

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a white textured sweater, is shown from the chest up. Her face is partially obscured by the large red text. The background is dark with numerous red splatters, suggesting blood. The text 'RAW' is in a large, bold, red, distressed font, and 'REBIRTH' is in a similar but slightly smaller font below it.

# RAW.

## REBIRTH

The road to hell  
is paved with good intentions.

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
BELLE AURORA

Raw:  
Rebirth  
**By Belle Aurora**

## **Raw: Rebirth**

Published by Belle Aurora

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*To the dangerously in love,  
to the fools who rush in,  
and to the ones still looking for their knights in scuffed armor.  
This is for you.*



## Prologue

### A.J.

A.J. was a smart boy. He was only five years old but knew the value of a secret.

He didn't like keeping secrets from his mum, and when he asked her if it was okay to lie, she told him it was never okay to be dishonest.

It didn't make sense.

A.J. had heard his mother lie before.

Why was she able to lie when he wasn't?

His mother explained that sometimes people told lies to stop another person from being sad, and these were called "little white lies."

A.J. thought about this.

His secret would hurt his mum, he'd been told, so it wasn't really a lie, he thought.

Keeping his secret was more a "little white lie." As his mother tucked him in to bed, he smiled up at her. "I love you," he told her, and he meant it.

His mother's smile softened. "I love you more, honey," she responded quietly as she ran gentle fingers through his messy hair.

She blew him a kiss as she left his room, turning off the light and closing the door behind her.

A.J. lay in his bed, awake and waiting.

He wasn't sure how long he waited, but when he heard the window rattle then lift in excruciating slowness, he smiled excitedly.

His little white lie was here.

Daddy was home.

\*\*\*

### Lexi

"Mummy?"

I heard him. How could I not?

But I continued to drive in silence. I wasn't really in the mood for conversation; however, the little monster in the back seat had other ideas.



My chest felt heavy, weighed down.

What a day.

Everything felt tight. My insides, my jaw, my grip on the steering wheel. Even my eyes felt tightly fixated on the road. But that wasn't A.J.'s fault, and I wouldn't let him know I felt like I was dying on the inside.

A sigh left me.

Daddy Day was never a good day for me.

"Yeah, honey?"

He didn't answer for a long while, and when a frown tipped my brow and I glanced back at him through the rearview mirror, his eyes were fixed on me, unblinking.

My heart ached as I looked into his soft brown eyes.

His father's eyes.

*Well, shit.*

My nose began to tingle. And just like that, fresh tears rolled down my cheeks. I swiped at them quickly and blinked rapidly, trying in vain to quell the familiar sting of sadness.

*Jesus Christ. Get a grip.*

My son, he didn't like to see me upset. His voice was little over a whisper and near desperate. "Don't cry, Mummy." His voice steeled, and he muttered, "I don't like it."

I heard his daddy in those hardened words.

*Ugh.* He was killing me.

We drew to a stop at a set of traffic lights and I took my hands off the wheel, looking back and forcing a smile. I spoke softly, almost pacifying. "Sorry, bud."

It was his father's birthday, and we were driving home from the cemetery. Every single time I saw that gleaming white marble headstone, it took me back to a time I chose to remember, when I would be better off forgetting. That time so long ago, yet so vividly fresh in my memories. No matter how much time passed, I was stuck there, in that time. In a place where I was wild and careless and in the arms of the man I loved.

Make no mistake about it. I was dangerously in love.

Recklessly in love.

The lights turned green and I twisted back, driving on, once again gripping the steering wheel like a lifeline. We were halfway home before I

realized I was driving on autopilot, not at all paying any attention to my surroundings.

My heart lurched in apprehension. I swallowed hard and shook my head in a poor attempt to snap myself out of my stupor.

Maybe conversation wasn't such a bad idea after all. "How about we go to the grocery store, get a bunch of junk food, and watch a movie tonight?"

The wide smile on my face was genuine then. There was only one man in my life, and he glued my heart together with mud, giggles, and drawings crafted with crayon and love.

A.J. smiled, my toothless monster, but as quickly as it came, it went. "What day is it?"

I stalled.

*Umm...*

I couldn't help my quiet laughter.

What a question?

Amused bewilderment stunned me and my brows rose. "Uh..." I tried to quell the urge to laugh again. "Sunday."

He blinked down at his lap before looking back at me through the mirror. He shook his head before staring out the window. "No, thank you."

Confusion marred my brow.

*Huh?*

He was passing up junk food? Since when?

I didn't want to push, but I was slow to realize I needed time with my son, today more than ever. I was going to have to sweeten the pot. "Maybe we could stay up really late, sleep in, and then go out for pancakes tomorrow."

*Ooh.* I smiled inwardly.

He looked tempted.

"What about school?"

Did he even know me? I was a cool mom. What was one day of missing school to bond with my son? "Forget about it. I'll tell them you're sick."

"That's a lie." He peered at me a moment before avoiding my gaze. "And I like school."

"Just a little lie." My smile began to droop. "A white lie."

Wait. Was I really explaining myself to a five-year-old?

What was going on here? A.J. wasn't acting like himself.

After a moment of puzzlement, a thought dawned and I recognized how selfish I was being. He was just a little boy, and perhaps today was harder for him than I thought. Maybe he had just started to figure out exactly what he'd lost in losing his father.

Chances were, even though I needed a distraction, maybe A.J. needed the time to process what he was feeling. And my chest ached.

Could he be mourning as I was?

I sighed inwardly and my smile turned sad. "That's okay, honey. Next time." But I couldn't help the feeling of disconnection between us.

And then we were home.

I pulled into the drive and turned off the car. Before I got out, I turned in my seat to look back at my sweet boy.

"Hey," I started, and when he looked up at me with those long, dark lashes, I melted. "I know today wasn't easy." I put my hand on his knee. "Are you okay?"

He was stoic a long moment, my baby, and then shook his head but remained stone-faced. I gave him time and a full minute went by before he dipped his chin, and carefully uttered, "If somebody told me something... a secret... and I want to tell someone else, is that okay?"

I thought about A.J.'s little friends, and asked, "Is the secret hurting anybody?"

A.J. thought about it. "No. I don't think so."

"Honey, when somebody tells you a secret, it's not your secret to tell. And when somebody is telling you that secret, they're trusting you to keep that for them." I reached over and ran my fingers down the side of his face. "You sure this secret isn't hurting anybody?"

He looked down, and those long lashes glanced his cheeks. He then gave a firm nod. "I'm sure."

*Thank God.*

I wasn't sure I could deal with much more upset today. "Okay, then no, sweetie. You shouldn't tell anybody."

"Not even you?" he queried sensibly.

"Me?" I pinched his cheek lightly, playfully, and he broke out into a huge smile. "You can tell me anything." I winked at him. "We don't keep secrets, right?"

I didn't understand it. He looked visibly upset but whispered, "Right."

*Uh oh.*

*Not good.*

My heart stuttered as I helped him out of his seat. I got out of the car and pulled him to me, hugging him to my side. His arm went around my waist.

What was going on with my boy? I was suddenly anxious.

“You can tell me anything.” I looked down at him, unblinking.

“Anything at all. And I won’t get upset. I’ll just listen if you need me to, but —” I stopped, stood in his path, and knelt down, looking my son deep in the eye. “—we don’t keep secrets from each other, buddy.”

He nodded slowly, wisely, as though he was caught in a predicament and wasn’t sure how to proceed.

*Shit.*

It worried me.

Once inside, I let my bag slide off my shoulder onto the breakfast bar and hesitantly glanced back to the little boy standing awkwardly in the doorway. We continued to look at each other a while before I asked, “You got something to say to me, bud?”

A second later, he nodded. “Yeah.” He shuffled his feet.

He had something important to tell me; I could feel it, as a mother does. I gave him my undivided attention. “What is it?”

A.J. spoke, and I wasn’t prepared for what he said. Not at all.

“Well, sometimes, late at night...”

Oh, this was not starting well. My heart immediately began to race.

“Sometimes...” He looked down at the skirting and rubbed his shoe against it. His voice lowered a few decibels. “Sometimes, Daddy comes to see me.”

The pressure in my heart released, the tight band uncoiling.

*Oh, Lord.*

Today was not the day.

I felt like crying.

“Baby.” My eyes closed of their own accord and I let out a humorless laugh, forcing down the thickness in my throat. I pulled him into me and squeezed him tightly, rocking him from side-to-side, kissing his temple.

He hugged me back just as hard and I explained a few things to him.

“I know it feels that way.” I kissed him again. “Daddy comes to me too sometimes.” I pulled back and watched him cautiously. “In my mind. In my dreams.”

“No.” A.J. shook his head. “Not in my dreams, Mummy. It’s real.”

*Oh, sweetie... no.*

My heart broke as I tried to explain to him that what he was feeling, what he was seeing, was nothing more than a coping mechanism. I should know. At one point, Twitch would be in my room every single night and I would talk to him. He never responded to my anxious questions. It took me a while and a whole lot of therapy for me to realize I was psychologically hurting myself.

“When I dream of Daddy, it feels so real.” Inhaling deeply, shakily, I spoke out on an exhale, “It feels so real that sometimes I don’t want to wake up from such a beautiful dream.” I closed my eyes to stress my next words, gripping his forearms. “But it’s just a dream, honey.” I pulled him to me once again and snaked my arms around him. “It’s not real.”

A.J. frowned. “No, Mummy.” He tried to shake his head against my chest. “It’s real. Really real.”

*No, it isn’t. He’s gone.*

“Baby.” My heart ached as much as the spoken words. “Daddy’s gone.”

“He isn’t,” he said adamantly in only the way a five-year-old could.

I bit my lip to stop myself from releasing a pained cry. Instead, I whispered, “Yes.”

But A.J. wasn’t having it. He took a step back from me, and I felt the loss immediately. The full force of his glare hit me. “No.”

*Goddammit.*

Didn’t he know how much he was hurting me?

Twitch was gone.

And he was never coming back.

But my son was so important, so precious to me, that I caved, and as I did, a tear trailed my cheek. “Okay, baby.”

A look of vindication crossed him, and when he threw himself into my arms, I held my baby and wept silently.

Because my son was mourning the father he never had. And whichever way he chose to cope with that was okay with me.

Even if it meant hurting me in the process.



# Chapter One

## Twitch

In the shadow of night, I moved slowly, quietly, and when the house came into view, I stalled. The lights were still on. I stood by the gum tree on the street corner and waited.

Looking down at my wrist, I checked my watch in the moonlight and counted the seconds. When the clock struck eleven, I peered up at the house and it was suddenly awash with darkness. It was like clockwork. Every night at eleven p.m., Lexi went to bed, but not before checking on A.J.

A small smile pulled at my lips when the lamp in my son's room illuminated the window.

And *there* it was.

See?

Clockwork. Same thing, day in, day out.

A moment passed and the window dimmed, and that was my cue.

With my hands in my pockets of my hoodie, I moved gracefully, silently, and when I reached the window, I put my hands to the top of the wooden frame and pushed. It rattled as it opened. I pulled out the fly screen and placed it on the ground before climbing in. The second my foot hit the floor of his bedroom, I heard plastic cracking.

I clicked my tongue, and muttered, "*Fuck*." When the little man in the bed lifted his head and blinked at me sleepily, I uttered quietly, "I thought I told you to clean this shit up."

He rubbed at his eyes, then mumbled, "I forgot."

"You forgot." I chuckled under my breath. "Sure you did."

The little smirk pulling at his lips told he was lying. My son might've gotten my looks, but he was his mother through and through. Kind and honest and good.

I glanced around the room, at the floor, before sighing at the mess, and stepped silently towards the bookshelf. "What's your flavor, boy?"

"*Green Eggs and Ham*," he said immediately.

My lips puckered into a small scowl. "Again?"

"Again." He nodded, sitting up in bed.

Another sigh was pulled from me, but it was exaggerated. I really didn't give a fuck what he wanted me to read to him. I would do it, reading the same book over and over again, if it meant I got to spend some time with my boy. Because what little time I got with him was something I cherished. It was precious, and I'd missed him his whole life. So what little I got of him, I would deal with.

Book in hand, I went to him. "Scoot over." When he did, I sat on the edge of the bed, lying back against the timber headboard, and I put my arm around him and held the book up.

Without hesitation, he leaned his sleepy head into my chest. I blinked down at him as he let out a little yawn, and I died on the inside.

I fucking *died*.

Never had a child been so loved as my son. His trust was not something I deserved, but I would take it because it was habit of mine—taking things that didn't belong to me. Claiming them as my own.

As I started to read in low tones, I recognized I didn't even need the book anymore. I'd read it so many times I knew the damned thing by heart. But A.J. seemed to like the pictures, so I held the book up and let him turn the pages when needed, watching him smile at the goofy-looking drawings, smiling right along with him.

I never understood what people meant when they said it was the little things.

Peering down at my son... I got it.

Those smiles, his laughter, the way he scratched his butt without shame... it was worth all the time I spent away from him. For this child, for Lexi, I'd do it all over again in a heartbeat. I didn't want to, but I would, which was why it was so important to have taken care of business before I reemerged from my hollow grave.

I was so close to being resurrected. I could taste it, taste Lexi's full, sweet lips as they worshipped me.

Thinking of the woman down the hall, alone in her bed, made my gut clench. How easy it would be to sneak into her bedroom and watch her a while.

Yeah. I was a sick fuck. And old habits died hard.

God. The memory of her...



My chest ached as my mind conjured up an image of her beaming up at me, smiling in that soft, warm way that was reserved for me and me alone.

I missed her.

It had been too long.

Finished with the book, I closed it then hugged my drowsy son close to me. “You tired, little man?” He nodded into my chest and I smiled. “Want me to stay until you’re asleep?”

Another nod, weaker this time, and a thought crossed me.

*I would kill for this child.*

Running a hand through his messy hair, I closed my eyes, breathing him in. He smelled of green apples, fabric softener, and something uniquely A.J. I pressed my lips to his head and held them there, missing him already.

One scrawny arm flopped down across my stomach and held me tight. His voice was whisper quiet. “You’re coming back, right?”

I frowned to myself. How could he ask me that?

He snuggled deeper into me, and my frown intensified. “Hey.” When he didn’t move, I nudged him and, slowly, he looked up at me, his eyes sad. “I’m coming back.” But his eyes remained sad, and I felt the familiar ache I always felt before I had to go. “I promise.”

A.J. looked up at me a long moment before he nodded. I held my little man tightly, wanting to reassure him but unsure about how. Then, I reached down and undid my watch, handing the heavy metal to him.

Grudgingly, he took it, and when he blinked up at me questioningly, I told him, “I’ll be back for that.” His eyes widened before he looked back down at the watch. God, this kid. The look of pride at being entrusted with something big like an expensive wristwatch was all I could handle. “You’ll keep it safe for me, yeah?”

His nod was solid, enthusiastic, and when I saw his slight smile, the aching feeling in my chest eased slightly.

I wasn’t sure about a lot in life, but I was sure about one thing. I loved my son. I loved him something fierce. And if somebody were ever stupid enough to fuck with him, I’d be there, Glock in hand.

Cock.

Click.

Boom.

Fuckin’ try me.

An hour later, the little guy draped over me was fast asleep and I needed to jet. Carefully as I could, I slid out from under him and readjusted the covers. I stood there a while, watching him, my gut coiling tightly.

I didn't want to leave.

But I had to.

Before I left, I ran a light hand over my son's hair, bent down, and kissed his brow. Whisper soft, I told his sleeping form, "Love you," and I fucking meant it.

Those words, they didn't alarm me as much as they used to. I had learned so much in my time away. How to appreciate life to its fullest was one of those things. I spared one last look at my child before slipping out into the night.

As I walked down the street, to my home, I wondered how long I could continue to hide in plain sight.

*Fuck.*

A smirk lined my lips as the answer presented itself.

*Forever, if I needed to.*

"How much longer?" I asked, very clearly pissed.

He sighed. "I don't know, Twitch. These things take time." I heard his chair squeak. "What, you think they're just gonna go ahead and trust what I've got to say about you?" He scoffed. "Please, son. The U.S. has reluctantly recognized your life again, but Australia isn't so willing." He paused. "There's an empty grave with your name on it, Twitch. You think that doesn't raise questions? Think on this. Your grave disappears, your girl goes berserk and wants answers." He let out a long exhale. "The longer this takes, the better for you. Trust me on that."

Ethan Black, my unlikely associate, was right, and it ribbed me to no end. I was sore. "Yeah. Whatever."

"Look," said the FBI's main man, "everything will work out. You knew this process was going to be a lengthy one. You said you were in it for the long haul. What's changed?"

Yes, I had. But seeing my son last night had me thinking. "Say I wanted to out myself now," I queried. "What's the worst that could happen?"

Ethan laughed humorlessly. "Fucking hell." When I didn't utter a word, he went silent a short second, then explained, "You faked your death, Twitch, and although pseudocide is technically not a crime, you're looking

at so many other charges you'll drown in 'em. Conspiracy, felony tax evasion, forging a death certificate—want me to keep going? Your girl will go down for illegally collecting life insurance. Oh, and here's your biggest one. *Fraud.*"

Right. Got it.

"That all?" I smirked when he let out a string of expletives.

"Keep your fucking head down and stay out of trouble," Ethan grouched, and from the sounds of it, he was as tired of this conversation as I was. "I got work to do." And then he hung up on me.

Alone in my room, a block away from the house that held my son and my woman, I thought about my current position, about Ethan's advice.

*Keep your fucking head down and stay out of trouble.*

My lips tilted up at the corners.

Nah.

That wasn't my style.

Standing quickly, I dressed and grabbed my keys. Before I left the house, I pulled my hood up over my head and slid on my Ray Bans. Hiding my tattooed hands in my pockets, I walked outside, headed towards my unassuming Nissan Patrol, and stepped inside.

It was Monday, and I knew where she was. Same place she was every Monday.

My Lexi was a creature of habit.

I drove quickly and once I got there, I parked, looking out my tinted windows. And there she was.

My restless soul eased at the sight of her.

I was far enough not to be noticed but close enough to see the soft curve of her ass. And, *fuck me*, she looked beautiful.

The yoga instructor, a slender dude in his forties, stood in front of the six women in a pose, balancing on one leg while pressing the opposite foot into the prone knee, with his arms straight up over his head.

The women matched his pose, and when Lexi wobbled, he rushed her, placing his hands on her waist to steady her.

My eyes flashed and the anger began to build.

Look, I might've changed some in my absence, but I wasn't a fucking saint. The sight of another man's hands on my woman had my heart thumping. It made me want to smash heads.

Jaw tight, I continued to watch.

When he said something, smiling, and Lexi spoke back through a wide grin, my stomach clenched painfully. They spoke a few moments, and when I couldn't take my eyes off those hands at her hips, my neck started to heat, my hands balled into fists, and I muttered under my breath, "Get your fuckin' hands off her."

As if he heard me, the asshole's hands slid away from her but not before lingering a short moment. And, honestly, I couldn't blame him. Lexi was a beautiful woman.

Only when he stepped away did my gut uncoil. I took in a deep breath, letting it out slowly.

Anger issues would plague me the rest of my life, but I was working on them.

She was dressed in black workout tights and a loose white tee, and I watched the neckline of that oversized tee slide down past one shoulder, revealing the thick strap of her sports bra. She had on a pair of white sneakers and her thick, brown hair was up in a high ponytail.

Quite suddenly, memories assaulted me and I closed my eyes, wanting so desperately to dive into those recollections and live there a while.

Lexi in my bed.

Lexi on her knees.

Lexi sucking me so nicely as she looked up into my eyes.

A low groan escaped me, and my brows lowered as I gripped my hardening cock, squeezing it tightly. "Shit."

My head fell back and I closed my eyes tightly. My lips parted as I fought to control myself; a frustrated sigh blew out from between them.

Yeah.

It had been too long.

I needed my baby.

A frown pulled at my mouth.

*Did she need me?*

As quickly as the thought came, it went, and a snuffle of light laughter left me.

Of course she did. Loving me was all she needed.

I'd make it worth it though. I'd love her back, love her hard, leave her satisfied, and make her surrender herself all over again. And she'd do it,

willingly. I knew what my woman liked. Time doesn't change those particular tastes.

I should know. It hadn't changed mine.

The thought of Lexi, naked and willing, my hand wrapped around her thick, dark hair, had my dick beading.

I squeezed it tight enough to bruise and bit the inside of my cheek, reveling in the pain. "*Jesus.*" I hissed in a breath through gritted teeth.

"Gotta get out of here."

Before I left, I spared one more glance towards my woman, and just as I did, she turned to talk to a lady behind her, smiling openly as she lifted an arm, held it across her chest, and kept it there, stretching.

And my soul screamed out for her.

With a deep sigh, I started the car, reversed, and then exited the parking lot.

Once upon a time, in the land of gods and monsters, there lived an angel.

And her name was Lexi.



## Chapter Two

### Lexi

I was cold and wet with perspiration but momentarily ignored the vicious need to shower. The second I walked into the house, I called out, “Hey, anyone home?”

To my absolute delight, no one answered, and with a light sigh, my feet took me into the kitchen. Grabbing a chair from the table, I dragged it, ignoring the low screech that vibrated throughout my ear, and then stood on it. Opening the highest cabinet on the left, I reached in and pulled out a strategically hidden chocolate bar. With a happy smile, I climbed off the chair, sat on it, opened the wrapper, and took a huge bite.

Eyes closed in sheer bliss, I chewed slowly, savoring the sweet, rich taste.

I looked down at the chocolate bar, feeling mildly guilty about eating the delicious treat almost immediately after finishing a workout.

With a light shrug, I took another bite, and uttered, “Meh. Screw it.”

This was why I worked out, wasn’t it? So I could eat what I wanted to? And right now, I wanted chocolate, so.... “Yum,” I garbled as I threw the rest of the bar into my mouth.

The front door opened and my eyes widened. I took the foil wrapper and shoved it into my bra, chewing quicker.

“Okay, little dude,” Molly said. “Take your shoes off and put your bag away.”

As A.J. rushed past the open doorway, he yelled, “Hi, Mum!”

Putting a hand to my mouth, I continued to chew, swallowed hard, and then called back, “Hey, honey.”

Molly walked into the kitchen and looked closely at me. She grinned and asked, “Have you been eating chocolate?”

How did she *know*? “What? No,” I said a little too quickly.

When she frowned, smiling, and brought her finger to the corner of my lips, she pulled back and sniffed her finger, smirking. “Chocolate.” Then her brow narrowed. “Where’d you get chocolate? I want chocolate.”

Shit.

Busted.

The twenty-two-year-old had fast become a member of this family. Yes, it was small and broken, but Molly fit with us. When Julius recommended her as a part-time nanny for A.J., I was hesitant. I should've known anyone that Julius recommended would have been checked thrice over.

He was not a man to take chances. Neither was his wife, Alejandra.

I missed them both quite a bit.

They lived with us for six months when they first moved to Sydney, and at their time of arrival, Alejandra had not been in a good state. Having been attacked and held for days, she was more than just physically damaged. Mentally, she was so fragile that she seemed almost brittle, to be knocked down at the slightest touch or sound or breeze, and after her ordeal, she barely spoke anymore. It didn't matter how many times I went over it in my head; I couldn't begin to understand what that poor woman had gone through.

In mere days, she'd lost a finger, had multiple bones broken, been repeatedly raped, and suffered permanent eye damage at the hands of a maniac with a hunting knife. She was now badly scarred and utterly petrified of doctors. However, Julius loved her just the same. In the time they lived with us, I got a firsthand view of just how wounded she was.

At times, the memory still haunts me.

I remember waking to the sounds of terrified screams and wailing cries, panting and gasping for air, and by the time I was out of bed and rushing down the hall, Julius was attempting to regain control inside their room.

"Wake up, baby," he uttered, then more frantic, "*Fuck*. Wake up!" Then, louder, "*Ana!*"

But the screams continued, and I stood at the end of the hall with a hand pressed to my chest in a weak attempt to calm my racing heart. When the yelps and panicked shrieks finally subsided and were replaced with the sounds of low keening cries, I grudgingly went back to my room, but sleep never came.

At one point, I heard shuffling out in the hall, so I put on my robe and stepped out of my room, and what I saw broke my heart.

Julius carried a pile of sheets into the laundry. The smell of urine was faint, but it was definitely there.



I moved into the open doorway, and feeling my presence, he twisted back to look at me, dressed only in pajama pants, looking dazed and sleep worn. I didn't miss the marks at his neck and scratches that marred his chest, his mocha skin partially reddened. "Hey," he whispered, then went back to stuffing the sheets into the washing machine. "Sorry we woke you."

Julius, I was coming to realize, had the patience of a saint. "Don't worry about it," I told him. After a short hesitation, I asked, "Is she okay?" With his back to me, he shook his head, and I stepped into the laundry room. "Another memory?"

"She, uh—" He cleared his throat. "She got tangled in the sheets. Woke up terrified." He sighed softly, tiredly. "Had an accident."

It was utterly depressing that this sweet woman had gone through so much in her short life that becoming tangled in sheets posed a threat, to frighten her enough into wetting herself. It killed me to watch her refuse help.

I was a qualified social worker. I had resources, if she would only reach out and take what was offered. At my fingertips, I held the best of the Australian mental health system. But I understood fear better than anyone, and what it could do to a person was truly destructive.

"Maybe we can try again with the therapy," I spoke quietly.

Julius let out a faint bark of laughter. "Yeah. Good luck with that. She barely speaks to me anymore. How you gonna get her to talk?"

My reply was honest and bleak at that. "I don't know."

He breathed in deeply, then let it out slowly on an exhale. As he passed me, he pressed a soft kiss to my cheek. "Sorry we woke you."

The next morning, I found Ana sitting at the kitchen table, opposite A.J., and when I shuffled in half asleep, she smiled. Sure, she didn't talk much anymore, but she was still as kind to me as she could allow herself to be, and if a smile was all she could spare, I'd gladly take it.

I squeezed her shoulder gently. "Morning, Ana." Pausing by my son, I bent at the waist and wrapped an arm around him, pressing kisses to the side of his neck. "Morning, honey. Are you hungry?"

He made a face before wiping at his neck. He was a little boy, after all. "No. Ana made me toast."

My eyes smiled at her when I straightened. "Thanks. Can I fix you something?" In response, she returned my smile but held up her mug,

telling me she had all she needed. I checked the fridge, and muttered, “Okay, well, I’m thinking bacon and eggs.”

At that, Julius stepped into the kitchen, looking sleepy and just woken. “I’m down for that.”

I snuffled out a laugh before turning back to Ana. “Do you notice he’s nowhere to be found until someone’s cooking?”

She turned to her husband, her eyes full of mirth, but simply sipped at her coffee. He sat by her, and with a harsh grunt and shrill squeak, her chair was dragged over to him. She put down her mug as he began to whisper into her ear. I discreetly watched them as I started to cook. Whatever he said had an effect. She began to nod slowly, closing her eyes, and when he pulled back, she lovingly framed his face in her hands and looked him in the eyes. When she spotted the dark circles beneath them, her face fell and she leaned in, pressing soft kisses to his full lips.

Regardless of what Ana had gone through, one thing was clear. She loved her husband more than words could describe. A love like theirs was rare, rarer still to survive all they had. I adored them both, and even though they had their problems, I was rooting for them.

As I fried eggs in one pan and bacon in another, I threw some bread into the toaster, and when it popped, Julius stood, lending a hand and pulling out two plates.

That was when A.J. struck. “Why do you have nightmares?”

My entire being stilled. I know he was just a child, but we had spoken about this and he knew he had no business asking Ana such a personal question.

So when she responded, I was stunned.

It took her a while. Her voice was quiet and sounded husky from lack of use. “Because bad people did bad things to me.”

I heard A.J.’s chair squeak, and then he was walking over to her. When I glanced at Julius, his back was ramrod-straight and I knew he was listening. My son sat by the small woman and looked into her white, damaged eye.

“Did they do that?”

She nodded slowly. “Yes.”

“Does it hurt?”

Ana shook her head. “No.” She took A.J.’s hand and touched it to the scars by her eye. A.J. winced, but she smiled encouragingly. “It’s okay. I

don't feel it anymore. It's numb."

A.J. took her lead and pressed his small fingers to her face. When he suddenly dropped them and asked, "Why do you cry at night?" I very nearly died.

Wide-eyed and thoroughly confused by his ill-mannered conduct, I spun around and scolded him. "That is enough."

But Ana put a hand up to me, letting me know it was okay. I couldn't help but notice the way her hands shook as she spoke, as if it was taxing her greatly to use her voice, but she did that for A.J. "I cry because I'm sad, baby."

And A.J. rewarded her.

Standing suddenly, he rushed to his room. We all heard the commotion as he threw things around, and when he finally found what he was looking for, he returned. Ana took the outstretched brown bear he held, and as she looked at it, he told her, "Sometimes, when I get sad, I hug my bear." He looked her in the eye in the unabashed way only a child could. "He feels nice. He's soft and smells like cookies."

Ana put her nose to the center of the teddy bear's stomach then smiled. "He does." She handed him back his bear. "But I can't take him from you. He's yours."

He puffed out his chest, as he stated, "I'm a big boy. I don't need him anymore."

"Sure you do," she said kindly, holding out his bear, insisting he take it from her.

When he said what he did, pride warmed me. "I think you need him more."

He was a good boy and he genuinely wanted to help. As I plated up breakfast, I quietly told her, "Stubborn as a mule, he is. He won't take no for an answer." My eyes widened comically. "Trust me on that."

At my son's persistence, she looked down at the bear, gently touching its nose before hugging it to her, her long black hair falling over her face. Her voice was soft. "Thank you."

He returned her smile. "You're pretty, Ana." Then he turned to me. "Can I watch TV now?"

Oh my God, this child. "Sure."

Julius's shoulders shook in silent laughter as he sat at the table, taking his plate with him. "I better watch my back, Lex. I think your boy's tryin' a steal my girl."

As I sat with them, I uttered, "I don't know what's gotten into him this morning. I'm so sorry."

But it was Ana who responded. "It's okay. I love A.J."

I looked at my son in the next room and my face softened. "He loves you too."

And he did. He proved it time and time again, spending time with Ana when he thought she was lonely, talking to her, sharing his snacks with the little woman, bringing her his most cherished things to borrow or keep. And when time came to say goodbye, A.J. was devastated.

He asked a soggy, "Are you ever coming back?" as he wiped at his nose with his sleeve.

Ana knelt down and smiled gently. "Of course, baby. We're not moving far." She took his hand and held it tight. "You can come visit whenever you like."

"Now?" he asked, sniffing, and she laughed softly at how ridiculous he was being.

I had a strong feeling that A.J. had helped her heal some, and there was no better compliment as a parent. It spoke volumes about his character.

It hurt to see him lose his friend, but it was nice to see Ana and Julius taking steps forward in life. For a long while, they were stuck. Not moving forward or backward.

Just... stuck.

With a gentle hand, she wiped away his tears and spoke quietly. "I promise as soon as we have furniture and I have a bed for you, you can come have a sleepover with us, okay?"

At that, he smiled through his tears. "Okay." He hugged her as tightly as he could, and when they parted, Julius held his arms open.

A.J. went to him slowly, dragging his feet, and when he reached him, he dipped his chin, looking miserable. Julius picked him up, and when A.J. rested his head on Uncle Julius's shoulder, my insides melted into a pile of goop.

"You're the man of the house," Julius told him, and A.J. nodded at his shoulder. "That means you've gotta look after your mom."

I smiled sadly when A.J. looked to me and muttered, "I will. I promise."

"That's my boy," Julius said, holding his godson close and swaying gently from side to side. "You good?"

A.J. shook his head dismally and Julius hugged him tighter, snuffling out a soft laugh through his nose. "Aw, c'mon. You're killin' me here."

When I saw A.J. smirk, I knew he was milking it, clearly loving the attention, and later that night, when Julius and Ana had finally left us, the house felt dreadfully still, quiet in a way it hadn't been in months, and to be honest, I didn't like it. Not one bit.

Weeks passed, and the house remained still. Julius called, and he sounded uneasy when he said, "I think I might be overstepping here, Lex."

What an odd sentiment.

We were so far past overstepping. After all we had been through, I didn't think we could have lived any other way than what we were. Boundaries never got crossed because there were no boundaries between us.

"No such thing," I told him. "What's up?"

"I got a call from someone I know. Actually, the daughter of someone I know. She's looking for work."

Yep. I was definitely confused.

I drawled out, "Okay?"

"She doesn't have a lot of experience, but she is good at one thing."

"Oh?" I asked cautiously, "What's that?"

"She's great with kids."

And my heart sunk. "Julius—"

But he cut me off with, "Think about it, Lex. You've wanted to go back to work for a while now but said the hours make it too hard to juggle A.J. and a job." He quickly uttered, "Molly can help with that. You'd be able to work again, whatever the hours." After a silent moment, he vowed, "A.J. will love her."

I didn't want to hurt Julius's feeling, but this did feel like overstepping. "Her name's Molly?"

"Yep. She's twenty-one and looking for something permanent."

I sighed softly.

My maternal worry came into play. "Do you trust her?"

"Lex," was all he said, and I knew it was a stupid question. As if Julius would let anybody untrustworthy around his godson.

The thought of working again sounded amazing. I couldn't help but consider the offer.

"Well, I can't promise permanent, but—" I let out a long drawn out sigh. "—maybe she can come down for a day or two next week so I can get to know her a little."

Julius was okay with that. "Of course, I wouldn't jump into anything until you meet her. She's, uh..." He paused. "She's different."

The following week, when I met Molly, I understood what "different" meant.

When I answered the door and found the petite, olive-skinned girl standing there, wearing black skintight jeans, a loose mesh long-sleeved top, and combat boots, I balked. She wore thick black eye shadow around her wide hazel eyes, and her big, pouty lips were painted an aubergine color. Her dark hair was short and curly, parted in the middle, and she had bangs, which she wore straight. Her short trimmed nails were painted black and she had tattoos. When she opened her mouth, I didn't expect to hear the sweetness her voice provided.

"Ms. Ballentine?" When I continued to stare at her, her eyes darted around slowly and she reached up to scratch at her shoulder. "Uh, I'm Molly." But I couldn't speak. Her eyes widened as she clarified further, "Julius sent me."

The last statement came out sounding like a question.

It took me a moment to reboot, and when I did, I shook my head as if to clear it. "I'm sorry," I told her, opening the door and stepping aside. "Please, come in."

She did, but she hesitated. I didn't blame her. If I'd received the same welcome I'd just given, I'd hesitate too.

Once inside, I led her into the kitchen and smiled politely. "Have a seat." The moment she was seated, her knee bounced erratically and I just knew I'd ruined my first impression with this girl. I tried to make it up. "So, you're a babysitter?"

"A nanny," she illuminated. "I was an au pair, actually."

She did not look it. "Oh, really? Whereabouts?"

"In London." Molly looked around the kitchen until she spied A.J.'s class photo on the fridge. It sat next to the one and only photo I had of

Twitch. She looked at my beautiful boy and a small smile played at her lips. “That’s A.J.?”

I turned to look at that photo and smiled. “Yeah. That’s him.”

“He’s cute.”

“Oh, he knows it.” My smile widened.

A brief moment of silence passed between us, and I watched as Molly’s face fell. She stood and opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out. She forced a smile and tried again. When she spoke, her voice held an understanding to it. “I don’t think this is going to work out.” I stood and attempted to speak, but she shook her head. “It’s okay, really. I get it.” As she backed out of the kitchen, she averted her gaze, and said, “Thanks for meeting me.”

That young girl felt alienated, and I had done that to her.

I felt like the lowest piece of scum to have ever been born.

By the time I found my feet and started after her, she was already in her bright red muscle car. I rushed out of my house, barefoot, and just as the car started with a low rumble, I stepped out in front of it, and she blinked at me as if I were a crazy person.

I motioned for her to turn off the engine, and when she did, she continued to sit in the driver side, looking cautiously at me and lowering the window. I walked the few steps over and bent at the waist, looking in. “Why don’t you come back inside?” She side-eyed me but didn’t make to move. So I tried to mend what damage I had done by saying, “A.J. will be home soon. If we’re going to do this, I’d like for you to meet him.”

The silence between us lasted a while.

Reluctantly, she stepped out of the car, and then we were back in the kitchen, waiting for A.J. to come home from his play date. Conversation was sparse, and Molly didn’t make eye contact after that, but the moment the doorbell rang and I let A.J. inside, waving off his friend’s mother, Molly was resurrected.

A.J. rushed into the kitchen, and the moment he spotted her, he blinked in surprise. “Who are you?”

She scoffed at his rudeness, then returned, “Who are *you*?”

“I’m A.J.” Then he stated, “I live here.”

And Molly grinned. “I’m Molly, and I don’t.”

So she was good with kids.

“Whoa,” he said, awestruck as his eyes glanced the tattoos through the holes in her shirt. “You’ve got tattoos.”

“I do,” she said, then narrowed her eyes at him. “Do you?”

He giggled. “No,” and then he added, “I’m too little,” as if she didn’t know. I knew it was coming before he said it. “My dad’s got tattoos. Lots of them.”

I did not expect her to say what she did. “I met your dad once.”

My frown was slight. She had?

And A.J. was instantly dumbfounded. He spoke slowly, quietly, “You did?”

She nodded. “Yep, I did. It was a long time ago, but I still remember him.”

Sounds about right. Who could blame her?

Twitch was hard to forget.

“How long?” A.J. asked, dropping his backpack on the floor and stepping closer.

Molly thought about it. “Years ago.” She smiled down at him, knowing he was wrapped in attention. “I remember he was so tall.” Then she frowned. “Or maybe I’m just small. I don’t know.”

A.J. piped in with, “You are small, but Dad was...” He looked to me, and I smiled reassuringly. He continued, “Yeah. Dad was tall.”

As I sat there listening to the little Goth tell my son what little she knew about his father, I leaned against the kitchen counter and smiled at her recollection. After she was done, A.J. was half in love, and when she said, “You look just like him,” I knew A.J. was hers, heart and soul.

I booked Molly in for two days a week for a month. I increased that by a day over the next week, and another the next, until eventually, she was in our home more often than not. I got to see a different side of her. The playful but firm guardian to a little boy who adored her, and she loved A.J. wholeheartedly.

It seemed natural that when I found part-time work in the social sector that I asked her to move in with us. Molly graciously accepted, and she’s been with us ever since.

But I wasn’t a stupid woman, and my time spent with Twitch had taught me a lot, to read between the lines and hear the words unspoken. So when I



found out that Molly was highly skilled in weapons training and martial arts, my suspicions were confirmed.

I wasn't sure who Molly was, but Julius wanted her near A.J. for a reason, and that reason was protection. I just didn't know why.

And that bothered me.



## Chapter Three

### Ling

With a vicious scowl, I put my hands to the doublewide doors and pushed as hard as I could. They opened with a whoosh, slapping the walls with a loud smack. I strode in, baseball bat in hand, surrounded by my brothers, and looked on at the absolute clusterfuck in front of me.

My men were brawling with the Turks again.

From behind me, Van cursed loudly, “Fuck, Ling.” His eyes shot to mine. “Don’t just stand there.” He looked down at me, leant in, and snarled, “Do something.”

Oh, I’d do something, all right.

My lip curled. I strolled inside and perched the bat to rest on my shoulder as I moved through the club. The tiny red dress I wore wasn’t exactly an outfit made for damage control, but, *shit*, what’s a girl to do?

These men were starting to rattle me. I was their fucking queen, and this was how they treated me?

I was going to show them just how I felt about their insubordination, and I was going to do it in a way that was uniquely my own.

The red-soled heels I wore felt tacky on the sticky nightclub floor, and when I approached one group of men tussling, I lowered the bat a moment before lifting it high up over my head. I braced, my face twisted, and then I brought it down as hard as I could over one guy’s head.

My guy.

He fell with an ungraceful thud, unmoving.

The two Turkish men reared back to look down at the prone body of my Vietnamese soldier and gaped. I smiled wide, wild-eyed, and leant in, crooking my finger. When I was sure I held their attention, I licked my cherry-red lips, and said, “Now imagine what I’ll do to *you*.”

Mere seconds later, they were scrambling as I pursed my lips, looking around for my next victim. I looked to my Dragons, my boys, and shook my head discreetly in displeasure. They never learned.

But they would.

As I moved onto another group of men, I held onto my bat with one hand while reaching into my garter for my switchblade. Singlehandedly, I flipped it open before gritting my teeth and bringing it down into the thigh of one of my men.

The young gun screamed out in pain and reared back to hit me. His face, contorted in anger, turned to fear the moment he saw me.

My eyes dared him to speak, dared him to make a fucking sound, and like the good boys I'd raised, he lowered his head submissively.

They were shameful.

It wasn't their fault they were like this. It was mine. I had been too lenient, too long, wanting my boys to have a good time while working. And they did. They just didn't know when to quit.

Clicking my tongue, my face transformed as I knelt down, gripping the back of his head lovingly and gently bringing it to my bosom. I stroked his sweaty face, and muttered, "I don't like hurting my babies." In a split second, my face contorted. I gripped his hair and tugged hard, forcing him to look up into my eyes. "But you continue to *shame* me." My eyes landed on the knife sticking out of this thigh. I put my hand down and pushed on it.

The young man's face twisted in pain, and he gasped, but he didn't scream. Instead, he bit his lip hard enough to bleed. My heart started to race.

*Damn.*

All this blood and pain was making me hot.

As I brought my face to his, I pressed harder on the knife's handle, and when a choked sound gurgled in his throat, I threw my head back and my mouth parted in desire.

I really needed to get laid.

When I slowly ran my tongue over the youngins lips, I felt his short, panting breaths against my mouth, and I pressed my lips to his, sweetly thanking him for his service. As I pulled back and stood, I peered down at him impassively. "Go home. Now."

With a sigh, I put my hand to my hips, legs braced, and looked on at the carnage that ensued.

Bodies littered everywhere; it was a bloodbath, and when I felt someone come up from behind, I put my hand to the .22 caliber concealed in my garter.

But then he spoke. "This is getting out of control."

My eldest brother, Van. The only brother I really bothered with, the only one of my family who understood me, because he was the same.

I nodded slightly, and when Van pressed his front to my back, I closed my eyes and swallowed hard.

It was a game we played with each other, pushing the limits.

Yeah.

We were fucked like that.

His hand came to rest on my hip and he leant in close, placing his lips to my ear. "This is your domain. Take control." The hand at my hip squeezed. "Be the queen I know you are."

I twisted to look up at him and he kept his face close. Too close.

Without breaking eye contact, I took out my gun, lifted it, and fired three shots.

Van's eyes smiled, shining with pride, and I returned that arrogant smile, peering down at his lips a long moment.

"Ling."

I bit my own lip, wondering what he'd taste like.

"*Ling*," he warned roughly, taking hold of my wrist and snapping me out of my stupor.

Blinking, I shook the unnatural desire off and looked around, searching the floor, momentarily surprised to find all eyes on me. Luckily for them, I loved the attention. Lived for it.

I took in a deep breath before my gaze darkened, and I stated loudly, "I'm disappointed." Peering into every set of eyes, I went on. "Should I lie down right here, or would you prefer if I bent over the bar?" At their clear confusion, I said, "Well, you're all fucking me *so hard* that I may as well get comfortable."

At that, every set of eyes turned downcast in silent apology.

The Turks knew better than to come here. This was my club. I fucking owned it, but that didn't excuse the behavior of my Dragons.

I thought about this situation, and the single sentence I thought so often came to mind.

*What would Twitch do?*

It was my mantra, how I lived my life, and so far, it had served me well.

"Who was it?" I took a step closer. "Which wise guy started it?"

After a long moment, one of them stepped forward. I didn't hesitate. I lifted the gun and pulled the trigger, the echo of the shot sounding too loud in the almost empty building. I took no joy in watching the man fall to the ground in a lifeless heap.

I closed my eyes and took in a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "When are you fuckers gonna learn? Ling giveth." My eyes snapped open once again and my face twisted in rage. "Ling taketh away."

As I turned, I uttered, "Decide where your loyalties lie and decide quickly." I was so angry. "Because Momma's this close to drowning her young."

An agitated sigh left me.

Sometimes, it was hard being queen.

I felt his presence, knowing he was on my ass, and the second I stepped outside, his strong arm came around my shoulders, pulling me to him. "Don't sweat it."

It was frustrating. I expected this position to give so much more than it took. No wonder none of my brothers objected to my takeover.

Five brothers, and none of them wanted the throne. I should've known.

On the other hand, I had their respect. I'd told them all straight up. They didn't have to love me; they didn't even have to like me, but they would respect me. Because I was the motherfucking queen of The Dragons, and that position demanded respect.

It was important to me.

I started from the bottom and quite literally fucked my way up to the top, but now that I was peering down from Mount Olympus, I realized something was missing.

A king.

Only one man had ever been worthy of the title, and he was gone. He was missing. It meant nothing without him.

It was supposed to be us, the two of us, doing this together.

Sure, I might've been queen, but without a worthy king, the empire gained meant squat.

I still mourned the asshole, but I did it silently, in private, away from prying eyes.

So when Van pulled me deeper into his side and muttered, "Come smoke a blunt with me. We'll talk," I nodded.

Because nothing made me feel worse than being alone, and tonight, I was lonely.

The second we stepped inside Van's house, I kicked my shoes off and threw my purse down on the counter before walking over to one of the three sofas and throwing myself back on it. Looking up at the ceiling, I wondered what the hell I wanted in life.

I had it all.

The money. The power. The grandeur.

Why was I being such a pouty little bitch?

Van came over to me, sat on the floor in front of me, put a hand to my knee, and squeezed it in a show of silent support.

He was my champion. My biggest supporter.

Sometimes, it felt like he was my only supporter.

Without a word, he took the small tin from his pocket and started rolling. He lit the end of the joint, taking a hit before passing it to me. I took it, putting it to my lips, and breathed in the strong, pungent smoke. I took another hit, then another, until the joint was plucked from my fingers.

We sat in silence a long time before I spoke into the dimly lit area, my voice just above a whisper. "Do you ever think about what *Cha* did to us?"

Our father was abusive in every way, shape, and form.

He didn't hesitate. "All the time."

It was hard growing up in a Vietnamese family and being the last of six children. To make matters worse, I was a girl. My father didn't care for that at all. He let me know every moment of my life. The stories he told would shape me into the woman I was today.

How, the moment he found out I was a girl, he threw my mother down the stairs, right there in the hospital. How he reveled in her bleeding.

Unfortunately, I survived. In fact, I survived multiple attempts at termination, all at my father's hand, and when I was born, he vowed to be rid of me, sooner rather than later.

Being groomed for sex was confusing. I remember being confused, at five years old, wondering why my father was suddenly being so nice to me. Had I been but older, I would have realized it was a trap. Being so young and craving my father's approval, I did whatever was asked of me because when I did, he was happy with me.

It was your classic case of training. A textbook case of conditioning.

The coward didn't even do the things he did himself. He would have my brothers do those terrible things to me, and when I took the throne from my father, I was going to make my brothers pay for what they did to me.

It was one night when Van and I had gotten into a relatively animated argument that I called him a pedophile. I wasn't prepared for the blow, and when Van slapped me, he did it hard enough that I saw stars.

Panting through the shock, he leant over me as I clutched my cheek, and spat, "You think you're the only victim here?" Well, yes, I had. And I watched my brother's chest heave with anger, with anxiety, as he blinked away tears at the memories. "You think we wanted to do those things?" He shook his head. "You were too young to remember. You have no idea what was done to us if we refused." He looked blankly at the wall. "He never touched you. That didn't stop him from touching us." When he snapped out of his trance, he blinked a moment then snarled at me. "You fucking watch how you talk to me, Ling Ling." When he walked away, leaving me on the floor, he uttered, "Don't talk about shit you know nothing about."

It was the severity of those words, the hidden pain in his voice, that made me see the truth for what it was. Van was right. I wasn't the only victim of my father's cruelty.

We didn't speak about it often, but when we did, I felt myself expel the anger inside me, float a while with the lightness in the air, and tonight, I needed it.

He handed me the blunt and I took it, licking my lips and holding it between my fingers. "Do you remember what you did to me? What he made you do to me?"

I put the smoke to my lips and breathed it in, closing my eyes, basking in the warm glow of my high.

With his back to the sofa, Van nodded. His voice was whisper soft. "Yes."

I took another hit and my mind turned heady. I didn't mean to ask what I did. "Do you want to do it again?"

Complete honesty. "No, but I think about it sometimes."

Same. And I was disgusted with myself.

And this was why we were as close as we were. Nobody understood. Only we comprehended the confusion child sex abuse caused, the puzzlement of being groomed by a family member and not knowing it was



happening, and finally, the heartbreaking experience of occasionally experiencing pleasure at the hands of somebody you shouldn't.

Of course, we weren't to blame. We didn't know any better. We were just kids, and the person we were meant to trust betrayed us. He betrayed us all.

No wonder we were as fucked up as we were.

"Do you want children?"

Van scoffed. "Fuck, no."

Fair enough. Only one of my brothers had a child, and he stayed as far away from that child as possible, scared to mess him up as much as we had been.

"I do," I revealed, taking in a deep breath and letting it out slowly. "I *did* anyways."

He leant back and the back of his head touched my shoulder. "Then you'll have kids, Ting-a-Ling. No biggie."

I ran my fingers through his hair fondly, and we returned to a comfortable silence.

No. It wasn't meant to be.

As much as it saddened me, children weren't for me.

And I would just have to live with the bitter jealousy that *she* got the child that was by all intents and purposes, mine.



## Chapter Four

### Lexi

I was in the kitchen when someone knocked at the front door. Molly put down the wooden spoon she was using to stir the pasta sauce and wiped her hands on a tea towel. "I'll get it."

God, she was a good girl. I was grateful to have her in my home, in my life. I hoped she knew how much I appreciated her. Lord knows, I reminded her as often as I could.

The second I heard the door open, Molly uttered an amused, "Geez, you look like shit. Long flight?"

And I had to quell the urge to squeak from excitement. Rushing forward in my Pikachu slippers, I saw him and threw my arms up, beaming, "You're home!"

Happy was scowling at Molly. "Ease up, lil bit." Then he came forward, sparing a tired smile. "Hey, beautiful." He was slow to wrap his arms around me, and when he did, I felt the weight of him settle on me, squeezing me tight. My hands came up to grip the back of his jacket, and I held him as firm as he did me. Rubbing my back, he pulled away but only slightly to look down at me through smiling eyes. "How you doing?"

I looked up into his weary face and my smile fell. "Are you okay?"

With his sigh, he closed his eyes, and his thick lashes looked remarkably long against his cheeks. After a moment, he ran a hand down his face and shook his head. "Don't worry about it." Then he forced another smile. "I want to hear about you. How's my boy?"

Something didn't seem right. Happy had been away for a week, and that was a long time for us. Usually a day or two didn't go by without us seeing each other. At least once a week, he, Nikki, and Dave came by for dinner. I was curious as to why he seemed so glum.

I jerked my chin at him, softening my smile. "Why don't you see for yourself? He's been asking about you."

Happy's smile widened before he kissed my cheek. "Be right back." Before he went to A.J.'s room, he pulled something out of his jacket pocket and took it with him down the hall.

And then I heard the little monster exclaim, “Uncle Happy!”

This was followed by laughter and muted conversation. Molly and I exchanged an amused glance before getting back to our assigned tasks. We were having a full house tonight, and that meant lots of food, lots of conversation, and lots of laughter. On the menu was spaghetti and meatballs, and I made this knowing it was Happy’s favorite.

A.J. rushed out of his room holding something bulky in his hand. “Look what Uncle Happy got me!”

He held out the Grim Reaper themed Matryoshka doll and I huffed out a laugh. What a morbid gift. Unfortunately, after inheriting quite a few of his father’s things, A.J. now had a fascination with skeletons. His most prized possession in the world was Twitch’s skull-and-crossbones cufflinks. There was a while where he’d take them everywhere with him.

“Oh, honey. That’s so—” My eyes widened as I struggled to find the word. “—cool.”

Molly came over, eyeing the nesting dolls with avid interest. “That’s awesome, little dude.” She gently cuffed him on the chin, smiling. “That looks hand painted. I’ll bet it’s the only one like it. Lucky.”

A.J. looked overjoyed at the news and went over to the couch to open it up and explore the macabre present. It took me a while to notice Happy hadn’t emerged from A.J.’s room. When I made it to the open doorway and saw Happy lying on A.J.’s small single bed, his face soft with sleep, I smiled, but my eye caught something sticking out of my son’s underwear drawer.

Gently pulling it open, I took out the cool metal and blinked.

It was a watch.

A very male, very bulky watch. One I’d never seen before.

Frowning down at it, I held the heavy silver in my hands and turned it over, examining the beautiful timepiece. “Where did this come from?”

I didn’t hear A.J. come up behind me. He spoke quietly. “It’s Dad’s.” I twisted back to look at him, and the little monster smiled a toothy grin. “I’m holding onto it until he comes back for it.”

My eyes closed and I spun around, swallowing hard through the sadness his words evoked.

*Damn it, A.J.*

*Daddy is not coming back.*

I fought the thickness in my throat.

*Stop.*

My heart began to ache painfully.

*Please... you're killing me, baby.*

Without a word, I shoved the watch back into the drawer, shut it with a light slam, then took a deep breath and changed the subject. "Quiet, honey. Let Uncle Happy nap." As I moved past him, I put a gentle hand to his back and led him back to the kitchen.

How long was this going to go on?

I needed advice, and tonight, surrounded by friends, was probably the best place to get it.

Not long after, the sound of the lock turning let me know we had another guest. When Nikki rushed in, wide-eyed and elated, she completely ignored us and said, "Where is he?"

With a roll of my eyes, I pointed down the hall, and with a swoosh of her long, red hair, she went looking for her man. The moment she looked in the room and saw his sleeping form, her expression went from excited to sad. She put a gentle hand to her heart and walked into the room. I heard her gently wake Happy. "Aw. You're sleepy."

Then a just woken Happy. "Hey, baby. I missed you."

I smiled at their cutesy banter and went back to preparing the garlic bread. About a minute later, the front door opened again, and Dave strolled through looking a little more than excited. "Where is he?"

Was everyone that walked into this house going to ignore me?

With a soft laugh, I pointed down the hall, and Dave jumped, clicked his heels, then strode down the hall just as Nikki and Happy emerged, holding hands. Dave barely spared Nikki a glance, patting her on the head, forcing an indignant sound out of her and making Happy chuckle. Dave looked down the hall, making sure A.J. was out of sight before he leaned into Happy and pressed his lips to the other man's.

I tried not to watch, but it was hard. It was still strange to me, their arrangement, but somehow they made it work.

Happy, Nikki, and Dave lived as a ménage, in which Happy was shared by both Nikki and Dave. And surprisingly enough, it wasn't Happy who suggested it. It was Nikki.

Speaking of the devil, she looked on happily as the two men shared a sweet moment.

Happy gripped the back of Dave's neck, bringing him deeper into the kiss before pulling back and smiling. "Hey."

"I missed you," uttered Dave quietly.

Happy sighed. "I missed you too." He pulled Nikki into his side. "Both of you." When he uttered a husky, "I can't wait to get home tonight," my brows arched.

Something told me they weren't going to play a nice game of Parcheesi. *Ugh. Lucky.*

I missed sex.

That was the hardest thing about being a single parent. I didn't trust any man enough to let them near my son, and I wasn't into the casual fling. Oh, don't get me wrong. I'd been on dates, and they were nice guys.

Maybe that was the problem.

*Nice* didn't seem to do anything for me anymore. Being with Twitch had changed me and my—ahem—preferences. Once, Nikki told me she'd met a Dom I might like, and I literally flung myself across the table to throw a hand over her mouth while I shushed her frantically.

Why didn't anyone understand?

I had my one in a million. I'd never find anyone like him again. And, to be honest, I didn't want to.

There was only one infuriatingly bossy, hot as hell, downright maddening Twitch.

And it wasn't like I was completely sexless. I still had a hand and my memories, and, for now, that was enough. I did miss that physical connection and craved to be touched at times, but that was life.

Truth was, I lived and part of me died. I mourned my loss and often times mourned it still. But moving on?

Yeah right.

God knows I've tried.

A slight, achy melancholy filled me.

It was hard to forget somebody who gave you so much to remember.

At the very moment the oven dinged, the doorbell rang, and I called out, "Coming!" When I opened it, Julius and Ana stood there, and I threw the

door open, smiling openly. “Hey, you guys. Come on in. I hope you’re hungry.”

Ana came forward, hugging me gently, and I was touched at how happy she looked to see me. Julius was patting his belly cheerfully. “Baby girl, when am I not hungry?”

I made a face of agreement, nodding lightly. “This is true.”

He grinned down at me before enveloping me in his arms, and I took all the love he gave. Truth was, I was kind of an affection whore. Always had been. Whenever someone needed a hug, I was the first to throw myself on them. Sometimes, I wondered if I was a little too handsy with some people. I knew how situations could be misread. I was uber cautious about touching men, but with Happy and Julius, I accepted all they gave because I didn’t have anyone else and I loved them dearly.

Whenever I was having a general home issue or needed some brawn, they were the first people I called.

They were kind of my “house husbands.”

I was thankful for their partners being so understanding in that sense. I seemed to borrow them all the time.

We all sat down at my barely big enough eight-seater table. Molly and I placed the food in the center of the tabletop, and I contentedly watched everyone dig in.

It was nice to share a meal with family and friends.

Nikki scooped out some spaghetti for the little monster, and when she held out her cheek, A.J. smacked a kiss to it before forking a huge amount of pasta into his mouth. Nikki smiled down at her godson. “You’re welcome, sweetie.”

Happy stole a piece of garlic bread off Ana’s plate, and I watched in amusement as she glared at him, smacking his knuckles with her fork. He pulled away, looking sore and shaking out his hand. And Julius chuckled, scooping a meatball onto his plate. “Don’t steal her food, man. She don’t like that. Only I’m allowed to do that.”

Ana nodded, then adoringly grinned up at her husband.

Molly held out the salad to Dave, and he took it with a wink.

Quite suddenly, I was choking on emotion. This—this right here—was what made my life good. I was surrounded by good people who provided

great company, and for the ones who couldn't bring themselves to participate in conversation, they spared a smile to those who did.

At moments like this, I considered myself lucky. Luckier than most.

When it got late, A.J. went around the table, hugging and kissing everybody goodnight before I walked him to his room and put him to bed. I watched him settle for the evening, and my heart jolted with the amount of love the sight of him induced.

With a light sigh, I made it back to the table as Molly dealt out the cherries-and-cream buttercake I'd made the night before. She handed me a piece, and I thanked her with a squeeze to her arm before I sat and laid it on them. "I have a problem I'd like to talk to you about."

Everyone stilled, looking up at me, giving me their full attention.

"What is it, babe?" Nikki asked cautiously, the first to speak.

I picked at the cake on my plate. "I don't know. It's probably nothing." I rolled my eyes and let out an exaggerated exhale. "A.J. has been talking about Twitch a lot. And he's been saying some very out there things."

"What things?" Julius queried, his face bunched.

"Well, for one, he says Twitch comes to visit him at night," I told them with a light laugh.

That was when Happy choked on his cake. He coughed and coughed until tears formed in his eyes, and he wheezed out, "*What?*" Nikki handed him her glass of water and he took it, chugging it down.

"Okay, look," I said sadly. "It's not that completely unknown for a child to conjure up imaginary scenarios in their minds when they're fighting to cope with something like this. I'm pretty sure that's all this is. What I'm asking is, should I let it go, or take him to see somebody, to talk to somebody?"

Julius said, "I think he should talk to somebody," at the very same time, Happy uttered, "It'll pass. It's a kid thing."

They looked at each other carefully, and when it started to become awkward, my eyes darted between them. I drawled out, "I might just give it some time and see how it goes." Then I shrugged and talked the whole thing down. "It's probably just a phase."

"Sure," said Nikki.

"Yeah," agreed Dave with a slight nod.



I was surprised when Ana opened her mouth and started to talk, albeit quietly. “I’ve been meaning to ask you something, Lexi.” She held her hands under the table so nobody could see how badly they shook.

She was talking to me. How great was that? I couldn’t help but smile. “What is it, Ana?”

Ana looked to Julius, and he glanced at me a moment before turning back to her and nodding. She looked at me a long while and we were patient. It took her a while to get it out, but she finally did. “My friend Manda is coming down from the States to spend a couple of weeks with us, and she really wants to meet you.”

Wow, okay. “Yeah, sure. I’d love to meet her.”

Unfortunately, it looked as though Ana was spent for the night because she looked to her husband and made a face of pure misery. Julius pressed a light kiss to her lips before he took over. “She wants to meet all of you.”

Why did this sound like something bad was coming? “No problem. Bring her to dinner one night and she can meet us all then.”

But Julius shook his head. “She wants to meet you first.”

Because that didn’t sound sinister at all.

What was going on here?

“Okay,” I drawled then laughed cautiously. “What’s the issue?”

Julius looked me deep in the eye. “Been keeping something from you, Lex.”

Well, shit.

Secrets.

Nuh uh. Did not like that.

My lips thinned and my brow narrowed. “What have you been keeping exactly?”

Julius looked at me a long while. “Manda is family. More specifically —” He licked his bottom lip. “—she’s A.J.’s aunt.”

Okay. Officially confused here. “What do you mean?”

Everyone at the table looked to them in complete silence, before Julius revealed, “Manda is Twitch’s biological sister.”

My breath left me in a whoosh.

“She’s the daughter of Antonio Falco Senior, making her A.J.’s aunt.” Julius mistook my silence for refusal. I know this because he put up a hand and said, “Now, hold up a second and think about it.” He went on. “She’s a

really nice woman. A doctor, Lex. Real respectable. In fact, she kind of reminds me of you. But she didn't want us to tell you about her, not until now. And she would really love to meet her nephew."

My lungs began to work again, and slowly, I took in a deep, burning breath then replied through an exhale, "I want to meet her."

Julius blinked at me. "Yeah?" Then he smiled. "Shit, Lex. She's gonna be over the moon. She's dying for an introduction."

When I looked to Ana, she looked so happy, but I couldn't function.

Oh my God.

Twitch had a sister.

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## Twitch

"You stupid son of a bitch." Happy glared at me when I opened the front door.

"Come again?" I said in deathly calm.

This asshole's got another think coming if he thinks he can walk into my house and talk to me like that. I mean, we've been friends a long time. You'd think he'd know better by now. I would pop him in the mouth quicker than he'd see it coming.

Happy strode in and I shut the door behind him. He paced, and as he did, I noticed he was holding a container in his hands.

"That for me?"

Happy's lip curled and he tossed the container at me. I took it, opened it, and my stomach rumbled at the sight of the spaghetti and meatballs. My baby could fuckin' cook, and I loved Italian food. Without another word, I went to the sink, picked up a washed fork, and went to town. I shoved a forkful into my mouth and made a sound low in my throat, chewing, and then garbled, "I love her meatballs."

When he stopped pacing, he turned to me, and uttered, "Are you out of your fucking mind, or is it your mission to get caught?" When I threw him a dark look, he pointed at me. "I would not push me tonight, fucker. I just came home from a fourteen-hour flight and haven't had my dick sucked in a

damn week. You think I wanna be here with your surly ass? Nah, man. I wanna be at home, not lecturing you.”

The fuck was up his ass?

I chewed slowly then swallowed. “Fuckin’ leave then, bitch. I don’t care.”

But then Happy put his hands on his hips, and muttered, “You been visiting A.J.?”

*Oh.*

I stopped chewing.

*That.*

What the fuck was it his business anyways? I wasn’t hurting anyone.

I held his eyes, and he ran a hand over his bald head then scoffed. “Lexi wants to take him to a shrink, Twitch. Thinks he’s suffering from grief because, for the life of her, she can’t understand why he’s suddenly imagining you everywhere.”

Okay. That might have been an issue.

Happy asked, “How long?” but I didn’t answer.

There was nothing wrong with my boy. He didn’t need a shrink. He needed his father, and I was working on that.

I inwardly sighed, picked at my food, and then muttered glumly, “I’ll cool it.”

Happy blinked at me a second before he waved me off and marched away. Before he slammed the door, he said, “I don’t fucking believe you, man.”

I ate the rest of my food in silence, trying not to be resentful that my friends got to hang with my woman tonight while I sat in the darkness, watching stealthily from across the street.



## Chapter Five

### Lexi

I was nervous.

I probably shouldn't have been, but I was. I mean, from what I knew, Manda had never even met Twitch. But she carried his genes, and that made me nervous.

Would she look like him?

Was she as authoritarian as he was?

I knew nothing about her, and Julius thought it would be better that way, that my impressions should come from the woman, not stories about her, and I had to respect that. But as I sat in front of the dresser, applying some light makeup, I couldn't help but wonder about her.

I quickly dressed in a cute skinny jean and tee combo, then threw my hair up in a high ponytail. When I looked at myself in the dresser mirror, I sighed contentedly. This was as good as it got. I didn't bother dressing up much anymore, and nerves had me not wanting to go overboard for fear of looking like an idiot. So, this was it.

As I attempted to walk out of my bedroom, my eyes caught a flash of pink on my nightstand. Frowning, my feet took me to it, and with a soft, confused smile, I picked up the little Zinnia that had been clearly plucked from our front yard and put it to my smiling lips, breathing in its delicate, earthy scent.

My son was so pure of heart it slayed me sometimes. I was doing my best to teach him the declining art of the gentleman. He hated the dance lessons I forced on him, but I swore he'd learn the basic waltz, and for the most part, we had fun while doing it. I tried my best on the manners front, but, well, he was Twitch's child, so I did what I could with that.

I don't know how long I stood in the kitchen, looking out through the large bay window in the family room, but when I saw a silver sedan pull up, my heart stuttered. I put a hand to my belly in a weak attempt to stop it from fluttering around as it was.

My heart began to race.

What if she didn't like me?

*Oh, no.*

What if *I* didn't like *her*?

*Ah, crap.*

Too late. The tiny ginger-haired woman dressed in black jeans and a white blouse was already halfway across my front lawn. Her massively oversized sunglasses made it hard to make out her features. And then the doorbell rang.

I counted to seven before I opened the door and stood there silently. When the little American woman removed her sunglasses, revealing striking blue eyes and a smatter of freckles across her nose, I was surprised. She looked nothing like Twitch. I couldn't help the sudden irrational disappointment I felt.

But then she smiled, and there he was. "Lexi?"

I didn't mean to. I really didn't. I tried hard to stop it, but I couldn't.

Putting a hand to my quivering lips, my vision blurred as I cried in complete silence, nodding.

The little woman's face crumbled and she came forward, wrapping her arms around me, hugging me a long while. When she pulled back, her own lashes were wet, and I let out a soggy laugh. "Hi."

She swiped at her cheeks before she choked on her own laugh. "Hello."

Managing to get a hold of myself, I blew out a long breath. "Well, that didn't go how I planned it." An embarrassed chuckle bubbled up my throat. "Please, come in."

Somehow, the unexpected outburst of emotion on both parts forced a connection between us, and I immediately felt at ease with this woman. I walked into the kitchen, twisted back, and asked, "Coffee?"

Manda dropped her satchel onto the floor and sounded almost relieved, pulling out a chair and sitting on it, and the at home gesture made me like her even more. "You're an angel."

"Funny." I grinned as I put the coffeemaker on. "That's what your brother used to call me."

Strangely, she said, "I know." But when my puzzled expression landed on her, she immediately amended, "I mean, so I've heard."

Okay, then.

As the coffee machine was filling, I felt a little awkward. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to go and cry on you out there. I guess I was a little

overwhelmed.” I bit the inside of my cheek. “You don’t look like Twitch, but when you smiled...” I shrugged. “For a second, I saw him in your smile.”

Manda’s face softened. “You must have loved him very much.”

I poured the coffee and spoke quietly. “I never stopped.” When I handed her a mug, bringing over the sugar and creamer, I told her, “I didn’t know he had a sister. He never mentioned you.”

She kind of looked embarrassed. “He didn’t know. I’m sure that under the circumstances, he wouldn’t have wanted anything to do with us anyways.”

Whoa. “What do you mean?” And more importantly, “Who is *us*?”

Manda smiled tightly, before explaining, “I have a brother named Giuseppe. We call him Zep.” She bit her lip. “He and Tony were born only days apart.”

And it all made sense.

My brows rose. “Oh.”

Manda laughed under her breath. “Yeah, exactly. So Zep and I have the same mother, but Tony’s mom, I never met. I heard she was a jerk anyways, so when I found out she died a few years back, it was like ‘good riddance.’” She paused. “Zep never felt the need to go looking for our brother, but I did, for a very long time.” She looked dejected. “I just found him too late.”

That was sad. I was sad for her.

My voice was kind. “I’m sorry.”

She shook her head, sipping her black coffee. “Thank you, but it’s okay.” She smiled. “I found you and—” she looked at me hopefully. “—my nephew.”

As if I were going to keep A.J. from this sweet woman. “He’ll be home in an hour.”

Manda looked momentarily jubilant. “I bought him a little present.” Then she seemed nervous. “I hope he likes it.”

“I’m sure he’ll love it,” I replied, but I decided to be honest and did this cautiously. “I didn’t tell him about you. He’s going to be surprised.”

Manda and I talked a while. She told me about her husband, Evander MacDiarmid, and when I asked why she didn’t keep the same name, she told me her father had insisted she keep her own. I wasn’t sure why, but it

seemed important, so I dropped it. When I asked about Antonio Falco Sr, Manda's face lit up as she spoke about the older man.

"He's the sweetest man you'll ever meet. I swear to God. He really wants to meet you, but—" She shrugged lightly. "—he didn't know if he'd be welcome, so I thought I'd come alone and gauge how you felt about that."

Meeting Twitch's dad? Oh, wow. This was intense.

Why was I so anxious about that? "I think I'd like that."

Manda beamed, but she kept a soft tone. "I'll let him know."

Before I knew it, an hour had passed and we were minutes away from Molly bringing A.J. home. I felt the need to warn Manda. "A.J.'s going to be home any minute now, which is why I need to explain to you that A.J. sometimes talks about Twitch in the present."

When her face took on an expression of pure confusion, she asked, "How so?"

I ran my finger along the edge of the wooden table. "It seems A.J. has been imagining his father has been visiting him at night."

Manda's face paled. "Really?"

I know. It was weird, but I couldn't help but defend my son. "He's grieving, Manda."

At my short statement, her expression softened. "Of course. Thanks for the heads up."

I smiled tightly. "No problem."

The awkward encounter passed the moment the front door opened. Manda stood, looking out into the hall, and we heard Molly say the same thing she said every school day afternoon. "Okay, bud. Shoes off. Bag away. I'll get you a snack."

Without even peering into the kitchen, A.J. ran past so quickly he looked like a blur. "Hi, Mum!"

Manda's brows rose as she turned to me, smiling, and I shook my head in return, grinning. "Hey, honey. Can you come in here when you're done?"

Molly stepped into the kitchen, looking from Manda to me, and when I made a face, reminding her not to be so rude, Molly sighed, walking forward and watching the other woman cautiously. "I'm Molly."

Manda smiled. "Manda. Nice to meet you."



Molly looked Manda up and down. "I'm A.J.'s nanny," is what she said. What it sounded like was, "*I'm A.J.'s detail, and I don't want you messing with him.*"

So Molly was a little protective. It was one of the things I loved about her.

When the little monster slid into the kitchen in his socks, he smiled at me a moment before he looked up at Manda, his eyes roaming her openly, guardedly.

Her smile widened and her voice turned wistful. "Hello, A.J." When he didn't respond, she turned to me and spoke whisper soft. "Oh my God. He looks just like him."

I know. It was overwhelming sometimes.

"Come here a sec," I said, and when he approached slowly, I bent at the waist, put my hands to his shoulders, and said, "I want you to meet Manda."

Polite as he could, A.J. uttered a quietly shy, "Hello."

Manda knelt down in front of him. "I've waited a long time to meet you."

A.J. squinted up at her, confused. "You have?"

She nodded gently. "Yes. You see, I'm...." She licked her lips, looking mildly unsure of herself.

When it looked like Manda had lost herself, I took over. "You remember when I told you that you didn't have any real aunts or uncles?"

A.J. nodded.

I put my lips to his ear and mock whispered, "I lied."

A.J. spun on me. His brows rose so high they almost touched his hairline, and he looked positively dumbstruck. He whispered back, "You lied?"

A soft laugh left me. "Not on purpose, baby. I didn't know about your aunt Manda."

A.J. faced her and muttered a disbelieving, "You're my aunt?"

Manda swallowed hard. "Yes." Then she gently explained, "I'm your father's sister," and A.J.'s head all but imploded.

He stood staring at her, unblinking. He did this a long while, and when he made no move to say or do anything, I snuffled out a soft laugh. "Are you okay, bud?"

He shook his head, and when I laughed, Manda smiled kindly. “I brought you a gift.”

Well, that snapped him out of his stupor.

*Typical.*

Leaving me, A.J. strolled over to her, and she pulled the handkerchief out of her satchel, unwrapping it carefully before placing the silver pocket watch into A.J.’s hands.

His eyes widened, and he said a hushed, “Wow.”

Manda pressed the top, opening the face of the intricately engraved watch. “This was my father’s. He gave it to me. It’s a family heirloom. See, you’re my family, A.J.” She touched his cheek. “And now I’m giving it to you.”

What she said was so touching I blinked back the sudden sentiment that swept through me.

A.J. leaned into her. “What does that say?” He pointed to the inside of the face.

Manda explained, “It says *Con Affetto*. In Italian, it means I love you.” She gently took his hand in hers. “My father, your grandfather, would love to meet you someday. Would you like that?”

And A.J.’s mind was blown once again. Turning slowly, he looked at Manda, and murmured, “I have a *grandfather*?”

Manda tipped her head back and laughed. I couldn’t help the smile that fought to be freed. He really was adorable.

“Yes,” she laughed. “You have a grandfather, sweetie. Although I’m sure he’d like for you to call him Nonno Tony.” At his astonishment, she touched a finger to the tip of his nose. “What do you say? Want to meet your nonno Tony?”

A.J. nodded slowly then more enthusiastically until finally, a sweet little smile stretched his lips.

Manda spent some time with A.J. and I insisted she stay for dinner. We ate at the table, as a family, and when Manda told A.J. she’d never met his father, A.J. responded with, “That’s okay. You can see him another time.” Then he smiled a toothy grin. “I’ll tell him you want to meet him.”

When he said those things, my heart shriveled and died a little more each time.

It was time for A.J. to go to bed, and after I tucked him in, Manda stood. "I should go. I'm afraid of outstaying my welcome."

But I simply walked over to the fridge and pulled out a bottle of wine. "Let's sit on the back porch." Then I smiled at my new sister. "I'm not ready to see you go just yet."

She looked at me with such unabashed affection in her eyes that I knew this was just the beginning. We were a small family craving more, and now that I had it, I mourned the time we spent apart. She followed me outside, and I sat on the top step leading down into the yard.

Manda joined me, holding out her glass, and I poured. She sipped at the aromatic white and made a sound low in her throat. "There's nothing quite like Australian wine." She held the glass up to the moonlight before putting it to her nose and taking in its fruity aroma. "There's no comparison. Every other one just tastes like swill when put next to a Barossa wine."

I nodded in agreement, sipping at my glass.

We sat in silence a while, before she said, "Tell me about him." When I looked over to her, she clarified. "How was it, your relationship with my brother?"

Oh, God. What a loaded question. "How much time do you have?"

She snuffled out a laugh. "As long as it takes."

"Okay." I leaned back on one elbow. "You asked for it."

I told her everything. Well, almost everything. I quietly kept out the fact that I willingly took drugs to prove to Twitch I was serious about him. I also kept out what Twitch enjoyed in the bedroom. Other than that, I let her have it. All of it.

My stomach clenched tightly.

Jesus. I missed the belt.

And by the time I was done, Manda's eyes were wide and unblinking. "Lexi," she muttered quietly. "That sounds awful."

Sipping my wine, I laughed gently. "I know." It did. It sounded horrible. "It's hard to explain why I loved him. He wasn't a want, Manda." I swirled my glass, watching the wine in it spin. "He was something I needed more than I needed to breathe."

"But the things he did...." She frowned.

"Yeah," I agreed. "Pretty screwed up, right?"

"I just don't understand."

She wouldn't.

No one did.

It wasn't something you explained; it was something you had to have lived through to get. "He loved me so much he took a bullet for me." I gazed over at her. "What's to understand?"

At that, one perfectly manicured brow rose and her lips puckered. "Well, when you put it like that." She raised her glass to me. "To the ones we love."

Yeah. I would drink to that.

I lightly touched my glass to hers, smiling out into the yard, and spoke quietly.

"To the ones we love."

\*\*\*

## Twitch

The second I opened the door, my sister glowered at me. "You son of a bitch."

I glared back. "Why does everyone keep callin' me that? *Fuck*."

"That woman—" Manda tramped into the house. "—is the sweetest person I have ever met." She looked so disappointed. "And you treated her like shit." Her hands came up. "No. Worse than shit." Her eyes narrowed dangerously. "You were mean. You were cruel. You were *nasty*, Tony."

Well, someone done gone and had a nice ole chat, didn't they?

I sighed, walking over to the fridge. "You want something?"

"I want you to stay away from her."

Slowly, I turned to face my sister, holding her eyes with the intensity of my stare. "Say again?"

Manda's lips thinned. "After hearing what you did to her, I don't know why she still loves you, but she does." She lowered her voice. "So you need to stay away from her. Because she loves you enough that she might just take you back someday." She shook her head. "And I can't allow that."

Her words shook me, but I didn't show it. My voice was calm, bored even. "That ain't your decision to make, Mandy."

She hated when I called her Mandy.

“I sat back while my best friend suffered through an abusive relationship. I did nothing, and Ana almost died because of it. I won’t do it again. Not ever again.”

Oh, shit. No she didn’t.

My eyes flashed. “You comparing me to Dino Gambino?” Anger bubbled low in my gut and I gritted my teeth. My tone turned dangerous. “I fucking love that woman.”

Manda’s eyes turned sad and she started to nod. “That’s what Dino told himself too, Tony. Said he loved Ana, and that was why he did the things he did. No one had the guts to tell him he was a vile piece of shit.”

*Do not fucking tell me this bitch just called me a vile piece of shit.*

The anger turned to rage and it burned me, lighting my veins and pumping raw fury into my heart. I spoke low, turning and gripping the edge of the counter so hard I was surprised it didn’t break, “You watch your fucking mouth.”

“Please, Tony. Don’t do it. Don’t go back. They’re fine without you.”

That was the breaking point.

I closed my eyes and swallowed hard, trying to breathe through the physical pain of my wrath. My breathing quickly turned into heavy panting. Taking a glass from the sink, I lifted it high before slamming it back down as hard as I could. The loud smash then tinkling of the broken shards did nothing to soothe my anger.

I spun, shouting a thunderous, “*I’m not fine without them!*” and my sister’s body jolted as she flinched.

She had no idea what it cost me to be here. She didn’t know shit.

Blowing out a long breath, I tried to calm myself, and when I spoke, I did it quietly. “You may be my sister, but you know nothing about me, Manda. Don’t pretend you do.”

We stared at each other a long moment before my sister turned and walked out of my house, gently closing the door behind her, and those words unspoken were louder than if she’d just yelled them at me.



## Chapter Six

Lexi

I watched the afternoon news in complete silence.

*“Underworld figure Ling Nguyen, matriarch of the notorious Vietnamese gang The Flying Dragons, has bought and taken ownership of the Darling Harbour’s infamous night club The Cross,” the reporter said.*

With my arm across my stomach, hugging myself, the other came up to my throat as I listened on.

*“The Cross’s reputation has diminished over the years, now known for being a meeting place for criminals and thugs alike. Nine people were killed there last year, while a staggering one hundred and three people were seriously injured on the premises, and police are baffled by the sale.”*

The screen turned to a police sergeant who spoke to reporters. *“If Miss Nguyen is here to do legit business, she’ll have nothing to worry about. However, we’ll be taking a special interest in the goings on at the location.”*

Oh, God.

This was not good.

My phone started to ring. I looked down at the screen and answered immediately. “Julius, are you seeing this?”

“I’m watching it right now.” He paused, then uttered, “I’ll take care of it. Don’t say a word to Ana.”

Take care of it.

Take care of Ling.

My stomach coiled in on itself and my lips parted. It didn’t matter how far away these men tried to get from their pasts; it followed them, for always. I wished they would be given the peaceful lives they desired. Regrettably, too much blood had been spilt, and that was not how their world worked.

It’s not like she didn’t deserve it. Ling was the reason Ana found herself in the hands of a madman. Ling was the reason Ana was the mentally crippled woman she was today.

Yes, she deserved to die, and I quickly decided I was okay with that.

“Okay.” I licked my lips and kept my eyes on the television. “Do what you need to do.”

“Look,” he said quietly. “I don’t think she’d be stupid enough to do anything in broad daylight, but—” He hesitated. “—I’ll talk to Molly. Tell her to be vigilant.”

My sudden frown was deep. The thought of Ling near my son was enough to make me crazy with worry. It was enough to make me violent. Just let her try to come near my cub. She had no idea of what a person was capable of when it came to the safety of their child.

Julius had told me about Ling’s unnatural obsession with A.J., about how she cried openly about me being his mother and her being left without anything of Twitch. She was crazy jealous, and that made her dangerous—not that she wasn’t before, and that was the worrying part. Insane as she was, there was nothing she wouldn’t do to get what she wanted. As long as she was far, far away, it wasn’t an issue. But she was here now, in Sydney, and that meant trouble.

If I had to choose between Ling’s life and my son’s safety, Ling would lose every time. That was the simple fact.

The words I spoke were firm and unyielding. “Take care of her, Julius.”

“Leave it with me. Don’t stress,” he uttered self-assuredly, then quietly seethed, “The bitch is as good as gone.”

He spoke so confidently, so surely, before he hung up.

So why didn’t I feel any better?

It was later that night when I heard the commotion.

I jumped awake with a start and ran breathless down the hall to find Molly holding A.J. back, away from the window.

The open window.

As A.J. fought Molly’s hold, he held his arms out and sleepily cried, “Daddy, come back!”

It was then I looked down at Molly’s hand, the hand that held the gun, and I shuddered, rushing over to the window. Panting in fear, I peered outside but saw nothing.

There was no sign of anybody. And I was suddenly glad I’d asked Molly to sleep in the room adjacent my son’s.

Molly and I exchanged a panicked look.



“Daddy!” A.J. shouted, louder this time, and the anxious need in his voice was enough to coat my arms in goose bumps.

But no one was there.

\*\*\*

## Twitch

It was late, and I shouldn’t have been where I was, but after the fight with my sister, I needed to see my boy.

The thought of being kept away from him was enough to make me lose my fucking mind, and I didn’t care what Manda thought. That wasn’t happening.

If I were honest with myself, maybe I was out here proving a point.

To who?

Fuck knows. Myself more than anyone, I guess.

Pulling my hood up over my head, I stepped outside into the dark of night, shoved my hands in my pockets, and made the short walk down to the house. I put my hands to the windowpane and pushed slowly, listening to the light rattle as it lifted. Without a sound, I climbed inside, and the moment I saw his small, sleeping form, the bands tightening around my chest eased.

My feet carried me silently over to my son and I knelt by his bed, watching him in the moonlight, gently stroking his hair. He blinked sleepily and I smiled, whispering, “Hey, bud.”

“Daddy.” He yawned, then muttered, “I missed you.”

He was my heart. “I missed you too. I couldn’t wait to see you, so I thought I’d visit.”

That was when A.J.’s eyes shot open. “Daddy, did you know you have a sister?”

I shushed him, looking towards the door. “Quiet, A.J.”

“And you got a dad too. I’m gonna meet him one day says Aunt Manda. And I have to call him Nonno Tony, but...”

My heart started to beat faster. “A.J., bud, I need you to be quiet.”

“...I don’t know what that means. And she gave me a watch. Not like yours, it’s different, Daddy.” He pulled open his underwear drawer and

pulled it out, grinning. “See?”

Fuck me, he was making a racket. I put a finger to his lips. “Quiet, bud, or Daddy’s gonna have to go.”

“No.” His face fell and his lips started to quiver. “You always have to go.” He looked into my eyes, pleading, “Stay with me. *Please.*”

Was that a creak, or was I hearing things?

Whispering, I stood and quickly rushed out, “A.J., I need to go...”

My little man yelled out, “No, Daddy.” Then his face bunched as he cried. “You always go!”

*Fuck.*

My heart was racing.

“...but I love you.” With that, I jumped out the window and sprinted as fast as I could.

As I ran, I heard him. “Daddy, come back!”

Then a quietly feminine, “A.J, what’s wrong? Talk to me.”

I swallowed past the thickness in my throat.

That was when I heard his desperate cry. “*Daddy!*” And it fucking gave me goose bumps.

No.

This was not good.

And when it all turned to shit, I had no one to blame but myself.

\*\*\*

## Lexi

“Doesn’t look like anyone broke in,” Happy uttered as he checked the surroundings of the house. He turned back, and asked, “You sure A.J. didn’t push the fly screen out?”

Tired and uneasy, I hugged myself. “I don’t know. He’s upset. He won’t talk to me.”

“And you said he was callin’ out for Twitch?”

I nodded wearily, but Happy said nothing.

What a night.

I hadn’t been able to get back to sleep after the incident. And who could blame me?

A.J.'s panicked cries were the stuff of nightmares.

When he twisted around to me, he shrugged, and said, "I don't know what to tell ya, babe."

"Is he...?" I blinked away the sudden rush of tears and tried again, my voice rougher than sandpaper. "I think he's hallucinating, Happy."

"No." Happy frowned, stepping towards me and putting his hands on my upper arms. "Lexi, he's not hallucinating." His face softened and he sighed. "He's just so desperate for his father that he's trying to make his own memories of him. That's all."

"You weren't there," I whispered. "You didn't hear him. The way he screamed." I closed my eyes and shivered. "It was terrifying."

When Happy continued to rub my arms sympathetically, I sighed and stepped into him, pressing my forehead into his chest, seeking comfort. He held me as long as I needed because Happy was a great friend like that.

A long moment passed before I looked up at him, into his eyes, and stated, "I want bars put on his window."

Without hesitation, he spoke. "I'll make some calls."

And just like that, I could breathe again.

\*\*\*

## Twitch

"You done fucked up," said Happy as he walked inside the house

I didn't say anything because the truth was I knew I had.

He stood in front of me, closing his eyes and stretching his neck from side to side. "Putting bars on his windows tomorrow."

*Motherfucker.*

My gut sank.

Damn. I really messed up. And it was costing me my time with my son.

Fuck. I hated my life.

At my long sigh, Happy lifted his face to look at me. "What did you expect? You walk into her fucking house like you own the joint. It was only a matter of time before you overstepped, like you do, and got yourself into shit. You know what pisses me off though?" I stood silently, listening, and his eyes narrowed on me. "You're not taking the blame for this, and you

deserve to. Instead, you leave a fucking five-year-old to take the responsibility for your screwed up games.”

I wasn't playing games. I just wanted to be with my son.

My jaw tightened, but I said nothing.

Happy laid into me. “You're so fucking selfish, and as a result, your boy's probably going to have to talk to a shrink. You know what's gonna happen when they can't find a cause for his hallucinations?” His stare was penetrating. “They'll medicate because no normal boy sees his dead father walking around on the street, Twitch.”

My stomach twisted.

No one was medicating my boy. I would fucking die before that happened.

Didn't he understand?

A.J. was my newest addiction. I needed him.

I needed my son, more than I needed anyone. He breathed life into me almost as much as his mother had, and if I couldn't have her, I *needed* him.

“Got nothing to say?” Happy waited, but I didn't speak.

What was the point?

He couldn't understand. Couldn't even begin to.

Happy nodded. “Okay. Well, I just came to let you know your games are up.” Before he left, he looked me dead in the eye, and muttered, “Stay away from him, Twitch. For now, just—” He breathed out a drained sigh. “—stay away.”

When he left and I was alone with my thoughts, I wondered just how much I would risk to see my son.

The answer soon became clear.

I'd risk it all.

\*\*\*

## Lexi

It had been a soundless day in our household, which was a rarity in itself.

I didn't know why, but A.J. was mad at me. Or at least I thought he was, until I saw the bright red Zinnia on my nightstand. With a sad smile, I

picked it up and put it to my lips, pressing a light kiss to its soft petals before walking over to my A.J.'s room and hovering in the doorway.

