slipped his fingers through my ponytail. “I’m gonna grab some coffee.”

As he passed his brother, Zed ruffled Teo's hair. “*Buon Natale, fratu.*”

Brando showed up a bit later, handing out gifts and kisses on heads. Presents were exchanged and kept spare, while snow swirled around outside,

painting the world a serene white. As the sun slipped behind snow clouds and the earth fell quiet, we all drifted between cat naps and disappearing into our books.

“Oh, I forgot to mention.” Brando snapped shut *A Christmas Carol* and stared over his glasses. “Gianno called this morning. He’s coming for dinner. Should be here shortly.”

“Sounds good.” Zed was reading, too. I’d given him the first book of *Outlander*. He laughed at something under his breath and turned the page.

We’d agreed on one present because what the hell business did an intentionally impermanent couple have, lavishing gifts of significance on each other? Of course, Zed obeyed the rules while bending them and gave me one gift that reeked of generosity. My favorite whiskey, which was a splurge.

Teo slept on the floor and snored.

The whole environment made me itchy. It was too pleasant and cozy. Too comfortable. But when I remembered I was going to say goodbye to it all in a few short months, the perfection of it was marred. It was a mirage of belonging that was never meant to last.



“THIS ISN’T FAIR. She’s like an encyclopedia.” Teo threw the card at us in disgust. “Fucking molybdenum. How the hell did you know that, Nairne?”

“‘Cause she’s the Hermione Granger of MIT, Teo.” Zed kneaded my neck in his grip, and grinned.

I shrugged and smiled. “I like chemistry.”

Teo scoffed. “Potions is the one thing Hermione’s supposed to suck at. Not to mention, what’s that make you, Zeddo—Harry Potter? Please. Try Cedric Diggory.”

I laughed. “Ice cold burn.”

Zed looked genuinely offended. “First off, Hermione and Harry aren’t going to end up together. I’m telling you right now. Secondly, fuck you, calling me a Hufflepuff! Gryffindor forever, baby. If anyone’s from the house of goody-two-shoes, it’s you, Theodore.”

Teo opened his mouth, presumably for a comeback, but we were interrupted by a new voice.

“*Buon Natale!*”

Brando laughed and stood. “*Ciao, Gianni. Benvenuto.*”

“Such a sore loser, Teo.” Zed sighed.

He lifted his hand from the base of my neck where he’d been working out the kinks, and stood, too. Teo followed and I was left reminded that I couldn’t just pop off a sofa and greet a newcomer with a handshake. So, I sat like I always did and put on a smile while they hugged and talked in a blur of Italian, until Zed stood back to let Gianni by so he could greet me.

He took one step my way, made eye contact, then froze. As he stared at me wide-eyed, I mentally noted that Zio Gianni was a looker. Hell of a gene pool these men had. Eyes a luminous amber. Rich brown hair, just dusted with silver along his temples. He was handsome, but besides his tan skin like Brando’s, he didn’t look a thing like Zed’s father.

Zed knocked him in the arm. “What’s up with you? You’re staring at her like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Gianni gave me his hand, eyes searching mine. “I’m sorry. She looked... familiar to me. *Piacere, bella.*”

Zed stared between us uneasily and stepped closer. He put a hand on my shoulder. “Gianni, *questa è la mia ragazza*, Nairne MacGregor. Nairne, Giancarlo Mancini. My godfather and general pain in my ass.”

Gianni sank into a chair behind him and raised a shaking hand to his mouth. “What did you say her name was?”

Zed squeezed then let go. “Nairne MacGregor. Gianni what the fuck is going on with you? Do you feel all right?”

Brando set a hand on Gianni’s back. “*Va bene?*”

Gianni tore his eyes from me like he was worried I’d vanish when he looked away. “Do you have something stronger than wine?”

“Grappa.” Brando backtracked toward the bar.

“*Grazie.*” Gianni’s eyes snapped back to me. Brando set a small glass in Gianni’s hand. His attention tore away long enough for him to throw it back. Then he set it delicately on the side table. When his eyes met mine again, they startled me. I recognized something in them that belonged to one man already in the room—possession.

“How old are you, Nairne?” He made it Italian like Brando, with an upswing on the end.

“Twenty-one, sir.”

“*Madonna Mia.*” He sat back, ran his hands through his hair. His hair wasn’t long but fell a little messy toward the front. Thick waves that had hid

the clarity of his cheekbones, his brow. When he tugged back his hair and better revealed his face, something stung me. I'd caught a reflection of myself in a mirror that shouldn't be.

Zed slammed his hands on his hips. "Gianno, I—"

"Zeddo, wait." Brando set a hand on his son's chest. "*Che cosa è, Gianno?*" Brando asked.

