



Bad Behavior

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Description: She was sweet and pure... Until I got my hands on her. When I saw Ivy for the first time, I knew I had to have her. She's an innocent princess who fights like a wildcat and tastes like honey—and my father wants her dead. But I can't. I won't.

So I tried to cut a deal with her owner; I was ready to pay for her, to keep her forever. But the man who owns her isn't willing to give her up. Worse, he wants her virginity. He'll be pissed when he learns I took it. Ivy loved every second of what I did to her. She thinks she's spread her legs for some hero but that's wrong; I'm as violent and dangerous as they come. If she doesn't believe me, she will soon.

Because no one will stop me from having her... Ivy is mine, and she'll always be mine.

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The Reckoning

The saying goes: 'Lightning doesn't strike the same place twice.'

That was something I used to believe, but now . . . It didn't mean shit.

I had been stolen twice; once for pleasure, and once for gain.

Both hurt, both had shattered me into unrecognizable pieces of myself.

But only one would keep me alive.

Who am I?

I'm Ivy . . . And I was about to be saved by the enemy.

* * *

The air surged through my lungs like the electric snap of a battery against the tip of your tongue. Inhaling a deep breath, I gasped to keep the oxygen flowing. I wasn't sure if I had died and was awakening to the force who had placed me on the earth to begin with.

My eyes were open, but everything was still black. I was in a deep pit that had no bottom, no top, no walls, only blackness. Trying to move my arms, a stabbing pain scaled over my shoulders then raked down my spine.

I wasn't dead.

Death would've been nicer.

A shred of fear kept me motionless, the pain holding me suspended like a statue.

Where am I?

I could feel the ground against my cheek. It was cold and damp, small grains of sand scuffed against my skin. And in that one second, all my other senses went into overdrive.

The world around me was gone, but I could smell the thickness of old air. It was musty, and I wanted to cough, but I forced my body to hold it in. I couldn't remember how I ended up here, and my silence might have been the only thing still keeping me alive.

Just listen.

My sight might have been stripped away, but I could still hear. My ears turned into megaphones, zeroing in on every noise that echoed. Water was dripping from somewhere near me, I could hear it pinging off of something metal. The normally quiet and easily bypassed sound rang like a bell inside my head. The dripping was slow but constant, coming every few seconds.

Pipes, cold hard floor, moldy scent . . .

A basement?

An old factory?

I wanted to scream in frustration. This couldn't be happening again, not again.

Straining to listen, I tried to figure out if I was alone, or if someone else was in the room, watching, observing, waiting . . .

But I didn't hear any hard breaths, or shuffling of feet across the floor. There was nothing. Complete silence enhanced the torture of the dripping water. Complete silence made my heart pound like a drum inside my chest.

For a brief moment, I wished I could halt the intense thumping of the muscle. I didn't want to give anyone—if they were watching, listening—the realization I was alive.

Because I still wasn't sure if I was supposed to be.

Wiggling my fingers gently behind my back, I felt the rope trapping my wrists. Shifting my ankles ever so lightly, I felt the coarse fibers digging into my flesh. It burned, buzzing up my calves, making me quietly cringe to myself.

This is not happening.

I won't let it.

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I knew that if I hadn't already endured everything I'd been through—living through before this—then this shit would really be fucking with my head right now.

The silver lining . . .

I was stronger now than I had ever been, the only positive that came from the pain I had already suffered.

But nothing was going to break me, I wasn't going to let it.

Taking another deep breath, I calmed my nerves. Letting my fingertips feel over the rope, I found the knot and began to work at it.

I need to get free and find something to protect myself.

Pulling and digging, tugging and tearing at the rope, I felt the knot pop loose, easing its talons over my wrists. Wiggling hard, I twisted my hands and pulled them free.

Okay, now we're getting somewhere.

My shoulders slumped forward as I brought them around, twinging with pain as the blood rushed back in like fire through my veins. But I didn't wait for the feeling in my muscles to come back. In one quick snap, I tore the blindfold off my eyes.