I know he heard me approach, but he didn't look at me; he just continued to stare out the window through the burglar bars that had been installed that day.

My heart ached to see him like this.

What was happening to my happy little boy?

With every passing day, my son grew more and more agitated, and not being able to pinpoint the cause was making me miserable.

"Thank you for the flower."

He didn't even spare me a glance. "I didn't give you a flower."

My brow knitted as I gently twirled the Zinnia between my fingers.

"Then where did it come from, baby?"

He hesitated.

The worry in me increased tenfold. "Baby?"

He was reluctant, but he spoke, and when he did, he spoke whisper quiet. "Daddy left it for you."

Okay, you know what?

I was a patient woman, but enough was enough.

My heart's tempo increased. I dropped the flower, walked into his room, and knelt in front of him. "A.J., Daddy is gone."

My son looked tired. "No, he isn't."

The air thickened around me, making it hard to breathe.

"Yes, he is, baby." I took his face in my hands and spoke firmly. "He is gone, and he isn't coming back. He can't."

And A.J. smiled so serenely that the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. "Daddy's not gone, Mummy. You'll see."

It was too much. My breathing turned heavy, I gripped his little arms tightly, and raised my voice. "That is enough! I've had it with this stuff. I know you're sad, but—"

A.J. looked confused. "I'm not sad."

"—this is getting to be too much. *Enough*. No more talk about Daddy." My voice quivered. "He's gone, honey."

But he simply smiled and shook his head.

My entire body felt as though it was on fire. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't see through the stinging blur at my eyes.

My heart was breaking.

That was when I dealt the final blow. Trembling, I lightly shook my son, blinked back tears, and yelled, "*Daddy is dead, A.J.!* He is dead, and he is *never coming back!*" My voice croaked. "*Not ever!*"

To see my son look at me the way he did was horrifying, and the moment I released him, his lips began to tremble. His eyes filled with tears, and when his face crumbled, I wanted to die a slow, painful death because it was what I deserved. Dipping his chin, his shoulders shook, and I listened to his barely audible cries.

I was a monster. A terrible person. And at that moment, I felt lower than scum.

Crying silently, I reached down and picked up my son, clutching him to me like the lifeline he was. His arms went around my neck and my entire body shook with the weight of my tears. I walked him to my room and laid him down on the bed, sliding in beside him.

I don't know how long we lay there. It felt like an eternity.

He blinked at me through wet lashes and said, "Don't cry, Mummy." His little lips quivered, as he choked out, "I'm sorry." He put a small hand to my cheek, wiping away the wetness there, and as he did, he whispered, "I won't talk about Daddy anymore."

Yes. I was indeed a monster.

It took me a moment, but I uttered quietly, "I'm sorry I yelled." When he turned over and shuffled back into me, I hugged him tightly, pressing soft kisses to the back of his head. "You can talk about Daddy." I was glad he wasn't facing me; that way he couldn't see the despair written all over my face. "You talk about him as much as you like, baby." More kisses to his sweet apple-scented head, and then I closed my eyes, and I whispered softly, "I'm so sorry I yelled."

He was gutting me, but if that was what A.J. needed right now, I would hand him the knife.



## Chapter Seven

### Ling

“If I didn’t know any better, I would think you were encroaching on my turf.” When I looked up from my desk and saw the beautiful Turk standing there, I smirked, and his eyes returned that smile. “Lucky I know better, yeah?” he prompted.

“Aslan the Turk.” I leant back in my desk chair, allowing my eyes to roam him freely.

Fuck me. I didn’t like Aslan, but he was gorgeous.

Dressed in his pristine black tailored suit, white shirt, and silken black tie, he leant against the doorway, watching me closely. The man in his early forties wore his dark hair cut short in a crew cut. He had a high fade, and his neatly trimmed beard took me back to memories of feeling its harsh scraping along my inner thighs. High cheekbones, strong jaw, fuller lips than should’ve been allowed on a man. Heavy silver rings lined his knuckles, and with a sudden intake of breath, I so badly wanted to feel the cool metal against my pussy. Those dark eyes of his were lined with thick black lashes that made him look much more innocent than he was, and something in me liked that I knew the real side of him, the dirty, raw, violent side of him that nobody else saw.

It was a privilege. I loved that side of Aslan Sadik.

I would say I missed him, but that would be a goddamn lie. The last time we fucked, he punched me so hard he almost left me with a broken jaw. Lucky for him, I was into that. I came more times than I should have.

No, I didn’t miss Aslan. I missed sex with Aslan.

My nipples beaded as I let out a soundless sigh. “What are you doing here, Sadik?”

I could still feel his teeth on me, biting me like the rabid dog he was.

His eyes never left mine as he slowly walked into my office. “I missed you.” He grinned, and we both knew that was a fucking lie, so... yeah, try again. When my eyes narrowed on him, he put his hands on the back of the guest chair and leant in on it. “I hear you’re having problems with your boys.”



My hackles rose.

It was days like this that I just wanted to relinquish the power I'd stupidly taken to become an untouchable and go back to being a ho without a care in the world.

I blinked at him as my cherry-red lips stretched widely with a smile. "Don't tell me you came here to offer your advice, Aslan." My face hardened. "Save your breath." I looked back to my computer screen. "Or I'll make sure you don't get a chance to breathe again."

The thought of killing Aslan made my core clench. I was already wet.

Aslan's eyes darkened a shade. "Talk to me like that again. Disrespect me. I fucking dare you." He moved close looking down at my lips before licking his own. "I honestly don't give a fuck if you've got issues with your boys, but I am here to tell you if you're stupid enough to trespass on my territory—"

"You'll kill me?" I stared at him.

At that, he took in a deep breath, moved around the desk, and knelt down, right in front of me, getting in my face. His voice was deceptively calm, but those pretty eyes held an intensity I didn't like. "I won't kill you, Ling. That would be too easy." His hand came up to grasp my chin, and he gripped it tight enough to bruise. He brought his face to mine, and the closer he got, I started to feel somewhat like a dog being backed into a corner. When his lips were a hair's breadth away, he spoke softly. "I'll start by killing your men. All of them. Your brothers included. No one you love will be safe." He pressed a gentle kiss to my lips, and when I tried to pull away, his eyes flashed. Digging his fingers into my cheeks, he gritted his teeth and hissed. "I will fuck with you so hard you won't be able to stand without seeming bowlegged, my little viper." His face contorted, and he pressed a painful, bruising kiss to my lips. "I'll play mind games with you every day of your miserable life. You'll never know when I'm coming, but I will come. I'll be in the shadows, for always, until the day arrives when—" He smiled, and his entire face transformed with it, no longer vicious, but once again beautiful. "—I will watch you take a gun to your head, pull the trigger, and splatter your brain across the fucking walls." He sighed happily. "And what a beautiful sight it will be."

Still gripping my cheeks forcefully, he held my eyes as he slowly reached between my legs and pushed my panties aside. When he felt the

wetness there, his eyes fluttered, and Aslan lost some of his steam. “You crazy bitch.” He slid a finger inside me, and my entire body caved immediately, submitting to him. As my eyes rolled back and my lips parted, Aslan bit his lip, and then whispered, “I want to fuck you so hard.”

My voice was hard. “You almost killed me last time.”

His eyes flashed dangerously, and then he grinned and muttered, “I want to do it again.”

The lone digit inside me started to make a “come here” motion, and I bit the inside of my cheek. Jesus Christ, it felt so fucking good. But I needed to be strong. “Things are different now. We can’t.”

If my men found out I was fucking the king of The Lost Boys, I would lose all respect, and to be honest, it wasn’t something I could risk. I was doing a fucking good job of losing their respect on my own. I didn’t need the help.

“I know we shouldn’t, but—” Aslan grinned into my mouth. “—you think you could stop me, bitch?”

My core clenched at the thought of him taking me roughly, brutally, and he felt it. I know this because he chuckled into my cheek.

I’d never given a single fuck about what people thought about me. I’d done bad things unapologetically my entire life. I did what I did, when I wanted to, because that was how Ling Nguyen rolled. And, at that moment, I hated myself for being the way I was.

Because I couldn’t say no.

My breath hitched. “Fuck me.”

I should’ve known what was coming.

Aslan smirked, pulled his finger out of my pussy, and stood. “I’m surprised at you, Ling. I thought it would be harder than that. Everyone talks about The Dragon Queen like she’s some fucking goddess, and look at you now.” He put his finger under his nose and closed his eyes, breathing my scent deep into his lungs. He sucked that finger into his mouth, licking it clean, and then smirked cruelly. “How does it feel, falling from the top, you weak-ass bitch?”

Well, shit. I ran my cold fingers over my now aching cheeks. It didn’t feel great, that was for sure.

Without a word, I reached under my desk and pulled out my gun, pointing it at him. When Aslan’s face blackened, I returned it with a grin. I

did this because we both knew I had a lust for blood and would have no problem shooting him right where he stood. After all, he was in *my* house, and the disrespect he had shown was colossal.

I lowered my pistol and looked at him closely. “God, you’re beautiful.” When his face softened marginally, I went on. “But you’re right, of course. Thank you for the reminder.” My lips parted at the sight of him and I made a show of looking him up and down. “Sure, I’d like that cock in my mouth,” I admitted, my voice turning breathy, “choking me as you thrust balls-deep.” I shook my head slowly and sighed, watching his sudden regret. I leered inwardly. “I’ve always liked you, Aslan, and I’ll miss fucking you. Or, should I say—” I smiled cruelly. “—I’ll miss *you* fucking *me*.”

Aslan glared at me. “I know what you’re doing. It’s not working.”

“Is that why your dick’s harder than a minister’s prick at Sunday school?” I smirked when he reached down to adjust himself brazenly. I lifted my pen to my lips. “No one would need to know,” I told him, gazing down at the outline of his hard cock. “It would be our little secret.” My face became void of expression. “By the way, how’s your wife?”

I guess I had a death wish. That was the only explanation I had for asking about her—his Turkish princess. And when he lunged for me, I wasn’t prepared. Or maybe I was and I just didn’t care. I don’t know.

It was an issue lately, my lack of care.

The first blow was hard enough to have my face snapping to the side, and as I tumbled to the floor, I felt his strong body straddle me. My heart raced from the sheer exhilaration of being hurt. My temple throbbed and I loved it. I felt it all over, the pain, and I savored it like a lover. The second blow hit me as hard as the first, and when I managed to focus, Aslan was over me, his lip curled, his eyes darker than I’d ever seen them.

He lifted a fist to deliver another blow, and that was when I smiled a bloody smile. “Now who’s weak?” When he realized I got him as badly as he got me, I laughed openly, spitefully.

Game. Set. Match.

*Yeah, bitch. You wanna play?*

I won this round.

Aslan didn’t understand that when I played, I only competed because I intended to win. At any cost.

It took a moment, but the now panting Turk sat back on his heels, and I was surprised when he muttered a weary-sounding, “Touché.”

Reaching into his breast pocket, he pulled out a clean, white handkerchief and handed it to me. Leaning up on my elbows, I took it and pressed it to my fat lip. It was bleeding. I knew this because the familiar metallic taste coated my tongue, and at that moment, I wanted nothing more than for Aslan to flip me over, pull down my panties, and fuck my ass as roughly as my body would allow.

Maybe even as roughly as it wouldn’t.

“Stop it,” he said, sitting back, leaning against my desk, and shaking his head at my open desire. “I’m not going to fuck you, Ling.” His brows narrowed. “You’re so messed up, baby.”

*Tell me something I don’t know.*

Removing the cloth from my face, I smiled through my split lip. “That’s why you love me.”

I was joking, of course. What he said next, I didn’t see coming.

Aslan watched me a long while before he cupped my cheek gently, and murmured, “That’s why I love you.”

My heart stuttered.

I didn’t like what his declaration made me feel. So I changed the direction of this meeting.

My small hand came to his on my cheek and I pressed my lips to the tip of his thumb, gently kissing it before pulling it into my mouth, sucking. Aslan’s lids shuttered and I sucked it deep. His lips parted and he let out a heavy breath.

Yeah. This was more my speed.

Pronouncements of love were wasted on me.

I didn’t do love. Not anymore. Love hurt too much, I’d learned, and the type of pain it caused was not my kink. Not even close.

Which was why I released his thumb with a pop and licked my lips before resting my hard gaze on him. “Get out of here, Turk.”

He stared at me a moment, unblinking, before he stood and tugged at the bottom of his jacket, straightening himself. When he held out a hand to me, I slapped it away, standing on my own and smoothing down the front of my dress.

Aslan stepped forward, closer than I would have liked him, and he searched my battered face. “I didn’t mean for this meeting to go in the direction it did.”

My chest ached.

I couldn’t deal with the affection that lined his voice. I didn’t want it. He needed to go.

Looking back over my shoulder, I shrugged it off. “Don’t worry about it.” Then I threw him my smiling eyes. “I just have that affect on people.”

*Just leave.*

He looked disappointed in himself. “You’re infuriating.” He spoke low, to himself. “Why the fuck do I want you so badly?”

With a light sigh, I sat back in my desk chair. “The same reason every other man I’ve screwed wants me, Sadik. I let you be who you want to be, who you really are. I bring forth your demons, and I fuck them too, because it makes me happy to see men lose control of themselves. Because it makes me hot to watch a good man be bad, and it’s so easy to do. Because I like to be taken rather than wooed. Pain makes me wet, and I know that’s screwed up.” I blew out a long breath and smiled warmly at him. “But that’s who I am. I couldn’t change, even if I wanted to.” My smile waned. “Believe me. I’ve tried.”

Didn’t he see what I really was? A cancer on this world, plaguing every man I met.

I was a sexually transmitted disease, and Aslan was just one of a long list of those infected.

The sad fact was men liked their girls insane. I was proof of that.

When he came to me, taking my face in his hands and looking deeply into me, my chest tightened at the concern in his eyes. He brought his full lips to mine, kissing me gently, and I let him, because I was a sadist.

My heart clenched painfully at what he said next.

“I know what your father did to you,” he spoke against my lips before pulling back. “Knowing what I know now, I’d have slaughtered him.” He held my face fast and looked down at me almost desperately. “I’d have killed him. Tortured him. Taken him apart, piece by piece, fed him to the dogs.” He was crazy. Why did I like that so much? “I’d have done it for you.”

A solid warmth spread through me. I should not have been feeling what I was feeling.

"I don't need a man to protect me, Turk," I told him, stepping back and watching his hands fall. Men had let me down my entire life, and I would never put myself in the position to have that happen again. "I save myself. Always have, always will."

Aslan sighed, but he did it with smiling eyes. "I know." When he turned to leave, he paused at my door. "See you later?"

Jesus, he was annoying.

I rolled my eyes. "You don't know how to take a hint, do you?"

He blew me a kiss, grinning hard, and then I was alone.

It was an odd feeling, really. For the first time since Twitch died... I didn't want to be alone anymore.

As I sat at my desk with a throbbing mouth and a bruised temple, my lips thinned.

Why did that piss me off so much?

It was close to four a.m. when my doorbell rang.

Sliding out of bed, dressed in nothing but a tiny silk teddy, I reached for the Glock inside my nightstand. When I had it in hand, I looked through the peephole and frowned, throwing the door open and pointing the barrel of my gun at his chest.

"What are you doing here, Turk?" My voice was rough with sleep.

He looked down at the gun a moment before training his smiling eyes on me. "I missed you."

Yeah, right. "Why are you really here?"

When he reached behind him, I stepped forward, face hard, and pushed my gun into his chest. "Fucking try it." Wild-eyed, I pressed my gun into him hard enough to bruise and smirked. "Give me a reason. I dare you."

But Aslan Sadik just watched me closely before pulling out the concealed item. He held it out to me, and my heart began to race.

"Is this a trick?" My eyes narrowed at him. "What game are you playing? I don't know this one."

"No game," he said, raising his free hand in a placating gesture. "It just reminded me of you." He ran his thumb over the red rose. "Beautiful." He gently touched the few bruised petals. "But a little damaged."

God, he was laying it on thick. "If you came here to fuck—"

“Actually, I have to go. My wife is likely waiting for me.”

When I made no move to take the rose, he took my free hand and brought it to his mouth, kissing my knuckles, and I hid the shiver it caused well enough. Unfortunately, I couldn’t hide the goosebumps that lined my arms, and when Aslan spied them, he smiled, running soft fingertips over them. “I think you lied.”

My brow lowered. “About what?”

“I think you do want to be wooed.” At my disbelieving scoff, he went on. “I think you want someone to be gentle with you, Ling. You just don’t know it, because you’ve never experienced that at that hands of a man.” When he stated, “You’ve been let down by men, myself included, and I’m sorry for that,” I wanted to unload my clip into him.

How dare he assume he knew me?

How dare he be partly right?

I didn’t speak. I couldn’t.

What did he want me to say to that?

He didn’t say a word as he placed the rose into my hand. I held it tightly, needing to feel the sharp sting of its thorns in my palms to break through the inner turmoil I felt.

Aslan walked backward, away from me, and I wanted him back. Before he left, he uttered, “You look beautiful in the moonlight.”

When he was gone, I shut the door behind me and put my back to it. I wanted to be unaffected, but I never had been, not with Aslan. I loathed that he somehow knew that.

“Fuck.” I looked down at the pretty rose and my heart jolted.

*Jesus Christ, Ling.*

*What are you doing?*

Oh, no.

The realization hit me like a ton of bricks.

I was falling in love.





## Chapter Eight

### Lexi

It was so good to be working again. I mean, it wasn't paid work, but it was still something I was passionate about, and if I could help even one person, then I was good. Truth was, I didn't need the money. I had more than I knew what to do with. Untraceable checks still came monthly to this day. But my time was something I could give to people who needed it.

I volunteered for a non-profit organization that did house checks on people suffering with depression, mental illness, suicidal thoughts, and a number of other mental disorders.

Walking to the door, I knocked, and when the woman answered the door, I smiled. "Hello. I'm Lexi Ballentine. We spoke on the phone."

The woman nodded but didn't move to open the door any wider.

"Can I come in?" When she watched me carefully, I said politely, "Or I can stay out here. That's okay too." I looked down at my notes. "It's Gianna, isn't it?"

She nodded, choosing to remain silent, and that was fine. I could carry a conversation on my own; I didn't need help.

I smiled softly. "That's a pretty name. Are you Italian?"

At that, she spoke quietly. "My father was." Then she asked, "You're American?"

*Got her.*

All you needed was an in, and she gifted me that, bless her. "Yeah. I came to live here when I was twenty. Have you ever been to Italy before?"

She shook her head, and I couldn't help but notice how gaunt she looked.

"Is it okay if I ask you a few questions, Gianna?"

She didn't look happy but said, "That's fine."

I made sure to speak in quiet tones. I didn't want to rattle her anymore than she clearly was. "When's the last time you ate, honey?"

The lean woman licked her lips. "Yesterday, I think."

*I think.*

“I only ask because I have some groceries in my trunk.” I laid my sympathetic eyes on her. “I know how daunting it can be to go shopping when you suffer from anxiety.” I really did. I spent the first year of A.J.’s precious life suffering from anxiety, and I had attacks more often than not. “Do you need anything? I have the basics. Bread, milk, cereal, eggs.”

God, she looked ready to burst into tears, and when she spoke, it was barely a whisper. “Yes, please.”

I closed the clipboard. “Be right back.”

Opening the trunk of my car, I took out a few calico bags and loaded them up. When I carried them over, I was pleasantly surprised when Gianna opened the door all the way. I took her unspoken invitation and headed inside. The moment I stepped inside, I came to recognize why she didn’t want me in her house.

It was a mess.

Ignoring the clutter, I walked on through to the kitchen, and said, “In here okay?”

The smell was bad.

When Gianna followed me into the kitchen, she watched as I unloaded the groceries and hugged herself, making her look even smaller than she was. “I’ve been meaning to clean up.”

Of course she had. But, for a person with anxiety, it was easier said than done.

Without asking, I went over to the pile of dishes at the sink and turned on the hot water. The pots on the stove looked moldy.

Gianna looked mortified. “You don’t have to do that.”

“Why don’t you sit down and eat something and we’ll chat.” I pulled on the gloves and allowed the steaming water to soak the plates a minute before I took the sponge and started scrubbing.

Knowing I was going to do what I was going to do, Gianna hesitantly poured herself a bowl of cereal then sat at the table as I washed the dishes. “Thank you.”

That was it. That was all I needed. It made it all worthwhile.

I twisted back to her and smiled. “You’re so welcome.”

We spoke a while before I told her about the free session of therapy she was entitled to. She politely declined, but I left the leaflets with her anyways. We continued to talk as I cleared away all the empty boxes from

around the house, and when I started picking up clothing off of the floor, Gianna joined in.

I put on a load of laundry for her and made sure to stay until it was finished, knowing it would likely not get taken out of the machine if I didn't pull it out myself.

It wasn't laziness. It was just the condition she was suffering from.

A couple of hours later, I left her cleaner home and told her I'd be back in a few days to check in. Gianna waved me off, and I had a feeling the next time I came over, she'd let me in.

Yeah.

My job was hard but most definitely rewarding.

A sad thought crossed me as I drove away.

Here I was helping people, and I still couldn't figure out how to help my son.

How depressing.

\*\*\*

## Twitch

It had been days since I'd seen my son, and I was going through withdrawals. I was irritable, irrationally mad, and I was on edge. Short of breaking into the house and stealing him away for a while, all I could do was watch on from afar as the little Goth took him out and about, to and from school, to the park for a play, grocery shopping where A.J. snuck things into the shopping cart and the small woman pretended not to notice.

I didn't know who she was, this babysitter, but I couldn't ignore the clip she wore under her jacket.

Whoever she was, she was there to guard my son, so I decided she was okay. She didn't look like much, and the truth was, I could've taken her out in a heartbeat, but Lexi trusted her enough with our boy, and that was all the credentials I needed to see.

The woman unwrapped an ice cream for A.J., and before she gave it to him, she squatted down in front of him and started speaking. I couldn't hear what she was saying, but she kept A.J.'s attention and her face softened in a way I'd never seen while watching her. A.J. threw himself into her arms

and she held him tightly, stroking his messy dark hair and kissing his forehead as a mother would.

A.J. took the ice cream from her, and the woman smiled down at him lovingly.

Yeah.

She was okay, I guess.

When a group of large men approached, I stepped closer, frowning. But the little woman smiled up at them, laughing, before she took turns hugging each one. I didn't recognize any of them, but I recognized the jackets they wore.

D.M.S.

Drugs, Money, Sex.

They were a Maori gang, and it seemed A.J.'s babysitter knew them well. It made me wonder who this woman was exactly and where she came from.

The large men all took turns shaking A.J.'s hand when the woman presented him proudly to them, and I silently fumed.

Who the fuck was she to introduce my son to New Zealand gang members like it was nothing?

If I had a living voice, I'd be having words with Lexi—mark my words.

This was not acceptable.

I needed to talk to Happy.

\*\*\*

## Molly

It was difficult for somebody like me to have attachments.

My life was sour, and for the most part, I felt I didn't deserve the kind of sweet I got from the little monster who had wormed his way into my heart.

I sipped my coffee, watching the boy I had grown to love over the rim of my bright yellow Pokémon mug. His tart expression was obvious. Of course, Lexi noticed it too, but A.J. had been moody for a while now and she didn't know why.

I caught her searching his face with well-hidden worry. She was desperately trying to find the cause of A.J.'s irritability.

I knew the cause. Part of it, anyways.

Zoe 'The Cunt' Braemore.

The little shit who teased A.J., and she baited him with something that should have been off limits. She teased him about not having a dad.

It would explain why A.J. had started to see his dad at night. It would also explain the sudden angst he developed in the mornings before school.

Something told me fucking up a five-year-old was bad form, but what did I know?

I was a hood rat, after all.

I pled ignorance.

The chair creaked when I leaned back in it, lifting my leg to rest an ankle on my knee. I waited a moment, basking in the comfortable silence, before looking to Lexi and stating, "So, I'm gonna pick up A.J. from school today."

Lexi looked up from the newspaper, a small frown creasing her pretty brow. "What?" She put the paper down. "It's your day off. You don't need to do that. What do the kids do for fun these days? Spoil yourself. Go out and get your nails done."

I glanced down at my chipped black nails before peering back up at her.

When she took in the face I made, she rolled her eyes. "Okay, so *don't* get your nails done." She smiled in encouragement. "Do something reckless and fun. Enjoy yourself, Molly."

My boy was damn near hyperventilating. A.J. stared into his toast, feeling my eyes on him.

"Nah." I sipped my coffee. "I have plans for my little boo." Lexi wanted to protest, but before she could, I asked A.J. "Handsome Dan, you wanna go for a ride with me in Big Red?"

Eyes wide, his fingers went limp, and the piece of toast he held in his hand dropped to the table with a dull plop. "Really?"

I didn't smile often, but when I did, I made sure I saved them all for this child. This beautiful, pure child who wore his heart on his sleeve. He was too good for this world, and somehow, by fate alone, I was the lucky bitch who got to spend almost every day with him.

Guiding him. Minding him. Protecting him.

It was not a job I took lightly.

I might've only been twenty-two years old, but I had seen some shit. That shit had aged me some. It also taught me a whole lot about life and who not to trust. It made me good at what I did, and although there were days when I wished I was never born, I'd go through every single bad day over and over again if it meant I would end up exactly where I was right now.

My thick lips felt wide and uncomfortably stretched. "Hell, yeah." I paused a sec. "As long as it's okay with your mom."

She was focused on me, hard. Her voice, however, remained quiet. "What's going on?"

Lexi was not a dumb woman. You would never guess it from looking at her, but the shit I'd seen? She'd seen it too. We just wore it differently.

I wore my battle wounds openly.

She wore them as deep-set scars.

*You do you, girl.*

When she crossed her arms over her chest, I reached over and stole a square of A.J.'s toast, grinning at the way he gasped in outrage. I chewed slowly, and it took me a while to answer. "Nothin'."

Lexi looked to A.J., concern etched on her features. She was a good mom. It was impossible not to like the lady. I wished I had someone like her on my side when I was a kid doing things a kid should not have been doing. Maybe if I hadn't seen it myself, I wouldn't have believed it were possible for a person like her to exist.

She would have fought for me.

She would have fought for me as if I were her own.

A mama bear at heart.

"Please, Mum?" He pulled out the big guns, turning up the adorable a notch by pouting his lips. When he lifted his hands, gripping them tightly under his chin in prayers, I knew she was toast.

Her shoulders fell, and I smiled into the rim of the mug.

Lexi's smile fell. "Are you sure, Molly?"

I waved her off, standing to take my now empty mug to the sink. "I'll put the booster seat in the trunk before I take off today. Don't worry. I'll keep it under eighty."

Her face softened mildly. "I know you will."

She didn't say this harshly. It wasn't a threat or a warning.

Alexa Ballentine had complete faith in me.

I wanted to hug her then. I mean, I never would. I wasn't the hugging type. But I wanted to.

She would never understand what she had given me the day she took me into her household, trusting me with her child. Lexi and her band of misfit friends were healing something inside me that I'd forgotten was long broken.

Rather than show the flurry of confusing emotions running through me, I turned my back on her and made a show of washing my mug. Without facing her, I uttered, "I'll have the little monster back by four thirty."

Lexi spoke to her son. "Go put your shoes on and get your school bag, buddy."

When I heard her come up behind me and when she came into view, leaning her hip on the sink to face my side, I lifted my eyes to meet hers. She all but whispered, "He adores you, you know."

She could've said anything. I didn't know why she chose to tell me that rather than asking me about the suspicious change of afternoon plans, but I was thankful for it. Thankful for her.

"The feeling's mutual, Lex."

Her hand came down on my shoulder and she gave it a light squeeze before walking away. She reached the hallway, when she spoke again, "I know."

Something warm and thick stirred in my chest, and I wasn't sure why, but I felt like crying then.

I rinsed my mug and set it down to dry.

Zoe Braemore was about to learn that even though A.J. didn't have a father, he had a family who loved him to. And not all families were blood related.

My car squeaked when I pulled in to park directly out front of A.J.'s school. It was barely audible over the loud purring rev of Big Red's engine, but I heard it and frowned.

I made a mental note to check the break pads when we got home.

Backup hadn't arrived yet, but he said he'd be there and I knew he would be.

I understood why he was doing me this favor without question.

It was because of A.J.

This kid, this sweet, naïve child, had no idea the connections he had in the underworld or the legacy he held. The son of Antonio ‘Twitch’ Falco, quite possibly the most dangerous man in the world at one point. The godson of Julius “The Law” Carter, a man who was judge, jury, and executioner of the underworld. He called Farid ‘Happy’ Ahmadi, the son of Persian mobster Omid Ahmadi, his uncle.

Together, these men, they were the holy trinity of the underground.

If you got in their good favor, you were golden. Set for life.

Without Julius, I never would have met Lexi. Never would have met A.J. And my life would have been poorer for it.

I owed Julius. Owed him big time.

He knew it. I knew it.

I had no idea how to repay him, and I fucking *hated* being indebted.

*You’ll figure it out.*

Well, I’d fucking have to. He’d make sure of it.

The black Hummer pulled up, and although I couldn’t see who was inside, I pushed off Big Red, my ‘74 supercharged Holden Torana SL5000. She was a beauty and all I had left of my mother. One ginormous figure stepped out of the car. He was daunting—I’d give him that.

Hemi spoke, and his New Zealand accent always made me laugh. “Hey, Molly love.”

What it actually sounded like was, “Huy, Molly luff.”

“Hemi.” My lip twitched. “Thanks for coming.”

He was just over six feet tall and weighed around four hundred and forty pounds. He was intimidation ensnared. With his shaved head revealing his tattooed scalp, he was downright scary. Which was why I chose him for this task.

“Kids, man.” He shook his head, looking mildly agitated. “Don’t dig this bullying bullshit.”

A bubble of laughter tried to claw its way up my throat, but I swallowed it down. It was funny that a man who regularly beat the shit out of people didn’t like bullies.

Did Hemi realize he *was* a bully?

I’d say no, because Hemi wasn’t exactly the sharpest tool in the shed.



When I heard the Hummer open, then shut again, I peered around Hemi to whomever it was he brought with him. I had to look hard at the second guy, but when he got close enough, my mouth parted in surprise.

*Oh, no, Hemi, you incompetent fuck.*

“Tama.” His name came out breathy and choked.

“Molly,” was all he uttered, rough and short.

My heart started to pound.

He didn’t have to say anything more. I mean, really, what else could he say?

His disinterest said it all.

If Hemi was daunting, Tama was straight up frightening.

“Oh, shit,” Hemi muttered, but what really came out was, “Oh, shut.” He scratched at his head. “I’m thinkin’ that maybe Tama wasn’t the best person to bring with me today, Moll.”

My eyes drifted away from the new addition to Tama’s face. He’d finally done it and got his *Tā moko*. His nose, chin, and neck were tattooed in a traditional Maori design. I wonder what he’d done to earn it.

Once upon a time, I would’ve had the honor to ask. As it were, I’d lost that right. I’d lost it a while back.

I blinked at Hemi, sarcasm oozing from my statement. “You think?”

Not picking up on that sarcasm, he nodded once before going on a mindless semi-rant. “Well, yeah, because of your guys’ history and all, you know? Like when you—”

I cut him off, speaking far too quickly and almost yelling my response, “*I know, Hemi. I was there.*”

Tama was a beautiful man. He wore his long black hair traditionally, up high in a top-knot. He once told me a lifetime ago the style he wore it in was called Tiki.

My ethnicity was part Maori, part Aboriginal. As a child, I thought I’d have the best of both worlds, but the rude awakening was neither group wanted me for their own. When I asked why, I was told that as I got older, my loyalties would be skewed. What they hadn’t known was by not accepting me, they—by definition—were against me. And I’d never forget it.

If one person made me want to forget my bruised ego, it was Tama.

Tama, who took me into his home, his bed, and his heart. He vouched for me, fought for me, and I betrayed him.

Everyone had one, that one person who taught them never to trust their heart. I was Tama's. I heard he was never the same after I left, and that played on me something fierce.

*Fuck, you're an idiot.*

I was. No denying it.

A long breath escaped me and I ran a hand down my face before acknowledging the man in front of me. "Tama, you don't have to stay—"

He cut me off with a barked laugh. When he sobered, he leant down into my face and spoke quietly but viciously, "I'm not here for *you*."

Of course he wasn't.

So why did that statement hurt me as much as it did?

"I know that," I said, trying not to let my frown show. Checking my watch quickly, I told them both, "We've got eight minutes before the bell goes."

An awkward silence fell over us. Hemi, of course, was completely oblivious to it, playing a game on his phone. Minutes passed before Tama lost his cool indifference.

"From cutthroat to nanny." Tama smirked, and he meant for it to be as mean as it came across. "How the mighty fall, hey?"

A moment's pause.

"If you knew that little boy...." My heart wrenched.

*Asshole.*

I didn't need to explain myself to him.

My eyes slid down to the ground and I held them there. I wasn't daring enough to look at Tama, whose eyes were boring holes into me. Those laser beams prepared to blind me with violent, volatile rage. I wasn't strong enough to fight him or the affect he had on me, so like the coward I was, I pretended to ignore him.

After the longest eight minutes of my life, the bell sounded and we got into position. Tama stood tall, his arms crossed over his chest, and Hemi mirrored him. I stood between the two giants, pulled my sunglasses down from my forehead, and leant my shoulder against Hemi's massive frame.

We were an alarming sight. It was almost a shame to waste such a picture on a bunch of five-year-olds.

It didn't escape my notice that A.J. was the first to leave his classroom, head down, face solemn, rushing toward the gate we occupied.

*Oh, sweetheart. What has she done to you?*

I wouldn't run to him. I wouldn't comfort him, not until we were out of view of everyone else. I wasn't here to play. This was serious shit.

He looked up a second, then did a double-take. He stood there a long moment, long enough for his classmates to gather and pause in their tracks as they openly stared at us. Some kids' mouths dropped. I noticed Zoe Braemore was one of those kids.

A.J.'s eyes widened comically, and his reaction to these scary-looking dudes surrounding me was priceless.

He smiled.

The little shit.

God, I loved him. He was fearless where it counted. A warrior at heart.

Picking up pace, he started to run toward us, his school bag slapping his back harshly with every stride. When he reached us, I held out my hand to him but was rudely interrupted when Tama snatched up my ward, lifting him high, clutching him to his side. And Tama glared at him.

It wasn't personal. Tama just hated everyone. Yet even though I knew this, my inner mum had me on the defensive. I knew Tama would never hurt a child, but when it came to *this* child, I would never give anyone the chance.

A.J. lost his smile and stared back at Tama. A fierce protectiveness lit inside me, even wilder than before, and just as I went to warn Tama to put him down or lose a limb, A.J. reached out with little hands and touched his tiny fingertips to Tama's tattooed nose. He spoke and my heart ached.

"My daddy has tattoos. Lots of them. Not on his face though. When I'm older, I'm getting them too, just like him." He pawed Tama's face without fear, looking closely at the artwork there. "Did it hurt?"

I watched the ice melt in Tama's eyes. The sternness on his face, however, remained unchanged. "Yeah."

Hemi stood unmoving. Without looking at A.J., he said loudly, "Hey, A.J., know what I hate?"

A.J. twisted his torso to look back at Hemi. He shook his head. "No."

"Bullies." Hemi's mouth twisted. "Hate me some bullies, bruh."

*Okay then.*

It took every bit of strength I had to not laugh.

I'd planned on being discreet, but Hemi didn't know how to spell the word, let alone depict it.

Zoe's eyes widened as she tried to walk past. I placed my hand on her little shoulder, stopping her in her tracks. I leant down in her cute little face, brushing a gentle hand over her curled pigtails. I spoke, but it wasn't to Zoe.

"Is this her, A.J.? Your friend Zoe?"

She looked over at Tama and her eyes wandered over to Hemi before snapping back to me.

Zoe Braemore looked ready to denounce her own name.

"That's Zoe." I didn't look back at my boy, but I could hear the curl of his lip. "But we aren't friends."

"Can you help me, Zoe?" The little girl nodded, slowly, wide-eyed. I leant in and looked left to right before coming in close as if the favor I was about to ask was some big secret. "A.J.'s cousins here heard someone might be upsetting him."

I looked up at Tama. He was scowling at the little shit.

"As you can see," I went on, "when A.J. is upset, his cousins are too." I lowered my voice. "Can you do me a favor?"

She nodded without question. Good girl.

"I want you to keep an eye on A.J. and tell me if you see anyone picking on him." I stood tall and peeked over at Hemi before looking back to Zoe. "Hemi over there... he hates bullies. Don't you, Hemi?"

Hemi turned his head meaningfully and nodded. He kept his gaze on the small child and I watched all the color drain out of Zoe's face.

My shot had just found its mark.

*Bull's-eye.*

And my work here was done.

I smiled widely, but it didn't reach my eyes. It must've been less than comforting because Zoe took a small step back. "I knew I could count on you. Thanks, Zoe. Have a nice day, won't you, sweetie?" As she walked away, I waved at her, while muttering under my breath, "Strike one, you little cunt."

By quarter past three, all the children were collected by their parents and almost everyone had dispersed. Everyone but us. Once we were alone,

Hemi's stance slackened and he went to stand in front of Tama who hadn't released his hold on A.J.

Hemi's chubby hand came out and A.J. met him halfway. They shook hands and Hemi introduced himself. "Name's Hemi, little bruh." He jerked his chin to the sullen man holding him. "That's Tama."

A.J.'s face turned thoughtful. And what he said next killed me.

"Molly knew a man called Tama."

Inside my head, a slow, drawn-out appeal. "*No, A.J. Nooo.*"

"Said he was scary. The scariest." A.J. looked to Hemi. "She loved him." He looked over at me. "Didn't you, Molly?" Then he turned to face Tama, his expression gloomy. "But he died. And that made Molly sad."

Bile rose up in my throat, a solid burning in my chest.

A.J., not knowing what he'd just done, reached for me. Numb to the core, I took him into my arms without question. He rested his cheek on my shoulder and hugged me around the neck too tightly. "I don't like when Molly's sad."

Hemi looked from me to Tama, then back again and, thankfully, completely out of character, did not say what was on his mind before making his way back to the Hummer.

Tama, on the other hand, held his jaw tight. He didn't take his eyes off me. I hoped he saw the apology I held in mine.

I was certain he did because after a long pause, Tama spoke. His voice was deceptively calm. "You love Miss Molly, hey?"

A.J. nodded at my shoulder.

Tama trained his eyes on me. He spoke without emotion, "Kid's a terrible judge of character."

My voice quiet, I agreed, "I know."

Because he was right. I didn't deserve what A.J. gave me. I didn't deserve what Lexi trusted me with.

I was an awful person and, one day, I'd get mine.



## Chapter Nine

### Twitch

When she walked into my house, Manda looked tired. “We need to talk.”

Yeah. It had been brewing too long. We needed to hash this shit out. It was already awkward as fuck. I didn’t need it playing on my mind.

She came to sit on the small sofa, and I followed her into the room, leaning against the wall as she began. “I heard things about you. Bad things. And I chose to find out for myself, to see who you were before I judged. So, brother mine,” she said, “who exactly are you?”

That was a tough question.

I didn’t really know anymore.

I clicked my tongue and gently massaged my temple. “Mandy, please. Give me a break. It’s been a shitty couple of days. Besides, we’ve been through this.” I looked at her pointedly. “You think Vander’s a fucking saint?”

At my words, she shook her head. “I know my husband, thank you very much, but he’s never tried to make me believe he was something he wasn’t. And you hurt that girl.” She looked disappointed. “Vander’s the sweetest man in the world.” At my open scoffing, she amended, “To me, he is. He’s never been knowingly mean to me. He’s always openly loved me. He’s never raised a hand to me because he knows I’d leave him.”

She wasn’t going to leave this alone. My sister had been a perpetual pain in my ass since the day I met her, involving herself with me, inserting herself into my life whenever possible, and even though she shit me more often than not, it was kind of nice to have someone who cared.

I dragged a chair over from the dining room table, swung it around, and sat on it backwards. “Do you know who I was back then?” At her meaningful stare, I muttered, “Of course you do.” I ran my tongue along my teeth. “You’ve met Lexi, so you know her brand of sweetness is rare, a fucking treasure.” At her nod, I laid it on her. “I wanted to see how far I could go before I broke her.”

“Why?”

My sister wasn't impressed and I didn't give a fuck. I just wanted her to understand. "Because I wanted her by my fucking side, Manda, for always." God, I was getting pissed. "You think I could allow someone like her to be my queen? She's nothing like you, babe. You've seen shit your entire life, whether it was from your pops—"

She cut in with, "He's your father too."

Whatever. He was nothing to me. "Or your brother's bullshit, and now you're dealing with it all over again through Vander. You know this life, what it all entails. Lexi didn't. She doesn't. I wanted to see if she had what it took to deal, to cope, because last thing I needed was to have my fucking woman run out on me, saying this is too much. So I pushed, and I pushed hard."

Reluctantly, I saw Manda was beginning to understand.

"She's it, Mandy. No shit. The second I had her, I felt a fucking lightning bolt hit me so hard it brought my corpse back to life." Thinking of my woman was testing. Lexi was life. "I was a sinner, and she was my only prayer. A deity. The only goddess I worshipped." I took a slight pause. "Still do."

And, by God, it was the honest fucking truth.

I saw my sister's face soften and I rolled my eyes. "So, the good news is I am exactly who I say I am."

Manda frowned. "And the bad news?"

"The bad news is—" I grinned. "—I am exactly who I say I am."

Guilty as charged.

And my sister snuffled out a laugh. "Jesus, you're a dick sometimes."

I was. I wouldn't apologize for it.

"Are we good?" I asked, scratching absently at the scruff at my jawline, because I would hate to have to lose my sister so soon after finding her, but I would give her up in a heartbeat if it cost me Lexi.

My sister looked at me a long while before she sighed. "Yeah, I guess so, but I swear to God, Tony, if you hurt her again..." She trailed off.

I met my sister's uneasy gaze. "I can't promise I won't. This is all new to me, being locked down to one woman, being a father. I'm bound to fuck up a time or two." *Or ten.* I puffed out a weary breath. "But I'll try not to."

That was the best I could give.



“Okay,” she said, standing. “Give me a hug. I have to go meet my nephew for a play date.”

Affection was something I was working on. It didn’t come naturally to me, but it did to Manda, so I would give her that for putting up with my curt ass. Standing tall, I held out my arms to her, curling my fingers in a “bring it in” motion, and she smiled up at me as she stepped into my arms.

I hugged my little sister tightly, and she squeezed me back in return. When it felt like too much, I released her, but she held on to me. Not sure what to do, I lifted a hand awkwardly and started to pat her shoulder, and she laughed into my chest. “Tell me you are not patting me like a dog, boy.”

I sighed loudly, a smile tugging at my lips. Fuck, she was an asshole for calling me out on my discomfiture. She was lucky I was starting to love her.

Pushing her away playfully, I watched her stumble as she laughed at me and I pointed to the door. “Get the fuck outta here.” This only made my sister laugh harder, but she did leave.

What a shithead.

\*\*\*

## Ling

Aslan pulled away from me. He was restless, and I didn’t know why, but he was making me just as fidgety. The moment his lips left mine, I glowered at him. “What is up with you tonight?”

He looked at me a long time before he adjusted me on his lap, snaking his arms around my body and holding me flush against him. His face was close, and although this whole warmth thing was new to me, I kind of liked it. “What are we doing here, baby?”

We were being stupid. We were pretty much guaranteeing our families’ hatred lived on. It was almost as if we wanted the world to know how selfish and dumb we really were because even though we were hiding, we weren’t exactly pulling all the stops on that front.

This was our third rendezvous at the city apartment I’d specifically rented to meet him at. I was an idiot and sure to get caught, but when it came to Aslan, I didn’t really think about the consequences, nor did I care.

Besides, so far, he refused to fuck me, so really, what were we doing? Not much.

But, truth was, if my brothers found out, they'd kill me. Quite literally. I decided on honesty. "We're fucking up in a real big way."

When he laughed softly, looking at me the way he was looking at me, with an attachment in his eyes that was aimed at me, I felt part of the ice around my heart crack as it sluggishly thawed.

"Come to bed with me," I leant in and spoke against his lips, grinding into his hard cock.

But he shook his head, smiling tenderly. "No."

He was killing me here. I was so fucking horny I was ready to dry-hump his leg if he'd only let me.

*Oh my God. Listen to you.*

If he'd let me?

Who was I, and what the hell happened to The Dragon Queen?

I did not like the person I was when I was with this man. He made me feel weak, and that would not do. I was my own person. I didn't rely on anyone, didn't need anyone. I was happily unattached. Fuck him.

"Fine," I uttered blasé-like. "I guess I'll just go out and find a nice young cock to suck." When his eyes flashed, I went on. "Maybe I'll let him make out with my pussy a while, and when he makes me come—" I pressed my tits into him. "—I'll show him gratitude by calling him Daddy. They like that, you know?" As I went to stand, Aslan gripped my wrist hard enough to bruise, and I smirked, liking where this was going. "Changed your mind, Az?"

He stood quickly, and I fell to the floor in a heap.

*"Motherfucker,"* I seethed.

"I don't know why I fucking bother with you," he said as he walked away from me.

And suddenly, I felt ill at the loss of him.

*Holy shit.*

That was new. I don't know whether I liked that.

Just before he reached the exit, I called out, "Wait." And to my shock, he did, pausing at the door.

Yep. Thought about it. I did not like that at all.

Looking like he wanted to smack a bitch, I wondered why he wouldn't just smack *this* bitch. He knew I was down for it. In fact, nothing would make me happier than if he just fucked my next breath out of me.

I couldn't believe I was about to say what I did. "This is new to me, Az. You gotta give me a break when I push because I don't know any better." *You pussy.* I sighed, humiliated at the fact that I was putting myself in this position. "I don't like upsetting you."

Suddenly, he turned and glared. "I have a wife at home, Ling, and believe it or not, she fucking adores me. I don't need this juvenile bullshit you like to play at, this jealousy crap. You drive me crazy." When he shook his head and put his hands to his hips as if he were contemplating the weight of the world, my insides shriveled because I knew what was coming. "I don't think we should do this again."

And because I had no idea how to deal with the abrupt sorrow inside me, I glowered right back. "No issue here." My voice was low. "It's time for you to leave."

After all, I got my mom's attitude and my dad's temper.

The beautiful Turk looked at war with himself a short moment before he looked me up and down, waving a hand in my direction, his lips thinning. "You know what? Fuck this. I'm out."

The thought of Aslan Sadik leaving me to go home to the wife who adored him drove me wild enough for me to make a point. Rushing over to my purse, I pulled out my .22 caliber, put my finger to the trigger, and fired. *Bang.*

The sound echoed in the penthouse apartment, and when his entire body jerked in shock, I reveled in it. He blinked at the hole in the wall beside his head and turned back to me, wide-eyed. "You crazy bitch."

Yeah. And you better not forget it. "Don't ever come back, Az. You've officially outworn your welcome."

Those dark eyes of his watched me closely a long while before he turned and left me alone with my thoughts.

And it was not a pretty place to leave a crazy bitch.

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## Lexi

“And they were huge, both of them!” said A.J. excitedly as he told me about meeting the two friendly giants. No, not giants. Cousins. A.J. called them his cousins.

“They were, were they?” I looked over at Molly, blinking, with my brows up to my hairline.

Molly had the grace to look sheepish. “They were just some old friends.”

Old friends who just happened to be in the school’s vicinity at pick up time, the same day Molly just happened to suggest she pick up A.J. on her day off, and take her red muscle car to boot.

Mmhm. Sounded legit.

*Pull the other leg, Molly.* “Oh, okay.”

Molly’s lip twitched at my clear disbelief. “Would you believe they just came to say hi?”

I couldn’t help but chuckle. “No. No, I wouldn’t.”

She looked peeved. “Damn. I knew you were smarter than that.”

When it was time to put A.J. into the bath, I lightly smacked his bottom. “Bath time!” Then I leaned into a wide-eyed Molly. “We’re not done talking about this.”

And she sighed, loudly.

Once A.J. was in the bath, playing with his windup frog, I crooked my finger to Molly and she met me in the hallway where I could watch A.J. but still talk privately. The moment she approached, I kept my eyes on my son but spoke to her. “I trust you—really, I do—but this sounds like something I should know about, Molly. So, spill.”

Molly’s ridiculously full lips puckered and she folded her arms across her chest, peeking into the bathroom before pulling back and uttering quietly, “Don’t freak out.”

My eyes widened. “*Don’t freak out?*”

Shit. This was worse than I thought.

Well, how could I not now?

Molly shushed me. “*He’ll hear you!*”

When both of us peeked into the bathroom, A.J. was watching us curiously and we both smiled widely. A.J. smiled back, but it was cautious,

which was fair enough, because Molly and I looked nuts, hanging out in the hall, whispering and such.

We pulled back, and Molly started with, “I noticed A.J. was leaving school as quickly as he could, so I went back at recess and lunch to see what was going on. It didn’t take long to find out this little scrag of a girl, Zoe, was teasing A.J.”

Oh, no. “About what?”

Molly’s jaw tightened. “About not having a father.”

Oh, God.

Suddenly, it all made sense. A.J.’s desperate need to see his father, even if only in his dreams, his sudden grief, the way he was suddenly attached to all things Twitch. I put a hand to my forehead and rubbed.

Why didn’t I think this might have been a school-related issue?

I was a fool to have missed it.

“Look, it’s all good. I took care of it.” I heard the anger in her tone.

“Zoe, the little shit, isn’t going to bother A.J. anymore. That’s for sure.”

And then it hit me.

Lowering my hand, I blinked at her. “You threatened a five-year-old with gang members?” When her eyes darted around, I leaned in and hissed, “*Are you crazy?*”

Her eyes rounded. “They didn’t say a word, Lex. All they did was stand there and look tough while Zoe and I had a little chat about bullying. I swear. I didn’t do anything that would get you or A.J. into trouble. I would never do that to you.” Molly peeked into the bathroom, gazing at the little monster before pulling back, looking miserable. “She was taunting him, Lex.”

Yes, kids could be cruel. I knew that from personal experience. But that didn’t mean Molly needed to step in. “You should have talked to me.”

“I know,” she muttered glumly. She didn’t look at me when she let out a hushed, “Sorry.”

I understood Molly only had A.J.’s best interest at heart. No one ever accused Molly of not taking her job seriously. “Thank you for sticking up for him.”

Her lip lifted a little. Just a touch. “I love my little maggot.”

That was when A.J. called out, “Are you talking about me?”

Molly and I both chuckled and responded, “No.”

A.J. undid the plug, and I stepped into the bathroom, wrapping a towel around him, drying him off. “You know what? I want to hear more about your new cousins.”

“Oh, man, Mum!” A.J. turned wide-eyed. “Hemi is so big.” He made a round belly motion with his hands and the towel fell, leaving him naked. I couldn’t help but laugh, picking up the towel and covering him again. “And Tama was a little mean, but Molly told me he’s always mean.” When I looked back at Molly, I caught her making hand signals to A.J., and the second she saw me, she forced a robotic grin. “Tama’s got tattoos all over his face. His nose, his chin. All over.”

At Molly’s long, drawn out sigh and shake of the head, I quelled my laughter, and uttered, “Maybe Molly could invite your new cousins over so I can meet them.”

A.J. gasped. “Yes!”

Molly scoffed. “No way.”

“Why not?” I asked, feigning politeness. “They sound like absolute gentlemen.” Molly stared at me, not loving my teasing. “I can’t see why you would keep these guys to yourself. And besides—” I turned my smiling eyes to her. “—I want to meet this Tama of yours.”

“He’s not mine.” Molly’s face fell and she looked down at her feet. “Not anymore.”

She looked so sad that I quieted my voice. “And nothing can be done to fix that?”

Molly shook her head. “No. I messed up there.” She straightened suddenly. “I think I’m just going to go watch TV in my room.”

Before I could object, she was gone.

And I had to wonder what on earth that sweet girl had done to Tama that she felt she didn’t deserve forgiveness.

Turns out, I was better off not knowing.



## Chapter Ten

### Twitch

I could barely breathe. “If you’re fucking with me, Black...”

Ethan chuckled roughly. “Unfortunately for the Australian population, I am one hundred percent serious. I’m sending someone to you tomorrow with your documents. His name is Gabriel Blanco. Let him and, for the love of St. Peter, be nice.”

“Fuck me,” I breathed out, trying to calm the rapid beating of my heart.

Ethan’s laughter faded to nothing. When he spoke again, I felt that shit. I felt it hard.

“You’ve waited a long time, Twitch, and your patience has paid off.” He lowered his voice. “I’m proud of you, son.”

I didn’t do compliments well. Especially not from other men. “Yo, Ethan. You got wood for me, bro?” At his sudden flurry of curses, I let out a low chuckle. “I’m kidding, man. Chill. I’m...” This was hard for me to admit. It took me a while to get it out. “I’m grateful. For everything.”

He grunted. “Why do I feel like I’ve just released a lion into the unsuspecting community?”

At that, I grinned hard. “‘Cause you know me.”

As he let out another string of expletives, I laughed low, and for the first time in five years, I could breathe again.

I answered the door and looked down at the man in the suit cautiously. “Name?”

“Gabe Blanco,” the middle-aged man said in his Australian accent. “Ethan Black sent me.”

When I made no move to let him in, Gabe shrugged. “I can take this shit back if you don’t want it.”

And my cheek ticked. Without a word, I opened the door and stepped back, allowing him entrance, but I watched him carefully.

I had trust issues. So sue me. If you’d been shot at the amount of times I had, you’d have ‘em too.

Gabe Blanco walked inside, over to the counter, reaching into the big yellow envelope. He spoke as he pulled things out. “Here’s your I.D.” He



tossed a small plastic card onto the bench. "Your passport." He laid the little blue booklet down carefully. "Social security and tax file numbers." A small, white piece of paper was placed down next to the passport. "Here's your bank card, account details, and Medicare card." The cards were in a plastic envelope of their own. "And finally, your Australian citizenship." The fancy-looking certificate was off-white and had an emu and kangaroo holding a coat of arms. "That one's false, by the way. Just for looks."

I couldn't help the way my lip twitched.

*Thank you, Ethan Black.*

I could have kissed him then.

"Is that all?" I asked the guy.

Gabe didn't hesitate. "Not really. I've been asked to pass on a message."

Why didn't that sound good? "What message?"

"Watch yourself because we'll be watching you," uttered Gabe clinically. When my face darkened a notch, he held up his hands in a mollifying way. "Don't shoot the messenger. Just passing that on."

I didn't like that. "From who?"

"Some head honchos at the A.F.P."

Shit. The last thing I needed was to be watched constantly by the Australian Federal Police.

Great. Just great. "Noted. Now, if that's all."

"That's it." Gabe grinned. "Welcome back to the land of the living, Antonio Falco."

When he held out his hand to me, I reluctantly took it, pumping it once before dropping it. I showed Gabe Blanco out and tucked all my documents back into the yellow envelope, and I did it with a slight smile.

Yeah.

I was back, bitches.

For where I was, I felt my anxiety should have been spiking, but it wasn't.

I was tranquil, serene, and I waited patiently for her to find me.

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Lexi

I laughed at the look of discomfort on Ana's face. "I know it sounds awful, but really, they're so comfortable and they look so cute. I bought three of them online from *La Perla*. Here." I walked away from the table of women as the men sat outside on the porch, smoking cigars and drinking whiskey. "I'll get them so you can see for yourself."

Walking into my room without switching the light on, I went to the dresser opposite my bed and pulled out the three harness bras, lightly shutting the drawers before glancing into the mirror.

My stomach dipped.

I dropped the bras with a start as I saw the lone figure on my bed, leaning against the headboard.

My heart began to race. Closing my eyes, I focused on my breathing.

*Oh, shit.*

It had finally happened.

I'd snapped. And it was no wonder with the emotional beating I'd taken from my son over the past few weeks. The constant reminder of his father had done something to me, obviously. My mind was fragile and could only take so much. Perhaps all the talk about A.J. seeing Twitch had inspired some kind of jealousy within me.

Breathing hard, I swallowed past the lump in my throat.

"Stop it," I whispered to myself before opening my eyes, and I watched the moonlight beam across the lower half of the hooded figure.

*Jesus Christ.*

He wasn't there. He wasn't really there. It was all in my head. But that didn't make it any less distressing, and the way my heart thumped made me feel suddenly lightheaded.

My hands shook and I balled them into fists, my nails biting into my palms. "Lexi," I warned myself. "Stop."

The brain was a funny thing. Almost like a hard drive. It could conjure up memories in a flash, no matter how hurtful. And right now, I was hurting myself.

Why did I continue to hurt myself?

When I opened my eyes and he was still there, I started to get genuinely distressed. Breathing shakily, I put a hand to my forehead and begged myself as quietly as possible, "Stop. *Please.*"

My stomach dropped when I heard rustling from across the room.

Wait.  
Did he just move?  
No. He couldn't have.  
But he did.  
He was.  
Silently, he sat forward and did something I'd been wanting for forever.  
He lowered the hood. And the moment I saw those soft brown, hooded eyes, my entire body turned cold.  
This wasn't the Twitch of my haunting dreams. This was somebody else.  
I couldn't breathe.  
This was a dream. Wasn't it?  
It had to be.  
"Angel." That smooth, husky voice was barely audible.  
I felt the blood drain out of my face. Quickly stepping back into the dresser, I gasped when I hit the edge and lost my balance. A bottle of perfume fell to the floor, and the shrill sound of glass breaking followed. My heart thumped in my chest. Wide-eyed and perplexed, I lifted my hands to my quivering mouth.  
And that was when all hell broke loose.

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## Twitch

"Angel."  
What more could I say? She looked beautiful dressed in tight-fitting jeans and a white sweater rolled up at the arms.  
Lexi's big blue eyes watered as she stepped back into the dresser, and when she lost her footing, I stepped forward, my hand out to her. Her entire body shook, and when she covered her mouth, panting rapidly, a frown pulled at my mouth.  
Shit.  
Maybe I should have done this differently.  
My baby looked like she was about ready to pass out.

In the doorway, a shadow appeared, and the little dude made an appearance. "Can I have some ice cream?" He switched on the light and looked at his mother's stance in confusion a second before he noticed me. My boy. He couldn't contain his excitement. "Daddy!"

He flew at me, and I caught him midair, hugging him as tightly as I could without hurting him.

My heart beat faster. This was it.

No more hiding.

My eyes observed her reaction. I continued to hold him, watching Lexi closely as realization dawned that this, what was happening, was not in her head. A mixture of emotions showed themselves.

First, shock. Then confusion. Lastly, hurt.

Her face fell, she shook her head slowly in denial, and she collapsed back against the wall with a thud, her body shaking violently as she started to cry. Her mouth opened and she tried to speak, but my baby couldn't through the tears wracking her body.

A.J. pulled back to look at his mother. "See? Told you."

Lexi pushed herself back against the wall, sobbing silently, unblinking, a haunted expression shadowing her pretty eyes. The look of sheer pain and betrayal was more than I could bear. I wanted to go to her, and I planned to, but the little Goth stepped into the room, her .22 pointed at me. She moved to stand in front of Lexi protectively before staring at me, unblinking. "Who the fuck are you?"

I was about to respond, when Happy walked in. "The fuck's going on here?" When his eyes settled on me, his face turned fatigued, his body slumped, and he muttered, "You asshole." He closed his eyes before swallowing hard. "You fucking asshole."

Yeah, I was.

He moved closer to me, reaching for A.J., and I stepped back, throwing him a black look.

*Yeah, try it.*

He could pry my son out of my cold, dead fingers.

"Twitch, we got a full house here. Don't do this. Give me your son."

At that moment, Lexi glanced between my brother and me a long while until it finally dawned on her. When she spoke, her breath hitched. She sounded injured. Wounded. "You knew?" We both turned to the desolate

question. Her tear-streaked face had landed on Happy. Again, at a higher pitch, more desperate this time. “You knew?” The panting increased and she whimpered before screeching at the top of her lungs, “*You knew?*”

The low keening cry that escaped her after that was gut wrenching. Crying her heart out, she wept until she had no air left in her body, and as she took in a harsh breath and lifted her head, she wailed openly, clutching at her throat as if she were choking on what she was feeling, and it crushed my very soul.

The hall was filled with people, silent people, and I barely spared a glance to those looking on in shock. But when Julius filled the doorway and his wide eyes landed on me, blinking slowly, I’d never felt more like a piece of shit than when I watched my brother crack open and break for he was unbreakable.

Yes, I’d betrayed him. And, yes, he knew it immediately.

Julius stood there as Lexi cried. His lips parted and he blinked slowly, putting his hands crushingly to his head as if he was experiencing the worst migraine of his life. “No.” He shook his head, and then suddenly, he wasn’t shocked anymore. He was pissed, and he growled, “No.”

Yes. “Brother,” I uttered quietly and watched as his face turned thunderous.

I observed him fight himself at every turn. He stepped forward, then back, and forward again as if he didn’t know what to do with himself, his fist clenching then unclenching over and over again. It took him a while to get control over his emotions, but when he did, he snarled, “Outside. Now.”

I knew it was coming. I’d have done the same. I put my boy down with a sigh and followed Julius out the front door, sparing a small glance at my weeping woman.

The way she looked now, overcome and devastated?

I never wanted to see it again.

She was in no state to watch this shit unfold. I muttered to Happy, “Keep ‘em inside.”

In the hall, I passed a gaping Nikki, Dave, and Ana on the way out, while Manda simply shook her head in disappointment.

That was okay. I could deal with that.

I was used to being a disappointment.

Before I even made it out the door, I unzipped my hoodie and shrugged it off, rolling my shoulders as Julius paced on the front lawn, looking like a man possessed. When he caught me staring, his face crumpled and his eyes turned wild as he shook his head. "I know you didn't do this. Not to *me*." He pointed a shaking hand towards the house. "Not to *her*."

Shit. He was taking this worse than I expected.

My voice was rough. "Had to, brother."

He was finding it hard to speak. "Five years." His breathing turned heavy. "Where the fuck you been?" His lip curled, but the words he spat were cracking, heartbroken. "I needed you."

I know he did. That was why he needed to believe I was gone.

If Julius didn't believe it, no one else would have.

"Spend the rest of my life makin' it up to you," I offered, conciliating. And I would. I hated that I hurt him, but it wasn't optional.

Julius stilled and his blue eyes flashed. "*Fuck you, Twitch.*"

And when he lunged at me, I let him.

Stone-like fists clipped my cheek, white exploded behind my eyes, and I fell backwards onto the dewy grass. Roughly, he straddled my thighs and hit me again, harder this time. And I saw stars. He knocked me again, and I felt my nose crunch under his fist. Again and again, he hit me, and I lifted my arms in a poor attempt to deflect the blows because he was mad enough to cause some real damage and, as it were, Julius showed no signs of slowing.

He knocked my arms out of the way, but I flung them up, over and over.

A solid punch knocked my shoulder, and I hissed through the pain. Julius gasped loudly, hastily, speaking through gritted teeth. "Where were you?" The next blow hit me in the chest, winding me, and he bellowed, "*I needed you, motherfucker!*" The hits slowed and then finally, the blows stopped altogether. Gripping the front of my tee, I felt my brother's body quake as he cried out a tear-laced, "I needed you." He sobbed through gritted teeth, "You piece of shit. I needed you."

Breathing as well as I could through my broken nose, I watched him cry and reached up to grip his upper arm, but he shrugged me off violently, standing as quickly as he could. "Get the fuck off me!" Before I could register what was happening, he walked over to his wife, took her by the hand, and dragged her to their car. "Manda," Julius barked.

When Manda rushed over and stepped into the back seat, the car took off with a screech.

As I elevated myself on my elbows, I spied Nikki and Dave leaving with my son. My heart wrenched and I stood, ready to object, but when Nikki turned to Happy, looking completely brokenhearted, and ground out, "If I were you, I wouldn't come home tonight," I knew it was probably better for A.J. not to be here for the chaos that would ensue.

"Daddy?" A.J. called out uncertainly, looking strangely at my position on the grass.

"It's okay, bud," I told him, panting and breathless. "I'll see you real soon."

Happy stood with his hands on his hips, exhaling slowly. He dipped his chin, looking down at his feet, then spoke quietly, "Could have given me a heads up."

I could have, but I was done waiting.

*Sorry.*

My silence was all the apology he was going to get, and he knew it because he shook his head and walked inside. A long moment went by before I followed, but where Happy took off out into the backyard, I detoured to where my soul craved to be.

In her room.

I moved to stand in the open doorway and watched the broken woman rest against the wall, cold, unblinking. She looked like a shell of a person sitting so small where she was. All I wanted to do was go over, take her in my arms, and hold her a while.

When it all became too much and the discomfort hit me hard, I scratched at my jawline and shook my head because I wanted to apologize, but that was ludicrous.

So I held her eyes and prayed she'd hear the words unspoken.

Suddenly, she glared at me from across the room, a stray tear slipping past her guard. I felt her whispered words deep in my gut.

"I hate you."

And at that moment, she really did.

A sadness I never imagined I could feel settled its weight on my shoulders.

It was okay though.

She could never hate me as much as I hated myself.

I stepped out of her room and let her be. I'd done enough damage tonight. We'd start fresh in the morning.

Making my way out back, Happy paced deep into the yard while the little Goth watched.

"So you're him," she said, turning those bored eyes on me. "I didn't expect you to be so young. I mean, you need a haircut and a shave, but I'm surprised." She tilted her head. "How old are you?"

I was forty-one. "Old enough to know better." Putting a finger to my nostril, I blew blood out of my nose and onto the porch. "Young enough to not give a fuck."

"That needs to be set. Come here." When I made no attempt to move, she rolled her eyes. "Or don't. Whatever. Look like a troll. I don't care."

It did need to be set. I made the few steps over and sat in the chair at the outdoor setting. "You ever done this before?"

She put both her thumbs to the sides of my nose and pressed into my cheeks, looking unconcerned. "A time or two." A moment before she set my nose, she uttered, "I'm Molly."

*Crack.*

"Aw, *fuck*," I groaned as my eyes watered uncontrollably and my nose began to bleed all over again. When she handed me tissue, I snatched them out of her hands and lifted my head to stop myself from bleeding on my tee. I couldn't help but notice how blasé she was acting and had to say something about it. "You don't seem so surprised to see me."

With her back to me, she continued to watch Happy pace. She shrugged. "I was, but now I'm not." She twisted, looking back at me. "Your son is not a liar." When she settled her eyes on a still-pacing Happy, she let out a long, drawn out breath. "I should've known." A while passed and we sat in easy silence. In the stillness of the night, Molly spoke the words I dreaded to hear. "She's never gonna forgive you."

Maybe not.

But I planned to make her love me again or die trying.

"You live here, yeah?" Molly nodded and I went on. "Tomorrow, you and I are gonna have words on how easily I was able to get in and out of this house and do it undetected."

Her brow creased, but she nodded once more.



Good.

We'd deal with it tomorrow.

Tonight, I would think on how to fix everything I'd fucked up.



## Chapter Eleven

### Twitch

It had been twenty-four hours and Lexi had yet to leave her bedroom, which was why I dropped in. I needed to make sure she was okay.

My son hadn't been home in this time, but Molly assured me he'd be back the next day.

For everyone's sake, he'd better be. If he wasn't, I was going after him, and I told her as much. No one was keeping me from him.

It was after midnight, and as I lay next to the angel who'd stolen my heart, I spoke quietly so as to not spook her.

"Lexi," I uttered, watching her back stiffen. "Angel." I reached out to touch her but stopped partway, balling my hand into a fist before pulling away. "We need to talk."

I watched her hug herself. She stayed that way, her body tightly constricted, a long while. Her voice was weak and her softly spoken words bruised me all over. "Go away."

Okay.

I had all the time in the world.

I really hoped she understood that because I wasn't going anywhere.

Not without her.

I went with Molly to pick up my son from school. When she blatantly refused to take me along, I told her I'd follow anyways, and I must have looked convincing enough because she caved rather quickly. I stayed in the car, waiting patiently as she collected him.

The second he saw me in the backseat, his face transformed into a huge grin. "Dad!" But then he focused on my swollen nose and the purple bruising under my eyes and his face fell. "Daddy?"

"I had a little accident, bud, but it's okay." I held my arms out to him and he climbed into the backseat with me, falling into me. I hugged him as long as I could before I buckled him in. As we drove, I explained, "Your mom's not feeling well, so we're gonna give her a break. I'm gonna come over a while, okay?"

My son's face lit up. "You're staying?"

Smiling hurt, but for him, I managed a small one. “Hell, yeah, I’m staying.”

For the first time in my life, I got to be a father to my son, and I don’t know who was more thrilled about it, me or him.

When we got back to the house and I walked into the kitchen, I rubbed my hands together. “So—” I peered down at the smaller, shorter, skinnier version of me. “—what do you eat?”

Molly let out a choked laugh and I spun on her, glaring. At the intensity of my scowl, she raised her hands in surrender and wiped the grin off her face, which was a good thing, ‘cause I didn’t have any problem kicking her ass.

A.J. looked to the girl. “Molly makes me a snack after school.”

“I’m making your snack today, bud,” I told him, discreetly throwing Molly the bird when she grinned hard at my son’s loyalty to her. “What do you normally have?”

“Almond butter apple sandwiches,” said A.J. and I blinked.

“Come again?” What the fuck was that?

Molly cut in with, “I can do it, really. It’s no problem. It’s kind of my job.”

I turned, biting the inside of my cheek. I could fucking do it. If she could do it and she was like—what?—thirteen, then I could make my goddamn son a shitty snack.

Oh, shit.

My heart was racing. I needed to calm down.

Closing my eyes, I breathed deep, letting it out slowly. “I’ll do it. Just show me where the stuff is.”

The girl must’ve sensed the irritability in me because she did as I asked and grabbed me an apple, a knife, and some shit called almond butter. “All you do is cut the apple long ways, cut out the seeds, and put a thick layer of almond butter on them before putting another piece of apple on the top. See? Almond butter apple sandwiches.”

Yeah, I got it. Seemed easy enough.

I started cutting the apple and Molly made a sound in her throat. “Not that way. Long ways, like this.” She held the apple on its side.

My exasperation raised a whole level. “Does it really matter which way I cut the stupid apple?”

“It does,” she said, smartass that she was. “Unless you want A.J. to be eating arsenic-laced apple seeds.” When my brow knitted, she let out a hushed, “You do not want that.”

Okay. Shit.

Was it hot in here?

Agitated as fuck, I scratched at the scruff on my jaw.

Who knew making a snack would be so hard?

After I finished the stupid fucking fruit sandwiches, I put ‘em on a plate and handed them to A.J., and the look he gave me, one of pure elation, made all the anxiety cease.

“They look just like Molly’s.” Then he gazed up at me, asking, “Can I go see Mum?”

I started, “I don’t think—”

But Molly cut me off. “Of course, little dude. Just remember, she’s not feeling well, okay? So use your indoor voice.”

And he was off, opening the door quietly and stepping through before shutting it just as softly behind him.

When I looked at Molly, she uttered, “She won’t mind, trust me. He comes before her. Always has.”

Of course he did. That was because she was a great mum. Nothing like mine, nothing like hers, just as I knew she would be.

And it gave me hope that maybe even somebody like me could be a good dad if I put my mind to it. With Lexi’s help, I’d learn.

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## Lexi

I was crushed, absolutely devastated at the realization of the duplicity of the last five years. I wasn’t coping. Not at all. Every time I thought it, my breath hitched and more tears than I even knew I harbored fell.

To make matters worse, my son had tried to tell me, over and over again, and not only had I not believed him, but I made him feel that he couldn’t talk to me about it anymore.

My eyes shut tight, I hugged myself under the covers as my guilt had my stomach dipping.

I was a horrible mother.

The door to my bedroom squeaked as it opened and I refused to open my eyes. I was being a coward, but looking into the soft brown hooded eyes of the man I loved was more than I could bear. It was a reminder of the lies and deceit, of the sheer heartbreak I felt, then and now, and I didn't know whether I had it in me to deal with that at this very moment.

But then I heard his sweet voice. "Mummy, are you okay?"

Without a word, I lifted the covers and he slid under them. Something cold touched my arm, and I squinted through my hot, swollen eyes. "What have you got there?"

A.J. picked up an apple sandwich and bit into it. "Daddy made me a snack."

My fragile heart cracked a little more. One more fracture and it would surely shatter into a thousand pieces.

"Oh, he did, did he?" I tried to keep my voice light, but it was harder than it sounded. "Is Molly out there too?"

"Yep," he said, nibbling on his snack, and some of my tension fell away.

No way would Molly let A.J. go anywhere without her. I knew she would risk almost anything to keep him safe. Even from his father.

Speaking in low tones, A.J. asked, "Is it okay if Daddy stays a while?"

I thought about that and decided it was better to keep Twitch happy for the moment because it wouldn't last long and an unhappy Twitch was not something to take lightly. I'd seen him upset. The memories still plagued me.

"Okay, baby, but just for tonight." I would give myself today, but tomorrow, I came out swinging. "I need to speak to Molly, honey. Can you get her for me?"

"Okay. Feel better." He kissed me with sticky lips and I loved him for knowing how much I needed it. The moment Molly came into the bedroom and shut the door, I whispered, "If he tries to take A.J., I want you to shoot him."

No hesitation. "No problem."

Good girl.

She left me be and I found sanctuary in the depths of my covers.

And now, back to my depression, for tomorrow, I'd come alive again.

\*\*\*

## Twitch

It was just after nine when I walked into my house to find Happy sitting at the table with Julius and Ana. I stalled a second, looking from brother to brother before I made my way in, lightly shutting the door behind me.

“You come to apologize?” I spoke directly to Julius, and when he glowered, I grinned. “Look at what you did to my face, Jay. I look like a beat-up sack of turds.”

Yeah, I didn’t know how to deal with this, so I did what I always did—became a wiseass.

But it was Ana who stood. She was so small, but the way she carried herself made her look even smaller. There was zero confidence in her stance, and I hated that because at one point, she was a different person. Her hands shook visibly as she opened her mouth to speak. Unfortunately, nothing came out, and from where I stood, it looked like perspiration lined her brow as she tried to focus on breathing.

My eyes met Julius’s. “What’s wrong with her?”

I wasn’t trying to be rude; I was just asking.

Julius held my eyes a moment then looked down at the table. “Ana has PTSD.” He didn’t look at me. “I don’t know why we’re here, but she wanted to come see you, so here we are.”

He sounded pissed, but he was here. That told me a bit about how much he loved his little sparrow. Interesting.

Without asking, I moved forward, closer to the woman, and looked into her face, overlooking the damaged eye and scars. “What’s up?”

Julius watched me closely, looking ready to pounce. That was when I heard her.

“Twitch, I need you to hold her still.”

I frowned down at her and muttered, “Huh?”

The fuck was she going on about?

“I hear it in my head sometimes.” Her voice was sluggish, quiet. “Manda said it that night, at Gio’s. You were there.” She took in a sudden breath before letting it out shakily. “I know you were. I was leaving, and you talked me back.”

Oh. I see. She remembered.

My jaw steeled.

I glanced at Julius, who now looked at me curiously, then licked my lips and spoke just as quietly, averting my eyes. "I'm glad you're okay."

From my place in the center of the room, I saw Julius go from confused to complete awareness, and when he closed his eyes and sighed, I knew he was caught up. "It was you." *Yeah, it was.* "You called me that night."

*Guilty, brother.*

"You killed him," the little woman breathed out because the words were too hard to speak at volume.

I did. I killed Maxim Nikulin.

Ignoring Julius, I spoke to her, directly to her, because she needed to hear it. "Fuck, yeah, I did. Do it again in a heartbeat. Motherfucker was hard over your bleeding face, girl." My lip curled. "He got off lightly. Mad I didn't have the time to give him what he really deserved. Sad, because I would've enjoyed delivering it."

She swallowed hard, and then let out a hushed, "I knew it was you. I thought I was going crazy," along with a soft, vindicated smile.

I shook my head, lips thin, rubbing the back of my neck and avoiding all eye contact.

She wasn't crazy, but by all means, she should have been, going through what she did. I wouldn't judge if she had been.

"I wanted to die." The words were peaceful, still in the air.

I didn't blame her. Part of me wanted to put her out of her misery that night. She looked too damaged to heal. "Yeah, I get that. Sorry I couldn't let it happen."

Ana's soft smile transformed her entire face. She was a pretty one, beautiful actually. I mean, not Lexi beautiful, but she had something about her. "Thank you."

"Don't mention it." Like, really. Don't mention it. *Ever again.*

I felt uncomfortable with praise I didn't earn, and taking out Maxim Nikulin was not something to be admired for. I should've done it years ago before he ever got to her. And now, she looked like she did, unable to speak without shaking like a damn leaf.

No. She should not be thanking me.



A moment of awkward silence passed before Julius stood, coming over to his wife, taking her hand before heading for the door. Before they left, I called out, “We ever gonna talk about this?”

Before he shut the door, he replied, “Yeah, when I don’t wanna kill you myself, asshole.”

I inwardly grinned. That was a good sign.

With a sigh, I turned to face Happy, who looked fucking dismal. “You get in touch with your Romeo and Juliet?”

He shook his head slowly and murmured, “Nah.”

“Stay here as long as you need to, bro.”

Happy’s face turned slowly and he scowled. “Damn right I’mma stay here as long as I need to. You’re the reason I’m in this shit, you erratic fuck.” He stood, walking into the kitchen and opening the fridge. “I could be at home, having a nice quiet night fucking my girl or being sucked off by my guy, but *no*.” He popped a beer and took a pull. “Twitch decides it’s time, and, by God, it’s fucking time because Twitch says so. Fuck everyone else and whatever chaos it causes because you got the discretion of a lit stick of dynamite.”

My glower was strong. I held up my index finger. “You only get one pass and that was it. Remember that.”

As he walked into the spare bedroom, he flipped me the bird and that glower deepened.

Prick.

I didn’t know how late it was when I climbed in through the window, but I just needed to be near her.

Lexi knew I was there. I know this because when the bed depressed with my weight, her body braced and she stopped breathing a second. And even though her back was to me, I felt calmer being within arm’s reach of my woman, regardless of how she felt about me.

I could deal with a lot. I could deal with sadness. I could deal with anger. But this ignoring me business, I didn’t dig that.

The quietness was starting to bug me. I decided to make a statement, albeit a quiet one. “I told you I’d come back for you. Both of you.”

The silence was broken by the sudden hitching breath, and then the bed shook with the force of her soundless cries. I wanted to hold her, kiss her, and comfort her. I wanted to remind her of how well we fit, but now was

not the time. When Lexi came to me, she would do it willingly. I would not take any more from this woman, not when she had already given me so much.

When she managed to regain control of herself, she wiped her nose with her sleeve before sniffing, “Get out.”

And I did.

Not because I wanted to, but because I owed her that much.



## Chapter Twelve

Lexi

Why?

I didn't understand.

*Why, goddamn it?*

As I showered, my sadness seemed to ebb, slipping down the drain by my feet with the sudsy water. My outer shell had cracked, broken, wide and gaping, and the inner part of me was no better. My soul shattered, my spirit was battered, and I hated him for that.

I washed my hair slowly, carefully, taking solace in the peace the warm water trickling over me brought. But it didn't last long.

*Oh my God.*

My heart began to race.

*How could he?*

My chest ached painfully and my throat tightened with anger, fury, and resentment.

*How could he?*

I closed my eyes and lifted my face into the spray, trying in vain to steady my breathing. Jesus Christ. I could barely take in a full breath. I was fuming. My jaw tight, I switched off the water and stepped out, toweling off my body then my hair.

From my place in front of the bathroom mirror, my entire being stilled when I heard him. "Morning, bud. Ready for school?"

So domestic. So familiar. As if he belonged here.

My lip curled.

How dare he?

My teeth ground as I slipped into my panties and bra. Sliding on black sweats and a tight gray spaghetti strap tank, I ran my fingers through my wet hair and threw open the bathroom door, stepping out into the hall barefoot and catching Twitch helping A.J. put his backpack on.

When those soft brown eyes met mine, he watched me a second before slapping a light hand on A.J.'s shoulder, squeezing. "I think Mom's feeling better, bud."

No, she wasn't, you fucking asshole.

Molly watched me carefully, and when I met her weary gaze and whispered a rough, "Get him out of here," she took A.J.'s hand before looking between the two adults in the room, one of which simply stood there, his lips drawn into a thin line, while the other had murder in her eyes.

As my son passed me, I knelt down and wrapped my arms around him, hugging him with everything I had in me before forcing a smile. "Have a good day, honey. I love you."

But A.J. was a smart child and he hesitated, before asking a reluctant, "Are you mad at Daddy?"

I didn't want to lie to him. I never had before, so I looked up at Twitch, looked him dead in his beautiful eyes, the same eyes that haunted my dreams for years, and stated a cold, "Yes, I am. And Daddy"—the word was sour on my tongue and made my stomach flip with unconcealed dread—"and I are going to talk about that."

Molly led a concerned-looking A.J. out of the house, and the moment the door shut, I faltered, not knowing what to say, not knowing what to do.

Twitch stood in the wide kitchen entrance, looking down at his feet, his jaw tight, and I took that moment to roam him.

Why?

Why were the years apart so kind to him when he didn't deserve it? Why did he have to look the way he did?

He was dressed in dark fitted jeans that hugged his long legs, a tight black long-sleeved tee that showed off his broad chest and shoulders, the sleeves rolled up to the elbows revealing his veiny, tattooed forearms. My throat tightened in a way that cut off my air supply.

It was so cruel. In my mind, I'd imagined him a thousand times looking just as he was right now, only in my dreams, I was happy to see him. A far cry from how I felt at the present.

Running a hand through his too-long hair, he paused to scratch as the too-long stubble on his sharp jaw and peeked up at me through his lowered gaze. His nose was swollen, and the purple bands under his eyes told me Julius hadn't held back when he tore into him, and that pleased me. He ran a nervous tongue across his full bottom lip, his hands clenching then unclenching in a move that told me he might have been anxious, but I didn't know for sure. This man had always been good at hiding his true emotions.

If he wasn't anxious, he should have been.

When he spoke, I wanted to kill him myself. "I missed you."

The intense fury that lit in my belly was warm but soon raged into a fiery inferno. I found the fucking words.

My voice was quiet, giving off false calm. "You missed me?"

Oh, no, he did not. I know he did not try it.

A single step closer, a whole new level of rage. "You missed me?"

Another step, another internal meltdown. Eyes wild, I whispered, "Is that what you said just now? You *missed* me?"

My heart was beating so fast I thought I might be having a heart attack. It wouldn't have surprised me, given the circumstances. It was already broken anyways, so what was a malfunction to boot?

Twitch looked me right in the eye, that smooth whiskey voice floating over me as I seethed. "That's what I said, baby."

My neck began to heat with raw fury. My hands shook, and when I took the final step over to him, I looked up into his face and blinked at the gall of this man.

When I lifted my hand, reared back, and slapped him across the cheek as hard I could, the sound echoed in the open space surrounding us. He barely flinched, and that only made me madder. Panting, I grit my teeth, raised my hand, and put as much force behind it as I could. When the loud crack sounded, my soul celebrated the way he winced from the blow.

My palms pulsed and prickled from the sheer force of the cracks. The pain was a welcome change to what I'd been feeling the last couple days. It was nice to feel something other than numb.

Suddenly, his broken nose started to bleed again and I reared back once more, lip curling, eyes wide, but before I could hit him another time, he caught my wrist, gripping it tightly in his grasp, staring at me penetratingly. "I'm sorry." He gently ran his thumb over my thumping pulse and softened his tone. "I'm sorry, angel."

My eyes flashed and my voice quivered, not from sadness but from unsullied anger. "You do not apologize for this. Do you hear me?" My breaths started coming in short, rapid pants. "You say sorry for accidentally stepping on somebody's toes." Lifting my hand, I smacked him across the arm. *Smack*. "You say sorry for buying the wrong brand of shampoo." *Smack*. A harder strike. My voice lifted an octave. "You say sorry for

coming home late, Tony.” *Smack*. My eyes stung with the force of my tears as I shook all over. “You do not say sorry for not coming home *at all*.” *Smack*.

Tears fell from my lashes and trailed my cheeks, and I couldn’t even find the care to be embarrassed about the way my nose ran.

Twitch’s body tensed with every hit I landed, but all he did was back himself into the kitchen, his jaw steeled, his brows drawn as he took what I needed to dole out. He moved away, and I followed in an unconventional dance I didn’t even know the steps to.

Every strike I dealt felt like a punishment on myself.

This was not who I was. This was the person he made me. And I hated him for it.

The blows came faster and faster and he moved slowly, his body rigid and unyielding, allowing me to back him up against the kitchen counter. My shaking arms flailed in all directions, not caring where the knocks landed, only that they did.

A distressed whimper left me. “How could you do this?” *Whack*. The words were rough. “How could you do this to *me*?” *Thump*. My voice cracked. “To *him*?” *Smack*. My body shook as I wept, and my blows weakened as my grief drained me like a cell phone battery. “I loved you, you *asshole*.” *Thwack*. When his eyes closed and he swallowed hard, I held my arm up, ready to strike again, but held it midair. My voice was weak, and I focused on the rapid beating of my heart, taking in a slow, trembling breath. “You do not apologize for this.” I dropped my arm, feeling nothing. Absolutely nothing. “Get the fuck out of my house, Twitch.”

As I walked back to my room, my palms hot and throbbing, I dealt a parting blow. “You should’ve stayed dead.”

I didn’t hear him leave.

Actually, I wasn’t even sure he did.

My window rattling in the dead of night woke me with a jolt to the heart.

I knew he would come.

It continued to rattle as he fought with it.

Which was exactly why I bolted it shut.

It was Wednesday, two days after I’d last seen my son’s father, and when I walked A.J. outside toward the car, I saw him waiting, leaning

against the wide monstrosity of a gum tree on the corner of the block.

My heart stuttered, but I feigned indifference.

What a thought. Indifference to Twitch.

Yeah, right.

I wasn't a very good liar, not even to myself.

The moment our son spotted him, he took off running, and I just didn't have it in me to cause my son distress this morning, so I said nothing.

Watching Twitch smile that crooked smile I loved so dearly was almost too much. The fact that it was aimed at our son officially made it too much.

Years.

He willingly missed out on years of A.J., and that hurt.

I wasn't stupid. I got it. He didn't want us then. Probably spent the last few years fucking around and sowing his seed, and now that he was likely bored of that life, he thought he'd give being a daddy a crack and see how that went. And after A.J. was nice and attached to his daddy, which I could see he already was, Twitch would leave him and I would be left to pick up the trail of destruction he left.

I couldn't let that happen, *wouldn't* let that happen.

I died a slow, painful death as I walked over to them, sliding on my sunglasses, and did my best to ignore the man I once thought was a god.

"A.J., we need to go, honey. Don't want to be late for school."

A.J. looked up at me, beaming. "Look!" He pointed at the house across the street, on the opposite side of the suburban crossroads. "Daddy lives there."

An uneasy feeling crossed me. My brows knitted.

If I remembered correctly... "That house was on the market six months ago."

*Don't you fucking tell me.*

*Nuh uh. Don't do it.*

Those soft brown eyes met mine. He uttered, "Five months ago," and I just knew.

*Oh, you motherfucker.*

Would the blows ever stop coming?

He'd been here for months. *Months.*

My mind could barely function on the fact, and my heart rate spiked.



The deception ran deep, too deep to follow, for I'd surely fall to my death trying to chart its path.

Twitch held our son to him, and it was a good thing because I was ready for round two. The shithead smiled at me, making a show of roaming my body with those perpetually hooded eyes. "You look good, baby."

*Fuck you* were the words I thought.

What I actually said was, "We need to go."

"Can I see Daddy after school?" A.J. asked politely, then added, "Please?" for good measure.

Stepping forward, I held out my arms, and A.J. came willingly to me, but during the handover, Twitch's hand touched mine, leaving a trail of solid heat along my fingertips. And I loathed that a simple touch was all it took to set my body on fire. When he was secure in my hold, I shook my head. "I don't think so." He frowned, and just as he went to argue, I shot him a firm look. "Not tonight."

Twitch observed, searching his son's face, jaw set at the disappointment he saw there. "Next time, bud. Besides, you know where I live." Then he looked at me, directly at me, and when he spoke, I heard the threat in them. "I'm not going anywhere."

Nope.

I did not like that.

There was definitely a warning laced in that last statement and, regrettably, Twitch never did play fair. Unfortunately for him, he didn't know me anymore. And the lengths I would go to keep my cub safe were infinite, even from his father.