Gianno leaned his elbows on his knees. "It seems so remotely impossible..."

Zed swore and looked about to beat the piss out of something when Gianno spoke up and clapped his hands. "Brando. Remember when I came with you to that fundraising dinner in the city? December of 1982."

Brando nodded slowly. "Yes, Zed was old enough to leave with a nanny and Deirdre came with us. She wore that blue gown. We, ah—" He glanced at us and smiled sheepishly. "We had a good time."

Gianno pointed a finger at him. "That we did. And I met someone that night. She was a surgical fellow in pediatrics...*più bellissima*. The loveliest woman. Tall and fair, eyes like the sea." He studied my face and ponytail. "Hair *come una fragola*. So intelligent and proud."

My stomach churned. That was my mother. Everything about that was Lorna MacGregor.

"I didn't hide my interest. She finally gave me her time, and between my wine and her whiskeys, we came alive, talking until they kicked us out." He sat back, ran a hand over his mouth. "I took her to my bed."

I swallowed, tried to find air for my lungs. Breathing was supposed to be autonomic, not a labor of concentration.

"When I woke the next morning, she was gone. No number, nothing but a note saying she'd enjoyed the night. I was disappointed she'd left me with nothing to go on, but I had little time to find her before I was required to go back home to Italy. I was still playing professionally and had to return immediately, pick up my schedule. I told myself to let it go and move on. Even though she was a remarkable woman. Not easily forgotten."

Zed dropped onto the sofa, cupped my neck. "Nairne, easy."

I couldn't break eye contact with Gianno, but I nodded.

Zed dropped his voice. "Breathe, *innamorata*."

I tried. I really did.

Gianno slid to the edge of his seat. "Over the next few years, I thought of her, contemplated ways that I might find her. Then fate played its part.

Visiting you all in the summer a few years later, I bumped into her at the hospital. We'd just had lunch, Brando, and I was walking out and nearly ran her over. It was her, the same woman. We laughed, felt that pull between us again. I asked for her number, and she gave it to me. And her real name."

I dragged in air that felt thin and inadequate. Zed gripped my neck and snapped at Gianni. "What the hell is this about?! You're giving her a panic attack."

He pressed on. "We made plans to meet that evening for a late dinner, after she got off her shift. She came running into the restaurant a little late, still in her scrubs, but still so radiantly beautiful. I finally had her real name to put to such loveliness. Lorna."

"Oh, my god." My hands shook, and I dropped forward as panic clutched my chest.

"Dad, get over here." Zed was around me, but he couldn't help. Nothing could help.

"Nairne, look at me." Brando took my face, examined it, felt my pulse. "She'll be all right, Zeddo. She's upset, but she's all right."

Gianni stood, paced in front of the fire. "Lorna sat down, played with the napkin. I remember watching her tear it to a hundred little pieces. She looked at me with pain in her eyes, and said she had something difficult to tell me." He gripped the mantel, then pushed away. "That a child had come from our night together. A daughter, who was nearly *four*-years-old. A little girl named Nairne."

Zed's body froze around me. His voice was lethal and low. "What did you say?"

Gianni's eyes met mine. "I can hardly believe I'm saying it, but this woman—she's my daughter."

I passed out in Zed's arms. And came to in them, as Italian invective shot across the room.

Zed squeezed me as he spat back something that I missed entirely. Gianni pinched his fingers together and waved them out in front of him. He yelled one more thing, then stormed out of the room.

"Zed?" I croaked.

His eyes flicked down. He held me to him and smooshed my face against his chest. "God, Nairne. I'm so sorry."

"For what?" I barely got it out between his death grip and my squished cheeks. "Zed, loosen up, mate."

He did as he looked me over. “For this.” He glared off where Gianni had headed. “What a fucking mess.”

Panic tightened my chest again. Gianni was his uncle. He called him *Zio Gianni*. “Zed, have we been...are we cousins?”

Zed’s eyes widened for a moment before he understood. “Jesus, no, Nairne. I swear to you. He’s not our *actual* uncle. We only call him that, since we’ve known him our whole lives. He and Dad grew up together, next door neighbors. They’re like brothers, but they aren’t related.”

I sank into his arms. “Oh, thank god.” I stared at the ceiling and tried to patch together a comprehensive picture of what had just happened, what it meant. I couldn’t. And a fit of inappropriate laughter was coming. “Because if I had to give up your cock, I think I might’ve cried.”

Zed glared down at me and smacked my arse. “It’s not funny. This whole situation is very not funny.”

I cupped a hand over my mouth and shook my head.