A soft glow of light was coming from a single bulb dangling in the center of the room, blasting my eyes like the damn mid-day sun. It seemed so bright, so harsh, zapping my pupils and blinding me again. Blinking rapidly, I shielded my face then

shot forward to start on my ankles.

Pulling the last loop of the binding, the strands broke away, falling to the floor.

I was free.

Free from the bindings holding me hostage, but still confined to a small, cement room. The place was solid, concrete block on top of concrete block that made up the walls. The ceiling was low, but just as solid, made of thick wood beams. The floor was partially finished, a shimmer of gray spotted the dark brown, but dirt was spread across the whole damn thing.

Rolling and rubbing my wrists, I glanced around the room, noticing a wide, messy trail on the floor. I knew what it was . . .

It was from me, from whoever dragged my limp body into this hellhole. Large footprints were scattered like fossils in the sand around my drag marks, all of them leading in and out from one exit, one door.

One escape.

There was only one way in and one way out of this place. There were no windows, no air-vents, nothing.

I was in a tomb.

A weapon. I at least need some sort of weapon.

Rubbing my arms, I shivered as the cool air tried to grasp my skin. But there wasn't any time for that, and my instincts knew it, forcing adrenaline through my body.

Searching the room for anything to protect myself, the only real option I saw were the pipes above my head. Feeling the icy metal, I rocked them, shook them, twisted them.

Wet droplets coated my palms, turning the solid pipes into slick, melting popsicles. I couldn't grab one without my hands spinning wildly and making no real headway in loosening it.

I felt like I had been hit by a truck. Every inch of my body was throbbing and sore. My shoulders were stinging, my face felt swollen and bruised. I didn't even notice how badly my ribs burned when I inhaled until I had to exert the energy to try and move a mountain.

Fuck! Come on!

Dragging my fingers through my hair, I felt the sand against my scalp, and the knots binding it all together. I didn't need a mirror to know I must have looked like complete shit right then.

My shirt was torn, hanging off my shoulders and exposing my stomach. The jeans I had on were gone, leaving me practically naked, aside from the thin panties Remo always insisted I wear.

Fucking pervert.

Standing barefoot, I dug my toes into the dirt, staring up at the pipes. I had one final idea lurch into my brain, a last-ditch effort to protect myself from whatever evil had stored me here.

Tearing a thick strip of fabric off the tattered bottom of my shirt, I wrapped it tightly around the smallest and weakest pipe I could find. Using every last inch of energy I had, I finally felt the metal spring free.

Clunk!

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As the pipe gave way, a loud ricochet echoed over the walls. It wasn't the ideal object I was looking for, a bit smaller than I wanted, but it would have to do.

Backing against the wall, I slipped down into a crouch and waited.

I wasn't sure how much time had gone by, I had no way of checking. I was stripped of everything—no purse, no keys, no phone.

Even my fucking shoes were gone.

Maybe it was hours that had passed, maybe minutes, or even seconds. Either way, sitting in a barely lit room filled with nothingness was torture in itself.

But I still waited, still listened, gripping the pipe like it had been glued to my hands.

Then it happened. It all happened so fast, and I hadn't fully thought about what I would do.

The voices came first, starting off distant, barely a whisper in the air. They grew stronger the closer they came, the thumping of feet mixed with proverbial chuckles and words I couldn't make out.

They're laughing?

They're fucking laughing while they have me locked in here?

A rage filled my gut, heating my core with a madness I hadn't felt before. The men

approaching the door were chatting and talking as if this was a normal situation, a day to day activity like they were going to play fucking basketball.

Standing quickly, I held the pipe like a baseball bat, ready to strike the second the door opened. The handle jiggled, and I could hear the distinct sound of the key clicking the lock open.

The door opened easily with no hesitation.

I was fairly certain with how they entered so brazenly that they didn't expect I had gotten loose. In one quick swoop, I swung the metal rod, hitting the first man on the head.

A loud growl shot out from the back of his throat, his body lunging forward and falling to one knee as he cupped his skull. A second man ran in from behind, and I did the only thing I could.