*Especially* from his father.

Avoiding Twitch was easier than I thought. It had been days since I allowed A.J. time with his dad, and after that first morning, Twitch hadn't come out to see his son off to school.

I thought it was smart of him to give me a wide berth after the week's occurrences. I went about my days as I would have the previous week, but I was on autopilot, barely thinking on the goings on around me, and when Nikki called for the hundredth time, I answered.

"Hey," I spoke quietly.

She immediately burst into tears. "I didn't know, I swear."

Her cries called to mine, but I refused to let them be freed, especially at the office. "I know."

"Then why aren't you talking to me?" She sniffled. "You think you're the only confused one, Lex?" A high-pitched squeak left her before she wept openly. "I'm losing my fucking mind here."

*Oh, sweet girl.* My heart hurt for her. "You haven't spoken to Happy?"

"Are you kidding me?" she sniveled. "Fuck, no," she uttered as firmly as she could. "Fuck him." Okay, that time her voice broke, and when she went on, I could barely understand her from the blubbing. "I hate him."

I smiled softly. "No, you don't."

At that, the dam broke. Nikki howled out a broken, "No, I don't." She continued to sob, and she croaked, "I want to though." A whimper sounded. "Why don't I?"

I leaned back in my desk chair. "Because you know as well as I do that whatever this is isn't on Happy. It's on Twitch." I was mad at Happy. I was so fucking mad, but I knew Twitch, and knowing him meant knowing he would have done whatever he meant to do with or without his friends' help. But that didn't mean I was ready to talk to Happy. So perhaps I had my own selfish reasons for suggesting what I did. "I think you should call him, honey." Because the thought of both Twitch *and* Happy living across the street from me made me feel backed into a damn corner.

"You do?" she breathed, and in that moment, I knew it was what she needed to hear, what she prayed to hear from me. If I'd told her I'd never wanted to hear his name spoken, Nikki would delete Happy's number and pretend the last five years of her life never happened. I, however, was not so cruel. This was my issue to deal with, not hers.

"I do, babe." And I meant that. "I mean, I wouldn't make it easy on him." When she let out a soggy laugh, I smiled. That smile fell as an awkward silence ensued. "Talk to him, Nikki. It's okay. I want you to."

My best friend was silent a long moment, but when she spoke I felt those words deep in my soul. "I love you, Lexi."

"I love you too, Nik Nak." I blew out a long breath, putting a hand to my forehead as my eyes closed. "And as soon as I know what the hell is going on, we'll talk, okay?" Before I hung up, I asked, "How's Dave?" At her scoff, my face bunched. "That good, huh?"

She hesitated. "He's... uh... *upset.*"

I couldn't help the soft laugh that bubbled up my throat. Knowing Dave, upset was the biggest understatement of the century, and when I heard Nikki's responding laughter, the hilarity increased. It was such an unbelievable situation. That's what made it all the more comical.

It felt good to laugh in the face of despair. I was pretty sure I was treading the thin line between sanity and hysteria.

When we finally got ourselves under control, I chuckled. "Well, I'm going to go now and try not to think on the fact that my ex just returned from the dead, lives across the street from me, and is trying to insert himself back into my life."

Nikki gasped loudly. "He lives across the *street*?"

Ugh. I was not talking about this. "Okay, so bye."

"*Wait!*" she called, but I already had my finger on the end call button.

I did not have the strength to deal. Not today.



## Chapter Thirteen

Lexi

“Can I come in?”

My cold eyes roamed the small woman, and when Manda held up her hands in a conciliating way, she uttered quickly, “I found out by accident. I was never meant to know. I swear it.” She inhaled deeply, and carried on through an exhale, “Our dad doesn’t even know yet.” Her face bunched at the thought. “And, *shit*, is he going to be pissed at me.”

I studied her a moment. Old habits died hard and curiosity had always been my failing. I mean, look at where it got me with Twitch. Pregnant by a criminal and alone in the world—that’s where.

Truth was, I wanted to know the facts and I needed to talk to somebody who knew what the fuck was going on here. Manda might just be that person. Lord knows I didn’t want Twitch anywhere near me right now.

Without a word, I stepped aside and with a tight smile, she moved past me, into the house. I gently shut the door behind us and followed her into the kitchen. When Manda saw A.J., her smile beamed. “Hey, you.” But A.J. barely spared a smile for his aunt before walking into his room, and Manda frowned. “Is he okay?”

No, he wasn’t.

I folded my arms across my chest. “He wants his daddy.”

Manda nodded in understanding, and I was thankful for her not offering her advice in this uncomfortable situation.

Molly stood from the kitchen table, staring Manda in the eye before peering at me. “I’ll get him ready for bed.”

“Thanks, Molly.” She really was a godsend. When I walked toward the fridge, I spoke along the way. “I take it you’re here to talk.”

At least she had the grace to look uncomfortable. “Yeah. I thought I should come bridge the gap.”

I brought out a bottle of white wine and held it in my hand. “I guess we’re going to need this.” But before I left the fridge, I twisted back to her and uttered, “How bad is it?” At her clear grimace, I reached into the fridge with a sigh and pulled out a second bottle, while muttering, “Rock ‘n Roll.”

Bumping the fridge door shut with my butt, I jerked my chin toward the cabinet to the left before slipping on my Pikachu slippers. “Grab a couple of glasses, will ya? Let’s sit on the porch.”

When we were both seated, I opened the wine and filled our glasses.

Manda started, “Well—”

But I cut her off with a click of my tongue. Inhaling deeply, I spoke a hushed, “Let me prepare,” and lifting my glass, I put it to my lips, tipped it back, and swallowed over and over again until its contents were gone.

Manda’s eyes widened at my unladylike hiccup, and I poured again. “One more.” I emptied the second glass then smiled. “Okay, I’m good. Lay it on me.”

“Where do you want to me start?” she offered slowly.

What a question. “From the beginning, of course.”

“I don’t go back that far, I’m afraid,” she said with a sad smile. “Like I said, I only found out my brother was alive by accident, and I can only tell you what I know. So how about I start with a bit of background on our family?”

Sure, why not? “Proceed.”

Was I already tipsy? Felt like it.

“Okay,” Manda started. “Well, let’s begin with the most senior member of the Falco family, Antonio Falco Senior, or Papa Tony as he’s referred to on the streets.”

“The streets?” I blinked. At her blank stare, my shoulders drooped. Ah, heck. “Your dad’s a mobster?”

Manda’s lips pursed before she motioned toward the bottle and feigned a smile. “Drink up.”

All right then.

Looked like I was going to need it. Taking her advice, I drank from my glass and she refilled it without judgment, and at that moment, I loved my sister-in-law.

“Papa Tony had been a high hitter his entire life, working his way up from nothing. He was a part of a firm called *Occhi Bianchi*, as his father was, like his father before him.” She sipped her wine. “My dad was young when he married my mother, Angela Rossi, and like most arranged marriages, neither of them were happy about the situation.” She shrugged. “Long story short, my brothers were born days apart at the same hospital.

Mom knew Dad screwed around and didn't really care, up until Zep was born. I don't know what happened to her, but something changed and she asked my father to be faithful to her so they could show their children how a family truly loves." Manda's eyes set on me. "You should know my father loved Tony's mother. He loved her a lot. But he was married, and although he honored his wife's wishes to remain faithful, he gave his name to his bastard son. Of course, he never saw the boy again."

How sad. I listened intently.

Manda went on. "When I was born, my father refused to give me his name."

My brow bunched. What the shit? "Because you're a girl?"

"No. He did it to protect me," she said carefully. "He gave me my mother's name and sent me to live with her sister. I grew up in another state, away from my parents, and this was done because my father's status had elevated a great deal over a short period. Everyone wanted to be connected to Antonio Falco, even if it meant marrying his children. My father didn't want that for me. He knew one day Zep would likely marry for alliance, and he wanted at least one of his children to marry for love.

"Unfortunately," she went on with a smile, "by an awful stroke of luck, I happened to be living a life away from the sleazy underworld my father was so heavily involved in when, by chance, I was working the late shift in an ER in Chicago and I was kidnapped by a couple of thugs. The same kind of thugs my father tried desperately to keep me from."

Putting a hand to my mouth, I gasped loudly. "No way. How did they know who you were?"

She chuckled, shaking her head. "They didn't. It was pure dumb luck that they'd chosen me, and when I arrived at the mansion, I was dragged into a room with a heavily bleeding man. He had multiple gunshot wounds. I had no tools, no equipment. Hell, I didn't even have *bandages*." She sipped at her wine then inclined her head slightly. "It was then I was told if that man died, so would I."

"Oh my God." I was positively enthralled and leaned in to her. "What did you do?"

"Whatever I could to keep him alive," she told me. "He lost a lot of blood, and although I removed the bullets I could find and sealed the wounds, I wasn't seeing the improvement I was hoping to see. After a

whole lot of cussing and some wild convincing, I managed to talk one of the thugs into letting me back into the hospital for supplies. By the time we made it back, the man's condition worsened and I thought I'd lose him, in turn losing my own life. So I did the only thing I could."

I leaned in, wide-eyed. "What's that?"

"I told him if he died on me, I'd bring him back and kill him all over again."

I blinked at her a moment before a shocked laugh left me. What a wild story.

"Countless IVs and days later, the man regained consciousness, and when he looked into my eyes, something happened to me. It was like a spark—faint, but it was there." Manda smiled softly. "I spent weeks at that mansion looking after the surly man. Day after day, he cursed me as I cared for him, and I couldn't wait to be out of there. Only, the day I was finally allowed to leave—" She looked at me, melancholy. "—I didn't want to go."

"Ugh." I held a hand to my heart. "You fell in love?" At her slow, dejected nod, I asked, "What did you do?"

Manda grinned then, holding out her left hand. "Married him, of course."

I looked down at the sparkly platinum ring then back up to the woman herself. My brow knitted. "You are out of your mind."

"I know," she said, beaming. "But the right man will do that to a sane woman."

Sheesh. Didn't I know it?

*Preach, honey.*

"So, I became Mrs. Evander MacDiarmid. My husband is the don of Highland Steel, and," she drawled, "he's so fucking hot. I swear to God, all he needs to do is talk in that Scottish accent and I'm tearing my damn clothes off."

Her admission was so unexpected that I laughed out loud, slapping a hand over my mouth. "*Manda.*" Dirty girl.

I liked this woman. She was pretty damn cool.

She grinned, and I saw so much of Twitch in it my heart panged. "Sorry. It's been weeks and I miss him."

*Weeks?*

*Bitch, please.*



I scoffed. "Try six years." When she blinked in shock, my brows arched as I lifted my glass in cheers before downing the contents in one gulp.

*Yeah. Take a seat.*

"You never...?" She trailed off.

I shook my head, and spoke quietly, "No."

"Why not?" Her brows furrowed in question.

*Because I loved your brother so much it still hurts.*

*Because when I lost him, I lost myself.*

*Because when he told me I'd never want anyone else, I thought he was just being arrogant.*

*Unfortunately, he wasn't.*

"I don't know," I lied easily enough. "I guess being a mom just kept me busy."

As we sat in the open air in a comfortable silence, Manda spoke and she did it gently. "You've got to talk to him, Lexi." When I chanced a glance at her, she added, "If nothing more than for closure."

I remained silent, sipping my wine, but after some time passed, I replied, "I know. I'm just not ready yet."

Not a second passed, before she uttered, "He saved Ana's life, you know." At my confused glance, she nodded. "I was there." Her eyes turned bleak. "She was dying and Tony saved her."

Wait. Ana had lived in my home for months. She never mentioned this. "Did she know?"

"No." Manda shook her head. "She does now. She's grateful. Julius, even more so, even though he doesn't want to admit it." She peered over. "It's only a matter of time before he's accepted back into the fold by his brothers." Why did that sound so foreboding? "I don't know my brother like a sister should, but I'm getting there, and from what little I do know, I can guarantee you something, Lexi." Her expression was grim. "He's not going to give up his son."

You know what? No.

I sat up tall, my back rigid. "He doesn't have a choice on that front."

Manda twisted her body to me, her eyes imploring. "Listen to yourself. Do you even know who you're talking about here? We're not talking about a regular guy trying to get partial custody over his kid. We're talking

Antonio ‘Twitch’ Falco. If you don’t give him something—” She let out a soft sigh. “—I’m concerned he’ll take it without asking.”

Okay. Maybe she did know a little about her brother. “I’ll deal with it.”

Soon after, Manda left, and as I sat alone in my bedroom, my anxiety rose when I pondered how long I would have before Twitch started to take without asking.

I didn’t know what time it was when the knock sounded at the door, but it was still dark out. Waking with a jolt, my heart thumped when the knock sounded again, this time louder than the last.

Sliding out of bed, I slipped on my Pikachu slippers and shrugged on my silken kimono before heading out my room and down the hall. I heard Molly approach from behind, and when I peered out of the frosted side window, I sighed at the familiar hooded shadow before opening the door. “Go awa—” The statement died on my lips when I spotted the bundle he was holding.

“You lose somethin’?” Twitch asked sleepily, holding A.J. in his arms. My heart stopped.

I blinked in confusion, my lips parted, and when I reached out for him, Twitch pulled back.

Before I could think, I hissed, “Give me my son.”

His face darkened, and he cradled our sleeping son in his arms as he spoke low. “I know you’re pissed at me, and I deserve that, so I’m gonna let it fly the way you just threw an accusation at me. I know you’re mad, which is why I’m not gonna mention that my son somehow got out of his room, out of the safety of his fucking house in the middle of the night with two grown-ass women inside who are meant to be keeping him safe. I’m also not gonna mention how he crossed the street in the dark, where he could’ve been hit by a car or snatched up and taken away without a fucking trace.” Shit. He looked furious. I hated that he had a right to be. Without hesitation, he handed me my son and I held him close, shutting my eyes and breathing him in as I stroked his head and rocked him. And Twitch watched me closely. “I know you’re upset, and that’s why I’m not gonna mention any of that shit tonight.” He took a step back, away from me, but his eyes spoke volumes. “But tomorrow, we’re gonna talk.”

He turned and strode back across the street barefoot, wearing nothing but boxers and his hoodie, and my entire being hummed in fright, because

there was no getting out of it.

Tomorrow, we would talk.

Dread had me on edge, and I was sure that was the only reason I did what I did that afternoon.

Coming home from work, I looked forward to seeing my little man after the stern talking to I'd given him that morning. Waking as I did the night before was the scariest thing I'd ever experienced in my life. Waking to find my child out of bed, knowing he'd slipped out of the back door and walked around the house to find his father in the middle of the night was a terrifying thought.

All the things that could've happened to him played in my mind on repeat, and I was ready to talk. Or so I thought.

So when I came home to an empty house, I started to panic. My feet took me from room to room and found A.J.'s schoolbag by his bed. My heart picked up pace. Molly always let me know if they were going somewhere, and after last night's scare, I was petrified at the thought of where my son could be.

I reached into my bag and pulled out my cell, dialing Molly's phone.

My brow lowered when I heard it ringing in the kitchen.

*Oh, God.*

My panic quadrupled.

*Where are they?*

My hands shook as I searched the house once more, including the back yard, and came up empty. By the time I was finished, stone-cold dread ate away at me. Taking my keys into my shaking hands, I jogged down the hall and out of the house just as A.J. and Molly exited the house across the street. I don't know what they were doing or why they were there, but immediately, I fumed.

They spotted me and Molly waved while Twitch kept a watchful eye on me.

My anger rose with every step, and by the time I reached them, I snatched my son's hand out of Molly's and held it tightly in mine then got into his father's uneasy face. "I'm only going to tell you this once, Twitch. You stay away from us. From me. From A.J." My voice rose. "You stay away."

My heart was thumping so hard I could barely hear myself over the persistent thud. Without giving him a chance to respond, I all but dragged my son back home, and as he cried, my heart ached.

“No, Mummy. *No!*” My heart raced, as A.J. shouted, “Daddy, don’t leave again. I want to be with you!” When he screeched, “*Daddy,*” at the top of his lungs, I could hardly breathe.

I pulled my son into the house, and when the door closed behind us, I turned on Molly. “Where *were* you? I called and your phone is in the goddamn kitchen. What a shitty, irresponsible thing to do, Molly!”

Molly blinked in shock. I’d never spoken to her like that before. “We were there for five minutes, Lex. A.J. made something for his dad at school and couldn’t wait to take it over.” Her brow furrowed and her voice turned quiet. “I didn’t think you’d mind.”

I spoke over A.J.’s piercing cries. “Well, I do! Jesus, Molly. You scared the crap out of me.” My bravado started to fail. “Do you know how it felt to come home, no note, unable to call you after last night?” My voice cracked. “I was terrified.”

It hit her then, and Molly’s face fell. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t think.”

“No, you didn’t,” I stated, walking A.J. into his room. When I knelt in front of him, gripped his upper arms, I spoke softly. “Honey, you can’t do that. You can’t just leave whenever you want. You have to ask Mommy.”

A.J. spoke through the tears. “I want Daddy.”

I closed my eyes, swallowing through the hurt his pained statement caused. “You can’t have Daddy. You have me. I’m your mom, and what I say goes.”

He struggled in my hold, his breath hitching as he cried. “I don’t want you. I want Daddy.”

*Fuck.*

I burst into tears. “You don’t need him. You have me.”

I didn’t see the blow coming, and it shocked me when it landed.

A short gasp escaped me as my cheek throbbed.

A.J. gritted his teeth, growling in fury, lifted his small hands up over his head, and he brought them down over my face again, as he shrieked, “I don’t want you. You’re stupid!”

Never had I felt the hurt I felt then. Everything Twitch had ever done to me faded to nothing at the act of being struck by my own child.

I wanted to die.

Molly came into the room just as A.J. hit me again. “You’re stupid!” She rushed forward as he smacked me again, screeching, “You’re *stupid!*”

As Molly reached A.J., he fell into her, sobbing, as I fell backward on my bottom, weeping silently.

Scrambling out of there, I made it into my room, shutting the door behind me before I covered my mouth with my hands and let out a low, keening cry. I slid down the door and sat there a while, wondering how on earth we had gotten here, to this, our lowest point.

Hours later, I sat in bed with the light on, reading the words on the page of the novel but not really taking anything in. From the corner of my eye, I saw him move.

Removing my reading glasses, I put down the novel to look at the little boy peeking in from behind the doorframe.

I spoke quietly. “Honey?”

That was all it took.

He ran into the room, and the second he threw himself at me, wrapping his gangly arms around me almost too tightly, I closed my eyes and held him to me, stroking his hair. A long while passed before he spoke, and when he did, I couldn’t contain myself.

His voice was soft, comforting. “You’re not a stupid, Mummy. You’re a smart mummy.”

Oh, lord, did I cry.

“I’m sorry, Mummy.” My son pulled back and used the same hand that struck me to wipe away my tears, and he consoled me as he fought his own sadness. “I love you.”

“I love you more, baby,” I told him through a snuffle.

A.J. slept with me that night, and as I held him close, breathing in his sweet apple-scented hair, I knew something had to be done.

Yes. Something was very wrong in our normally harmonious home.

And his name was Twitch.



## Chapter Fourteen

### Twitch

I kept my eyes on the house across the street. I hadn't seen my son in days. Lexi wasn't exactly handling my presence at the time being, so I stayed away. Since my return, she changed some, and I hated seeing her like this. No longer the fun, loving mother I'd come to watch from afar, she was now an anxious mess, her face strained, her eyes bleak, and knowing I was the cause was fucking with me.

So I held back, continuing my watch, keeping a distance. I didn't know how long I would manage that, but I would hold off for as long as I could. My palms were sweating. I hated feeling out of control, always had, and everything that was happening right now was out of my control.

Angst coursed through me at the thought of being kept from my son. How long would this go on?

For a solid week, I checked Lexi's window at night, and when I found it locked, I left with a nothing but a sigh. All I wanted to do was talk to her, be close to her, and it was killing me to not force myself into her life, as I really wanted to. I could've snuck in if I really put my mind to it. I could've broken the latch, leaving her room forever open to me, but I needed her to want me. To show me she wanted me.

Yesterday morning, in the silence of my home, I heard Happy talking to his woman. He spoke to her a long while, apologizing profusely, taking responsibility for what he'd done, and after what seemed like hours, he walked out of my guest room with his bag.

I peered at him before turning back to stare out the open window. "Goin'?"

"Yeah," he muttered, standing in the open doorway. "Talked to Nikki. She wants me home."

"And Dave?" I knew how much he loved that dude.

Happy sighed, reaching up to rub at his bald head. "He might pop me in the mouth, but I don't care. I'll let it slide. Isn't anything I don't deserve anyways."

Before we got into this mess, we knew there would be consequences. The price was small for what had been gained though. I'd do it all over again. I wondered if Happy would do the same.

Happy approached and I turned, holding my arm out to him. He gripped my forearm before we brought it in, slapping each other on the back. He didn't say a word. All I managed was, "Owe ya."

I didn't need to say it. It was a given. But Happy had put up with me for the past five years, keeping me updated, sending me photos of my son, my woman, being my eyes and ears when I was a world away. He dealt with my temper, my rage, my depression, and he did it without complaint.

Yeah.

I owed him.

When he left, I continued to stare out the window, thinking about my son and how much I wanted him with me.

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## Lexi

The week went slowly, torturously so. I had that time to think about my reaction to Twitch wanting to spend time with our son. My mind wandered to places it shouldn't have. I was still so understandably hurt, but as I sat back and looked at this situation in its entirety, I came to realize that by keeping Twitch from A.J., I wasn't just hurting Twitch. I was hurting my son.

Which was why I was swallowing my pride and walking across the street.

Before I even reached the house, the front door opened and Twitch stepped outside, his brown eyes watchful, likely waiting for another attack, and he was right to expect it. I bit the inside of my cheek to stop myself from verbally lunging at him.

Dressed in navy fitted jeans, a tight black long-sleeved tee, and scuffed white Adidas originals, he ran a hand through his too-long hair. With the scruff on his jawline, he looked like a wet dream. No. That was too tame a statement. He looked like a supercharged wet dream. A wet dream on Ritalin.



*Jesus.*

His shoulders lifted slightly as he moved to put his hands into his jean pockets and when he spoke, his rough voice washed over me. "Hey, angel."

Two words. That was all it took for my nipples to bead.

God. I was pathetic.

Averting his intense gaze, I uttered softly, "Can I come in? I need to talk to you."

Without hesitation, he drawled, "Always welcome here."

My heart ached in a way that made me want to cry. I wouldn't. But I wanted to.

I followed him inside and was surprised to find how homey it felt. The front door opened into a widely spread area, and from my place, I saw the clean kitchen and dining area as well as a small sofa and big screen television. My nosey ass peered down the hall toward the bedrooms, but I quickly inhaled, then turned away.

Twitch, never one to miss a thing, uttered, "Want the tour?" I went to shake my head, but he added, "It ain't much. I mean, it's not the mansion at Darling Point, but—" His lip twitched. "—it's a place to rest my weary head. Besides..." He absently scratched at the scuff at his throat. "I'm tryin' to lay low."

The mansion at Darling Point. Oh, the memories. I spent most of my nights there. It was the place I got pregnant. The same place I almost died after a drug-fueled night. That mansion was my home as much as it was his. I missed it sometimes. I would occasionally drive down there just to get lost in my head a while.

Keeping my distance, I nodded slowly, then lightly sighed. "Sure."

I would be lying if I said I wasn't curious.

As he walked me through the house, I kept two steps behind, needing that space between us. He threw open the door to the bathroom, switching on the light. "Bathroom." Then the door next to it. "Laundry." Down the hall, he opened a room with a double bed. "Guest room." The room beside it was open. It had a single bed with Paw Patrol sheets, a bookcase with children's books, and a toy box. Before he said it, I knew what this was. "A.J.'s room."

My concern reached a fever pitch and I spun on him, asking, "What are you doing, Twitch? Why are you here?" And finally, "What do you want

from us?”

But the beautiful brooding man threw his thumb back behind him, and when he spoke, he did it low, full of insinuation. “Wanna see my room?”

Swallowing hard, I shook my head and hated the way I flushed. “I want you to answer my questions.”

He took in a deep breath before releasing it through his nose. “Not big on demands, baby. You know that.”

My stomach flip-flopped. “Stop calling me baby.”

Leaning against the doorframe, those full lips pursed and his eyes crinkled in the corners. He took his time roaming my body, and when he said the single word, I knew I’d made a huge mistake in coming here. “Never.”

*Say what you came to say and leave, Alexa.*

“A.J.’s miserable,” I told him and was fascinated over the way he straightened and gave me his undivided attention. “So I need to know what your plans are.”

Twitch’s concern stayed at the forefront, but he licked his lips and murmured, “My plan is to be a father to my son.” He added carefully, “If his mom will let me.”

Okay. “He’s not a toy, Twitch.” His eyes narrowed, but I went on. “He’s not something you can play with and put back when you get sick of him. He’s a little boy, an impressionable little boy who, for whatever reason, loves you.” At that statement, Twitch’s body relaxed a little. “So, what’s happening? Are you staying or leaving?” It took everything I had to be brave enough to say what I did. “Because even though it makes me unhappy to see you, I’ll deal with it if that’s what he needs.” My voice quieted. “But you can’t leave. Not like you left me.” Because I didn’t think A.J. would survive it.

No hesitation. “I’m not leavin’.”

A light scoff left me. “Forgive me for having zero confidence in you.” My mouth pulled down in a grim line. “There was once a time when you told me you’d do anything for me, and look how that turned out.”

His eyes bore into me, laser beams, discomfiting. “How do you know I didn’t?” Before I had a chance to think on that, he said, “I’m not going anywhere. I’m back for good. And—” He hesitated. “—I want to be a good

dad.” He dodged my hard gaze, appearing slightly awkward when he added, “So maybe you can help me out there.”

He seemed sincere. Why did that bother me so much?

My heart beat increased in pace. This was it. No going back now. “You can start by picking him up from school today.”

Twitch’s head snapped up, his eyes questioning as if he thought this was a joke.

It was a fucking joke. *I* was a joke. As if I was allowing this.

It wasn’t a decision made lightly. Unfortunately, I knew this man, so I would give him an inch before he ripped a mile from me, leaving a path of destruction around everyone I loved.

When I managed to find the courage to peer up into his eyes, his brows lowered, but he uttered, “Yeah, sure.” When he went on, he did it guardedly. “Am I bringing him here, or...?”

“No, bring him home.” *To me.* “If you want to hang out with your son, you can do it there.” *Under my watchful eye.*

The words unspoken hung in the air.

*I don’t trust you.*

But Twitch’s lip lifted in the corner. “Okay. He’s out by three, right?”

“Yeah. You remember where it is?”

He gave me a singular nod. “I do.” After a moment, he said, “When are we gonna talk? Really talk?”

I was a coward, so I checked my watch. “Another time. I have to go.”

“Yeah.” His lips thinned. “Yoga.”

*What did he just say?*

My brows rose slowly. My mouth gaped. “You’ve been following me?”

He let out a choked laugh and shook his head as if I were hilarious.

“Baby,” was all he said, as if asking, “*Do you even know me?*”

I inwardly sighed.

Of course he’d been following me.

This was Twitch we were talking about. He probably knew my weekly schedule by heart. *Shit.* He probably knew what time I showered every night.

With a long sigh, I shook my head, and uttered, “Yep. I am not even going there today,” and was rewarded with the most beautiful crooked smile

known to man. And that smile struck me in such a way that I knew I needed to get out of there and do it quickly.

Twitch saw me out, and as I walked away, he called to me. When I twisted to face him, his jaw was tight when he said, “The yoga dude, your teacher or whatever the fuck he is.”

My brow knitted. “What about him?”

“You tell him to keep his paws to himself—” He stood tall, eyes darkening a notch. “—or I’ll break ‘em clean off.”

My insides blazed hotter than the sun.

*Ugh.*

The door closed before I could even react, and I should not have felt the way I was feeling at that moment.

*Jesus Christ.*

No.

Definitely not.

When I walked through the front door, I heard him. “Can you, I don’t know, fuck off?”

My brow lowered as I slowed my walk. That was when I heard Molly’s sweet voice. “No, thanks.”

Twitch sighed loudly, and when I made it through the hall entrance, he looked over at me completely flustered, his brows furrowed in annoyance. “Angel, tell her she can leave me alone with my son.”

I looked between Molly and Twitch, then looked over at A.J., who sat oblivious on the sofa, eating his after-school snack. I shook my head slowly. “Molly goes where A.J. goes.”

He blinked at me, irritated beyond belief, and when Molly shot him a wide smile of victory, he stepped toward me. “Jesus, Lex. I’m not gonna fuckin’ steal him away.”

“Aren’t you?”

When he gave me a look of absolute disgust, I almost felt ashamed of myself.

Almost.

I watched his throat bob as he swallowed through the anger. When he spoke, it was little over a whisper. "I would never take him from you." His lips thinned and his brow lowered dangerously at the thought. "Not ever."

*Good to know, not that I'm dumb enough to trust you.*

Before we got into an argument, I slid my bag off my shoulder and onto the floor. "Are you staying for dinner?"

"I don't know." He still sounded injured at my accusation. "What's on the menu?"

"Eggplant Parmesan."

He made a face of pure rapture. "Fuck, yeah, I'm staying."

I shook my head, curbing my smile at his oddly familiar reaction. He loved Italian food, and when I cooked for him, he loved *my* Italian food. As he followed me into the kitchen, I uttered quietly, "You need to stop swearing around him."

Twitch scoffed. "He's heard it all before. He knows not to say that shit." I made a sound low in my throat, and he called out, "A.J., tell Mommy what Daddy told you about swearing."

From the other room, A.J. spoke loud enough for us both to hear. "I can listen to it but can't say it." Then he added, "Not until I'm older."

My brows pulled down, and I called back, "Not until *ever*," and Twitch grinned so hard that I felt it in my womb.

At dinnertime, we sat at the table, and while Twitch was already on his second serving of my Eggplant Parmesan, A.J. glared down at his plate. "I don't like it."

"You either eat or go to bed. It's your choice, honey," I told him. We never had an issue until a meal was all vegetables. I got it—he was five; he was also a boy, and my son was a carnivore.

He folded his arms across his chest. "You don't have to eat things you don't like. Why do you make me eat things I don't like?"

A look of pure sympathy washed over my features. I leaned down, placing a gentle hand on his shoulder, squeezing. "Because I'm your mother and your suffering is very important to me."

Twitch snuffled out a laugh, and when A.J. peered up at him with pleading eyes, Twitch raised his hands. "Don't look at me, bud. Mommy makes the rules around here."

I'll admit, it was nice to have backup, and, not surprisingly, after Twitch said that, A.J. started to pick at his food.

Before long, it was time for A.J.'s bath, and Twitch said goodnight to the tiny version of him, and after he was gone, I had to think real hard about why the house felt so empty without him.



## Chapter Fifteen

Lexi

“Hey.” Twitch came jogging from across the street. “Am I picking him up today?”

The other night felt too familiar, too natural, and I spent half the time pondering why I was so upset at that. Truth was, it was everything I dreamed about. A home with my son and his father, a domestic setting. It was something that made my soul ache.

It wasn’t a good idea for me to fall into a fantasy headfirst. It did nothing to dwell on the past. I needed to think about the now. And this was moving rather quickly. I needed to slow it down.

No. I needed it to come to a complete stop.

Shaking my head, I took a step closer to him, and said, “Baby steps.”

His face changed, and although he didn’t look angry, he was certainly irritated and peered at me a long while through drawn brows, before he muttered, “It’s Thursday.”

Yes. I also went to kindergarten. I too knew the days of the week. “I know.”

“If it’s okay with you, I’d like to come to his swimming lesson.”

I hesitated. It was one thing to have Twitch in my home where I could control the setting. I didn’t like the thought of being out and about with him as a family. “Look, I don’t know.” But Twitch just stared at me, and I caught on swiftly with a light roll of my eyes. “You’ve already decided you’re coming, haven’t you?”

He peered down at me, his eyes full of amusement. “My asking was more a courtesy.”

A light sigh left me.

Of course it was.

As I loaded up my things into the car, I uttered, “I guess we’ll see you later then.”

But he didn’t walk away. Instead, he took one step closer then another, and when he was in my personal space, he looked down at my dress. “The



other day, the dress you wore, the one with all the frilly shit on it.” He paused, watching me closely. “Liked it. Looked good on you.”

*I didn't wear it for you.*

He always did like when I “dressed nice.”

As far as compliments went, that was top shelf for Twitch. I avoided his gaze, and replied clinically, “Thank you.”

“We gonna talk tonight?” His side brushed mine, and my entire body burned. When I made no move to respond, he clicked his tongue. “We need to talk, Alexa.”

*Uh oh.*

He only ever called me Alexa before I got a spanking.

*Ah, crap.*

I loved being spanked.

*Nuh uh.*

No. I loved when *Twitch* spanked me.

*Ugh. Shit.*

Sudden flashes of images past flooded my mind, and as I struggled to breathe, my fingers loosened and I dropped my keys. When Twitch squatted down to pick them up, those images intensified. Wide-eyed, I peered down at him, unblinking, as he looked up at me knowingly. With other things on his mind, he glanced at my crotch, and my core clenched under his watchful eye. He ran his tongue over his bottom lip, my knees weakened, and I had to lock them together to hold myself up, mortified that he was evidently thinking the same thing I was.

When he spoke quietly, the air left me in a whoosh.

“I feel like we’ve been here before.”

I snatched my keys out of his hand, and the only sounds that could be heard in the street was the clip-clopping of my heels as I all but ran to the driver side of my car.

*Goddamn it.*

The sexual tension was building. He was making sure of that. And I was falling into his sticky web.

“Yeah! C’mon, A.J!” Twitch stood and called out before sitting back down, looking at me through wide eyes. “Look at him go.”

“He’s good.” And he was so excited, so proud, that I couldn’t help but smile. “He’s been swimming since he was two.”

“He’s not just good, Lex.” Twitch shook his head. “He’s a fuckin’ child prodigy. I mean—” He waved an arm out. “—none of the other kids are that fast.” He caught the eye of a mother glaring at him. “No offense, lady.”

Oh my God. I tilted my head toward him and whispered, “Will you stop?” Sure, he wasn’t wrong. A.J. was a great swimmer. It was as if I were seeing my son with fresh eyes. “But you’re right.” When I felt his eyes on me, I kept my own trained on our son. “He’s amazing.”

We were quiet a while before he spoke. “You did that.” I looked at him. “That’s all on you, baby.” His gaze held me captive. I couldn’t look away. “You’re a great fuckin’ mom.” When he turned back to watch our son, he uttered, “Knew you would be.”

Was I though?

I thought I was doing okay. But, recently, it didn’t feel like it.

Over the last few weeks, with every day that passed, I felt I was failing him. As a mother, as a protector, as a role model, everything I taught him, I had done the opposite of with his father. No wonder his behavior was so funky lately. He probably looked at me and wondered why he needed to follow the rules when his mother couldn’t.

I vowed to try harder for the sake of my son. I would not disrespect his father in front of him. I would not let my anger rule my emotions. And, for the sake of our happiness, I would talk to Twitch and try to figure out how to make this work for all of us.

Our family was small. Our family was fragmented. But that didn’t mean we couldn’t all get along.

A.J.’s happiness meant more to me than my own contentment, so, for the greater good, I would smile through my discomfort.

When we got home, Twitch paused by the lawn, and when I let A.J. into the house, I held the door open in silent invitation, watching him closely.

The moment his feet moved, I turned, walking down the long hall and into the kitchen before kneeling in front of the sleepy little monster. “Get ready for bed.”

But A.J., as drowsy as he was, looked to his dad. “Can I stay up?”

“No,” I answered for the both of us. “You need to get into your jammies, honey.”

With a look of sheer aggravation, A.J. put his hands to my arms and pushed lightly. “It’s not fair.”

And at that moment, Twitch let out a humorless laugh. “Whoa there, boy.” When A.J. gazed up at him, Twitch threw him a hard look. “I know you didn’t just put your hands on your mother.” Without asking, he helped me to stand and took my place, kneeling in front of our precious boy. “We do not hit women. Not in anger. Not ever. You feel me?”

A.J.’s shame was worn on his sleeve, and even though Twitch made him stew a while, he put a gentle hand to his son’s messy hair. “You’re tired, aren’t you, buddy?” A.J. nodded, unable to look up into his father’s eyes. “Say goodnight to your mom. I’ll come in, read you a story.”

Wow. He was doing to the whole “being a father” thing rather well.

It was confusing. Part of me cheered for him, part of me hoped he failed, and some small sliver of my hurt pride wished he found the job too hard and disappeared again. That same small sliver caused me immeasurable amounts of apprehension.

Without a word, A.J. shuffled over and wrapped his arms around me in silent apology. I hugged him as tightly as I could without cutting off his air supply, because I knew how it felt to be reprimanded by Twitch, and it didn’t feel good.

Having given Molly the night off, I watched Twitch walk the small carbon copy of him down the hall and into his room, and then started on the dishes. Not long after, I heard soft footfalls, and then he was enquiring, “That happen a lot?”

I knew what he was asking. “No. Only since your arrival.”

“No shit,” he said, coming to stand at my side while I continued to wash the dishes. “I’ll talk to him.”

My brow furrowed, but a small smile appeared on my lips. “I think *I* should give him the ‘we don’t hit women’ talk.”

In not so many words, a bold allegation was made. He was a hypocrite. How could someone like him, who very clearly liked to put his hands on women and dominate them, talk to his son about not doing what he so very much enjoyed?

A moment of silence passed between us.

“What do you think I should have said to him, baby?” His voice was smooth as silk, and when he came to stand behind me, my lungs ceased to function. Strong hands came to rest on my waist, and I blinked drowsily, drunk on his closeness. When he pressed his front into my back, my

stomach clenched and a shaky breath left me. “That I don’t hit women—” His lips touched the shell of my ear and my nipples peaked. “—not unless they beg me real, real nicely?”

*Oh, fuck.*

Where had all the air gone?

The moment I felt his thick erection, my mouth parted in a silent moan. He pulled back a moment to adjust himself, and then his cock’s impression was resting between my yoga pant-covered ass cheeks. He thrust lightly once, twice... until my eyes snapped open with a start.

Oh, God, it physically hurt to say it, but it needed to be said. “Stop.”

But Twitch was not feeling my “stop.” In fact, he felt it was so weak a protest that he simply lowered his face to the side of my neck, gently biting the delicate skin there, and when his teeth nipped me, my entire body jerked.

“Stop.” Louder this time, but the breathy tone in which I spoke said something else.

“No.” Twitch opened his mouth and attached himself to me, sucking on the sensitive area where my neck and shoulder met. One hand slid up, over my ribs, to rest just under my aching breast. And I died.

*Jesus, girl. You aren’t seriously thinking about going through with this, are you? Have you learned nothing about impulse control? I know this guy makes you loopy with all his sex voodoo, but shit, he’s got you being the reckless bitch you left behind.*

The thought was enough to force a knee-jerk reaction, and without so much as a word, I pushed back with my bottom hard enough to catch him off guard. When he stumbled back a step, I spun around, holding a hand out. My face was flushed, and I all but panted, “Stop,” and this time, I meant it.

Twitch frowned down at me, looking mildly exasperated, but he closed his eyes, taking in a deep breath. When he reached down and wrapped his fingers around his denim-covered cock, squeezing tightly, I thought I’d fall to my knees and beg him to feed it to me.

Luckily, I was out of breath and momentarily speechless.

My eyes firmly fixed on those deft fingers massaging his hard length. The next words he spoke were a warning. “You keep looking at me like I’m a snack, I’m gonna have you on your knees.” As I lifted my head, his

hooded gaze held me fast. “And when I tell you to suck my cock, you’re gonna do as you’re told, angel.”

*He left you.*

*He left his son.*

*He is selfish, a sociopath who doesn’t know how to love. He is damaged and he left you broken. Don’t ever forget that.*

My glance firm, I met his eyes and told him, “I don’t belong to you.” I shook my head. “Not anymore.”

He didn’t even flinch. “Yeah, you do.” His arrogance was maddening. “The fact that you felt the need to vocalize tells me just how much ownership I have over you. I know you want me, but you’re mad at me, rightfully so, so you’re not letting yourself have what you really want. And you can fight me, baby. You know I’m into that. But when it all gets too much and you need me as much as I need you, you just gotta do one thing.” He stepped back, away from me, and I felt the loss immediately. “Leave a light on.”

My brow furrowed.

Leave a light on?

Twitch took another step back, and it took every ounce of strength I had not to follow him. “We rekindle what we lost and it all goes down well, then we’re gonna talk—” Those soft brown eyes landed on my collar and, I swear, they flashed briefly. “—about those pretty bras of yours and who you’re wearing ‘em for.”

And I watched, open-mouthed, as Twitch walked down the hall and out of my house.

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## Ling

The meet was going as well as it could, seeing I had countless enemies in this very room. At any moment, any one of those fuckers could pick up their gun, lift it high, and shoot me dead. Did that bother me?

No. It didn’t.

In fact, feeling as I felt now, looking across the room at the beautiful Turk, all I wished for was someone to do it and set this miserable bitch free.

Aslan Sadik was an illness, and I had caught him—bad. I had all the symptoms. Lack of sleep, little to no appetite, irritability, and a heavy feeling weighing on my chest.

My lip curled as I watched him laugh, grinning through his conversation with Titus Okoye, the just-visiting Liberian arms dealer.

I fucking hated him.

So when Elias Munoz, the too-young-to-looks-like-he-could-lead, American-Argentinian boss of Los Gatos Negros came to sit by me, I blinked at him. “Are you lost?”

Elias smirked at my attitude. Whatever, fucker. “You seemed like you needed the company.”

I scoffed exaggeratedly. “Elias, I never lack company when I want it.” My eyes smoldered down at his crotch, and I made a show of licking my cherry-red lips before leaning in. “There a bathroom around here we could slip away to?”

Elias was neutral. Fucking him would cause me no harm, because we had nothing to do with each other. Our borders didn’t touch, and our men rarely came into contact, but when they did, no issues arose. And even though he looked tempted, he reached out to run his thumb along my jaw, and said, “I’ve heard about you, Ling, about what you like.” He shook his head, moving to pull away. “I’m not into that.”

Before he managed to escape me, I took that large hand and held it in mine, playing with his long fingers. “I have many tastes, Elias. I’m something of a chameleon. I can be whatever you want me to be.” I grinned playfully. “I just need you to punch me in the mouth so I can come is all.”

Elias blinked at me a long moment before his lip twitched. Then, when he tipped his head back and laughed so loudly, I knew I had achieved my goal. From my peripheral vision, I saw the Turk watching me, and it took everything inside me not to look at him, to taunt him openly.

*Fuck you, Az. You think you’re special? I don’t need you.*

I didn’t hear Luka Pavlovic approach, but when he towered over me, he looked furious. “I know what you did, *kurva*.”

My eyes narrowed on him. “I beg your pardon?”

His lip curled. “We all know what you did, Dragon whore. To Julius. To his wife.” When he leant down into my face, my first reaction was to scratch his eyes out. But I maintained the picture of calm. “If this wasn’t

neutral ground, I would end you right here where you sit.” He made a show of looking me up and down. “You don’t have a friend in the world, Ling, not especially in this room, so why don’t you just take your skinny little ass and walk it off a cliff?”

Luka was a well-respected man. The so-called King in these parts. The Croat held me firm with his eyes, and a tangible silence filled the room. The foreboding I felt held me weighed down in that seat, and when I looked around at the men around me, I found not one of them willing to step forward and stand with me. Not even the beautiful Turk.

Whelp, that was my cue to leave.

Although my heart was racing, I turned to Elias. “Wanna come home with me? I promise I’ll be gentle.”

But, as I knew he would, Elias shook his head slowly. “No thanks.”

I pursed my lips in dissatisfaction. “What about you, Luka?” I took a step forward and gently touched his tie. “I’ll let you punish me. I’ll even try not to come.”

Luka expression turned irate. His voice low, he spoke through gritted teeth. “I’ve never hit a woman before, but for you, tonight, I might just make a fucking exception. You repulse me, deviant.”

At his unrestrained anger, my eyes flashed. “Ooh, Luka. Don’t tease, baby. I’m already soaked.” I took his hand, bringing it towards the hem of my dress. “Wanna feel?”

When he snatched his hand away, I laughed musically, then looked around at all the stoic faces surrounding me. “Don’t even try it. Every single one of you has eliminated a problem before, and Julius, my old friend, was mine. So come at me if you need to, but don’t pull this holier than thou shit. I did what I needed to, to get myself where I am today, and I gotta say—” My eyes narrowed. “—the view isn’t what was promised in the brochure.”

Glaring at each and every one of them, I stood from my seat and maintained eye contact as I left the room. As I walked out, my gaze landed on Aslan, and when he looked away, I smirked in victory. But when I was out of sight, I pulled out my cell and dialed, putting the phone to my ear as I walked.

Tensions were rising, and I needed to get my shit together.





## Chapter Sixteen

### Lexi

I was sad. Saying goodbye to Manda was harder than I thought, considering we'd only just met. We spent an awful lot of time hugging and she promised to come back soon, maybe with her father. I promised to keep in touch and send her updates on her nephew. She promised to send me a video of her husband speaking in that sexy brogue of his.

We were two women brought together by chance, parted by distance, and I hated that she was now an ocean away. I truly felt she was my biggest ally at the moment.

Every time I spoke to Nikki, she asked constantly about how things were going with Twitch, when things weren't going at all. Whenever I managed to catch Dave, he bluntly enquired when Twitch was leaving again, and it very well nearly broke me because he was only asking what I was actually thinking. When I spoke to Julius, he refused to speak about Twitch at all, and Ana was hardly a conversationalist. I had yet to speak to Happy, and the more time that passed, the more it felt like a widening bridge between us.

It seemed hardly fair to have Twitch in constant contact while I couldn't spare a word for a person who I would describe as my rock when shit went down.

I decided it was time for old traditions to recommence.

Tonight, we'd eat dinner together, as a family. Only tonight, we'd place an extra setting and try to avoid anyone becoming seriously injured.

Yes. That was definitely the goal. That nobody left bleeding.

I checked the oven, and the smell wafting out of it was divine. With a smile, I got to work making the gnocchi from scratch. It wasn't hard once you knew what you were doing, and I'd learned to make it years ago, no longer needing a recipe, simply going off feel alone. I was still working away when the doorbell went off, and when I opened the door, the tall, blond man who stood there smiled down at me almost sadly.

Putting my hands on my hips, I said, "David Allen, you get over here right now."

Dave didn't need to be told twice. He wrapped his arms around me and I closed my eyes, not realizing until just this moment how much I missed my friend. When he pulled back, he looked grim. "I'm sorry I haven't been in touch."

I rolled my eyes. "Don't start. I know this hasn't been easy on you."

Dave frowned. "Don't do that, Lex. Don't make excuses for me. Yeah, I got a shock, but your shock was so much bigger than mine and I lost focus of things. I'm sorry."

I didn't tell him it was actually easier without everyone around, butting into my business. Instead, I smiled, and stated, "Apology accepted." I turned and made my way back into the kitchen and he followed. "So, tell me what's happening. How are things with Happy?"

"Not great. But we're, ah..." Dave made a sound in his throat. "Talking."

I spoke fluent Dave. They weren't talking. They were fucking.

My grin was hard to hide. "Well, that's good. Isn't it?"

Dave pulled up a chair as I went to work on the gnocchi. "I guess. I'm having a hard time with this, Lex." He sighed long and low. "I already have trust issues. This has just rocked me."

I know what he meant. "Yeah. I get that."

At my bleak response, Dave focused on me. "How are you?"

"I'm doing as well as I can under the circumstances." I threw him a wide-eyed look. "I don't think I meet the height requirement for this emotional rollercoaster."

"Well, all I can say is I hope you've learned something from all this, because—"

The front door opened and Molly walked in, followed by A.J.

Twitch trailed close behind.

The second Dave saw Twitch, he stood, wearing an expression of pure disbelief. "Are you serious, Lex?" He sputtered, "For fuck's sake, you cannot be serious right now." His hands shook. "Have you learnt nothing? Don't you see what he's doing?" My neck began to flush, and I was glad that Molly was smart enough to have read the signs and took A.J. into his room while Dave vented. "It's bad enough he's across the street." His face was strained. "I'm shocked at you. I didn't think you'd be stupid enough to let him in your house!"

I saw the exact moment Twitch went from mildly agitated to purely enraged. He took a menacing step forward. "The fuck you just say?" Then another. "I know you did not just call my woman stupid, Dave."

But Dave was feeling brave. "Your woman." He laughed humorlessly then looked to me. "His woman? That was quick, Lex. Nice."

Oh, no. My plans were going down the drain fast. Someone was going to get hurt if I didn't do something.

"You piece of shit," Twitch said, speaking softly, never raising his voice. "You're gonna leave and you're gonna do it now." His eyes darkened. "Before I fucking make you."

"Stop it." My voice shook.

Dave scoffed. "You're going to make me?" After a moment's silence, he thundered, "Who the fuck are you to come into this house and make threats? You hurt Lexi. You hurt her beyond repair. Unlike you, I *love* this woman. See, Twitch, that's what you do when you love someone. You tell them things they don't want to hear because it's the right thing to do. You treat them like they deserve to be treated. You *stick around*."

My heart began to race. The tension was thick enough to cut with a knife.

At Twitch's murderous expression, my entire body stilled. "You think I didn't wanna be here, with my girl, with my fucking *son*?" Twitch spoke low. "You think I wanted to spend the last five years sleeping under bridges, in train stations, without a fucking cent to my name, because I couldn't claim that name anymore?" He took another step and my gut sank at his words. "What? You think I've been out there hustlin', fucking around, vacationing in Ibiza? Let me tell you something, my man. Chicks don't dig homeless guys." His lips thinned. "Oh, yeah. The glamorous life. You got my number, Dave."

My heart ached. Oh, how it ached.

Hearing all of that did something to me, to my soul. A small fragment of my broken heart began to repair itself.

My heart threw me an earnest look.

*I told you he wouldn't have done what he did without a reason.*

My brain rolled its eyes.

*If you believe him, you're a freaking moron. Don't let the same snake bite you twice.*

At war with myself, a decision was made. There was no avoiding it. It was high time Twitch and I talked.

Dave lost some of his steam, but his jaw was tight when he uttered, “You owe us an explanation. Where have you been?”

At that, Twitch lost his cool. His eyes flashed. “I don’t owe you shit, motherfucker.” Then his brows lowered. “The only person I need to be talking to about this is the angel standing right there.” He jerked his chin toward me. “And she ain’t ready for that, so I’m doing something I rarely do.” He glanced at me meaningfully. “I’m waiting.”

Twitch was not a patient man. He was compulsive and had control issues. The fact that he was showing restraint... it was monumental.

Who was this man, and what had he done with the rash, selfish, and careless one I knew way back when?

Twitch spouted the words as if this was his home and he had the right to. “You got two choices, Dave. You can leave with your tail between your legs and my foot up your ass,” he offered. “Or you can shut the fuck up, apologize, and eat the meal your girl’s making.” He looked Dave up and down, measuring him. “If I were you, I’d choose option two. It’s been a long time, and I’m spoilin’ for a fight.”

Without waiting for a response, Twitch went down the hall, looking for his son.

A long while passed before Dave spoke again, and before he did, he cleared his throat. “I didn’t mean what I said.” A slight pause. “You’re not stupid, Lex.”

Wasn’t I though?

My son had called me stupid. My friends were now calling me stupid. It was a common theme of late, and if one was being called out repeatedly, chances were that person was the thing they were labeled.

I was suddenly overwhelmed and my throat thickened with emotion. I spoke quietly, blinking away tears. “Don’t worry about it. It’s been a little crazy around here.”

“Yeah.” Dave’s low tone matched mine. “I can see that. The last thing you need is for your friends to start turning on you.” He put a hand to my shoulder. “I’m so sorry.”

Abruptly depressed, I felt the need to explain myself and my actions. “It’s just that A.J.’s been miserable without him, and the more I keep him

from his father, the more he lashes out.”

“Oh, sweetie.”

My heart thumped. “I didn’t know what to do, and even though it’s been hard on me, I thought if I just let him see Twitch, he’d be happier.”

“Of course.”

It was difficult to breathe around the strain in the air. “You can’t possibly understand the situation I’m in. I’m screwed if I do, screwed if I don’t. I’m trying to be smart about this, Dave. Just trying to take the road with the least amount of mines buried in it.”

He looked absolutely dejected. “I know.”

“And Twitch has been surprisingly good in this time,” I revealed grudgingly. “It’s like... I don’t know. He’s changed, Dave. I don’t know where he was or what he was doing, but the time away has done something to him.” My eyes imploring, I uttered, “This man is going to be around. I’d like it if we all got along. If you can’t do it for me, please, do it for A.J., because he loves his dad.”

“And what about you, Lex?” He held my eyes. “Do you love him?”

*Until the day I die.* “I don’t even know him anymore.”

Dave seemed moderately appeased by my response because he left it at that. He also joined us for dinner, and when people started to arrive, their concern about Twitch being present was worn so clearly on their faces they didn’t have to say a word about it.

Thankfully, nobody said a thing about it, and honestly, I wouldn’t have either, given the daring glares Twitch handed out. It felt awkward for a while, but when Ana began to talk to Twitch, the table came alive with conversation. Sure, Twitch wasn’t terribly involved, but he stayed, and Julius remained civil, watching his old friend, his brother, with a light in his eyes I couldn’t exactly read.

What was it? Wistfulness? Anger? Sadness? I couldn’t put my finger on it. Perhaps a bit of all three.

When Happy stepped through the door with Nikki, I found it hard to look at him, and when he approached me carefully, as one would a spooked deer, I looked up at my friend and watched him crumble. He opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. He peered over at a watchful Twitch before his lips thinned and his eyes closed, as he muttered, “Lex, I... I’m so sorry.”

When I took the three steps over and wrapped my arms around his middle, he held me so tightly I choked up. I felt his apology, felt his sorrow at disappointing me, felt his regret in that tight embrace. I didn't speak. I couldn't. I simply reached up and took his face in my hands, pressing a soft kiss to his cheek.

It wasn't forgiveness, not exactly. It was a small mercy I bestowed on him, because I loved him, my dear friend.

Soon after eating dessert, everyone was making a move to leave, and Twitch was in the middle of saying goodnight to A.J. I hadn't meant to eavesdrop, but when I approached, my son's question held me captive.

"Uncle Dave said you hurt Mummy." He paused a moment. "Is that why she's mad at you?"

"Yeah, bud," was all Twitch said.

"Did you say sorry?"

"No, I didn't." He hesitated. "I can't say sorry for what I did."

"Sometimes when I make Mummy upset, she needs a hug." My heart jolted. "Maybe you should hug her."

Twitch snuffled out a light laugh. "I might try that. Thanks for the advice."

A.J. sounded pleased with himself. "You're welcome."

I couldn't help but smile as I walked back into the kitchen.

Truth was, after the month I'd had, I could've used a hug.



## Chapter Seventeen

### Lexi

Twitch spent the afternoon with A.J. after picking him up from school, and when I came home from work with a headache and in a foul mood, he cornered me in the hall as I was coming out of my room.

His watchful gaze roamed my face. “You okay?”

*What do you care?*

Ugh. Knee-jerk reaction. I really needed to stop with that.

I winced, then looked up at him through squinted eyes, speaking quietly. “Yeah. Just need some pain pills and I’ll be good.”

When he marched into the kitchen and opened the cabinets, it took me a moment, but I followed him, and when he filled a glass with water and approached holding the pills in one hand, the glass of water in the other, I stood there, lips puckered in thought. “What are you doing?”

He frowned down at the pills, then looked back up at me without speaking.

I hesitated.

Twitch sighed, taking the glass and resting it on the edge of the kitchen table; the pills followed. He took a long, hard look at me before he uttered, “Stubborn-ass woman,” then left the room to sit with A.J. on the sofa, watching *The Lego Movie*.

I wasn’t used to this, to Twitch being an active participant in my life. Even when we dated, we had an odd relationship. It was give and take.

I gave while Twitch took, sometimes more than I had to give.

So sue me for being hesitant. I wasn’t used to being looked after by a man who once told me he’d break me.

Sighing lightly, I took the pills with a big gulp of water, then walked into the family room and looked to Molly. “I need a few minutes for these pills to work.”

She nodded. “No problem. I’ll take care of dinner.”

I threw her a look of pure gratitude. “You’re wonderful.” When my eyes settled on the two entangled bodies on the sofa, my heart melted. Twitch lay on his back, his arms twisted up and behind his head, causing his biceps to



bulge in a way that was almost sinful. The little boy draped across his legs with sock-covered feet hugged his dad with both arms, as if he were scared he'd be taken from him, and my melting heart ached painfully. When A.J. reached into Twitch's hoodie pocket and retrieved a couple of chocolate rainbow-colored buttons, throwing them into his mouth, memories of a time long past came flooding back.

Those sweet brown eyes focused on me. "Are you okay, Mummy?"

I smiled at my son. "Fine, honey. Thank you for asking." I chanced a sneaky look at Twitch that turned out not to be so sneaky because said man was staring right at me, a familiar heat in his gaze.

My last thought before I went back to my room was bleak.

*If you hurt him, I will kill you myself.*

And if it came to it, I was sure I would.

"Hey, mama bear."

I stretched under the covers and blinked through the drowsiness. The long shadow lying beside me spoke again. "Your cub's askin' for you."

Confused and blinking through my slumber, I asked a rough, "What time is it?"

"Seven thirty."

My eyes snapped open. "What?" I sat up in bed and the covers fell to my waist. I stretched languidly, and spoke through a yawn, "Why didn't anyone wake me?"

Twitch elevated himself, resting his head on his upturned hand.

"Because I told everyone to shut the fuck up and let you sleep."

I let out a long breath. "You didn't need to do that."

"I know I didn't, but I did." His eyes rested on my collar, drifting downward. "You need to look after yourself, baby." I suddenly realized I was wearing a tiny tank top without a bra, and when I tried to discreetly cover my chest, his lips lifted at the corners. "Nothing I haven't seen before." As he stood, he said, "Only a matter of time before I see it all again."

A shocked laugh left me. "You're so full of shit."

"I'm not." He sounded slightly insulted.

"Oh, but you are," I insisted then released an offhand smirk. He didn't need to know I was burning up at the thought of being with him again.

"What makes you think I still want you, Twitch?"

He leaned into me then and I pulled back at the intimacy in that small move. And when he spoke, the words hit me with the force of a thousand orgasms. “Because I’m your motherfucking king, and you are my beautiful queen. So be good, bow down to me—” His voice lowered a notch. “—and let me love you.” He slid off the covers, leaving me feeling bereft and alone. He straightened, and the air of cockiness about him increased a whole level. He slowly moved toward the door. “Come say goodnight to our son so I can bring you back to bed and show you how much I missed you.”

The air burned in my lungs. “You’re fucking crazy.”

He grinned then. “Guilty, baby.”

If chaos and fury were ever joined, Twitch would be the child born of the coupling. And what a crazy, beautiful hurricane he was.

My resolve was wavering at an alarming pace. I couldn’t deny I wanted him. The question was, was I senseless enough to let him back in?

Later that night, it took some convincing, but Twitch finally left, and as he did, he shook his head and sighed. It was after eleven when I got up to get a glass of water, and when I put the glass to my lips, my heart stuttered at the shadow sitting on the back porch.

My brows narrowed, as I muttered under my breath, “What the hell is he doing?”

*Why is he hiding out there?*

As quickly as the thought came, I recognized the error in my assumption.

He wasn’t hiding at all. He was waiting on me to find him.

Taking my glass of water, I unlocked the sliding door, stepping outside. Without a word, I came to sit on the top step, wrapping my kimono around my legs as I did. Twitch sat on the bottom step, and when he put something to his lips and a soft orange glow shone bright in the darkness, I glowered in the dark. “Are you serious?”

He took in a deep inhale of the joint, and when he blew it out, he said, “It’s for my glaucoma.”

My brows arched, and as he took another hit, I leaned forward and softened my tone. “You have glaucoma?”

He choked on his laugh, smoke billowing out of his mouth with every cough, and mortification turned me hot.

Oh my God. I was an idiot.

Twitch's rough laughter went on and on, and the longer it went, a smile formed on my lips, and soon after, I was chuckling at my own stupidity.

"Oh, shut up. I'm tired."

As his laughter subsided, he muttered, "Fuck, I missed you."

"You didn't have to miss me." I couldn't help myself. I was hurting.  
"You could've just stayed."

"You think if that was an option, I wouldn't have been here?"

I shrugged. "I don't know."

When I gazed over at him, he caught my eye a moment, before he uttered roughly, "Don't look at me like that."

"Like what?"

The intensity of his gaze pierced me. "Like you hate me."

Didn't I?

Why didn't I?

I lowered my hurt stare and sighed. It was time. "Let's talk."

Twitch took another hit of the joint before offering it to me. I hesitated, and he uttered, "It helps me sleep."

I shook my head, but I wanted it so badly, somehow needing it to cope with the conversation ahead. I balled my hands into fists and refused politely. "I don't do that anymore." Memories of Twitch putting his lips to mine and lightly blowing the pungent smoke into my mouth as I inhaled the mix of drugs and the man himself had me heady.

My chest ached with the need to relive that. But I stood firm, denying that need.

"Why did you do it?" I spoke into the silent night.

He didn't speak for a long while, and I wondered if he actually would. But then he started, and although it may not have been the explanation I wanted, it was an explanation nonetheless. "I never planned on things going the way they did. Never planned on wanting you the way I do, needing you the way I do. And once you were a drug coursing through my veins, I knew I'd do anything for you. Even disappear, if that's what it took."

My silence was an invitation to keep going, and he did. "I made some poor decisions in my time as king. Made enemies and didn't care because I never planned to live past forty." He took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "But that changed, and I knew if I claimed you openly, I'd be

putting a target on your head.” He looked at me. “I need you to know I never intended to die on you, but when you sprung it on me that you were pregnant and that asshole shot me, it was an opportunity I couldn’t waste.”

I was so confused. “I don’t understand. What opportunity?”

“Spent a lot of time looking for people, clearing my streets of threats.” He shot me a look. “Purging the badness and getting myself to a position where coming back would mean nothing touched my boy.”

Oh my God. That sounded like he was telling me that he’d spent the last five years tracking people down and... murdering them. “Why are you telling me this?”

“You and I are now an open book.” His eyes held me firmly. “I hope you can handle that, baby, because some of the shit I’m going to tell you is fucked, even for me.”

My heart jolted. Was I ready for that? I didn’t know.

“Turned myself into the cops.”

“What?” I asked, completely stunned.

He snuffled out a laugh. “I know. Me, working with the authorities. What the fuck, right? Worked with the FBI a while, and if I delivered what I promised, I earned complete immunity and got to come back to you. That was the deal.” He paused. “I didn’t think it’d take as long as it did. I was arrogant, thinking I’d wrap shit up within a year.” He scoffed. “The first year was the hardest. I got nowhere fast. No leads, no resources. The only two people who knew I was alive were the two people who helped me become dead. Slept on the street, stole what I needed, and lived off garbage at one point. Sometimes I’d throw a shit-fit and give up, plan on staying dead. But...” He closed his eyes then peered at me tiredly. “I’m selfish, baby. Needed to be with my son. Needed to come home to you.”

He leaned back on the step, resting on his elbows, looking out into the yard. “No one was taking your crown. Not on my watch. I forged you a throne, angel, and I made it from the bloody, mutilated corpses of every fucker who got in my way, leave you sitting pretty in a pool of blood, wearing a crown of thorns.” He smirked, then his voice filled with reverence. “My queen.”

My stomach clenched. That should not have lit a fire inside me. Jesus Christ, I was a fucking freak.

“No one was getting to you, to my boy. Use my body as a shield. Cut me open. Bleed me dry.” He shook his head slowly. “Not happening.”

I had so many questions. I don’t know why I chose the one I did. “What happened to your tattoo?”

I didn’t need to specify. The iconic 13 I’d come to love no longer graced the apple of his cheek. In its place was a scar. The scar I’d witnessed him receiving at eight years old when we were children, brought together for one short night, destined to meet again as lovers, and although I didn’t know it at the time, I needed him.

He was a fire so hot his flame turned blue. And I wanted to be burned over and over again, smiling through the pain and begging for more.

I was clearly a masochist, but sometimes you needed to bleed to be reminded that you were still alive. And Twitch made me bleed, oozing red warmth until my heart stopped, and every time he killed me, I was revived with a single kiss.

His love was deadly, and I didn’t want the antidote.

Twitch peered at me a long moment. “A little give, a little take. You know how it works, baby. I gave a little, so now it’s your turn. You give me what I want, and I’ll answer your questions.”

Immediately weary, I let out a hushed, “What do you want?”

His voice rough, he named it. “I want you to touch me.”

When I rolled my eyes and moved to stand, his warm hand closed around my wrist, pulling me back down. “Not like that. I mean anywhere. Anywhere you want. Just—” His voice was low, coarse. “—touch me, baby.”

It sounded so innocent, but I knew Twitch, and nothing about him was innocent. To believe he were capable of anything so pure was foolish. But I wanted to touch him.

I inwardly sighed. I loathed that I lived for affection. Something as basic as a simple touch was so important to me. It could convey messages untold, and right now, the need Twitch wore on his fatigued face told me he needed it.

Shuffling over, he waited patiently as I lifted my right hand and brought it to his face, gently cupping his cheek. The moment my fingers came into contact with his warm skin, his eyes closed of their own accord and I watched him take in a deep breath, releasing it slowly, savoring my touch.

The affect I had on him filled me with sudden power, and I reveled in his relaxed state.

Placing my other hand to his neck, I scraped my fingernails over the neatly trimmed scruff, celebrating the way his face wore a look of pure rapture, and spoke quietly, "Tell me."

He made a sound low in his throat. "It was too obvious a marker. The FBI made me laser it off." He groaned quietly as my hand slid down to his shoulder, lightly kneading the knot I found, and he spoke through an exhale, "Thought about you every second, every day."

I wanted to climb into his lap and beg for a single kiss. "Where do we go from here?" Then, even more quietly, "How do we move on?"

His hooded gaze landed on me, and his response was as soft as his whiskey voice would allow. "Very fuckin' slowly."

I peered into those soft brown eyes and ran my fingers gently down his jawline. My voice was little over a whisper. "I don't know if I can ever forgive you."

His reply was pure Twitch. "Never asked for it, angel."

Arrogant ass.

Looking down into his face, I watched him as he watched me, and being with him, right here on my back porch, felt so right that I frowned, disappointed in myself.

That was the problem, I guess. When you looked at somebody through rose-colored glasses, all the red flags? They were just... well... flags. Unassuming. Safe.

But I knew better.

Running my hands through his too-long hair, I tightened my grip in it, pulling back, forcing his head up and loving the way his lip curled in discomfort. I brought my face close to his, slowly, meaningfully, and when our lips were only a hair's breadth away, I spoke quietly. "You need a haircut."

Releasing him quickly, I stood and moved toward the sliding door, stopping only when he uttered a perplexed sounding, "That's it? That's all you have to say to me?"

I pursed my lips in thought, tilting my head slightly, and then nodded. "Yep."

My eyes met his as I locked the door and switched off the kitchen light, leaving him awash in darkness. And to say I was proud of myself was a huge understatement.

Yes.

I was stronger than I gave myself credit.

\*\*\*

## Twitch

A surprised laugh left me as I sat alone on the porch in the dark.

I adjusted myself in my pants and my lip twitched.

She made me crazy. All I wanted to do was hunt her down, bend her over, and drive home, pumping into her sweet pussy until I unloaded inside her.

But I would wait. And that wait would make it all the more sweet.





## Chapter Eighteen

### Ling

The Cross was having a good night. Music blared as I watched from the closed off balcony, and the second I saw him, my brows lowered.

The fuck was he doing here?

I peered around him, on the lookout. He was alone or, at least, it seemed like he was. Making my way down, I kept my eyes open, anticipating the attack I assumed was coming. But when I saw him sitting alone at the bar, curiosity moved me forward.

My guys were close, watching but keeping their distance, and when one of them stepped forward, I shot him a hard stare. He backed off immediately, and I made my way over, standing behind him, uttering, “What are you doing here, Az?”

He unfolded his long body when he stood. His eyes smiled, and I wanted to gouge them out. “I missed you.”

Fuck him. “You need to leave,” I said firmly. “You’re not welcome here.”

Aslan took a step closer but stilled when I pulled out my gun, aiming it down at his cock. He put his hands up in surrender. “I just came to see how things were going. I know you got a shipment coming. Came to see if you wanted to bury the hatchet. I could help you, Ling.”

He took another step and my stomach ached. He was encroaching, and I didn’t want to hurt him, but I would if I needed to. “Back off, Az.”

“No,” was all he said as he took another small step into me. One more step and we’d be flush against each other.

He was trespassing, violating a code, and my men knew this. I could feel their eyes on me, gauging my next move. Would I allow Aslan Sadik to come into my home and disrespect me in the way he was?

No, I would not.

I couldn’t.

I didn’t want to do what I did, but I would make an example of my beautiful Turk.

Aiming to the left, I pulled the trigger, and the shot rang out over the music. Aslan's entire body jerked and, putting a hand to his side, he let out a shocked laugh. "You shot me." He lifted his hand to peer down at the red wetness there, and he panted, "You fucking shot me." His wide eyes met mine, and as they did, his lip twitched. "You crazy bitch."

Oh, please. It was a flesh wound. If I wanted him dead, he would be, and he knew that.

One of my men came forward, gun aimed at Aslan, and I stepped back, away from a married man I couldn't have. "Escort Mr. Sadik to his men. If they cause trouble—" I turned and began to walk away. "—paint the town red."

As I sat alone in the city apartment with my head in my hands, I couldn't seem to control my rapidly beating heart. I hadn't cried in years, not since Twitch died, and if I still had the ability to I was sure I would have. But I had long since dried up.

When the front door opened, I sighed in relief. Something told me he would come, and the moment he stepped into view, shaking his head at me, I smiled sadly.

Az moved to put his hands on his hips, but when he touched his wound, he grimaced then glared at me. "I can't believe you shot me."

"You asked for it," I returned because he deserved what he got and was lucky I didn't aim to kill.

"You crazy bitch," he said once more, crossing the room. Before he made it to me, I stood, waiting. The moment he was close enough, he slid his arms around my waist and lowered his face to mine, pressing soft kisses to my lips, and I loved how he made me feel tipsy. His aftershave smelt so good I wanted to lick a line from his neck all the way down to his cock. I put my hands to his chest, liking the way he made me feel so small. He made a sound low in his throat then spoke between kisses. "My crazy bitch."

I closed my eyes, pressing myself into him. "I didn't want to."

"I know," he said. "I could see you didn't. I'm sorry for pushing. I just," he sighed, "really fucking missed you, baby." His eyes bore into me. "Tell me you love me."

No.

I shook my head, my eyes sad. He couldn't ask that of me. I couldn't give him that. He wasn't mine. He never would be. We were stupid for attempting something that could never be, but I had never wanted anyone the way I wanted this man. I loved him more than was wise.

So I pushed. Running my nails down his chest, I looked up into his eyes, and muttered, "Come to bed with me."

I wasn't expecting the response I got.

"Okay," he replied, and when he smiled that billion-dollar smile, I couldn't help but return it. God, he was everything. He couldn't separate himself from me long enough to walk the short distance, and I laughed as we stumbled into the bedroom, smiling into this beautiful man's kisses. Deft fingers unzipped my dress, and when it slid to the ground, I stepped out of it, making the brief walk over to the bed and climbing onto it with a grin. Once I assumed the position—on all fours with my ass in the air, head down into the covers, and my hands behind my back submissively—I breathed out, "Fuck me, baby."

A long while passed, and when I realized he hadn't moved, I sat up, looking back at him over my shoulder. I saw him gazing up at the ceiling, wearing an expression of pure frustration.

My heart sank. "What's wrong?"

He averted his gaze. "This wasn't what I had in mind." His lips thinned. "I don't want this."

Pride had me grating on the inside. "You don't want me?"

"I do," he assured me. "More than anything. But not like this, Ling." His eyes showed his unhappiness. "Not like this."

What? How were we meant to fuck then?

I sat on the edge of the bed in my underwear and looked at him, puzzled. "We can do it however you want, Az. How do you want me? Handcuffed? Tied up? Blindfolded? I got a school uniform somewhere around here. I can call you Daddy. What's your pleasure?" When he closed his eyes tightly and let out a curse, I started to get pissed. "I need you to talk to me, baby. What's happening here? Because I'm pretty fucking confused." My brows knitted. "I thought you wanted this."

"Come here," was all he said, pinching the bridge of his nose, and when I approached carefully, he looked down at me, and uttered, "Do you have any idea of how much I want you?" I looked down at his straining jeans,

but he laughed softly. “No. Not like that.” He put my hand to his chest, just over his heart. “Here. This is where I want you.” He moved my fingers to his lips. “I need you here too.” When he tugged my hand to his temple, he looked me deep in the eye, and explained, “I want to share everything with you. My body, my heart, my mind, I want to give it all to you. Just you. But —” His brows lowered as a thought hit him. “—I don’t think you know how to share that way, do you, baby?”

What he was asking of me, I couldn’t give. Not because I didn’t want to. Because I never had it in the first place. I was desensitized. My feelings were numb. They had been fucked out of me at a very young age. But if I had those things, if I could give those things to anyone, I would give them to Aslan Sadik.

“I can’t,” I told him miserably, wanting so badly to be what he needed.

And for the first time in my adult life, I felt horribly inadequate and completely flawed.

What a strange, depressing feeling.

He took my hand and pressed his lips to my knuckles, watching me from lowered lids. When he spoke, he did it softly. “Do you trust me enough to try?”

Did I?

It was hard to speak. Aslan made me want things I had never wanted before. What a frightening thought. “Of course.” But I threw him a hard glare. “But if I don’t come, I’m going to be pissed.”

His soft laughter against my knuckles was soft, and sweet, and beautiful in a way I didn’t know existed. “I promise I’ll leave you completely satisfied.”

A sudden pang tore at my chest because he would leave me to go home to his wife. The same wife who adored him.

Aslan made me feel human in a world that told me I was a monster. Part of me loved him for that. The other part loathed him for showing me what that was like, when I could have been happily naïve for the rest of my days.

Now I knew better. I knew what I had been missing, and it was impossible not to grieve the years I’d lost to my circumstances.

When Az descended, his full lips touched my cheek. “Put your arms around me. Hold me, Ling. Like you don’t ever want to let me go.”

I didn't. So, I did as he asked and snaked my arms around him, careful of his wound. It was funny really; a month ago, the idea of injuring men made me hot. But when it came to this man, the idea of hurting him made my stomach turn.

What was happening to me?

My heartbeat slowed as I looked into his midnight eyes. He looked like an angel in the moonlight, and when he kissed me, I saw stars. He made love to my mouth softly before his tongue met mine, caressing it with his, and he tasted delicious, like bourbon and mint. We stood there for what seemed like hours, and for the first time in my life, my swollen lips had nothing to do with being hit, or bitten, or slapped.

His gentle kisses combined with his light touches had me reeling with anticipation. Again, not something I was used to. My kind of sex was the rough, clothes tearing kind, and Az had yet to touch me anywhere I needed to be touched. My nipples strained against my lace bra, almost as if they were reaching for his touch. My pussy ached in way I'd never experienced. My eagerness alone had my sensitive clit craving just a brush of his fingertips.

All from being kissed.

Az walked me backwards with his arms still around me until the backs of my legs hit the foot of the bed, and I assumed this was it. This was where he'd turn me, bend me over, and fuck me hard. But that didn't happen. No. Instead, he lightly slapped my ass. "Get on the bed, baby."

What, just as I was? No cock sucking? No removing my clothes? No removing *his* clothes? No demands? What the fuck?

I climbed into the center of the bed and watched in fascination as he slid onto the covers next to me, pulling me into his body. When I felt his hardness at my hip, I reached down to rub it, but Aslan's hand intercepted mine. "Let me make you feel good. Then you can touch me."

When his lips touched mine, I sighed into his mouth. Nothing ever felt as good as this man's lips. He ran a hand down my side, his thumb lightly caressing the skin above my panty line, and then his lips trailed firm, open-mouthed kisses from my jaw, to my neck, lower still. Az lightly pushed me onto my back, and when his mouth left a line of kisses down the center of my body into the valley of my breasts, I arched my back, wanting more than he was giving. And from the way he chuckled, he knew it too.

Az pressed his lips to the area just below my belly button, and my stomach clenched knowing what was coming. He spread my legs and kissed me over my panties. And my pussy flooded.

Holy shit. What a turn on. A man who takes his time. Who knew?

It was unreal, the sensation. It was almost too much but also not enough. I lifted my hips to his mouth, reaching for more, and was rewarded when he pressed harder into my panty-covered core, gently nibbling and licking me through the thin material. A low moan escaped me. I felt high on what he was doing to me, and when he removed his mouth from where I needed it, I lifted my head to look at him, thoroughly disappointed.

Az smiled at me, standing before undressing slowly. When he left his boxer briefs on, I almost pouted. I wanted that cock.

He climbed on top, towering over me until his position was right, and when he lowered himself, leaning the majority of his weight on his arms, and the solid outline of his cock came to rest on my already soaked panties, I sighed, throwing my head back into the covers. As he started to move, grinding against me, I began to pant lightly.

It felt amazing and we weren't even skin-to-skin. I was absolutely dumbfounded.

Reaching up to my tits, he yanked one cup down, revealing a taut, needy nipple. He glanced at me a moment before lowering his head and capturing that hard peak between his lips, suckling gently, and I almost came off the bed. I felt every pull of his mouth as if he were sucking my clit. His hand moved from my hip, sliding down to gently rub me over my panties and, my brows bunching, I let out a low groan.

Yes. Direct contact.

He was barely touching me, his fingertips rubbing soft circles over my lace-covered clit, and just when my pussy clenched tightly, Az asked, "Are you clean, baby?"

*What?* My eyes shot open.

I blinked at him, and the words were spoken quietly. "I don't know." Because I didn't. It had been months since I was tested.

But Aslan's tone held no judgment. "Okay." He took a condom out from the waistband of his boxers and tore it open before taking them off and rolling it on. He made short work of my panties, and then he came to lie between my open legs.

I couldn't help but query an incredulous, "Missionary?"

"Yeah." He grinned down at me. "I want to kiss you, baby. Is that okay?"

Was that okay?

"Yeah." I guess that was okay.

He pulled back a moment, taking his cock into his hand and guiding it to me. The moment I felt the tip of him caress my opening, my lips parted. I didn't think there was a time in my life when I'd been more curiously turned on than now. Sure, the sex I had before got me off mainly on shock value. But this was the real thing. It wasn't just sex. Aslan Sadik was showering me in love, and I felt it.

Az pushed, slowly, and my heart thumped in my chest as he worked himself into me, gently thrusting until I was entirely impaled. And then he moved, and I knew I'd never be the same. His eyes on me, he pulled back, driving back into me then starting a rhythm. Before long, I was hot all over, and when he kissed me, I moaned against his lips, kissing him back eagerly.

I felt it coming, but it was different this time. Normally, when I came, it came hard and fast and knocked the sense out of me. This was a slow burn. A climb.

My cunt tightened around him and his brows lowered, mouth parting. "Oh, yeah, baby. My beautiful girl. You gonna come for me, Ling?"

His softly spoken words did something to me. I felt the prickles line my spine, and when my core clamped painfully tight, my stomach clenched and my mouth rounded as my eyes shot open, completely unfocused.

Not a moment later, my entire body pulsed and I fell to pieces, milking his cock as I found my release.

"Fuck, Ling," Az groaned, kissing my lax lips. "Oh, shit." He panted, closing his eyes. "Baby, yes."

While I was still coming down off my high, Az drove into me, his hips thrusting erratically until he buried himself as deeply as he could and held himself there, inside me, as his cock began to throb. He groaned long and low before he fell onto me, holding my tit as he tried to steady his breathing. I could feel his rapid heartbeat through the jugular at his neck, and for whatever reason, it made me smile.

But that smile was short-lived.

Suddenly, the thought of losing this, of losing this man, was crushing. I was overwhelmed with the abrupt anxiety I felt.

Humiliatingly so, my body shook as I began to cry. And when Aslan lifted his head to look at me, I covered my eyes with my hands.

“Baby.” He sounded sweetly concerned. “What’s wrong?”

I needed to tell him.

Removing my hands from my face, I swiped at my cheeks, blinking away tears. My lip quivered when I disclosed a dismal sounding, “I’m in love with you and I don’t want to be.”

Surprisingly, Aslan wasn’t offended by my admission. Instead, he looked overjoyed by it. “About fucking time you conceded.”

“Don’t make fun of me. This is serious.” I glared.

Az looked down at me tenderly. “It is serious.” He pecked my lips affectionately. “I love you too, Ling.”

The words were quiet, and even as I spoke them, I knew they were a useless plea. “Then be with me.”

*Choose me.*

*Pick me.*

*Come home to me.*

But he shook his head. “Baby, you knew what this was and I’m never leaving my wife. She’s a good woman.” At my eye roll, he gently reprimanded me. “Don’t do that. You don’t know her. The shit she’s had my back on, the shit she’s stuck with me through, I owe her that much.” He searched my face. “She has my name, but it’s you, Ling. Everything else goes to you. I promise, baby.” He watched me carefully, as he asked, “Can you deal with that?”

A short while passed before I responded.

“Yeah,” I lied.

Because if Aslan made love to his wife the way he made love to me, it was no wonder why she adored him.

And I hated her.





## Chapter Nineteen

### Lexi

It was Saturday, and although Molly usually took A.J. out with her in the morning, giving me the time to go for my weekend jog, I told her she could have the day off. I needed to buy my little monster some new clothes. My son seemed to have shot up overnight and all of his pants were starting to look like clam diggers.

He sat at the breakfast table, eating cereal, and when I told him we were going shopping, he immediately asked, “Can Daddy come too?”

I hesitated only a moment, making sure to keep my smile wide, then answered, “I don’t think so, honey. He’s probably busy today.”

Truth was, I had no idea what Twitch was doing today. I just wanted a day with my son, uninterrupted and alone.

After I got A.J. ready for the day, making sure to take his little backpack filled with snacks and a bottle of water, we stepped outside.

“Hi, Daddy!” A.J. waved enthusiastically, calling out to Twitch, who just happened to be walking back into his house.

I sighed, then whispered under my breath, “You’re always there when I don’t want you to be, you sly fucker.” It was like he knew every time our front door opened. I wouldn’t put it past him to have put sensors on the damn door.

My brow furrowed.

I would definitely be checking the door for sensors when we came home.

Twitch, dressed in fitted blue jeans that encased his long legs, a black tee that made his arms look downright nibble-worthy, and those scuffed Adidas originals, peered out from under the black cap he wore. “Hey, bud. What’s up?”

When A.J. took off running down the drive, my heart stopped beating. It did this because it didn’t look like he was going to stop when he reached the road. I screamed out to him, “A.J, stop!”

At the very same time, Twitch’s face turned panicked and he started running. “Stop!”

A.J. came to a stop just at the street line, and when Twitch reached him, he put a hand to his chest and let out a long exhale. “Jesus, bud.” He panted. “You gave me a fuckin’ heart attack.” Then his face darkened, but he spoke as gently as he could. “We’ve talked about this. You can’t just run across the street. Cars are always coming and going, and sometimes they don’t stop.”

A.J.’s face fell. “I’m sorry.”

My heart was thumping, and the second I could breathe again, I uttered in false calm, “Say goodbye to Daddy, then go sit in the car, honey.”

A.J., knowing not to push his luck, hugged his father, apologizing once again before opening the car door, then shutting it behind him. As soon as I knew he couldn’t hear what we were saying, I leaned into Twitch, and whisper-hissed, “I never had an issue with those kinds of things until you came along. In the time you’ve been back, my son has been so goddamn reckless, and it makes me ill.” When his jaw tightened, I sighed and asked the delicate question I’d been meaning to. “Have you thought about moving somewhere else?” Twitch’s brow knitted, and I explained, “I think it would be better if you weren’t so close. That way, he’d know he couldn’t see you whenever the impulse strikes.”

But his face turned stoic. “I’m not going anywhere. I like it here. I want to be close to him.” He made a valid point and I hated him for it. “Ask yourself what happens if I move and he decides to come looking for me? He walks farther away from here, crosses wider roads, and I’m not going to be there to step in when needed.” At my thin-lipped silence, he looked at my outfit. “Aren’t you supposed to be jogging?”

My eyes widened. “Are you still following me?”

His words were quiet, annoyed. “I’d follow you anywhere.”

My heart stuttered for a different reason then.

“Whatever,” I muttered, shaking my head. “I need to go.”

But Twitch followed. “Where are you going?”

“To the mall,” I uttered, stepping into the car and closing the door behind me but lowering the window.

That was when my dear child called out, “Mummy said you’re too busy to come with us.”

*Ah! Goddamn it. Mothertrucker.*

And Twitch just looked at me knowingly. “Oh, she did, did she?” I lowered my eyes because I knew what was coming. “Well, as it turns out, I’m free as a bird today.”

Yep. *That* was coming.

“Yes!” A.J. yelled, and I uttered a completely deadpan, “Oh, yay, so exciting.”

Twitch walked around the car and opened the passenger door, sliding in beside me and doing his belt up before twisting back to his son. “We’re gonna have a great day.” Then he looked at me, daring me to say something. “A family day.” When I glared at him, his lip lifted in the corner and he took off his cap, running a hand through his hair, which was now long enough to curl behind his ears. It didn’t look bad. On the contrary, I didn’t think Twitch could look bad, even if he tried. It just wasn’t what I remembered. “What?” he asked at my obvious frustration. “Apparently, some people think I need a haircut, so I need to go to the mall anyways.”

I drove without saying a word because all the words I wanted to say were too rude to say in front of my five-year-old. Instead, I stayed silent, and when we got to the mall, we all filed out of the car. Twitch took A.J.’s hand like it was the most natural thing in the world, and he walked by my side. The moment we stepped through the doors, Twitch put his arm around me.

When I frowned at him, attempting to shrug him off, he tugged me deeper into his side, held me tightly, and spoke directly into my ear, his breath warming my skin. “Fight me. I dare you, baby.”

That sounded like a threat.

A delicious threat.

I tried to ignore the way it felt to have his arm around me. It had been so long that I thought I’d imagined the way it made me feel. Unfortunately, I hadn’t.

He smelled good.

*Ugh.*

Why did he have to smell so good?

Asshole.

Breathing in deeply, I held his scent in my lungs for as long as I could before speaking through my exhale. “Okay, first stop, the barber.” I peered around Twitch and spoke to A.J. “You want to get a haircut too, honey?”

A.J. looked from me to his father, and Twitch gazed down at him, smiling. “Up to you, little dude.”

“Yes, please.” I would never get over how sweet his little voice was.

We walked into the first barber we saw, and while I was helping seat A.J., I heard one of the barbers ask Twitch what he wanted. I almost laughed when he responded, “I don’t fuckin’ know, man. Something neat, I guess. What’s trending?”

Before I thought about what I was doing, I told the barber, “Give him a mid fade, clean up the sides, and leave the top a little longer.” I tilted my head in thought. “Don’t shave him clean. Just a trim and tidy. He’s going to need some products to take home too.”

When the barber looked down at Twitch in confirmation, his eyes crinkled in the corners and he held up his hands. “She’s the boss. Happy wife, happy life.”

My stomach clenched and my heart warmed.

*Stop it, heart.*

I did not like how it felt to have Twitch call me his wife.

My body was a freaking traitor.

Another barber came to introduce himself to A.J., shaking his hand.

“So, you want what your dad’s having?”

Of course they knew Twitch was his father. Our son was an exact replica of the man seated beside him. Twitch looked pleased at being referred to as A.J.’s dad. He wore his pride openly.

A.J. nodded happily and my heart panged. Anything to be like his dad. The barber gently grabbed A.J.’s chin. “Oh, yeah, look at all that fuzz.” He eyed my son. “When’s the last time you shaved, boy?”

A.J. giggled hysterically. “Never.”

“Never,” repeated the barber, solemnly. “Well, there’s your problem. That’s why you’re such a mess.” The barber spun A.J.’s chair around a couple times, and I couldn’t help but laugh along with him as he held onto the sides for dear life. “Hey, Momma,” the barber uttered. “How about we give him a nice clean shave?”