“Nairne, I swear to the baby Jesus on his birthday, if you don’t stop laughing about this—”

I scooted myself up, folded over, and went into hysterics. “If my punishment is a good spanking, then just get started then, will you?”

Zed tugged my ponytail and laughed against my lips as he kissed them hard. He hauled my chair against the sofa and smacked the canvas seat. “Get your little ass in that bedroom in the next five minutes, *innamorata*, or it’s going to get even worse.”

I kissed him back through my own laughter. “Yes, sir.”

THIRTY-TWO

Zed

I WATCHED HER SLEEP. The rhythmic rise and fall of her chest. She'd hit the pillow and immediately fallen into REM. No surprise to me, she was exhausted by the day's events. Her eyes danced under her eyelids and I wondered if she was dreaming about her father. The one man who, in her wildest dreams, she'd never thought she'd meet.

What a fucking mess. All of it. Gianni being her dad. Our impossible love. Jesus, I loved her. It had fallen out of my mouth as I'd sunk into her body and felt the metaphorical weight to the physical reality, *and the two shall become one flesh*. And when she'd looked at me in pain and longing, I felt the words she'd been too stunned and afraid to say back. I knew she wanted me. I knew we made sense like nothing else in my life had before. I knew I wanted to be one thing with Nairne. Together. And it was the one thing I couldn't have.

I had less than six months to squeeze a lifetime of love out of her, and then after that I'd be tortured with seeing her here and there, over extended family and friend functions, since presumably she and Gianni would make a relationship work. She'd visit him in Italy. Our families were close friends. Any time we made it to Genoa, we spent practically the whole time together. Paths would cross and I'd have to see another man take my place one day and give her the life I couldn't.

I was jealous and sick to my stomach at that thought, but more than both of those selfish emotions, I was happy for her. That she had a parent now, a family to call her own. In retrospect, they had a lot in common, now that I put it together. Sharp wit, unassuming confidence in their abilities, humility in

their curiosity about all they wanted to know and didn't yet. An intensity to their affection that didn't have much breadth, but rather incredible depth for those lucky enough to earn it. I wasn't surprised how well they'd hit it off.

They'd talked after she and I'd taken a "nap" and Gianni had cooled down from all the hotheaded shit I said to him when he made her drop into my arms in a faint. He'd hurt her, and anyone who hurt the woman I loved got my fiercest brutality. I'd apologized, he'd apologized, and I'd begrudgingly left them alone. After they'd spent about two hours in Dad's study—I may have paced around outside it until Dad grabbed me by the arm and got me a little drunk in the kitchen to distract me—Gianni left looking proud and happy. And Nairne smiled to herself like she had a secret that made her glow from the inside out.

She stirred in her sleep and smiled. How could I let this go? A woman whose iron sharpened mine. A partner and lover like I'd never found before.

Mom had once told me never to accept "impossible" as the answer to life's challenges. *"Look within yourself, Zedekiah. And don't accept an answer you can't tolerate. It's we who shape our lives, who make our truth and the path born from it."*

Everything about us was impossible, but accepting that answer made me ill. Could I find a way out? Escape without undoing everything I'd worked for, without endangering people and negligently allowing violence and cruelty to spread like a poison in the city again?

I kissed her cheek and breathed deeply. She smelled like ocean air and blossoms. Like new shores and possibility.

I wanted her. Impossible could fuck off. I pressed my lips to her hair and whispered, "Wait for me *innamorata*. I'm coming."

Nairne and Zed's story continues in [She's a Spitfire](#), Book Two in The Tough Love Series.

Acknowledgments

When I had my first daughter, I was told more times than I can count that it takes a village to raise a baby. Well, it takes a village to make a book, and I'm so very grateful for my village.

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I began my writing journey with an idea in my head and a need in my heart to create characters whose quirks and circumstances might be a little larger than life, but who were ultimately quite relatable. I've written characters with foibles and oddities, challenges and fears, passions and dreams, some of which may echo in your life. I hope that as you've followed them, you've enjoyed both an escape into an unexpected world, and a coming home to an emotion or an experience that resonates with you.

Writing is an iterative process, and only gets better with constructive critique. If you have the time and inclination, please leave an honest review. Your feedback is invaluable to me!

About the Author

Chloe writes stories that, like people, resist categories. Her contemporary romances are hot, witty, full of heart and keep you on the edge of your seat. She's an avid reader, Harry Potter lover, and eats more peanut butter cups than she probably should.

To sign up for Chloe's latest news, new releases, and special offers, please visit her [website](http://www.chloeliese.com) (<http://www.chloeliese.com>) and [subscribe!](#) Want to connect further? Find Chloe on the following platforms:



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