I kept swinging.

Adrenaline purged my veins, my heart slammed around inside my chest, beating against my ribs. But it didn't matter how much pain I had felt before, because right then I felt nothing.

His arms were flailing, darting around my body as I swung blindly in the air. And as the thought crept in that maybe I had a chance to escape, a chance to run and free myself from whatever these men had planned for me . . .

It all came crashing down in a quick flash.

My arms were grabbed from behind me, thick fingers curled over my biceps, yanking my limbs to my spine. Screaming in pain, the pipe fell from my grasp, landing with a

heavy thud on the floor.

“Get off me! Get the fuck off me!” I could hear my screams, but I didn't recognize the voice. It wasn't me screaming, it was fear screaming.

“You stupid fucking bitch! You dumb, stupid, fucking whore!” The heated words were followed with a palm across my face.

Prickles of pain shot over my jaw, searing the bone just under my eye. Another hit came down on my face, knocking my head in the other direction. My neck snapped, hair falling into my eyes and covering the tear that trailed over my cheek.

I will not let them see me cry.

They don't deserve the satisfaction.

The taste of iron filled my mouth, coating my tongue in liquid metal. “Fuck you,” I hissed, spitting in the direction of his voice.

A deep, throaty laugh filled my ears behind me. “You hear that, Tony? She wants to fuck you, she is a whore.” I could feel the hot air leave his lips, slinking over my neck.

I wanted to wash my skin, get the feel of his breath off my body. “Let me go, and you won't get hurt.”

The laugh turned louder, hitting a higher pitch. “Us? Who's gonna hurt us, Sweetheart? Looks to me like you're talking out your ass.”

“Shut up, Vince.” The man's hand came up and brushed the hair from my face. “Do you know who we are?”

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Looking into his eyes, I saw nothing but empty holes. I didn't recognize him, didn't know his voice. He was a large man with dark greasy hair slicked back tight against his scalp. A thin patch of facial hair followed his chin and trickled up to his ears.

He was well dressed, to my surprise. A black button-up wrapped his torso, rolling up on his forearms, his pants had seams running down the front, pin-straight ironed out seams.

“Did your mommy iron your pants for you?” I couldn't stop my tongue from lashing out, even if it earned me a second, harder crack across my jaw.

“You're gonna learn quick, that mouth needs to stop.” His fingers teased the edge of my bra strap, flicking it on my shoulder. “Or it's going to get you in trouble.”

“Fuck you.”

“There she goes again, Tony. She wants to fuck you.”

“Well, she knows her position here then.” Bringing his mouth to my ear, he whispered. “Because I'm going to make you wish you never woke up, never broke free, never met me.”

His tongue licked my lobe, teeth biting down hard. Letting out a loud yelp, I tried to move away, free my arms, and kick him.

But I couldn't.

I was too small to break out from the muscles holding me tight.

The man behind me was still faceless, but that didn't last very long. The guy he called Tony pulled a gun from behind his back, pushing it snugly against my temple. “No more games, Sweetheart.”

The barrel was pressed so hard against my skin, I could feel the death it held inside. He didn't wield the gun like it was his first time holding one.

This man had experience, and I didn't plan on dying in here like that. So I went into survival mode two; play his game for now, and wait. The right time to get away will show itself, and I'll grab it by the balls. I was determined not to miss my opportunity, but now—with a gun to my face—was not the time.

Kicking the gun towards the back of the room, he said, “Move.”

Vince released me slowly, stepping to the side and pulling out his sidearm. “I want her first, Tony.”

“Fuck you man, no way. I took the pipe to the head, she's mine first.”

No . . . No . . .

Anything but that.

I could feel the tears welling up behind my eyes. The room became glossy, covered in a watery haze. “Please, please don't. You don't have to do this.”

Deep down I didn't want to beg them, but I didn't want to be violated . . . Not here, not like this.

“Um, yeah we do. I'm taking mine, I deserve that much for getting you here.” The cold barrel of the gun slid across my lower back. His voice was smiling, making me ill to my stomach. “With an ass like that, I can't not take the piece I earned.”