My brow furrowed, but I continued to smile. “Huh?”

The barber leaned in and spoke quietly. “It’s just a little fun. We don’t actually put a blade in the razor.”

Oh. That was so cute. A.J. would love that.

I looked down at my son, my eyes full of mirth. “Yeah, why not? He is starting to look untidy.”

A.J.’s eyes widened in delight, and I had to cover my mouth to stop myself from laughing out loud. When I saw Twitch watching me closely, my brows rose in silent question.

His eyes continued to roam me, and when he finally settled back on my face, he blew me a kiss and I scoffed. He was laying it on so thick I couldn’t even stand to walk through the sludge.

I would never admit it, but I liked this playful side of him. It was a side I rarely saw an age ago, but then again, we were both different people back then. Lord knows I was not the same person I was five years ago. Hell, I wasn’t the same person I was yesterday.

After both of my men looked fresh and—

*Whoa. What?*

My heart jolted.

Where did that come from?

My chest ached at how easy it was to refer to Twitch as mine.

It hurt on so many levels because a man like Twitch was so wild he would never be caged. Not by me, not by anyone.

As we walked out of the barber shop, Twitch took A.J.’s hand and moved to reach for me, but I pulled away, needing the space. I felt his eyes on me as I wrapped my arms around myself and walked to the side on my own. Reading me well enough, he gave me the distance I craved.

We walked on in silence until the little voice called to me, “Mummy.” A.J. held his legs together tightly and made a face of discomfort. “I need to go.”

When I stepped toward him, Twitch stopped me with, “I’ll take him.”

Before I could say a word, Twitch walked our son to the mall’s restroom. It wasn’t long before they both walked out of the bathroom, and while Twitch looked somewhat red in the face, A.J. peered up at his father wearing an expression of pure distress. “But is it okay?”

My brow lowered.

What was going on?

Twitch put a gentle hand over A.J.’s mouth and spoke quietly. “It’s fine, kid. We’ll talk about it later, okay?”

Okay. What the hell was happening here?

“Mummy, can I go on the ride?” pleaded A.J., and I fished out a coin, watching him rush over to the kiddie ride in the center of the mall. The moment he was out of hearing range, I asked quietly, “What happened?”

Twitch looked mortified. “I think we might have a situation here.”

He looked so distressed that my panic grew, and when he started to explain, I listened intently. “So he uses the urinal, right, and I need to piss too.” He lowered his voice. “So I whip it out and start to go and...” He closed his eyes, and whispered, “He looks over and sees it, right?”

My son had a penis. He knew what a penis was. What was the issue here?

“Okay,” I drawled.

But Twitch looks at me meaningfully. “He sees it, Lex.” When I didn’t catch on, he spoke slowly. “The *piercing*, baby.”

Recognition dawned on my face. “You still have that?”

He ignored my question. “I mean, he looks at it, then looks at me, and he asks what happened.”

“What did you tell him?”

“The first thing that came to mind.” His brow lowered. “I told him it was an accident.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “You told him it was an accident?” My mouth parted slightly. “Why would you say that?”

“I panicked,” he hissed. “Give me a fuckin’ break.” He scowled. “What’s he doin’ looking at other men’s junk anyway? You gotta talk to him about keepin’ his eyes to himself.”

Excuse me?

“He’s your son too, and he’s never been into the men’s room before. He usually comes into the ladies’ with me. I’m guessing he was just curious. He doesn’t know men’s room etiquette, and *you* want to be a daddy, Twitch, so you talk to him about it.” I folded my arms across my chest and stared at him. “That’s what being a parent is, Tony. It’s answering questions. Uncomfortable questions.” At his sheer discomposure, a bubble of amusement shot up my throat and I laughed. “I can’t believe you told him it was an accident.” My laughter grew. “What were you thinking? He’s probably wondering how he’s going to spend his life avoiding such an *accident*.” I could barely hold myself up as I continued to chuckle. “Oh my

God. He's going to have some questions for you, Daddy. I hope you're ready to answer them."

He watched me laugh a long while before his lip twitched. The word was spoken low and there wasn't a hint of malice in it. "Bitch."

The hilarity started all over again, and when A.J. returned from his ride, I finally managed to calm myself down enough to take him into a clothing store. After the men's room incident, things seemed lighter, and I even sent Twitch a few small smiles of silent support. He was going to need it for the talk that was to come.

After I picked out some new clothes for A.J., we roamed the store and I looked for a new blouse for myself. However, every one I picked up got an unimpressed sound made by the grown-ass man trailing behind me.

"What?" I asked, holding up the simple white blouse. "It's nice."

"Yeah," Twitch uttered. "It's nice. If you're a spinster living alone with your forty cats."

"I happen to like cats," I muttered, putting the sensible blouse back.

"Now this..." He held up a tight, off-white, low-cut mini dress before looking at me. "This is hot." He thrust it toward me. "Get that."

I scoffed. "No, I'm not getting that." I glared at him. "It's inappropriate. I'm a *mother*."

Twitch nodded. "Yeah, you're a mom. You're not dead, angel." He looked me up and down with heat in his eyes. "You're hot. Own it."

A.J. ran into the men's area and I followed, avoiding that conversation at an expert level. When Twitch picked up a pair of dress pants, I kept my eye on A.J., and said, "You don't wear suits anymore."

Not a question, just an observation.

He grinned down at me. "Always did like me in a suit, didn't ya, baby?"

God, he was infuriating. I could be a jerk too, you know? "I liked you *alive*."

As I walked away, his hand snaked out, gripping my hand tightly, pulling me back, and when I was close, he pulled me to stand in front of him as he held up a black suit, and muttered, "I mean, I could get it, but where the fuck would I wear it?"

"You could have worn it to your funeral," I murmured, bored-like.

And he blinked down at me. "I thought you were a volunteer."

So, that was off topic. My brows arched. "I am."



“Nah.” He shook his head slowly. “You’re a fuckin’ comedian.” When a surprised laugh left me, he went on. “That your side gig?” I laughed harder and his lip twitched. “When’s your next show? Get me a front row seat.” I couldn’t breathe from laughing so hard and he lightly smacked my butt. “Fuckin’ smartass. You better watch that mouth or I might have to fill it with something.”

My mouth opened and I couldn’t believe myself. “With what?”

He looked down at my smirking mouth and ran his tongue along his bottom lip. His voice was low, husky. “Something hard.”

I looked down, right at his crotch, feeling bold. “I *am* hungry.”

Oh my God. *Stop.*

Twitch’s eyes flashed, and when he moved to seize me, I expertly avoided his grabby hands, making my way over to our son. “Okay, honey. I think we’re good to go.”

A.J. looked mildly devastated. “But you always let me go on the playground.”

I made a hesitant sound in my throat. “We’ve already been here a while. Daddy’s probably getting bored.”

“Daddy,” came from behind me, “is never bored when he’s with his family.” When I rolled my eyes, he uttered, “You wanna go on the playground, bud? Let’s do it.”

We walked out of the mall and into the afternoon sun. The second I gave A.J. the go-ahead, he ran into the outdoor playground, running into the throw of other children and rushing up the stairs to the top of the slide, waving at us while beaming. When a father I regularly saw waved to me, I smiled and waved back. And that was when a hard body came to press into my back.

I turned to face him and asked a low, “What are you doing?” His face was close and all I wanted to do was lightly run my nails down that sharp jawline. One strong arm came around my back while the other landed with a smack on my ass, and I yelped in surprise. “*Twitch!*”

He looked down at me, challenging me to fight him. “Looks like you know some of the other daddies around these parts.”

Oh, Lord. Was he jealous?

He was being ridiculous, and when the large hand gripping my ass cheek squeezed, I swallowed hard. “A.J. plays with his daughter

sometimes.” Oh, God, it felt good, but... “Let go of me.”

Those soft brown eyes hooded. “Either I hold onto you, or,” he spoke dangerously low, “I hold onto his neck.” My lips parted and he focused on them. “Up to you, baby.”

I thought about that. Part of me knew he would never make a scene. Not here anyway, and never in front of A.J. The other part of me didn’t want to risk never being allowed back to the mall again.

A long moment passed before I allowed myself to fall into him, and when I did, I was rewarded with another hard squeeze before he slid that hand into my jeans pocket, holding me close.

And Twitch was right. We had a great day.

As a family.

By the time we left the mall, Twitch carried his son on one side and held me close on the opposite. We were his accessories and he wore us with pleasure, his chest puffing out with a smugness I’d never seen him wear. And it was nice.

Everything was going well. That was, until we walked back to the car and he hesitated, focused on a man walking toward us. I frowned as the man stilled in his step, looking at Twitch as though he’d just seen an apparition.

*I know the feeling.*

Twitch’s hesitation only lasted a second before we started to walk again, and when we passed the tall, olive-skinned man with dark eyes and thick brows, Twitch jerked his chin to him but did not stop walking. “What’s up, Sadik?”

We left the man wide-eyed and open-mouthed in shock, and when we were safely seated in the car, I turned to Twitch, and uttered quietly, “Who was that?”

Twitch responded just as quietly, “That was the person who’s going to let it be known to every fucker in Sydney that the king is back.”

Oh, shit.

“C’mon, angel.” He scratched at his jaw, looking out the window. “Let’s go home.”

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## Aslan The Fucking Turk

The moment she answered the phone, I stated urgently, “We need to talk.”

“What’s wrong?” she asked immediately.

“Baby,” I started, still shocked. “I’m pretty sure I just saw a ghost.”



## Chapter Twenty

Ling

“It’s not possible.” I paced, unable to take a full breath into my lungs. I paused to look at Aslan. “It wasn’t him.”

Az sat on the sofa, resting his elbows on his knees while covering his mouth with his fingers. At my hesitance, he straightened. “It was, Ling.” When I wasn’t convinced, he stood. “I saw him with my own eyes, baby.” But I still wasn’t swayed. He put a hand to his good hip and closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I know what I fucking saw. It was him. He even stopped a sec and said, ‘What’s up, Sadik?’”

I don’t know who Aslan saw, but it wasn’t Twitch. It couldn’t be. He was dead. I went to the fucking funeral. I spent months mourning until Julius took pity on me and gave me a job, a home, and a new life.

No.

It wasn’t Twitch.

Az was confused.

*Yes, that was it.*

He was confused, or at least I thought he was, until he went on. “I swear to God, Ling. It was Twitch.” His eyes implored and he let out a humorless laugh. “I’m not crazy. He was with a woman about this tall.” He put his hand up at a certain height. “A pretty one in that girl next door kind of way. She had long, wavy brown hair, big blue eyes, a little curvy body with a nice rack on her.”

My heart jolted.

That sounded like Alexa Ballentine.

But what he said next confirmed my beautiful Turk wasn’t as crazy as I hoped he was. “And he was holding a little boy,” he stated sincerely. “A little boy who looked just like him.”

No.

I shook my head and Aslan sighed, rolling his eyes. “*Baby*. I know what I saw.” He implored patiently, “Ling, please. Would I lie to you?”

I didn’t think he would, but people closer to me had betrayed me before, so I wouldn’t discount the idea.

There was only one way to find out.  
My stomach clenched.  
I would hunt down Lexi.

\*\*\*

## Lexi

I was nervous.  
Oh, God, was I nervous.  
Alone in the house, I sat on the edge of my bed and looked over at the light switch. A moment passed and I huffed out a breath, standing then moving toward it, but I faltered in the dark, turning away and covering my mouth with shaking hands.

Was this really a good idea?  
I thought about it a second.  
No, said my heart.  
My brain agreed, shaking its head.  
I shouldn't be doing this, but I really, really wanted to. It had been too long. I needed it so badly that I disregarded every good sense I had and strode across the room.

And when I did what I did, I sat on the vanity stool in my silken kimono and waited.

\*\*\*

## Twitch

As I passed the window, I blinked over at the house and frowned.  
That frown deepened when I lifted my wrist to check my watch.  
11:51 p.m.  
I looked back at the house, holding onto my frown, but then a small smile cut into the darkness.  
My voice was low. "I'll be damned."  
She left a light on.

\*\*\*

## Lexi

The window rattled then opened, and when he climbed in, shutting it behind him, he stood tall, watching me carefully through his perpetually hooded gaze. He looked good in black jeans, a gunmetal gray long-sleeved tee, and his sneakers.

I was ashamed for wanting this, wanting him so badly that I left myself open to be hurt again. But this was Twitch, and I always seemed to do irresponsible, insane things when it came to this man.

What had Manda once said?

*That's what love will do to a sane woman.*

Right now, I felt that in my fucking bones.

So when I stood on shaky legs and made the few steps over, barefoot, I held the item in my hands out to him and he looked down in puzzlement, taking it without a word. When he unfurled it, I saw the recognition dawn and he blinked at me, his brow lowered in confusion. "You kept it?"

Yes.

I kept the belt. The same belt he'd used on me so long ago. The now bloodstained reminder of his death.

I kept it.

He looked momentarily overwhelmed, but he hid it well. He took in a deep breath before letting it out slowly, shakily, and then he settled his eyes on me. "You ready for this?"

Taking the hair-tie off my wrist, I gathered my hair into a low ponytail and secured it. Then I nodded, and whispered, "Yes."

Twitch took a menacing step toward me. "You need to be sure."

"I am." As sure as I could be.

Another looming step. "I won't stop, baby."

"I know." I was counting on it.

Until, finally, he stood in front of me, reaching up to cup my cheek lovingly, his tone low, rough. "Turn the light off. Soon as you do that, it's on."

My nipples tightened.

Turning, I made it to the light switch and raised my hand but hesitated, asking the question I dreaded to hear the answer to. "Are you clean?"

His brow furrowed. "Of course."

I nodded, clearing my throat. "I'm not on birth control." Of course I wasn't. There was no need. I wasn't sleeping around. Most nights, I wasn't sleeping at all.

And when Twitch heard my quiet statement, his eyes heated with pleasure. "Noted." He let out a short breath. "You remember how this goes?"

"Yes." My voice was breathy.

How could I forget?

Only speak when spoken to. Beg and be rewarded. Disobey and pay.

His eyes held mine, and without a word spoken, I hit the switch, showering the room in darkness, leaving us both awash in the delicate moonlight streaming in through the window. And even though I couldn't see his face anymore, I heard the tenseness in his voice, and all of my fantasies over the past six years came to life.

"Make me hard."

Silently, on soft feet, I took a step toward him.

*Oh my God.*

Then another.

*Holy shit.*

The closer I got to him, the heavier my heart thumped. My stomach clenched as I made it to him. I moved to kneel and I did it slowly. Once on my knees, I reached up, popped the button on his jeans, and lowered the zipper leisurely. Separating the flaps, I looked up into his eyes as I ran light fingers over the protruding hardness straining behind his boxers. My eyes, since adjusted to the darkness, watched him watch me with parted lips, and the moment I wrapped my hand around his material-covered cock, he closed his eyes and threw his head heavenward, letting out a sharp breath.

His reaction had me feeling bold. Brave.

Sliding my hands down the elastic waist, I wrapped my fingers around the smooth, hard heat of him and pulled him free.

As soon as my eyes landed on his thick, long cock, my mouth salivated.

My breath came in choppy as I held onto him with a trembling hand and eyed the piercing I once would have killed to have inside me. Apparently, time hadn't changed me. I lifted his cock and let out a soft sigh as I inspected the silver ball resting on the sensitive underside. Unable to help myself, I ran my thumb over it and watched his dick jerk in my hands.



He was still impressive. Goddamn him. He was still also the biggest cock I'd had the pleasure of fucking, and, *Jesus*, how I needed to feel the thick heat inside me once again.

My eyes fluttered at the thought, and a quiet, "Oh, shit," escaped me.

Immediately, he reproached me. "I tell you to speak?"

His voice was harsh. My pussy quivered. But I didn't respond, simply shaking my head. And when he placed a gentle hand to my crown, softly stroking my hair, I leaned into his touch in a somewhat feline gesture, craving more of his approval.

And he gave it to me. "Good girl."

Oh, I would have done anything to hear him say that to me.

I thought about that and flushed.

It seemed I would still do anything to hear him say those soft, affection-coated words.

Tightening my grasp on him, I stroked him singlehandedly, watching through my drowsy-eyed gaze as he became impossibly stiff in my hand. Leaning in, I stared up at him and pressed a gentle kiss to the tip of him, feeling salty moisture on my lips. Flattening my tongue, I licked him clean, and the sudden gasp it elicited from Twitch was delicious. So delicious I had to do it again.

I laved him slowly, with meaning, over and over again, and when he panted, "Enough," I should have stopped.

But I didn't.

I couldn't.

The warm, clean taste of him was addictive. Always had been. I didn't want to let go. I'd missed him too much.

So when he reached down and gripped my cheeks tightly, forcing my mouth open, a soft whimper escaped me. And he clicked his tongue. "I say enough, you stop." He released his hold on me, and I glared up at him, dropping his cock and rubbing my sore cheeks. And the asshole reached into my kimono, sliding his hand into my black strappy harness bra and finding one taut peak, lightly pinching the sensitive nub.

My head fell back and a quiet moan escaped me. And when he pinched me a second time, I was no longer thinking straight. Reaching down, under my silken robe, I grasped my wet mound through the satin and lace and

looked up at him, beseeching. My voice was whisper-soft. "Please. Please. Oh, please."

I needed to come more than I needed my next breath.

But Twitch took my upper arm and jerked it away, forcing me to release myself. And just when I thought I'd explode in a vicious tirade, he gripped his cock and stroked it slowly, mesmerizing me. That was when he ordered, "Open."

I was only confused a single moment before I opened my mouth slightly. But Twitch made a sound in his throat. "More." A little wider. But Twitch just held his cock, held it away from me, stroking slowly, and I got his silent message. I opened my mouth as far as it would go.

He fed his length to me gradually, deliberately so, and I almost gagged when he gently thrust into my mouth, but after doing it a couple times, I grew used to his size again. It felt natural to have this man's cock in my mouth, when nothing about this should have felt as such.

I held my mouth open for him until my cheeks burned, and when wet strands of spit leaked out the sides of my mouth, down my chin, then farther still, dripping into my cleavage, his nostrils flared.

With a harsh tug, he yanked at my robe. "Take it off. Show me what I'm missing."

My stomach dipped violently.

*Shit.*

I loved when he spoke so unforgivingly. It had me so hot and bothered I thought I'd come right there and then.

With gentle fingers, I pushed the kimono off and it fell into a pile behind me, leaving me dressed in a pair of satin and lace panties and their matching strappy bra. When I moved to push the strap of my bra down, his hand caught mine and he spoke quietly. "Leave it on."

Somehow, I knew he'd like it. The second I saw it, I thought of him. It was beautifully delicate with its sheer lace cups and thick black straps, crossing all over, making me look tied up like the gift I was. It came across as a dominant male's dream, and I was inwardly delighted that he was affected by it.

I mean, I specifically remember him once telling me he liked his women in silk and frilly shit because they were gifts to be unwrapped.

*Well, Merry Christmas, Twitch.*

As if he heard my inner thoughts, his eyes roamed my body, and he muttered, "Pretty." Then his scowl returned. "Stand up."

It was hard to stand when the jerk didn't offer a hand, but I managed to rise as gracefully as I could, and when I turned to face him, I caught him looking down at my tits through that sleepy gaze of his. He swallowed hard then reached up behind him to grip the back of his shirt and pulled his tee off.

And that body.

What a reveal.

My insides were a mess. I wanted to cry at the sheer beauty of that inked form of his. He was delectable, and I hoped he gave me permission to run my tongue all over the muscular plane of his stomach. Maybe lower still to the hollow that sat just under that stomach. Farther still to lick my way across that indented V, the same V that pointed like an arrow to the place I wanted to suck so hard that he gifted me the salty sweetness of his seed.

Fuck. I wanted him to come in my mouth.

He made light work of his shoes and socks, shucking his pants down his legs and stepping out of them. Sure, he kept his boxers on, but the way his hard dick bobbed out from over the lowered waistband was hot as hell. After all this time, I wasn't disappointed. And when he moved to sit on the edge of the bed, he spread his legs wide and patted his lap. "Sit."

This was new. I was a little confused, but I went willingly, and the moment I sat on his thigh, looking ahead, I knew why he was doing this.

We were directly in front of the dresser mirror.

An arm came around my waist and pulled me back, flush against him, and the feeling of his cock resting against my ass was almost too much. Knowing it would get me in trouble and not caring in the slightest, I looked into the reflection, right into his eyes, and lifted my hand to my breasts, sighing as I rolled my nipples between gentle fingers.

Surprisingly, he allowed me a moment before his other arm came around me, constricting me, cocooning me so tightly I could barely move. And when he placed his lips to my cheek, nipping me lightly, he asked a deathly quiet, "Who is responsible for your orgasm?"

I huffed out an annoyed breath and earned another nip to my jaw.

My eyes lowered, but he put a stern hand to my jaw and turned me to face him, and when I lifted my eyes to his intense, blazing stare, he was so darkly beautiful I could have died. “You are,” I whispered almost lovingly. And he heard it.

A soft kiss to my jaw was my reward.

When he jerked his chin toward the mirror, I twisted to look back into our reflection just as Twitch ran a hand down my side, across my thigh to hold my hot mound.

The burning desire he caused set me alight. My heart smoldered, and when he released me to wrap my hair around his hand, I knew I would do anything for this man, willingly, just to please him.

His blunt fingers began to rub against me, and although I felt I was losing myself, I knew what he wanted of me and I held his stare. He began to rub harder while keeping his slow pace, and I took in a quaking breath. When he gripped my thigh and draped my leg over his, leaving me open to him, my heart thumped. I was so close. And when he used his thumb to push my panties to the side, I closed my eyes, thankful he was finally going to touch me. My scalp pinched as he gently yanked my hair, forcing a wince from me, and I opened my eyes to watch as he ran his middle finger up and down my slit, unhurried, as if he had all the time in the world.

Well, I didn’t. I was dying here. “*Please.*”

Another swift yank and I hissed in a breath. As I contemplated how much shit I’d be in if I thrust into his touch, he spoke low, tenderly, “Is this what you need, angel?”

Before I could respond, he slipped that middle digit inside me. My lips parted, my eyes widened, and I let out a panting gasp. I nodded eagerly into the reflection and he released my hair, running a hand down my back before he slipped it around me and tweaked one needy nipple.

A moan left me through gritted teeth. And Twitch watched closely as my hips bucked into his touch. His eyes darkened and he removed his finger from me.

*Goddammit!*

“I think you’ve forgotten your place, Alexa.”

*Oh my God. He called you Alexa. That can only mean one thing.*

In a lightning-fast move, he had me draped over his lap, and before I could squeak from excitement, his hand came down hard and fast onto my

ass.

*Thwack.*

My face flushed with a mixture of pleasure and pain. I felt my core clench.

I didn't look into the mirror, but I knew it was coming.

*Thwack.*

It felt so good. It felt like a release higher than the orgasm I craved.

It was nirvana.

*Thwack.*

My entire body shook as I began to weep. Not from the pain or humiliation of wanting this so fucking much but of relief.

*Thwack.*

The last blow, the hardest blow, shook me to my core, and Twitch ran his strong hand over my flaming derriere in a warm, adoring manner that left me shaking from pent-up emotion. And when he moved me to stand in front of him, I sniffled, avoiding his eyes.

The words he spoke were so inappropriate I adored him for it. He ran both hands over my red, swollen cheeks and pressed a soft kiss to my belly before looking up at me. "So pretty when you cry, sad girl."

*Jesus Christ.*

He had the horns of a demon, the eyes of an angel, and the mouth of a god.

Lucky me.

He watched me in concern as I swiped at my cheeks and gripped my waist, his fingers splayed across my flesh. "We still doin' this?"

He was out of character. So was I, just for the moment.

I blinked rapidly. "Yeah."

He searched my face a while before his eyes darkened and he was back. "Get on the bed. All fours, right at the edge."

I scrambled to get where he needed me, and as I twisted back, looking over my shoulder, I watched Twitch finally lower his boxers, leaving him completely bare to me, and I lifted my ass higher in invitation.

He took the two steps toward the bed and eyed my upturned ass before gripping one cheek tight enough to ache, shaking my flesh lightly. "Touch yourself. Show me you want it."

Without hesitation, I reached between my legs and circled my panty-covered pussy.

But Twitch clicked his tongue. "Not like that. You know what I want."

Feeling bold and hornier than hell, I reached between my legs and flipped him the bird, rubbing my middle finger along my slit.

I heard his amusement. "That was not very nice," he purred before my body jolted when his hand made contact with my ass. My mouth rounded as the sound echoed throughout my room. "Sassy girls don't get to come." Another smack, lighter this time. "Only angels get to come."

He moved forward, hooking his fingers into the waistband of my panties then yanking them down to my knees. The cool breeze over my superheated flesh was nice, even nicer so when Twitch bent down and blew lightly over my heat. "I'm going to fuck you now." Another light breath over my hot skin. "Gonna show you how much I missed my baby."

When he pushed himself into my ass, leaning over me, I knew what was coming and lifted myself, presenting my neck in complete submission. The thick leather felt mildly restricting as Twitch slipped the metal pin into the tightest hole, and with the belt safely secured around my throat, Twitch wrapped his hand around the length of the leather, leaving me feeling like a pet. His pet.

My pussy throbbed in anticipation.

I didn't hate it—that was for sure. All I could think about was how much I wanted this. Needed this. Needing *him*.

Twitch.

It all came down to him. Always had. And I wouldn't think about tomorrow. I could only live in the present because with Twitch, tomorrow may never come. I'd learned my lesson. It wasn't 'one step at a time' with him; it was 'live in the now, because the future is not guaranteed.'

Taking hold of himself, he ran his cock up and down my wet slit and hissed in a breath. "Who owns this hot little cunt?" He spanked my pussy with his dick, a wet slap sounding out. "Whose is it?"

There was no denying it. "Yours." I panted out, "It's yours."

He continued to drag the smooth head of him through my wet heat. His voice was curt, dark. "Never wanted anyone like you want me." Another slap of his cock, and this time he caught my clit with his piercing. "Isn't that right, angel?"

As my clit pulsed, I let free a long moan, and when he tugged on the belt in warning, my pussy clamped. “Yes,” I breathed. “You were right.”

*You were right, you asshole, and sometimes I hate you for it.*

The room reverberated with his smug chuckle, and slowly, he pushed into my needy hole. The head of him slid into me, and as I felt the ball of his piercing drag along my inner flesh, a light gasp left me and my eyes fluttered closed.

That was when he spoke. “See?” he uttered meaningfully, driving farther into me. “Made for each other.”

He didn’t stop until I was fully impaled on his throbbing shaft. Or maybe it was me who was throbbing, I didn’t actually know. What I did know was that he needed to move.

Like, now.

I was full. Stuffed. I’d forgotten just how thick he was. My pussy felt like it was on fire as his steel heat filled me. I was overloaded in the best way possible. My entire body was tingling at the feeling.

And Twitch grunted, “How the fuck are you still so tight?” He pulled back then thrust into me again almost angrily. “*Fuck.*”

My eyes rolled into the back of my head. “Ce—” I tried to get the word out. Licking my lips, I tried again. “Cesarean.”

Yep. That would do it. I hope he understood because I couldn’t think right now, let alone talk about it.

He started slow, pushing into me, and from the way he muttered, “Yes. So beautiful,” I knew he was watching the show. When I elevated my ass that little bit more to heighten the pleasure on both ends, that small move pulled a groan from Twitch the exact moment a low moan escaped me.

It was ecstasy.

Pure sexual napalm.

Volatile. Explosive.

I felt the second he released the belt. How? Because its length fell down my side, but when he tangled his hand in my hair and pulled lightly, my core clenched. He pulled firmly, forcing me to follow, and then I was up in a kneeling position, my back arched almost painfully as Twitch wrapped his free hand around my throat while continuing his slow thrust assault. I panted with every lunge, and when Twitch put his mouth to the corner of my lips, kissing me deeply at the cheek, I almost came.

And he felt it.

Releasing my neck, he gripped my chin lightly, and growled, “Do not come.”

And then I did something dumb. Super dumb. I poked my tongue out and licked his fingers.

I felt the stutter in his thrust as he took in a deep breath.

I did it again, and he grunted into my ear. “If you don’t want me to make a deposit, you need to stop.”

But I couldn’t stop. I needed him. All of him.

When my tongue came out a third time with his face close to mine, he watched me, and when I least expected it, he gripped my chin hard and offered me two fingers.

*Oh my God.*

*Hallelujah!*

I pulled them into my mouth, sucking desperately, and Twitch stopped breathing a moment, his hips jerking into me spasmodically.

He released my hair so suddenly I almost lunged forward, but thankfully, he held me up, and when I was stable, his hand slid down between my legs. Unexpectedly, he pinched my clit, and I cried out around his fingers. The long length of the belt came to rest between my cleavage. He slowed his thrusts and he did it again, lightly slapping my pussy between pinches. Time slowed and my body went lax as the familiar prickles lined my entire back. My eyes closed as colored lights danced behind my closed lids, and I moaned when Twitch asked, “You gonna come on my cock, angel?”

I tried to nod but couldn’t. All of my energy was going into my orgasm.

The moment my slick core tightened around his shaft, he let out a grunt and pressed his face into my neck. “Fuck. Come for me, baby.” My breathing shook as the first contraction took me, and when Twitch uttered through gritted teeth, “Yeah. Just like that. Milk me,” I was lost.

I fell to pieces, and as my body spasmed uncontrollably, I never wanted to be put back together again.

Not now. Not ever.

Twitch released me and I fell forward onto the bed, panting and weak from my release. He gripped my hips tight enough to bruise and pulled me back into his violent thrusts. Biting my lip, I gripped the covers and moaned



as he panted, the sounds of our bodies coming together reverberating off the walls.

And then, with a low growl, Twitch held me into his body harshly as he came down, covering my back with his front and holding me close, and he gently rocked into me.

I felt it.

His throbbing cock. The wet warmth inside me.

I felt his release. And the intensity of it was simultaneously frightening yet heavenly. Amazing.

His low groan filled the room, and as he panted into my ear, I felt him still inside me. I was consoled by the feeling of being surrounded by him, by the feeling of being filled with him. I was comforted by his mere presence. This man would never truly understand how much he meant to me, and that simple fact broke my heart as quickly as I thought it might have began to heal.

Twitch surprised me, as he often did. When he pulled out of me, I felt our combined releases run down my legs. A split second later, he fell to the bed on his back and pulled me down on top of him, taking his now softening dick and fitting it back inside me, and I liked that on an insane level. I guess we both needed the closeness.

With my head on his chest and my finger gently running over his flat nipple, the question vibrated throughout me as he ran his hands gently down my back to settle on my ass. "You okay?"

"Yeah," I lied.

And he chuckled quietly. "No you're not."

No, I wasn't.

I blinked away tears. There were so many things I wanted to say, to ask.

*I missed you.*

*Where were you? I needed you.*

*How dare you come back after all this time and make me love you again, you cruel bastard?*

*I don't need you anymore, you asshole. I spent five years without you. I could go an eternity.*

But mainly,

*Don't ever leave me again. I need you more than I need to breathe.*

I was confused, and when I rested my chin on his chest, I found him looking at me. A single tear trailed my cheek, as I uttered a grim, “You need to leave.”

But his eyes held mine. “What did I tell you?” He ran a hand over my now-messy hair in a sweet, loving gesture, looked me deep in the eye, then swore, “I am never leaving you again.”

And the way he said it, sincere and so full of conviction, I believed him. I believed him.

# Chapter

## Twenty-One

Lexi

Knocking on the door woke me, and when it persisted, I blinked sleepily into the morning sun. That was when his arms tightened around me.

“Tell ‘em to fuck off, Lex.”

*Oh, shit.*

My eyes snapped open and I blinked down at the beautiful man in my bed. I sat up quickly. “Oh, shit!”

At that, he squinted at me, rapidly blinking away his drowsiness.

“What?”

I was panicking. “I thought I told you to leave!”

His eyes snapped open at that and his brows knitted. “And I told you I wasn’t going anywhere.”

The knocking continued and I scrambled out of bed. “You need to go. Like, now.” I went to the window and opened it, hoping he’d get the hint. “Please, Twitch. Just go.”

“What’s the problem here?” He lazed in my bed, putting his arm behind him, using it as a pillow.

Ugh. It was disturbing how great he looked in the mornings.

More knocking, and I poked my head out into the hallway and called out, “Just a minute! Coming!” before turning back to my ex, and hissing, “I do not want A.J. to find you here, in my bed.”

But a sleepy Twitch grunted. “So what? He knows I love you. I’ve told him a hundred times.”

Aw. My heart.

Also... *nope.*

I slipped on my pajama pants and threw on a sweater, all the while begging, “Please, Twitch. I don’t need this right now. And I definitely don’t need him getting his hopes up. He’s already acting out some. I don’t want that to increase when he realizes Daddy isn’t moving in.”

Twitch's brows lowered and the words came out unhurried. "Daddy *isn't* moving in?"

Hard knocking, then a sweet little, "Mummy, I need to go!"

"Coming," I yelled out, before whisper-hissing to the giant baby in the bed, "No! Daddy is most certainly *not* moving in!" I scoffed. "We screwed and it was great, Tony, but that's all it was."

Lies. But he didn't need to know that.

He looked kind of injured when he slid out of bed, thin-lipped and moping. "Fine. I'll go. But..." His naked body was so gorgeously distracting. "This isn't over, angel."

I left him dressing in the bedroom, closing the door, as I rushed down the hall and swung open the door. The little monster dropped his bag at the door and hurried past me. "I need to pee!" And when Julius and Ana watched me suspiciously, I stuttered through my lame explanation. "Hey, I'm really sorry about that. There was this huge roach in my bedroom and he—" Fuck. "I mean *it* just wouldn't let me out of my room." I forced out a laugh. "I was kind of cornered." Slapping a hand onto my shoulder, I smiled a little too widely. "Sorry."

But Julius narrowed his eyes at me. "A roach, huh?" He scratched at his nose. "Yeah, they sure make 'em big these days." His eyes trailed to the side of the house just as Twitch stepped into view, and I fucking died a thousand deaths.

My senseless late night guest just walked across the yard, smirking like the fool he was, pulling on his tee, and then he calling out, "Mornin', all."

Julius laughed under his breath, shaking his head before turning to me, his eyes smiling. "Yep. Definitely a roach problem goin' around."

I was mortified. My cheeks blazed fluorescent pink, and when Ana leaned in close, looking at my throat, her eyes widened. Her words were whisper-soft. "Is that a hickey?"

A gasp left me as I slapped a hand onto my neck, and croaked, "No!"

Ana's eyes smiled and she nodded slowly.

Oh my God. He gave me a hickey. How old was he, seventeen?

My mood darkened. I should have known. He always did like to make undisputed claims.

"*Asshole*," I muttered then sighed, irritated. "Well, don't just stand there. Come on in."

As soon as I walked down the hall, A.J. rushed me, throwing himself into my arms, and I laughed, lifting him. “Hey, you. Did you have a good time?”

He nodded, grinning. “It was so much fun! Ana made popcorn and we watched—” He held up three tiny fingers. “—*three* movies. I got to stay up late. And Uncle Julius made me breakfast this morning and I want to sleepover again.”

I chuckled softly. “Sure, buddy, but not for a while.”

His face fell. “Aw, why?”

I squeezed him tightly. “Because I missed you. I love when you’re home with me.” I pulled back, running a hand through his neatly trimmed hair. “I always miss you when you’re gone.”

He smiled a toothy grin a second before his brow knitted, just like his father’s. “Why was Daddy walking around the house this morning?”

My gut sank.

*Oh, fuck my life.*

“He was...” Ah, shit. I couldn’t think. My palms were sweating. “He was checking for spiders.”

“Oh,” said A.J., as if he completely understood.

Whelp, if he did understand, I was hoping he’d explain it to me because I had no freaking idea what I was talking about.

Julius choked on a laugh. “Real pest problem in this house.”

I scowled at his smirking face. “It would seem so.”

A.J. was completely oblivious to any and all innuendo his uncle Julius was giving off. “Can I please watch TV now?”

Oh, God, yes. “Sure, honey. Go for it.”

When my child was out of sight, I turned back to my so-called friends and watched as they grinned widely in my direction. With a grunt, I walked over to the coffee machine and turned it on. As I did, a small smile pulled at my lips. “Oh, shut up.”

Later that day, after I’d showered and covered the small hickey on my neck, I went to the store, leaving A.J. in Molly’s care. When I returned, it was no surprise that Twitch was on my living room floor, playing Guess Who with his son.

“Hi,” I called out as I walked the hall with a grocery bag in each hand.

“Hi, Mummy,” said A.J., looking down at the game.

Twitch jerked his chin toward me. “Need a hand?”

I smiled politely. “I’m good.”

While I unpacked the groceries, I heard Twitch speak to his son. “Bud, I need to talk to your mom a second. Why don’t you go find Molly?”

Just as he walked into the kitchen, I popped the pills into my mouth and sipped some water, swallowing them down. He looked down at the packet. That was fine; I wasn’t hiding it. Not from him.

He held the box up. “What’s this?”

I shrugged lightly. “Plan B.” His brow furrowed, so I went on, “Emergency contraceptive.” His brow pulled even lower, and I uttered quietly, “I’m not on birth control, Tony, and you...” How did he phrase it? “...made a deposit. This’ll make sure a baby isn’t conceived.”

His face turned impassive as he processed what I was saying. “So,” he started, “no more babies?”

It was a question asked in a way that implied he assumed we wanted more children.

My heart stopped, then started again with a jolt.

I asked the question cautiously. “You want more babies?”

Twitch twisted to look into the family room where A.J. was now battling Molly in a game of Guess Who. What he said made me melt. “Look at him. Look how perfect he is.” He took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I could have another ten of those, at the very least.” He twisted back to me. “We’re not gettin’ any younger, baby. This might be our only opportunity.”

I liked the sound of that so much that it made me irrationally angry. And because I was angry, I needed someone to take it out on. “Well, yeah, Twitch. I’d love more kids, but I’m not prepared to do it alone.” My mouth pulled down into a frown. “I don’t even know how I got through it the first time around. Everything was a blur. I was mourning and medicated, and I was in no state to have that beautiful boy.” My heart began to race. “I was in such a bad state that I was robbed of my own wishes. I couldn’t give birth naturally because I was too weak, mentally and physically. I couldn’t breastfeed because my milk supply never came in. I wanted those things—” I scowled at him. “—and you took them from me.”

His jaw steeled. He didn’t speak.

“So, what?” I asked. “What’s the plan? You’re just going to come back every five years and impregnate me? Is that it?” My heart was racing. “Miss out on all the hard stuff and come back to enjoy your children when they’re *fun*?” I shook my head. “Like I said, yeah, I wanted more children, and maybe some day I’ll have them.” I shouldn’t have said what I did. “But not with you.”

Molly, feeling the tension in the kitchen, stood and said to A.J., “Little dude, come see the bird’s nest I found.” The little monster followed her into the backyard, leaving me alone with the man who broke my heart.

Twitch looked tired. “What the fuck do I have to do to convince you I’m not going anywhere?” He took a step closer, his eyes imploring. “Tell me what I need to do and I’ll do it.”

I shook my head slowly. “No, you don’t get to do that.” My eyes settled on his. “You don’t get to be upset when the person who would have given her goddamn life for you no longer trusts you. You’re at fault here, not me.”

He spun on me, giving me his back, and I knew he was fighting to control himself.

My voice came out weary. “I was your ride or die, Tony. I would have done anything for you. And you left me.” My soul was still hurting. “You left me with a broken heart, a child, and a fucking tombstone.” I let out a humorless laugh. “Not only that, but you made me believe you were my hero, that you saved me.” This was not something I would just get over. “That’s so messed up.”

When he turned to face me again, his face was drawn. “If I could go back—”

I rolled my eyes. “You’d have never done it. I know.”

But he shook his head. His tone was black. “Do it all over again.” I frowned as he went on. “To keep you safe, to keep my son safe, I would sacrifice everything. Even my own life.” My face turned passive as he dealt his parting blow. “You don’t fucking get it, do you, angel?” He looked miserable. “The few hours I spend with you are worth the thousand I spent without you.”

My heart panged at his uncharacteristically open admission.

He looked at me a long moment before he lowered his gaze and moved. I watched him walk down the hall and out the door.

Maybe I was being too hard on him.

Unfortunately, I just didn't have it in me to care.

Nostalgia had me taking a detour on the way home. Regrettably, what was meant to be a reassuring and comforting trip ended up being traumatic in so many ways I could barely function.

I came home sobbing, and when I parked my car, I marched across the road and slammed my fist on his door.

The second he answered, he took in my red, blotchy face and his eyes widened in panic. "What happened?" He gripped my arms and spoke softly. "Where's A.J.?"

"A.J.'s fine." I sniffled. "He's with Molly." Fresh tears flowed, and I took my hand, pounding my fist onto his chest, as I ground out, "You tell them to put it back!"

He grasped my hands in his, holding them firmly as his brow furrowed. "What? Put what back? Who?"

But I wasn't in the mood. "You know what I'm talking about." I choked on a sob. "I want it back. Now."

He held my hands in his, rubbing them gently. "I need you to talk to me, angel. Explain this to me."

My wretched sob was barely audible. "The headstone." I blinked through my tears. "You tell them to put it back. It wasn't theirs to take."

And as if a bulb lit up over his head, his body slumped and he sighed softly. "They finally took it."

My voice was rough. "There's nothing left. They dug it up. It's gone"

The entire grave was gone, like the last six years hadn't happened. As if my mourning was all in my mind and it wasn't warranted. My head was a mess.

How dare they?

That gravestone meant something to me, and they couldn't have it.

"Baby." His brow furrowed as he continued to caress my hands. "Why are you so upset about this?"

"Because," I started, swiping at my cheeks. "Because when you leave us again, it's all A.J. will have left." My body shook with the force of my soul-wracking cries. "Because it's all *I'll* have left of you." I panted hard, snatching my hand from his and pounding it onto his chest once more. "It's mine. I want it back!"



Twitch's face fell, and as I took out my anger on his hard, unyielding chest, he wrapped his arms around me, pulling me into his strong body while I fell apart. I cried hard, without shame, and as I took in an unsteady breath, I let out a shattered, "Don't leave us. Not again."

What I meant was, "*Don't leave me.*"

He had to know I wouldn't live through it. Not a second time.

What he said did not appease me. It wasn't a promise. It was hardly a vow. "I swear to you I will never leave you." He pressed his lips to my temple. "Not willingly."

And I knew why he couldn't give me more than that.

It was because he was Antonio "Twitch" Falco, a man who was once a king in this city. And now that word was spreading about his return, there would be some who would go so far to make sure he never stepped up to challenge the throne ever again.

It was because bullets spoke louder than words.

# Chapter

## Twenty-Two

Lexi

A.J. was readying himself for school when Twitch walked into the house like he owned the place. From his room, A.J. called out, “Daddy?”

His tired eyes smiled as he walked over to the coffee pot, pouring two mugs. “I’m here, bud.”

This was part of our routine lately. Twitch would drop A.J. off at school and pick him up, and he did this most days, without Molly. Molly, of course, had quite a bit to say about that to the man himself. She accused him of vying for her job, and I couldn’t help but laugh at her scathing accusation. She really was adorable. As if I’d ever turn her loose. She was more than just an employee. Molly was family.

It was so hard to give Twitch even a pinch of my trust, but I knew if we were going to make this work, eventually Twitch would have to be trusted with his son alone. And if I were being honest, after seeing how he interacted with our little monster, I didn’t think he would ever do anything to hurt him. When it came to our son, Twitch always seemed to put him first, which was a relief.

As the man in question passed me in the kitchen, he pressed his long, hard body into the back of mine and lowered his head to kiss my cheek. “Mornin’, angel.” He placed the second mug of coffee onto the counter in front of me like an offering to the shrine of a goddess.

My heart was aflutter.

Jerk.

I was also not in the mood. My lips thinned as I turned on him, and when I saw how the move had positioned us, I immediately regretted it. We were close. A little too close. Twitch held onto the counter, blocking me in, and when my eyes darted around in panic, his eyes crinkled in the corners, knowing I was caged.

My voice was quiet but irritated, and my eyes narrowed on him. “Why are you being so nice to me? You were never this nice to me. I would beg

for you to be nice to me and you still wouldn't." I peeked out at the side of his large frame to make sure no one was coming. "So what gives?"

Was I spoiling for a fight? Yeah.

Was Twitch going to give that to me? No.

Slipping one arm around my back, he gently tugged on my braid, forcing my head up, and when he spoke, my reserve shattered. "Spent six years without you. Six years thinking about everything I should have done when I had the chance. Six years of guilt. Six years of regret. I left one way and came back another. I'm a changed man."

When my brow furrowed, I whispered, "But you still like what you like."

Clearly, his bedroom tastes hadn't changed.

I stated this meaningfully and his eyes laughed. "I said I've changed, baby, not that I'm a fuckin' saint."

When my lips parted and I glanced up at his beautifully full mouth, he took a miniscule step closer, putting our bodies impossibly close, and spoke quietly, "Don't think I haven't noticed you avoiding my mouth."

Ah, crap. I thought I was being so discreet. I faltered on my response. "The other night, you—" I swallowed hard. "—you could have demanded a kiss, and I..." I would have. I would have given him anything.

But Twitch shook his head slowly, meaningfully. "Was never into forcing women. It doesn't get me off. And forcing you?" His jaw tightened. "I'd rather off myself." He lifted both hands to frame my face adoringly. "I only ever want you willing. I want you to want me so much it fucking hurts." *It already does.* "I want you to think about me all the time." *I rarely think of anything but you.* "I want to star in your dreams." *Every night, baby.* He ran his thumb over my soft lips. "I want you to give me that mouth more than anything, because—fuck me—I haven't thought about much else other than those smiling angel lips on mine." He released me, stepping back. "But I want you to want it too."

I did.

*I do! Come back!*

Molly walked into the kitchen, pausing when she saw how close we stood staring into each other's eyes. Her brows arched and she threw a thumb back over her shoulder. "If you need a minute, I can come back."

“Nah, were good,” uttered Twitch before rounding on the little woman, looking down at her with a knowing look. “I heard some little shit was bothering my boy.” His eyes narrowed on her. “A.J. tells me you brought some of your friends to pick him up one day. Big friends. Tats of their faces kind of friends.” He straightened to full height, folding his arms across his chest, looking more vengeful god than man. “I know you didn’t take members of D.M.S. to my son’s school to beat up on a little girl.”

Molly paled, which was strange, because she was rather dark-skinned. “I didn’t ask them there to beat her up. Shit, she’s *five*. I just wanted them to scare her a little, not lay into her. They just stood there, I swear.” Her face turned solemn quickly enough. “Besides—” Her lip curled. “—she deserved it.”

But Twitch’s eyes continued to watch her a long moment before his lips lifted in the corners. “Stone-cold bitch.” He laid a crooked smile on her and I was jealous of it. He pointed at her, waving that finger in her direction. “I knew I liked you, Molly.”

As Molly relaxed, I rolled my eyes. “Don’t encourage her. It was an irresponsible move.”

But Twitch moved to stand next to her—in a show of support, I suppose. “No. It was a *bold* move, and if she cares that much about our son, I can’t fault her. I’d do the same.”

And for the first time since his arrival, Molly blinked up at him in awe.  
*Shit.*

He had won her over.

Great. Just great.

It was getting a little lonely out on my ledge while Twitch continued to invite people inside. I was starting to get the feeling that almost everyone was okay with him being back. I needed to talk to people of a like mind, and luckily, I was meeting them for dinner.

“Hey.” I smiled, walking into the Indian restaurant.

Nikki smiled sadly as she hugged me tightly. “Hey, girl. How are you?”

Dave stood and embraced me, pressing a soft kiss to my head. “We’ve been worried about you but didn’t want to push.” He looked down at me sympathetically. “I know it’s been a struggle.”

A struggle. What an understatement.

With a heavy sigh, I took a seat at the table and waved him off. “Don’t even worry about it. It’s been...” I searched for the word. “...chaotic.” Yes. That would do. But before we began, I took a glass of water from the table and sipped at it. “How are things with you guys?” They looked at each other a moment before dropping their matching gazes of sadness. My gut sank. “How’s Happy?”

Nikki forced a smile. “Things are okay. He’s good.”

“Things are not okay.” Dave couldn’t even look at me. “He moved out.”

“What?” I leaned in, shocked. My mouth gaped. “What happened?”

Nikki shrugged but kept her too wide smile pasted on her face. “I don’t know really.”

Dave sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I asked him to move out.” When he looked at me, his eyes were sad. “I’m not coping well.”

Nikki’s smile fell. She looked devastated as she put her hand to Dave’s arm in support. “It’s been hard on all of us.”

He looked at her dotingly and placed his hand on hers, as he whispered, “I’m sorry.”

She shook her head and a sad smile graced her lips. She spoke just as quietly, “It’s okay.”

My heart was breaking for them. I know what Happy had done was wrong. He’d lied to us, and he’d done it for five years. But they didn’t know the precarious situation Twitch had put him in. They didn’t know the unwritten rules of the underworld. They didn’t understand how important it was for Happy to keep the ruse going. And they likely never would.

They would never understand that the three unlikely brothers would never truly be out of the underground’s fold. It was something you either accepted, or you didn’t. I felt the need to expand on that out loud.

Letting out a dejected sigh, I uttered, “This world they live in, the roots run deep.” When they both looked at me, I picked up my straw and stirred the icy water, speaking on. “It runs deep in their veins. It’s more a part of them than this life, than *normal* life,” I clarified. “Normal to Twitch, Julius, and Happy is just another setting on the washer.” I laughed humorlessly. My lips turned down into a frown. “It doesn’t exist for them.” I peered up at my best friends, hoping they would fathom what I was saying here.

“They’re trying to have a taste of that life, but it’s not going to be easy. They’ll forever have targets on their heads. They’ll occasionally lie for what

they deem the greater good. They come with a warning label attached to them. They all do, and if you can't handle that, you need to break it off."

Dave thought about my words. His expression went from mildly dumbfounded to spooked then finally settled on annoyed. "Because that's not scary at all." He picked up his beer and took a pull from it before signaling for another. "Thank you, Lexi." He shook his head, his lips thin. "Thanks a lot."

The glass of wine I ordered came, as Nikki asked an incredulous, "And you're okay with being lied to?"

I held up my wine glass in salute. "Don't ask, don't tell." I chugged that mothertrucker down, showing just how not okay I was with that.

Dave chuckled as I delicately wiped away a runaway drop of wine that was now trailing my chin. "Okay, enough about us." He searched my face. "How are you?"

My brows furrowed and I spoke slowly. "My deceased ex-mafia boyfriend came back from the dead, lives across the street, and is now inside my house, in my space for at least eight hours of every day." My brows dipped farther. "He makes sexual innuendos constantly and tells me he loves me a lot. He..." I took in a shuddering breath. "He's being sweet, and funny, and he looks so goddamn good that half the time I'm imagining myself in bed with him." My voice turned quiet as a small smile pulled at my lips. "And at this very moment, he's camping out in my family room inside a blanket fort he made with his son, a son who loves him more than anything in the world." I forced a smile, but my voice quaked. "So, you know, okay, I guess."

Nikki's eyes narrowed on me. "Oh my God," she whispered.

My brows arched at her disbelieving tone. "What?"

Her eyes remained wide as she leaned in, her mouth gaping. "You fucked him."

Dave gasped, putting a hand to his chest, his expression one of pure shock and, like the incredibly smart person I was, I just sputtered in astonishment. "How do you always *know*?"

Nikki leaned back, grinning, putting her arm to the back of Dave's chair. Her shoulder jerked in a light shrug. "It's a gift." She grinned wider, looking extremely happy with herself.

Why were my friends assholes?

Dave blinked at me, his hand firmly planted to his chest. "I am shocked. Positively shocked."

"I didn't mean for it to happen," I lied then sighed, setting the record straight. "Actually," I started, my face falling, "it was kind of my choice."

Another gasp escaped Dave, and I mock-cried, "You don't know how hard it's been to avoid him, to avoid how I feel about him, and I'm trying, but *damn*." I sighed dreamily. "He hasn't changed, not where it matters. Not in the bedroom." Dave choked out a laugh, and my expression turned despondent. "I know. I'm an idiot." I held my hands out to them. "I'm ready. Let me have it."

Nikki shook her head. "I'm not going to yell at you."

"I am," Dave chimed in.

Nikki reasoned, "You have a huge emotional connection with this man, and, yeah, what he did was unforgiveable, but I know you, Lex. I know how much you loved him."

"Well, I don't know what you want me to say," Dave uttered, exasperated. "It's like you're inviting him to hurt you again. It's fine that he's being a good dad. That's actually really great to hear. But he was not a good boyfriend." He scoffed. "He wasn't even a good human being."

I knew this.

I knew all of this. But it was good to hear.

Nikki, ever the romantic, smiled. "He says he loves you, Lex. That's huge coming from him." Then she asked, "Are you going to give it another shot?"

Dave looked as if he was going to lose his mind. "No, she is not!" But when he looked at my hesitant face, his shoulders drooped. "Oh, God. You want that, don't you?"

Ugh. All these questions and obvious observations had me anxious. "I don't know what I want, okay?" I huffed out a long breath, running a hand through my hair. "I'm confused." I was definitely that. "You guys haven't seen him with A.J." I smiled softly. "It's the most adorable thing. He's so good with him, in a way I never thought he could be, but he is." *Please understand*. "He knows he made mistakes with me. He freely admits it. It's like," I tried to explain it in the best way I could, "he's an advanced version of himself. He's not Twitch anymore. He's Twitch two-point-oh. It's like his

emotion chip has been upgraded or something.” I shook my head, feeling stupid. “I don’t know.”

The silence at the table lasted a while before Dave spoke, and he did it reluctantly. “Well, maybe if we did see,” he started. “Maybe if we could see this new and improved Twitch you speak of, maybe then all this wouldn’t seem so scary and we’d feel less anxious about the whole thing.”

But Nikki shook her head, smiling. “I’m not anxious. I think it’s nice.”

Dave rolled his eyes. “Okay, fine. *I’m* anxious, Lex, and can you really blame me?” No, I couldn’t. “Has he even given an explanation of where he’s been this whole time?”

I nodded, not offering an explanation because Twitch’s business was not their business.

“Okay.” Dave looked from me to Nikki. “So.” He shrugged. “Barbecue at casa de Ballentine?”

Wait. “What?” I asked guardedly.

Dave looked me in the eye. “If you want us to be accepting, I’m going to need to see all this firsthand.”

I thought about it.

It actually wasn’t a terrible idea. Perhaps being together would help us heal, all of us. The more I thought about it, the more perfect the idea sounded, and I smiled. “Okay. Barbecue at my place. Saturday, five p.m.” I pointed to Nikki. “Bring your nikkaks.” I then pointed to Dave. “Leave your attitude at home.”

Nikki clapped. “Yay!”

Dave grumbled, “Can’t promise that.”

Now that the details had been ironed out, I was excited. It had been ages since we got together as a family. I don’t think I realized how much I needed it till just now. I needed my friends close. I needed things to go back to normal so it would be done.

Barbecue at casa de Ballentine.





# Chapter

## Twenty-Three

Lexi

The next day, I powered through a jog that I really didn't want to do and made it home to shower just before 10:00 a.m. When I'd just opened the door to the bathroom, I heard my little monster say something that would completely wreck me.

"Daddy, can I stay with you?"

Every molecule of my being wanted to rush out of there, gun a-blazing, and tear this conversation up before it even began. But some small part of me wanted to hear what "Daddy" had to say about that. So I did what any other woman would have done.

I eavesdropped.

"Uh." Twitch hesitated. "I don't know about that, little dude."

A.J. wasn't deterred. "Why?"

"Because," said Twitch matter-of-factly. "You belong with your mom."

My wrath fizzled slightly.

My son tried again. "But I wouldn't be far."

"Exactly. So there's really no need to stay with me, is there? Besides, I see you every single day, bud, and that's not gonna change."

A.J. let out a dejected sounding, "Okay."

"Look," Twitch told our saddened son. "I want you with me all the time. I do. I would love for you to stay with me, and maybe one day, we can do that. But not now. Okay, bud? Because right now, Mommy needs you to be with her." When he added a soft-sounding, "You make her happy," a small part of our broken trust repaired itself.

He had an open opportunity here. A golden ticket. But for some unknown reason, he hadn't cashed in. And I was thankful.

I waited a few minutes before stepping out of the bathroom, and without pausing, I headed into my room to sit by the vanity, brushing out my wet hair. Not a minute later, the man in question was standing in my open doorway. I peered at him, and he stepped inside, talking in low tones. "Hey, so I don't know what just happened, but—"

Cutting him off, I looked back into the mirror and brushed my hair. “I heard.” It was surprising, his need to disclose what had just occurred. I tried not to take my son’s need to be with his father personally, but it really hurt.

“I told him no,” he added, frowning at my expressionless face.

“I know.” I glanced up into his reflection. “I told you, I heard.”

He slid his hands into his pockets and watched me a long moment. “I thought you’d be upset.”

“I am,” I divulged. “But it’s not your fault.” I tried to explain without being unkind. “You’re sort of like a new toy. You’re shiny and fun. And although you’re his father, I’m still the disciplinarian in this house, so…” I shrugged, trying to hide the pain my son’s innocent request had caused me. “I guess it’s natural for him to want you.”

*Like I do.*

Twitch took the two steps over, reached out, and touched a strand of my wet hair. His words were poised and self-assured. “One day, it won’t be an issue, because I’ll be living right here, under this roof, and he’ll have both Mommy and Daddy close enough that he’ll get bored of my surly ass and want his mom’s back.”

I looked up at his reflection with arched brows, fighting a smile.

“Cocky, much?”

His eyes peered deeply into mine. “No. Just confident.”

“Right,” I muttered quietly before continuing to brush the knots out.

“So.” Twitch sat on the edge of the bed, his eyes ever observant. “This barbecue thing I’m feeling might be an interrogation.”

No one ever accused Antonio Falco of being a stupid man.

I blinked innocently. “My, whatever do you mean?”

His lips twitched at my southern genteel tone. “You know exactly what I mean, Lex. And it’s cool, I guess, but I will tell you though.” He stood. “If Dave comes at me again, I’m not holdin’ back.”

“I know,” I admitted on a wry smile. “I already warned him.”

“Yeah, you did.” His expression turned smug. “My woman’s got my back. ‘Cause she’s solid.” He lifted a hand, tightening it into a fist. “A motherfucking diamond.”

I rolled my eyes, but his words caused me to blush so freaking bright it looked like I’d viciously scrubbed my face with sandpaper. “Go away.”

Mercifully, he did, but as I was lucky in that way, the night would prove I was rather unlucky in others. Namely that Dave situation.

It was just before five when the comrades started to file into my home, and while Molly greeted them at the door, I said my hellos from the kitchen as I made the salads that would accompany the ridiculous amount of meat purchased to feed the men in attendance tonight, because, like my son, they were all carnivores.

When Ana and Julius walked into the house, I stopped tossing the greens and hugged them both. “Hey, I’ve missed you guys.”

From down the hall, Twitch emerged from A.J.’s room, and upon seeing his old friend, he crept up behind the mocha-skinned Adonis and caught him unawares, both arms tightening around him like bands. He held Julius firmly, and when Julius spoke through gritted teeth, “Let me go, you fucker,” Twitch lifted him off the ground an inch and shook him twice, causing Julius to choke out, “I swear to God, brother.”

That was when Twitch released him, grinning snarkily. “Good to know you still remember me, *brother*.”

The way he said brother was like the man was anything but, and both Ana and I looked at each other uneasily.

Julius spun on him. “You wanna run that by me again?” His expression furious, he looked around for A.J. then leaned in and spoke quietly. “I’m not the one who left, motherfucker. You are.” The fury he wore was real. “Not a fuckin’ day went by that I didn’t think of you, of how I let you down, and you were out there livin’ your life, saying fuck the rest of us?” He shook his head. “Nah, man. Don’t come at me with that bullshit.”

When Twitch stepped forward to stand next to his brother and extended a hand toward Ana, he said, “Look at her.” Julius did, and Twitch went on, “That woman changed your life, didn’t she, bruh? Changed it like you had no fuckin’ idea she would. She became your all, your *everything*, and you tellin’ me you wouldn’t have done the same shit I did to keep my angel safe?” Twitch lowered his hand and looked Julius in the eyes. “I know you would. Fuck, I know you *did*. Went and massacred thirty men without blinking a fuckin’ eye for that little sparrow.” He looked to Ana. “All for her.” He peered back at his brother. “So tell me you’re pissed at me. Tell me I fucked up. But don’t even think about tellin’ me you don’t feel me doin’

what I needed to do to keep my family off limits because I know you feel that shit in your very soul, my brother.”

The silence was thick enough to cut through.

Julius looked down at his feet a long while before Twitch nudged his arm. “C’mon. You need a beer.”

Ana and I watched Twitch walk away, leaving the back door open. It took a few moments, but Julius trailed behind him, and after they were gone, my eyes widened at the little woman by my side. I spoke quietly. “Oh my God, I thought they were going to fight again.”

Ana made a face, nodding rapidly in agreement.

A second went by and I smiled, then whispered, “But it’s nice they’re talking.”

Ana nodded, smiling softly.

Nikki and Dave arrived next, and just as we all greeted each other, Happy arrived.

Nikki lunged for the bald-headed Persian god, wrapping her arms around him, and as he stumbled back, he laughed. “Whoa there, baby.” Happy smiled down at her before pressing a chaste kiss to her lips, and Nikki smiled into it, as in love as she had been six years ago when they’d met. The words he spoke were stickily sweet. “I missed you.” But when Happy released Nikki and hugged both Ana and me, he moved past Dave with a quiet, “Hey,” and nothing more, before heading into the back yard.

Dave looked completely devastated.

And I wanted to shake him then. I wanted to tell him that true love was not always sunshine and roses. That sometimes love stank to high heaven. But when you found love, even one as messed up as theirs was, you held onto it with both hands because the highs outweighed the lows a hundred to one.

Alas, I did not.

Instead, I put a hand to his arm and squeezed, throwing him a sympathetic smile.

The men surrounded the grill, and even my little monster was called into the fray of testosterone and masculinity, handed a pair of long tongs by his father and given the job of manning the sausages. And it was adorable. But, as little boys do, he got bored quickly enough and went to play ball with Molly on the grass.

When I walked over to find out how long the meat would be, faster than a cobra strike, Twitch caught me around the waist and pulled me back into his body. He held me tightly for entirely too long, and as I fought to get out of his hold, he put his face to my neck and bit me. This had me erupting into fits of giggles. He knew I was ticklish, the jerk. And all of my guests watched our interaction closely, as if we were a pair of fascinating creatures on a Sir David Attenborough documentary.

It was disconcerting, but I knew why they felt it necessary.

Mistakes had been made in the past. Terrible mistakes. Ones not worth repeating.

The food was served, we ate, and after clearing the outdoor setting, the sun began to set over the yard. As I moved to take the seat next to Twitch, he reached up and patted my ass gently, and I felt that light caress all over. Easy conversation commenced, and as I looked around the table at my smiling friends, I felt more at ease than ever before in my life as they laughed at some stupidly trivial story Nikki told.

It was dark when A.J. rushed out of the house and climbed to sit on Twitch. I wasn't the only person watching the sweet interaction between father and son. While our son lay back into his dad's reclining body, Twitch held him close, pausing every now and again to press a gentle kiss to the little monster's apple-scented hair. And when Nikki caught my eye, she put a hand to her heart and made a gooey face.

*Tell me about it, sister.*

Trust me, I felt it. I felt it every time I saw them together. My ovaries had exploded several times over the past month and a half. It was a problem.

When A.J. went limp and started to drool, I grinned at the beautiful sight of my sleeping boy, signaling Twitch and moving to take our son from him, but he just waved me off. "I got it."

Without a word, as if it were the easiest thing in the world, Twitch lifted A.J. higher into his arms and walked his sleeping form inside, putting him to bed for the night. And that was when Dave leaned in and spoke, albeit quietly, "I'm not a hundred percent convinced, but okay. I see it."

That was it. That was all he said, and I wondered what exactly it was he saw.

When Twitch returned, silence greeted him. He glanced around the vigilant eyes at the table and held his arms out. "All right. Who's first?" He sat with a light sigh, reaching out for me, and like the schmuck I was, my hand found his without question. Our fingers entwined and nothing else mattered to me, only that we were here, together, enjoying an evening with friends. Enjoying life with our son.

Of course, I wouldn't give in so easily, and I think Twitch knew this. My hesitance was second nature at this point. What was the saying?

Once bitten, twice shy.

The thing was, I liked how Twitch sank his teeth into me.

Yes. I was an idiot.

Dave straightened in his chair and leaned forward. "Okay, I'll start." He shrugged. "Where have you been?"

Twitch lifted my hand and nibbled at my knuckles. He spoke against my skin, and the rush of warmth caused my arms to erupt into a mass of goose bumps. "Next question."

Dave leaned back and scoffed. "Seriously?"

Twitch lowered my hand, pinning him with his stare. "Seriously." I squeezed his hand, and he peered at me a moment, before he reluctantly added, "I've been all over, and Lexi knows where and why. I don't owe any of y'all fuckers anything, so watch yourself."

Nikki nodded lightly, completely respecting that, while Julius listened intently and pretended to be bored.

Why were men so proud? Why did they think showing emotion made them weak? I didn't get it.

But Dave did not like the tone that was taken with him and he retaliated in the worst way. "So, you're telling us that a man like you spends six years without a woman?" He barked out a laugh. "Fuck off, man. Pull the other one."

Oh, no. He went there.

My chest began to ache.

It was a question I wanted to ask but did not have the guts to broach.

So when Twitch responded, "I never said that," I pulled back, sliding my hand out of his to blink at him. And he frowned, saying, "Baby," before turning back to Dave with a harsh glare, taking a balled up napkin from the table and throwing it at him. "David Allen, I'mma fuck you up."

“What?” laughed Dave, easily avoiding the projectile. “I’m curious.”

And Twitch’s cheek ticked. “You are a lot of things, my man, but curious is *not* one of them.” He pointed at him before taking a long pull of his beer. “I know what you’re doing and I don’t like it.”

Dave put his hands up in surrender, but he did it smirking.

“How many?” I spoke low.

Twitch leaned in. “Do we need to do this now?”

I pulled away from him, speaking slowly, “How many?”

His jaw steeled as he looked me in the eye and spoke through gritted teeth. “One.” Then he thought about it. “Half of one.”

*What?*

“Come again?” My brows arched. “Half of one? How does that work?”

Twitch looked pissed. “Look, it was a long time ago, all right?”

My arms folded across my chest. “Yeah, no. Let’s hear it.”

Throwing himself back in his chair, he groaned out loud before sitting up, and uttering, “It was A.J.’s second birthday. I went out for a drink. Things were taking way longer than I hoped, and for a fuckin’ second, I gave up and decided I wasn’t coming back, okay?” He peered into me, his eyes dark and stormy. “It was three years in and I had only done about one eighth of what I needed to do. Tracking the things I needed to be tracking was harder than anticipated, and Happy—” He looked over to his friend. “—was about all the help I had. Thank you, my brother.” He pounded at his chest with a closed fist.

Happy raised his beer to him, inclining his head.

“So.” Twitch leaned back and lifted his ankle to rest on a prone knee. “I found a woman who—” He made a face. “—I don’t even know what she looked like. She had a pussy and that was enough. And I take her round back of this dank bar, into the alley, and push her to her knees, tellin’ her to get to work.”

My heart ached at hearing this, but it was good he was being open. I wanted to know.

What he said next surprised me.

“But my cock isn’t coming to town.” My head snapped up, eyes wide, and Twitch shrugged. “I don’t know. That’s never happened before, so I tell her to back off so I can jack it.” When Julius sniggered, Twitch’s jaw tightened and he flipped him the bird. “And I’m tryin’—believe me, I’m



fuckin' tryin'. But nothing's happening. It took me a second to realize it was not happening, so I got out of there, blue balls and all." He looked over at me and sighed. "And that was the goddamn horrifying moment I realized I was a one-woman man."

Oh.

Throwing a dark look to Dave, he narrowed his eyes on him. "I don't owe you shit, but I'mma say this once, my man, so listen up." Those soft brown eyes landed on me, and he uttered, "Fell in love with an angel at eight years old." My heart stuttered. He went on, "Tiny little thing with big blue eyes, carrying a first aid kit half her size, dragging that shit into her neighbor's backyard, because she saw a little boy was hurt and hiding." His brows knitted in feeling. "An angel who tried to fix a gaping wound with a fuckin' band-aid."

I wasn't sure anyone knew this story. It was probably why I saw confused expressions all along the table, except for Julius. This wasn't a story I shared.

It was ours and ours alone. Our beginnings ran deep, like the roots of a hundred-year-old oak. The same oak I had carved his name into.

The story took a turn, when he added, "Became obsessed at sixteen. By my mid-twenties, I loathed that girl. Spent a lot of time and money looking for her. Planned to do bad things to that woman, and I found her, eventually. In my thirties, did some stupid, fucked up shit trying to find an in with that girl, and when I finally did and I was all in, she smiled at me, and all I could think was 'oh, shit. I'm in trouble here.'" He glared at Dave. "We got a history you can't even comprehend with your suburban happiness, you jackoff. So don't assume you know me. Don't even assume you know her. We're riding out the storm I created, and we're doin' that privately." His eyes remained hooded as he let out a cruel smirk. "So go ahead and underestimate me, David Allen. I fuckin' dare you. I promise you this." His eyes softened when they landed on me, and he spoke directly to me. "I'm not goin' anywhere."

I wanted to cry then.

This man. He was the only man who could break me, shatter my heart, and I would pick up every single broken shard and place them back into his hands.

There was only one love like this. It was a desperate, overwhelming kind of love that made a person do stupid things and act out in ways they never deemed possible. But it was ours, confusing as it was.

Not long after Tony's bold statement, everyone was moving to take their leave, and when I followed the line of people out, a strong arm snaked around my waist, pulling me close. As I looked up into his eyes, he stared down at me with such an intense look of adoration that I almost came right there, in front of our guests.

How inappropriate.

"I'll call you about taking A.J. for another sleepover," Julius called out as he and Ana walked to their car. That was when a sleek black Mercedes Kompressor crept past at a snail's pace. And when the window lowered, my gut clenched and my entire body froze over.

*Oh, no.*

She looked over at Julius, licking her cherry-red lips before blowing him a kiss.

*Oh, shit.*

But when her gaze landed on me, she widened her eyes, pulled out her hand, made the motion of a gun, and pointed it at me, calling out, "Boom, bitch!"

*Fuck.*

I gasped loudly, stumbling backward, completely terrified and clutching at Twitch. And when her lips formed a wide, punishing smile, I knew she could feel my fear and I hated her for celebrating it.

It all happened so quickly I wasn't sure if I had simply imagined it.

Twitch left my side and as he bolted to the car toward the open window, and as it crawled along slowly, Ling spoke, looking Twitch up and down meaningfully. Her tone was as seductive as the snake she was. "Death looks good on you, baby."

I heard Ana begin to hyperventilate, and Julius ushered her into the car while Happy rushed over to stand in front of me, his body shielding me from harm. Nikki and Dave simply looked on in shock.

Twitch was furious, but he didn't show it. The thing was, I felt his fury in my heart. I felt his dread. His anger seeped into the air around us. "I knew you were crazy, but you got some balls on you, Ling Ling," Twitch uttered in false calm. "You made a mistake coming here." The car picked up

speed. “Test me. I dare ya.” He ran after it, and as it sped away, he called out, “*Got a fuckin’ target on ya head now, bitch.*”

The second the car was out of sight, he spun, the veins in his neck bulging as he looked to Julius and rested his hands on his head, muttering a quietly panting, “We got us a problem.”

Yeah.

No, shit, Sherlock.

Julius nodded, his jaw tight. “Let’s go.”

Happy stepped forward and shook his head. “No way. Something stinks here.”

Yes, it did. “No.” I stepped forward, eyes wide, hands shaking. “None of you are going anywhere. Do you hear me?” I twisted to face Twitch. “You’re not going anywhere!”

Ana shoved open the passenger door and stumbled out, trying to steady her breathing. Julius looked plain worn. “It’s okay. It’s all right, baby. I’ll take care of it.”

But Ana shook her head and tried to speak. “Do— Do—” When she closed her eyes and let out a pained groan, my heart broke for her. Her trauma had increased tenfold at seeing the woman responsible for her capture and torture. She tried again, “Do you remember—” She took in a deep breath. “—what happened—” She panted noisily. “—when she separated us?” She shook her head, and cried out, “Not again!”

Julius’s bravado seemed to falter at her words. He pulled his wife close, wrapping his arms around her and rocking her as she wept.

Twitch also lost some steam. “Okay.” His brows lowered in thought. “Everyone go home.” He looked from Ana to my pale face and his lips thinned as he sighed. “Tonight is not the night.”

But as everyone departed and Twitch walked me inside, holding my hand tightly in his, only one thought circled my mind.

*The crazy bitch knows where I live.*

Well, shit.

That can’t be good.

# Chapter

## Twenty-Four

### Twitch

It was late, and I lay beside my angel, wondering how the fuck I'd let this happen.

My entire time away was about wrapping up loose ends. I was careless in believing the one I left behind would know to stay away.

I heard about Ling.

I heard about her betrayal, about what she had done to Julius and Ana. I heard about her forceful takeover of The Dragons, the execution of her father. More recently, of the mockery she was making in the underworld.

For the first time since their beginnings, The Dragons were now recruiting half-blood Viets. It was unheard of. The Dragons were known for their traditional values, and Ling was fucking that all up.

Some people even said she was fucking her brother.

Knowing Ling, I wouldn't put it past her. She was mental and nothing was off limits.

I knew eventually curiosity would get the better of her, but I didn't expect it so soon. Fuck, I didn't expect her to ever *approach*. The bitch made a mistake coming here tonight.

Keeping my anxiousness to myself, I kept quiet as the woman beside me turned, snuggled close, and pressed her face into the side of my neck. Without hesitation, I scooped her up and pulled her to lie on top of me, because she needed comfort and I was working on being everything she needed.

I'd found my religion. Lexi was my bible. And with her mercy, I would be reborn.

My voice rough, I whispered, "You need my help sleeping?"

Her subtle nod was all she gave me.

And that was okay because tonight was not about me making demands. It was about giving selflessly to my queen.

So I rolled us and peered into her damp eyes, ran my hands up her thighs, and lifted the hem of her skirt before moving backward off the bed.

Gripping her ankles, I dragged her down the bed until that sweet ass rested on the edge of the mattress.

She elevated herself on her elbows, looking up at me, wide-eyed and curious.

My baby.

I would do whatever I needed to keep her safe.

Right now, though?

I got down on my knees, spread her legs, lowered my head, and prayed.

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## Lexi

“Daddy?”

I heard the little monster, but I was too busy being a coward and continued to feign sleep.

From his position, pasted to my back, the man beside me lifted his head and his voice was sleep-rough. “Hey, bud. What’s up?” He quickly added, “Don’t wake your Mom.”

A.J. approached, and muttered, “You had a sleepover?”

I tried hard to quell my smile, but it was difficult. He sounded so left out, our beautiful boy.

“Ah, yeah,” he grumbled, lowering his head back down to the pillow we shared. “I couldn’t find my keys.”

At that, I couldn’t suppress my smile. It was a good lie. One he would believe.

A.J. sounded confused. “They’re right there.”

Twitch lifted his head again. “Oh, what? No way.” He faked his surprise so well that my entire body shook in silent laughter, then jolted as Twitch pinched my ass, hard.

Our son giggled. “Silly Daddy.” A moment later, “I’m hungry.”

Twitch sighed. “Where’s Molly?”

“In the shower.”

I whispered, “Go feed our son,” and Twitch ran his hand over my bare hip, under the sheet. A slow, loving caress. A secret caress, just for me.

God. I was so in love with this man.

It was perplexing. What a contrast our previous relationship was compared to the one we had now. I was coming to realize Twitch was not as complex as I once thought. I mean, sure, he was a complicated creature, but he wore his heart on his sleeve, and when he decided he loved you, he gave all of himself. And as it were, I needed all of him.

The night before, I had the strangest dream.

There he stood holding a dagger in one hand, his heart in the other, and as he fell to his knees, bleeding from the gaping wound in his chest, taking his final breath, he extended his bloody, shaking hand in offering, pleading with me to take the still beating piece of him.

I did, and when he finally perished, he did it smiling.

When I woke with a start, hot with worry and panting, I found him in the dark and he opened his arms to me. I rested my head on his chest and listened carefully to the steady rhythm of his heart until I found peace and fell asleep again.

“Okay, little dude. I’ll be there in a sec. Wanna put some bread into the toaster?”

A.J. rushed out of my room, and called out, “You want some?”

“Nah,” he called back loudly, knowing full well I was awake. He pressed his front into my back and kissed my bare shoulder as the hand at my hip trailed over my stomach, lower still until it rested just above my mound. “I already ate,” he muttered huskily into my skin, pressing his smiling lips to my flesh.

A happy “Mmmm” was all I could respond with.

He sure had. He ate his fill.

I grinned into my pillow, and when I felt the mattress lift, the bed felt colder and I had to fight a pout.

“You hungry, Mommy?” he asked as he pulled on his jeans, moving to leave the room without his tee but pausing at the door for my response.

I lifted my head and squinted through one eye, and my heart thumped at the sight of him. God, he was gorgeous. “Yeah.”

He watched me through lowered lids, his eyes roaming my sheet-covered body. It left little to the imagination. Then Twitch shook his head and sighed loudly. “Get up, baby, or I’m comin’ in after you.”

A few minutes passed, and I found my underwear, pulling them back on before slipping into a bra and wrapping my silken kimono around me. I

opened the curtains, letting in the morning breeze, and sat at the dresser, where I brushed my hair and pulled it into a topknot at the very top of my head. But when I saw something at my collarbone, I leaned in. When I focused on it, I brushed my hand over the purple, then rolled my eyes.

Another hickey.

*Nice, Twitch.*

When I walked into the kitchen, to the man spreading Vegemite on toast for his son, I watched his face screw up, and when he noticed me, he grimaced. “How can you feed him this stuff? It tastes like ass.”

“He’s been brought up on it.” I shrugged. “He likes it.”

“It’s thick, and brown, and....” I swear, Twitch paled a little, closing the bright yellow lid and pushing the jar as far away as he could, muttering, “No, thank you.”

“So,” I started. “You need to stop leaving marks on me.”

But Twitch just ignored me, taking the plate of toast to the little boy in his underwear watching cartoons on the family room floor. When he returned, however, he stalked over to me with meaning. With every step he took, I was forced back one until I felt my bountiful derriere hit the kitchen cabinets, and when he had me where he wanted me, he looked down at the newest hickey. His eyes flashed a moment before he lifted his hand, resting it lightly at my neck, running his thumb over the purple redness at my collarbone.

“Can’t you read?” he uttered, the whiskey-smooth lilt of his voice causing my body to react. “Every one of these marks is a love letter.” He peered down at me, those soft brown eyes seeing deep inside me. “You look hard enough and you’ll figure out what they say.”

Jesus Christ. I’d never been more turned on by mere words in my entire life.

I wanted to grip the back of his head, pull him down to my neck, and beg him for more scripture to read in my spare time.

Instead, I ruined the moment. “What are we going to do about Ling?”

His eyes darkened at hearing her name. “We’re not doing anything.” His jaw steeled, and he quietly said, “Leave her to me, angel.” At my look of uncertainty, he went on. “I’m not sure she’ll come back, but after the message I sent, she’s sure to back off.”

“What message?” I couldn’t help but ask.

And surprisingly, he answered me, his thumb gently running over my skin in a consoling manner. “Comply or die.”

I think he was a little shocked when I peered around him to look at A.J. When I was sure he wasn’t listening, I kept my voice low and avoided his gaze. “I don’t want her to be given a choice.” When I met his narrowed eyes, I told him candidly, “I want her gone.”

He blinked at me a long moment before his lips thinned. “It’s not gonna be easy. She a queen and her Dragons keep her protected. We gotta be smart. Discreet.” At A.J.’s shuffling around the family room, Twitch twisted back to look at him before turning back to me, and explaining, “A problem of her proportion might take some time to—” He thought of the word. “—disappear.”

“I don’t care.” I put my hands to the waistband of his jeans before hooking my fingers into his pockets and gently pulling him closer. He came when called. I looked up at him, looked him right in the eye, and whispered, “I want her dead.”

The way he looked at me then, with an admiration and respect I rarely saw him wear, made my insides quiver. He reached up to cup my cheek, and I leaned into his touch as he rumbled out, “Solid.”

It was a compliment but completely unfounded, since I felt I was falling apart.

And when he put his hands to my shoulders and peered down at my lips, he asked, “When are you gonna give me that mouth, baby?” The need in his voice was palpable. “I’m tryin’ to be patient, but I told you before, I’m not a saint.”

“Soon,” I promised breathily.

I wasn’t ready just yet, but nearly there. When I gave him my mouth, there was no going back. It was the last piece of myself I had to give, the most intimate part of me I had to give, and I wasn’t giving it up without certainty.

And when he looked at me the way he was looking at me right now, with his heart on his sleeve as well as in his eyes, I lowered my gaze as my heart thumped. “Stop it.”

He sounded confused. “Stop what?”

My cheeks flushed. “Stop winning me over.”



His gruff chuckle hit me right in the ovaries, and when he wrapped me up tight, lowering his head and laughing into my neck, I held onto his pockets and smiled bashfully.

It was then I realized I wanted more children with my beautifully tortured king, and maybe if he came through, putting the Dragon queen well into the ground, we'd talk about that.

Twitch was the medicine I didn't know I needed, and I wanted to shoot him up, right into my veins, and stay high on him for a lifetime.

What did that say about me?

*Lord.*

I didn't want to think about it.

Molly walked into the kitchen, and groaned, "Oh, God. *Stahp.*"

When Twitch twisted to look at her, his eyes crinkled in the corners. "You know, you could just fuck off."

Molly poured herself a cup of coffee. "Seriously. It's like seeing your hot mum making out with her newest boy toy." She swept out her arm toward Twitch. "And her boyfriend is a tattooed tank who doesn't wear his shirt around the house. Ugh. Gross."

I tipped my head back and laughed out loud.

This was why I loved Molly. Her level of sass was extraordinary.

"Whatever." I struggled out of Twitch's hold, and as I did, he made a low growl in his throat. I touched a gentle hand to the neatly trimmed scruff on his face, and stated, "I need to shower."

Molly stepped closer. "Hey, Lex, you've got something right here." She pointed at her collarbone, and when I made no move to, she took another step and made to wipe it off of me before she realized what the mark was. Her eyes widened in surprise before they narrowed then settled on Twitch with a glare. She spoke low, "How old are you? Fourteen?"

When Molly turned, shaking her head in disbelief, and walked out of the kitchen, Twitch lifted his leg and kicked out, catching her lightly on the butt. The moment her coffee spilled, she let out a sound of pure infuriation before spinning on him and screeching, "*Jerk!*"

And that was my cue to leave.

I made my way into the bathroom, and the sounds of family argument settled upon me, making me feel both light and happy.

Seriously.

I was a freak.

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## Twitch

“You don’t remember me, do you?”

Molly sat on the sofa with A.J. on her lap and her eyes watched me intently. Her voice remained sweet as she ran a hand through my son’s hair.

I looked up from my phone. “Should I?”

A.J. was on his tablet, his ears covered with headphones as he watched some stupid show where grown-ass men and women unboxed surprise eggs and showed the youngsters at home what they got. I seriously didn’t get the things kids watched these days. It was obscure.

And people thought *I* had problems.

“You knew my dad,” was all she followed with, and when she didn’t continue, I lifted my hand and threw her a “give me more” gesture. She took in a deep breath and let me have it. “I was about eight years old, and when you walked into our house, I hid behind a bannister, watching you.” She smiled. “I was convinced you were a *Mokoi*.” When I frowned, she explained, “An Aboriginal spirit who kidnapped and ate children. My dad told us stories about the *Mokoi*. They were tall and unusually thin with dark hair and red eyes, and they slept high up in the trees, looking out for their next victims. The *Mokoi* were undead, born of dark magic, and they often bore the souls of those who misused magic in life.”

At my perplexed stare, she looked at me and bit her overly full bottom lip, her melodic voice haunted. “My home life was not good, and even though I was just a child, I felt I was better off taking a chance with a *Mokoi* than to stay where I was.” She lowered her face and looked down at my son with an affection she reserved only for him. “I was barefoot and dirty. My curls were badly tangled, the t-shirt I wore was torn, and the soles of my feet were bleeding.” She swallowed hard and blinked rapidly. “And I approached you, put my sticky hand in yours, and said—”

Oh, fuck.

I remembered her.

How could I forget?

"I'm ready," I completed her sentence, blinking at her in disbelief.

She nodded, her eyes shining. "Yeah." She cleared her throat. "You looked at the state of me and knelt down, wiping the tears from my cheeks. See, I was sad that I'd never see my sisters again, because when a *Mokoi* took you, you didn't come back. You looked mean, but you were kind to me, and for a split second, I was okay with you eating me."

*Ah, shit.*

I thought about my son in a similar situation and my chest ached.

It was a hard limit for me. I never could stomach cruelty to children.

"But you did something I didn't plan," the little woman enlightened.

Yeah. I recall.

I looked down at my son and muttered quietly, "I killed your father."

She smiled widely, nodding. "Yeah. Shot him dead, right in front of me."

My brows knitted. "I never meant for that to happen."

"I know," she said on a hush. "But it changed my life. It changed my sisters' lives too. Our dad..." She paused. "...was a cruel man. He liked to psychologically torment us, and when that didn't work, he physically punished us." Her lips thinned. "For nothing more than being girls."

Monty "The Butcher" Holden was a pig of a man, and I had no guilt over killing him.

I was confused though. "How did you end up here?"

"Completely by chance." Her brows arched. "I saw Julius at a meet and asked about you. He told me you'd died, and I was—" Her voice quieted. "—upset. Because I owed you, and finding out I would never get the chance to repay you was beyond frustrating. He asked how badly I wanted to relieve myself of that debt, and I told him I would have done anything. That was when he suggested meeting Lexi." She stroked my son's hair and A.J. reached up, pulling her arm down to hug it close as he watched the screen on his lap. "And when I met this little thief, he stole my heart."

Where was this going? "Why are you telling me this?"

Molly looked at me with meaning. "Because I need you to understand that I'm ready to protect your family, to the death if necessary."

She meant what she said. I could tell.

"Hopefully, it won't come to that," I muttered. "My son seems to like you alive." And that meant something to me.

Her eyes rested on the little monster in her lap and she smiled softly. “It doesn’t matter what he wants. If it comes down to it, I’ll shield him with my body.” She hugged him, and A.J. smiled up at her, unable to hear what she was saying. She smiled through her words. “And I’ll kill anyone who tries to harm him.” When her eyes settled on me, she sobered. “*Anyone.*”

Good. We were definitely on the same page.

I looked back down at my phone. My voice was low.

“I knew I liked you, Molly.”

# Chapter

## Twenty-Five

Ling

As I sat on a stool, wearing nothing but his shirt, my eyes smiled at the beautiful man cooking for me.

“So I told him—” He paused to flip the frying gözleme. “—he’d better fucking watch his mouth or I’d add another hole to his head.” He turned to grin at me. “And I’m pretty sure I watched a grown man shit his pants.”

I chuckled under my breath, shaking my head. He was ridiculous, my beautiful Turk. And he was starting to mean more to me than anyone in the world. So I needed to tell him.

He was bare-chested, and my eyes roamed the muscular planes of his body. As he turned back to cook, I cleared my throat, then spoke up, “I found him.”

Aslan stilled. He kept his back to me a long moment before he twisted to face me, his expression unreadable.

“Yeah.” I ran a hand through my long hair and sighed. “You were right.” My eyes met his. “He’s back.”

Az searched my face, before drawling, “And how do we feel about that?”

We.

Ugh. He was killing me.

“We,” I started, “feel betrayed and hurt.” *And rejected.* My gaze drifted down to the counter, and I ran a perfectly manicured nail over the cool marble. “We don’t know what to think or what to say.” I sighed then looked him in the eye. “But we don’t feel good about it.”

“Right,” he said lightly a moment before he turned off the stove and moved the pan off the heat. With his back to me, he uttered a quiet, “And where does that leave us, baby?”

The fear in his voice called to the fear in mine.

“I don’t know,” I muttered honestly.

He spun on me, those dark eyes darker than I’d ever seen them. His voice was low, dangerous. “Do you want him back?”

Again, honesty, plain and simple. “I don’t know anymore.” I lowered my eyes. “I thought I did.” My heart pounded. “But I don’t think so, because...” I swallowed hard, avoiding his blistering gaze, and speaking low, “I have you.”

Aslan had filled the gaping hole inside me. I no longer wanted or desired Twitch. I needed the man standing right in front of me, the man by my side, despite the odds being ever against us.

Despite the fact that no one would want us together.

Despite the fact that the man I loved was married and was never leaving his wife.

We were royalty in our own right but would never rule together. We were a tragedy in the making, and that only made me want him more.

I watched as his body drooped, losing some of the obvious tension in his face. His lips parted and he let out a long breath, running a hand across his nape.

Our desperate stares met across the counter, and everything wrong in the world melted away.

My voice was whisper-soft. “I love you.”

Az closed his eyes, and he kept them closed as he responded in kind. “Love you too, Ling.”

The tightness around my heart loosened, and I watched the man who had won me over with damaged roses and soft kisses breathe a sigh of relief.

Let Twitch have his little family.

I had something better.

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## Twitch

I felt her watching me in the open doorway. As I pulled my hoodie on, I heard the quiet words she spoke.

“Where are you going?”

Her voice was soft, but she couldn’t hide the concern that lined it.

Zippering myself up, I turned and wished I hadn’t. She wore her worry like a second skin. “Just making a house call.”

Lexi's arms came up and she hugged herself, and that small move had me wanting to stay in and be by her side, sleep beside my woman, and feel at home with my family. Unfortunately, I couldn't. This shit needed to be nipped in the bud, and my brothers and I were the only ones capable of doing what needed to be done.

She jerked her chin, gesturing to my side. "You always take a gun on house calls?"

Didn't miss a beat, my angel. "On these types of house calls, I do."

I was worried about her reaction.

I shouldn't have been.

Straightening, she nodded and then sighed softly. "Okay." She dropped her hands to her sides, and said, "Well, tuck your son in before you leave."

Jesus fucking Christ.

This woman.

Solid.

When I moved, I did it slowly, with purpose, and when I reached her, I looked down into her big blue eyes before I spoke low. "Kiss me before I go."

She looked me deep in the eye. "No."

When my brow furrowed, she smiled widely, and my dick jerked.

When she backed out of the room, I moved down the hall to say goodnight to my son. After I did that, I noticed her waiting for me at the front door. I approached leisurely, and when I got close, she stepped into me. It was second nature to have my arms around this woman.

This woman who had given me so much.

Her heart, a son, a home. She gave everything I didn't know I wanted and continued to give on the daily.

I was a lucky man, and one day this angel would be my wife, wearing my ring, and after we made our vows, I'd keep her barefoot and pregnant and fucking happy.

Looking at her the way she was, I decided I needed a daughter with Lexi's rare sweetness and diamond-like strength. A girl who loved her daddy regardless of the piece of shit he was.

Her gentle caution cut through me like a hot knife through butter. She spoke quietly into the crook of my neck. "Be safe." When she pressed a soft

kiss to the old gunshot wound, the rounded scar that I got protecting her that fateful day six years ago, I lost my composure.

I growled low in my throat then pulled back to set my dark gaze on her. “Keep lookin’ after me like this and I’ll marry your ass.”

Her response gave me shivers.

Looking up at me, wide-eyed and pretty as a peach, she tilted her head slightly, and asked, “Promise?”

The sound of a car pulling into the drive caught our attention, and I leaned down to press a kiss to her forehead. “Later.”

Without another word, I stepped out of the house and made it over to the black SUV, opening the door and sliding into the passenger seat. The second I closed the door, the car took off and I turned to Julius. “What’s the go?”

Happy spoke from the backseat. “Her shit’s tight, man. I don’t know how we’re gonna get in, let alone get close enough to pop her. Her men guard her like she’s the second coming of Christ.”

Julius grunted. “She’s got an apartment in the city, off the books. Ling thinks she’s smart, but the cockier she becomes, the sloppier she gets. She goes to this apartment to lay low. Almost every night, she’s there and—” When I turned to him, he glanced at me a moment before he turned back to the road. “—you won’t believe who I see coming in and out that place on the regular.”

“Who?” I asked, my brow lowered.

“Aslan Sadik.”

When Julius said what he said, the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end.

“Motherfucker.” I slammed a fist onto the dash, hard enough to make the plastic creak. I looked to Julius. “Guess who saw me at the fuckin’ mall a couple weeks back?” I twisted to look back at Happy. “Aslan the fuckin’ Turk.”

Happy’s frown was deep. “What? You think he and Ling are a thing?” He shook his head. “No way. The Dragons and The Lost Boys hate each other, man, have since the dawn of time, and that hate runs deep. She’s already disgraced. I don’t think she’s that dumb.”

“She is,” Julius stated darkly. When he peered over at me, his lips were thin. “Why didn’t you say anything?”



I threw him a look that said “are you fuckin’ kidding me?” then blinked at him a long moment. “You weren’t answering my calls, because I,” I drawled slowly, “*hurt your feelings.*”

Julius narrowed his eyes at me before turning back to the road. A while later, he spoke. “Okay, so Aslan is feeding Ling info.” He looked in the rearview mirror to look at Happy. “That’s the only thing that makes sense. The question is, why?”

It was obvious.

Happy reluctantly uttered, “Because they’re a thing.”

“Because they’re a thing,” Julius repeated, sighing under his breath.

Ling was suicidal if she thought The Dragons would look past this transgression.

No. They’d have her head on a platter.

Maybe that was the smartest way around our problem, to let her destroy herself.

“Okay.” I looked out the window of the moving car. “Let’s go have a word with the Turk.”

The house was a fortress. It was huge, imposing, and they had security to match Alcatraz. But we had something they didn’t.

Happy.

From the backseat, he typed quickly on the laptop. “Give me a sec.” He kept typing. “They’ve got two consecutive systems running at the same time. It’s confusing.” His fingers moved fast along the keyboard. “Okay, I’m getting there now.” The sounds of buttons clicking was doing my head in. “One more command and—” He hit Enter. “—they’re offline.” He looked from me to Julius. “Let’s go. I don’t know how long till they realize and send someone to fix what I fucked up.”

Pulling the hood over my head, I stepped out of the car and opened the app Happy installed on my phone. I pointed it to the three-door garage and hit the button. One of the doors began to rise, and I turned back to Happy, my face solemn. “Fuck me.”

Happy simply lifted a brow and grinned.

The man knew his shit.

The right technology in the wrong hands was a dangerous thing.

We all moved inside and I hit the button again, closing the door behind us. There was a door at the back of the wide-open space, and when I made

it there, I gently put my hand to the knob and tried to twist, but it had no give. It was locked. Julius lifted his hand and tapped lightly next to the keypad attached to the door. I stepped back as Happy moved in, opened the plastic casing, and fiddled with the wires. Moments later, the red light turned green, and when Happy tried the knob, it turned.

We were in.

The moment the door opened, a feminine voice called out, “I thought you said you were going to be late?” We moved down the hall, weapons drawn, and she went on with, “Well, I just started season three of Game of Thrones. Come watch with me.” She chuckled. “I swear to God, Az, this stuff is so screw—” When she came into view, her head jolted in shock, her wide eyes darted between the three of us, and she whispered, “Oh.”

The young woman in the wheelchair was overly thin, her big brown eyes wide with fear, her long black hair pulled into a low ponytail. She wore a thick sweater and had a blanket pulled over her lap. Her full lips parted in distress, as she spoke quietly, “Are you going to kill me?”

I felt like an asshole. She was clearly unwell. But that wasn’t my problem. “I don’t know yet.” I stepped closer to her, my tone gentle. “That depends on your husband.”

Surprisingly, she held my stare with the strength of the queen she was. “Well,” she sighed. “He’s not going to be home till late.” She used her hands to spin the wheelchair around and started to move slowly. “So, come on in, I guess.”

We followed closely behind her, and when she made it into the cozy-looking family room, she settled herself in front of the heater, taking in its warmth, rubbing her legs and wincing. She looked back and swept an arm out toward the sofa. “Sit.”

Before I sat, I went to her and held out my hand. “Phone.”

Looking up at me with those haunting eyes, she pulled her cell out from under the blanket, and I saw the Messages screen was opened and the single word written there was **Help**. Luckily, she hadn’t sent it yet. My eyes narrowed on her and she shrugged, appearing mildly sheepish. “Can’t blame me for trying.”

No, I couldn’t.

While Happy and Julius sat on the sofa with their guns out, I pulled up a stool from the breakfast bar and sat by the frail-looking woman. She

watched me closely, and I uttered, “You probably don’t remember me—”

But she cut me off with a matter-of-fact, “I remember you.”

Okay. Good.

That was good.

Then she knew what I was capable of.

We didn’t speak for a while after that, but when the hour mark passed, I was getting bored of waiting. When I saw the woman’s eyes blink slowly, tiredly, I cleared my throat. The second her weary eyes settled on me, I uttered, “What’s wrong with you?”

The words weren’t cruel, just curious.

She smiled sadly. “Multiple Sclerosis.”

I sighed in sympathy, shaking my head lightly. “Sorry.”

“That’s okay.” She grinned, but it was so strained it came out a grimace. “Maybe you’ll put me out of my misery tonight.”

No, I wouldn’t. “Yeah, maybe.”

Another hour and I was ready to ask the now sleeping woman if she had a deck of cards or checkers or some-fuckin’-thing—anything, to help pass the time.

That was when the garage door opened and heavy footfalls approached. “Asya?” Before he entered, she stirred, blinking through sleep. He called out, “The fucking servers are offline again.” He sounded frustrated. “I swear to God, *tatlim*. I’ve had it with this monitoring bullshit. It’s like I’m paying them to dick me arou—”

When he stepped into the family room, his eyes settled on me sitting by his wife, and when he saw the groggy state of her, he lunged. “*You prick.*” He rushed forward, and Happy and Julius stood, pointing their weapons at him. Panting, Aslan had the good sense to put his hands up and take a step back. He looked at me, his nostrils flaring in anger. He spoke through gritted teeth, “She’s ill.”

I used the barrel of my gun to scratch my temple. “I can see that.” I looked back at Asya, who was now looking at her husband with wide, apologetic eyes, and I turned back to him. “I’ve been a perfect gentleman, haven’t I, Asya?”

The vein in Aslan’s temple bulged as his face screwed up and he threw a pointed finger at me. He hissed out, “*You don’t speak her name!*”

He clearly loved this woman. What the fuck was he doing with Ling?

I chanced a look at the woman.

The only thing that made sense was that he wasn't getting sex at home.

My lips thinned.

Bad choices led to bad circumstances, and he was stuck now. I hoped Ling was worth it.

"I'm fine," said the woman beside me. "He hasn't done anything, *aşkim*." She blinked at me, swallowing hard. "Not yet."

Relief washed over Aslan and he tried to calm himself. He looked between the three of us vigilantly, taking in his position, his surroundings. His impending doom. "Why are you here?"

"You know why, Sadik." My tone low, I uttered, "I'm here about a woman."

Aslan looked confused.

"A woman who up until a couple weeks ago thought I was dead."

The fucking Turk started to catch on.

"A deadly viper," I explained. "A Dragon who came to my home in the middle of the night, made a threatening gesture to my woman, and put a target on her pretty little head."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he uttered, but his narrowed eyes spoke volumes.

He was willing to talk, but not in front of his wife.

Well, fuck him.

I never did play by the rules. Had he forgotten who I was?

The throne belonged to someone else, but we all knew if I wanted it back, all I had to do was claim it as mine.

"Sure you do," muttered Julius. "You've spent almost every night in her city apartment till the early hours of the morning." He looked to Asya. "What? You didn't know your husband was fucking The Dragon Queen?" When Asya's already pale face turned porcelain and she looked to her husband in question, Julius tossed her his phone. "Got some nice photos there for ya, princess." He turned back to Aslan. "Oh, I'm sorry. Was that 'need to know' bullshit?"

Asya scrolled through the photos and her panting increased. When the phone fell from her hands to the hardwood floor with a bang, she sounded as if she were choking, and when she lifted her trembling hands to her

mouth, shaking her head softly, she settled her teary eyes on her husband, now knowing the level of his betrayal.

Aslan swallowed hard. "It's not what it looks like," he told her, but it sounded weak to everyone in the room.

"I'm gonna tell you this once, Sadik," I said before I offered my advice. "There is something wrong with that woman. Ling is a plague on this world. She will ruin your life in every way possible, and when you don't give her what she wants—" I looked to Asya but spoke to her husband. "—she'll start fucking with the things you love." I faced him and watched his face fall. "It's not her fault; she just doesn't know any better." I warned him, "You can't fix her. What's broken inside of her, it can't be repaired."

Aslan looked to his wife, wearing a sadness I'd never seen the normally confident man wear. "It wasn't planned," he told her, his rough voice wavering. "I'm so sorry, *sultanım*."

I could see it was starting to sink in, but I needed them to know what my position was on the fucking Turk's relationship with The Dragon Queen.

Turning to the woman beside me, I held out my hand, and she reluctantly placed her shaking fingers into my expended palm. I spoke to her directly; fuck her husband. "I have a confession to make. I didn't come here to hurt you, but—" As she blinked, her lashes dampened. "—I can see that's what I've done here, so, I'm sorry." I patted her cold hand and licked my lips. "Your husband has a choice to make, and I hope he makes the right one, because—" I peered into her eyes needing her to see just how serious I was. "—if I come back here and you catch me again," I uttered somberly, "I'mma be the last thing you ever see, princess."

She took in a shaking breath before she nodded in understanding.

I placed her hand onto her knee, covering it with my own as I focused on the broken man across the room. "What you need to understand, Aslan, is that Ling might be crazy, but..." I released his wife's hand and stood, walking over to him, and when I spoke again, my tone was black. "But I taught her everything she knows." I stepped in close, and muttered quietly, "You want crazy, bruh?" My hooded gaze lowered on him as my lip curled. "Fuck with my family, and I'll show you Ling's crazy has got nothin' on mine."

I looked him up and down, then whispered, “You made vows to that woman, you piece of shit. That mean nothing to you?” I watched his face crumble. “She’s sick.” The first of his tears fell. “She needs her husband, and you leave her alone to go screw a diagnosed psychopath?” He closed his eyes, and I muttered, “What’s the matter with you? Get your shit together and be the fucking man your wife needs while you still got the time.”

When he trembled with the extent of the emotion he tried to keep inside him, gun in hand, I twisted back, and asked, “Yo, Asya? You want me to off this punk for you?”

“No!” she cried, her body shaking with the force of her sobs. “No, please. Please don’t.” She reached for the man who didn’t deserve her, and wept quietly, “Please. I love him.”

Aslan cried openly then, and I saw nothing but shame in his eyes.

Good. I was done here.

I lifted my hand and poked him in the chest. “You’ve been touched by an angel.”

And with that, we left, leaving a trail of bloody broken hearts between us.

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## Aslan The Fucking Turk

We sat in silence for what seemed like hours before she spoke.

“Her?”

The level of betrayal in her voice cut me hard. But Asya deserved the truth, so I would give that to her, even though my voice shook. “Yes.”

With that single word, my wife was destroyed. I watched from across the room as she wept in complete silence, and in that moment, I felt completely unworthy of the princess turning her wheelchair away from me to cry in privacy.

Tonight, my world fell apart, and I had nobody to blame but myself.

I wanted to beat something senseless. I wanted to be alone. I needed to get away, but I couldn’t leave her.

She sniffled then took in a deep breath, attempting to steady the wavering of her voice, and what she said slayed me. “I didn’t mean to get sick on you, Az.” She spun her chair around to face me. “I know we said forever, but—” Her lips trembled. “—forever is coming sooner for us than we hoped, and—” Another set of tears fell. “—I’m so sorry for that. I’m sorry our forever was only temporary.” Her quiet sob was my undoing. “I never meant for this to happen, *hayatım*.”

It didn’t hit me until she said it that I might have felt betrayed by her getting ill.

I was a bad man, yes. But I’d never been a bad husband. Until now.  
And knowing that broke me.

Without a moment’s hesitance, I went to my Turkish princess and knelt in front of her. The action alone spoke volumes. To be submissive was not in my nature, but I would surrender to her, time and time again, because she was worthy.

My voice rough, I uttered, “I’ve disappointed you, *karım*.”

She looked at me with a deep sadness. “As I’ve disappointed you.”

I was a demon.

Who was I to make such a pure soul feel a disappointment when she did nothing but shine through the darkness that consumed me?

I was indeed a fiend. A villain.

When she reached out for me, I met her halfway, taking her delicate hand in mine. Those pretty doe eyes I’d always adored held mine, as she whispered, “*Seni seviyorum*.”

*I love you.*

The words choked the life out of me, and, lowering my head to her knee, I held her hand tightly like I was afraid she’d leave me and cried like a child.

I loved my wife. I loved her so much more than I loved myself. I loved her more than anything, even the woman with an ice-cold heart and cherry-red lips. And Twitch was right.

Ling wasn’t worth it, no matter what I felt for her.

My family came first.

I was stupid to have started what I had. I needed to end it.

Tomorrow, I would cease my affair.

# Chapter

## Twenty-Six

### Lexi

He crept into bed sometime before dawn, and when he shuffled closer and gently stroked my hair, I spoke into the darkness. “How’d it go?”

But, for the moment, he ignored me. “C’mere.”

I went willingly, needing to hear his heart beating, and when I laid my head on his chest and listened to the steady drumming of his heart, I relaxed into him, running a hand up and down his side with my eyes closed. “So?”

He hesitated a second before he spoke low. “Lost her only ally.” Good. His arms tightened around me. “Breakin’ down the stronghold, piece by piece.” Then he said through a yawn, “I don’t give a fuck how long it takes. You want her gone, baby—” His voice turned drowsy. “—she’s gone.”

It was a promise. He made a vow. Everything inside me told me he would keep us safe.

And like the idiot I was, I chose to believe that.

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### Molly

The text I received made my phone feel heavier than it should have.

I had just put the little monster to bed and knew I would have to respond, one way or another.

My heart raced.

Either way, I was screwed.

If I said yes, I was back in with the person whose family destroyed me.

If I said no, he was lost to me forever.

I held the phone in my hand as I walked the hall, finding him sitting on the floor in front of Lexi as she lay down on the sofa on her stomach, watching the TV and adorably running her fingers lightly through his hair. Twitch closed his eyes, loving her attentions, and they both looked tired. I hated to interrupt, but this was important.



Clearing my throat, I waited for him to open his eyes, and when he squinted up at me, I simply jerked my chin in the direction of my room, ignoring Lexi's sudden uneasy stare.

I walked the hall, stood in the center of my room, and waited. He followed soon after, and when his imposing figure blocked my open doorway, I blurted out, "I need you to stay here tonight."

His brow knitted. "Why?"

It was a reasonable question. I don't know why it pissed me off so much.

On the defensive, I said, "I have a job tonight."

That did not go down well. "I thought you were out."

"I am," I revealed, "but I owe this guy."

"No," Twitch uttered coldly. "You said it yourself. You owe me." He looked me up and down. "You're not goin' anywhere, Molly."

Fucking bullshit. "I'm not a child," I seethed, my eyes wide with fury. My full lips curled. "I'm not *your* child. You can't tell me what to do. Besides," I added, "I'm only asking out of respect." I ended on, "I'm going."

He seemed to think on that, fighting the need to say something, tapping his hands on the doorframe a long moment before he held out his hand. "Give me your phone."

If this was the only way to get him to leave me alone, I'd deal. I unlocked the screen then handed him my phone.

He typed quickly, looking down at the screen, then muttered, "You get in trouble, you call this number. Someone will come for you." I reached for my phone, but he held it out of reach. "I need you to remember your promise to me." His dark stare held me in place. "You make sure you're safe, and if you feel you're not, you fucking call. Your life is important to me." His words made my heart warm. But then he ruined it. "Your life is a tool. It is something I can use to keep my son safe, so make sure you come back in one piece, Molly. If you don't—" His whiskey-smooth voice was deceptively calm. "—I will be very disappointed."

I wanted my phone back, and he knew this because his lip twitched as I stared at the rectangular cell with a frown.

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know yet, but I'll leave soon."

“Got everything you need?” He was talking weapons.

I nodded. “I’m all set.”

“You need a ride?”

For fuck’s sake. “No, *Dad*,” I drawled, getting annoyed. “I’m taking Big Red.”

“When are you coming back?”

Oh my God. It finally clicked.

He was stalling me for some reason, but why?

I was officially pissed.

I leant in, and hissed, “Give me my phone!”

He checked the screen a moment before he handed it over, and I scrolled through my contacts, locating the number he added.

I read it out loud, “911.” I followed on a chuckle.

He did not laugh. No.

He watched me closely. “Call it if you need to. Don’t be a hero. Your life is not yours to risk, Molly.” He stepped out of my room and into the hallway. “It’s mine.”

As he walked away, my lip curled and I flipped him the bird.

The words he called back were highly amused. “Not nice.”

I sent the text.

**Me: I’m in.**

And then I waited.

A few moments later, I got a message back.

**Tama: The warehouse. An hour.**

Just like old times.

I dressed quickly in my black skinny jeans and a black spaghetti-strapped tank sans bra. It didn’t matter. I was petite as petite came. My boobs were barely existent. No one would even notice. Over the top, I wore a tight, long-sleeved, black lace number that did nothing to shield me from the cold. It was more a fashion statement. Finishing up my look, I put on my black hi-top Chucks that had definitely seen better days.

Reapplying my lipstick to the lips my sisters once called soup coolers, I checked my makeup and I was good to go.

Before I left my room, I slipped on my loaded holster and wore it openly. I wasn’t hiding anymore. Not from Lexi, not from anyone. As I made it into the family room, Lexi was standing, and when she looked

down at the leg wrap I wore that housed my favorite hunting knife, her eyes widened a moment before she took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and stepped closer to me, placing her hands on my shoulders.

And what she said had me feeling things that made me uncomfortable.

“This house is only a home because of the people in it.” Lexi’s soft, maternal voice washed over me. “And it wouldn’t be the same without you. So, be smart and be safe.” I closed my eyes, and she touched her warm hand to my cheek. “Come back to us, Molly.”

I loved this woman. She reminded me of my mother.

“I will.” My tone was soft.

Without looking back, I made it out the back door and into the garage. When I turned on Big Red, she roared to life, shaking the walls of the interior with every rough rumble she spewed to let everyone know she lived.

Fuck. I loved this car.

I left then, and I didn’t know when I would be back.

But I planned on coming back.

To my family.

The dilapidated warehouse was old news. I’d been here hundreds of times before. It was actually where Tama and I first met through a mutual friend, who told Tama Hariana about my specialty. A specialty he just happened to have need of.

I was a mercenary. A gun for hire, and a damned good one too. I learnt from the best, training with the worst of people who gave me the edge I needed to get a foot up in a world that wanted to step on me, weighing me down until I sunk into the cold, hard ground.

Made a name for myself by sixteen, and by eighteen, they started to call me Quickbeat. I don’t know who started that, but it caught on, and while, once upon a time, people would shout my name openly, they started to whisper it.

I’d by lying if I said I didn’t like that.

They were waiting for me outside. There were four of them, huge Maori men, but I only had my eyes on one.

*The one.*

I sped into the lot, Cardi B’s “I Like It” blaring from the speakers. The subwoofer made the entire back windshield vibrate with the heavy bass that

made my heart stop. I needed to get revved, and music helped me out in that department.

It had been a while since I'd done this.

Big Red roared when I hit the accelerator and spun the steering wheel, leaning into the door as the car drifted sideways, and I watched with a smirk as gravel sprayed the men, forcing them to cover their faces with their arms. I stopped the car suddenly, switching it off and stepping out with a shit-eating grin, bumping the door closed with my butt and slinking over to them confidently.

I looked over the guys. I knew them all.

Hemi, the giant teddy bear, was there. He jerked his chin at me.

Amoho did not spare me a smile. That was fair. I looked at him hard as he glared at me.

Kawana's face was soft, but he didn't greet me either.

That sucked.

I loved Kawana. He was my boy.

When my eyes landed on Tama, I stood in front of the huge, muscled man. His 6'3" height was a contrast to my 5'5", but I held my own, standing tall and folding my arms across my chest. My melodic voice was so deceiving. It always had been. "Tama." I looked him up and down, pausing over his crotch before lifting my eyes to his. "You look good."

He did. My God, did he ever.

Tama was 275 pounds of pure muscle. His chest was wide. His shoulders were wider. I'd always considered this man a god. A vengeful god, and his black stare was on me. The tattoos on his face made him look terrifying, but all I wanted to do was run my fingers over them and trail them with kisses.

When he opened his mouth, the words came out rough and my entire body broke out in goose bumps. "Why did you come?"

*Because you asked me to.*

*Because I'm sorry for the pain I caused you.*

*Because I will never love anyone the way I love you.*

I shrugged, my eyes never leaving his. "The price was right." My tone lowered. "Speaking of which...."

Tama reached behind him, and momentarily, my heart stopped.

I was outmanned, outnumbered, and outranked.

Oh, wow.

It was stupid to come here.

Faster than a lightning strike, I had both of my Glocks pointed at him, unblinking, and the asshole grinned, throwing the bundled wad of cash at my feet.

He did that on purpose, and with my idiotic display, I had revealed my anxiousness. And Tama was counting on it. He knew me well.

Shit.

Tama was mocking me. Even more so, when he said, “What do you need money for? Nappies for that boy of yours?”

I didn’t respond. I barely blinked. But I lowered my weapons and holstered them. Trying to peer around them, I uttered, “What’s the go?”

His hair was immaculately pulled up into a traditional topknot, worn immaculately, and when he let out a soft sigh, he lowered his massive arms. “I want her dead.”

My brow furrowed. “That all?”

He could have done that himself.

Tama looked down his nose at me. “I want her to suffer.”

Ah. There it was.

Tama didn’t torture women.

No. He left that to me.

I nodded. “No problem. Who is she?” His response was to give me no response at all, and after an intense staring contest, my feet moved. Leaving the money on the ground, I passed him, whispering, “Fair enough.”

The warehouse was dim except for the single light trained on the woman strapped to the chair in the center of the empty floor.

Poor bitch.

I wonder what she had done to warrant the wrath of Tama Hariana?

But then my mind went to the money and only one thought stuck.

*Who cares?*

It was a rough life, ours, and not many people could understand how we did it. Ethics were just blurred lines to me, to Tama. They weren’t rules exactly, just suggestions we chose whether or not to follow.

Sometimes we did; sometimes we didn’t.

For the right price, anything could be bought. Even death.

And that’s where I came in.

I strolled over to the woman, who was dressed in an oversized black jacket, black, generic sweats, and her feet were bare. Her head was covered with a loose calico bag, and from the way she struggled and strained, her screams muffled, they had taped her mouth over.

Good.

I didn't want to hear it. It could be fucking distracting at times. I didn't need that.

"Sorry, love," I told her quietly. "Nothing personal. It's just business."

Taking the knife out of my leg wrap, I reached into my pocket and pulled out the leather gloves, putting them on before reaching to my neck and pulling up the black face cover up over my nose. The only reason I wore this was to protect myself from infected blood touching me. I was always careful, but you never knew the people you were dealing with.

As I pressed the tip of the knife into the woman's hand, and she tipped her head back and shrieked from behind the covering.

My heart raced.

Her entire body shook, and I removed the knife from the center of her hand, then muttered, "I don't know what you did to piss him off, but I promise I'll end it as soon as I can."

I didn't dig cruelty. I wasn't cruel by nature.

I was made this way.

When I peered back to find all four men forming a wall, my heart jolted.

That was odd.

Why did I feel they were locking me in?

The woman in the chair called out around her cries, and I swear, there was a familiarity about her. My brow lowered and I looked back to Tama, wiping the blade of the knife clean with my leather gloves. "Who is she, Tama?"

Tama shook his head. "Someone who needs to die."

I twisted back to the woman and frowned at the way she tried to move her hands. They shook so badly, but she tried in vain to move them, making the motion over and over again, but I didn't see what she needed me to.

Something made me feel uneasy. Looking back at how the men were guarding the exit, I peered back at the woman, and when I stepped closer to her, reaching out for the calico face covering, Tama warned gently, "You touch that mask and I swear to God, Molly, I'll fucking kill you."

My heart raced. My breathing turned heavy, and I watched the woman with wide eyes. When she moved her fingers into a twisted motion that took me back to my childhood, a choked gasp left me and I rushed forward.

It was an M. She formed it with shaking fingers and my heart stopped.

When the sounds of heavy footfalls followed close behind, I rushed to her, threw myself onto her lap, using her as a seat while I shielded her and, legs spread, my entire body shook with pent-up rage. I lifted my Glocks, and they stilled in their tracks.

Tama walked forward, and my voice shuddered. “How could you?”

He simply watched me, and he did this a while before he spoke calmly, “That’s the price you pay, Molly.” The words were emotionless, cold. “A sister for a brother.”

Motherfucker.

Standing on shaking legs, I held his stare. “I’m taking my sister and I’m leaving.”

“No, you’re not,” said Tama.

But from behind him came a barely audible, “Yes, she is.”

My heart thumped.

Twitch.

Tama and his men stepped back from the unarmed man, and when Twitch spoke again, he looked directly at Tama. “You know me?”

Tama’s jaw tightened. “Yeah, bruh.”

Twitch scratched at the neatly trimmed scruff on his jaw. “Good.” He looked around the men and spoke to me. “Let’s go.”

I don’t know how he knew where I was, but right then, I was relieved for him turning up unannounced.

Tama’s voice was blazing white fiery rage. “Listen here, bruh. If Molly’s in your house, she’s there to infiltrate.” He warned Twitch, “Someone’s gonna end up dead, and it won’t be her.”

“That what happened to you?” Twitch asked Tama, but he didn’t respond. “I think if Molly did that to you—specifically *you*—you’re not asking the right questions. Namely, why?”

Tama shook his head. “You’re making a mistake.”

But Twitch just stared the huge man down. “Sounds like you already made a couple of those concerning your girl there.”

The second I had the head covering off of my sister, I looked down at her tear-streaked face with wide eyes. “Lenka.”

My older sister broke down in sobs, and I carefully removed the tape from her mouth. Her voice quivered. “I thought you were going to kill me, Mol.”

*I was.*

The thought rocked me to the core.

Tama turned, clearly infuriated that his plan was ruined, and he roared, “You killed my brother, Molly Te Wiata. And that will not go unpunished.” He pointed a stern finger at me. “Mark me.”

My sister turned to face me. “You never told him?”

“Shut up,” I muttered, walking her along.

But Lenka would not be silenced. She pushed away from me, and her voice carried out through the entire warehouse. “Your price has already been paid, you fucking dog!”

Tama stepped forward. Being called a dog was the lowest of insults. “What did you just say, bitch?”

Lenka was furious. She shook with it. “Your brother Uri was a pig of a man.”

“Say again.” Tama stepped closer and his voice shook.

But Lenka was not to be intimidated. “My sister loved you, you asshole. You think she killed your brother for fun? Ask yourself what the fuck he must’ve done for Molly to have taken his worthless life.” She panted. “We were on your land.” Her voice croaked. “We were promised protection.” She pointed a shaking finger at the giant man, and wailed, “We were promised protection, and *you* let us down, *Tama Hariana!*”

Tama looked confused. I lowered my gaze, refusing to look at him.

Lenka’s voice quavered. “He touched her. She was just a child. He did things to her, and she was not prepared for him. He wrecked her, and no matter how hard we tried, the nightmares consumed her.”

Tama sounded perplexed. “Who?”

“Keisha.” My voice was detached.

My little sister, Keisha. The baby of our family.

Lenka tried to keep it together. “Uri raped her. He took her by force. She was just a little girl.”

Tama laughed then. “You’re fucking crazy.”



The other men laughed too as Twitch watched on, and Lenka's eyes widened as she screeched, "*You weren't there!*" My sister fell to her knees and wailed like a wounded animal, holding her throat. She wept out, "You weren't there." No one was laughing anymore. Lenka closed her eyes and her voice was weak. "I found her hanging by pink floral sheets. The sheets of a thirteen-year-old. A thirteen-year-old who found out she was pregnant and felt she couldn't come to us." Lenka's eyes leaked as she blinked at Tama, her emotional state frail. "He did that to her."

Tama shook his head.

And we were done here. "C'mon." I helped my sister up and walked her towards the entrance, towards Twitch.

Towards freedom.

When I had Lenka safely stowed away in the passenger seat of my car, I strode over to the men, making sure to keep my distance as I slowly pulled out a Glock and pointed it at Tama's head. My tone was low. "I loved you. At one point, I would have done anything for you. But when I brought up my concerns about Uri, you brushed them off." I lowered the gun, holding it at my side. "You let me down. You let Keisha down." I stepped backwards. "Her death is on you, Chief."

When he watched me carefully, his gaze suddenly unsure, I muttered, "A sister for a brother?" I looked him up and down, lowering my weapon. "You got it. Consider my debt paid."

I accidentally took a step back too far and ran right into Twitch. He stood at my back, putting his arm around my shoulders, and I allowed it.

The words he spoke were overwhelming.

His voice was low, rough. "I think you fuckers need to let it be known that Molly is under my protection." His tone was deadly. "Far as y'all are concerned, she's my adopted daughter. She's family. You come for her—you come for me and *all* of mine." The arm tightened around my shoulders, holding me still, and I hadn't realized I was shaking until then. "Spread the word."

My anger got the best of me.

Panting, I lifted my gun and unloaded the clip, the echoes of gunshots reverberated around us, and when the sound faded to nothing, Twitch spoke from behind me. "Nice shooting."

“What are you talking about?” I slipped out of his hold and turned back to look at the bullet holes surrounding Tama and his men, leaving them completely untouched and looking irritated as hell.

As I walked back to my car, I uttered a cold, “I missed.”

# Chapter

## Twenty-Seven

### Twitch

I stepped out of the car and walked over to Molly.

“Wanna talk about it?”

“No,” she muttered, sulking.

I paused to look at the other woman in the car and didn’t want her in the house. She looked unstable. Didn’t want that shit around my son. So I pulled out my keys and handed them to Molly. “Take her to my place. Clean her up. Let her sleep it off,” I spoke with caution. “But tomorrow, she’s gone.”

Molly looked back at her sister a long moment before she nodded subtly. I knew she got what I was selling.

*She might be your sister, but we’re your family now.*

They walked across the street, and when I saw them close the door behind them, my watchful gaze scanned the empty street. When I was sure they were safe, I made my way inside, and the second I got in, both Happy and Lexi stood. I put my hands up. “She’s fine.”

Lexi’s entire body drooped with relief before she straightened and used her momma voice. “What was she thinking?”

I unzipped my hoodie and shrugged it off, throwing it onto the sofa. “She loves him.” Once, I would have mocked her for that. Today, I got it. “You do stupid things for people you love. Anything to make ‘em happy.”

Happy grunted out a laugh. “Ain’t that the truth?”

I strode over to the man, arm extended, and when I got close enough, he put his hand in mine and reeled it in, slapping me on the back at the very same time my hand connected with his. “Owe ya.”

Happy laughed. “I know.” When he pulled back, he grinned. “I got a tally going.” He held his arms out to Lexi and she went to him, hugging him tightly, and then he was gone.

My angel stood, watching me carefully before she took a step forward, holding out her hand. “Come here. Talk to me.”

Well, shit. That didn’t sound good.

Every time we talked these days, we ended up arguing. I didn't want to argue. I wanted to go to bed with my woman and sleep breathing in the sweet vanilla scent of her thick hair.

But Lexi wanted to talk, so we'd talk.

Making my way over, I ignored her hand and stepped closer, putting my hands on her hips and bringing her into me. "I can think of so many better activities to be doing than talking," I whispered huskily.

And although she looked thoroughly affected, her lips parted, but she shook her head.

My lips thinned. "Okay, baby." I sighed. "What do you wanna talk about?"

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## Lexi

I looked up at him and felt my heart short circuit.

Shit. He should not have affected me the way he did. Not after all this time.

I loved the way he looked at me. I never knew how he was going to use that mouth. Would he simply talk to me, or devour me whole?

Honestly, I was fine with both options.

When I licked my lips, his watchful gaze landed on them. His hooded stare made my heart beat faster.

He looked at me as though his cock was already inside me, and strangely enough, I felt it.

Clearing my throat, I tugged him toward the sofa, and when I sat, I was pleasantly surprised when he lay back across the length of it, with his head in my lap.

It made my heart warm to see him using me as he needed. He'd always been so full of pride. Six years ago, he would have never allowed himself to be put in a position of weakness. And he gave that to me.

I must've watched him a second too long because when he reached up and gently rubbed the center of my brows, he made a sound in his throat, and then muttered, "No frowning." His own brows furrowed. "Nope. Don't like that."

The last couple days had me noticing I was falling back into Twitch too hard, too fast, and the last time I did that, I got my heart broken. So we needed to talk.

I took in a deep breath, and started with a quiet, “I have concerns.”

The second I said it, I felt his body stiffen. He spoke cautiously, “What kind of concerns?”

“The kind of concerns that make you question whether you’re making the right decisions for yourself.” My heart was racing, when I added, “For your son.”

At that, he sat up and looked straight ahead a long moment before he took in a deep breath and spoke on an exhale, his tone rough, “What is this?”

My voice trembled. “I need to let you know that even if we can’t be together in the end”—God, it hurt—“I’m happy that you were a part of my life.”

At that, he put his hands to my shoulders, squeezing. He closed his eyes a second before he looked into my eyes, his eyes wide. “Are you—” I felt his hands shake against my skin. “Are you asking me to leave?”

Oh.

I frowned to myself.

I could see how he thought that.

“No,” I spoke softly. “No.” I reached up and took his hands in mine, and when I looked him deep in the eye and uttered, “I’m giving you an out,” his entire body went lax and he started to breathe again.

But I didn’t expect the reaction I got.

I expected understanding. I expected his appreciation. I did not expect raw fury.

He spoke through gritted teeth, pulling away from me, and I felt the loss on a personal level. “If you want in, be in. *All* in. But I’m sick of this shit, no bullshit.” Those soft brown eyes were suddenly hard. “I know you want me as much as I want you, so why the fuck aren’t you with me?” He closed his eyes and swallowed hard. “You’re my fucking religion, Lexi.” When his eyes snapped open, they pled with me, but his voice was uncharacteristically quiet. “Let me worship you.”

I didn’t understand it, but his anger seemed to feed mine. “You’ll have to excuse me for having doubts.” My hard gaze held his. “Especially when

it comes to my son.”

“*Our* son,” he fumed, before he readjusted his tone. “He’s our son, Lex. We both had a part in making him. He’s *ours*.”

I immediately regretted what I said. “But only one of us stuck around.”

He stood and paced, and my chest ached. This was not what I had planned. I wanted a quiet conversation; I wanted simple answers, and what I got was a bubbling argument that only seemed to grow.

“So, what?” Tony uttered. “You want me out?” I never said that, but I was too stunned to speak. He obviously took this as a yes, because his next words were a pistol and they were aimed at me. “Listen to me, Alexa. A.J. could love us both.” He paused in his steps to lay his dark stare on me. “Or he can hate you. You decide.”

*Bang.*

My voice shook at the understanding of what he just said. “You asshole.”

And that was the moment he realized he’d fucked up. He put a hand to his hip and another to his forehead, lightly knocking his knuckles into his temple. He spoke through gritted teeth, his eyes shut tightly. “That didn’t come out right.”

“I think you need to leave.”

“I didn’t mean that.” He sighed.

My tone was whisper-soft. “You need to leave.”

“No.” He shook his head, trying to reason with me. “I’m staying right here. Ling’s fucking crazy. You think she wouldn’t think twice about coming here, hurting you?”

I was way past giving a solid fuck. “What do you care?”

When he lunged at me with his hulking body, it was so sudden a move I didn’t have time to react. He caught both my wrists in his hands, almost bruising, and he shook me, snarling, “Don’t you fucking get it? I would lay down my life for you.” When my wide eyes met his, he looked down at his hands and dropped my wrists, stepping back and looking away. “In fact,” he panted lightly, lost in his own head, “I already did.”

I rubbed at my wrists, not because it hurt, but because his rough touch burned me in a way I hadn’t felt for years.

And in true Twitch style, he walked down the hall, opened the front door, and stepped out, disappearing on me.

The moment he was gone, I missed him.

When I woke in the morning, feeling irritated beyond belief, I stepped out of my bedroom in my barely there nightie and was shot directly in the feels.

*Son of a bitch.*

I stilled midstep and watched the artfully decorated grown man lay on the floor with his shirt off as his son pressed colored markers to his skin, using him as his own personal coloring book.

The little monster looked up at me, smiling. “Hi, Mummy.” He gestured to his prone dad. “Look.”

I was looking.

He was beautiful.

And when he peered up at me, my throat closed over. Even more so when he uttered a cautious, “Mornin’, Mommy.”

Ugh. My heart. Not fair.

I cleared my throat. “You taking him to school this morning?”

“Of course,” he said, watching my face in a way that spoke volumes.

He was contemplating how much damage he’d done the night before.

I nodded, avoiding his watchful stare. “Okay. I’m going for a run.”

By the time I got out of the shower, they were gone, and when I stepped into my bedroom, my eye caught the blur of red on the nightstand.

I went over to it, picking up the bright red zinnia and twirling it between my fingers before pressing it to my lips. The petals were cool against my skin.

Why I felt like crying then, who knew?

Shaking the sadness I felt off, I stretched for a while before dressing and making it out to my car. I unlocked the door then sighed, noticing I’d forgotten my drink bottle. I stepped out of the running car and ran back into the house for a split second, rushing back to the car in record time, slipping my belt on, and started to reverse.

Feeling the jam on the radio, I sang along. Loudly.

“You don’t even lock it?”

Hitting the brakes, my body jolted, and in my panic, I beeped the horn a second before taking in a deep breath and shrieking to the high heavens.

“Still can’t sing for shit, baby.”

As I continued to shriek, I heard his low, rough chuckle, and my shriek heightened in pitch as I reached behind my seat, blindly swatting at the infuriating man.

When his laughter increased and I ran out of breath, I twisted in my seat and looked back at him, wide-eyed and panting. The moment I saw him lying on the back seat, reclining with an arm behind his head, looking comfortable as ever as he grinned at me, I turned around, tipped my head back, and shrieked again, only this time yelling out, “*Jerk!*”

My heart beating out of my chest, I ran out of breath a second time, and with flushed cheeks, my body shook in silent laughter. Dropping my forehead to the steering wheel, the horn sounded again and my laughter increased. I spoke through my breathlessness, “You scared the shit out of me.”

I felt him climb over the center console and into the passenger seat, waiting for me to get my shit together, and when I finally did, I peeked up at him through narrowed eyes, and that beautifully crooked smile hit me like a punch to the face. He leaned in. “Miss me?”

I shook my head, my throat thickening drastically. “You’re an asshole.”

“I know,” he uttered roughly. “But this asshole adores you.”

*Oh, he didn’t.*

*He did not.*

That’s all it took.

My face crumpled and I burst into tears, and as I sobbed, I spoke through my cries. “I am so petrified.”

“Of what?” When I didn’t respond, he tried again. “I need you to talk to me, angel.”

My shoulders shook. I dipped my chin, watching the tears fall into my lap. My voice was feather-soft. “Of you leaving me again.” I implored, “Do you know how that feels? To never know if today is your last day together? To always think that this could be it?” The tears kept coming, and I croaked, “It’s fucking terrifying to want forever with someone who may not be able to give it to you.” I took in a deep, shaking breath, as I admitted, “I lost myself when I lost you. I don’t think I’d survive it a second time.”

He watched me closely, his eyes soft. He didn’t speak a while, but when he did, his tone was earnest. “Everything I did, I did for us, so we could be a family.”



“I know. But it hurts to love you, Twitch.” I spoke through a shuddering exhale. “It always has.”

Reaching over, he took my hand in one hand and took my chin in the other, turning me to face him, and what he said made my stomach clench. “Ride this out with me and we’ll make it out of this together.” Lowering his head, he pressed his lips to my knuckles and spoke against them. “Ride or die, baby. Together for always. You’re it for me. I know I’m it for you.” He peered up at me through his lowered gaze. “Love me forever?”

My lips parted and I swallowed hard. “Forever is a long time.”

His eyes crinkled in the corners. “Yes, it is.”

He released me with a reluctant sigh before he opened the passenger door. He hesitated a second before he looked straight ahead, and the solemn vow he made had my heart aching.

“It probably doesn’t mean shit now, and I know you needed to hear it back then, but I couldn’t give it to you then, so I’m layin’ it down now.” A short pause, and then, “I will love you till the end of time.”

Before I could even register what he’d said, the door had shut and he was walking back across the street.

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## Twitch

It had been a rough week on my angel and I knew what she needed.

A night out.

A night of good food.

A night with her man.

Preferably one in which we ended our rough week with a rough night in bed.

So when I turned up at the house, wearin’ the eight thousand dollar suit I’d bought just for her, and walked down the hall, into the family room, I saw Molly and A.J. reclining on the sofa. When the little woman spotted me, she chuckled before letting out a long whistle. “Holy shit. You going to a funeral or something?”

My son just looked up at me with wide eyes and whispered, “Whoa.”

But the house felt empty. Frowning, I looked around, before asking, "Where is she?"

A.J. turned back to the TV. "Date night."

*Excuse me?*

My voice turned low. "What now?"

Molly's wide eyes settled on me. "It's date night."

Like hell it was.

"With who?" I could barely contain my fucking rage.

Molly shrugged before looking me up and down. "I'm sure you could find her if you really wanted to. You know," she said with meaning, her brow arching. "Like you found me?"

Pausing only momentarily to say goodnight to my son, I left the house, and my anger pulsed so hard that all I could hear was the rushing of blood in my ears. Stopping home, I got my keys and headed to the car. I started it then reached over to the glove box, retrieving my treasured .45 caliber, resting it on the seat beside me.

My jaw steeled as I thought about what Molly said.

Looked like I was going to a funeral after all.

Pedal to the metal, I sped down the street, absolutely fucking raging, tracking the GPS to my woman.

And God help her when I found her.

# Chapter

## Twenty-Eight

Lexi

I knew he'd come. I was counting on it. And as I sat on the beach waiting, I heard his sigh as he approached. I twisted back to look at him, and when his face went from irate to mildly relieved, he paused, shaking his head before he muttered, "You're alone."

My brow narrowed a moment, but when I saw what he was wearing, a soft smile graced my lips. It was a blast from the past to see him in the tailored gunmetal-gray suit.

Jesus fucking Christ almighty. I bit my lip. "You look handsome."

My lady bits liked that *very* much.

He came to stand next to me, and when I peered up at him from my sitting position, he glared down at me. "Molly said you were on a date."

"No, she didn't." I looked out toward the shore, watching the waves crash and foam. "She said I was on date night."

Silence followed, and the longer it went on, the wider my internal grin became.

"Okay," he said, moving to sit by me. "I'll bite." Lifting his knees, he rested his forearms on them then narrowed his eyes on me. "What's date night?"

I smiled to myself, mentally praising his cool and calm demeanor.

Was this a test? Not intentionally, no. But it was proving to be a good one, and his composure told me just how much he'd changed.

That was important.

"To answer that question, you need a little background info. So," I started, "A.J. was at school one day, when one of the students asked their teacher what date night was. The little girl wanted to know because her parents were going on a date night, and she wasn't sure what that was. A.J.'s teacher was explaining that sometimes mommies and daddies go together for a night out without their children. That some parents did this once a week, while others only did this on special days. And when A.J. came home, he asked me why I didn't ever go on date nights. I explained

that it only applied to parents who had partners.” I turned to face Twitch.  
“But A.J. didn’t think that was fair to me.”

Twitch’s face softened and my smile widened. “Ah, the injustices of the world. Nope. Our son wasn’t having it. He asked if there was a special day, *any* day, that I could use for a date night. And I had one in mind. So, he insisted I use it. And here we are.” I turned to the man by my side. “It’s fitting you’re here for it.”

“Why today?”

“It’s March eighteenth.” When I saw he wasn’t catching on, I put him out of his misery. “The day we met, as adults. You know.” I watched him closely and laid the bait. “The day you organized for that awful man to attack me.”

Well, that got him talking.

He straightened and sneered. “He was never meant to take it that far. And when I saw what the fuck he’d done, how he hurt you, I went berserk. Lost my damned mind. I could’ve torn him apart with my bare hands.” Twitch’s balled his hands into fists. “Kill him all over again given the chance.”

“I know,” I murmured. “I know you would.”

A thick silence enveloped us, and I couldn’t help myself.

Grinning into the night sky, I asked, “How mad were you when you thought I was on a date?”

“Mad enough to have brought my Glock.”

I should not have found that as funny as I did. My laughter rang into the fresh evening air, and I heard the dangerous man beside me choke on his own laugh.

God, we were crazy.

When my laughter quieted, I spoke softly, “We’ve come a long way, haven’t we, honey?”

“Yeah,” he agreed, and I felt his eyes on me.

I turned to face him, and when I found him frowning at me, my own frown formed. “What?”

Jaw tight, he looking straight ahead. “I do know how it feels...” He paused. “To feel like this might be our last day together.” He licked his bottom lip. “And it scares the shit out of me.” I gave him the moment he clearly needed before he went on. “You’re scared of me leavin’, and I’m

scared of you waking up and realizing you're officially sick of my bullshit. 'Cause one day, you will."

He said this so agonizingly soft that I recognized he really believed that. *Around and around we go.*

What a pair we were.

"The last time I saw you alive, you told me you wanted to break me," I recalled quietly.

"Who says that goal has changed?" My head snapped sideways to his, my eyes narrowing, but his gaze smiled back teasingly. "How else am I meant to put you back together again?"

I rolled my eyes, but my heart warmed in a way that was hazardous to my health.

Into the darkness, we listened to the waves crash, when he finally spoke again. "I realized too late."

My brows knitted. "Realized what?"

His stormy eyes focused on me. "That breaking you would never fix me."

*Oh, baby.*

How he'd grown.

It was too much for me. I needed a fresh conversation. Lighter conversation. "Do you remember when you used to bring me here?"

"I remember everything." He grinned then. "We'd come here to get high."

"No," I corrected him. "*You'd* get high and *I'd* watch." My eyes widened. "And then I'd let you drive me home." I shook my head at my idiocy, chuckling humorlessly. "Oh, God, I was so reckless with you."

"You were, but it was fun." He smirked.

My brows arched. "I don't know about that."

He looked at me. "You tellin' me you don't think about that time and smile at the memories?"

Of course I did. How could I not? It was the most turbulent, unstable time of my life, and I loved every second of it. But times had changed.

I conceded, "*Some* of it was fun. But the thought of doing it all over again—" I tried to quell my soft laughter but failed. "—I think I'd give that a polite pass. I'm a mother now." I smiled sadly. "I can't just think about myself anymore."

“I feel that, baby,” he allowed, and I know he did. He loved his son more than anything. I genuinely felt it whenever they were together. “A.J. is everything I knew he’d be and more. And I’m grateful.”

He was grateful.

The memory from way back when assaulted me hard and fast, and I was thankful for the darkness then as my knees tightened and my stomach clenched.

“You’re grateful?”

Twitch looked at me then, and when I moved, I could tell he was wondering what I was up to. But as I crawled the short distance over and used his rock-hard shoulders as leverage, lifting my leg and climbing over him, his hands landed on my hips, helping me settle into his lap.

Our faces close, I ran my nose up the length of his and whispered, “Grateful enough to suck my tongue?”

His shuddering intake of breath had my pussy flooding on cue. My lips parted slightly. I ignored the heavy beat of my heart and leaned in, pressing a soft kiss to the edge of his lip, and the hands on my waist tightened like a vice. “Lexi,” he growled in warning, a moment before his stormy eyes met mine. “Don’t play with me, woman.”

My eyes widened at the brutal tone he took with me. I was worried he’d mistake my sudden quiet gasp for fear.

I should’ve known better.

Twitch chuckled darkly. “You think you’re in control here?” He clicked his tongue. “Oh, baby.” When he leaned in and his minty breath warmed my lips as he uttered roughly, “It’s like you don’t even know me,” I choked on a moan, my panties completely, almost embarrassingly, soaked.

And the asshole grinned triumphantly.

So I did something I never would have done six years ago.

*Ready or not.*

I took control.

*Here I come.*

My heavy gaze landed on the full bottom lip of his and my heart thumped. He wasn’t prepared for when I leaned in close and gently touched my tongue to that lip, running across it leisurely. Torturously slow. And when his arms snaked around me in an attempt to regain power, holding me captive, I internally smirked.

*Who's in control now, bish?*

My victory, however, was short-lived.

His mouth parted on a groan. I slid my tongue in, and his lips closed around it, sucking lightly, moaning into my open mouth, and I fucking died, returning his needy sounds and pushing myself harder onto his hard length. He liked that. I know he did because he growled, and as his hips bucked into me, I saw stars, panting like a bitch in heat.

Twitch sucked a little harder, reaching up with one hand to wrap my hair around his wrist, and when he tugged my head to the side, I gasped at the mixture of pleasure and pain pulsing through my veins. He took advantage, dipping into me, suckling me deeper into his mouth. Deep enough that our lips finally met in a slow, sensual kiss. And this man's lips were everything I remembered them to be.

Whistling, cracking, exploding fireworks in a rainbow of colors.

TNT. Dangerous and unpredictable, and he held the fuse too close to my heart.

A goddamn atom bomb whose mushroom cloud would strip my flesh from my bones, leaving me bare, and open, and bleeding red.

And these types of explosions, I felt all over, in my mind, my heart, and my core, all at once, all equally affected.

And if I died then, I'd have died happy.

I wanted to reach up and run my hands through his hair, but I struggled to free myself. His arms left no give. My breathing intensified as I writhed against him. "Please."

But Twitch tugged my hair, hard enough to pinch. "No."

Secretly loving the throbbing sting at my scalp, my voice grew anxious. "I want to touch you."

"No," was his husky response, as he took my lips in a deep, punishing kiss and I drooped in his hold, exhaling into him.

I tried one last time, my voice soft and pleading. I spoke into our kiss, "Please, baby. *Please.*"

He growled low in his throat before his arms loosened around me. "Never could say no." His eyes were low and glazed over, when he uttered, "Not when you beg so nicely."

*Yes!*

My arms finally free, I wrapped one around his broad shoulders, and while the other gripped the back of his head and when his mouth clashed with mine, I made a longing sound low in my throat as my head swam. My nails dug into his scalp, and he hissed against my mouth. My eyes flashed before I smiled into his lips. I couldn't help myself. Panting lightly, I gripped the longest part of his hair and pulled hard.

He winced and I straightened, towering over him, the tip of my nose gently touching his. I could barely keep a straight face when I muttered, "Gratitude displayed. Now thank me, honey."

I was so lost in the feel of him that I didn't see it coming,  
*Thwack.*

My eyes widened, my body jolted in surprise, and I shoved at his shoulders. "Ow."

"You wanna be a smartass? I'll make your ass smart." He ran his hand softly over the throbbing handprint at my ass, and when my face bunched in irritation, his eyes laughed, and he all but whispered, "Thank you, baby."

Oh, *Lord.*

If I thought I loved this man before, I fucking worshipped him now.

His eyes scanned the deserted beach and he kept his voice low. "You wanna fuck here, or take it home?"

Umm. I had the choice?

Okay.

That was different.

My eyes softened as I placed my hands to his shoulders, lightly scratching his expensive suit jacket with my nails. "Home," because, "I have sand in my butt." I ended on a hush.

When his entire body shook with silent laughter, I smiled warmly down at him, and when he peered up at me, his eyes full of mirth, my heart ached wildly.

It didn't make sense.

How could you possibly miss someone you had your arms wrapped around?

It was ludicrous.

Without warning, I leaned in and put my mouth to his. Reaching under my skirt, he ran his hands up the backs of my thighs before resting them on



the full curve of my ass, and when I sighed into his mouth, he slapped my bottom lightly and growled low in his throat. "Let's go."

The second we made it into the dark, still house, the tall man at my back reached out for me, pulling me into his front, and my arm came up behind us to gently stroke his hair. He put his lips to the shell of my ear and spoke low. "Need you to be quiet for me."

My stomach churned in anticipation. I nodded, and when he put his mouth to my neck, I worked hard to silence the low moan that wished to escape.

With my hand in his hair, I breathed out a short exhale, and as one arm circled my waist tightly, the other reached under the hem of my skirt to rest on my mound. I bit my lip to stop the gasp bubbling up my throat. He rubbed me meticulously till my legs shook, and just when I thought I'd fail in my mission, he stilled his fingers, cupping me gently, tenderly.

His whispered, "Good girl," was all the reward I needed.

It wasn't like I had a choice. Our son was down the hall, at the opposite end of the house, as was Molly, and I didn't want either of them to hear, or worse, come and explore.

He guided me into my room and softly shut the door behind us. The moment we were alone in the moonlit space, it was on. His voice quiet but hard, he commanded, "Undress me."

*Oh, yas!*

I slowly turned and found myself closer than expected. With no time to waste, I got to work, running my hands up his chest to his shoulders then pushing the tailored jacket off him before gently resting it on my dresser. The silk tie came next. I loosened it, leaving it draped over his shoulders. My nimble fingers undid the buttons on his shirt, one by one, slowly until his strong inked chest was bared. He held up his wrist and I worked on one cufflink, moving to the other before they joined the jacket on the dresser. And when I reached his pants, I gave the black leather belt a strong tug, forcing a huff from the man I would give everything to if he so desired it. Without a word, I kept my eyes on his hooded gaze, and I popped the top button of his slacks and gently lowered the zipper. But as I moved to reach into the opening, he snatched my wrist, first bruising then running a thumb over my pulse lovingly.

The words he spoke were hardly a request. "Get naked."

My insides clenched.

Yes, sir.

Kicking my heels off, I reached for the hem of my dress and lifted it over my head. I held my arm out, dropping it into a heap at my side, and when I reached behind me, to unhook my bra, his eyes surveyed me hungrily. When the hook came free, I held the cups of the satin bra to me a moment before letting the straps fall down my arms, to the floor, leaving my full breasts bared.

Twitch's nostrils flared like a bull ready to charge.

And, *oh*. I liked that.

Just when I made to lower my panties, he made a noise in his throat, and as my confused gaze met his, he shook his head. "Leave 'em on."

My confused gaze deepened, and his eyes dared me to protest.

I knew how this worked. This wasn't my first rodeo.

Removing my hands from my waist, I held them by my sides and waited for his instruction. And when he noticed this, his eyes flashed with unbidden pleasure.

He ran a gentle, loving hand down my side, and muttered, "Perfect." A moment later, the darkness in his eyes returned as he looked me in the eye, and stated, "I'm going to let you ride me tonight, and you're gonna make it good, but I swear to God, baby, you make a fucking sound, *one* fucking sound, and you will not come. Do you understand me?"

My lips pulled down into a frown, but I took in a deep breath, straightened, and then nodded in response. And he was pleased.

"Good." With a slow movement, he reached up to his tie and tugged on it, holding it. "Your hands."

My internal frown quickly waned as I held out my hands to him and watched him deftly wrap the length of the silken material around my wrists, pulling it tight enough to cut off my circulation. Watching me all the while, I swore he could see the way my heart leapt into my throat as he tied it off, holding both my small hands in one of his.

He pulled me toward the foot of the bed, and as he sat, spreading his legs wide, settling himself on the edge, he reached into his boxers and pulled himself free, gripping himself tightly and working his erection up and down, completely unhurried.

And I swallowed hard to stop myself from drooling.

“Climb on.”

I didn't dare make a sound, but my heart was beating so hard I wondered if he could hear it as loudly as I could. Stepping closer, I put one knee to the space between his legs, using the leverage to lift myself as gracefully as possible to straddle him. The way his legs were positioned made me have to spread my legs in a rather unladylike manner, and he knew this.

He wanted this.

He enjoyed making me uncomfortable.

Twitch was my cult leader. I was his whore. And I liked his lessons, the ones where he taught me that uncomfortable could be a wondrous thing. I was his fearless student, so eager to learn. So eager to please.

Looking me in the eye, he searched my face a second before he reclined marginally, and ordered, “Get to work.”

I shuffled forward until the most desperate parts of us met, and although my panties were an inconvenience, they didn't stop me from feeling his throbbing heat. As I ground against him with my bound hands in front of me, obediently, I watched his face change. He fought himself, and every time he did, the power I felt inside me grew a notch.

Without meaning to, with every harsh breath, with every mar of his brow, he made me a dangerous woman.

I worked him slowly but firmly, rocking against him until I thought I might come. My face bunched, and when I accidentally released a small whine, my eyes snapped open and I bit my lip.

His hard eyes on me, he put his hand to my collarbone, resting his hand uncomfortably close to my neck. “I must've been hearing things.” He watched me, his gaze unwavering. “You say something?”

I shook my head and, taking in a shuddering breath, licked my lips.

The hand at my collarbone loosened and he stroked the side of my neck with his thumb. “I thought not.”

Without warning, he reached under me and tugged my panties to the side. Holding his cock in his hands, he ran the head of him across my slit, gliding through the silky wetness there, and my breathing quickened. He spread my ass cheeks, the head of him slipping inside me easily.

My breath caught, and I wanted to moan so badly that I bit my tongue hard enough to bleed. I wasn't stupid enough to believe he'd give me a

second chance. He was being extremely generous by letting the first one slide. Another fuck up and I wouldn't come. And that would be tragic.

Twitch closed his eyes, looking pained, then groaned out quietly, "*Fuck.*"

Suddenly high on the feeling of our sex, Twitch lifted my bound hands up over his head, lowering them onto his shoulders, and as he gripped my hip with his free hand, he growled, "Eyes on me."

The hand at my neck tightened. My eyes widened only momentarily before he thrust into me, pulling me down into him as he drove into me mercilessly. And when my eyes began to droop, a light slap to my jaw had me focusing on him. He shook his head, gritting his teeth as I bounced on him. "I said eyes on me."

He fucked me ruthlessly, the hand at my neck beginning to constrict my breathing. Not enough to choke me, but just enough to make me uncomfortable. And when I felt myself losing the battle for composure, the hand at my neck came up to grip my chin. Leaning in, he pressed his face to my cheek and talked dirty.

The filthy whispered words were all I could bear. "That pretty pussy got me close, baby. She's beggin' for it," he panted lightly, holding my hips down as he drove into me over and over again. "She's hungry. Wants to be fed. And when I finally feed the cunt, she's gonna suck it all up like she's dying of hunger and I'm the only thing she can stomach." His black gaze met mine, gripping my chin tightly before pressing his firm lips to my lax ones, stealing a kiss. "Because I am."

The confidence in his tone indicated he spoke no lies.

And with those words, I was shot.

He pulled my trigger. And I tipped my head back, my mouth rounding, and expired.

My body constricted so severely I shook from head to toe, and when the first spasm took me, I gasped out loud, no longer able to keep my promise of silence. My arms tightened around his neck, and as I rode out my orgasm, Twitch rode me. Hard. His hands on my hips, he pulled me down on his cock repeatedly, the wet squelching sounding too loud in the otherwise silent room. As he used my body as his own personal pleasure device, I watched as the vein in his temple bulged when he brought me down, again and again, my tits firmly pressed into his chest.

Feeling his release nearing, my lips parted, and I whispered, “Give it to me.”

His face screwed up and the hands at my hips dug into my skin so hard I knew my skin was marked.

Leaning in, I spoke against his lips. “Feed her.”

His head fell back a moment before he put his forehead to mine, his eyes raging. “You want it?”

“I want it,” I huffed.

He gritted his teeth, slowing his thrusts. “You need it?”

Was he crazy?

Did I *need* it?

Fuck, yes, I needed it.

Panting lightly, I responded in the only way I could. My face soft, I breathed the words into him. “I love you.”

And that was that.

Twitch put his hand to the back of my head and pulled me impossibly close, slamming his mouth to mine. I kissed him fanatically as he grunted into my mouth, his cock jerking, and I felt him spill himself inside of me.

Minutes passed and his hard touch gentled, stroking me everywhere he could reach, and when he lifted his heavy gaze from my shoulder, he brought my hands down between us, loosening them from the tight bindings. The moment they were free, he took my wrists in his hands and stroked them tenderly with his thumbs before taking my left hand and bringing it to his mouth.

When he closed his eyes, I put my hand to his chest, feeling the steady thumping of his heart, and the words he spoke made my heart respond in kind. “Far as everyone else is concerned—” He pressed another kiss to my hand. “—there may as well be a ring on this finger.” He watched for my reaction, and when he didn’t get one, he prompted, “You feel me?”

My heart both warmed and ached instantaneously, but I trusted my gut, when I whispered, “I feel you.”

I didn’t realize he was apprehensive until he released a long breath, replying on an exhale, “Good.” His gaze fell to my lips. “Now kiss me, baby.”

So I did. I kissed him long and hard, my tongue sweeping out to meet his, and he held me to him almost as if he was as frightened of losing me as

I was him.

Our love was insane. Like smiling into the face of a firing squad.  
*God.*

Why were we like this?

The answer soon revealed itself.

Because living without each other was not a life worth living.

Yes, we were crazy. And that was okay.

He would be my remedy. I would be his therapy.

Because we were crazy in love.

# Chapter

## Twenty-Nine

Lexi

The next morning, when the little monster barged into my room and found his father in my bed, he growled, “You had *another* sleepover?”

My laughter shook the bed, and when the man at my back snuffled out a laugh into my hair, I snorted.

This child. I couldn’t even deal.

It was too early for this.

I lifted my head and yawned. “Morning, sweetie.”

He stood at the foot of the bed, looking mad as a bag of cats at a greyhound meet, and when he folded his arms across his chest, my eyes widened. He muttered, “It’s not fair. How come Daddy gets to sleep in here? Why can’t he sleep with me?”

To that, his daddy responded a sleep rough, “You wanna sleepover, little dude? All right then.” The arm he had around me tightened as he stretched. “How about you come sleep at my place tonight and we’ll do...” he grumbled, half asleep. “I don’t know. Manly shit.”

A.J.’s face turned shocked then morphed into disbelief before settling on pure excitement. He put his arms up in the air, and yelled out, “Yes!” before hightailing it out of the room, running down the hall, and—if I wasn’t mistaken—he was already in his room packing a bag.

I spoke into the silent room. “What about Mommy? Is she invited to the manly sleepover?”

Twitch reached up under the covers and squeezed my breast. “Nope. Sorry, Mommy. Only boys allowed.”

I feigned upset. “Oh, no, whatever shall I do?”

He moved my hair to the side, pressing a long kiss to my neck. “Keep backin’ that ass up and I’ll fuck you into next week.”

Jesus.

The dirty talk never failed to excite me. And when I accidentally—on purpose—pressed my ass back into his morning wood, he hissed out,

“Jesus. You don’t know when to quit, baby.” He made a growling sound deep in his chest, before he warned, “Stop.”

I pouted. “Okay.” Reaching for my robe, I slipped it over my naked body, tying it around my waist before picking up Twitch’s boxers and putting them within arm’s reach. He watched me pick clean underwear, and when I looked through my closet, pulling out a plain black dress, he made a noise.

Twisting back, I blinked. “You don’t like it?”

He made a face that said he did not.

Why did that matter to me?

I put the dress back, and when I pulled out a tan-colored, knee-length dress with a pencil skirt, he pursed his lips in approval.

“Okay,” I uttered, taking it with me to the bathroom.

I showered quickly, and as I opened the bathroom door to let out steam, I listened to the conversation my son was having with his father.

“Why do you call Mummy baby? She’s not a baby. She’s a lady.”

“Well, yeah,” Twitch explained. “It’s a term of endearment.”

A.J. didn’t understand. “What’s a terma deerma?”

Twitch snuffled out a laugh. “Something you call someone you care about very much. And I call your mom that because I love her and want to keep her safe, and I’d do anything to protect her.” He paused. “You get it, bud?”

“Yeah,” uttered A.J. “I get it.”

I smiled to myself, stepping out of the bathroom and checking the time. With an anxious squawk, I rushed into my room and came out hopping on one foot, trying to put my shoes on without falling. “Oh, shoot. I’m going to be late.” Snatching my bag up, I called out, “Okay, I have to go. I love you, honey.” I paused at the door, smiling at my little man. “See you after school.”

That was when A.J. called back, “I love you too, baby.”

And the silence that followed was absolutely horrendous.

Unable to stop myself, I started to laugh at the sheer horror on Twitch’s face. “Oh my stars, Daddy.” I laughed silently, and when he looked at me with an expression that yelled *Help!* I shook my head, my entire body quaking with suppressed mirth. “I am not touching this one with a ten-foot



pole. This is all on you.” I opened the door and stepped out of it, choking on the hilarity. “You have fun with that!”

I laughed the entire way to work.

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## Ling

I was feeling so low that it only made sense to get high.

A storm was brewing. A raging storm that was bound to cost lives. And its billowing winds had knocked the sense right out of me.

It had been three days since the phone call.

The phone call that wrecked me.

Having not slept in three fucking days, I drove in silence, and it never even occurred to me to wonder how the hell I was still functioning after being awake for a solid seventy-two hours. The blow I snorted earlier was probably the reason my heart was racing the way it was, but in my mind, my heart was malfunctioning, crashing from the news that I was no longer wanted.

I didn’t cry. No. I wouldn’t cry.

No man was worth my precious tears. In all my years, I never believed myself stupid enough to fall for this kind of bullshit.

Yet, here I was, broken.

The baddest bitch on this side of the hemisphere, I considered myself immune to the ministrations of men like him. How could I be so stupid?

My lip curled as I pushed down on the accelerator, gripping the steering wheel tightly, overtaking cars recklessly as I flew down the highway.

Aslan Sadik left his mark on me.

*Oh, he gonna learn today.*

And now, I would leave my own mark.

The beautiful Turk would learn that you couldn’t just play with people’s feelings like he had. You couldn’t just tell somebody you loved them then discard them. It was a dick move to make somebody believed you cared for them then just... leave. He showed me tenderness I’d never known, and I would never be the same.

I begged.

*Can you fucking believe that shit?*

My insides shriveled with shame.

*I begged him to stay with me.*

*Who is this weak-ass bitch?*

My heart rate increased as I let out a humorless laugh, my hair whipping around me as the wind assaulted my stinging eyes.

Yes, that's why I was tearing up. It was from the wind. Not from the hurt.

*Yeah. You tell yourself whatever you need to tell yourself, boo.*

Stupid men.

I hated them. All of them.

I was officially going full-metal lez. No more cock for me. I clearly wasn't responsible enough to trust myself around dick anymore.

What a fucking shame.

I loved cock.

When I started driving, I didn't know where I was going, but now that I was pulling up to the curb, I realized I'd known all along. My hold on the steering wheel was so tight my knuckles turned white. I took in a deep breath and glanced across the street a moment before what was left of my heart built a wall around itself, protecting itself from me and the decisions I had made to allow this to happen.

I didn't even blame Az. Not really. I trusted him and I knew better, and that was on me.

Maybe that's why this stung so much. The only man I had let break me before was a man who preferred to die than be with me.

I tipped my head back and laughed openly a long while before my heart jerked in such a way that caused me to put a shaking hand to my chest, panting through the pain.

Why didn't anyone want me?

"What's wrong with me?" I spoke into the stillness of the car's interior before gritting my teeth, looking at myself in the rearview mirror. Lifting a hand, I reared back and threw it across my cheek, the impact making a solid *whack*.

I gasped then panted, my eyes rolling into the back of my head as my core clenched. The area throbbed, and I closed my eyes in bliss as a tear fell from my lashes.

*Again.*

I lifted my opposite hand, shaking from anticipation. I needed more, more pain to dull the grief. When the second blow landed, I let out a low whine, biting my lip, treasuring the blazing heat throbbing in my panties.

Some things never changed.

It was careless of me to think I could.

I was born this way. I couldn't alter, no matter how much I wanted to at the weakest of times. But this crazy bitch owned her insanity, wore it like a second skin, and today, I was not just crazy. I was deranged, demented.

Psycho with a side of schizo.

A lunatic with loose screws.

And as I stared into my reflection, running my hands over the heated flesh at my cheeks, I barely recognized myself.

*What have they done to you, little bird?*

My gaze settled, calmed, and when I took in my next breath, my raging heart steadied, and with a coolness I had perfected over the years, I stepped out of the car.

This was the beginning of the end. Homecoming. And I hoped Az was ready for it, because I had plans for him and the wife who adored him.

My Louboutin-clad feet carried me to the trunk, and when I hit the button on my keys, it lifted. I examined my choices.

Crow bar?

Baseball bat?

I made a thoughtful sound low in my throat before I reached in and took one in each hand, weighing up my options. After a second, I peered straight ahead, brow bunched in consideration.

The answer was obvious, of course.

"Both." I grinned as I turned and stalked towards the black Tesla Model S 75D coupe.

Cars beeped me as I crossed the street without looking, but little did they know that I was the wolf amongst sheep and I would eat them whole with little to no warning at all, for no fucking reason at all. So when a truck honked at me a second too long, I stilled in the middle of the street, turning to face the man inside the cab.

He made an obscene gesture.

I hissed like a cat.

He rolled down his window, and called out, "Get out of the road!"

"Make me," was my sweet, slow response.

The man shook his head. "Fuckin' crazy bitch."

*Crazy like a fox.*

I tipped my head back and laughed before licking my lips and winking at him. "You know it, baby." I continued on my merry way, a spring in my step, and when I walked inside the building I should not have been in, the security guard stood immediately, recognizing me. The burly man stilled when I smiled at him and uttered politely, "I think you should call your boss down, handsome." Turning, I walked over to the business insignia on the marble floor and slowly hiked up my skirt. "He's going to want to see this."

The high-class real estate firm was quiet as I squatted, waiting, and the moment the elevator doors opened, I held his dark eyes as I relieved myself over the fucking marble floor he had imported from Italy, over the insignia his beloved father designed, over every goddamn thing we had together that *he took from me.*

Yeah.

I pissed all over it.

They said actions spoke louder than words, and right now, I *know* Aslan Sadik got what I was saying.

*You and yours can suck on this, you piece of shit.*

When the security guard looked down at me with disgust, I blew him a kiss, and when I was done, I stood, carefully slid my skirt down, and held the thundering eyes of a beautiful Turk. The security guard picked up the phone, but when Az put up a hand, the burly man put the phone down.

He looked at me a long moment before he took the couple steps over, and when he peered down at me as he did now, with a gaze full of worry and pity, I wanted to kill him then. When he spoke, I knew it would only be a matter of time before I did just that.

"Okay. You did what you had to do." He looked around at the few men surrounding us then spoke low. "You're hurt. You're mad. I get it. I do." He leant in, muttering, "But you're embarrassing yourself, Ling. You need to leave." His eyes narrowed heatedly. "Or I'll make you."

*What did he just say?*

The vein at the side of my neck throbbed in time with my increasing heartbeat, and reaching down, I picked up my weapons and nodded,

feigning shame. “You’re right.”

His handsome face turned soft, and I knew I had him where I wanted him.

*So beautiful.*

I wanted to shatter those high cheekbones, slam my bat across his face to make sure his million-dollar smile never shone again, take my crowbar and level it down over his head, spilling out his brains for my pleasure alone.

Instead, I dropped the act, my face sobering, and when my slow smirk appeared, his trepidation returned tenfold.

*I’m back, bitches.*

“See, Az,” I explained on a sigh, “I wanted this to work out.” Reaching out, I smoothed down his lapel. “I really did.” My eyes met his. “But you fucked up, and now,” I enlightened, “you have to pay.”

More of his men arrived, watching the altercation. Amongst them was Aslan’s younger brother Enver, and the moment Aslan spotted him, his disquiet began to grow. I could’ve ousted us both then. I could have spilled the tea and let all his men know their king had declared his love to The Dragon Queen, but I didn’t.

No.

Aslan Sadik’s suffering would come nice and slow, and I would pluck the things he cared about most from him, one by one, so he could feel the pain of every loss before I struck again.

This boy was going to learn today that Ling Nguyen was not a love swept teen.

Ling Nguyen was a motherfucking queen, and if he didn’t let me use his face as a throne, I would impale myself on his broken, bloody spine until the raw pleasure made my body shake.

His lips thinned, and when he placed his hands on his hips, lowering his face, I heard the unease in his voice. “What do you want?”

*Oh, baby. You have no idea.*

The silence around us tense, I leant in, and hissed, “*Everything.*”

He straightened as I spun around and walked back outside, standing in front of the gorgeously sleek car Az treasured. Lifting the bat, I saw Aslan stand in the open doorway watching me, and I held it out in his direction a moment before I spoke.

“Batter up.”

As I brought the bat up, I grinned at the beautiful man, then winked before I threw it down, smashing one of the headlights. The glass shattered, showering out onto the street, and I moved to the other side, held the bat high, and brought it down, taking out the other headlight. Groaning in pleasure at the destruction I was causing, I bit my lip and my eyes flashed at the very same moment my breathing got heavy.

It was such an intense, heady feeling that I thought I might come, out here, on the street.

When Aslan’s younger brother rushed out the door, charging at me, I giggled like a schoolgirl and made a show of cupping my pussy, letting out a breathy moan. Az took chase, grabbing his brother, holding him back, and he let out a flurry of quick-shot Turkish in his ear. Enver struggled in his brother’s hold, and I smirked at his deadly scowl.

The car was a gift from brother to brother. It was part of the reason Aslan cherished it. Sure, the car was worth a cool hundred and fifty grand, and to these men, that was pocket change. But the real reason Aslan loved this car was because his brother had bought it for him, and he loved his brother.

Too bad Enver didn’t know we sullied the gift by screwing in it every chance we got.

When I took out the taillights, I sighed happily, and as I put the bat through the rear windshield, I gritted my teeth, the force of the blow reverberating through my arms.

Twisting back, I peered at Az over my shoulder and grinned.  
“Halftime.”

As I picked up the crowbar I’d left on the hood, Enver struggled in his brother’s hold, and then bellowed, “You’re dead, bitch!”

I thought about what he said, tilting my head to the side, my brow knitting. “You know what, little Az?” I blinked at the younger version of the beautiful man. “You’re so right.” My face turned dark. “I am dead.”

Dead.

Dead inside. Dead of mind. Withering soul. Failing heart. Fucking *dead*.  
And I was okay with that.

It was better to face the harsh truth than believe in pretty lies.

My lip curled as I brought the crowbar down onto the car, over and over again, grunting through every blow, my palms burning hot and my face screwed up. And after my rage had mildly subsided, I threw the crowbar onto the dented hood of the car and turned back to the men, letting out a sigh of satisfaction.

But what Az did to me next secured his fate.

His body jerked, then shook, and when he opened his mouth and laughed out loud, my blood boiled.

The men surrounding him joined in, the loyal cronies they were, and my veins pulsed pure molten lava.

Their laughter mocked me. Mocked The Dragons. It mocked my capabilities as a woman and a leader. And I was not having it.

Reaching under my skirt, I pulled the pistol out of my garter, lifted it, and fired. The men jerked back in shock, and when I continued to empty the entire clip into the hood of the car, watching as the engine smoked, I took a step back, laying my hardened glare on the man himself. Shrugging lightly, I pursed my cherry-red lips, and uttered, "Oops."

The blazing amber under the hood grew and I knew it was time to go.

I wasn't sure what would happen next because I didn't have a plan, but what I did know was this.

If Az wasn't with me, he was against me.

And that meant war.





## Chapter Thirty

### Lexi

As the tall, handsome man walked the smaller version of himself across the street, I smiled outwardly while at the very same time my heart ached.

Watching him walk away was becoming harder to bear, and every time he did, he took a piece of me with him.

Luck had brought us together. It was neither good nor bad, just... luck. First as children, then as adults, and now, once again, as two people with nothing left to lose but each other. The stakes were high as I imagined this was our last chance to get it right.

They reached the door, and as my son turned to me, waving like a loon, I smiled for real then, waving back. Because he was precious. A gift. And Twitch had given him to me.

And when the man himself lifted a hand to me in acknowledgement, I found it hard to wave back, the main reason being I wanted him here, at home, where he belonged.

But he let me down so often before that it was hard to swallow my pride and invite him into my life again as a permanent fixture. Because I was still hurt. Because no matter that he was back, I couldn't erase the last six years of emotional torment that he willingly put me through. Because, regardless of the fact that I loved him, I was still a woman scorned.

I was a fragile china doll, and Twitch didn't just watch me fall. He threw me off of the safety of my mantle, knowing I would shatter. And now, the pieces left of me?

They were sharp.

A moment too late, I lifted my hand, returning his wave and pasting on a false smile that didn't fit my face.

He, of course, noticed.

Pausing, I watched his smile wane as he contemplated what had happened between my front door and his to have caused me such distress, and without looking back, I walked into the house, closing the door behind me as gently as possible so as not to disturb the silence that greeted me as a friend.

A second later, my phone chimed.

**Tony: I can bring him back.**

My heart squeezed as I typed my short reply.

**Me: Have fun x**

I loved Twitch as much as a person was permitted to love another. Perhaps even more than was acceptable. Definitely more than was sensible.

My cell vibrated in my hand, and as though he'd heard my inner turmoil, I read his response with a tender heart.

**Tony: I love you.**

At that very moment, I felt silly about my hesitation.

**Me: I love you too, honey.**

I looked down at my response, and my fingers kept typing without permission. Stone-faced, I peered at the screen a long moment before hitting Send.

**Me: But if you even contemplate leaving again, I will fucking kill you myself.**

My heart thumped in my chest and I drew in a deep inhale, making a poor attempt to steady my heavy breathing. When my phone pinged a third time, I let out a shaky exhale as I read in silence.

**Tony: Never, baby.**

With those two words, I went from raging seas to tranquil waters, my unrest leaving me in a single shuddering breath.

Who was this man to have such power over me?

When my phone chimed again, I frowned down at the screen, and when I read the message, a shocked laugh left me.

**Tony: Send me a tit pic.**

I continued to laugh through my answer.

**Me: No!**

A second later,

**Tony: That's funny. You make it sound like it was up for negotiation.**

My smiled turned timid. I found I kind of wanted to do it simply because it would please him.

But I couldn't.

Could I?

No.

I shook my head and typed fast.

**Me: Behave, Daddy.**

When his response came in, my stomach clenched in time with my pussy.

**Tony: Yeah, baby. That's right. I like it when you call me Daddy.**

My lips parted as a quiet squeak left my throat, and in my mind, I hated that I heard him speak the filthy words into my ear.

I should not have found that arousing.

Why was that so hot?

Almost immediately after that,

**Tony: Gotta go. We'll continue this later.**

*No. Come back!*

But what I actually replied was,

**Me: Miss you both already x**

And I did.

I really did.

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## Ling

The woman in bed with me moaned with pleasure as I closed my lips around one pink nipple and sucked on the stiff peak. Her tits were perfect, just like the rest of her. So what if she was different? So was I. But who the hell was anyone to judge us?

I wanted to show her a good time, a blissful time, because she and I, although different, were fighting the same battles.

People judged us. They persecuted us. We were mistreated and hated on, and the love I showed her in this bed had that big dick energy behind it. The kind of lust that set the stars alight. I wanted to make her come over and over again until her pain was dulled and I was numb.

Numb was good. I could deal with numb.

The woman lifted her head, and breathed, "Ooh, baby. Look at what you do to me."

Her hand disappeared under the sheets, and when it resurfaced, it was lightly jerking her cock.

I salivated, wanting to wrap my mouth around it so badly, and when she thrust her hips lightly in my direction, her pretty pink lips pouting, I smirked, giving her what she needed. I lowered my head, and as she held out her hard dick to me, I stuck my tongue out and licked all around the head of it, watching her heavily made-up eyes roll back into her head as I laved her stiff heat, licking up the precum I was causing to erupt.

So, yeah, I said no more men, and I meant that. Thankfully, I found a loophole. Which was great for me, because I loved nothing more than a good fucking down.

As I took her into my mouth, her hips jerked, forcing me to take more of her into my mouth, and I felt her gratitude in every shallow thrust she gave as she fucked my mouth. Her panting grew, and when I saw her stomach clench, I released her cock with a pop before replacing my mouth with my hand and jerking it roughly in my hands. “You gonna come, baby?”

“Yeah,” she panted, watching me through hooded eyes as I worked her dick hard.

“Come in me.”

Her eyes glazed over as I presented my ass to her like the gift it was.

Without hesitation, the pretty blonde took her cock in her hands and worked it into my tight asshole. I let out a low moan when she held my hips, digging her long acrylic nails into me as she fucked my snug hole. It didn’t last long though. Within a couple minutes, I felt her seize up, and when she drove into me fitfully, I knew she was too far gone to stop.

“Oh, God,” her sweet voice sounded out. “Oh, shit, baby.” She stopped thrusting, and when she drove into me one last time, I felt her entire body stiffen and I smirked into the sheets. She grunted once and then again, her belly quaking with the force of her orgasm. And I was glad I could give that to her without judgment or shame for being nothing more than the person she was.

It was a hard knock life for those considered different.

I should know.

I led the pack.

“Well, isn’t this nice.”

The woman yelped, scrambling back and pulling the sheets up over us as Aslan stood in the open doorway of the bedroom of my city apartment, his expression completely void of emotion.

I really needed to change the locks.

The poor lady beside me looked mortified.

I, on the other hand, sized my main squeeze up with a lusty look. “You should have called, Az.” I made a show of running my tongue along my top lip before leaning into the woman at my side, squeezing her too-round tit through the sheet. “I would have saved you some.”

Az shook his head, looking far more disappointed than he had a right to be. “Twitch was right,” he said, and my heart stopped.

*What did he just say?*

What had Twitch said?

When did Twitch say something?

What the fuck was Az doing speaking to Twitch?

His eyes hard, he took a step back and his lip curled in disgust. “You are too damaged to be fixed.”

The words were severe, meant to taunt, and—fuck me—they met their mark.

*Oh my fucking God.*

It all made sense.

“Twitch warned you away from me.” Not a question. A firm statement.

Motherfucker.

I’d kill him.

I was surprised I managed to keep my tone calm, hiding the fact that I was infuriated. “Since when do you take orders from anyone, Sadik?”

The asshole avoided the question.

“I came here to call a truce.” The beautiful Turk’s lips thinned. “I came to apologize to you, Ling, but now...” His expression turned passive. “Now, I don’t give a shit.” He looked at the woman by my side before turning back to me. “You are a selfish, spoiled little cunt who throws a shit fit every fucking time something doesn’t go her way.” Those midnight eyes assaulted me. “Call yourself a queen?” He huffed out a cruel laugh. “Shame on you. You’re a fucking joke.”

And with that, he turned and walked away.

I sat up straight, letting the sheets fall to my hips, and when I reached under my pillow, the thunderstorm inside me raged with a fury I’d never had the pleasure of experiencing until that very moment.

So when the shot rang out and the woman beside me screamed, Az stood there a moment, motionless as I'd ever seen a person. And that kind of stark stillness was so unnatural a view it frightened me. As the redness began to show, he slowly shuffled around to face me. Reaching up to hold his heart, he swayed on the spot, looking down at the exit wound before gazing up at me, wide-eyed and shocked.

"You crazy bitch," he muttered weakly. His body shook violently a moment before he wheezed out, "You shot me."

The sound of his body falling to the ground was one that would haunt me every night in my dreams for all eternity.

"Oh, fuck," I whispered unsteadily.

I didn't want to kill him. I didn't mean to kill him.

Looking beside me at the woman in bed, I uttered a quietly stunned, "I didn't mean to."

It just... happened.

And as she looked at me as though I were a fucking monster, she nodded animatedly in agreement, and I knew she thought she was next.

I licked my lips.

She was right.

Lifting the gun, her face fell as she started to cry with the realization that her next breath would be her last, and all I could do was say, "I'm sorry," as the shot echoed throughout the room. Her naked, lifeless body fell backwards off the bed, and I was thankful she had the graciousness to take her leave from my sight.

What was only moments ago a room filled with the sounds of mutual pleasure was now awash in silence. In a single moment, I lost the love of my life.

My eyes darted from where he lay to the gun in my hand.

He died by my hand. I killed him.

Dropping the gun as if it burned me, it fell to the side of the bed with a dull thud.

I moved, and I don't know how long passed because it felt as though time had stopped.

As I sat on the edge of the bed, my eyes on the prone body of the man who changed me kiss by gentle kiss, I felt something building. Something bleak and foreboding.