“You're a fucking sicko, you know that? You get your jollies off raping women, how pathetic. You're fucking pathetic.” Sneering, I ground my teeth together, wishing any amount of pain to come down and strike him where he stood.

His fingers dove into my hair, coiling painfully around the roots, and snapping my head back. “I thought I told you to watch that mouth?” Shoving me forward, I landed on my hands and knees at the feet of Vince.

I had this sick feeling of being their twisted play toy seep through my skin and turn my brain into hot soup. And I hated it.

I had lived it already, was living it before I ended up here.

Looking up at Vince, he was skinnier than the other guy, but just as massive. His hair was longer, pulled back in a smooth ponytail, a devilish grin peeling up on his face. “I think I'm going to like this one, Tony.” His teeth bared down on his lip, hand grossly cupping and squeezing his groin. “She's feisty, I love a woman who doesn't make it easy.”

“Slow down, Vince, you get my sloppy seconds.” Tony's hand wrapped around my neck, lifting me up on my knees.

“I don't care, either way I'm going to fuck her till she bleeds.” Vince bent down, twirling a strand of my nappy hair around his finger. “You'll like that, won't you?”

Pulling saliva up from the back of my throat, I let it fly right into his face. “Fuck you too, Asshole.”

Vince's face went from excited to sour, grimacing instantly. And in one quick snap, he swung the butt of the gun across my cheek. I could hear the cracking of bone under the metal object, my jaw shattering and displacing in agonizing pain.

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Falling to my side, I gripped my face and moaned. The pain was surreal, hitting and igniting a fire that spread over my body.

I don't deserve this. I only wanted a better life.

Not this, not what I had.

“There you go, Sweetheart, lay down. That's exactly where I want you anyway.” Tony slid his hand over my thigh, curling his finger into my panties, and tearing them off. I tried to fight him again, despite the crushing throb in my jaw.

But he had me pinned down, I couldn't kick him, couldn't hit him. His hands were tightly wrapped around my wrists, holding my arms above my head. Lowering down, his hips kept me in place, knees bracing my legs open.

And the tears I had been holding filled my lids to the point I couldn't hold them back anymore. They came hard and fast, rushing out with so much force and emotion that I couldn't breathe.

Vince was standing over us, smiling and chuckling, while his hand found his cock to stroke it slowly. I was sick to my stomach, ready to throw up. This couldn't be happening, it just couldn't be.

Closing my eyes tightly, I wished myself to wake up. To wake up and be at Remo's house, in his bed, in the sick safety he had harbored me with.

Either place I honestly didn't want to be in. But at Remo's, I knew my place, I knew

what to expect.

At least until he grew tired of me. That was his threat, his line to keep me good, to keep me at the mercy of his ways.

But I never let that thought flutter through my head. Because I wouldn't let him tire of me, I was determined to live.

Shit. Is this what he meant?

Is this what he was talking about?

My family had made the sale with more rules than Remo had wanted, but he was so eager to have what no one else had that he was willing to put up with it.

I tried desperately to force my thoughts into a happy place, to remove myself from my body, and not feel what Tony was about to do.

His fingers eagerly tore at his pants, tugging at the button, and feeling for the zipper. I tried not to look at his eyes. They scared me, there was no life, no emotion, no feelings or care for another person.

He was a living zombie, death in the form of a human body . . .

Except he wasn't human.

As he worked at his pants, Vince watched like a he was actually enjoying what was happening. And as the world was about to collapse around me, and kill me yet again . . .

A calm, deep voice rained down above my head. His tone was thick, smooth, flowing

like cognac.

A voice I knew, but couldn't place, a voice that saved me for the moment.

“Get the fuck off her. You don't touch her, no one touches her.” A gun was being aimed at Tony's head, the unknown man set back in a shadow covering his face.

“Boss man, I was just tasting the merchandise. Come on, I deserve that, I did all the dirty work to get her here.” Tony held his hands up, eyes large and wide.