Sorrow.

The first sob shot out of me like a bullet leaving a gun, hard and fast. Cradling my head in my hands, howling with grief, I hugged myself and rocked quietly, saying the words over and over again like a mantra.

“I didn’t mean to. I didn’t mean to. I didn’t *mean* to.”

Minutes went by, and as my tears continued to fall, I came to the conclusion that one person was to blame.

Sliding off the bed, I crawled over to him on weak knees and lay by my beautiful Turk, stroking his thick hair. “I’m sorry,” left me quietly as I leant in and pressed my lips to his. Another sob left me. I spoke through the tears, pressing another gentle kiss to his lips, whispering, “Wake up, baby.”

But he wasn’t listening.

My body shook from my place on the floor as my tone became desperate. “Everything’s going to be okay.” I sniffled, and explained, “I just need you to wake up.” I paused at his stillness. “Okay?”

Nothing. “Okay?”

Not a word.

My lips trembled, and I stroked his hair harshly as my voice cracked, “Okay?”

I took a moment to look at him. His open eyes were void and hollow, and his gaping mouth seemed to be frozen on a cry he never got the chance to set free.

Closing my eyes, I let out a low whine before body-wracking sobs took me by force. Tears blurred my vision as I wept openly, pulling him to me and holding him in death as I should have in life.

It was okay. Everything would be okay.

My arms shook around his dead weight. I took in what little warmth he had.

We’d just lie here a while, and tomorrow, everything would be fine.

I cradled his head to my bosom and rocked him gently, putting my lips to his temple as I whispered all the things I wish I’d said yesterday.

Everything would be fine.

Unfortunately, everything was not fine.

My eyes swollen from the crying, I looked up as my brother entered the bedroom, his eyes looking from Aslan’s cold, lifeless body to me then back

again. He swallowed hard, running a hand down his face, as he uttered a quiet, “Ling....”

I know.

It was bad.

As I crouched in the corner of the room, wearing nothing but my bloodstained skin, I said the only thing I could.

“It was an accident.”

Regretfully, the gunshot wound to his back said differently.

My brother blinked at me a moment before his feet moved and he crossed the room. Van knelt in front of me, taking a soft hand and cupping my cheek before attempting to pick at the bloodstained hair that had dried to my face from when I put my head to Az’s chest in an effort to see if his heart was beating. “It’s okay, Ting-a-Ling.” He lifted me to stand and pulled me into his arms. He held me tightly, rubbing my bare back. “We’ll fix this.”

No.

Didn’t he understand?

This wasn’t something we could fix.

We couldn’t bring him back. Couldn’t make him breathe again, or smile again, or argue with me, or love me with a full heart and an empty mind, damn all the consequences.

My brother snatched the sheet off the bed and wrapped it around my shivering body, pulling me to his side before guiding me out of the bedroom and towards the sofa.

This could not be fixed.

Aslan was dead.

Van sat me down and began to make the necessary phone calls. My gaze turned harsh at the understanding that I would never again hold the man I loved.

And I blamed Twitch.



# Chapter

## Thirty-One

Lexi

The commotion started as soon as the front door opened, and I listened to it trail the hallway, settling into the family room. From inside the bathroom in my Pikachu slippers, I stopped applying mascara when I heard my little man.

“And Squidward is a butthead, but SpongeBob doesn’t care. He likes him anyway,” explained A.J. enthusiastically.

“Why is he a butthead?” asked Twitch.

“I don’t know. He gets mad and doesn’t like people. He likes his clarinet,” A.J. went on, “The boss, Mr. Krabbs, is a butthead too. He likes money and he’s a crab, but his daughter is a whale and she cries a lot.”

Twitch sounded maddened. “The fuck kind of show is this?” I heard a huge thud, then squeaking, and Twitch muttered, “Off the couch, little dude. Your mom’s not gonna dig that.”

More squeaking. More bouncing. Then A.J.’s voice rose excitedly as he jumped on the cushions. “I like it. It’s funny. Patrick is silly. Daddy,” he panted as he kept jumping, “can we watch SpongeBob?”

Twitch didn’t speak for a moment, but when he did, I heard trouble brewing in his tone. “A.J.” he began, “I said off the couch.”

Unfortunately, it didn’t seem like our son was in the mood for listening, and the loud, grinding squeaks continued, followed by the little monster’s puffing and panting, and I listened as A.J. ignored his father. “Mum lets me watch it in the mornings before school. Can we?”

“Off the couch,” he tried again, his tone deceptively calm.

The creaking and squeaking continued as A.J. burst out with, “Oh!” He screamed at the top of his lungs, “*Who lives in a pineapple under the sea?*”

The entire house shook as Twitch hollered, “*Get off the couch!*”

It was so loud that the silence that followed almost echoed off the walls. When I heard the squeaking stop, my heart began to race.

My first instinct was to fly out of the bathroom with guns blazing and tear the handsome man a new asshole. But the social worker in me told me

to wait and see how this played out.

With a heavy heart, I waited.

At the sound of A.J.'s breath hitching, my insides coiled tight, and when Twitch let out a groan, followed by an apologetic sounding, "Oh, buddy. I'm so sorry. C'mere," little footsteps rushed over, and when I peeked out of the bathroom, I found Twitch on his knees, cradling our son to him, rocking him from side-to-side as A.J. cried quietly.

And my chest ached painfully.

The parenting gig wasn't easy. There were plenty of manuals, yes, and everyone had an opinion on how to parent, but it was basically all about experience, and Twitch hadn't yet had that pleasure.

I needed to understand that he was learning as he went, and some of the lessons would be learned the hard way.

When the man in question kissed our son's head and sighed before pulling back to catch the little monster's tears with the backs of his fingers, he explained, "What happened then wasn't your fault, okay?" A.J. nodded, holding back tears as Twitch went on. "When I was a little boy, some bad things happened to me, and sometimes loud noises do something to my head." He pointed at his temple and tried to speak delicately. "Sometimes loud noises make Daddy angry, okay? But that's not your problem, bud." He touched a gentle hand to A.J.'s jaw, wiping away more tears. "I'm tryin' to be better." Twitch pulled our son to him again, hugging him tight. "I'm gonna do better."

I heard the words he didn't say.

*I'm gonna do better... for you.*

A.J. wrapped his little arms around his father's neck, and croaked, "I'm sorry."

I watched Twitch's heart break. He closed his eyes, pained. "You did nothing wrong. You don't have to apologize for anything, okay? *I'm sorry,*" Twitch uttered, placing his lips to the top of his apple-scented head. "I messed up and I'm sorry." After a long moment, Twitch pulled back and peered down at the sad-looking gremlin. "Are we good, little dude? Forgive me?"

A.J. was an observer. He didn't always take things for face value, and when he looked into his father's eyes, he must have seen the sincere

apology in them because he nodded slowly, contemplatively, as though he truly believed Twitch was sorry.

As did I.

So when Twitch sighed in relief and stood up to put his hand to A.J.'s head, and muttered, "Go put your bag away. I need to talk to your mom," I was ready for him.

He appeared in the doorway of the bathroom looking pale and upset, and when I clicked my tongue, stepping toward him, he met me halfway, wrapping his arms around me tightly as I snaked my own around his waist, pressing myself into him.

My poor baby.

My poor, haunted baby.

Twitch lowered his face into the crook of my neck, and the move had my chest panging so hard I could barely contain it. Reaching up, I stroked the back of his head lovingly and kissed the space above his ear, providing the comfort he needed at that moment.

I held him for a solid minute before he pulled back, straightening and taking a deep breath to steady himself. And I smiled softly. "Hey."

But he didn't speak. He simply lowered his face to mine, seeking more comfort from my lips. And I gave it to him.

The kiss was slow, and deep, and full of apology, and when we separated, his eyes seemed less turbulent and more focused. More like himself. And when he covered my mouth a second time, taking my lips in another hard kiss before turning and moving to exit the bathroom, I called out to stop him.

He stilled in the doorway, twisting back to look at me expectantly.

*Don't say it.*

*Don't say it.*

*Don't say it, Alexa.*

"You ever talk to him like that again," I kept my voice mild, "I'll have your balls."

*Ah, nuts. You said it.*

Twitch looked at me a long moment, his eyes flashing, and when he pounced at me, I squeaked in shock, my heart jolting.

One strong arm came around me tightly, the other sliding down my back, gripping my ass in his firm grasp, biting as he squeezed hard. He

growled low in his throat and gently nipped my earlobe before he let out a rough sounding “I love it when you go all mama bear.” He pulled back, biting his bottom lip, his gaze hooded, and when his hand lifted and landed on my ass cheek with a hard slap, I yelped. His eyes flashed a second time, when he rumbled, “Fuckin’ sexy.”

And my vagina swooned dead away.

He left me in the bathroom, alone and horny, and when he came back a short while later, finding me in the exact spot he left me, his eyes crinkled in the corners. “Molly’s gonna watch the monster. I’m takin’ you out to lunch. So—” He checked the solid silver watch. “—be ready in an hour.” He took a step back. “Oh, and baby?”

My gaze settled on him, but when I opened my mouth to speak, all that came out was a little peep.

The creases at his eyes deepened, as he ordered, “Dress nice.”

I walked out of the house feeling stupid, but that stupidity faded into nothing when I saw the monstrosity purring in my driveway.

My mouth gaped, and when my eyes found his, my voice was small. “What the heck is this?”

He looked like a goddamn snack as he ran a hand through his hair, leaning against the black fancy car in those black jeans that hugged his long legs ever so nicely. Wearing a gray shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his forearms, it showed off his big hands and tattooed arms in a way that made my gut tighten and my heart jump into my throat. He’d swapped out his scuffed Adidas originals for a brand new pair of casual black lace-ups, and my mouth went drier than the Sahara.

Jesus Christ, he was handsome. Too handsome, in my opinion. And when he took off his sunglasses, his heavy gaze roamed my body, and I was back to feeling dumb, especially when he held out his sunglasses in my direction, and muttered a rough, “What the fuck is *that*?”

My stomach clenched in embarrassment and I dipped my chin, as I uttered, “That time we went shopping,” my voice was small, “you liked it so...”

*Oh, no.*

The tight, white, low-cut mini dress was definitely more appropriate for a twenty-year-old, not a woman in her thirties. Clenching my eyes shut, I slapped a hand to my forehead and spun around, walking back toward the

house in my caramel-colored heels. "Sorry. Let me change." Under my breath, I whispered, "So *dumb*," as my cheeks flamed.

Heavy footsteps rushed over, and when he gripped my wrist, whirling me around, I couldn't even face him.

I was an idiot.

"Look at me."

I shook my head. His fingers came to my chin and forced my face up to him, but I closed my eyes as the humiliation continued to course through me.

"Angel," he said as softy as a man like Twitch could. "Look at me."

Another shake of the head. "I feel stupid."

"You look beautiful." At that, I opened my eyes to find his lips thin, and when his brow creased, he ran his thumb over my wrist, and revealed, "Problem is, I won't be the only guy who notices."

My eyes narrowed on him.

What was he talking about?

"You're taking this rather well," I said cautiously.

"I'm..." He cleared his throat roughly, as if he were trying to eject the irritation he felt. "I'm working on my anger issues."

*Oh.* My heart began to swell. *Sweetheart.*

My face softened along with my voice. "I can change."

Those perpetually hooded eyes ran down the length of me and he let out a long exhale. "You bought that dress for me, so you're gonna wear that dress, and I'm gonna shut the fuck up about it because you look hot and I'm hungry." He tugged on my wrist, pulling me back to the car. "Come meet my baby."

My lips pursed.

*Oh my God.*

*Are you jealous of a car?*

Maybe.

The sleek black sports car was so shiny, so new, that my brows arched. "She looks expensive."

"She was," was all I got back.

I stepped toward it, running light fingers across the exterior, and when I got to the back of the car, I read out loud, "Maserati." I didn't know a lot about cars, but I knew this brand was one of those brands guys lost their

damn minds over. My face solemn, I smiled a smile that didn't reach my eyes. "How expensive?"

At that, he reached up to scratch his brow. "I'm starved."

Yep.

Very expensive.

I rolled my eyes but allowed him to open the passenger side door for me, and when I slid inside, I had to admit. The cool leather interior was gorgeous. And when Twitch got into the driver side, I faced him, smiling. "Okay, I'll concede. It's nice."

"Yeah," he agreed quietly, reversing out of the driveway. "For two hundred thou, it fuckin' should be."

My eyes bugged out. "*What?*" And when his eyes laughed, I sputtered, "Y-you are freaking insane."

"I got money, baby." He put the car in drive and shrugged before looking at me meaningfully, his tone almost accusing. "You stopped cashing the checks."

The checks.

The checks he'd been sending every month for the past six years.

My heart caught in my throat, but I swallowed past the lump. "I have enough money, Twitch. Enough to last a few lifetimes. I don't need any more."

Reaching over, he took my hand in his, placing it on the gear stick, and his hand came to rest on mine. When we changed gears, we did it together. He kept his eyes on the road. "Can't ever have too much money."

"Yes, you can. Besides," I told him truthfully, "I would have given it all up to have you with me."

His face on the road, I watched his expression turn grave, and when he spoke, he did it quietly. "I know."

We arrived in the city soon enough and, as luck would have it, got a spot right in front of the Italian restaurant. Twitch walked around and opened the passenger door for me, offering me his hand, and when I took it, stepping out, he locked the car with a click of a button and put his hand to my lower back, guiding me into the eatery.

It felt nice to be out together, just us two. I sometimes wondered if we'd ever get time alone between school runs and work and being parents. I

definitely felt selfish wanting Twitch to myself, but I couldn't help it. I craved him, desired his attention on a level that was borderline unhealthy.

Being seated quickly, the young woman who brought our menus basically swallowed her tongue when she introduced herself as our server. She blinked wide-eyed at the tattooed god across from me and stumbled over her words. "Hello, I'm.... My name is.... I'm Adela, and I'm your.... I'll be servicing you." Her cheeks flamed. "I mean, I'll be your server today." Her lips parted as she looked down at my handsome companion, and she squeaked out, "Would you like to hear today's specials?"

Twitch narrowed his eyes on her. "No."

"Okay," she breathed before turning and disappearing.

"Well." I looked down at the menu, speaking quietly. "You certainly got her attention."

"I don't want her attention," he replied just as quietly, and when I peeked up at him, his eyes scanned the menu. A short moment later, he looked up at me through his lowered gaze. "Yours is enough."

Ah, shit.

My goddamn *heart*.

"Maybe I wanted to hear the specials," I grumbled and watched his eyes smile.

"Want me to call her back?"

"No," I sighed then tried not to laugh. "She looked like she was on the verge of a stroke," I ended on a chuckle.

He watched me closely, a smile tugging at his lips before his expression turned solemn, and when he spoke, the words wrapped around my throat, choking me. "Wanna get hitched?"

I blinked at him as the menu fell from my hands. "What?" Confusion hit me as his question settled over my shoulders like a warm scarf. I swallowed hard and my mouth parted before my brows furrowed, and I asked, "Today?"

His lips pursed. "Why not?"

*Umm, what?*

My heart was racing and I found it hard to breathe. "I never know if you're being serious or not, and this is one of those times I need to know—" The words came out breathy. "—if you're being serious or not."

“When it comes to you, baby, I’m always serious.” He searched my face a moment, before stating, “I’m not a hard man to please. I don’t want much in life. I’m not askin’ for a lot, angel.”

“What...” The question came out on an exhale. “What are you asking for?”

No messing around. I needed him to lay it out for me.

He thought about it, his face serious. “I want my ring on your finger. Want you to take my name. Wanna wake up with my arms around you and my cock buried deep inside that pretty pussy every fuckin’ morning.”

Oh, shit. I wanted that too.

But then he went on, taking in a deep breath and letting it out slowly as his soft brown eyes held me fast. “I want you to want me, and I want you to show me that every chance you get. I want loyalty. I want complete and utter devotion. No bullshit. I want to share everything with you. Everything, baby. No secrets.”

My mouth parted as I let out a sharp breath.

‘Cause that didn’t sound alarming.

No.

Not at all.

He watched for my reaction. “I want you to give yourself to me selflessly, and I want you to do that because you know that no matter how far I take it, how uncomfortable I make you, you trust me to know your limits, that you trust me to keep you safe. I want you to feel how much I want you too, and I’m working on my greed, but I’m a selfish man by nature.” He finished with, “I want it all.”

I waited a moment before I responded, and sarcasm oozed out of my statement as I widened my eyes and worked on breathing steadily. “Not asking much?”

At that, he let out a rough chuckle, and when he smiled that crooked smile I loved so much, I melted inside. His smile softened, as he uttered, “Said it yourself, baby. You’re my ride or die.”

My heart expanded three whole sizes.

Twitch was crazy.

Crazy beautiful.

And all of what he wanted, I wanted too. But this was too much, too fast.



“I...” the words were whisper-soft. “I don’t know, honey. It’s only been two and a half months, and we’ve barely even—”

He pulled out a black velvet ring box and set it on the table between us.

“—oh my God.” I sounded strangled. “You bought a ring, you cocky bastard.” I forced out a humorless laugh and my knee bounced under the table. “Nope.” I shook my head. “Nuh uh.” My gaze was heavy on the little box taunting me in the center of the table. “No.” But as I said this, I reached for the ring box and pulled it in front of me, staring down at it unblinking.

And when I opened it, my brows furrowed in disappointment.

“It’s empty.”

Twitch made a face. “Is it?” He spun the box around to him, and muttered, “Huh. Weird.” Reaching over the table, he took my left hand and gently brought it to his mouth, pressing a kiss to my knuckles and speaking against my skin. “Ah, look at that.” He brought his other hand up. “I found it.”

My heart stuttered as the golden ring appeared between his fingers. He kept his eyes on me as he gently slid it onto my finger, and when I pulled my trembling hand back, holding it up in front of me to look at the thin, demure ring with a single diamond in the center, I held my breath for a long time.

As I breathed out a shaky exhale, I heard him say, “Didn’t think you’d want something flashy.”

I didn’t. “It’s perfect,” I uttered quietly, almost sadly, and when I opened my mouth to speak, he cut me off with a wave of his hand.

“It’s okay. I know you’ve got mad hesitation, and I get it, so we’re not making any decisions today. I just gotta make it clear that this is the end goal and I’m quietly confident.”

*Oh, thank God.*

I didn’t trust myself making a decision right this second because if I did, we’d likely be married by nightfall.

Nodding, I looked at the ring once more before I put my fingers to it, sliding it off. But he stopped me with, “Why don’t you leave it on a while?” My eyes met his and a single brow rose, when he added, “See if you like it.”

That sounded reasonable enough.

All right.

“Yeah, okay,” I uttered, slipping the gorgeous ring back on, but I added quickly, “Just to, you know, try it on for size.”

The corners of his eyes creased. “Sure, baby.”

The sticky sweet response told me I wasn’t fooling anyone and he damned well knew I wanted to wear the ring because I wanted to be his as much as he wanted to claim me for his own. I was just too cowardly to admit it.

During lunch, I couldn’t stop staring at the ring, and every time my eyes landed on it, I smiled unconsciously. It was everything I’d ever wanted for us, everything I’d pictured in my mind, in my dreams.

Why was I so scared of making that dream a reality?

We left the restaurant hand in hand, and when Twitch put the keys in the ignition, the car behind us started to honk its horn. I twisted back, looking at the gunmetal gray Lexus as it beeped us again.

Twitch looked into the rearview mirror, his jaw tight. “What the fuck is this clown doin’?” Another honk, and Twitch closed his eyes, gritting his teeth. He wound down his window and threw his arm out, waving the car on. “Go around, asshole.”

More beeping, for longer and longer, and when Twitch shot out of the car looking ready to kill, I whispered, “Oh, shit.”

I heard his angry tirade, “You want a problem, pal? Well, you got one now. Get the *fuck* out of the car.”

My heart raced as I watched on, wide-eyed and petrified.

The car door opened and a tall, dark-haired, middle-aged man slipped out, and he did not look afraid of Twitch at all. In fact, when he walked forward, his face drawn, he made a point of stepping into Twitch, way too close.

And when Twitch’s shoulder drooped, he shook his head slowly and uttered, “Should’a known.”

The man in front of Twitch smiled then, and Twitch returned it. When they rushed each other, hugging and slapping each other on the back, laughing, I was a little confused. They pulled back, looking each other over, speaking quietly, cheerfully, and that confusion rose a notch when Twitch came back to the car and grinned happily. “I wanna introduce you to somebody.”

“Okay,” I drawled, unbuckling my belt and exiting the car as gracefully as one could in a mini dress.

The moment I was out, Twitch was by my side, pulling me close, and the man smiled broadly, taking all of me in before letting out a slightly Slavic accented, “How in the hell did you land this beautiful thing, you ugly bastard?”

Oh, my. He was so charming, and when he smiled like he was, all eyes and teeth, it did something funny to my stomach.

A stunned laugh left me, and when the man reached out, I put my hand in his and blinked as he kissed my fingers.

Twitch did not like that.

“Yo, Pav. You like your hand, man?” When this Pav turned to face Twitch, my handsome man stated, “Unless you wanna lose it, I’d let go.”

Pav smirked then, releasing my hand gently and putting his hands up in surrender before saying, “Stop calling me Pav. You make me sound like a fucking dessert.” The man turned to me. “And I ain’t that sweet, sugar.” His eyes were warm. “I’m Luka.”

But Twitch tugged me back to his side, and I fell into him with an *oomph*. He had the nerve to speak for me. “Luka Pavlovic, this is my wife, Lexi.”

*Motherfucker.*

Slowly, I pulled back to blink at my beautiful, broody jerk, and his eyes smiled down at me. Looking at Twitch, I spoke to Luka. “I’m not his wife.”

“That’s a nice ring you got there.” Luka peered down at my left hand. “He give that to you?”

Umm. “Well, yes.”

Luka’s brows rose. “And you’re wear it freely?”

Hold on. “Yes, but—”

Luka grinned, cutting me off with a matter-of-fact, “Then you’re his wife.”

What? “Now wait a minute.” I turned to Twitch, taking my hand and shoving at his shoulder, looking pissed. “Did you set this up?”

Twitch’s eyes sparkled down at me before he lifted his face to Luka. “Isn’t she somethin’?”

Luka’s gaze darted between us. “I have never seen a woman put her hands on you and live to tell the tale, so—” He nodded, looking thoroughly

perplexed. “—yes. She’s something, all right.”

“Yeah,” I muttered. “She’s something.” My eyes narrowed on Twitch. “She’s pissed off is what she is.”

Both men laughed, and I failed to see the humor in this situation.

After a moment, Luka sighed, watching Twitch carefully. “Heard you were back. I didn’t believe it though.” His face turned serious. “Not many men return from the grave looking as good as you do.” Twitch and Luka exchanged a knowing look and Luka shook himself out of his stupor. “So when I saw you just now, I thought I was imagining things.” He shrugged, grinning. “I had to take a closer look. And here you are, my brother.”

Twitch’s face softened when he glanced at me. “Had reasons to do what I did.”

Luka’s eyes narrowed on Twitch a moment before he looked at me, wearing a weighty look. “Yes. I can see that.” He straightened. “So.” He clapped his hands together, rubbing them greedily. “You’re back.”

Twitch shook his head slowly. “I’m back, Pav, but I’m not *back*.”

Luka’s brow creased. “You’re out?”

“I’m out,” he stated firmly, and the knot in my stomach eased. “Got a wife. Got a son. I don’t want back in. Got more important shit to think about other than watching my back twenty-four seven.”

The man didn’t look impressed. “You know it’s not that easy, Twitch.”

“It is—” Twitch assessed the man before resetting his dangerous tone. “—if I say it is.”

The conversation continued, and I didn’t understand half of what was said.

“People are going to talk.”

“Let ‘em talk.”

“Word’s gonna get out.”

“I don’t care,” was Twitch’s scathing reply.

“Technically, the throne is still yours.”

“Am I speaking English, Pav?” Twitch was positively incensed. “Listen to me, my brother.” His arm tightened around me, and it almost felt like he was seeking the strength to remain calm. “I’m *out*.”

“Fuck me.” Luka sighed before stating accusingly, “You’re out. Julius is out. Happy is out.” He glared at Twitch. “It’s funny that when you all needed shit done, I was there with whatever the fuck you needed, and now

that shit's going south in my kingdom, none of you fuckers are around when I need you."

Twitch stilled at that. "What do you mean shit's going south?"

Luka sighed, closing his eyes. "The body of Aslan Sadik was found this morning in the harbor, a bullet in his back. The Lost Boys want answers, and I'm trying to give that to them. They're mourning, and that makes them volatile." Luka's jaw steeled. "There are rumors going around." He looked around before continuing, "About a relationship he might have been having with someone he should not have been having a relationship with."

"Ling." It was a grave response.

And as my body stiffened at Twitch's side, Luka's lip curled. "Seem to know a lot of underground shit for someone who's out." When Twitch's gaze darkened, Luka added, "Just saying." He peered down at his shoes, before stating, "I'm pretty sure she did it, but no one saw a thing, and when I called in to question The Dragon Queen, her brother gave her an alibi." Luka raised his eyes to Twitch. "Said they were together all night." He licked his lips and peered at me a moment before he clarified, "In bed."

My stomach lurched.

Ling was screwing her *brother*?

Oh my God. Gross.

My face must've conveyed my feelings about that, because Luka shook his head, illuminating, "As far as we know, it's a lie. Van will say and do anything to keep his sister safe. And he'd go that far to do it."

Still... ew.

Twitch paused a long moment, before he said, "I don't know what to tell ya, man."

Luka watched him closely. "Why don't you start by telling me what the fuck you and your boys were doing making a house call to Asya Sadik a few weeks back."

My heavy gaze landed on Twitch, and when his eyes met mine, he didn't squirm or fidget at all. He looked the picture of innocence. Fortunately, I knew better.

His shoulder jerked in a blasé manner. "A friendly visit. Just wanted to push my old friend Az in the right direction, away from the jaws of a fucking Viper. And maybe I thought giving him a scare like that would do it."

I heard the words, but I knew you didn't visit friends in the middle of the night bearing weapons.

"Ah, Twitch," Luka groaned. "You dumb fuck."

I couldn't help myself. "*Hey*." When the irritated man's eyes snapped to mine, I was suddenly self-conscious. I pressed myself into Twitch's side more out of fear than a show of support and uttered a weak, "Don't talk to him like that."

To my absolute surprise, Luka's shocked expression transformed into a wide smile, and when he looked to Twitch, the man at my side pressed his lips to my temple. I felt his smile against my skin. "See?" The softly spoken word warmed my skin. "Solid."

It took a moment, but Luka's smile fell. "If I need you, I'm calling it in."

I didn't like the tone he used. It sounded like an order, and that concerned me. Unconsciously, my hand came up to rest on Twitch's broad chest and my face turned solemn.

"I'm out, Luka," was all the response the man got.

And as he walked backward to his car, I saw the danger in Luka Pavlovic when his face darkened, and he told my man, "You're out when I say you're out." He grinned then, but it was warped. "Didn't you hear, brother?" That grin vanished, and he muttered severely, "I'm the fuckin' king now."

The car rolled away, leaving us in the street with me clutching at Twitch, feeling as though I was about to lose the man I just got back. And I was stunned to realize I wasn't going to let that happen again.

Not willingly.

# Chapter

## Thirty-Two

### Twitch

“Need you to call your boy for me,” I said as Molly sat at the dining table with her ankle resting on her knee, sipping at her coffee.

Her face bunched. “What boy?”

*C’mon, Molly. Let’s not play this bullshit right now.*

I rolled my eyes then sighed. “You know which boy. The huge Maori fucker.”

Her eyes landed on me, and those overfull lips of hers parted slightly. A moment passed, and she shook her head. “No.”

Coming to lean against the wall, I scratched at my prickly jawline and drawled, “Wasn’t really a request.”

“No,” she stated more firmly before standing and attempting to rush out of the room.

She was quick.

I was quicker.

My hand shot out, gripping her upper arm tightly, stopping her in her tracks. Her deadly stare landed on my hand before she slowly looked up at me, her lip curling, and I smiled as she shot me full of ice.

“Take your hand off me.” She was a bitch, our Molly. And that was good. It would serve us well. She tried to pull out of my hold, and spat, “He let his brother rape my sister.”

Silly little sparrow. “He didn’t do shit and you know it. What happened had nothing to do with Tama, but you’re hurt, so you wanna make him the enemy.” My hold loosened on her, but she didn’t run. I watched her face fall as she listened to the words I spoke. “You both lost someone important to you. You’re both upset, and if you talk about that, you’ll realize you both have something to be sorry for.” I released her then. “But neither of you are to blame.”

“I killed his brother.” Molly blinked away tears, refusing to let them fall, and I respected her for that. “He’ll never forgive me.”

That was when Lexi's quiet voice penetrated the silence. "Oh, sweetie." My woman's face was desolate as she moved instinctively to Molly and wrapped her arms around her from behind, resting her temple on her head. "I didn't know." Lexi's eyes closed as she dealt with what had just been revealed to her. And solid as she was, she squeezed Molly tightly, and muttered, "I'm so sorry."

Molly spun in her hold and allowed Lexi to mother her, and it did something to me. Both of these women were important parts of my past. It was funny how the past kept repeating itself, bringing us together, *forcing* us together as if we were all to play a significant role in one another's future.

Lexi pulled back, her eyes sad, and peered down at Molly, keeping her arms around her. "You don't have to call him, okay?"

My face screwed up.

Um, yeah. She did.

But, my beautiful angel, she surprised me when she added, "But I know Twitch wouldn't ask this of you if it weren't important, honey. So—" She ran her fingers down the side of Molly's soft cheek. "—you don't have to, but—" Her eyes landed on me a moment before she went on gently. "—we'd like it if you did."

Almost immediately, Molly uttered a hoarse, "I'll call him."

And Lexi leaned in, pressing her lips to the petite girl's forehead. She closed her eyes and held them there a long time before she responded a heartfelt, "Thank you. I know this isn't going to be easy, but I'll be right here with you, okay?" Molly's dejected eyes lifted to hers, and Lexi smiled warmly at the little woman. "I'm not going anywhere."

Molly nodded, her expression one of desperation, and the childlike look in her eyes forced a protective streak out of me that I hadn't felt with anyone apart from my son and his mother.

"Call him," I uttered as I pushed myself off the wall. "Tell him to come alone."

I had a bad feeling. A feeling that told me some people would need to be sacrificed to keep my family safe. I walked away, needing to get a grip on my inner turmoil. Because I couldn't protect everyone.

The silence was thick, sticky, holding the four of us in place as we sat at the table. And when my eyes drifted from the huge monster of a man with



the tattooed face to the tiny, petite willow of a woman with pouting lips, I couldn't help but smirk inwardly, because in the ten minutes we'd been here, they only had eyes for each other.

As Lexi remained seated by Molly, she threw me a look that said "Oh my God, this is so *awkward*," and I heard that shit whispered into my ear. Clearing my throat, I turned my eyes to the man and held them there. "What do you know of The Dragons?"

Tama's dark gaze didn't leave Molly as he drawled, "The price of this chat is gonna cost you."

The soft way he said it made me realize he wasn't talking to me. My eyes narrowed on Molly, and I watched the panic set in.

I decided to let it be known that, "Molly doesn't work for you, Tama. She works for me, and I don't have any plans to let her back into the fold." He turned to me, and if I wasn't who I was, having seen the shit I'd seen, I'd think he was a scary man. Fortunately, his intimidation tactics didn't have shit on mine. "Especially not after the shit you pulled the last time you called her out."

His deathly stare landed on her once again, and his response was rough, low. "Never said I wanted her for work."

My stomach clenched with anger, painfully tight. "Not about to make my girl turn tricks for you either, so if that's the plan, you can take this opportunity and get the fuck on out of my house."

Tama didn't speak for a long while, but I noticed the way his hands clenched into fists, then released constantly, before he said, "What opportunity?"

I internally grinned.

Got him.

"I hear you got a guy. A guy who runs surveillance. And I hear he's good."

"Amoho." Tama chest puffed out with pride. "He's not good. He's the best."

His confidence spoke volumes. "I need him to keep an eye on Ling Nguyen."

But Tama was already shaking his head. "Nah, bruh. We don't fuck with The Dragons." He blinked down at the table. "They're mental. No rules apply. That queen of theirs has a screw loose upstairs. Let's 'em run rabid."

His lip curled. "Disgusting. Shameful." He took in a deep breath before shaking his head once again. "I won't have my men killed for you, and that's what will happen if we take this job."

"Not if I kill her first," I drawled, and damned if that didn't get his attention. "The Dragons are a pain in everyone's ass, and I plan on forcing 'em to disband." Oh, yeah, he was listening, all right. "You help me out here, their territory is yours."

It was prime territory. A city spot that no one other than The Lost Boys held.

Yeah. Tama was listening.

I don't think he understood how this worked because the cocky fuck felt the need to negotiate. "I still want Molly."

A short bark of a laugh left me. "You can't have her." My mirth faded to nothing and I laid it down. "You get the territory or you get nothing. But greedy fuckers get a parting prize too," I told him. "A free hole in the head."

At that, the giant man actually cracked a smile. He seemed to contemplate my offer, and he did this a long while before he stood, and said, "I'll talk to my men. Get back to you." I stood and walked him out of the kitchen, but when he suddenly twisted back to face Molly, he paused a second, then muttered, "Coming?"

To say she was stunned was an understatement. Her brows creased, looking like she was in a huge amount of pain, and her mouth parted in disbelief, but she didn't move.

The giant Maori watched her a moment before his lips thinned, and he nodded in understanding before continuing out the door. What he didn't see was Molly move to stand.

I stopped her with, "You're not going."

She looked completely rattled, as though she was being pulled in all different directions and she wanted to follow them all.

"Molly, you're twenty-two. He's *my* age," I said sternly. "You can't go with him." When her eyes narrowed on me, I fought a chuckle but shook my head, muttering, "I'm not allowin' this, girl. Sit your ass down."

And when her eyes flashed and she snarled, "Fuck you!" she rushed to her room a moment before returning with her bag.

I forced out a long sigh. "Get back here, Molly."

But she ignored me, running after him. “*Tama!*”

The front door slammed shut, and from the window, both Lexi and I watched on as Tama turned just as Molly launched herself at him, and the second her caught her, their lips met in a hard, desperate kiss that had me grinning in victory.

By my side, Lexi sounded irritated. “It’s not up to you who she’s with, Twitch. She loves him and—” When she faced me, her big blues narrowed down at my lips. “Why are you smiling?”

My baby.

God, she was beautiful.

Gently moving her hair behind her ear, I continued to smile, as I stated, “I don’t pretend to know much about women, but I do know one thing. They do not like when you tell ‘em what to do. Or to stay away from somebody they want.”

I saw the exact moment she caught on. Her eyes widened and she dipped her chin to hide her smile, and when she finally looked up at me again, her eyes were full of mirth. “You sneaky shit. You did all of that... *said* all of that on purpose, knowing she’d go to him.”

Tama carried Molly to his car, kissing her like she was air and he was dying to breathe again. Fully deadpanned, I uttered, “Oh no. Molly, come back.”

Lexi tipped her head back and laughed out loud, and I grinned down at her flushed and smiling face before my heated gaze landed on her full lips. “I need that mouth, Mama.”

Her eyes flashed a moment before they turned lusty, and I loved how after all this time, we were still as affected by each other as we were in the beginning. “Just my mouth?” She sounded disappointed.

I shook my head slowly as I took her hand, pulling her close. “Every journey needs a starting point.”

A choked sound left me as her greedy fingers came out to rub my cock through my jeans. Her voice breathy, she let out a hushed, “Aren’t you going to tell me off?”

She wanted to be told off.

Fuck me. She was perfect.

But today, I just wanted my smiling, sweet angel. Just her. And I wanted all of her. “Touch me.”

Walking her backward down the hall, I kept my eyes on her, and she kept her small hand on my straining fly. When I lowered my face to kiss her, she backed away playfully, smiling as she avoided my lips, and my heart did this weird kind of jittery thing.

*Huh.*

That was different.

Whenever I was around this woman, I couldn't seem to keep my hands off her or my pants on.

The second we were in the bedroom, I put my hands to the bottom of the cotton dress she wore and whipped it off, and the sight of her in her tiny lace panties and matching white bra...

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## Lexi

He'd been standing there a long time. I was beginning to get self-conscious.

"Honey?" My brows knitted lightly.

What was wrong with him?

Suddenly, he frowned and swallowed hard then blinked and he was back. But when he pulled out his phone and pointed it at me, I lifted my hand with a gasp, almost knocking the cell out of his hands.

"Do *not* take photos of me." Totally outraged, I hissed, "Not like *this*."

He had the gall to look annoyed. "Why not?"

"I'm..."

*Oh, no.*

My eyes shut tightly, and the insecurities I'd fought since I had A.J. returned wholeheartedly. I covered my stomach pooch with a splayed hand, completely embarrassed, and then I whispered, "I'm not the same." I said this in a way that he couldn't misunderstand my meaning.

And he got me.

Taking a step forward, his hard length pressed into my hip. Looking down at me with meaning, he uttered a rough sounding, "That feel like disappointment to you?"

No.

It felt like my ruin.

Unexpectedly, my mouth opened and all the words flew out. "I'm not as thin as I was."

"I like you like this."

"I have a gut."

He scoffed. "It's hardly a gut."

"My butt is bigger."

At that, he grinned, sliding a hand over my hip to squeeze a rounded cheek. "I know."

Asshole.

Feeling direct, I went on, "Pregnancy made my tits huge. Look." I pressed my arms into them to make my point, and when the globes protruded obscenely, I blinked up at him. "See?" His eyes were on my boobs, and when I ran a hand through my hair, sighing in irritation, I said, "It's so not fair that I look like this when you look like—" I threw an arm out to his entire being. "—*that*." I went on, "I work out. I run. I yoga. It doesn't matter what I do; these curves do not want to leave me." When his eyes crinkled in the corners, I revealed sadly, "They've made themselves at home and, apparently, are not going anywhere."

"Good," was the cool response he gave.

My eyes narrowed. "Have you even been listening to me?"

He sighed. "I'm listenin', angel. I just don't give a fuck is all." Just as a heated gasp left me, he smiled that beautifully crooked smile, and uttered, "I hear your concerns, but I'm a man. I love curves. Curves on you though?" A rumbling growl sounded low in his throat and his eyes hooded. "*Boom*."

Well, shit.

Boom.

I liked that.

"I'm just a little insecure is all, and—"

He leaned in and cut me off, capturing my lips in a firm, potent kiss that made me positively heady, and when he pulled back, his eyes were warm, as he quietly uttered, "Shut up, baby."

"Okay," was my breathy reply.

With a gentle push, I landed back on the bed, and he was climbing over me. My eyes widened as I glanced down the bed at my bright yellow

slippers. “You want me to leave the Pikachu on?” His lips landed at the side of my neck and I smiled softly, releasing a small shrug. Okay.

“Whatever you’re into.”

“I’m into you,” was definitely the correct response, and I felt those words deep in my soul as he sucked at the delicate area where neck met shoulder, marking me.

My eyes closed in bliss and I lifted my hands to the back of his head, needing this gorgeous man to leave me another love letter branded on my skin, lest I forget how he felt about me.

With every kiss, with every gentle touch of his tongue to mine, he sent stealthy messages. Secret messages meant only for me.

*You are the reason I breathe.*

*I would do anything to make you happy.*

*I love you.*

And I returned my own to him.

*I live for you.*

*I would kill for you.*

*I love you more.*

Having lived many places in my lifetime, nowhere felt more like home than Antonio Falco’s arms.

How very frightening.

When he suddenly took my left hand, peering down at the ring I continued to wear, he kept his eyes on the sparkling diamond but uttered, “Always find my way back to you.”

Yes. He did.

But my heart stuttered because it sounded sad coming from a man who didn’t do sadness, and that worried me.

“We’re getting married,” I told him as my throat thickened with emotion. And I don’t know exactly where I was going with that. Maybe I just needed to throw the reminder out there.

And when he shook his head, my heart clenched, but what he said had my insides unraveling. “Don’t care what anyone says. Don’t care what the law says. If I call you my wife, then you’re my wife. But if you wanna make it official, we can do that, baby.” He kissed my knuckles. “Far as I’m concerned, you’re Mrs. Antonio Falco.”

I blinked up into those eyes that warmed in my hold. I pulled my hand free and framed his face with them. I ran my thumbs across his rough cheeks, caressing them lovingly because he was precious to me.

My voice quiet, I confessed, "I'm scared."

He didn't respond, simply nodded, and I knew we were on the same wavelength.

Lowering his head to the valley between my breasts, he laid on me with his arms around me as I stroked his hair, hugging him tightly, feeding him the comfort he so desperately needed.

Because Twitch's past was catching up to us.

I just hoped we had a little more time together before we were finally caught.

We made love slowly in the afternoon, leisurely, with our lips never far from the other's, and it was everything.

Something changed with that gentle lovemaking session, and I don't know what precisely, but deep inside, I felt it was a good kind of change. Like the complex man beside me had opened himself to me completely. And as we lay together in the nude with my leg draped across the both of his, Twitch pulled me into his side before taking my hand and holding it to his mouth.

The sweet gesture made my heart swell, and in that moment, I felt truly treasured.

In the stillness of the space around us, I kept my eyes closed, and spoke quietly. "I want more children."

I felt Tony's mouth pull into a smile against my hand.

And I was sure he felt my responding smile against his chest.

As I gently placed my hand on his chest over his heart, he put his lips to my forehead, and uttered smoothly, "Whatever my baby wants."

My chest ached as my heart went from full to bursting. "I love you."

He pressed his face into mine, his lips softly kissing wherever they could reach, and I closed my eyes, taking in the love he gave as well as the unspoken words he said. Because Twitch let his actions speak for him.

And I liked what they were saying.

# Chapter

## Thirty-Three

Ling

“I don’t want to stay here anymore.”

Sick of being babysat, I stood and made to leave my bedroom. But the maddening man I called my brother rushed me, putting his hands to my shoulders and directing me back inside. “Ling Ling, you need to lay low. This is not up for discussion.” He looked down at me warmly. “Be good. Please?”

In the days after the death of Aslan Sadik, Van had some of the better-trusted Dragons scour my city apartment, cleaning every inch of it while my brothers took care of the bodies. In mere days, that apartment was back up on the market with quite a lot of interest, but I refused to sell, and without explaining myself, I wondered if Van knew why. Because if I sold, it would be gone, all of it, as would all of my best memories I had with the beautiful Turk.

It was hard being unable to mourn because I was on lockdown and my brother was trying his hardest to occupy me, but nothing could occupy a broken heart as well as sorrow could.

I moved slowly, sitting on the edge of the bed, talking low. “Why did you do it?”

From the corner of my eye, I saw Van still. He didn’t answer for a long moment, but when he did, his voice was rough. “You would have done it for me.”

Would I have?

I wasn’t so sure anymore.

Grief was doing funny things to my perception.

“Come here.” I held my hand out to him, and he came to me without hesitation, sitting by my side and allowing me to take his hand.

What I would give to feel anything other than what I was feeling then.

I would do anything, terrible, disgusting things, just to feel something other than the depression coursing through my veins.



“You told them we were in bed together,” I muttered, taking his hand and placing it onto my bare thigh, keeping my tone quiet. “How would you like to make that rumor a reality, brother?”

Van closed his eyes, gripping my flesh hard enough to bruise. “Ling. Stop.”

No.

Placing a gentle hand on his jaw, I turned him to face me, and his eyes shut so tightly I thought he might cry. “Look at me.”

But my brother shook his head firmly, and whispered, “Don’t do this.”

But I wanted to do this.

I wanted to forget myself for a while and I didn’t care how.

My heart lurched as I leaned up and in, pressing my lips to his.

It felt wrong. Even more so when Van’s mouth remained slack.

“Kiss me back,” I said sadly.

But he didn’t.

My eyes stung. “Kiss me back,” I begged, and my breathing hitched as the first of my tears fell. “*Please.*”

Van kept his eyes closed and his lips lax. And that was the moment I truly realized how low I had sunk.

Az was right.

I wasn’t a queen. I was a fucking joke.

Clearly uncomfortable, my brother’s body stayed rigid even after I scrambled back, away from him.

My voice weak, I dipped my chin and felt ashamed for the first time in years, crying softly, “I’m sorry.” When the man beside me stood and headed for the door, I panicked. Eyes wide, I called out, “Don’t leave me.”

His, “I have to,” was said in a way that told me if he didn’t, we’d do something we’d regret.

So I watched him leave.

The thing was, I was headed in that direction anyways, and if I didn’t make a bad decision here in my bedroom, I was afraid I’d make one elsewhere.

With a stone-cold expression, I took my shopping cart towards the checkout, and when I was called on, I rolled up, unloading the items onto the conveyor.

The plump checkout chick scanned the items, placing them in bags.

After a while, she scanned the small black hoodie, holding it up and smiling. “Oh, Lord. That is adorable.” She threw me a smile before peering at the rest of my items, and saying, “Someone’s getting spoiled today. How old?”

“I don’t have him yet, but—” I removed my sunglasses and smiled coyly. “—he’s five.” I looked over at the conveyor full of boy clothing and toys. “And, yes. He will be spoiled.”

“That’s lovely that you’re adopting. It’s a wonderful thing you’re doing.” The checkout chick made a gooey face. “You’re going to be a great mother,” she said knowingly before nodding. “I can tell.”

Yes.

I would be a great mother.

A great mother indeed.

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## Lexi

The second I opened the front door, my eyes widened happily and a loud gasp left me. I shouted excitedly, jumping up and down, clapping enthusiastically before throwing myself into the small redhead’s arms.

“Manda!”

The woman I affectionately called my sister chuckled as I forced myself on her, making her stumble and put a hand to the wall by the door to steady herself. My exhilarated laugh rang into the fresh morning air.

I pulled back, reared my arm back, and grinned like a fool when I lightly slapped her arm. “What are you *doing* here?”

She shrugged, smiling hard at my excitement. “I told you I’d be back, didn’t I? But—” She twisted back to look at the car parked on the street, sounding a little anxious. “—I might have done something really dumb here, Lexi.”

My eyes narrowed on her before they rolled over to the parked car. When the three men exited all at once, my face went slack, and I released a quiet, “Oh.”

Automatically, my face spun, looking back into the house uneasily, then came back to rest on Manda’s apologetic face. I spoke quietly, “You should

have called.”

Her suddenly weary expression told me she knew this, and my concern increased as I heard Twitch approach. From behind me, I felt him still at my back as he peered over the top of my head to our guests. Feeling his body stiffen, I quickly spun, and when my eyes landed on him, his eyes were unblinking, jaw rigid, on one of the men.

The oldest of the men.

His ice-cold stare came to rest on Manda. She immediately let out a hushed, “Don’t be mad at me.” When he didn’t respond, she closed her eyes. “Please don’t be mad at me.”

The silence dragged on, and as the three men kept their distance, Manda revealed solemnly, “He’s sick, Tony.” Twitch looked down at his little sister, and she added, “I know I sprung this on you, but he doesn’t have a lot of time left, and I just thought if you got to meet him,” she sighed tiredly, “you’d have some closure.”

The silence coiled tight around my chest like a vice.

When Twitch spoke, he spoke to me, low and rumbling. “You wanna meet my dad?”

I did, desperately.

My face came up, and I uttered, “This isn’t about what I want.”

He looked down at me, his eyes cold, his words warm. “My entire being is about what you want.” When I didn’t answer, he got his answer and sighed softly. “She wants to meet him.” And when he lifted his hand and waved the men over, my heart started to thump in time with their steps.

But as they reached us, I felt coldness at my back and I realized Twitch was gone.

My chest ached painfully, but I pasted on a smile as the tallest of the men stepped forward, and when he opened his mouth, his silky smooth Scottish brogue caressed my skin. “Is this my sister-in-law?”

“Wow,” was what I stupidly said, and Manda chuckled.

My stunned gaze landed on her, and Manda’s ridiculously handsome husband took the hand dangling at my side, brought it to his mouth, and planted a kiss to my knuckles. He continued to hold my hand as he looked me in the eye, almost hypnotizing. “Hello, gorgeous. The name’s Evander, but almost e’ryone calls me Vander.”

“Oh, wow,” escaped me, and as my cheeks heated, I turned to Manda, and uttered, “I totally get it.”

And although her husband’s eyes narrowed on me, he kept smiling, but from the way Manda’s body shook in silent laughter, she got me. I cleared my throat and smiled widely. “It’s lovely to meet you.” Suddenly embarrassed, I glanced down at my feet before glaring at Manda. “If I had known you were coming—” My eyes met Vander’s. “—I would have dressed more appropriately.”

“Don’t be silly, love.” His eyes landed on my feet and he grinned. “Pikachu’s my favorite.”

Well, duh.

He was everyone’s favorite.

“Please, come in.” I held the door open, and as Manda and Vander stepped inside, I was suddenly standing face-to-face with a man who looked so much like my non-husband that I had to stop myself from reaching up and touching his beautiful face.

Although his face shape was slightly different—angular and much more severe-looking—his neatly styled dark hair, his strong chin, his full bottom lip, the way his eyes hooded unintentionally, they were all Twitch. But he wasn’t Twitch. And from the way he was looking at me with those forest green eyes, unsure and mildly irritated, I could tell he didn’t want to be here.

Suddenly shy, I swallowed hard and slowly put my hand out to him. “Hello. I’m Lexi.”

The man peered down at my hand uninterestedly before the older man slapped him across the back of the head, and muttered coarsely, “When a woman puts her hand out, you take it, Giuseppe.” The mature man’s eyes smiled at me mischievously before he shook his head, and murmured, “Kids, huh?”

Kids?

Giuseppe was in his forties.

I couldn’t help the tinkling laughter that escaped me.

Giuseppe rolled his eyes, gently taking my outstretched hand, pumping it once, then huffing out a clearly annoyed, “I’m Zep.”

Cool.

This guy looked like he was the life of the party.

If the party was held at four a.m. in a dank cemetery, that is.

The older man all but pushed Zep out of the way to stand in front of me, and something strange happened. As we held each other's eyes, an untold understanding passed between us. He wanted to be here, wanted in on whatever it was we had going here, and I felt that in my bones.

This man was a good man. No doubt about it.

Without a single word spoken, I stepped forward and he opened his arm to me, folding them around me in a fatherly gesture that made my heart twinge.

Antonio Falco Sr. held me a long time before he pulled back to gaze down at me with shining eyes. Lifting a hand, he cupped my cheek and smiled warmly. "Beautiful girl."

My throat catching, I whispered thickly, "Papa Tony."

Unable to speak, he patted my cheek, and I leaned into his rough touch before stepping back and letting them both through. Once inside, I was surprised to see Manda looking into the backyard through the window, and when I went to stand next to her, I could see why she was smiling.

Vander and Twitch were out back talking close, smiling, and when Vander gripped the back of Twitch's neck, pulling him in to kiss his cheek in a brotherly gesture, Twitch let him. As Vander pulled back, Twitch tapped the back of his knuckles to the bulge at Vander's fly, causing him to jump and Twitch to laugh as they burst into rapid-fire chatter.

It was so strange. They knew each other well enough to play around as they were, yet I didn't know any of these people. He hadn't mentioned them to me at all.

I wondered why.

Manda and I laughed quietly at the men's antics before she turned to me and looked hopeful. "You got any of that top-shelf Australian wine in the fridge?"

Pffft. Did I ever.

As I reached into the fridge to pull out a bottle, I paused before peering at the two men watching me closely. Instinct had me reaching for a second bottle then asking, "What time is it?"

Manda checked her phone. "It's just past midday."

"Nice," I drawled as I gathered a third bottle into my arms. Jerking my chin toward the cabinet, I said, "Grab some glasses, will ya?"

Manda was already on it, holding the stems of six wine glasses between her fingers. “On the porch?”

I grinned at her. “You know it.”

As I pushed open the sliding door with my foot, I stepped outside and set the bottles of wine on the beautiful outdoor setting. The moment the men followed Manda and me out, I couldn’t help but notice the conversation between Twitch and Vander stopped as Twitch’s soft brown eyes darkened a notch. He lost his smile, and I hated that.

I filled glasses and handed them out, but when Vander declined, he brogue was thick. “I brought a bottle of Scotch with me, but I didn’t think we’d be startin’ this early.”

At that, Twitch muttered a cool, “Grab it. Fuck knows I could use a drink.”

Vander’s lips pursed, and when he disappeared, the conversation lapsed into an uncomfortable silence. The second he returned with the bottle, Twitch tapped his tumbler. Vander poured a couple of fingers. Twitch tapped the glass again. Vander poured a little more. But Twitch shot his brother-in-law a look that said, “You better fill that fucker up,” so Vander did. And I watched as Twitch downed half the glass in one fell swoop.

“Honey,” I started, but Twitch just looked at me, almost daring me to finish my sentence. And because I was who I was and Twitch was who he was, I knew he needed today to be reckless, so I gave him that.

Papa Tony faced Zep and began foolishly with, “Your brother—”

Oh, that did not go well. Not with Zep and not with Twitch.

Zep scoffed. “He’s not my brother.”

“Damned right, I ain’t,” returned Twitch acidly.

Zep glared at Twitch. “What’s your problem?”

“I don’t got one.” Twitch barked out a laugh. “But I can see you do, bitch.”

Zep smiled viciously. “You just call me a bitch? You got some balls on you.”

“Boys,” Papa Tony cut in, pacifying.

Twitch held his bitter stare. “Yeah, I’m callin’ you a bitch.” He sat back, looking him up and down. “Spoiled little rich-ass bitch, got everything in the world handed to him. Sad little entitled motherfucker actin’ all jealous, because—”

Zep's eyes flashed. "I ain't jealous."

"—I got Daddy's fuckin' name." Twitch ended by raising his arms, and the more angry he got, the more hood his accent turned. "You want the name? Take it, bro. I don't fuckin' want it. Fuck knows it ain't ever done me no good."

Zep's lips thinned, then he clarified quietly, "I ain't jealous."

Twitch downed the rest of his tumbler, and when he peered over at Vander with his darkened gaze, Vander filled him up without question. And when Twitch downed another half of his full glass, his eyes became bleary, as he uttered, "Good. I'm glad you ain't jealous." He ran his fingers along the outside of his glass before scoffing out a laugh. "The fuck would make you jealous of me?" Those soft brown eyes hooded dangerously. "My stepfather beating on me from the time I was a fuckin' baby? Livin' on the streets? Eatin' out of the fuckin' trash? The years I spent in juvie?" He let out a harsh, humorless laugh before drawling out a hushed, "While you were safe at home with your mom and pops, I spent my entire life near death, bein' let down by every fucker who was meant to be protectin' me. Your life turned you into a prince. My life turned me into a fuckin' animal." He sipped at the Scotch, licking his lips. "You had your shit handed to you on a silver platter, my man, while I built an empire from scratch. Made millions. Earned respect from my peers. Was called a motherfuckin' king in these parts." His eyes narrowed on his brother. "Had little bitches like you too scared to say my goddamn name out loud." Twitch shook his head slowly. "You got nothin' on me. I don't know you. I don't wanna know you. But that woman—" He pointed at me harshly. "—is the most important thing in my life, and she wants to get to know you, so I'mma shut my fuckin' mouth right now and let this shit happen because it'll make her happy. And when she's happy, I'm happy."

My heart warmed.

Also... *oh, no.*

No one dared to speak.

So Twitch looked around the table before landing on his brother and smirking sharply. "Does my existence make you uncomfortable?"

Zep turned to his father. "Think I'mma head out."

Papa Tony looked positively heartbroken, and when his eyes scanned Twitch's hard face, he began softly, placating, "Tony—"

A loud thump sounded, making my body jolt, and when Twitch's balled fist came down on the table hard enough to shake the table, we all watched the wine glasses jolt then fall, followed by the shrill sound of glass shattering as one rolled off the edge of the table to the ground. And when Twitch spoke, I'd never heard such raw fury.

His expression manic, his eyes lowered, he spoke through gritted teeth, and my entire body broke out into goose bumps. "My name is *Twitch*." He kept his voice low. "Christened on the streets by my real family, *Pops*." He said Pops like it was a derogatory word.

Twitch turned to face Zep. "You don't want a brother?" His lips pursed as he nodded. "No issues here, man, but..."

All of a sudden, he got up and strode back into the house. We all looked around at each other, unsure of what was happening, but when Twitch returned to his seat, he held in his hands something that made my heart stutter.

He held the photo between his fingers and held it out to Zep. "But this little boy—" He paused to turn the photograph toward his own face and he looked down at our son fiercely. "—this beautiful little boy—" He turned the photo back to his brother. "—he's got your blood running through his veins, and he don't got much family. I know he'd love another uncle, a *real* uncle, and you'd fuckin' love him too because he's goddamn lovable. So, make a decision, man. In or out?" He shot him an unemotional glance. "I'll let you take your anger at your pops out on me because you don't mean shit to me, but I dare ya to try that shit on my kid." His eyes narrowed perilously, and his voice was just over a whisper. "I fuckin' dare ya." The cold stare extended to his father. "And *you*..."

Twitch stopped himself, shaking his head rapidly and letting out a harsh breath. He stood so quickly the chair he sat on flew backward with a bang that made my heart pound, and when he strode toward me, I sat up straighter, expectantly.

Looking thoroughly distressed, he took my head in his hands and put his face close to mine, his eyes imploring. "I thought I could do it, but I can't." The kiss he planted on my lips was bruising.

I watched him walk into the house and heard the front door slam behind him. His car started, and then he was gone.



# Chapter

## Thirty-Four

### Twitch

It was late when I drove back from Julius and Ana's. I shouldn't have been driving at all, but I wanted to get home to my girl. I hadn't seen my son all day, and I knew he'd be in bed, but I still needed to see him before I passed out, which I felt would be soon. So I drove slowly, as carefully as a drunken man could.

The moment I pulled into the driveway, the front door opened and Lexi stepped out of the house in her tiny silken robe, her face drawn, her mouth tight, looking apprehensive as fuck. And I felt like an asshole.

I stepped out of the car and approached slowly on unstable legs. Why I said what I did was anyone's guess, but I announced it magnificently. "I'm drunk."

"I know." She pressed into my side, sliding a shoulder under my arm, and I relaxed, putting my weight on her. "Julius called." She looked up at me, her eyes warm, but her tone was irritated. "You should have let him call you a cab."

"I know," I told her because she was right. How lucky a prick was I to have this woman who loved me and put that shit down unconditionally? She was everything that was good in this screwed up world, and she was mine. My lips pulled up at the sides as I squinted through heavy lids. "Do you even know how much I love you?"

"No." She walked me inside, and asked an amused, "How much do you love me?"

"A lot," I told her, and the sound of her soft chuckle made me want to give her everything she ever desired in life.

And I would.

I'd do that for her.

Do anything for her.

My baby.

"Where's the party?" I said a little too loudly when we got inside, and she put a finger to my lips, hushing me. I lowered my tone. "Everyone's

gone?”

“Manda and Vander are staying with Julius and Ana. They just left. But —” She side-eyed me cautiously. “—Zep and Papa Tony were going to check into a hotel, and...” she hesitated before going on, “I thought that was silly, seeing that you have a place across the street that’s going unused, so I told them they could stay there.” Her eyes searched my face carefully. “The refused repeatedly, but I insisted, and eventually they gave in.”

My stomach lurched, but I stood tall before leaning in and putting my face close to hers. “You are a good woman.”

She smiled then, and I knew I’d take on the entire fuckin’ world to keep my queen content.

Stumbling, I moved down the hall toward A.J.’s room, and Lexi followed closely behind as I walked in as quietly as I could, kneeling by his bed and putting a gentle hand to his head. I felt a wave of relief wash over me as I watched his chest move up and down as he breathed easily in his sleep.

I stood, walking by my beautiful, blue-eyed angel. She said, “C’mon. Let’s go to bed.”

But my fuckin’ feet weren’t working well. On top of that, my head was spinning. I made it as far as the sofa before I lowered myself, putting my hands to the floor then sitting back against the couch. And Lexi watched me a moment before coming to sit behind me, her legs at either side of my head. I rubbed my stubbly cheek against her knee and watched in captivation as goose bumps lined her skin.

“I’m tryin’ to be a good dad,” I told the darkened room.

“I know you are,” she replied softly, running a soft hand through my hair.

“I love him so much it scares me.”

She let out a light laugh. “I know the feeling.”

As she ran a hand down my cheek, I muttered, “I just want him to look at me and not see the piece of shit I am.” Tilting my head back to look at her, I asked quietly, “How do I do that?”

Lexi was my world, but that little boy, *my* boy... he was my entire universe. The thought of someone trying to keep me from him was unconscionable. I would do anything to be near him. Nobody could keep me away.

I'd fuckin' like to see somebody try.

The small hand at my cheek stilled, and when it came under my chin, holding me in place, her face bent over mine, and she stated firmly, "You are not a piece of shit." When I only blinked at her, she leaned in, putting her nose to mine. "Do you understand me?"

I was though. Lex just couldn't see it. She only ever saw what she wanted to see of me, and that made me a lucky bastard because she only ever tried to see the best in me.

Instead of speaking, I lifted my face, and when our lips touched, I kissed her backward and she breathed life back into my cold, unfeeling body.

She was my bible. The pages. The ink. The prayers. And I would revere her till the day I died, took my place, and waited for her on the other side. I wasn't a holy man, but I believed that shit in my fuckin' soul.

Nothing could part us. Not even death. Death could try, but I'd beaten it before and I'd do it again if need be.

Anything to stay with my woman.

But something was bothering me, and when I moved to stand, my woman helped me without judgment. And when I was on my feet again, I shuffled toward the front door. Immediately, Lexi put her hand to it, stopping me from exiting. "Where do you think you're going?" She added sternly, "We're going to bed."

"Look," I told her, blinking slowly, "I gotta have a word with the sperm donor."

"Not tonight you're not." Her brows furrowed and her lips parted before she put a hand to her hip, looking bossy, and domineering, and sexy as hell. "You're drunk."

I needed her to understand. "I need to say what I have to say now because tomorrow..." I felt stupid saying what I said. "I'm not gonna have the guts to say what I need to say, baby."

My sheer honesty struck a chord. Even in my fucked up state, I could see that.

She watched me carefully a long time before sighing. "You're not going to start another fight, are you?"

"I don't plan to," I uttered honestly, but I didn't know what would happen when I got there.

Her eyes closed and she took her hand off the door, and I loved her for knowing I needed to do this. I turned the knob and headed out on rocky legs. When I made it to my house, I knocked on the door, and when it opened, Zep stood there. The asshole didn't open up for me, so I pushed my way in.

*This is my fuckin' house, bitch.*

"Where's the old man?" I asked, looking around my space.

"He's in bed," Zep uttered tightly. "He's not well."

"I need to talk to him."

Just as Zep shook his head, my bedroom door opened and out stepped my father in his pajamas.

He looked old then. Really old.

Fragile, frail, completely breakable. And right then, I wanted to break him.

The second I saw my sire, I forgot my promise to Lexi and started my unexpected rant. "What kind of man holds his child—" I held up my hands. "—in his fuckin' arms—" I dropped them by my sides. "—and never sees him again?" I looked him in the eye, not at all hiding my anger. "Who does that?"

Neither man responded, but my father appeared distraught.

A long moment passed before the man who sired me said, "You think it was easy?"

I didn't give a fuck.

"Yeah, I think it was easy." I swept an arm out to Zep. "You had a son. You didn't need another. Was that it?" The way he looked at me was doing something funky to my insides. My breathing got heavy. "What was wrong with me, huh?"

The thought of somebody trying to keep me from my son made my physically ill. Made me want to hurt somebody. Made me want to knock heads.

How could this fucker do what he did without looking back?

For the life of me, I couldn't understand it.

I was a father.

I was drunk.

And, fuck me, I was emotional.

My throat tight, my voice cracked as I fought the words out. “Why didn’t you want me, man?”

The sperm donor walked farther into the room. “Giving you up was the hardest thing I have ever done.” His brows creased. “I thought I was doing the right thing. Letting you grow up in a world of zero expectations, especially those that came with our name. I wanted better for you.” He shrugged weakly. “So I let you go.”

I blinked rapidly then swiped harshly at the wetness leaking onto my cheek. “Yeah. Fat load of good it did me.”

The old man’s expression turned grave. “I can see that. And I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry?” I let out a sharp laugh before looking to my brother, pointing at the old man. “He’s sorry. That’s nice.” I nodded slowly, facing my father. “I don’t know what you thought would happen when you got here. Maybe you thought I’d be over the moon to see you, that I still needed a father. I don’t know. But let me tell you something, old man. You did one good thing.” I paused a second. “You taught me exactly what it is I don’t wanna be as a father. So...” I took a step backward. “Thanks.”

I walked out the door to find Lexi standing on the street corner shivering but waiting. And my heart grew a size.

No. I didn’t deserve her, but that didn’t mean I was ever going to give her up.

When I made it across, I wrapped a heavy arm around her and rubbed her frigid skin, frowning. “You’re freezing.”

Her teeth chattered when she gazed up at me, her eyes full of concern, and she asked, “Are you okay?”

No. “Yeah.”

I wasn’t.

But I would be.

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## Lexi

He was in a mood, and I didn’t blame him.

This morning had been tense, to say the least, especially when A.J. decided to tell his dad how great his Uncle Zep and Nonno Tony are, about

the gifts they bought him, showing Twitch the gold chain and crucifix he was given, how they told him all about his family back in America and Italy. Our son, not even remotely sensing the stress in his father because his excitement was on overload, went on, and on, and on about the two men across the street, while Twitch sipped his coffee in complete silence.

And past experience had taught me that a silent Twitch was a dangerous Twitch.

He got inside his head. He overanalyzed. He drove himself mad. I knew this from our time spent together so long ago. So I did what I felt I needed to do to snap him out of it.

The house was empty and silent apart from the running shower, and when I moved inside the steaming bathroom, I sat on the closed toilet lid. My heated gaze roamed his body through the frosted glass, and reaching up, I put my fingers to the button and pushed.

“Ah, *fuck!*” came from inside the shower as the water heated then ran cold when the toilet flushed.

The frosted door swung open, and the gloriously naked man set a glower on me that was so vicious my entire body blazed, my pussy clenching in eagerness.

“What the fuck, Lexi?” he growled, and when I lifted my fingers slowly to the button, his glare intensified and his jaw set. “Don’t do it.” The moment my fingers touched the button, his hand came up and he pointed at me. “You do it, you’ll pay, baby. Mark me.”

*I know.*

A shudder visibly escaped me, and I bit my lip, watching as Twitch’s eyes flashed.

I grinned internally.

He’d caught on.

Looking him deep in the eyes, I hit the button, the flush sounded, and just as he let out a harsh snarl, I jumped up and ran out of the bathroom as fast as I could. The shower was turned off, and I heard the frosted door slam, but my legs weren’t as long as his and he caught up to me in the hallway. The second he grabbed the back of my tank with a harsh hand, he yanked me backward and I slammed into his body with a gasp.

He was completely wet, completely hard, and panting harshly.

“Bitch,” he muttered fondly into my ear, and I smirked only momentarily before I forced it down again.

My nipples tightened as his hand came up to my chin and held it firmly, as I let out a hushed, “Please don’t make me do this. My husband will be home soon.”

The words were hesitant.

But oh, God, was he into it.

Twitch forced his hard cock into my hip so hard it hurt. “You think I give a fuck? I hope he does come home. Hope he sees you like this, hot for me.” He spun me around to look into his hooded gaze. “You started this; now you’re gonna finish it.” Putting his hands to my shoulders, he pushed roughly, and I landed at his feet in a heap, feigning concern. And he smirked cruelly as my gaze landed on his angry-looking erection. “Never had a cock this big, have you?”

I shook my head, my entire body breaking out in goose bumps.

Reaching down, he put his hand to my cheek, caressing it gently. “It’s gonna hurt when I finally take you, and you’re gonna love it because I love it.” His voice turned rough as he gripped my chin hard. “Aren’t you?”

Eyes wide in insincere fright, I nodded slowly as well as I could around his forceful grasp, swallowing hard.

“You run,” he warned smoothly, “I chase.” He looked down at me, his gaze thunderous. “And when I catch you, baby—” He sucked in air through his teeth, kneeling in the nude and running a hand over the leg of my yoga pants. “—I’ll fuck you so hard you’ll taste me in your mouth for years.” One large hand slid up to the waistband of my pants and slid inside roughly. “Now,” he spoke through gritted teeth, “let me feel how much this tight cunt wants me.”

I tried to close my legs, but he threw them open again with a grunt, and as a harsh pant escaped me, his rough fingers made contact with my panties. He kept his darkened gaze on me when he slipped his hand under the flimsy satin, and as his fingertips met my wet pussy, he released a rough breath at the very same moment my head fell back and a low whine was forced from my lips.

With deft fingers, he rubbed my slick entrance, and with the other hand, he slow jerked his cock in a way that made me want to beg for a taste of him.

“You want this?” I know what he wanted and shook my head as he laughed cruelly. “You say one thing—” When he pushed a finger inside my slick heat, my mouth rounded and my eyes closed as he slowly, steadily finger fucked me. “—but your pussy is sucking me in so nicely, kissing my finger so sweetly that I know you’re lying.” He pushed his finger in me all the way and held it there as my insides shook. “You sure you don’t want this?” My mouth gaping, I shook my head deliberately, watching him watch me. And he leaned in, putting his nose to mine, as he muttered, “What do you want, little sparrow?”

“I want...” It was hard to find my voice, but I did, and what I said shocked the both of us. The words came out shaky. “I want you to choke me and tell me I’m a good girl.”

His eyes flashed.

Mine widened.

And when he moved, he did it so fast everything blurred.

The thick digit inside me slipped out, my yoga pants were ripped down my legs along with my soaked panties, and just when I thought he’d drag me to the bedroom, he sat up on his knees and reached up to grip my throat harshly, forcing me back into the wall. I panted around his severe hold, reaching up to grip his forearm with both my hands.

It felt so wrong, so unnatural to want this.

He was too coarse. Too brutal.

It made no sense for my pussy to be weeping the way it was.

Yet, here we were.

With one hand at my throat, he snaked his free arm around my waist and held me in place as he shuffled forward, trapping me between his body and the wall. Draping my legs over his knees, he put his forehead to mine, unforgivingly close, and rubbed my pussy firmly. “This what you want, baby?”

He was out of character.

“Yes,” I breathed out shakily.

Twitch’s face softened a moment. “You sure?”

He was giving me an out before this turned violent. But I wanted to give him this gift, because I loved him and... “I trust you.”

Looking pained, his eyes closed and he held them shut tightly, knowing this was costing me my comfort, but being consciously unable to let me go.



Would he test my limits?

Yes. He always did.

Did I trust him to stop if need be?

No, he wouldn't stop. But he would slow it down for me if I failed to keep up. And that's all I needed.

Small reassurances. Not grand gestures.

I watched in fascination as he took in a deep breath, stretched his neck out, and then opened his eyes to lay his dark glare on me. He leaned in and put his lips to the shell of my ear, and when he rumbled out what he did, I knew it was on. "Daddy's gonna fuck you now, baby."

My core squeezed, and when he tightened his grasp on me, I felt my heart beat steadily against his palm, and my body was his to do with what he pleased.

Today, I was his toy. His plaything. A tight hole and nothing more. And he would use me because he wanted to, not because I had given my permission. Because he was hurting and needed an outlet.

I gave myself up as tribute to his pain.

My mouth opened in a silent moan as he placed the tip of him at my needy slit.

"Shut your mouth," he growled, and I did, my eyes on him, breathing heavily through my nose.

As the tip of him kissed me softly, he held my neck callously in one hand while the other came down to haul up my tank top. He peered down at my black, strappy harness bra, looking at me attentively, before running rough fingers over the swell of my breasts. "Don't be shy, angel." His brows furrowed at the softness of my skin then he licked his lips. "If I bite... yeah, it'll hurt." He yanked down my bra harshly then smirked unkindly at the way my breath hitched. "But I promise you'll like it."

He applied the smallest amount of pressure, and as the head of him slipped into me, my eyes fluttered closed, a soft breath leaving me lightly. Little by little, he slid deeper and deeper, dangerously slow. And when I was halfway impaled, his brow knitted, he gritted his teeth, and with a solid thrust, a loud gasp was pulled from me as he drove into my pussy, balls deep.

Feeling full and desperate, my lips started to move, and then I was begging on a rushed whisper, "Oh, please. I want it so bad. *Please*, baby."

Give it to me.”

The way his eyes hooded... oh, fuck. He was a vision, my dark seraph.

He brought his face to mine, nose-to-nose, as he kept his eyes on me. His responding whisper was so hot it should have been illegal. “This pussy is a part of you, angel, but you and I, we both know the truth.” His minty breath warmed as he bit my bottom lip hard enough to pulse. A keening moan was forced from me as he laved the sting with his tongue. “It’s between your legs—” He nipped me again, softer this time. “—but it belongs to me.”

This was what I affectionately called beast mode.

His words had me reeling.

I guess we all loved a gentleman but secretly craved a savage.

When he tilted his hips back and thrust upward, my entire body shook. He did this steadily, over and over, his tight grip on my neck, my pussy dripping. My bare back against the wall, my nipples peaked at the combination of hot at my front, cold at my back, and when my sex clenched around him, I felt his cock jerk in response.

A sudden urgency ran through the both of us.

Twitch’s face screwed up heatedly, and when his free hand came up to join the other at my neck, I could feel he was close. Clutching both of his hands tightly, I felt my air supply being cut off, and when my eyes widened on him, his expression remained unchanging as he pumped into me.

My arms felt heavy as I failed to take in a full breath, and when I was too weak to hold on any longer, they fell to my sides as he fucked me senseless. As he fucked the very life out of me.

Existence was strange that way, and I felt it was poetic justice to be killed by a man I’d only moments ago told I trusted with my life.

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## Twitch

I was surrounded by things I loved.

Her body, my favorite art piece.

Her moan, my favorite song.

Her breath stolen, she continued to put her trust in me.

I wore her love like a tattoo.  
She revived my scorched soul with a single kiss.  
I loved this woman.  
I loved her to death.

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## Lexi

Eyes open but bleak, I lost consciousness.  
Moments later, I was revived with a sharp gasp as he released me.  
And the orgasm that hit me came out of nowhere.  
His arms came around me, holding me up as I took in the air I so desperately needed. My heart raced erratically, and complete and utter bliss filled me, flowing through my body in waves. Tipping my head back, I opened my mouth and screamed as I clenched fitfully around his cock. Not a second after, he pushed as deeply inside me as he could, and I heard his rough grunt around my harsh wheezes.

Twitch held me close, my head falling to his shoulder, and I continued to gasp, taking in as much air as I possibly could. My forehead had misted with perspiration—from exertion or fear, I didn't know.

His softening cock slipped out of me as my legs continued to shake, and when he placed his face into the crook of my neck, breathing me in, I came to realize that I would give anything to keep him sane.

Even my own life.

“Angel,” was what he panted into my neck, kissing the hot but soft skin there. The skin he'd held too tightly for entirely too long.

What he meant was, “I'm sorry.” But there was no need for apology. I thought it cruel to have someone apologize for being nothing more than he was.

A natural born hunter. A conditioned killer.

That was like asking a lion to apologize for being a predator and trying to convert it to veganism.

Unfounded.

Feeling his release dripping out of my still clenching core and onto the hallway floor, I gripped the back of his head with both hands, holding him

close. Breathing heavily, my voice croaked, “I wanted it. Besides...” I moved my lips to his damp hair, and whispered, “You needed it.”

The way his hold tightened on me, leaving me breathless, told me I’d been right.

And for as long as I lived, I would give everything in my power to make this complex man’s life a little less complicated.

# Chapter

## Thirty-Five

Lexi

It was after midnight when I heard the car start. My eyes shot open with a start and I listened fixedly. The front door closed behind him and I shot up out of bed, running to the window, watching in complete disbelief as he made to leave.

My heart squeezed so hard my breath left me with a whoosh.

As he loaded a duffle into the passenger seat, my eyes widened and I took in a shaky breath before whispering on an exhale, “Oh my God, you asshole.”

He was leaving. Running in the night like a goddamn coward.

My chest began to ache painfully.

*Motherfucker!*

In that single moment, anger like I had never felt before settled over me. In that moment, I was a child born of rage and bedlam. Fury be thy name, and as I rushed out the door, my ferocity ignited from a singular spark to a raging inferno and it burned so hard it scorched my veins.

If he thought he was leaving me, leaving *us* a second time, he had another think coming.

“No,” I called the second I crossed the threshold. That call was upgraded to a shout when he turned and stilled, an expression of impatience crossing his features. “No!” And once I passed the front porch, I didn’t stop, charging him in nothing but my slinky, cream-colored nightie. My heart began to race as I lifted my hands, put them to his shoulders, and pushed as hard as I could. “No!”

My shove barely moved him.

How infuriating.

“Go back inside,” he uttered passively, and my anger went supernova.

I spoke. I spoke even though my voice shook. “You don’t get to do this.” When he turned his face away, I lifted my trembling hand and brought it to his cheek, forcing him to look at me. “You don’t get to do this to us *again.*”

He licked his lips, blinking down at me unemotionally. "Go back inside, Lexi."

"No." I stood my ground, but my bravado slipped. "Not without you."

Twitch took in a deep breath. "I gotta get outta here a while, okay?"

"No." My veins lit with pure scorching lava. I shook my head and ground out excruciatingly, "Not okay."

I hated that I cried when I got angry because he thought I was genuinely sad, when in reality I was trying my hardest not to fucking kill him myself.

My eyes blurred with unshed tears. "Is this what you do now? You just pack up and leave when shit gets hard?" My breathing turned heavy as I let my anger be known. "I'm so glad you feel you have the *choice*, you fuckhead," I panted then wept. "I don't have that luxury, to escape when I feel like I'm fucking sinking inside, which is a lot, by the way. Because I'm a *mother*." I pointed toward the house as my tears left a burning trail on my cheeks. "And there's a little boy in that house who depends on me."

When he lowered his face, the sadness crept in, outweighing the anger. My grief was real, and while I had already gone and experienced the first three stages, the forth step came hard and fast. And then I was bargaining.

"Please don't do this." My shoulders shook as I cried openly. He opened his mouth to speak, but I lifted a hand, cutting him off. "I don't care what you do to *me*, but don't do this to him." It was hard to breathe and my voice turned weak. "I barely survived it, Tony." My lips quavered, as I whispered agonizingly, "This will kill him."

As we stared at each other a long while, Twitch unzipped his hoodie and stepped forward, cloaking me in his warmth and his smell, pulling the hood up over my head while looking completely calm, and I hated him then.

How could he appear so tranquil as I felt my world was falling apart?

So when he stepped forward and cupped my cheeks, I fought him.

"No." I lifted my hands and slapped at his chest. He leaned in again, and a pained grunt escaped me as my hand connected with his chin. "Don't touch me!" A strong arm circled my waist and held me fast, and I lifted my arms, hitting him again and again as I wept openly. "Don't touch me, you piece of shit!"

"Baby, stop," he cooed, avoiding as much of my assault as he could.

Balling my hands into fists, I punched his shoulders, but my blows were abating as my heart weakened, as my soul desperately tried to understand

why this was happening all over again.

The answer was a hard pill to swallow.

It was happening, because I let it.

“Let go of me.” I struggled in his hold, and when he didn’t release me, I screamed, “Let go of me!”

And just like that, Twitch had turned me into another angry housewife yelling in the street.

He let go then, and as much as I begged for it, I wanted to rush back into his arms if it meant keeping him with me a while longer.

Yes. I was truly pathetic.

And when I shook my head and turned my back on him, heading back toward the house, wondering how in the hell I would explain this to my son, he caught my wrist. I yanked it free with little to no effort and turned my deathly glare on him. “You want to go?” I swept my arm out. “Go.” My expression severe, I warned, “But I swear to you, Antonio Falco, if you leave today, you leave for good. Do you hear me?”

Yeah, I said it. But I didn’t mean it.

I spun on my heel because I didn’t want him to see me cry again. He stopped me with, “I left a note.” My feet failed me and I stalled. “It’s just a couple days.” My throat constricted painfully. With my back to him and my feet chilled, he spoke quietly. “I’m coming back.”

My breath left me with a whoosh and my shoulders slumped. I didn’t dare face him.

He went on, “Just a few days. That’s all.” And when I heard him approach, my entire body turned rigid. “I’m coming back, angel.”

Why should I believe him?

Last time I believed him, I ended up burying him.

“I’m not leavin’ you. Not the way you think.” I loathed that I heard sincerity in his voice. “I told you, baby.” What he said next had a fresh stream of tears falling. “Always find my way back to you.”

I hugged myself then, trying in vain to talk through my tears. “Where are you going?”

He didn’t hesitate. “Spent six years without you, angel. Spent those years alone and miserable. Now I got you, got my boy, and I’m fuckin’ happy. I’m not takin’ any risks.” My back warmed as I felt him stand right behind me. “Gonna find someone who makes sure we get at least six more

together.” When his hands came down on my shoulders, he uttered, “I’m tired of waiting. I can’t live like this, knowing she’s out there planning whatever the fuck she’s planning. Livin’ with this dread in the pit of my stomach.” He inhaled deeply, followed by an exhale. “It’s messin’ with me, baby.”

Ling.

This was about Ling.

At my silence, he went on, “You know me, Lex. You think I’mma wait for the bitch to attack first? Fuck that shit.” The hands at my shoulders squeezed as he made a negative sound in his throat. “It ain’t my style.”

My feet were freezing, and when I turned, I did it slowly. My damp eyes met his, and I asked quietly, “Why do you think she’s planning something?”

Brutal honesty. “Because I would be.” And the certainty in his voice made my heart stutter.

My eyes turned as desolate as my tone. “You’re not leaving?”

He shook his head slowly and his eyes spoke to mine, holding a certainty in them. And at that moment, confidence surged through me. One I had no right to feel, not with our history. It filled me with hope.

I held my breath.

Past experience told me to fear this man and what he could do to me, but my heart objected so profoundly that it wouldn’t be silenced. I took the objection and kissed it soundly, holding it close, nurturing it to grow.

When he glanced down at his watch, he uttered the words I feared hearing. “I gotta go.” At my unsure expression, he stepped closer, taking his hands and placing them gently on my waist. “I’m coming back,” he uttered earnestly. The hands at my waist squeezed. “And when I do, we’re getting married.” His soft brown eyes searched my strained face, before he ordered gently, “Kiss me before I go.”

Soft promises made with a forked tongue.

No. I shouldn’t have believed him.

Then why did I?

Because it was better than the alternative.

My heart cracked, fissures appearing all over the fragile glass it was made of, and when he looked me deep in the eye and commanded, “Kiss me,” my feet moved without permission.



He lowered his face at the very same moment I stood on my tiptoes, and when our lips touched, so much was said without ever being spoken. My arms wrapped around his neck and I was not letting go. Not yet.

His tender kiss said, *"I won't let you down,"* while my desperate lips begged, *"Come back to me."*

And when he backed away, carefully pulling my arms off of him, I watched him approach the car and I panicked. "Don't get lost, okay?"

He snuffled out a soft laugh before looking at me. *Really* looking at me. "Don't you know, angel?" The intensity of that look gave me chills. "No matter which map I take, they all lead back to you."

Jesus Christ.

I was in love with a silver-tongued snake.

My breath hitched as I delayed his departure. "Love me forever?"

He opened the car door and paused. And then he smiled, the beautifully crooked smile that haunted my dreams to this very day. "Till the end of time." Before he slid into the drivers seat, he muttered, "Wait for me, baby."

But I didn't respond because it didn't need to be said.

And as I watched the car reverse out of my driveway, I came to the sickening realization that I would wait.

I would wait a million years.

My eyes fluttered open sometime before dawn. I reached out, knowing he wouldn't be there.

Fingers blindly searching the empty side of the bed, I closed my eyes and curled in on myself as my heart ached tenderly, hugging his hoodie to me in the early hours of a lonely morning. I breathed in his heady scent and, eventually, slow as the sun rose, I fell back asleep.

"Where's Daddy?"

*I don't know and it's killing me.*

Smiling down at the little monster with a light that didn't reach my eyes, I uttered, "He had to go away for work."

Molly glanced at me from the table, frowning, and we exchanged a solemn look.

My son peered between us, before asking carefully, "When is he coming back?"

His hesitance slayed me.

I sat beside him and ran a gentle hand through his hair. “I’m not sure, baby.”

A couple days, he said. The note he left said a week. For all I knew, it would be months. Years, even.

Who knew?

My attitude grew more pessimistic by the second, and before I did something really dumb, like burst into tears for the fourth time this morning, I peered down at my little man, and said, “How about we put on a nice dinner tonight? I can call Ana and Julius.”

The little monster’s eyes lit up. “And Uncle Happy and Nikki and Dave?” When I nodded, he went on, “And Aunt Manda?”

A short laugh escaped me. “Yep. Uncle Zep and Nonno Tony too. Everyone.”

“Yes,” he offered immediately, grinning hard. And I was glad for it. God knew I needed the distraction.

Twitch was noticeably absent during dinner, but only my wonderful, pushy Dave had the guts to ask the question everyone was thinking.

“Where’s Señor Gets-Mad-A-Lot?”

It was after dark. A.J. was in bed after overdosing on chocolate ice cream and passing out on Ana’s lap. Molly was in her room talking to Tama on the phone, which left me able to speak freely. “I don’t know.”

The entire table went silent, and I forced out a laugh before looking around. “Anyone have any idea where he went?” I settled my gaze on Happy. “With a duffle bag.” Then to Julius. “In the middle of the night?” My eyes turned to Papa Tony. “Anyone?” When I turned to face Zep, my voice hushed. “Because I’m going quietly crazy here with every hour that passes. I mean—” My desperate eyes found Nikki’s. “—I don’t even know if he is coming back.”

Nobody responded, and that in itself spoke volumes.

“Don’t be silly,” Nikki started surely, breaking the silence. “He wouldn’t do that.” Her tone lowered a decibel. “Not again.” But her confidence fell as she looked to Happy and found him peering at Julius, an unspoken question in his eyes. “Would he?”

Dave jeered, “Yes, he would.” He held his hands up in surrender and it was directed at me. “I’m sorry, babe, but....” At my pale and drawn face, he drifted off, knowing I wasn’t in the mood for his sass.

I held my empty wine glass out to Manda, and she filled it without hesitating. I twisted to face her. "He didn't talk to you?"

I was desperate here. Completely frantic.

"No, sorry," uttered Manda apologetically, putting a hand to my arm in consolation. She then nudged her husband.

Vander shrugged. "Didn't say shite to me, darlin'."

My head fell back and my face bunched in despair. "Jesus." Putting a hand to my forehead, I smacked it, fighting tears, and spoke through gritted teeth. "Where is he?"

"Cuba."

Dropping my hand, my eyes settled on Zep. "What?"

He cleared his throat. "He's in Cuba." When my lips parted and my brow knitted in query, he added, "Looking for someone."

"How do you know this?" *No offense, but*, "Why would he tell you?"

But Zep kept quiet, torturing me with that intense stare of his.

My heart began to race. "Is he okay?"

Zep nodded slowly.

I swallowed past the lump in my throat. "You've spoken to him?"

An affirmative nod was all I got. Thankfully, it was all I needed, and when my body slumped and I could finally breathe again, Zep uttered, "Just trust him, okay?"

Trust him.

I was trying here. I really was.

I thought about it a long moment before taking in a deep breath, and letting out a breathy, "Yeah. Okay."

And when I downed my entire glass of wine in one hit, nobody acted surprised.

My eyes scanned the empty driveway, wearily.

It had been three nights since Twitch had left, and although I checked my phone every few minutes, there were no calls. No text messages. Zero notifications.

My phone came up as empty as I felt.

But as exhausted as I was, I looked down at the ring on my left hand, and something inside me held onto the sliver of hope that was vying for attention.

*He's coming back. I know he is.*

My heartbeat faltered.

*He has to.*

Walking back to my bedroom, I climbed into bed and did as I did every night.

I left a light on.

# Chapter

## Thirty-Six

Ling

*What are you doing here, Ling Ling?*

I don't fucking know.

No matter how hard I thought about it, I couldn't work out what chain of events lead to me being here today, but here I was, and I couldn't leave. Not until I saw her.

Standing in the dim coolness of the crisp April evening, I lay in wait. Watching. Waiting for a glimpse. And when she finally came into view, my brow lowered in incredulity.

"Well, fuck," I uttered quietly.

*Seriously?*

Okay. So, Asya Sadik wasn't what I expected.

I rolled my eyes in the dark, sighing in frustration.

Of course. She just had to be in a wheelchair, didn't she? Because why not?

My lip curled.

*Great. Just fucking great.*

Sure, I was a monster, but even I couldn't kill a helpless woman in a wheelchair.

No.

I couldn't do this.

But as I moved from my shadowy hiding spot and turned to leave, the back door opened, and she stalled me with, "You just gonna stand there all night, or you coming in?"

Turning slowly, I narrowed my eyes on the willowy woman. A slow smile pulled at my lips and I looked her up and down.

She was nothing. She was *vapor*.

I was beautiful.

She was... sick.

I was a deadly fucking viper.

She was a deflated balloon.

My reign was real, and the terror surrounding me had grown men falling to their knees.

I glanced down at her blanket-covered lap.

She couldn't even fall to her knees if I pushed her.

Disgust ran through me.

She was pitiful.

So why the hell did he love *her* enough to leave *me*?

My cherry-red lips split into a grin as I tilted my head, and muttered, "Aren't you afraid I'm going to kill you?"

Her returning smirk had me marginally impressed. "Bold of you to assume I want to live."

My brows arched, my lips pursing at the odd amount of confidence that flowed around the clearly ill woman.

*Touché, bitch.*

"Come in." She wheeled herself backward into the house before turning her back on me. My, oh my. She was a daring little cunt. "I want to talk to you."

A short moment passed before I took in a deep breath and followed her inside, closing the door behind me with my leather-gloved hands. She watched me closely as I approached. Just so we were clear on my position, I held my magnificent rose-gold .45 Glock in my hand, and when the little woman's eyes narrowed on it, she asked, "Did my husband give you that gun?"

A slow grin stretched my lips.

*Yes, he sure as shit did.*

When I didn't make to respond, she held my gaze, jerking her chin toward the pistol. "That's my gun." Her lips pulled into a thin smile as she shook her head and let out a humorless laugh. "He gave you *my* gun." When her face fell, I felt that shit hard. Even more so when she murmured, "Fuck me, Az. You bastard."

My heart clenched so hard it skipped a beat.

I blinked down at the beloved gift, my smile fading to black, and heard her say, "He must have really loved you."

Yeah.

I thought so too.

*Az, you fucking asshole.*

Placing the tainted present on the counter, I sat on the stool and threw her an expression of pure frustration. “You’d think so, yet—” My tone was bleak. “—he came home to you every single night, even when I’d beg him to stay.” My shoulders jerked. “He was cruel. He shouldn’t have let me love him like that.” My throat thickened with emotion. “And I did. I loved him so much.”

“To death, it would seem,” she responded quietly.

I would never admit it, but I could see why Az loved his wife. Asya Sadik had a confidence to her that would have made her a great leader. Maybe, in a different world, under different circumstances, we would have liked each other.

... *Nah.*

When my stoic gaze met hers, she rolled her eyes. “I know; you weren’t *there*. You had nothing to do with his death. Ling is innocent, your brother insisted. How dare we ask how the fuck our cherished Az ended up dumped in the harbor? Because, Allah knows, it couldn’t have been The Dragon Queen. She isn’t *that* crazy.” Her sarcasm game was strong. “I know what Van said. We both know he’s only doing his duty. Can’t say I would have done the same, but I can respect family values.” She dipped her chin, avoiding my gaze. “We both know it was you.”

It was strange. She meant nothing to me, but it seemed we were kindred spirits, imprisoned by our own darkness, our very own form of hell.

We were both hurting.

“I didn’t mean to.” The words that left me were haunted. “It was an accident.”

She considered this. “Accident or not,” Asya uttered, “he’s gone, and I need you to do something for me.” When I narrowed my eyes at her, she didn’t flinch. Her tone was stark. “Call it compensation.”

I didn’t owe her shit. But I found myself asking, “What do you want?”

Zero reluctance. “I want you to kill me.”

My stare was hard, and my eyes held hers a long minute before a bark of a laugh shot out of me. But her expression remained unchanging. I shook my head and muttered, “No.”

Asya Sadik’s cheek ticked as she wheeled herself forward, and spoke through gritted teeth, “I don’t think you understand me, Ling Nguyen.” Her tone held no room for negotiation. “You killed my husband. You left me

alone in this world without the man I love. And you're going to kill me, you heartless bitch." She breathed heavily through her nose and her voice trembled. "It's the very least you could do."

"I didn't come here for that," I told her, even though I had, but things had changed now that I'd spoken to her. And call me cruel, but knowing I wasn't alone in my sorrow was holding the broken pieces of me together.

If I was going down the road of suffering in silence, I preferred not to do it alone.

She was coming with me.

Asya's face screwed up, and she spat, "I'm dying." Her face crumpled. "Do you understand that?" Her desperation was clear. "I am a burden to my family, Ling. Every single day, they come and go, and leave me without my fucking dignity." Her eyes shone, as she bit out, "I won't do it to them. I can't. Not anymore." Straightening, she sniffled then sat tall, steeling her voice. "So, you're going to kill me. And you're going to do it now." She took a deep breath, speaking through an exhale. "I'm ready."

Goddamn it.

Sigh of all sighs.

I actually felt for the bitch. But I wouldn't kill her.

I made the short walk over and looked down at her pitiful self in her pitiful wheelchair with her pitiful illness, and spoke firmly, "I am not going to kill you, Asya Sadik."

Her face fell once again, but before she had a chance to argue, I put her pistol into her lap, gently took her hand, and covered it with my own, placing it over the rose-gold beauty.

Why I became so emotional, I didn't know. This woman meant nothing to me. We weren't friends. We weren't family. She was nobody. And yet I felt her pain on a personal level.

Our agony was our connection. A solid link between us. Had I been her, I would've wanted to die too.

Fuck. I wanted to die regardless.

I swallowed past the lump in my throat, and whispered, "Say hi to Az for me."

Without a moment's hesitation, I turned and walked out the back door, closing it behind me with gloved hands. I don't know how far I got before the shot rang out, but the loneliness I felt was heavy on my shoulders.



Once again, alone in my misery.

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## Lexi

It was just before eleven when a knock at the door sounded, and when Molly rushed out of her room, a gun in each of her hands, a solid glare on her face, she turned to me, and said sternly, “Get back.”

So strange to be taking orders from the babysitter, especially one who was half my age. But I did as she asked.

Another knock sounded, and then, “Lexi.”

The second I heard him, I shot out of my room, and Molly looked pissed when she threw open the door, and snapped, “What, you don’t know how to call?”

Julius stood there, his jaw tight, his eyes on me. “Grab your shit.”

Molly’s tone turned rattled. “What’s happening?”

Julius turned to her. “Asya Sadik killed herself.”

“Okay,” Molly drawled. The way she said it told me she didn’t understand.

Neither did I.

“Luka called,” he told me. “Said security footage shows Ling on the premises. Ten seconds after the bitch leaves, Asya offs herself.” Speaking directly to Molly, he uttered, “A few seconds after Luka calls, Amoho tells me he lost sight of her. We don’t know where she is.” His eyes found mine in the darkness. “I’m not sayin’ she is, but I can’t guarantee she’s not on her way here, Lex, so I need you to come with me.”

My hand shot up to my throat, as I uttered weakly, “To where?”

“Somewhere you can’t be touched,” was all he said. “Ana’s overwrought. I can’t watch you both.”

And because I was scared out of my wits, I allowed Julius to pick my sleeping son up out of his bed, and when Julius led, like the obedient pet I was, I blindly followed.

As we pulled up to the mansion on Sydney’s north shore, Warriewood to be precise, my mouth gaped. It wasn’t Darling Point, but it was still freaking huge.

Holding my sleeping son in my lap, my lips moved of their own volition. “Who lives here?”

But Julius didn’t reply. He was too on edge. Too focused. Which, of course, terrified me. And when we pulled up to the tall security gates, Julius wound down his window and pressed the button on the intercom.

From the other end came, “*Molim?*”

Julius spoke calmly. “Open the gates, Pav. You know it’s me.”

The gates opened and Julius drove down the long cobblestone drive in complete silence.

*Pav.*

Ah, shit.

We were in the king’s castle, and I wasn’t too sure Twitch would be happy about that. “Does Twitch know about this?”

Julius snapped harshly, “*Twitch ain’t here.*”

My entire body jerked at the roughness in his tone. It was so unlike him my eyes widened in shock and I blinked in alarm.

Holy hell.

This may not be the precaution I assumed it was. And when Pav stepped out of his house looking grim in his sweats, I waited until Julius opened the door for me before I slid out with my son.

Luka Pavlovic approached slowly, carefully, and spoke just as cautiously. “I know we got off on the wrong foot, but I want to assure you that you’ll be safe here.” He glanced down at my sleeping monster in my arms, and when he lifted his hand to gently stroke my son’s head, I let him. “Both of you.”

“Thank you.” I didn’t know what else to say, so I said nothing.

“Come inside,” he spoke quietly so as not to wake A.J. “I’ll show you to your room.”

When I twisted back to Molly, she stayed by Julius, and I uttered, “Let’s go.”

But Molly lowered her face, sounding momentarily ashamed of herself. “I’m not welcome here, Lex.”

“No,” Pav agreed in deathly quiet. “She is not.”

What?

Oh, hell, no. This was not acceptable.

“All right.” I twisted back to Luka and uttered, “I want to thank you for the offer, but we’re leaving.”

Luka’s brows narrowed. “You can’t. I won’t allow it.”

Who the hell did he think he was?

I kept my tone steady. “I’m not one of your minions, Mr. Pavlovic. You can’t tell me what to do. And—” I faced Molly. “—if Molly isn’t welcome, I don’t think I want to be either.”

Julius approached, looking irritated as hell. “Lex, don’t be stupid here.”

I spun on him, incensed. “And *you* better watch your tone with me, Julius Carter. Don’t forget who welcomed you into her home and put her family at risk for you and yours.” At least he had the grace to look sheepish. I spoke to Molly. “Would Tama take us in?”

Her face brightened. “For sure.” She had already pulled her phone out. “Let me call him.”

Luka looked positively riled. “You’d rather stay with D.M.S. scum than with me?” He turned to Julius and sputtered an unamused, “The fuck, brother?” When Molly put the phone to her ear, Luka rolled his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Okay. All right.” His brows lowered and his lips thinned. “She can stay.”

My insides uncoiled with relief, and as I held my son in my arms, rocking him gently, I muttered a sincere, “Thank you, Luka.”

“Come in.” He shook his head, turning toward the house and sounding thoroughly annoyed. “And be quick about it.”

As I walked away in my Pikachu slippers, Julius spoke hesitantly. “I’m not pissed at you, Lexi. I’m pissed at him.”

I turned to face him, and as I did, I noticed the weariness in his features. It hadn’t occurred to me until that moment what he must be feeling right now. Our men held themselves so tall it was rare to see them falter. And Julius looked close to falling.

When I spoke, I did it softly. “I want her dead too, honey.”

Pain had molded me into a warrior. Hurt had turned me sharp at the edges. Love had forced the fear out of me.

Ling would die. It was only a matter of time before karma finally caught up with her. And after all she had done to my family, I wanted to watch the whore bleed until her veins ran dry.

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## Ling

“What the fuck is wrong with you, Ling?”

My brother sat at the end of my bed as I walked into my room. He sounded mad. That was unusual. Van was my biggest fan. He thought I hung the fucking stars.

I barely wavered as I passed him, heading into the en suite bathroom.

“What’s up your ass?”

After washing my face and undressing, I emerged in my silken pajamas, but the pure hatred Van wore had me pausing midstep.

*Weird.*

Yep. This was definitely strange.

And when he stood and spoke, it came out a growl. And that growl had all kinds of messed up images running through my head. “I told you not to leave this fucking room, but you come and go as you please, like an entitled toddler. Fuck what your very presence on the streets is doing to your family.”

Oh, yeah. He was pissed.

My beautiful brother was mad at me.

Oh, no. I did not like that. “Van,” I started slowly, a frown marring my delicate brow.

“No,” he snarled, and when I took a step away from him, his face turned expressionless. His tone much the same. “This was a mistake. I thought you were ready, but you’re not.” He took in a deep breath. “Which is why we’ve decided that you’ll no longer be leading The Dragons.” My mouth gaped as he went on. “The vote has been cast. I’m taking over, Ling.”

I blinked over at him, my gut clenching hard with suppressed anger.

*Like hell he was.*

Holding myself like the queen I was, my face remained void, when I stated, “A mutiny, Van?” A soft laugh shot out of me. “Really?”

But the Van I loved was nowhere to be seen. Instead, Van the douche took his place. “Call it what you will. I’ve already started damage control.” His cold stare held me fast. “I never should have listened to you. But that’s my fault. I trusted you, and I should have known better.”

His words cut me deeply.

*This fucker.*

Panic flared deep in the core of my very being. “Van, think about this.”

“I have.” He nodded. “I am.” He looked me up and down. “What a shame you turned out to be, Ling. You’ve taken us from being one of the most prominent and trusted firms in the southern hemisphere to being your own personal playthings, treating our men like children then punishing them when they misbehave. Our reputation has suffered in your command. Your ‘I don’t give a fuck’ attitude has cost us more than you’re worth, I’m afraid.”

What the fuck? He’s never spoken to me as such.

“So here’s what’s going to happen.” He took a step closer to me, and I didn’t trust the peacefulness in his tone. “You’re going to sit here, in this room, like the doll you were born to be, and you will listen to whatever it is I say because you know I have your best interest at heart.”

That was the plan? He was locking me away like a retarded sibling?

My blood began to boil.

Did he even know who I was?

That was so not happening.

“You will no longer have anything to do with The Dragons. You won’t see them; you won’t talk to them. You won’t even see our brothers anymore because I know how great a manipulator you are. When the time is right, you will live at my house with me, where I can keep an eye on you at all times.”

My anger rose to hot, heavy rage.

He took another step forward. “And when you invite me into your bed,” he spoke low, “I will come to you.”

My heart started to beat faster.

The rage turned to white, blistering fury.

No. None of this was working for me.

“We aren’t normal, Ling, and I’m sick of trying to be something I’m not. So I’ve decided to stop fighting the darkness inside me and embrace it instead.” And he smiled so viciously that I saw my father in that hollow grin. “It’s quite freeing. I can see why you live the way you do. I think you’ll find I make a half-decent king. And, in private—” Another confident step closer. “—you can be my queen.”

My insides twisted painfully, and when I lowered my eyes, my brother mistook my position for one of submission.

I heard pride line his voice as he reached out to cup my cheek warmly. “My pretty little doll.”

We were royalty in our own rights, but I had something my brother would never have. Tenacity. It was something you were either born with or you weren’t. It couldn’t be taught. Lucky for me, I had the shit in spades.

Playing the role he very clearly wanted me to play, I reached up slowly to smooth his lapel and I kept my eyes lowered, as I asked a hushed, “Come to bed with me?”

Van wrapped his arms around me, resting his hands just below the small of my back. “Do you want me, Ling?”

Did I want his highness?

No. “Yes,” I muttered quietly, and when he moved us towards the bed, a calmness I’d rarely felt flowed through me, radiating warmth in a cold situation that would not end well no matter how it played out.

At the side of the bed, I ran a hand down his chest to his stomach, lower still until my fingers rested just under his navel. “Lay down.”

As his eyes fixed on me, he did as I asked, and when I climbed over him, I put my hands to his chest and sat low on his stomach. I leant in close until my front met his and I could feel his heart thumping in his chest. He was excited by this, our shame. His heart called to mine; it beat for me and me alone, and I slid my hands under the pillow, pressing myself into him in a purely sexual way.

My brother’s eyes hooded in pleasure, and I smiled coyly in return. “Are you sure you want this? I’m a dangerous woman, Van.” My voice turned breathy. “Once you have me, you’ll never be the same.”

Van’s soft smile made my stomach ache, and when he uttered a rough, “I love you,” I came to realize he did.

He *really* did.

Van thought The Dragons would thrive under a king, but he didn’t appreciate what The Dragons had when they had it. I know he thought he was doing what was best, but he was already making terrible decisions, and regretfully, I wouldn’t stand for it.

“You think The Dragons need a king, brother mine?” I asked sweetly, trailing kisses along his jaw.

“I do,” he grunted out as I ran my tongue along his chin.

Did I want my brother?

I wanted a lot of things.

I wanted him to understand me.

I wanted him to realize his error.

And most of all, I wanted him dead.

Kissing his cheek, I spoke against his stubble-rough skin, “My beautiful brother, you have been the sunshine in my darkness. You have picked me up every time I fell, and I thank you for that. But I need you to hear me now, and hear me well.” I moved then. My lips a hair’s breadth away from his, I looked Van in the eyes and whispered viciously, “*I am the motherfucking king.*”

In a move he did not see coming, his eyes widened as I sat up, lifting the hunting knife out from under my pillow, up over my head, and as I brought it down into his chest, my eyes widened and my lip curled. The surprised sound he made when the seven-inch blade entered his body was music to my ears. I brought it mechanically down over and over and over again, and every time the knife slid into him, a harsh grunt escaped his mouth. Wet warmth splattered my face, over my eyes, but I didn’t dare shut them. I needed to see the exact moment the light faded from his eyes.

I counted every blow.

My steady hand stilled only when I reached sixty-three and Van’s chest looked like minced meat.

My white covers now colored red, I sat back and pursed my lips, looking down at my brother, panting lightly. He wheezed and coughed, and as his body shook, I took the hunting knife and slowly licked the blade. As I did this, our eyes met.

The expression he wore was an equal mixture of shock and pain, and I didn’t give a solid fuck. “I’m sorry, Van, but I guess you could say my answer to everything you just offered is...” I paused a second, my face darkened, and I spoke slowly, “No.”

He opened his mouth and attempted to speak, but all that came out was a sickening gurgling sound.

I should have just slit his throat, but I didn’t want to. I wanted to watch.

“This could have gone differently. You know that, don’t you?” When he didn’t answer, for he couldn’t, I took his head in my hands and moved it in

a slow nod. “That’s right. I didn’t want to do this.” I cupped his cheeks, and he gasped for air as I moved his head from side to side in a shake of the head. “But our visions clashed, and one of us needed to go. And it sure as fuck wasn’t going to be me, Van. You know I’m too selfish to share what’s mine.” His harsh wheezing got weaker. “This right here? This is what makes me a good leader. Nobody’s safe, Van. *Nobody*. I guess what I’m trying to say is—” I held him fast as he took in a short, stuttering breath. The exhale never came. And when I dropped his head, I blinked down at my bloodstained hands. “—long live the king.”

The silence started to turn on me as my actions played in my mind on repeat. And for some unknown reason, sitting over my brother’s dead body, I just couldn’t find the will to care.

This was my castle, yes, but I’d never rule again. When it was found out what happened here, my life was forfeit. Luka Pavlovic would put a bullet between my eyes.

Because that’s what you did to sickly animals.

You put them down.

I thought about what to do now, but only one option stood out.

If I was going out, I was going out with a bang. And when I finally detonated my atom bomb, the explosion would be felt all over. I would shake every fucking window in this shithole of a town.

A bloodstained smirk stretched at my lips as I slid off the bed and stalked out of the room, barefoot and painted red.

Yes. They would feel me. I’d make sure of it.

*Boom, bitches.*



# Chapter

## Thirty-Seven

Lexi

“No word?”

I poured my coffee, looking down at the black and gold mug, my lips pressed thin. “Nope.” When my eyes met Luka’s, I shrugged and forced a smile that I knew didn’t reach my eyes. My response was listless. “He’s never really been the ‘calling to check in’ kind.”

At my semi-annoyed tone, Luka smiled fondly. “No, he hasn’t.”

Over the last few days, Luka Pavlovic and I had gotten to know each other, and as the days went on, an unspoken understanding was formed. A mutual tolerance. He no longer treated me as a burden, and I no longer gave him the sass of a hormonal thirteen-year-old. Unlike Twitch, Luka was actually something of a conversationalist, and the more we spoke, the more I came to like the man.

And in our shared hatred of a highly reckless woman, we were perfectly matched.

After all, Luka had a lot to lose in this situation. While I didn’t rate losing his position as highly as losing my life, Luka’s reign was important to him, as much as my life was to me.

Every time I thought of what Ling was capable of, I pictured my son growing up without his mother, without his father. And that scared the shit out of me. There was so much I wanted to be around for, so much A.J. needed me here for. I wasn’t ready to meet my maker. Not yet. Neither was Twitch. So I gave him time because truthfully it was all I had to give right then and there.

As I sat next to him at the table, I ran a hand through my hair with a sigh and turned my weary face to him. “What’s in Cuba?” Luka lowered his gaze, running a finger over the table, and I narrowed my eyes on him. “Does it look like I’m running, Pav?” He looked me in the eye. “No, I’m right here, and if you knew half the shit that man has put me through, trust me, even you’d tell me to hightail it out of here.” My eyes softened. “But I’m here. I’m waiting. I just want him to come home.”

“He will,” he said immediately, before adding, “There’s only one thing in Cuba, Alexa, and for your sake, I hope Twitch isn’t stupid enough to bring that shit here, because—” He shot me a look of unmistakable displeasure. “—I will not be pleased.”

The way he was looking at me made my heart stutter.

“What if he doesn’t come back?” I whispered, and my eyes swept low to my hands, completely unfocused as I quietly stressed.

And for the first time since I met him, Luka Pavlovic sounded uncertain of himself. “You could stay here, with me.” He really was a sweet man once you saw past the intensity he wore like a hefty armor. And when I opened my mouth to speak, he added certainly, “But he’s coming back.”

Luka sounded so sure. I wish I felt the same. “How do you know?”

Missing Twitch came in waves, and today I was drowning.

He spoke low and cracked a wide smile that I was sure had panties melting all over the world. “Because I would come back for you.”

Sadly, only one man’s smile affected me. It was crooked and full-mouthed and made him look something like a naughty boy, and I adored it.

I rolled my eyes but softened it with a laugh. “Lady killer.”

“Acquitted,” he uttered quietly, and as he walked away, he winked, and I wasn’t sure if he was actually joking or not.

I should not have been chuckling the way I was.

Definitely not.

My skin prickled almost painfully as goose bumps trailed my arms, starting from my shoulder all the way down to my wrist. My brow knitted tiredly, and when the light breeze hit my arm, I frowned in my sleep and snuggled deeper into the covers.

Only there were none.

The wooden bedframe creaked and my eyes snapped open, blinking rapidly into the darkness, and as they adjusted, my heart jolted.

“Angel.”

The whiskey-smooth whisper was a balm on my soul, and I sat up and lunged at him, throwing my arms around him with a rough exhale. He permitted me to hold him to me firmly, pulling his head into my bosom as I knelt beside him on the mattress. I pressed firm kisses to his head again and again, and when he put his lips to the valley between my breasts, my nipples tightened with a desire that wouldn’t be denied.

Without a word spoken, I reached for the hem of my nightie and whipped it over my head, leaving me in nothing but a pair of tiny silk panties. My voice thick with emotion, I ordered him to, "Kiss me."

Hearing the need in my voice, he did as commanded.

The moment his lips touched mine, I was lost. Moaning into his mouth, my hands found his belt and I tugged at it desperately, managing to loosen it before popping the button on his jeans, reaching in and taking his stiff length in my hands, palming it tightly.

Twitch's mouth went lax as he released a low groan.

I needed him inside me. Right now.

In the darkness of night, I pled on a whisper, "Please, baby."

The slight hitch of his breath told me I was not alone in my need.

Lightning fast, he flipped us, and as he towered over me, a stiff yank had my panties thrown down my legs. When my hands found the bottom of his tee, he muttered a rough, "Leave it." The insistence in his tone had my core weeping. Kneeling between my legs, he held his cock in one hand then lowered himself, sliding inside me with a roughness that forced a small whimper out of me.

And Twitch gave me what I desired.

Completely dressed, he fucked me hard, he fucked me fast, and for the first time in years, he fucked me missionary, his mouth desperately seeking mine. But I needed to feel more of him. My hands moved jerkily, lifting his tee to feel his hard chest on my heaving breasts before wrapping my legs around his hips and meeting him thrust for thrust.

It was urgent. It was rushed. And, more than anything, it was completely inebriating.

Together, we were perfection.

You couldn't beat this.

A grunt passed his lips, and he muttered tightly, "Missed you."

As he drove into me ruthlessly, I breathed out, "Love you," and when I did, he stilled entirely, searching my face in the dark, reaching up to lovingly cup my cheek before leaning in and capturing my mouth in a firm kiss that spoke entire poetic verses while all I could manage were empty lines.

On the cusp of release, I elevated my hips with a low moan, and he took the hint, pulling back, then pushing all the way into me. My core clenched

tightly, and Twitch panted into my mouth as he held my face close, screwing the last six days of anxiety out of me. Body tight, I sunk back into the mattress, my lips parted, awaiting the train to hit me, and when it did, I shook. I shook as though I'd been electrocuted, my orgasm hitting hard and fast. He swallowed my moan with a kiss that bruised, and when he stilled, looking me dead in the eye, I felt his cock throb. And as he spilled himself inside me, all was right in my world.

For the moment.

The sounds of our harsh panting called out into the silence, and Twitch put his mouth to my neck, gently biting me. Smiling softly, I wrapped my arms around his head, treasuring the feel of his mouth on me. His stinging bites worked their way from my neck to my collarbone to my shoulder, and when his teeth clamped over my skin, my core clamped around his still-hard cock, lovingly, like the sweetest of kisses.

God. I missed him.

It was funny how you could desperately miss being intimate with the one you loved, but when you hadn't been held in a while, you realize sex isn't what you missed after all.

He kept his mouth on my skin a long time, and when he finally lifted his head, I held his gaze, running my fingers from his temple down his scratchy jawline. "You're back."

And as his brow furrowed, I just knew Twitch had heard all of what I said. Even the parts I tried to hide. "Not likin' the surprise in your tone, baby."

*Well, what did he expect?*

I smoothed his brow with gentle fingers and ignored his statement. "Did you find what you were looking for?"

"Yeah, and Pav ain't happy," he muttered, and he sounded so tired that my arms tightened around him, offering what comfort they could. "So we're leavin' first thing."

He was back.

He came back.

Secretly overjoyed, I pulled his head down and pressed my mouth to his forehead with my warm, kiss-swollen lips. "Okay, honey."

Although I was relieved he was back, something inside me refused to let go of him, and no matter how we rearranged ourselves, my arms remained

tightly secured around my man.

Lucky for me, Twitch didn't seem to mind.

My eyes widened at the three people facing off with Luka Pavlovic, and when Luka spotted Twitch and me approaching, he closed his eyes, shaking his head slowly.

"I want you out," he muttered.

"Pav." Twitch put his hands up in a placating gesture. "Let's talk."

One woman grinned, plopping herself down on the sofa. "Yeah, Luka." She looked him and up down. "Let's talk."

"Talk" sounded very much like "fuck" coming from her lips.

"I would shut my mouth if I were you, Fernanda," Pav growled through gritted teeth. And when the second woman lost her ability to hold in her laughter, Luka looked pissed. "Don't make me come over there, Luna."

It was then I noticed the women were twins.

Fernanda wore her dark hair long and wavy down her back, while Luna had her hair short, buzzed at the sides and longer at the front, messily styled. Fernanda wore tight jeans and a tiny tee that showed off her stomach. Luna wore baggy cargo pants and a loose tank with a sports bra underneath. Fernanda looked highly feminine while Luna wore black eye shadow smudged around her eyes with an attitude that said "approach with caution," but their tall, slim bodies were the same, their faces identical.

Fernanda licked her lips seductively. "Sounds like you missed me, Pav." Then she winked, and when I turned to glance at Luka, he looked as though he wanted to take the few steps over and throttle the woman. "But," she sighed, "that's what you get for banishing us." Her lips pouted melodramatically, as she uttered, "You shot me in the heart, baby." Quite suddenly, her face changed and she muttered darkly, "How about I repay the favor?"

"Jesus Christ." Twitch huffed out an irritated breath. "You got a death wish, Fern."

When Luka pulled out his gun and pointed it at her, the expression Fernanda wore was one of sheer victory. And he knew immediately that he'd revealed too much in his actions.

Oh, yeah. My wide eyes settled on the way Fernanda watched the Croatian Sensation. They were definitely a thing at one point.

“I wouldn’t provoke me, *Papi*.” Fern sat tall, a slight smirk pulling at the corner of her mouth. “I’m a woman.” Her eyes narrowed on Luka before she leaned back on the sofa, resting her arms over the back of it. “Been washing blood stains off my clothes since I was a teenager.”

My brows arched.

*Oh, snap.*

It was hard not to be affected by the woman. I kind of liked her brand of sass. I could definitely learn a thing or two from her.

The man behind the two women spoke, and I’d never heard anything like his rich, gravelly voice.

“Enough.”

It reminded me of sex.

Yes. That was it.

It was pure, unadulterated sex. I felt it all over. And it disturbed me enough to take a step back, away from him.

“No one asked you shit, Thiago,” Luka spat viciously. “If I needed you to mediate, I’d fuckin’ ask for it.” He then ran a hand down his weary face. “It’s bad enough I got the Vegas in my goddamn house. I don’t want to hear you, man. You’ve been warned.”

The man, Thiago, was tall and built like a Russian war tank. With a broad chest, thick neck, and a scowl without rival, he was *all* muscle. His dark hair was buzzed short and stubble lined his razor-sharp jaw. His strong chin, high cheekbones, and tanned skin reminded me of a G.I. Joe figurine. Only G.I. Joe came off like a pussy compared to this demon of a dude.

When he caught me eyeing him with a frown, he settled that unimpressed glare on me, and, nope, I did *not* dig it. But instead of being scared, I surprised myself by being thoroughly irritated. And when I uttered a perfectly calm, “You keep looking at me like that, you’ll lose an eye,” no one was more astounded than I was. What was even more astonishing was, I meant what I said.

I felt Twitch move into me, and complete and utter adulation flowed through me. With that small gesture, he spoke volumes.

He had my back, forever and always.

Thiago held my gaze a long moment before his lips twitched and his face softened marginally. When he spoke to Twitch, all he said was, “She yours?”

And Twitch replied, “She’s wearin’ my ring.”

Thiago’s lips thinned, and he muttered a quietly aggravated, “Wonderful.”

What was the matter with these men?

Thankfully, the conversation came to a halt when Molly came into the room holding A.J.’s hand, but as her eyes landed on the three vagabonds, she tugged my son back, holding him away from the danger the holy trinity clearly emanated. Unfortunately, the little monster had already seen his father.

His soft brown eyes widened in sheer delight, as he called out, “Daddy!”

With a force that was unnatural for a five-year-old to have, he snatched his hand out of Molly’s and started to run. The second he reached Twitch, he jumped, and papa bear caught him midair, holding him close as A.J. hugged him around the neck so hard he had to be strangling him.

“There he is.” Twitch grinned into our son’s hair, kissing his head then swinging him from side-to-side, patting his back. “How you doin’, bud?”

A.J. held him tight. “You were gone forever,” the little gremlin muttered sadly, and my heart ached.

But Twitch didn’t care that he was choking him. He wanted his son close. There was a thickness that lined his tone. “I’m back now.”

“Aw,” muttered Fernanda, turning wide eyes to Luna.

Luna put a hand to her heart and her mouth gaped before letting out a disbelieving, “Twitch.” Her eyes landed on our little boy and she blinked at him. “You’re a father.” She sounded absolutely stunned, and that kind of shock normally only came from people who you were familiar with.

As in, *closely* familiar with.

Who were these people?

“So there’s no chance of stealin’ ya girl then?” My head snapped to Thiago, and as I glowered at him, he winked before a slow grin appeared.

Twitch was not amused, and although he said, “You can try, Tee,” what I heard was, “*I will kill you slowly and bathe in your blood.*”

Feeling he was close to implosion, I moved, pressing into his free side, and he put his arm around my waist almost reflexively. His mood did not improve when Luka decided to weigh in.

“You gotta take a number like the rest of us, fucker,” he added slyly. “I was here first.”

Oh my God.

My stomach clenched.

Twitch’s cheek ticked as he slowly looked toward his friend. “You’ve been good to me, Pav, so I’mma pretend I didn’t hear that.”

Luka shrugged, appearing completely unconcerned. “I said what I said.”

Fernanda’s jaw tightened and she lowered her gaze to hide her hurt. And I felt for her then. Whatever she had done had hurt Pav. That much was clear. And now, Pav wanted to hurt her.

The arm around me tightened. Showing my unreserved loyalty, I turned, leaning up to press my lips to his neck over the puckered scar he’d gotten six years ago, and when I felt his muscles loosen under my mouth, I began to relax enough to pull away.

Twitch’s eyes narrowed on his friend. His voice was barely over a whisper. “You’re lucky I’m holdin’ my son.”

These men were tiresome, and as my eyes closed, I reached up to pinch the bridge of my nose and ground out, “Can we *please* not do this?” Slowly, I opened my eyes and peered around the room. A tired sigh left me. “I hate to say this, but—” My apologetic eyes landed on Luka. “—we need your help.” And when my weary gaze found my son, I touched his soft hair before turning back to the room. “We have a problem to take care of.”

A problem with cherry-red lips and a motherfucking attitude.



# Chapter

## Thirty-Eight

Lexi

The silence was thick, and while I normally appreciated a moment of quiet, this silence was different. It was sticky. Suffocating. And as we drove home at Luka's wishes, my entire body thrummed in hyperawareness. Because we were being hunted like prey.

We were being hunted, and the king refused to help.

The logical part of me understood why Luka rejected our appeal for aid. The maternal part of me knew I would never forgive him his actions.

"No one else can help us." I turned my pleading gaze to him, and when he looked away, I knew—I fucking *knew*—he would do nothing. That, of course, didn't stop me from trying. "Luka." I took a step forward before turning to peer at my sleeping son on the sofa. I would do anything for that boy. I had. I would. And I would continue to. "Please," I appealed to the softer side he rarely showed. The side I was lucky enough to find in my time alone with him. "*Help* us."

But when he responded as callously as he did, Luka Pavlovic was dead to me. "What do you want from me, woman?" He turned to face the Vega family lurking in the corner of the room. He eyed the three of them meaningfully. "Seems to me you got all the help you need."

I quickly realized his problem and, wow, I couldn't believe him.

My soft gaze ignited into fiery rage. "You're bitter? That's what this is?" My eyes widened in understanding. "You won't help us because you're fucking bitter?" I spun to face Fernanda, and sputtered, "He won't help protect my son because of *you*?"

"Baby." Twitch put a hand to my shoulder, but I shrugged it off, demanding an answer.

Fernanda's cool stare landed on Luka with the force of an ax going through soft cypress. "Don't stress, *gatita*." She looked disgusted at the man she once called her king. "Can't you see how shook he is? That should tell you everything you need to know." Her confidence was unwavering. "We're all you need."

So as we drove home with the Vegas trailing us, I probably should have felt more at ease than I did. But it felt wrong. All of it. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but something was *wrong*.

Twitch pulled into the driveway, and the Vegas parked behind us. Within seconds, Molly drove up in Big Red and Tama stepped out of the car with her. I didn't even notice Julius and Ana until I stepped out of the car. Happy was the last to arrive, and he came alone.

My eyes slid over to Twitch. "Family meeting?"

Taking A.J.'s hand in his, he stopped to watch me carefully. "Family meeting."

With a long sigh, I unlocked the front door, and just before I stepped in, Thiago stepped in front of me. I frowned. "What are you doing?"

Thiago Vega looked down at my sleepy son a long moment, and when he responded, my gut clenched. "Checking for snakes." He went in alone.

My stomach ached suddenly, violently, and I felt the blood drain out of my face.

It never actually occurred to me that Ling might have the balls to be sitting pretty, waiting for us in our own home. And the more I thought about it, the more I came to understand that there were no rules for Ling Nguyen. She was a paradox, wanting to rule, but hating the system and policies that came with that.

No. Ling didn't play by the rules.

She walked the line of them, slipping a foot on either side of that line whenever it suited her. From what I gathered, she wasn't the great leader she thought she'd be. Ruling purely from fear, not from respect. It was only a matter of time before The Dragons turned on her. Regrettably, I couldn't wait that long.

"How bad is it?" came from behind us, and when I spun around, Zep was standing there, hands in his pockets and facing his brother.

"Bad enough that I want you in my house listening in," Twitch said tightly.

Zep nodded slowly, and his face looked as tight at Twitch's response. Evander crossed the street, moving to join his brothers-in-law.

Moments later, Thiago returned, jerking his chin toward the house.

The mass of us walked inside in complete silence as Twitch lead the majority out onto the back porch. Molly took A.J. by the hand. He yawned

openly and rubbed at his eyes as she guided him to his room, putting him to bed.

Nobody spoke until she returned, and when Tama went first, I wasn't expecting what he had to say.

He cleared his throat, gaining attention, and when he held up his cell phone and shook his head, he uttered, "Amoho called. It's not good." He looked spooked, and even I knew that for someone like this huge Maori warrior to look the way he did now, the news was indeed not good. "Van Nguyen was discovered in his sister's bed."

My face bunched.

*Ew. Gross.*

When nobody attempted to speak, Tama clarified, "He was stabbed so many times his chest caved in."

Wait. "He's dead?" I blinked at him, not expecting that story to take the turn it had.

Tama nodded. "And Ling's missing." He faced Julius. "Amoho lost sight of her somewhere on the highway about twenty minutes ago." His lips thinned. "He's pretty sure she knew she was being followed."

Julius hissed in a breath through his teeth, and the strain he wore was plain to see. "Well, fuck." Ana slipped her hand in Julius's and they exchanged an apprehensive look that made my stomach hurt.

"There's more," Tama went on. "Seems The Dragons wanted a power change." He made a knowing face. "As far as we know, The Dragon Queen has gone rogue."

Gone rogue?

Gone *rogue*?

My stomach twisted painfully and I swallowed hard, sitting in the chair closest to me. My voice was weak. "Well, that doesn't sound great."

"No," Evander agreed. "It doesn't."

"Where was she headed? What direction?" asked Twitch, and I knew what he was actually asking.

Was Ling on her way here?

Oh, Lord.

I held my breath.

But Tama just shook his head. "Last we knew, she was headed north." North. Away from here. Toward the king.

Thank God.

And even though I hated him right now, I swallowed my pride, and let out a softly irritated, “Someone should warn Luka.” When everyone looked at me like I was a crazy person, I shrugged, and uttered, “Jesus, guys. I’m pissed, but I don’t want him dead. And I definitely don’t have to stoop down to his level.” My eyes landed on my beautiful, brooding man. “Make the call.”

But Twitch shook his head. “You wanna call, you call. I ain’t wasting a single fuckin’ breath. Not on him.”

“Yeah, fuck him,” murmured Luna.

Fernanda muttered quietly, “I already did.”

Luna grinned. “How was it?”

Fernanda sighed dreamily, a small smile gracing her full lips.

“Phenomenal.”

That was the point Thiago had enough. He put a large hand to his forehead, and uttered under his breath, “*Jesucristo.*”

Fernanda chuckled low and throaty while Luna leaned in, and whispered, “She loves torturing our brother.”

I could see that.

“Twitch,” I plead softly. But he simply shook his head. He wasn’t going to budge on this.

Stubborn ass.

I held out my hand with a glare. “Give me the damn phone.”

“I’ll call him.”

Twisting back to Happy, I shot him a grateful look. “Thank you.”

Even though Luka had forsaken us, I wouldn’t have his death hanging over my head like the sword of Damocles.

Twitch looked mad as hell, calling out to Happy as he walked back into the house. “You make sure he knows why you’re callin’. You tell him the woman he just refused help is still watching his fuckin’ back.” He closed his eyes, and ground out, “Motherfucker.”

The tension was thick enough to cut through. Surprisingly though, it was Fernanda who spoke on Luka’s behalf. “It’s not his fault. Having us here makes things difficult for him. He banished us with good reason.” She actually looked sad. “That’s why we left willingly. Being back in his

domain against his edict... it raises question about his authority.” She made a face. “Or lack of it.”

It was the way she spoke—whisper-soft and utterly despondent—that had me asking, “What did you do?”

Her face turned expressionless a full second before she pasted on a cunning smile. “That is a story for another day.”

All right then.

Not my business.

Got it.

“Do we have a plan?” I asked to the crowd. Nobody answered. I turned to face Twitch, and uttered softly, “We have to have a plan, honey.”

A plan was good. A plan meant we were trying to maintain control in a situation where we had none.

Twitch kept his eyes on me. “We’ll lay low the next few days. Keep A.J. at home—”

Already shaking my head, I cut in with, “I’ve already kept him from school the entire time we were at Luka’s. Anymore time away and they’re going to ask questions.”

Molly pursed her generous lips. “I’m with Lexi. Having A.J. at school means Ling’s target narrows onto the two of you, and I hate to say it, but my job is to protect that little boy, not his parents.” It stung how heartless her words were, but she was right. “School is probably the safest place for him.”

Luna was nodding. “She’s right. With Molly and the little *niño* out of the picture, we can focus on the two of you.”

I could see Twitch was caving. He spoke to Molly. “You stay with him. All fuckin’ day. You hear me?”

“I hear you,” she responded earnestly, and I knew Molly would do whatever it took to protect my son, even throw herself in front of a mass of bullets.

Julius pulled out a chair and sat, tugging Ana down onto his lap. “We don’t even know who she’s after.”

Twitch replied positively, “She wants me.” His eyes hooded more than usual as he ran a hand through his hair and spoke low. “It’s always been me.”

A moment of silence passed between us all, and I had a feeling we were all thinking the same thing.

He was right.

It had always been Twitch.

“You packin’?” Thiago asked him.

“Always, bro.”

“What about you?” he asked me. “You know how to use a gun?”

At the very moment I responded, “Yes,” Twitch uttered, “No,” and when he heard my answer, his brows furrowed as he blinked at me in bewilderment.

My brows arched. I spoke to Thiago but kept my gaze locked on Twitch. “Yes, I know how to use a gun.” A moment passed, and then I offered, “You think Julius Carter lived in my house six months, going through what he did, and didn’t teach me to protect my son?”

At that, Tony’s face softened. “You got a gun in the house.” A statement.

“Yes, I do.”

“And you never told me.”

“No, I didn’t.” It seemed we all had some secrets.

He kept his voice light. “You ever plan on using that gun on me?”

“Occasionally.” Damned if there hadn’t been a few times I thought about it.

His eyes grinned, and mine smirked right back at him.

In response to my deception, all he uttered was a soft sounding, “Solid.”

Fuck. I loved this man.

And when Zep spoke, his words were directed to Luna and Luna alone. “You’re coming with me.”

Luna’s brow knitted. “No way,” was her reply, but it sounded like she said, “You’re insane.”

Zep looked her up and down like she was a snack of epic proportions and he was famished. His lip twitched. “I want you on my team, Lulu.”

*Lulu?*

Wait. They knew each other?

All of a sudden, it dawned on me. It all made sense. Zep knew Twitch was in Cuba. How? Because he probably suggested it. And now that I looked deeper at how Zep was watching Luna, I saw more than I wanted to.

Zep was into her.

Luna blinked at him. “So does everyone else,” she responded, chuckling without sounding at all amused.

Thiago, sick of his sisters’ apparent suitors, snapped, “My sisters stay with me, Falco. Both of them.” He ended on, “We aren’t here for you.” And damned if it sounded like a threat.

But then again, anything coming out of the mouth of Thiago Vega sounded like a threat.

“How we gonna run this?” asked Happy, leaning against the wall.

Molly chimed in with, “I’m sleeping in A.J.’s room until further notice.” She peered over at Luna and Fernanda. “You guys take my bed.”

They nodded in agreement.

“Thiago, you take the sofa,” Twitch suggested.

“It’s not a pull out,” I said, my eyes drifting over his monstrous form then adding an apologetic, “Sorry.”

“Everyone else—” Twitch shrugged lightly. “—I don’t know. Go home, I guess.”

It was the first time I’d ever heard Twitch sound unsure of himself, and it scared the ever-loving shit out of me.

When everyone made their leave and we were alone in bed, we held each other tightly, closely, and I don’t remember falling asleep, only waking up.

And when I finally did wake, it was alone to a cold bed.

# Chapter

## Thirty-Nine

### Twitch

“What are you doing out here?” she asked quietly.

*Contemplating doing some stupid ass shit to keep you safe.*

“Nothin’.”

But she knew me, this woman. She knew me well enough to know when I got inside my head it was a dangerous thing.

And her whispered words told me just how well she knew the person I was. “Stop it.” When she took the few steps over and knelt beside me, I lifted my tired gaze to her, and those big blue eyes I loved shone with concern. She sat back on her heels and held a hand out to touch me but stilled part way, balling her outstretched hand into a fist. She didn’t speak a while but when she did the words were firm. “Whatever you’re thinking... just stop.”

How could I?

It consumed my mind. Consumed my thoughts. Consumed me whole.

We weren’t dealing with just anyone here. I’d taught Ling, and I’d taught her well. This wasn’t going to end until one of us was in a casket, and she now had nothing to live for.

I was fucking with a person who had nothing left to lose.

That made her a dicey adversary.

“I’ve talked Ling off of a lot of ledges before.” I looked back out into the yard. “Maybe I can talk her off this one too.”

Unfortunately, I didn’t actually believe that.

Neither did Lexi.

And when she looked at me the way she was now, worried and tense, I felt the need to be real with her, even though I probably shouldn’t have. But I meant it when I said I didn’t want secrets between us. “She doesn’t have a weakness, baby.”

No hesitation. “Sure she does. We all do.”

“She’s more snake than person, Lex.” My posture stiff, I added an irritated, “Full of a poison that I put there. Ling is a monster of my own



creation. She's barely human, and I nurtured the animalistic side of her. I fed it and watched it grow and did that shit happily because, at the time, I could use that part of her. And what happens as a result of that—" I blew out a breath. "—is my own fault."

My woman laid it out, no holds barred. "I know you're worried. I'm worried too. But you don't need to because I'll protect you." The words were whisper soft.

A small snuffle escaped me, and when I turned to my wife, I caught her expression and my smile waned.

She was serious.

Dead serious.

My expression stone-faced, I uttered a rough, "Think I spent six fuckin' years away from you for you to go and risk your life for me?" I shook my head slowly. She needed to heed my hard words. "Not happening."

I saw the exact moment she got me. Her face fell and her pretty pink lips parted slightly as she swallowed hard. The term of endearment trembled. "I love you."

"Don't do that." I clicked my tongue in annoyance, my spine stiffening.

"What?"

"Don't..." It hurt to say it. My voice quieted, "Don't say goodbye. Not now." A solid pause. "Not yet."

Yes, Ling was leaving a trail of bodies behind her, but as my woman moved slowly, resting her forehead on my shoulder, her thick brown hair hanging in waves as she hugged my arm tightly as though I were already dead, I decided I wouldn't be one of them.

\*\*\*

## Molly

It was stupid to say, "Don't stress," to somebody who was very clearly stressed, so I followed up softly with, "I won't let anything happen to him."

Lexi smiled tiredly as she kept her eye on the little monster eating toast at the dining table and keeping conversation with a bunch of contract killers. "I know you won't."

Her certainty in me lifted me to a higher power, had me leveling up.

So when it was time to head off, I took my little dude by the hand and walked him to the car with a confidence that surpassed me. We waved from the driveway and I took off down the street, peering back at him through the rearview mirror. “Hey, bud,” I started. “I know it’s a little crowded at home these days, but soon, everything will be back to normal, okay?”

A.J. examined me with wisdom beyond his years. “When the bad lady is gone?”

This child. Jesus. The intensity he exuded was completely unnatural for a boy his age, yet coming from him, it was expected.

“When the bad lady is gone,” I clarified.

We drove on, and just before we reached the school, his little voice sounded. “Molly?”

“That’s my name. Don’t wear it out.” I winked in the mirror then smiled, trying to ease the tension radiating from him.

His soft brown eyes widened, and he pointed towards the road wearing an expression of pure terror. “*Look out.*”

I didn’t see the black Mercedes Kompressor run the stop sign, but as I hit the brakes and spun the steering wheel to avoid the impending collision, my head throbbed and I gritted my teeth as the front end of Big Red screeched to a stop on the footpath without being hit. A cloud of smoke covered the car and the smell of burnt rubber had my nose bunching.

My heart beat out of my chest. “Oh my God,” I panted as my hands shook.

“Molly?” the little frightened voice said quietly.

Without a moment’s hesitation, I swallowed hard and pulled out my phone, hitting the panic button Happy had installed on it then undid my seatbelt and knelt on the front seat to look back at my little monster. His silent cries made my chest ache. “Are you okay, buddy?” I looked him over. He didn’t look hurt, just shaken, and when he nodded like the trooper I knew him to be, my body slumped and I let out a relieved sigh. “Oh, buddy. I’m so sorry.”

From outside the car came an alarmed but feminine, “Oh, God, are you okay? I saw everything. Do you need help?”

“No.” I reached out for A.J. and he put his trembling hand in mine. I squeezed it tight, thanking God things weren’t any worse than what they were. “We’re okay.”

“Are you sure?”

Suddenly, the worry from the woman’s voice was gone and was replaced with menace, and my heart stuttered. I turned slowly, and the second I saw her, my insides shriveled.

*Oh, fuck, Molly. What have you done?*

Ling blinked at me through the open window and her brow lowered. “You don’t look good.”

“Back off,” I growled through gritted teeth as it hit me hard.

She was never after Twitch.

It was A.J. she wanted.

“You’re hurt,” Ling insisted as she threw open the passenger door. It all happened so quickly I had no time to react. One second, I was conscious, then next moment, I wasn’t. I fought it. God. I fought so hard, but as she continued to Taser me, I lost the battle.

And as the darkness took me, I heard her utter, “See? Not fine at all.”

\*\*\*

## Ling

Inwardly gloating, I watched the young woman’s body shake with the force of fifty thousand volts. I observed happily as her eyes rolled into the back of her head and she shook like she was being electrocuted because, well, she was. I held the Taser to her stomach and gloried in the way she shuddered spasmodically. When she began to foam at the mouth, I stopped, rather reluctantly.

I didn’t want to kill her. I just wanted her to suffer. And suffer she would when she at last woke to find her ward snatched out from under the safety of her steeled wing.

Molly would suffer.

They would all suffer.

I had plans for this little boy, this beautiful little boy whose parents were a pair of fucking assholes. Selfish, self-absorbed *assholes*.

My grin was hidden under my stone-faced expression, and even though I didn’t reveal it, I felt it so damn hard I wanted to lift my head heavenward and laugh into the morning sun.

Oh, yes.

I would make them hurt in the cruelest of ways.

“Help!” I screamed as loud as I could, garnering attention from the street.

My eyes wide, I slipped out of the car and rushed to the few people surrounding the close call. “Somebody help!” I put my hands on a man, gripped his shirt tightly, and sputtered, “I know this woman. Call an ambulance!”

The man already had his phone out, dialing, and I internally smirked but rushed back over to the car, and called into the window. “Molly? Can you hear me, Molly?” I panted loudly for good measure, then uttered a wavering, “You’re going to be okay.”

Forcing tears out of my eyes, I made my lips tremble, as I yelled out to nobody in particular, “Somebody help my friend!”

A small crowd had gathered around the car, and as I opened the back door, I reached out to the little boy I had loved before he even existed. My heart full, I muttered, “Come to me, A.J.”

But he just sat there, watching me with wide eyes. He was terrified, and I did not like that. Not at all.

“I know your parents, sweetie,” I told him. “Come with me. I’ll take you home.”

When his eyes settled on the back of his guardian’s head, he turned back to me, and uttered, “Is Molly okay?”

*Who gives a fuck?* “Yes, sweet boy. She’ll be fine. She just fainted is all.”

He hesitated, peering down at my hand.

*Come to me.*

“Come here.” My voice was low, commanding, and when I saw him push himself back into the seat, away from me, I internally reprimanded myself. “Don’t you want to go home to your mummy, Alexa? And your daddy too?”

*Come to me, my baby.*

The little boy nodded slowly, cautiously, and I smiled softly. “Come with me, sweetie.” He put his hand in mine, and my insides uncoiled. I hadn’t known I was holding my breath until I let out the shaky exhale.

He had come.

He'd come to me willingly.

My soul ached.

How bad of a person could I be if this sweet soul came to me freely, eagerly?

This child would be my redemption. He was my chance at a better life.

My tone whisper-soft, I said, "Let's get you home."

As he allowed me to pull him out of the car, I lifted him in my arms, and as I settled him onto my hip, my lips began to tremble as I wrapped my arms around him and held him close to me.

The feeling... oh, God.

My heartbeat slowed in that moment.

The feeling of holding your child for the very first time was nothing short of awesome.

"Oh, shit," I whispered as I pressed my lips to his head. For the first time in my life, I felt my heart might just burst from fullness. My eyes closed at the sheer force of the emotion I felt right then. It was hard to breathe past the thickness in my throat.

Holding my son close, I walked past the crowd, and when I was noticed, a man called out, "Hey! Where are you taking him?"

I didn't bother responding.

A mother did not defend how she protected her child and protect him I would, even from his own parents.

I walked the short distance to my black Mercedes Kompressor and put my little man in the backseat, buckling him up before running a gentle, loving hand down the side of his face. Sliding into the driver seat then turning on the ignition, I drove and drove, and I wasn't sure how long passed before the sad little boy in the back seat uttered an unsteady, "I want my mum."

"Sweetie." My brow furrowed as I peered into the rearview mirror.

"Don't be sad." I kept my smiling eyes on him as I revealed my little secret.

"I'm your mummy now."

\*\*\*

## Twitch

My phone buzzed in my pocket and I pulled it out, putting my coffee mug down. I looked down at the screen before answering. “What’s up?”

“Molly lit the distress signal,” said Happy.

He was on speaker in a car. He was driving, and as I heard cars honking around him, I knew he was driving fast.

Without a second to spare, I bolted out the front door and spoke into the phone. “Where?”

“The street before the school.”

I was already in my car, and as I turned the ignition, I saw Lexi rush out of the house barefoot, her eyes wide in question. I didn’t have time to stop. I pulled out of the driveway so fast the tires spun.

My chest thumped as I drove toward the school.

And for the first time in my life, I prayed to a God I didn’t believe in that this was only a caution.

I arrived to a scene of chaos. Molly’s car was smoking from under the hood, all the doors were open, and I couldn’t see anyone inside. The car was stationary on the sidewalk, a long trail of skid marks leading to where it had come to stop. Happy was talking to a paramedic, and when he doubled over, holding his head in his hands, I stalled midstep.

My heart stopped beating.

The heaviness in my chest weighed me down. I couldn’t move.

Happy straightened. He spotted me and started to walk over, but I stepped back, away from him. He kept coming, and the moment he reached me, he put his hands to my shoulders.

I shrugged him off. “Where is he?”

“Molly’s in bad shape. She’s barely breathing. They’re taking her to—”

Right then, I didn’t give a fuck about Molly. “Where is he?”

“—the hospital.”

Suddenly irate, my eyes widened, as I panted out, “*Where is he?*”

Happy swept his tongue out along his lower lip and placed his hands onto his hips. “She ran ‘em off the road, a witness said. Got out of the car and did a pretty good job of convincing the crowd that she was a friend.” He looked at me meaningfully. “Allowed her to get close.”

My eyes flashed. Pushing against his chest, I gripped his shirt tight and curled my lip, letting out an ominous, “I swear to God, bro....”

Happy didn't flinch as he spoke the words that had my head imploding. He said it quietly, wretchedly. "He's gone, Twitch." I pushed at his shoulders and watched him stumble. "She took him."

*Fuck.*

My head spun.

*Shit.*

My heart broke.

*No. No. No, no, no.*

This wasn't happening.

Wandering aimlessly, I put my hands to the top of my head and blinked into nothingness.

I wanted to blame Ling, but the truth made my chest cave.

This was my fault.

\*\*\*

## Lexi

The sound of the car pulling in had me stepping out to meet him, my throat tight. As Twitch stepped out of the car, his eyes bleak, avoiding my gaze, my breathing turned shallow.

That was when I saw it.

The school bag hanging from his hand.

Police cars pulled up in front of the house, and as I blinked without focus, my entire world crumbled. I shook my head and peered over at Twitch, utterly dazed. When he finally met my eyes, the raw emotion I saw behind those soft brown eyes had me putting a hand to my throat, and stating, "No."

One man stepped forward, and I heard him speak, but none of it really sunk in.

"Ms. Ballentine, my name is Gabriel Blanco. I'm with the Australian Federal Police." He took his time, speaking low and calming. "Can we come in?"

I turned slowly to Twitch. My vision blurred with unshed tears. My voice was little over a whisper. "Where's my son?"

Twitch stepped forward holding the small blue schoolbag in his hands, and it hung there like bad omen. He spoke softly, "We were wrong." Reluctantly, he amended his statement. "*I* was wrong." His hesitance spoke volumes. "She wasn't after me."

"Oh," I breathed out as my throat closed over and the first of my hot tears trailed my cheeks. I fell to my knees, unblinking, and let out a hushed, "I see."

We were wrong.

*Dear God, no.*

My heart began to race and my breathing turned to heavy panting as the gravity of this situation hit me.

We were so wrong.

The Dragon Queen had my son.

\*\*\*

## Ling

He was crying.

Oh, God, he cried, and it seemed like he would never stop. It went on for so long I wondered if he would ever just dry out. There was no way a child as small as he had stored so much fluid for the tears he cried were never ending.

He cried in the car.

He cried in the apartment.

He cried as I bathed him. As I dressed him. As I held him and rocked him and loved him.

He cried.

And it hurt so badly.

A small sigh escaped me.

So this was motherhood.

I kept my eye on him from a distance, and when he finally cried himself to sleep, I let out a shallow, shaking breath, sneaking closer and gently settling on top of the covers next to him. Running my hand through his hair, I watched him sleep a little while before I succumbed to the weight of my eyelids and drifted off.



Tomorrow would be a better day.

*Fuck.*

It had to be.



## Chapter Forty

### Ling

He slept as soundly as he could under the stressful circumstances I'd put him in, and I couldn't have been prouder. Even though his brow was marred, he looked positively angelic. I smiled gently at this strong little boy and wondered how long it would take for him to finally warm to me. I wasn't sure. It could be days, or months, or years. It didn't matter. Once he saw my intentions weren't to hurt him, he would succumb to me.

He would have to.

I had no need for him otherwise.

"Good morning, sweetie," I uttered softly from his bedside.

His little body went rigid and my smile increased.

He was a weary little thing.

And when he opened his lids and peered up at me through sleep-glazed eyes, he stared at me a long moment before looking around the room. I saw the exact moment he realized what happened the day prior wasn't a dream, and when it hit him, his lips parted and his sweet little face fell hard.

I clicked my tongue and sat down on the edge of the bed. "No crying, sweetie. Come now." I held out my arms to him, but he didn't come. Grinning, I let my arms drop. "Okay. You're not a hugger. I get it. That's okay."

That was when he opened his mouth, and asked a quiet, "Where's my mummy?"

Hmmm. Dilemmas.

The little dude seemed to be reluctant to let go of his whore of a mother.

That was okay. I could fix that.

I'd do anything to get to my goal.

I licked my lips, before stating, "Your mummy and daddy gave you to me as a gift."

His brow furrowed as his bullshit meter went off. "No, they didn't."

Okay. He was smarter than I gave him credit for.

My eyes narrowed at his insubordinance. "Yes, they did."

“No.” He sat up in bed and looked me in the eye with a look I’d only ever seen his father make. It was pure, unrivalled anger. “You’re a liar.”

My lips stretched into a grin. “Is that so?” I leant in slowly and spoke calmly. “Then why haven’t they come to get you?”

It was a question he couldn’t answer, and the way his face void of emotion told me he was thinking about it. What he uttered next made my spine stiffen.

“You’re the bad lady.”

Ballsy little shit, he was.

I fucking loved it.

I expected him to be like Lexi, seeing as she brought him up, but the truth was, he was exactly like Twitch. And I could use that, manipulate that, mold him into the heir I deserved.

“I’m not a bad lady,” I lied softly, reaching out for him, but he shuffled away from my touch, looking meaner than a junkyard dog with fleas.

*Nice.*

This tiny little creature was definitely going to be a thorn in my side. An annoying little itch you couldn’t reach to scratch.

My mouth parted in a small gasp. That was it. That was what I was going to call him, my son.

“Itch,” I spoke into the silence of the room. “My little Itch.”

An ode to his father.

Yes. I smiled maternally at the little boy who looked like he wanted to shank me.

It was so strange. I already loved him. He was everything I thought he’d be and more. His attitude, his resilience, it was everything I needed to make him my successor.

Peering down at him warmly, my heart ached with joy with the comprehension that he was perfect. Just perfect.

Yes.

I loved him.

And I was not letting him go.

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## Twitch

Sleep never came that night, and when dawn broke, my eyes settled on the woman sitting at the edge of the bed in her nightie, staring blankly into the wall.

It killed me to see her like this.

I wondered if this was how she was when I left, and a whole new level of guilt settled over me to see this beautifully resilient woman looking broken and shallow, when her love ran so deep. I didn't like it, and my only thought was to fix it and fix it fast.

My phone chimed at the very same time the doorbell rang. I slid off the bed, holding my cell in my hand, and as I passed my woman, I put a gentle hand to her shoulder.

Her lack of response was a bullet to my heart.

I answered my cell the second I stepped out of the room. "Yeah."

"Fuck, Twitch. *Fuck*. I..." He paused momentarily. "I don't know what to say." Ethan Black's tone conveyed he already knew about my son. He sighed. "Tell me what I can do and I'll do it."

The doorbell rang a second time, and I made my way over, throwing the door open. Sergeant Gabriel Blanco stood outside, coffee in hand, and I didn't bother with niceties. With a jerk of my chin, he got the message and stepped inside as I responded to the head of the FBI. "I appreciate it, Black, but—" I told him the way it was. "—you can't help me, man."

My time spent working with this man was short, but in that brief time, we got to know each other. And Black read between the lines. "Listen to me now. Don't do anything stupid."

*Motherfucker.*

My grip on my cell tightened. "Don't do anything stupid? That's your advice?" My anger spiked. "This psycho fucking bitch took my son out from under my fuckin' nose, caused the car he was in to careen off the goddamn road, and you want me to stay calm, Black?" I didn't give a fuck if Blanco was in my house listening in; I said what I said. "The second I get my hands on that mutt, she's dog food, Black." My tone low, my voice trembled with fury. "You best believe I'mma make that happen by my own hands should I get the opportunity, and I fuckin' hope I do, because nothing would make me happier than tearing that red-lipped viper limb from limb."

And when I'm done with her, y'all are gonna need dental records to identify her." My hands shook. "I'mma cut off her motherfuckin' head and drink from her pretty little skull."

"Twitch," Ethan Black warned.

But I wasn't having it. "I got shit to do." I hung up then turned to Gabe Blanco. "Ya didn't hear nothin', you get me?"

Hated to admit it, but Blanco was a decent guy. He lifted his to-go cup into the air, and muttered, "What's that? Sorry. I couldn't hear you over drinking this delicious coffee."

Yeah. Damned right he couldn't. "Any news?"

"Got an anonymous tip last night to check a warehouse down south." I straightened, but he went on. "Had a few of my guys check it out before dawn. And yes, she dumped her car there, but there was no sign of her or your son. I'm sorry."

My brow knitted in thought. "Where'd you say this warehouse was again?"

On edge and ready to choke a bitch, we pulled up to the house. He met me out front while Gabe sat in the car.

Jerking his chin toward Gabe, Tama uttered, "That the cop?"

"Yeah, and he's gonna stay right there." I looked back at the car. "You upload the footage?"

"Amoho's going through it right now."

Without a word, he turned and walked back inside. I took it as an open invitation and followed, but when the door shut behind me, my eyes caught the little woman down the hall and my steps faltered.

Molly's entire body stiffened at the sight of me. She held my gaze for a fleeting moment before she lowered her head and limped into a room, quietly closing the door behind her. And Tama stood there, observing, watching me watch her.

He motioned toward the opposite room, and I headed on in, keeping my eyes on the door Molly had disappeared behind.

She signed herself out of the hospital before any of us had the chance to check on her. Her sister, Lenka, arrived at the house not long after, taking Molly's things and loading them into the back of her car. And that was it.

Molly was out.

Out of our home. Out of sight. Out of mind.

Just out.

I didn't expect it of her, the weak-ass shit she was pulling. She wasn't a bitch-ass punk.

"How's she doing?" I asked quietly.

Tama blinked at me before frowning. He didn't answer a long while. "How do you think she's doing?" He held me with a stare. "Doesn't care a lot, my Molly, but she loves your son. Swore to protect him till the death. And now—" He turned to face the closed door. "—she wishes she was dead."

A rough sigh left me as I scratched at the stubble at my neck.

Guilt was a needy bitch.

Guilt demanded it be acknowledged. I knew this. I felt this. It was harsh and, yeah, at first I blamed Molly for what happened, but the truth was, Molly had nothing on Ling, and pitting the two against each other would have been a futile fight. Ling would always remain victor in that battle, no matter the circumstances.

Her guilt was on me, and I wore it like a noose around my neck, choking me.

"Got something," the large Maori man at the computer uttered. He peered into the screen, squinting. "Yep. It's her all right."

I took the few steps over and looked down at the footage. Ling stepped out of her Mercedes, went to the passenger door, and opened it. It took a while for my son to step out, but when he did, a breath of relief filled me. I surveyed Ling and the way she held her hand out to my son.

It was odd, the way she was acting.

And when A.J. refused to take her hand, my stomach dropped.

*Jesus, bud. Don't give her an excuse to hurt you.*

But Ling just got to her knees, spoke to him a second, and then wrapped her arms around my son, holding him tight as if she had the fuckin' right.

The infuriation was hard to breathe through. My woman was at home a fuckin' mess, and Ling was taking the affection meant for Lexi.

*Fuckin' bitch.*

I was going to rip her apart. Yeah. I was going to kill her with my bare hands.

"It's a white or silver SUV," Amoho muttered, watching Ling drive away with my son. "I can't make it all out, but I think I can get partial

plates.”

This guy was a computer wizard.

Feeling a rush of fondness for him, I slapped my hands down onto his shoulders and squeezed hard. “Do it, man.” Standing back, I took in a deep breath and blew it out slowly.

Tama stood there, imposing like a goddamn tiki statue, his face drawn, his lips pulled down. “Want to help you get your boy back.”

He meant it. Not because he was with Molly, but because he knew if we didn’t get my son back soon, one of my people would soon be sent to identify his body. And even psychopaths like us didn’t condone violence against children.

“Appreciate that.” I looked over at Amoho. “Gonna need a copy of that footage.”

Amoho spun on his chair and threw me a small, white USB. I caught it with ease, as he spoke, “We get anything new, we’ll call.”

Before I stepped out, Tama stopped me. “Look. About Molly—”

I cut the big guy off with, “What she’s doing is not helping me.” The words were harsh but spoken softly. “You tell her that she once told me she’d do anything to protect my son, and I’m holding her to that, because, right now, he needs all the help he can get.”

And with that, I left.

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## Lexi

Never before had I realized how cruel the mind could be.

Take now, for instance.

Against all wishes, I wondered what my son’s last thoughts would be before Ling took his life.

Would he remember the times we stayed up late together and watched movies, laughing as he tried to catch the popcorn I threw into his mouth? Or would his last reflections of me be about the times he begged me to believe him about his father’s return and how his awful mother refused to see reason?



I wasn't crying, not anymore, but the tears continued to fall, trailing my cheeks and dripping down my neck.

My mind was stuck on the morose.

I only hoped that when the time came, she made it quick for him.

My brow lowered as I heard my own thoughts.

Listen to me.

What the hell was I doing?

Absolutely nothing.

Sitting here, feeling sorry for myself while Ling was doing God knows what with my son. It was appalling.

What kind of mother did that make me?

It made me a mother who was not worthy of her son.

Feeling a newfound energy source derived from grief, I stood and changed clothes. I went to my nightstand and slid out the bottom drawer, revealing the small metal box hidden underneath. Keying in the code, it opened, and I retrieved the .22 caliber Glock Julius had given me for my own protection. It was loaded and ready to go. Before I left my room, I looked at myself in the mirror.

My face looked sunken. A solid blackness sat under my red eyes. My lips were pale and dry, and a constant frown creased my brows.

I was an absolute mess.

But I didn't have time to dwell. I grabbed my purse, and Luna looked up from her laptop when I stepped out of my room. She must have seen the steely look in my eyes, because she stood slowly. "Where are you going, Lexi?"

No deception here. "I'm going to see Pav."

Luna put her hands up in a placating gesture. "No need. Fern and Thiago are already there and they're negotiating for his help. They'll be back soon, and I'm sure we'll have an army at our disposal." She paused, looking me up and down. "I know this is hard for you, but we're doing everything we can to get your son back and get him back safely."

I didn't want to scoff the way I did. It sort of just escaped. "No offense, Luna, but you can't possibly understand—" My voice broke. "—what this is like." My lips trembled. "And I need to do something, not just sit here like a damsel in distress and wait for someone to help rescue me from this situation." I sniffed, blinking back tears. "So I'm going."

She shocked me when she sat back down, keeping her eyes on me.  
“Okay.”

Wait. Was this a trick?

“Okay,” I said, pulling my purse up my shoulder and turning slowly to leave. Before I hit the door, I spun back and uttered, “Come with me?”

Luna’s face softened as she stood once more. “If you want.”

I did want that, because I was furious at Luka Pavlovic and I did not trust myself alone with him should his answer be yet another refusal.

Shockingly enough, Luka let me into his home without an argument, so what happened when he answered the front door was on him.

Pulling out my pistol, I held it steady and pointed it at the center of his chest.

“Lexi,” Luna muttered in caution, but I was a woman on a mission.

Pav didn’t look too fazed when he uttered a tired-sounding, “What are doing, Alexa?”

To prove my seriousness, I held the gun away from him and pulled the trigger.

*Bang.*

Neither of us flinched, but the sound was deafening.

Thiago and Fern rushed out, guns at the ready, but when they both saw me, they lowered their weapons and Thiago took a small step forward.

“Alexa, don’t do this.”

My nostrils flaring as I took in severe breaths through my nose, I peered at him for a millisecond before resting my wild eyes back on Luka. “You’re going to help me find my son, Luka.” I took a step forward and pressed the barrel of the gun to his pec. He put his hands up sluggishly and took a step back. With every step I took, he moved back into his home, and I spoke all the while. “You are a coward,” I told him scathingly. “And for the first time in my life, I’m not.” Another step. “I’m not scared anymore. I’m just angry.” My vision blurred with tears of fury. “Because a queen in your domain decided she hates me enough to take my son from me, and that’s on you—” I looked him over disgustedly. “—your highness.”

Fern piped in, “Lexi, I don’t like him either, but you can’t do this, *gatita*.”

Ignoring all the warning signs, I stepped closer. My voice shook. “I begged for your help.” My lips trembled. “*Begged* for it. And you refused.

Every second he's gone is a second I won't get back, and I'm not prepared to lose anymore than what I already have." Taking a small step away from him, I lifted my arm, aiming at his head. "So I'm not asking anymore, Luka. Now, I'm demanding." My arm began to shake. "*You will help us.*"

Luka Pavlovic looked me deep in the eyes. He spoke quietly. "Put the gun down, little one."

The hand holding the gun shook almost as uncontrollably as my voice did. "No. Not until you say you'll help me." Jaw tight, my tone lowered, weakened. "I need your help."

That was when Fern spoke. "Lexi, please. Put the gun down." She paused a long moment, before she revealed, "He thinks he knows where she is."

At that, I spun to face her. "What?"

Luka took the opportunity I'd given him, lifting my arm high, taking the gun out of reach, stepping into my body, and holding my quivering form close. When I blinked up at him through my tears, he surprised me by sparing a small smile for the person who just threatened a king in his own demesne. "You think I'd let anything happen to that little boy?" It was hard to take in a full breath. "That boy spent a week in my home. Ate from my table. Called me his uncle." My body slumped at the very same moment my breath hitched. Luka ran a gentle hand down my cheek and shook his head. "I protect my family, Alexa. And whether I like it or not, you're family."

My very soul ached at the force of the relief I felt right then, and as Luka called Twitch, Fern guided me to the sofa and sat me down, where I stayed locked in my head in complete and utter silence because I had nothing more to say.



## Chapter Forty-One

### A.J.

A.J. looked across the room to where the unfamiliar woman sat on the edge of her bed and brushed out her wet hair, humming to herself and smiling all the while.

Yes, he was only five-years-old, but he knew something was wrong.

Something was very wrong.

This woman—this bad lady—had told him his parents had given him to her as a gift, but that sounded wrong. As wrong as being alone with the too-smiley woman felt.

He didn't like it here. He wanted to go home.

Home to his mother. Home to father. Home to Molly.

Just *home*.

A.J. peered around the room as he often did, looking for some way out. But she was always one step ahead, locking doors, closing windows, sleeping in the same room as him. He was beginning to think he'd never find his way home, and remembered what his mother had told him.

If he were ever lost, all he needed to do was find an adult and they would help him find his way home.

He slyly glanced over at the pretty woman. She was an adult, but she wouldn't help him.

He began to wonder just how many bad people there were in the world. How many of them looked safe and pretty like her? How many of them were women?

It was a frightening thought for such a young mind to comprehend.

"Excuse me," he spoke softly.

The woman stilled before turning to him. She looked at him expectantly. "Mummy."

He hated this. She insisted he call her that. But she wasn't his mother. His mother was his mother. This woman was a bad lady, and he didn't know why she wanted him, why she took him.

And so, he refused to call her that.

Her smile widened as if she felt his internal struggle. As if she enjoyed it.

When she turned to face him, what she said caught A.J.'s attention. "Sweetie, if you call me mummy, I'll give you anything you want."

He thought about that. "Anything?"

The bad lady's smile stretched into a grin. "Anything," she promised.

A.J.'s little heart began to beat faster. He didn't like what he knew he had to do, but he'd do it. He'd do it for his mum.

"Mummy," he started, and the woman's face softened along with her smile, "I'd like to go home now." The moment he saw the woman's spine stiffen, he knew he'd said something wrong. "To my real mum and dad." When her eyes shuttered, A.J. felt a cold draught flow through the room as her mood darkened. "Please," he added as politely as he could.

But as easily as her mood had soured, her lids fluttered and then she was smiling again so sweetly he actually believed she might do as he asked.

He should have known better.

"Oh, sweetie." The woman gazed at him warmly before uttering, "*You are home.*"

A.J.'s entire body broke into goose bumps at the way she said it, like she really believed it. Something was very wrong with this lady. And luckily, A.J. was smart enough to see that he was not going to win by upsetting her.

So, for now, he'd do as she pleased no matter how much it hurt him.

He turned back to the toys on the floor, and when he spoke again, he did it gently.

"Okay, Mummy."

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## Twitch

The front door opened and Thiago stood there, watching me closely, a frown marring his perpetually knitted brow. "Where the fuck you been?"

I pushed past the jackoff and stalked down the hall into the main room where everyone was waiting on me. They were all there. The instant I saw

her sitting on the sofa, her face void with emptiness in her eyes, I went to her.

As I approached, ignoring everyone else around me, my chest tightened when, for the first time in two days, she blinked up at me, and muttered, “We’re going to get him back.”

I frowned at my woman. Of course we were. What did she think—that failure was an option? Did she even know me? What the fuck was going on inside that pretty head of hers?

Not knowing worried me.

Taking her small, cold hand in mine, I sat by her and pulled her into me, pressing soft kisses to her clammy brow, and she let me, closing her eyes, taking in the comfort I so rarely offered. And when I pulled back, searching her face, I gently pushed stray hair behind her ears and vowed, “He’s coming home, baby.”

She did her own intake of my sincerity, and as she reached up to cup my cheek with her weak hand, she smiled softly. “Be a parent, they said.” She grinned, but her breath hitched. “It’ll be easy, they said.” When her lips began to quiver, I hugged her to me, cupping the back of her head as she trembled and shook, and in that moment, I knew I would do anything—and I meant *anything*—to see my son home safely to his mother.

It was cruel to think that our family would likely be torn apart with this battle.

It was cruel to have only had my son with me a few solid months. But, no matter the sacrifice, we’d see it through.

I would give anything for my little man. Including my life.

“Where’s the cop?” Pav asked from across the room.

Peering over Lexi’s head, I stated, “Sent him on his way.” When our eyes met, I uttered, “He can’t help us, Luka.”

From the grave nod he gave me, I knew he got me. This was our problem. We did not play by common rules in this kingdom. The law meant nothing to us. We dealt with our own in whichever way we saw fit, and Ling Nguyen had signed her own death warrant.

I wasn’t prepared for what should occur if Gabe Blanco got to Ling first.

She’d plead insanity, likely serve a few years, and get out on a complication or loophole. And I couldn’t let that happen.

“Okay, let’s get started.” Pav moved into the center of the room and looked around at our small but capable family. “The Dragons kept a lot of their dealings on the hush, which made it pretty hard to track down any property acquisitions they may have had a hand in. But, with the right tools —” He inclined his head to Luna, who returned it regally. “—you can find anything on the internet.”

Zep’s gaze rolled over the woman sitting next to him before reaching out to impishly pinch her side. “Lulu to the rescue, huh?”

“Stop it.” She flinched, pushing away his hand. “I’m ticklish.”

Zep’s eyes hooded, and nobody missed the claim in the way he said, “I remember.”

Happy stood to the side, leaning against the wall, and he jerked his chin to the boyishly styled woman. “What did you find, Luna?”

“Actually,” she began, throwing a co-conspirator look to her sister, “it was Pav and Fernanda who gave me the idea.” She glanced around at her peers. “It’s no secret now that Ling and Aslan were a couple, and after he ended it, things went sour. So after a bit of inside research, I simply looked up all of Sadik’s prospective property hauls. It took some time, but I managed to track down some of his losses.” She shrugged, completely undermining the extraordinary work she had done. “They all lead back to the same offshore account.”

Julius spoke low, folding his arms across his chest. “Those accounts should be untraceable.”

It was then Luna let some of her pride show. “*Should* be, yes.”

Happy, now curious, came over to take the spare seat next to Luna and pulled her laptop closer to him, going through her findings. “She did well trying to cover her tracks. Bounced transfers from multiple accounts from different countries, but she fucked up in a very small, very stupid way.”

Luna peered at Happy a long moment before a slow smile spread across her lips. And Zep did not like that. “Oh, yeah?” he muttered, breaking Luna’s spell. “How’s that?”

Happy exchanged a knowing look with Luna. “The originating account was kept the same. Rookie mistake. Also dealt in Australian dollars. It’s a massive giveaway. Should have dealt in Euros or US Dollars. It would have made the search that much broader.”



Evander stood behind Manda, his brow low. "How many properties are we talking here?"

"Fourteen," specified Luna. "But we've narrowed it down to three."

"Three?" Manda frowned. "That's all?" She peered around the room, confused at the hold up. "What are we waiting for? Let's go."

Evander nodded in agreement. "I'm ready when you are."

Pav held up his hands, and uttered, "Now wait a second. We've only got one chance at this. She sees us coming, you think she's just gonna try to escape and move along? Nah." His lips thinned as he shook his head. "She's gonna take out her hostage and then herself. So we need to be smart about this. Set it up right."

No one expected Lexi to speak, let alone say what she said. "We'll do it your way, Luka. But I'm warning you. All of you." A pregnant pause followed. "At the first opportunity, I'm taking her out. Me." She turned her serious expression to me. "I get to kill her."

I pulled back from my woman enough to look her in the eye. "You're not coming."

She smiled then, so serenely that my stomach cramped, and when she uttered, "You think you could stop me?" my heart sank.

Because I couldn't stop her. Wouldn't stop her.

And there was safety in numbers.

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## **A.J.**

A.J. couldn't sleep. It was the first night she'd left him to sleep alone, and he wondered why he slept easier with her in the room. It made no sense.

He should have felt safer without her, but even a boy as young as he could see that the bad lady didn't mean to harm him, only claim him as her own. Be a mother to him.

And so, in the dead of night, he went looking for her.

He found her quickly, sitting in front of the television, her wide eyes glued to the screen as she watched the news. Approaching quietly from

behind, he stilled midstep when he focused on the television screen and watched what she was observing so intensely.

It was a photo of him.

*“...day two of the search for missing school boy, Antonio Julius Falco. Footage shows the five-year-old being brazenly taken from the wreckage of one vehicle and being escorted to another by this woman.”* A photo of the bad lady showed up on screen. *“Ling Nguyen.”* The reporter went on, *“Ms. Nguyen, known leader of the nefarious Dragons, has a warrant out for her arrest for the murder of her brother, Van Nguyen, and kidnapping. If you have seen this woman or know anything about the kidnapping of Antonio Julius Falco, please contact Crime Stoppers on...”*

A.J. stopped listening. He stopped listening because the bad lady was wrong.

They were looking for him.

He smiled inwardly before clearing his throat. “Mummy?” He rubbed his eyes for good measure, and when the woman hurried to switch off the television, she spun and frowned at him.

“What are you doing up, sweetie? It’s late.”

A.J. pouted his lips the way his real mother found adorable and muttered a croaky, “I can’t sleep.”

The bad lady clicked her tongue and held out her arms. He went to her willingly and allowed her to wrap her arms around him, and it was funny. When his mother hugged him, he felt warm and safe and loved. But when this woman hugged him, he felt nothing. He felt numb.

She kissed his head and rubbed his back. “How about I make us some hot chocolate?”

Anything to stay awake a while longer.

Now that A.J. knew his parents were looking for him—not that he had doubts—he needed to find a way out of here, and he could only do that if she were preoccupied.

“Yes, please,” he murmured softly.

And the smile she gave him was so wide, so sweet, that he almost forgot how bad this lady was.

Almost.

“Anything for you.” Without delay, she adjusted the robe from around her, tightening the ribbon around the waist, then moved into the kitchen.

His eyes scanned his surroundings but he saw nothing. So when the woman called him into the kitchen, he went. She smiled as she pulled out a stool for him, and when he sat, his heart jerked as his soft brown eyes landed on the object in front of him.

The woman went to the fridge, pulling out the milk, and as she did, she watched his observing gaze closely.

A.J. swallowed hard before looking up at her. His voice was timid. "Is that a real gun?"

She poured the milk into a pan then turned on the gas stove. "Yes."

Wow.

"Why do you have it?" he asked quietly.

The woman placed her elbows on the counter and leant in. "To protect you."

A.J.'s brow knitted. He didn't know anyone who wanted to hurt him. "From who?"

"From the people who want to take you from me."

A.J. wondered if his father had a gun. A bigger gun than this one. He didn't know, and not knowing frightened him.

He needed to do something, and do it fast.

So when he reached over and picked it up, his other mother tilted her head, never taking her eyes off him.

A.J. had seen people use guns, on TV, in movies.

How hard could it be?

It was heavier than he expected. Much heavier than the toy gun he had at home. But he lifted it high, putting his finger to the trigger. His other mother smiled, her eyes on the weapon he held. So A.J. closed his eyes, held his breath, and pulled the trigger.

*Click.*

His eyes opened and a look of confusion crossed him.

Nothing happened.

A.J. let out the breath he was holding, and before he lowered the gun, his other mother spoke kindly.

"You're holding it wrong, sweetie. Here. Let me show you." Over the counter, she adjusted his grip and placed his finger back on the trigger. Her soft gaze was cunning. "Now. Shoot."

A.J. didn't hesitate a second time.

He pulled back on the trigger and...

*Click.*

Nothing.

The bad lady grinned. "Oops. The safety is on." She reached over and flicked something. "Try again, baby."

He did.

He pulled the trigger and, this time, the gun actually fired.

*Bang.*

But A.J. wasn't prepared for the force behind it, and when the gun kicked back, right into his nose, throwing him from the stool and onto the ground, his other mother laughed, walking around the counter to help him up off the cold tiled floor.

A.J.'s nose tingled and he thought it might be bleeding.

She knelt by his trembling body, took the gun from his shaking hand, and got into his space, and she was not laughing anymore. Instead, she leant in real close, held his terrified gaze with her wild eyes, and whispered, "*Boom.*"

And as A.J.'s body shuddered, she lifted her head heavenward and laughed openly.

One thing was for sure. This woman was scary. And A.J. was afraid of her.

She didn't act like a mummy should. She didn't act like his mummy did. She did everything different, wrong. She was unpredictable, and that made A.J. feel helpless. He never knew what she'd do next.

When she stopped laughing and lowered her face to his, she watched him a short while and her smile began to wane. "I get it," she started. "You don't love me, not yet. But I need you to know that I love you. I love you very much." The rest of her smile fell away, as she said, "So I'm going to lock you into your room tonight, my love." She reached out to smooth his messy hair. "Before either of us does something silly."

Suddenly, A.J. didn't feel so good. The words he spoke were nothing but hushed. "I'm sorry, Mummy."

She smiled then, and the knot in his stomach loosened. "It's okay, baby." The woman stood and held her hand out to him. Without hesitation, A.J. took her hand and she hugged him to her side, rubbing his shoulder. "Are you okay? I know that was a little scary."

He nodded. His nose hurt, but he was okay.

“My strong boy.” She chuckled proudly as she guided him into the kitchen. “It’s been a long day. Let’s have some hot chocolate and go on to bed. Okay?”

“Okay,” he whispered, and they sat in silence, drinking their hot chocolate, looking at each other all the while.

A.J. didn’t know much, but he knew one thing.

He needed to get his hands on that gun again.

Because if they weren’t coming for him, A.J. was going to save himself.

# Chapter

## Forty-Two

### Thiago

Dressed in black, merging with the shadows surrounding us, I looked across the lot to my sisters and gave a sharp nod.

Fernanda moved first, gracefully, like a ballet dancer. Luna went next, with a casual air only she could pull off.

The first two buildings were a bust. They were abandoned. Empty. On the verge of demolition. Normally, this would have made for a decent place to stash a child. Unfortunately, from what I knew about Ling, she was the ballsy kind. Cocky. She liked to put on a show. And although we hadn't done a full sweep of the building yet, I knew she was in *there* somewhere.

In the fully occupied apartment building.

It made it harder for us to do what we needed to, but it didn't mean shit, because we were the notorious Vegas. We could get any job done for the right price. Alone, we weren't worth much, but as a family, we were priceless.

Each of us brought something different to the fold; each of us brought something important and necessary. Together, my sisters and I were invincible. Regrettably, that meant we often had targets on our heads. This was why we chose to stay underground for the most part.

This was also why Luka banished us.

I wasn't a stupid man by any means. Being banished only did two things to our business. One, it raised our fee to astronomical proportions. And two, it kept Fernanda safe. And safe was how Luka liked his woman.

Yeah, he was pissed at her, but Luka Pavlovic adored my sister. He adored her so much that even though it likely killed him inside, he sent her to live half a world away from him.

And with that decision, he had my respect.

What can I say?

I definitely preferred my sisters safe than dead.

A number of minutes passed before a hushed voice sounded within my ear.

“I’m in place,” said Fernanda.

“So am I,” uttered Luna.

My eyes scanned the darkness surrounding me. I walked the parking lot, taking in every car I passed. “Find her,” I told my sisters, and they had my complete faith. I trusted them like no one else. They were clever and accomplished and talented, my sisters.

I trusted them with my life, which was lucky because oftentimes, during the jobs we pulled, it was crucial.

My feet moved silently along the cement flooring as I went from one floor to the next, surveying car after car.

“Uh, guys?” Luna whispered. “I think I’ve got a visual.”

“What?” Fernanda sputtered in disbelief. “How?”

Luna chuckled. “Eat shit, Fern. I got here first.”

“Where are you?” Fernanda never did like coming in second.

“Scaling the building,” Luna said so matter-of-factly that I smiled.

My sisters were nuts.

“Where are you, Luna?” I asked quietly as I continued to walk the lot.

“It’s hard to say,” she uttered softly. “I think it’s the tenth floor. I don’t know. Waiting to confirm visual.”

“Waiting for confirmation,” Fern moped, trying to sound professional.

I kept walking as I smiled. They were the only two women in the world who could make me laugh. Shit. They were the only people in the world who could make me smile. I loved them dearly, my little sisters. And I wouldn’t let anything happen to them.

As my eye caught a silver SUV that could have been the same one from the surveillance tape Twitch had obtained, I approached cautiously, my brows lowered. Taking out my phone, I looked over the images saved onto my cell, comparing them to the car in front of me. Peering over every inch of the car, I took a step back and sighed.

That was when Luna said the magic words. “Visual confirmed. I have both Ling and the boy in sight. I repeat, I have the boy in sight.”

Fern crowed in my ear. “Hell, yeah, baby. That’s how we *do*.”

“Nice work,” I told them. “I’ve got the car. I’ll call Luka.” Taking a deep breath, I muttered, “Let’s take this bitch down and get the boy home safe.”

“That’s the plan,” stated Fern, before asking Luna, “Yo, Lulu. What do you need?”

Luna hesitated only a moment, before she said, “Access to the roof. I’ve got a plan.”

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## Ling

It had been a long couple of days, and between the lack of sleep, the anxiety that ran through me with every ticking second of the clock, and the ominous knowledge that my time with my heir may be cut short, it rattled in a way that had me panicking.

“Hey, sweetie,” I uttered with a smile as I came to kneel by him. “I brought you something.”

As I handed over the blue and white chocolate bar, he frowned down at it. “What is it?”

“It’s candy. American candy. It’s called an Almond Joy. Sort of like a Bounty, but with an almond on top.” He watched me warily. Yes, he had the right to watch the way he did, but that didn’t mean I had to like it. “I thought we could eat one together before bed.”

My little Itch, he looked down at the candy bar a long moment then back up at me. “No, thank you.”

I made myself look sadder than I was. “Oh. Okay. It’s no big deal.” Taking my time, I ripped open the wrapper on one bar and bit into it. I chewed slowly and moaned, closing my eyes. “Wow. It’s been so long since I had one of these.” I made a happy face and nodded. “It’s really good.” I licked my lips and asked slyly, “You sure you don’t want one?”

Of course he wanted one.

He was all but drooling for it.

But, like most mothers had, I was sure Lexi had taught my son to not take candy from strangers.

So when I bit into the candy bar again and smiled blissfully, it was only a matter of time before he gave in. Unfortunately for him, the temptation was too strong, and when I opened the second candy bar, holding it out to him, he took it slowly, studied it carefully, and then bit into it. Once the



chocolate hit his tongue, I watched him chew eagerly, and when he swallowed the first bite, he went in for a second rather quickly. And at that moment, I felt my heart swell at the very same time my stomach ached.

Because he should have listened to his mother.

“It’s good, right?”

He nodded enthusiastically and my insides coiled tight.

You should never take candy from strangers.

# Chapter

## Forty-Three

### Twitch

My heart raced the entire way over. Once Thiago had confirmed the visual on A.J., I could think of nothing else than holding my son again but silently fearing I might be too late. The car pulled up and Luka twisted back to face us. “You good?”

“Yeah.” I wasn’t though. Not even a little bit. And from the looks of my woman, neither was she. “We good, angel?”

She blinked up at me, but her movements were slowed. She was beyond exhausted, and I wished she would have just let me do my thing. I got why she couldn’t do that, but it would have been easier for me if I didn’t have to also focus on her tonight.

“Yeah,” she spoke timidly. “I’m ready.”

Luka’s gaze drifted between the two of us. His lips thinned and he nodded slowly. “Okay. Let’s do this.”

It was close to 3:00 a.m. It was important to have the element of surprise on our side. Not that it mattered. Ling would be waiting. Ling would be ready for us.

And a sleeping snake still had fangs.

Happy, Julius, and Zep were already waiting. Soon, Evander and Manda joined them. And when we got out of the car to join the ranks, Luka checked his messages and spoke to the small crowd gathered at the entrance of the apartment block. “Thiago, Luna, and Fern are ready to go. Happy, you got something for us?”

Happy handed out small, black plastic-looking things. “Put it in your ear. This way, we’re all connected. You won’t be able to talk to the Vegas, but you’ll be able to hear them. Only Luka will be able to communicate directly.”

We all put the earpieces in and listened to Fern sing “Another One Bites The Dust.”

Luna’s teeth chattered. “It’s fucking freezing up here, guys. Make a move already.”

Happy turned to face Luka. "When you're ready."

"We're ready," he said with a curt nod.

But from behind us came, "Sorry we're late." I spun around at the sound of her voice. She looked small and scared and out of place. But she held her head high and blinked at me a moment before her eyes met Lexi's. A small shrug bounced her shoulders. "Heard you could use some help."

Lexi bound forward and wrapped her arms around Molly. They held each other a long time, and while Molly's eyes closed, Lexi whispered into her ear, and I watched Molly's face crumple in pure sadness. She shook her head and uttered a whispered, "I'm so sorry."

Meeting Tama's eyes, I jerked my chin at him. "Thanks for coming."

Luka didn't appear impressed. "Great. Nice. Family reunion. Fucking wonderful. Now—" He motioned to the building. "—time's wasting. Let's move."

Lexi uncoiled her arms from around Molly but remained by her side in a show of silent support, and while Happy broke us into the building using his gadgets and whatnot, Julius moved to my side, speaking for my ears alone. "Ana wanted to be here."

I frowned at him. "That girl has gone through enough. I'm glad you were able to talk her down. Besides..." My own voice quieted. "This isn't her fight."

Julius leaned in and he put his hand to my shoulder. "He's coming home."

Yeah, he was.

He was.

My son was coming home.

The huge double doors beeped a second before the latch clicked over and we were in. Happy held the door open, and as I walked past him, I muttered, "My brother," proudly.

We had to take both elevators up, with Lexi, Molly, Tama, Luka, and me in one, Julius, Happy, Zep, Evander, and Manda in the other. Once we reached the tenth floor penthouse, Happy knelt by the door, inserted a blank cardkey into the lock, and used his phone to hack the code.

The light turned green and my heart jolted. We were so close.

Before anyone went inside, Julius held a finger to his lips and motioned for everyone else to stay in the hall. The apartment was dark as he entered,

gun drawn, but soon enough, I heard her.

“Drop it, Jay.”

A light switched on and, from the hall, we watched Julius illuminate in the soft glow of lamplight.

What Julius said next had me rushing to his side. “Ling,” he uttered, his face awash with concern, “what have you done to him?”

*What?*

Fuck this shit.

My feet carried me faster than they ever had before, and when I joined my brother in that room, my eyes landed on the small woman cradling my son in her arms in the nook of the large bay window.

She looked high, or tired, or both. I couldn’t tell.

Ling smiled at me, but it was more a taunt. “Quiet, Daddy. You’ll wake him.”

“Put him down, Ling.” My voice shook with raw fury.

From behind me came, “Let go of my son,” and I was surprised by how steady Lexi’s voice was at that moment.

Ling looked up around us, and her eyes widened as the space within the bedroom got smaller and smaller with bodies filling the area. Molly slid to one side of the room as Tama matched her move on the opposite wall, blocking the little woman in.

“Oh. You brought guests. If I’d known, I would have tidied up.” She smirked at Lexi. “But you know kids. Messy little things.” Manda stepped forward, and Ling slowly raised her gun, clicking her tongue. “Get back, baby, or I put a hole in you.”

But Manda took another small step forward, putting her hands up. “Ling. My name is Manda. I’m a doctor.” She looked down at her nephew and her brow creased. “I’m concerned. A.J.’s breathing is a little too shallow for my liking.” She spoke to Ling as if she were a child. “Can you tell me what you’ve given him?”

Ling frowned down at the little boy in her arms, and I wanted to kill her right then and there. “I gave him a little Phenergan.”

“*What?*” I was fucking shook. “You drugged my son?”

The stupid bitch. My jaw ached with how tight it clenched. She was dog meat.

Manda nodded lightly. "It's an antihistamine. They sometimes use it to make children drowsy on long flights." She turned back to Ling, took another small step forward, and asked, "How much did you give him, Ling? This is very important, okay? Too much can kill him."

But Ling ignored Manda as she gently rocked my son in her arms. "I just wanted to hold him. He's always on edge. I just want to love him," she whispered softly.

"He's not yours." From beside me, Lexi's breathing turned heavy, and I watched her fists ball in unconcealed anger. "You can't have him."

At that, Ling blinked rapidly before settling on Lexi. Her lip curled. "And who's going to stop me, Lexi? You?" She scoffed, and then she was irate. "You and yours, always been trouble. I mean, personally, I don't know what the hell he sees in you." She looked Lexi up and down slowly. "You're really very... ordinary."

"Let's talk about this," I muttered. "What do you want, Ling?"

Ling thought about that a moment before her eyes flashed. "I want you to suffer." To my absolute shock, Ling's eyes shone with unshed tears. "I want you to hurt." The first of her tears fell as she went on. "I want you to know how it feels to lose someone you love, Twitch." Her body shook in silent sobs. "For the first time in my life, I was happy." Her lip curled. "And then you came back and ruined it." She took in a deep breath and blinked away the wetness at her eyes. "Az and I were happy together. But you didn't like to see me happy, did you? You were jealous that I didn't want you anymore, weren't you? So you just had to get involved." She looked sad then, and I realized I'd never before seen Ling wear sadness so openly. "I loved him so much. And you took him from me." Ling smiled down at my son lovingly. "Tit for tat, baby."

She was crazy. "I didn't take him from you."

"You did," she insisted.

"No, I didn't."

"Yes, you did!"

"You shot him, Ling. You shot him in the back as he walked away from you." I paused a moment. "That's all on you."

She stood then, and the way my son's mouth gaped was so unnatural that I knew this had to end soon so we could get him the medical help he needed. His arm flopped out to the side, and as Ling opened her mouth and

bellowed, he didn't even flinch. "It's your fault he's dead!" She panted, looking deeply pained. "He never would have left me if it weren't for you. He would be here with me if you just kept your fucking nose out of my damn business, you asshole!" Her lips quivered. "*You're* the reason he's dead."

My inner ear hummed as Luna spoke on a hush. "I don't have a clear shot out here guys. I can't see the boy."

Fern added, "Me neither."

Thiago spoke gruffly. "No go."

I needed to buy some time. I stepped forward, and as I did, Molly and Tama stepped in time with me. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah." Ling nodded, but her expression remained fierce. "You're sorry now, aren't ya? Because I have something of yours. Something you love very much."

When Ling lifted her gun, Lexi took a small step forward and gasped out, shaking. "You touch one hair on his head and I will fucking gut you. Do you understand me, you dumb bitch?"

"Ooh." Ling smiled widely and looked over Lexi with a newfound appreciation. "Meow, Lexi. Who knew you had it in you?"

She took a step back, toward the window, and Luka, being the only line of communication with the Vegas, started to monologue. "Get away from the window, Ling. It's not safe."

Ling smiled sadly. "We both know I'm not getting out of this alive, Luka." She peered down at A.J. warmly. "And wherever it is I move on to, I plan to take my son with me."

My stomach dropped. Like hell she was.

That was when Luna said, "Let her open the window."

*What?*

Luna had to be fucking with us.

My heart began to thump.

No way was I letting my son anywhere near an open window on the tenth floor.

I took a step closer and raised my hands in surrender. "Take me instead."

Ling stepped into the nook with bare feet and reached back blindly to unlock the window. Her mouth pursed. "Hmmm. Nope." She looked me

over. “Although, I stick by what I said, baby. Death is a good look on you.” When she pushed open the window, a crisp breeze blew in, and as she lifted her gun and aimed it at me, she muttered, “Let’s make it permanent.” Ling’s finger lightly pressed on the trigger and she grinned twistedly. “See you in hell, baby.”

Everything began to move in slow motion.

Ling’s grip on her gun tightened.

I readied to die.

Lexi moved to stand in front of me, her arms wide.

Everyone rushed forward.

And that was when it happened.

Suddenly, Ling was pushed back into the room with such force, she was hurled unceremoniously six feet away. A.J was thrown from her arms, and where he landed, he remained unmoving. He didn’t respond to the fall, and I knew something was very wrong. For a split second, we all watched him, wishing, hoping he would awaken. But he didn’t.

Lexi and Manda dashed over to him, looking him over. Molly joined them, carefully taking instructions from Manda as she checked his vitals.

But I had bigger fish to fry.

Ling, sprawled in the center of the room with her pistol still resting beside the window, looked out at Luna. Perched on the windowsill, legs apart and holding onto the safety rope like a fucking superhero, she flipped Ling the bird then blew her a kiss. “Sup, bitch?”

Ling’s eyes widened as she realized she was done for. Scrambling backward, she kept going, breathing harshly, until she hit the wall, and that was when Julius did something he’d wanted to do for a while now. He walked over to a petrified Ling, knelt in front of her, and said something I wasn’t expecting. “I forgive you.”

“What?” Her voice trembled and Ling blinked, puzzled-like. “You do?”

“Yeah.” He nodded before rearing back and punching her square in the mouth as hard as he could. As she panted rapidly, Julius got into her face and smiled. “You’re gonna die tonight. And I get to go home to my wife. So, I guess you could say—” His face darkened a notch. “—I win.”

That was my brother.

That was the Julius I knew. He was not one for unnecessary violence. And I was so tired of this life that I found I wasn’t either. Not anymore.

Luka and I walked over to the cowering queen while Tama trailed behind, a shadow. She was pathetic and I hated her.

Pav nudged my shoulder. "It's your call."

I looked down at her bloody mouth then back at my woman. I know she wanted in on this, but I couldn't let her live with that. I couldn't let her sully her pure soul. Mine was already dirty, and as we lived the rest of our lives together, she could do as a good wife did and pray for me.

As I peered down at this little woman, this little snake who lived to see others burn, my anger lit. She was nothing. She was insignificant. And after she was dead, nobody would mourn her.

So I did her a solid.

Reaching down, I wrapped my hand around her throat and picked her up. She fought me all the way to the window, slapping at my hands and kicking out at me, and the room seemed to still around me. I felt all eyes on me as I took step by concrete step toward Ling's demise. And when I got her there, I spared her a short glance, giving Luna the chance to move inside, away from the window.

Wide-eyed and red-faced, Ling Nguyen knew what was coming.

She choked out, "Do it."

Oh, I would.

But not before I said what I needed to say. "I'm sorry I ever met you." Her breathing slowed. "I'm sorry I made you into this person." She stilled in my arms. "I'm sorry I didn't love you enough to let you go when you had the chance to move on."

It would be one of my biggest regrets.

My grip on her throat tightened, and I uttered, "Say hi to Az for me," a single moment before I pushed her back out of the window.

Leaning over the sill, I watched her fall.

I watched her arms flail as if she were a flightless bird. I watched her eyes bug out and her mouth round in a silent scream. I watched her fear life for once in her miserable life.

And I took immense pleasure in watching her hit the ground below.

*Would you look at that?*

*She bounced.*

My entire being lightened as the weight left my shoulders, but it didn't last long. We needed to leave this place. We needed to leave fast. And as we



did, I couldn't help myself. As one car took off with my woman, son, and sister inside it, I hesitated.

I needed to get a closer look, to confirm her death.

The moment I approached Ling's lifeless body, I felt a strong sadness leech into me. I knelt down by her still form and reached out to gently stroke her hair. She was bleeding from everywhere, the eyes, the nose, the ears. Her body was as broken as her soul. How fitting.

A lot of people had let this woman down in life. And I was one of them.

I stood, sparing a single glance for her before taking a deep breath and turning away from the dangerous woman I had created. In that moment, I felt sore in a place I shouldn't have felt sore. Simultaneously, my chest ached as my stomach eased.

As I made my way back to my people, one odd thought went through my mind.

Just as she was born and as she had been her entire life, Ling Nguyen even died prettily.

It figured.

# Chapter

## Forty-Four

Lexi

As soon as the car slowed to a stop, I shot out of the back and into the emergency entrance with Manda on my heels and my son in my arms.

“Help!” I panted as I ran. My voice croaked, “I need help!”

Two nurses rushed forward, and while the female pried open the little monster’s eyes, shining a light in them, the male asked, “What happened?”

What happened?

I had the insane urge to laugh out loud.

Jesus Christ. How much time did he have? Because, oh boy, did I have a story to tell.

Thankfully, Manda responded on my behalf. “He’s been given Phenergan and we don’t know how much.” She peered down at A.J. “Judging from his shallow breathing, I’m guessing a double dose at the very least.”

The female nurse put a stethoscope to my son’s chest and frowned before moving it around. When her frown deepened, the last few days of exhaustion caught up with me, and my arms began to shake as I struggled to hold my little boy in my arms.

My small stumble was noticed by all.

From my side, Manda uttered, “Let me take him, Lexi.”

But I took a step back.

No.

Nobody was taking him from me. I wouldn’t allow it.

When the male nurse held his arms out, my initial reaction was to open my mouth and spew out a long string of vicious obscenities. But my current state of exhaustion even made that too much. Instead, I simply shook my head as my eyes darted from nurse to nurse erratically.

The female nurse sighed loudly. “Listen.” Her tone told me she was done with my shit before it began. “I need to get that little boy onto a respirator. I also need to get an IV line into him, and I can’t do that with you pulling at him the way you are.”

I blinked down at my son, and for a solid moment, I was genuinely terrified of letting him go.

My shoulders shook as I lowered my face to A.J.'s cheek, pressing shaky kisses to it as I began to cry. Given the moment I had so desperately needed, I looked into her eyes and my breath hitched, as I croaked out, "Please don't take him from me."

Didn't they understand?

I just got him back.

My biggest fear at the moment was A.J. waking up in an unfamiliar room, in an unfamiliar place without me.

He needed me.

*No.*

*You need him.*

At my candid fear, the woman's face softened. "You came to us for help. Now let us help him, love."

When gentle hands came down on my shoulders, my head snapped up, and his soft brown eyes held me in place. "Let go, baby."

I shook my head as my lips trembled. "No."

Twitch moved slowly, and then he was at my side. His eyes never leaving mine, and with firm but gentle hands, he went about prying my son out of my arms.

It took me a second to react. Affronted, my lip curled as I recognized what he was doing. I tried to step back, but his free arm held me around the waist. "Let go."

Why didn't he get it?

I couldn't.

I just *couldn't*.

We struggled as he attempted to take my son from me. "No."

And when he said what he said, my entire body weakened. "You'll get him back this time, angel. I promise. Just let go."

My fear spoken out loud, my breath left me all at once. Grief struck me hard like a punch to the gut.

In my declining state, he managed to force our son from me, and as I lifted my head and cried openly, my knees wobbled, but he held me tight. I heard him say, "Take him," and I watched as the nurses took my son.

They took him from me a second time in as many days.

And I did the only thing I could at that moment.

I cried.

I cried my heart out.

“Antonio Julius Falco.”

The moment his name was called, I shot out of Twitch’s lap and rushed over to the fairly young doctor. Where I found the energy was anyone’s guess. “Yes. That’s me.”

I turned back to Twitch and couldn’t help but notice the dark circles under his eyes. Momentarily, I felt awful. In my manic state, I had forgotten about how he must be feeling. He had done such a good job of looking after me that I neglected to remember that this was not about me. It was about us. And perhaps, my usually strong man needed solace in my arms as much as I needed comfort from his.

Taking a small step back, I slipped my cold hand into his, held his eyes, and amended my statement. “That’s us.” I turned back to the doctor. “We’re his parents.”

“I’m Doctor Prahesh.” The doctor watched us both closely a second. “Your son was given a fairly high dose of Phenergan. The amount he was given has led to an overdose. We’ve administered activated charcoal. We use this to treat poisoning. What this does is stop any further absorption in the gut and trap the toxins to be expelled otherwise.” He looked over at Twitch. “Antonio has been placed in ICU.” The conversation took a turn when the doctor’s lips thinned, and he admitted, “We were hoping to see some kind of result by now, but so far, there’s no change in his vitals.” My gut sank as he went on. “His breathing is what we’re most concerned about.”

My heart thumped as I tried to make sense of what he was saying.

“But he hasn’t worsened.” I squeezed Twitch’s hand. “That’s something, right?”

*Typical Lexi. Always looking for a silver lining.*

Doctor Prahesh agreed, “Most definitely.” He looked between us, a pair of panicked parents, and took pity, as he uttered, “You’re welcome to sit with him if you like.”

“Yes,” I said immediately as my tight shoulders drooped. “We’d like that.”

It wasn't past my notice that Twitch's hand was as clammy as it was. His jaw tight, he nodded, and his whiskey-smooth voice sounded far too gravelly for my liking. "Lead the way."

And as if the world was against us being with our son, the voice coming from behind stopped us with a sharp, "Antonio Falco." The both of us spun around to find Sergeant Gabriel Blanco wearing a tight expression, and it was focused solely on Tony. When he spoke again, he didn't bother with niceties. "I need you to come with me."

Twitch looked the man up and down. His tone was purely bored, as he replied, "What for?"

"A woman is dead. I need a statement."

Gabe, the man I'd had coffee with a dozen times, the man who consoled me through the absence of my son, peered at my husband as though he was a piece of shit. And, for the life of me, I couldn't help myself.

I slipped my hand out of Twitch's and slid in front of him, a human barricade. My eyes full of rage, I ignored the staccato beat of my heart and stepped toward the sergeant. "That monster poisoned my son, Gabe. She poisoned him, and I don't know if he's going to wake up." My voice was deceptively calm as I tried in vain to steady my breathing. My hands shook when I forced the words out. "You want a statement? Okay. I'll give one." Looking Gabriel Blanco deep in the eyes, I didn't stutter as I let the accusation fly. "All the resources in the world, and you couldn't do in days what my family managed in one night." Oh, they could try all right, but nobody was coming for us. No way, no how. "Tonight of all nights." I shook my head lightly. "Shame on you, Sergeant Blanco."

A moment of silence went by, and the longer the moment lasted, I could see Gabe Blanco question himself. And I was glad for it.

Taking Twitch's hand once more, I looked at Gabe but spoke to my man. "Come on, honey." My voice was drab, dry. "We should be there when he wakes up."

As we walked away from our impending doom, Gabe called out, "You can't run from this. I'll be back."

His fiery statement didn't scare me.

We weren't running.

The villain in our fairytale had finally been vanquished, once and for all.

No. We were done with running.

Twitch pulled me into his side and pressed a soft kiss to my brow. I placed my hand on his chest and sighed deeply, lovingly, as we walked closer and closer to the glue that held us together.

Our son.

The silence came as a reprieve, and right then, I came to realize the only place we would run to in the future was each other's arms.

Because we belonged together and nothing could keep us apart.

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## Twitch

It had been twenty-four hours.

I was officially freaking the fuck out. And as Lexi slept in the chair in the corner of the room, I lay by my son on the narrow hospital bed, observing the tubes coming out of his mouth and nose, wondering how I had managed to put the person I loved more than life itself into this position.

Guilt was a fairly new emotion for me. I didn't love it; that was for sure.

I was desperate.

And so I begged.

"You gotta wake up, bud." *You gotta because I can't live with the shame.* "Just open your eyes." *Please.* "Your mom needs you." *I need you.* "Please, buddy." I shut my eyes tightly and swallowed hard, as I whispered, "I'm so sorry, son."

I cried silently so as not to wake her.

It was the least I could do in this shitstorm I formed.

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## Lexi

"What are you doing?" I asked as Doctor Prahesh moved around A.J.'s bedside and surveyed the respirator that was keeping my son alive.

He pressed buttons on the machine and stayed silent a while before responding. "I think it's time to see how A.J. goes about breathing on his

own.”

Twitch was suddenly not sleeping anymore. He sat up, blinking drowsily. “Say what now?”

“*What?*” My mind fizzled a moment before it completely blacked out. “You want to turn off the one thing keeping my son alive?” I couldn’t have scoffed even if I wanted to. I leaned into him, frowning, and seethed, “Over my *dead body*.”

“Doc.” Twitch frowned. “I get this is your job and all, but—nah.”

But Doctor Prahesh didn’t see the seriousness in this situation. Instead, he smiled kindly. “I know this is difficult for you both, but A.J.’s vitals have improved considerably. His color has returned. His fever has subsided. And now, I’d like to compare his breathing to when he first came in. But I can’t do that if we don’t take him off the respirator.”

Parents were supposed to know what to do in these situations. They were meant to be strong and have a plan and trust their doctors. But as Tony and I glanced at each other, we wore matching expressions of uncertainty, and his uncertainty fuelled my own to levels a parent should not have had.

Nobody spoke a while.

“Do it,” Twitch said, and my eyes widened in shock.

My mouth parted lightly. “What? *No!*”

Twitch shuffled to the edge of the seat. “Baby, they can’t keep him on it forever.” His expression softened, and I swear there was a distinct sadness in his eyes. “Got to let him fall so he can fly on his own.”

It was a beautiful sentiment spoken at the wrong time.

My throat tightened, and I whispered anxiously, “What if he doesn’t fly? What if he hits the ground?”

Twitch looked down at the ground, and as he did, he bit the inside of his cheek. He didn’t respond a long moment, but when he lifted his head, he shrugged. “No better place to fall than right here, angel.”

“The longer he’s on the machine, the more of a chance he has of developing pneumonia,” Doctor Prahesh said. “It’s been thirty-six hours. With your permission, I’d really like to try to wean sooner rather than later.”

My heart was at war with my head.

My body cold, my eyes bleak, I paced the length of the room, placing my fingertips over my mouth and weighing up the possible outcomes. Out

of the twelve possible outcomes my mind conjured, only one of them turned out happily.

I didn't like those odds.

I hated those odds.

Running a hand through my hair, I paced some more until I stood right in front of Tony. My voice quivered as I blinked away tears, and rambled, "I usually know what to do in hard situations, and I don't know what to do here, Twitch. What if he doesn't want to breathe on his own? What if he was hurt worse than we thought? I can't lose him, and right now—" My voice was little over a hush. "—we could lose him."

Twitch reached out and took my fingers between his. He caressed them a second before I spotted the way his cheek ticked. "Don't say that," he spoke quietly but firmly. "He's strong, raised by a solid mother with the genes of his stubborn-ass father." He didn't look at me, and I wondered if it was because he was worried I'd see his own fear splashed across those beautiful eyes. "He's not going anywhere. He's coming out of this, baby."

My eyes swept over to the little boy who looked even smaller in the bright white sheets of his hospital bed. So many tubes coming out of him. I wasn't ready to let go. And as Twitch squeezed my fingers between his, I realized that maybe I didn't have to.

He was right.

I would have to let my baby bird fall if I wanted him to fly.

"Okay." Swallowing past the knot in my throat, I said the words calmly, even though every part of my soul ached. "Do it."

With a short nod, Doctor Prahesh left the room and returned with a nurse. They worked in tandem with the nurse at the machine as the Doc gently worked on detaching the tube from the breathing tube. "And," he uttered as my heart stopped, "now we see what our little Antonio is capable of."

He removed the tube and watched carefully as he put a stethoscope to my son's chest. And his chest was the only thing I could focus on.

It wasn't moving.

My voice shook. "He's not breathing."

Doctor Prahesh listened closely. "Give him a second."

Completely terrified, my body went rigid, as I panted out, "He's not breathing, Twitch."



We watched closely in complete shock and horror as our son lay lifeless on the bed.

Doctor Prahesh frowned. Seconds passed by and he looked at the nurse. I didn't like the look that was exchanged.

"What's happening?" I asked.

Neither of them spoke.

"*What's happening?*" I croaked out in panic.

Doctor Prahesh removed the stethoscope from my son's chest and opened his mouth to speak but was interrupted when Twitch shot up out of his chair. "There."

I looked to where he was pointing.

He was pointing at A.J.

More specifically, at his chest.

"*There,*" he said, moving forward toward the narrow bed.

Doctor Prahesh placed the stethoscope back on A.J., but it didn't matter.

I could see.

*Oh my God.*

I could see it moving.

*Thank you, God.*

He was breathing.

Doctor Prahesh smiled as he listened through the instrument. "That's the way," he spoke low, to himself, and his smile widened. "Nice and deep."

A shocked laugh shot up out of my throat, and I fought to breathe through it. Twitch turned to face me, but he wasn't smiling. He was still, an unbreakable tree lost in a fight against a fierce hurricane.

I needed him to bend.

I needed him to bend before he broke.

"Honey." I took a step forward.

He didn't respond.

"Honey." I touched his arm, and he looked down at the spot I'd touched before resting his turbulent gaze on mine. I smiled and softened my voice. "He's breathing." I sniffled. My eyes blurred with unshed tears before I laughed out, "*He's breathing.*"

"He's breathing," confirmed an ecstatic-looking Doctor Prahesh. "He's off the ventilator and breathing on his own." He twisted back to look at us. "That's the best we could ask for."

“Why—?” Twitch tried to speak but cut himself off. He tried again, slower this time, and the thick emotion I heard in his voice had me moving toward him, pressing myself into his side. “Why isn’t he awake?”

It was something I wanted to ask but had been too frightened to.

I listened intently at the response Doctor Prahesh gave. “Well, sometimes, when people have experienced a trauma as Antonio has, the body isn’t the only thing that needs to take time to heal. The mind is delicate. A child’s mind, even more so.” He looked back at our son. “He’s healing. I think your son will wake when he’s good and ready.”

“*I think*” wasn’t something I wanted to hear, but I’d take it.

Doctor Prahesh was a smart man.

And nine hours later, the little monster opened his eyes and woke from his prolonged slumber like the sleeping beauty he was.

# Chapter

## Forty-Five

### Twitch

In the days after we got A.J. home, our house was full, for days, for hours on end, and for the first time in my life, I didn't mind the company. It kept me thinking about the could-haves, the would-haves, the should-haves. It kept me from thinking about the things that might have been, and I was grateful for the reprieve from my thoughts.

Gifts came by the carload, and although A.J. was having a hard time speaking after the removal of his breathing tube, he was getting better by the minute and damned if he didn't love being spoiled.

I couldn't believe how resilient this child of mine was.

There he was, smiling and laughing, playing on the floor with Happy and Ana while I fought the urge to cry. I fought that urge so hard, but it hadn't left me for days.

Every smile he threw my way shot me in the heart. Every excited look, every happy gasp, every hug he gave as he passed me wrecked me. Wrecked my soul in a way I couldn't comprehend. Breathing in a full breath hadn't happened since he was taken from us, and I still couldn't manage one. Because we might not have been so lucky, and I silently vowed that I would spend the rest of my life being the father he deserved. I would be the kind of father I wished for as a child, the involved, loving kind. The kind of dad who instinctively knew something was wrong with his kid. The kind of father who knew his child *that* well.

Something had happened to me over the past week. Something had changed. I felt myself softening in a way that felt unnatural, in a way I wanted to fight it, but I was tired of fighting. Maybe it was time for a change. And as I sat down next to my ailing father, I spoke without a trace of malice. "You're coming back to visit, right, Pops?"

Antonio Falco Senior didn't have a lot of life left in him, but he wanted to spend what little time he had left making up for the mistake he'd made a lifetime ago. And, right now, as I looked over at my recovering son, I could appreciate that. I could respect that.

His voice was rough. "You want that?"

I shrugged. "Sure. Why not?"

He blinked at me in stunned disbelief. He was waiting for the shoe to drop. But there was no shoe to drop. I said what I said.

When enough time had passed, I uttered, "So, is that a yes?"

He spoke cautiously. "Maybe you could bring my grandson to visit me in Vegas?"

No hesitance. "Okay. I mean, it might not be for a while. Depends on how he recovers and all, but yeah. I think Lexi would be down for that."

My father's lip tilted up at the corner. His lip twitched then stretched as he smiled. That smile pulled into a grin, and when he lifted his shaking hands, I realized he was sicker than I thought. Without warning, he roughly grabbed my cheeks and pulled me in. When he kissed my cheeks as hard as he did, wheezing out a laugh, something I'd never felt flowed through me, slowly. Languidly. It was liquid warmth in my veins.

It was a father's love.

Something I'd never had before.

And as I fought the emotion I was feeling, I took one of my dad's trembling hands and kissed his thick, aged knuckles as he continued to smile down at me like I was breathing life into him. With one hand in his and the other on his shoulder, I gently shook him and uttered, "Don't up and die on me, okay?" My tone was as steady as I could make it. "We got shit to catch up on."

That was when my brother stepped in with a sharp clap to my shoulder. "What's going on? You two need to get a room or some shit?" Zep grinned down at me as I glared up at him. "You gonna miss us, asshole?"

With a solid frown, I shrugged his hand off me. "Fuck you, bitch."

And as Zep laughed openly, he wrapped his arm around my neck, mock-choking me, and pressed a smacking kiss to my head. "It's okay, fucker." He dug his knuckles into my hair and rubbed hard enough to make me grit my teeth. Before he walked away to sit beside the growing amount of people surrounding my son, he uttered a straight up, "I'mma miss you too."

My father smiled widely at the exchange, sighing out, "Like real brothers." He nodded sadly. "You've made an old man very happy, my sons."

It was nice, and part of me didn't want it to be because I'd miss it too much.

We were a world away from them, my family, and I would miss them more than I wanted to admit. So I didn't.

As Manda and Zep fought over a truck Molly and Tama had brought the little dude, A.J. laughed rowdily and I smiled. From my place at the table, I watched Julius, Nikki, and Dave sit outside with my woman. She was smiling. She was happy.

Everything was okay.

Everything was good.

So when Luka called, my stomach dropped because I knew what was coming.

We went not because he was my king and I was his ward.

We went because he was my friend and I owed him.

Hopefully, what I owed wouldn't cost me much because, fuck me, I had nothing left to give.

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## Lexi

As soon as we sat on the plush white sofa and Luka started to talk, I knew what was happening here.

"I need you," was all he said, and it was aimed solely at Twitch.

Yes. My worst fears were confirmed. He wanted the holy trinity back in the fold.

I twisted to look at the man by my side and my nose bunched. "No."

But Luka was persistent. "My kingdom is falling apart, and in the midst of it crumbling to pieces, I helped you." The last statement was directed at the both of us, and he made sure I knew this, looking between us. "It might take us a while, but we can rebuild, Twitch. I just need a few good men."

Again, "No."

Luka glared at me. "Am I talking to you, woman?"

*Oh, no, he did not.*

He was going to understand me, so help me God.

“Do you see this ring?” I held up my left hand, and the gleaming diamond sparkled in the light. “This ring means his life isn’t his to bargain with anymore. It’s mine, Luka. And I say *no*.” My expression told him to fight me. I fucking dared him to try. “You may have a throne, Luka.” I stood a second before I sat back down on Twitch’s lap. “But this one’s mine, and I’ll be damned if anyone tries to take it from me.”

Twitch tried to cut in with, “Baby—”

But I stopped that shit with a firm, “If you don’t shut your mouth, I will shut it for you, Tony. I swear to God. Do not push me right now.”

A sigh at my back told me I was being a pain.

Luckily, I didn’t care.

A cold silence followed.

“She’s scary,” uttered Luka quietly.

“She’s solid,” countered a smug Twitch, squeezing my hip tenderly.

Yes, I was. But it was more than that. I had a fear in me that never left me. That fear had driven me to do things I never thought myself capable of. That fear was slowly ebbing out of me, but that fear would never be gone completely with Twitch working in a way I never knew if he was coming home.

I couldn’t live like that.

I deserved better.

We deserved better.

“Six years,” I whispered. “Six years I spent without him.” He couldn’t possibly understand the hell I had gone through in that time. “My son has missed out on so much. I just got him back, Luka. I can’t lose him again. I’m sorry. I’d risk myself before I ever gambled with his life because that bullet hole...” My sigh came out tired, but I fired up again almost immediately. “That *goddamn* scar at his neck tells me he’s stupid enough to believe he’s invincible. And we all know that’s not true.”

At that, Twitch sounded offended. “You wanna ease up, angel?”

No, I did not.

I spun on his lap to face him, took a deep breath, and spoke carefully, “Do you know that when wolves mate, the female will act afraid just to place herself under him. She acts frightened, Twitch, but she does what she does to protect his throat, his weak spot.” His face softened on me. “You

call me a queen, honey, but what kind of queen would I be if I didn't protect my king?"

Twitch looked at me and blinked, completely resigned. Lifting his hand, he cupped my cheek tenderly, running his thumb along my jaw. And the action told me all I needed to know.

He was with me.

What decisions were made from now on, we made for us. For our pack.

"That's disgusting," stated Luka, and when we both turned to face him, he looked kind of ill. "You guys are fucking disgusting, you know that? Also—" He leveled a glare on Twitch. "—where the fuck do I find one like her?"

I felt my king's body shudder under mine in silent laughter. But I kept my eyes on Luka.

Fate had brought us together time and time again, but I wouldn't take that for granted. Tomorrow wasn't promised to us. So I fought to keep us safely together.

"He's mine, Luka. Mine and mine alone." My voice trembled, and I hated how weak I felt then. The words came out slow. "You can't have him."

Luka watched me closely, and the newfound king's eyes darted over to the fallen royal behind me. A long moment passed before he rolled his eyes and uttered, "You know what?" Luka uttered before slapping his hands down onto his thighs, and then pinned me with a lighthearted stare. "I don't even want him."

*Oh, shit.*

And I could breathe again. "Oh, good."

Could they see the way my heart was beating out of my chest?

I hoped not.

"Well..." As I stood, I licked my lips and feigned my composure. "As nice as this has been, Luka, we need to get home to our son."

Twitch took my trembling hand in his and squeezed it in a silent show of support, and when Luka glared down at our entwined hands, he stood with a long sigh. "Whatever." His lips pulled down. "Take that sappy shit out of my house, a'ight?" He pointed toward the front door. "Bounce."

But I smiled. Because I had come to know Luka. And when I released Twitch's hand and made the short walk over to him, he allowed me to take

his face in my hands, pull him down, and plant a long, hard kiss to his cheek. When he finally moved back and I opened my mouth to speak, I couldn't get out what I needed to say.

*Thank you.*

Luka must have sensed this. I know he did because when I struggled to speak, he blinked down at me hesitantly and muttered a soft, "It's okay. We're good."

I blinked away the tears that seemed to assault me on the daily, the feeling of overwhelming emotion that hadn't left me, and nodded through the lump in my throat as I took a step back directly into the arms of a man who literally fought death to be with me in life.

Talk about commitment.

I was beginning to see that Twitch never did anything he set his mind to in a half-assed manner. Life, work, love. He was extreme in all ways. Intense. And now that I had lived without him, I came to appreciate what he gave to me.

He was mine and I was his, unconditionally, and we were finally happy.

As we left Luka's, I lost myself in thought as Twitch drove us home. I was only pulled from my thoughts when he reached out for my hand, entwining our fingers, and rested them on the center console. He looked at me a solid moment, searching my face before settling back onto the road.

"You good, baby?"

Was I?

I thought about it.

"Yeah," I breathed out quietly. "We're good."

I know it wasn't what he asked, but it was the answer he got, and from his slight smile, it was the answer he wanted. When he opened his mouth and out came, "I fucking love you," it sounded more like a threat than an endearment, and it was so severe, so stark, I couldn't help it.

I snorted loudly.

And Twitch's smile widened into a grin.

*Goddamn it.*

I loved this man, and I let it be known. Leaning over, I pressed my lips to his cheek, kissing the roughness there warmly, fondly, over and over, and as I moved to pull back, he frowned.

"Hey. Get back here."



When he gripped the front of my shirt and thrust me to him, I let out a little “*Eek*,” as our lips met harshly. He took my mouth in a way that poems spoke of. Without falter, in complete abandon, and the earth stopped moving for the seconds our lips were joined.

*How could I live without this urgent kind of love?*

The answer came swiftly.

I couldn’t.

I wouldn’t.

And as my eyes fluttered open again, I felt my cheeks warm while the headiness subsided. I stared at the man opposite me a long while, and when he turned back to wink at me, my stomach coiled tight.

It didn’t take a genius to work out our brand of love was rare.

So when I opened my mouth again, I spoke softly. “I love you, Twitch.”

He kept his eyes on the road, but his grip on my hand tightened. The cocky asshole replied, “I know.”

I wanted to smack him then, but I didn’t.

Instead, I smiled gently out into the open road. “Good.”

The utter bliss I felt at that moment felt so consuming, so strong, that my mind just had to go ruin it.

*Yeah. You’re happy now. But how long will it last, Lexi?*

Just like that. Mood ruined.

My anxiety returned tenfold. My mind wandered. My insides flipped almost painfully.

We would be fine.

I mean, what else could go wrong? Everything was as it should be.

My mind laughed.

*Don’t hold your breath.*

But because I believed in us and wanted this to work so badly, I did.

I shouldn’t have.

# Chapter

## Forty-Six

Lexi

My heart stuttered the moment I saw the familiar police car parked out front.

“Twitch,” I muttered as I sat up straighter, my lips parting in dread.

His brows pulled down in confusion, and he spoke softly, obviously sensing I was easy to spook. “It’s probably nothing.”

He was probably right. But what if it wasn’t?

I had already undone my seatbelt by the time Twitch pulled into the drive, and when the car came to a stop, I flew out of the car, slamming the door shut behind me, and rushed toward the house with a racing heart and wide eyes. The second I opened the front door, I called out, “A.J!”

He didn’t respond. My apprehension turned to sheer terror. And when I made it down the hall, I stilled in my steps, meeting Gabe Blanco’s solemn eyes. I held those eyes, and I breathed heavily as I asked an unsteady “Where’s my son, Gabe?”

My back warmed as Twitch stood protectively at my six.

I wasn’t expecting the answer I received. “Child Protective Services.”

My mouth gaped. My stomach dropped.

From behind me, Twitch uttered in complete disbelief, “Say again?”

Gabe sat at our dining table, sipping on the coffee he’d helped himself to, and shrugged. “I don’t know what you were expecting, Falco.” He leveled us with a stare that I was sure was used to intimidate the worst of criminals. “You refuse to give a statement. Refuse to let us talk to the boy —”

Twitch stepped past me, his eyes thunderous, and boomed, “He’s not ready. He’s *healing*.”

“We have questions, Twitch. Questions you refuse to answer.” Gabe stood, meeting Twitch move for move as he raised his voice. “And now, a higher power has decided they’re done waiting for you to be ready. So, well done.” Gabe spun around, running a hand through his short brown hair. “*Fuck!*” He twisted back and glowered at Twitch. “You think I wanted

this?” He shook his head. “Look at me like that all you want, asshole.” He pressed his pointed finger into Twitch’s chest. “You caused this, not me.”

I was listening, but it was hard to comprehend.

What did this mean?

The silence was thick enough to carve with a knife, and when Twitch slapped away Gabe’s hand from his person, I felt the blood roaring in my ears.

My query came out monotone. “You’re taking our son from us?”

It was my worst fear come to life.

Gabe looked heavenward and placed his hands on his hips. When he lowered his head, he refused to look at me. “*I’m* not doing anything, Alexa.” His lips thinned. “I told you, this is out of my hands.” He took in a deep breath and talked through the slow exhale. “If it’s any consolation, Molly is with him.”

Tony’s cheek ticked. “I swear to God, you piece of shit, if anything happens to him—” Twitch took a menacing step forward, but I took a handful of the back of his shirt, holding him back.

“Stop, baby.” My voice was barely audible.

We had to be smart here.

To my surprise, he stalled in his tracks, breathing heavily through his nose, his body vibrating with pent-up anger.

I was a qualified social worker. I knew the system. I knew it inside out.

They couldn’t do this.

They couldn’t.

*They could.*

No. Not with my son they couldn’t.

*Sure. Tell yourself that, Lexi.*

Feeling a stinging ache in my chest, I pondered this new development. We weren’t dealing with just anyone here. We were dealing with a system higher up than the Australian Federal Police. That only meant one thing.

We were now dealing with ASIO.

*Jesus freaking Christ.*

This was not good.

The Australian Security Intelligence Organization. And an organization like that got shit done. An organization like that had no rules.

I swallowed hard, gaining my bearings, and wrapped my hands around Tony's arm to stop him from taking an unsuspecting lunge at an Australian Federal Police officer. "What do we need to do here, Gabe?" When he didn't respond, I pled through my grief. "*Please*," I uttered. "Don't do it for us. Do it for A.J. He's probably terrified." The thought made my stomach dip.

And when I looked up at Twitch, he peered down at me with a resolve that told me we would do *anything* to get him back. Because forever meant nothing without our son.

"I guess." Gabe sighed out loud before pursing his lips. "I guess you could start by giving a statement. Telling us what really happened that night." He didn't look impressed with the pair of us. "That would be a start."

And because Gabe Blanco knew who my husband was, knew who we were, he picked up his keys and began to move toward the front door. "I'm gonna give you some time to..." He paused. "...process these events."

Bullshit.

He was giving us time to get our stories straight.

Before he left, he handed us his card. "See you in an hour, yeah?"

"We'll be there," uttered Twitch, placing the card into his pocket.

And once we were alone, we turned to each other, looking almost as bad as we both felt.

My eyes closed of their own accord as my shoulders drooped. "I'm starting to get real sick of this shit, honey."

Unyielding arms snaked around me and held me close. He kissed the top of my head while gently rubbing my back. "Just a minor setback, baby, that's all." Those big hands hovered at my hips. "We should run through what happened."

I lifted my eyes to meet his. "Run through what?" My gaze rested on his knitted brow. "Ling was careless. She was spotted. We confronted her. Just before we could call the cops, she jumped to her death. End of story."

Twitch's hold tightened on my hips. His eyes never left mine as he lowered his face and kissed my lips, whisper-soft. Against them, he muttered, "Solid."

I was coming to find that I was. I had a diamond-like strength buried deep inside me that was rising to the surface. I made no apologies for being

the person this life had fashioned me to be.

You either rolled with the punches or got knocked the fuck out.

Naturally, with the amount of punches I had been dealt, I finally learned how to deflect.

It took me years, bruises, and a broken heart, but I had ultimately grown.

When Tony pulled back, I hooked my fingers into the loops of his jeans. He rubbed my arms from shoulders to wrists, soothingly. “You ready, baby?”

My expression void, I nodded. “Let’s go get our boy.”

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## Twitch

We were an hour into questioning, and I was starting to get rattled. None of the questions so far had been about Ling. In fact, it sounded like Gabriel Blanco was trying to get information on the people I owed, the people who had helped save my son’s life.

I wasn’t having it.

Gabe sat across from me, and the recorder on the table taunted me. “And the Vegas?”

“What about ‘em?” I leaned back in my chair, not giving a single fuck.

Gabe’s shoulders tightened along with his face. “As far as we know, they aren’t exactly welcome in these parts. Why are they back?”

I shrugged. “How the fuck should I know?”

Their story was not mine to tell. They were good people who had fucked up.

Who hadn’t?

“Twitch.” Gabe pinched the bridge of his nose before looking up at me through weary eyes. “Give me something, man. Anything.” He closed his eyes. “Help me help you.”

What did he want from me? “I haven’t done anything wrong. And if you think I have—” I lifted my brows pointedly. “—prove it. Charge me. Lock me up.”

We both knew he had nothing on me. If he did, I’d already be in a cell.

Gabriel Blanco was not a stupid man, and he knew he was flogging a dead horse. Thankfully, he moved the fuck on, taking notes on his small notepad. "Okay then." He kept writing for a while, and once he stopped, he peered up at me. "Tell me what happened with Ling Nguyen. How did you just happen to come by her?" He let the cool silence float around us before sitting up tall. "How did she end up dead, Falco?"

My lips compressed. "She was careless. She was spotted. We confronted her, got our son back. She threw herself out the window."

Gabe watched me, unblinking. When he realized that was all I had to give, his brows arched. "That's it?" At my silence, he barked out a harsh laugh. "Seriously, Falco? That's all you're giving me?"

I thought about Lexi in a room alone somewhere being questioned like a fucking criminal, and my throat tightened. But I remembered what she said to me before we were separated.

*"I know it's against your nature, honey, but I need you to be as cool, calm, and collected as you can be, okay? Fight the anger. Be smart. Be safe."*

It was against my nature, but I was changing.

For her, I'd do anything.

I took in a deep breath and mentally counted to ten, fighting the fury that was building. "That's what happened, Sergeant Blanco." My jaw tight, I uttered, "Can't give you anymore than the truth."

Gabe narrowed his eyes on me. "You mean to tell me that Ling Nguyen, The Dragon Queen, rumored to have murdered hundreds of people..."

*Thousands*, I internally corrected him.

"...just gave in without a fight?"

I put my hands on the cold table, fighting the urge to throw my fists into his face. "She was cornered. Knew her time was up. It was either jail or death." I lifted my brows. "Ling chose death." My eyes unwavering, I held his stare. "I watched her walk over to the window, step onto the sill, and jump." My insides clenched at the way it felt to throw her from the tenth floor. Pleasure filled me at the memory of the shock in her eyes. "It was suicide."

The door behind me opened, and when the tall, silver-haired man stepped through, he uttered, "Those were my findings."

*What? How? Why...?*

“Motherfucker,” I said slowly as I moved to stand.

Ethan Black smiled despite his obvious annoyance. “Can’t seem to keep yourself out of trouble, can you, son?”

Although I was happy to see him, my brow furrowed. “What are you doing here?”

Ethan did not respond to my question. I didn’t miss the way his smile faltered momentarily. But he was a seasoned veteran at dealing with me. “Spent some time with your son.”

My eyes widened. He did? “When?”

“Here. Just now.” His smile turned warm. “I can’t believe he’s only five. Lord, is he smart. He’s a good boy, Twitch.”

*Wait.*

Was he telling me...?

“He’s here?” I turned to Gabe, my eyes surveying his every move. “In this building?” When Gabe’s expression turned sheepish, I closed my eyes and shook my head slowly, as I ground out, “You piece of shit.”

“Met your woman too,” Ethan added quietly. When I turned my turbulent gaze to his serene one, he lifted a brow. “Couldn’t help but notice she had a nice-looking ring on her finger there.” His voice quieted. “I didn’t get it then, but I get it now.” He paused a second. “A woman like that... worth it.”

Gabe let out a harsh breath. “I’m in the middle of an interview here, Black. Can I help you?”

Ethan stood tall and looked down at the sergeant in a way that only the Chief of Staff of the FBI could. “Yes. Suspend the interview. You got everything you needed. We’re done.” Ethan put his hand on my shoulder. “Come on.”

That was it?

I didn’t need to be told twice. I stood fast and moved to follow.

Before we could exit, Gabe Blanco sputtered, “Sir, wait.” He stood looking over at Ethan in disbelief. “The information he has....” He let the rest of that statement linger in the air.

And Ethan proved to me he was a man of his word. “Antonio Falco has done his time. Six years of it. This man has provided all he needs to provide, and now he’s leaving.” Ethan Black set his black stare on Gabriel

Blanco. “Ling Nguyen’s death was ruled a suicide, and this country is safer for it. Don’t you agree?”

Gabe’s fists balled in frustration, and he lowered his head a moment before he lifted his face. He looked resigned and spoke carefully. “Yes, sir.”

“Good. Now,” Ethan responded, “unless you’re planning on charging this man with a crime, I’m taking him to his family.”

His tone begged for Gabe to fight him.

I kind of wished he would. Nothing would make me happier than to see this blue-collared douchebag be taken down a peg or two.

Gabe’s tone sank a notch when he lowered his gaze. His jaw tight, he replied, “Yes, sir.”

Ethan opened the door, and with a smirk that I know must’ve killed him, I threw a wink Gabriel Blanco’s way as I followed my old friend to freedom.

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## Lexi

The creaking of the door had me standing immediately, and the second my concerned gaze met his, my shoulders drooped and I leisurely made my way over to him. He put his arms around me, placing his face into the crook of my neck, and I took in everything he gave with that firm embrace. When we had taken all we could get from each other, I lifted my face and he looked down at me a long moment before he gently kissed my lips.

“You good?”

“Yeah,” I replied quietly. “Are you?”

Twitch’s eyes smiled. “We’re good, angel.”

“*Daddy*,” the little voice croaked. He slid off Molly’s lap, and then the little monster was running for him, his arms outstretched.

Twitch grinned as he lifted his son into his arms and hugged him tightly, cradling the back of his head to him. “Hey, buddy,” he spoke softly into his hair, and he rocked him gently.

The sight was one of the many that made my heart swell. I would treasure moments like this in my memory for all eternity.



It was then that I noticed the older man at his back, and when I snuggled into Tony's side, I smiled kindly at the silver-haired man I'd met only an hour ago. "Hello again."

Ethan Black spared a polite smile for me. "How's he doing?"

A.J. rested his head onto his father's shoulder and hugged him around the neck.

My heart wasn't in my uncertain reply. "He's getting there."

The truth was A.J. was understandably petrified of being separated from us. Physically, he was healing. Mentally... I wasn't so sure. He woke in the middle of the night and crawled into bed with us more often than not, and we let him. He smiled less than he used to, laughed less too. His five-year-old eyes looked weary and aged, and those eyes assessed their surroundings carefully, searching for danger in places where there was none. It worried me that part of my son would never completely heal. He would never be the carefree child he had been. I knew this.

How could he be?

Ling had broken my son, and while she had the reprieve of death, A.J. would have to live with the fear she'd instilled for the rest of his life.

I was so tired. All I wanted to do was go home and heal as a family.

I turned to Twitch and ran a hand down my son's back. "Can we go home now, please?"

"Ah," Ethan cut in before Twitch could speak. "Before you do, I need a word. It's important." And when Ethan gently touched A.J.'s hair and spoke directly to our son, I knew something was up. "Son, I need to have a word with your parents. You think you could give us a minute?"

A.J. lifted his head, looking restless and fretful. He spoke carefully. "No, thank you." It came out as polite as he could manage it, but I heard the fear in his voice. He wasn't chancing another bout of separation. He wanted to be near us, and I was thankful that Ethan understood that.

"We're not going anywhere, son," Ethan stated. "I'm not taking them anywhere. We're going to stay right here, okay? I just need to talk to them a minute."

Twitch watched the turmoil form on A.J.'s face, and from the way his jaw tightened, he did not like it. "It's okay, bud. We're gonna be right here."

We gave A.J. the time he needed, and when Molly came forward, she held out her hand to the little monster. "C'mon, boo. There are some cool

toys over there. Let's play a while."

Twitch lowered him to the ground, and although it took him a while, A.J. took Molly's hand and allowed her to lead him to the toy corner. He pretended to play as he kept his eyes on us, and it broke my already fractured heart.

Ethan swept his arm out toward the small sofa. "Please, sit."

*Oh, no.*

Something was wrong.

*Jesus.* I wanted to cry. When would it end?

We sat in silence, and as Ethan pulled out a chair to sit in front of us, Twitch muttered, "Why are you here, Black?"

His tone indicated that he had just realized the man's presence may not have been the godsend we initially thought it.

Ethan rested his elbows on his parted knees and clasped his hands together. When he said, "What do you want first, the good news or the bad news?" my heart stuttered.

It was the way he said it, like there really was no good news, that made Twitch sigh loudly and put his head in his hands, letting out a low groan.

My lips moved. "The good news."

Ethan nodded lightly. "Okay. The good news is you have both been cleared of any wrongdoing in the death of Ling Nguyen."

My nose bunched. "We didn't do anything wrong. She stole our son. Drugged him, Mr. Black." I sat forward and reiterated, "We did *nothing wrong*."

"I know that," stated Ethan in a most placating way that had me sitting back again.

Twitch removed his hands from his exhausted face and sat tall. "And the bad news?"

"Well," Ethan began. "ASIO have had eyes on you since your return, unsurprisingly, and up until your little situation with Ling Nguyen, they were happy to..."

What was this?

I didn't understand.

And when I peered at Twitch in confusion, he rolled his eyes, letting out a frustrated, "Fuck me, Ethan. Just say it already!"

Ethan said it. "You're being deported, Twitch."

Excuse me?

The look on Twitch's face said he was just as shocked at the news as I was.

"What?" I uttered in disbelief.

Ethan sat back in the chair. "Australia is, unfortunately, very sick of the shit that seems to follow Antonio Falco, I'm afraid."

Twitch's face changed, settled, as though he'd just figured something out. "That's why you're here." He snuffled out a humorless laugh. "You're my escort."

Ethan didn't bother mincing words. "Correct."

Twitch's cruel smirk made my stomach ache. "They think I'mma go quietly because you're here? Fuck me, they thought wrong." He stood so quickly, so violent-like, that I let out a short gasp. Putting a hand to my chest, I peered up into his wild eyes. "This is *bullshit*." He paced then gritted his teeth, and growled, "If they want a war, they fuckin' got one, Black. Mark my words." His smile turned sly. "Think they're gonna separate me from my woman. Fuck that. I'll unleash hell on this backwater town before I ever let anyone take me away from my family."

This was my husband. This was who he was, and I wanted all of him.

The good. The bad. The psycho.

Twitch was a man of good intentions, stitched together with barbed wire and fueled by raw fury. And, as time went on, I came to realize I did not want him to change because the broken parts of him were the parts I treasured wholeheartedly.

A decision was made.

"Sit down," I said.

His eyes snapped down at me in confusion.

"Sit down," I repeated inflexibly.

He watched me a long moment before he slowly sat by my side, and when I spoke, I spoke carefully, in a way I hoped he would understand where I was coming from. "The first time you left me, I felt like it rained every single day in my heart. And the clouds blocked out the sun. For a long time, I saw nothing but gray." I took in a deep breath and let out a slow exhale. "I don't want that again. I will never be okay with being separated from you. Where you go, I follow." I looked down at his hands and slipped my small one into his. "We belong together."

When he finally found his voice, he asked, “What are you sayin’, baby?”

“I’m saying—” My unsure eyes met his. “—that maybe it’s time for a change.” My sad gaze slid over to the little monster playing mechanically in the corner without enjoyment or happiness. “Maybe this is a blessing in disguise. Maybe this move will be a good thing for all of us.”

He looked as though I was crazy. “Are you serious?”

“As a heart attack,” I muttered with a short nod.

“A.J. goes to a great school,” he countered.

“We’ll find another great school for him to go to in the States.”

“He has friends here, baby.”

“He’ll make new friends.”

He looked perplexed. “You have a life here.”

I shook my head. “It’s not a life worth living without you.”

And I meant that.

In all the time I’d known him, I had never seen Antonio Falco’s face soften in the way it did then. “Baby,” he uttered gently, and when he pulled me to him, I lifted my face to his as he cupped my cheek and kissed me as if I were the most precious thing in the world. It was then I realized this decision was a no-brainer.

Living life without Twitch was a torture I was not willing to subject myself to.

Ethan gave us our moment, and when we turned to face him again, his eyes smiled over at Twitch and, rather baffling, muttered, “Worth it.”

“So,” Twitch asked, “how does this work?”

“How long do we have?” I added.

Ethan snuffled a laugh out of his nose. “They want Twitch on the next flight out.” At the look of pure incredulity on both our faces, he quickly added, “But I can work on them. I’d safely say you have five or six days. A week at most.”

“A week?” I repeated.

Was that enough time to pack up our entire life?

I guess it would have to be. It wasn’t like we had a choice.

“Look,” Twitch said as he took my hand, running his thumb along mine caringly. “How about I go, and when shit is sorted, you bring your ass down with my boy?”

Wow.

He sounded like he positively hated that idea, like it was hard for him to even say out loud.

Lucky for him, that didn't work for me.

It was crazy how much love you could harbor for another person. It coursed through my veins. Gave me life. "We go together," I uttered gently before turning to Ethan. "A week is great. We'll make it work. Thank you, Ethan."

Ethan stood. "Great. I have a phone call to make. Excuse me."

Once he was gone, Twitch's fingers wrapped around then tugged on my wrist, and when I found his soft brown gaze, he muttered, "You don't have to do this."

My response was blunt. "I know I don't."

His brows rose. "This attitude of yours is new." His lips thinned. "Don't know if I'm loving it or hating it, Lex." I couldn't help the grin that stretched my lips. And when he looked at me, I mean *really* looked at me, his brows lowered marginally. "Are we really doing this?"

I tilted my head in thought. "Yeah," I said quietly. "We are."

"You sure?"

I had a feeling he wasn't going to ask again. This was the time to speak up if I had any concerns or disputes. And the more I thought about it, I couldn't think of anything I'd rather do than take our first steps as a family. To grow. To rebuild what had been broken together.

As I looked over at our son, I smiled to myself. "We're good, baby."

In fact, nothing sounded more perfect to me.

# Chapter

## Forty-Seven

Lexi

“They can’t do that.” Nikki shot up out of her seat, wide-eyed and furious.

I smiled at her outrage on my behalf. When I spoke, it was gentle and calm. “They already did, sweetie.”

“But—” Nikki began to pant. “But—” She looked like she was going to be sick. Her voice weakened. “But—” She threw the back of her hand into Happy’s shoulder, and when he glared up at her, her face crumpled. “*Do something!*”

Happy’s expression softened. He pulled his main squeeze down by her wrist and settled her by his side. “Ain’t nothing I can do about this, babe. Besides—” Happy smiled sadly over at his brother. “—they want to go.”

“No, they don’t,” Nikki murmured. My expression gave me away. Her eyes shone brightly, and when they settled on me, her lips parted, as she stated accusingly, “*You want to go?*” She blinked rapidly. “*You want to leave us?*” She sounded utterly heartbroken. “Why?”

I knew this was going to be hard, but somehow it went differently in my head.

Standing in the corner of the room with his arms folded over his chest like a petulant child, like the broody bitch he was, Dave glared at Twitch severely. “Because of him.”

Twitch threw his arm up and shot Dave the bird. “Fuck you, *David Allen.*”

Dave didn’t flinch. “It’s the truth.” He pushed himself off of the wall and moped. “She’s leaving us because of your endless fuck-ups.” He looked so confused. “Regardless of who you are and what you do, she loves you. Always has.” He shrugged, appearing lost in thought. “I don’t get it.”

That was when Happy murmured, “You wouldn’t.”

The entire room went silent.

*Uh oh.*

Dave’s brows lowered a notch. “What’s that meant to mean?”

Happy put his hands up, conceding. "This isn't about us."

Dave took a step forward. "You just made it about us."

"I shouldn't have said anything." Happy peered at me, then Twitch, and I couldn't help but notice the way Nikki rubbed his arm as she kept her sad eyes on her man. "I apologize."

But Dave didn't want to quit this conversation. "No, you shouldn't have. But you did. So..." He threw his arms out to the sides. "Go on, Happy. Say what you want to say."

Happy gritted his teeth in frustration. "You want me to talk?"

"Yeah." Dave's brows arched. "I want you to talk."

"Okay, you wanna do this here? Fine." Happy's jaw remained tight, and it didn't match the serene way in which he spoke. He peered at his ex, and his narrowed eyes told me what was coming was probably not something Dave wanted to hear. "You're a fucking coward."

My brows shot up to my hairline.

*Snap.*

This was a long time coming. The tension between Happy and Dave had been building for a while now, and it just reached boiling point.

No going back now.

Them's was fighting words.

Dave stumbled back a step as though he'd been pushed. Placing a hand on his chest, his lips parted in shock. He blinked over at Happy, and when he found his voice, he said faintly, "That's not fair."

"No, it isn't," Happy agreed, then sighed. "But it's the truth." When he pointed at me as suddenly as he did, I leaned back in surprise. "Here is a person who knows what she wants. Loves the man she loves and will follow him to the ends of the earth, just because she *knows*, Dave. She knows she can't live without him. And that's a beautiful thing." He glowered at his ex-partner. "You mock her for adoring him, but she's braver than you ever were. Than you'll ever be." Happy's stern expression fell away, and all that was left was pure sadness. His tone matched his wretchedness. "So you tell yourself you don't need me as much as I need you. You be the dismal bastard that was created by your fear. It's all good, baby." His tone darkened. "But don't you mock her for being the person you couldn't be."

Twitch reached into his pocket, pulled out a handful of chocolate rainbow-colored candy, and threw a couple into his mouth, chewing slowly. “That’s what I’ve been sayin’.” I flung my elbow into his side and he looked down at me, annoyed. “What?” He winked at my unsubtle eye roll and held a chocolate up to my mouth.

Despite myself, my lips parted, because... chocolate.

The silence was suffocating, and when I turned to face Twitch, my expression screamed, “What the *frick*?”

Twitch sighed and his lip curled. Before he spoke, his face gentled. “Yo, Dave,” he called out, leaning back and resting his arm behind my head on the sofa. When Dave peered at him, dejected, Twitch jerked his chin toward him. “Why you makin’ my brother miserable, man?”

Okay. So, Twitch was about as subtle as an anal probe.

Dave scoffed. “*I’m making him miserable?*” Dave spun to face Happy. “*I said I was sorry!*”

Happy stood, matching Dave’s octave. “*You made me move out!*”

Dave’s face crumbled. “*I made a mistake!*”

“*So let me move back in!*” Happy thundered.

Dave boomed, “*I’ve been trying to for months. I just didn’t know how!*”

To that, Happy had no response. But Twitch did. He put his lips to the shell of my ear, sounding smug as all get out. “And that’s how it’s done.” As I leaned into him, smiling to myself, his arm tightened around my shoulders. When neither Happy nor Dave spoke, Twitch got sick of the way they stood there looking extremely puzzled by the last minute’s exchange. He clicked his tongue, “Bro.” Happy turned back to face him, and Twitch uttered a bored, “You gonna kiss and make up or what? ‘Cause I gotta tell ya.” He made an uninterested face. “I’m kinda done with this bullshit.”

Nikki’s small smile stretched wide as she watched from the sideline, and when Happy took his time, she put her hand to his thigh and gently pushed him toward Dave. And after what felt like a lifetime, when Happy moved, so did Dave.

The two men embraced like lovers reunited, and when they kissed, I felt their broken connection fuse, mending right in front of my eyes. They kissed slowly, and my heart began to swell at the way their love filled the room.



Nikki's rested her clamped hands under her chin, looking blissfully happy. But when her eyes caught something by the door, her face turned alarmed and she let out a startled, "Uh...."

And when I turned back, I saw why.

A.J. stood there, watching Happy and Dave rekindle their bond. He didn't look upset or disgusted. Just curious.

The light grunt that escaped me had everyone turning toward my son, and when they did, they stilled completely, frozen in shock.

It took him a while before he spoke, but I knew he would eventually.

"Uncle Happy," he asked inquisitively, "Why are you kissing Dave?"

My heart stuttered.

Oh, God, I wasn't prepared for this talk. Why was I not prepared for this talk? I knew it would come eventually. I should have been ready for this talk!

Happy's looked panicked. "Uh...."

"Well..." Dave's cheeks were flushed and he swallowed hard. "You see, little dude..." Dave trailed off, not sure what to say, looking to me for help.

An unsuspected hero came to the rescue.

"Come here, bud," Twitch uttered, patting the small spot next to him.

"Sit." A.J. took the seat next to his father, and when Twitch spoke, I was stunned by what he said. "Uncle Happy and Dave are in love, and that's why they were kissing."

*Ugh. My heart.*

The little monster frowned in thought. "But I thought Nikki and Uncle Happy loved each other."

"We do." Nikki smiled sweetly. "Very much." She peered over at Dave. "But we love Dave too."

Twitch looked down at our little guy, and explained, "Sometimes dudes fall in love with dudes, and that's okay."

*Yes, it was, baby. Preach.*

A moment's silence passed.

A.J. turned to Nikki and asked interestedly, "Do you all sleep in the same bed?"

*Well, shit.*

My stomach dipped violently.

Nikki got over her shock quickly and cleared her throat. “Yes, we do, honey.”

A.J.’s nose bunched as he looked over at Happy and Dave. When he turned back to Nikki, he said, “Don’t you get squished?”

Nikki’s surprised laughter sounded throughout the room, and she nodded. “Well, yeah. Sometimes I do.”

A.J. sat back into his grinning father and threw out a suggestion. “Maybe you should get a bigger bed.”

“You know what?” Nikki stifled her laughter. “That’s a great idea. Maybe we should.”

And while all of this was happening, I just sat there, blinking down at my son. The amount of pride I felt in that moment was incomparable. He really was a beautiful soul. Our boy. A.J was resilient, he was pure of heart, and he continued to amaze me. As mothers often did, I couldn’t wait to see the man he would become. I already knew he would be something special, and the woman who captured his heart would be exceptional in every way, shape, and form.

I, for one, couldn’t wait to meet her.

The afternoon went on, and after I signed the forms, I handed them to Happy. “Thank you for doing this.”

He tucked the Power of Attorney papers into his jacket pocket. “Don’t worry about it. Don’t worry about the house. Don’t worry about anything. I’ll make sure you get the best possible price for it.” He inclined his head to Twitch. “You too, bro.”

I knew he would, but as I looked around the house I called home for the last six years, I couldn’t help but feel a sweeping sadness rush through me. I hugged myself as I looked down the hall. The very same hall my son had taken his first steps in. There were a lot of memories lining these walls. I just hoped they would stay fresh in my mind as we made new memories wherever we ended up.

Arms came around my waist and held me as I fell apart on the inside. The man behind me remained silent, and I loved him for knowing that words couldn’t describe what I was feeling right then.

We were days away from uprooting and I was anxious.

It was a bold move.

No home. No friends. No bed to sleep in. Starting from scratch at thirty-eight years old. It was rough.

My chest ached at the realization that I only had days left with everything I knew and loved, everything familiar to me. And that sucked. But what sucked worse was the six years I spent without the man I loved.

I would choose him.

I would choose him a thousand times.

I would choose him for eternity, because my heart remained empty without him.

So we would move and we would do it happily.

Together, as a family.

I was proud of myself.

Saying goodbye was harder than I imagined, and I imagined it to be horrible, so that was saying something. All of our friends and family came to see us off, and while Ethan Black stood off to the side, we embraced our loved ones with heavy hearts and shining eyes.

Julius snaked his arms around me. "We'll visit," he rumbled tightly. I squeezed him tighter, unable to speak, and when Ana threw her arms around the both of us, my throat constricted uncomfortably.

I would miss them terribly, all of them, equally.

So when Ana knelt in front of A.J. and handed him the same brown bear he had given her what seemed like a lifetime ago, he blinked down at it before frowning in question. And when she spoke, she spoke clearly without the shake in her voice I'd heard so often, without the crippling fear I knew she carried inside of her. With Ling gone, part of Ana had healed. "I know you're a big boy and you don't need him anymore." She looked down at the bear. "Whenever I would feel sad or lonely, I would hug brown bear. And your bear did a real good job of chasing that sadness away." Her expression fell as she lifted the bear and hugged him one last time. When she was done, she held him out to my son. "But it's time he was returned to you."

A.J. looked torn. He hesitated. "But he's yours now. You need him."

Ana reached out and cupped A.J.'s cheek lovingly, as she whispered, "I think you need him more."

Oh, Jesus. My heart. They were killing me.

A.J. reluctantly took his brown bear from Ana. He peered down at the plush, cookie-scented teddy a long moment before he leapt into Ana's arms. She hugged him and kissed him and whispered endlessly into his ear, and when they finally separated, both of their eyes were misting.

It broke my heart.

*Well, this blew.*

Ethan cleared his throat from the sidelines and my gut cramped. It was time. And as we made the move to do the long walk into the international terminal, I held it together. I waved and smiled and held my shit together like my world wasn't falling apart. I kept that false smile pasted on my face until we boarded. I wore that smile like a mask until we found our seats, and I held it there. A piece of armor. A heavy shield. My smile was my sword. I held it there as the plane took off. Once we were flying high, only then did I allow it to falter.

My smile wobbled and wavered. The inevitable sting of salty tears behind my lids. I took in a quavering breath as the mask I wore crumbled to pieces, and when the first sob hit me, it hit me hard, leaving me gasping for air.

Without a word, Twitch lifted the armrest between us and pulled me onto his lap. I buried my face into the crook of his neck and wept openly as he kissed my cheek, whispering sweet nothings into my ear. I was emotional. A wreck. And he let me be without judgment or scorn. He let me be me, and I didn't think there was anything more important in the world than being with somebody who didn't fear your demons, but made love to them.

I cried until there were no tears left in me, and when I was done, the sorrow had ebbed out of me. I felt better, lighter.

Slowly, I slid my legs off of my rock and shuffled back into my own seat, swiping at my red, swollen eyes. He left me be a while, but when the silence between us started to bother him, he leaned over into my face, and as I blinked at him through wide eyes, he demanded quietly, "Kiss me."

There would never be a time in my life when I would deny myself the feel of Antonio Falco's lips against mine.

I kissed him softly, my hand coming up to cup his cheek as I did. And when I pulled back, he leaned back in to peck at my lips. My heart warmed and a smile took me by surprise.

With our son by our side, we held hands the entire journey home.

I closed my eyes and rested back in my seat as we took our first step toward forever.

It was our second week back in the States. Nothing was as I remembered it. We were literally home, in our hometown, and nothing about this place felt familiar. Everything had changed. Everything felt wrong. So when Twitch asked Ethan if he could watch A.J. for the afternoon, my curiosity was piqued.

When I asked where we were going, all Twitch said was, "For a drive."

It was a long one. The entire way, Twitch silenced my thousand questions, but when we reached our old neighborhood, I found I had no further questions to ask. I watched on through the passenger window as familiarity started to show itself in this unfamiliar place. And when Twitch pulled up to the curb, the two houses in front of us stood there, an everlasting memory shot through my head, and suddenly, I was six again.

*"What's your name?" I asked in my sweet six-year-old voice.*

I abruptly found it hard to breathe.

*He kicked at a stone. "Doesn't matter. You'll forget it once I'm gone."*  
Home.

We were home.

Twitch watched me a long while, as my eyes surveyed just how much the houses hadn't changed. It was so strange. The entire neighborhood had altered, upgraded, except for these two houses. It was as though they were stuck in a time warp.

Stuck waiting for us.

"C'mon," he uttered softly, and when he stepped out of the car, I leisurely undid my seatbelt and followed.

I swallowed hard as memory after memory assaulted me like bullets. Shot after shot, they penetrated my heart, my soul. And even after this short while, I found I didn't want to be here anymore. It hurt too much.

"Why are we here?" I asked softly.

"Because," he said, turning to face our memories. "These houses were cruel to us."

Yes, they were, and thinking about it made my heart ache.

"These buildings were unkind," he went on. "And I'm still not okay with what these houses did to a couple of innocent kids."

Well, shit. My nose began to tingle. "Oh, honey."

*Tell me what to do, my love. Tell me how to make it better. Name it and it will be yours.*

My beautiful man.

My survivor.

My knight in scuffed armor.

"These houses set in motion a chain of events that led to us finding each other over and over again, and I'm sorry for how we started out, but, fuck me, I'm grateful to these houses that you're here with me. Right here. Right now. So..." He licked his lips, turning to face me, and when he cupped my cheeks and placed a gentle kiss to my forehead, I closed my eyes and listened to what he had to say. "What we're gonna do is knock down these nasty houses. We're going to watch them go down. Watch every brick and every fuckin' splinter of these shitholes be knocked to the goddamn ground. See every cruel word and slamming door be blown away to nothing. And where our pasts lay in ruins, we're going to build a wish."

*Oh, fuck.*

My shoulders shook. I was already crying.

The gravity of our situation hit me hard, like a hammer to the heart.

We made it.

*We made it.*

We were here, together, working on our future. And with every ounce of my being, I couldn't think of anywhere else I'd like to live than the bones of where it all began.

Truth was, it didn't matter where we lived. A house was only a body. And we were the heart. For as long as we were together, nothing could take that away from us.

As he kissed my lips, I cried faintly then sniffled. "Yes."

Twitch pulled back to look into my eyes. "Okay?"

"Okay." I laughed through my tears.

Moving to stand behind me, he wrapped his arms around my waist and rested his chin on my head. I lifted a hand to his forearm and squeezed. That was when he uttered, "I've got plans for this place."

Oh, Lord. I bet he did.

And just because I could, I threw a spanner in the works.

"I'm pregnant."

Twitch stilled at my back and I smiled slowly, widely. And when he regained movement in his limbs, his arms tightened around me hard enough to make it hard to breathe. But I didn't mind.

When he put his mouth to the shell of my ear, and whispered, "Love you," my world was complete.

And in the midafternoon of a beautiful spring day, we stood at the bones of a memory and made plans for our future.

\*\*\*

## Twitch

My head was a mess. I didn't know what to do, how to feel. But in all the anarchy of my generally chaotic mind, one thought played on repeat.

What a wild credence that all I had been chasing had finally stopped running.





# Epilogue

## Lexi

I threw the door open and squealed happily when I saw them. The little redhead lunged at me, and when her body collided with mine, my breath left me with a whoosh. Struggling to breathe, I laughed through the discomfort as my unlikely best friend and I met for the first time.

“Lily,” the broody giant still waiting at the door with his offspring grumbled, “you’re choking the life out of her.”

But Lily just hugged me tighter. “I don’t care. I’ve got five months of hugs bursting out of me right now, and she’s going to get them or so help me.”

It all started a month after we arrived in the states. Twitch made a phone call to an old friend. That old friend was a man named Nox. During the phone call, Twitch explained to Nox that I was having a bit of a hard time dealing with the unfamiliarity of our living situation. At the end of the call, Twitch surprisingly handed me the phone, and the woman on the other line started talking.

I wasn’t expecting the hurricane that was Lily. And what a godsend she was.

One phone call was all it took and, just like that, we connected

Not a day went by that Lily and I didn’t speak. Whether via phone call or text, we were as familiar as two people living in different states could be. So when Lily called to say they were coming down to visit her sister, I was over the freaking moon.

To meet your unlikely soul mate was a special thing.

And now that she was here, I felt like I was already mourning the loss of her, for in a week, she’d be gone.

I held on tighter.

When she finally pulled back, I looked into her smiling eyes and stupidly said, “Hey.”

Lily tipped back her head and roared with laughter. I couldn’t help but join her. When the laughter started to hurt, I held onto my distended belly and groaned through my mirth. “Ow.”

“Aw.” Lily put her hands on my baby bump and gently rubbed it. “How is my little guy?”

I took in a deep breath and let out a slow exhale. “How would you feel having someone lug you around in your comfy water bed, never ending room service, sleeping all the time?”

“Pretty damn good.” Lily’s brows arched.

My smile widened as I peered down at my belly. “He’s great.”

From the door, Nox uttered an amused, “So, are we allowed in or what?”

My cheeks blazed. I rushed over and swept them in. “Oh my God, yes! Come in. Come in!”

As he passed me, Nox planted a kiss on my cheek. “How you doing, Lex?”

“Great, now that you guys are here,” I told him before looking at the handsome boy by his side. He had dark hair and blue eyes. “Oh, Lord. Is that Rocco?” I knew it was and turned to Lily. “He’s so tall. What are you feeding him?”

Rocco, who was ten going on eleven, looked embarrassed as his mother moved to stand behind him and explained, “It’s just those good Taylor genes, babe.”

The little princess holding Nox’s hand was something else in her tutu. It was a shock to see her wearing the tiniest pair of black combat boots I’d ever seen. She had Nox’s dark hair, but Lily’s green eyes. I smiled down at her. “Hello, sweetie. What’s your name?”

Of course I knew her name. I got pictures of these kids on the daily, but I felt it was important to include the children, let them know they had a voice in this house.

“I’m Angie. I’m four.” She held up four fingers and I loved her right then. She looked me dead in the eye and did not hesitate, when she stated, “You’re pretty.”

*Oh, sweet Jesus.*

I couldn’t help myself. I reached out and tugged her into me for a long hug. Angie returned my hug and I narrowed my eyes on Lily. “You set that up, didn’t you?”

Lily laughed. “I swear I didn’t!”

In Nox's arms was a tiny girl with red cheeks, sucking her thumb in the sweetest little dress I had ever seen. She was the spitting image of Lily. Thick ginger hair and green eyes. She also looked like she did not want to leave the safety of her daddy's arms, and looking at Nox, I could see why. He was a tank of a man.

Nox kissed the little angel's head. "This is Mia." He sighed. "She missed her nap and now we're all paying for it."

Lily rolled her eyes at her husband's dramatics. "I give her ten minutes before she passes out."

My expression sympathetic, I rubbed the little girl's back, and spoke softly, "Maybe we can put on a movie for little Mia. We have pillows and blankets. My son A.J. can make you a fort. Does that sound good?" Mia thought about that before sucking her thumb into her mouth, moping dismally. Finally, she nodded, and I smiled widely at the tired angel. "Okay, sweetheart."

When A.J. ran into the house from the backyard, he screeched to a stop at the realization that we had company. As he did often these days, he took his time observing the people around him. It took a few seconds, but when he deemed it safe, he stepped forward.

I stepped around him and put my hands to his shoulders, proudly introducing my son. "This is A.J. He just turned six." Lily and Nox said their hellos, but A.J. seemed to be stuck on his words. "Say hi, honey."

"Hello," he forced out, looking away.

The poor thing. He sounded as awkward as he felt. Unfortunately, it took A.J. some time to open up to people these days. He, understandably, didn't trust easily. He didn't talk as freely. He was somewhat reclusive amongst company. My son was in therapy, but the therapist warned that she couldn't help if A.J. wouldn't speak to her.

I prayed that he would find the strength to push past the fear and angst, and regain the part of himself he'd lost. In the meantime, all I could do was love him and support him wholeheartedly as he found his way out of the hole Ling had thrown him in.

"Well..." I gently squeezed A.J.'s shoulders. "I hope you guys are hungry. Twitch is firing up the grill as we speak and we have enough food to feed an army."

Nox's eyes lit up in interest. "I am hungry."

Lily peered over at her husband slowly. "You're always hungry."

Nox grinned at his wife tenderly, and I loved that so much my chest ached.

A.J. gathered all the pillows out from around the place. The kids worked on building a fort suitable for Mia as Lily and Nox followed me out back. Twitch did a double take, and when his eyes landed on our guests, his eyes crinkled in the corners. "My man."

Stepping forward, he and Nox clasped hands before bumping shoulders and slapping each other on the back hard enough to bruise. Nox gripped Twitch by the shoulders. "It's been a while."

"No shit," muttered Twitch. They stared at each other a long time, surveying the changes in each other before I saw the emotions get the better of my husband and he pulled back, swallowing hard, then uttering, "You need a beer."

But Nox seemed to know Twitch better than I assumed, and as my man walked away from the group and into the house, Nox turned to me, grinning roguishly. "Some things never change."

"No," I agreed quietly, fighting a smile.

The evening went on without a hitch. Everyone had eaten. The kids finally warmed to each other and played inside all night as little Mia slept through the noise. The conversation was a fountain, flowing and never ending, full of joy and laughter, and as the night slowed, I didn't want our friends to leave.

Lily joined me in the kitchen as the guys continued catching up outside, and as we loaded the dishwasher, somebody tugged my shirt.

Startled, I looked down at my son. His eyes were stuck on the little girl wearing a tutu and combat boots. He didn't address either of us as he spoke gently. "She didn't tell me her name." His voice was far away. "What's her name?"

He was acting strange. I was momentarily dumbstruck.

Lily's eyes darted between us until she uttered, "Her name is Angela. We call her Angie."

A small smile stretched his lips. "Angie," he murmured dreamily. And when he peered up at me and said what he said, my heart stopped. He spoke quietly, sincerely, and he held such determination in his tone that I found myself believing him. "I'm going to marry that girl."

My mouth gaped. So did Lily's.

But A.J. didn't notice. He only had eyes for the dark-haired, green-eyed girl who had apparently stolen his heart. Before either of us could speak, A.J. floated away, back to the group of kids playing by the sofa, leaving both Lily and me dumbstruck.

When I found my voice, it was weak. "He doesn't know what he's saying."

Lily jumped on that. "Right. He's just a little boy."

"Exactly," I forced out on an awkward laugh. "Oh my, kids definitely do say the darndest things." I licked my lips and faltered. "But still. Maybe we should..."

Lily added gently, "...not tell the guys about this?"

I was so glad we were on the same page. "Yes," I rushed out.

And she nodded, swallowing hard. "Agreed."

"Great."

"Cool."

And as we conversed politely, I couldn't help but notice that neither of us could take our eyes off of the peculiar way Angie and A.J. sat together on the sofa. Angie held her handheld gaming console in her hands, talking non-stop, explaining the aim of the game, and as she yammered on, A.J. watched her closely, his eyes searching her face, smiling softly to himself. And my chest ached.

*Oh, shit.*

My son was in love.

The house was quiet. That was a rare event in itself. Sure, it was early, but silence was not as calming as it had once been. Especially not when I had to endure the time without my son as I had. Silence was daunting, and as I crept into his bedroom and found him fast asleep, my heart uncoiled and I allowed myself to breathe again.

Sitting on the edge of his bed, I looked down into the angelic face of the boy who almost never came home. My hand moved without prompting, and as I touched his hair, I reminded myself that we were good.

We were good.

Being as quiet as I could, I let him sleep a while longer because he wasn't broken in his dreams.

Barefoot and pregnant, I made my way to the fridge and poured myself a glass of orange juice, then went in search of the man missing in action. It wasn't often we woke separately, but when we did, I became restless.

It didn't take long, and when I pushed open the sliding door and stood in the open doorway dressed in only my nightie, he peered up at me a moment before continuing what he was doing. And with every second that passed, the mirth crept up my throat, dangerously wishing to escape. But I kept it on lock.

Instead, I leaned against the doorframe, and uttered, "Once upon a time, I thought you were a god." I sipped my juice. "And now look at you, doing laundry, hanging up my panties and bras."

I held the laughter down as much as I could, but when his eyes crinkled in laughter, he pointed at me in warning, and five of my bras hung from his forearm. I lost the battle, tipping my head back and let my light laughter free.

He shook his head, but I didn't miss the way his lip twitched. When he muttered, "Fuck you, baby," it sounded more like, "I love you, baby," and I couldn't wipe the smile off my face.

With my heart full and my baby kicking, I made to leave, and as I did, he called out, "You could help, you know."

I paused in the doorway, gazing over at him, and my brows rose.

*This guy.*

"I've done laundry for six long years, honey." I started to close the sliding door between us, and as I did, I sassily stated, "It's officially your turn."

He mock-glared at me through the glass.

I blew him a kiss.

He went on clipping my panties and bras on the clothes line. And I'd never been more content in my life.

Days turned to weeks. Weeks turned to months. Months turned to years.

The old oak in the backyard, the same oak I had carved the name of the boy I swore I wouldn't forget at the age of seven, now bore the names of each additional family member we welcomed into our brood.

It had become tradition.

Later that year, another name would be carved into the Falco oak.

And my heart and soul settled as my family grew.

The soft cries coming from the nursery had me shooting up in bed, momentarily confused and fretful enough to make me sweat. But he was already up and out the door. And when he returned with the little bundle, I switched on the lamp as he set her down gently between us.

Her nostrils flared and her mouth pulled down, her lips trembling as her little arms attempted to break free of her muslin restraint. No. She wasn't happy, our little dame. And we both knew why.

Blinking sleepily, I reached up to unhook the front of my bra and lowered the cup before gently lifting my sweet little girl and holding her to my breast. She latched on quickly, my little piggy, and did her thing as her father leaned on his side, propping himself up drowsily on his elbow, watching us both lovingly as she ate her fill.

My husband stroked the wispy hairs at the back of her head, and whispered sleepily, "Slow down, Fia. Momma's not goin' anywhere."

My heart could barely take how much love I had inside me. It was strong, overflowing, and as it settled over me like a warm blanket, I wondered if it would ever get old.

Chances were, it wouldn't. And I was okay with that. In fact, I was counting on it.

Twitch was somewhat of a voyeur these days, especially when it came to his children. He loved to watch A.J. do his homework, priding our eldest on his smarts. He adored watching Matteo fall on his little tush, trying in vain to stop his little legs from falling out from underneath him as he attempted to run before he could even walk. But, most of all, he treasured every moment of Sofia's feeding.

His little princess, he called her. Daddy's girl.

I had a premonition she would be the apple of her father's eye.

Heck. She already was.

So much he'd missed out on with our firstborn. He was making sure he didn't miss out on another single second of their precious childhood.

Scars.

We had them in spades.

But those scars had shaped us into the people we were today. And although our wounds had started out painful, the marks they left were permanent. Everlasting. And I was grateful for the reminder of how hard we had worked to be together.

It told me a lot about us.

Failure was never an option. Twitch and I would be together or die trying.

There were days when I would sit back and watch my family thrive with such sentiment that I would silently excuse myself and weep in complete quiet, in secrecy, because the sheer force of the emotion was absolutely crippling.

We had made it.

Every day was a gift.

We had made it, against all odds, taking the road less traveled.

It was us against the world, and I would protect this family with every last fiber of my being.

Which brings me to my point.

A word of warning to those meaning to harm my family.

My name is Alexa Falco. And I am not afraid anymore.

Come for us.

I dare you.

I will take you the fuck down.

**The End.**

**Raw:**

**Rebirth**



*A note from the author.*

I want to thank you all for your undying love for my complicated bad boy, Twitch.

I am so glad that he found his happily ever after with the beautiful Lexi.

I am also thankful for your love and support.

Your patience drove this book. Your loyalty wrote the words. And your kindness brought me light on the darker days.

So, thank you all.

All my love,

Belle x