“Wrong answer, Tony.” A loud click echoed in the shadows, Tony's brows drew up, hands shaking briefly. Fear had stained his face for that one second, only to wash his skin in white.

BAM! The shot rang out, slicing my eardrums like a serrated knife.

“No one touches her. Now clean this mess up.” Waving the gun, he motioned towards Vince.

I wanted to look up, but I kept my face on the floor. Forcing every muscle in my body to keep still, I curled my legs up into my chest and waited.

I wasn't sure what I was waiting for; a verbal assault, a reprimand for having forced his hand to kill one of his own, an onslaught of pain for bringing this on him.

But the faceless man's voice calmed my nerves and I couldn't explain why.

His voice stopped my heart, and breathed life back into my soul.

I was alive.

I was untouched.

But for how long?

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Ivy

Holy shit.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I just watched a man's execution.

I didn't want to think about what had just happened, it was too hard to process. But it was real. Tony was right there, breathing, talking . . . Then he wasn't.

Yes, he was just about to violate me in the worst way possible, and take the last bit of myself I had left; but I still felt sorry for him, sorry for how his life had been cut.

I shouldn't, I shouldn't care about that man.

But that didn't mean I wanted him dead.

Or did I?

I didn't try to help him. I didn't try to speak up and stop the shadowed man.

No. I let him do it and did nothing.

Could I have that much evil and hatred inside me?

Or was I just a product of the life I had been given?

My eyes were closed. I shut them tight out of habit. It had saved me so many times before, and all I could hope for was that it would save me now.

If I didn't see his face then maybe he'd let me go. I couldn't identify a man I didn't know.

Right?

But that voice . . .

There was no way in hell that voice would ever escape my memory. Those words would play forever in my head, and I knew the sound of his voice was something that would always be crystal clear in my ears.

I was grateful for him stopping the brutal act about to be forced on my body, but now there was a feeling of owing him my life.

He had saved me, and yet I was still at his mercy.

Coddling my knees, I counted inside my head. One, two, three . . .

It was first thing my mind went to. When I was a little girl I used to get panic attacks, and I hated them. It always felt like I was dying. The air would get thin, my chest would feel heavy like there was a boulder that had just dropped onto my ribs. It was horrible and no matter how hard I tried I couldn't always control them.

My father used to sit me down when it would happen, he'd hold my arms, and speak slow and soft. He'd tell me to close my eyes and count, then he'd make these loud exaggerated breathing noises for me to try and follow.

For a long time I thought it was silly, and as I fought for air I would curse him under

my breath.

But it worked. I had to give him that, if nothing else.

It was a panic attack that swept me into the hands of a monster, leaving me with little answers and no resolve. I had to try and fit the whole scenario together myself, there was no way in hell I'd allow Remo's answers to be the solid truth.

I wasn't letting that happen again. I wasn't going to let my body rule my conscience. I was already vulnerable and trapped, a black out wouldn't give me what I needed.

I felt my chest start to squeeze, my throat closing slowly as the air became tarnished and hard to take in.

No. Not now, not right now!

Between the numbers floating inside my head, I could hear the two men in the room, hear the sound of Tony's body being dragged away. The scratching of his clothes against the ground screeched like nails on a chalk board. Feet thumped around me, pounding the ground like an earthquake.

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But I just kept counting.

I didn't want to know anything, not about what they were doing or where they were taking him. The less I knew the better. At least that was what I figured.

There was talking, whispering, and hard grunts filtering into my head. “How the fuck did she get loose?” The shadowed man spoke with assertion, demanding the answers he looked for.

I could tell by his voice that he was pissed, the darkness to his tone poured salt on my wounds. What is he going to do with me?

The episode was passing and everything around me was coming back in. The smell, the dripping pipe . . . It was all there.

Vince was speaking so soft I couldn't hear what he was saying. But I heard the other man clear as day. He didn't bother one bit to cover up his anger over what went down.

“You fucking piece of shit. Rope—you used fucking rope? Do I need to do everything around here? Can't you jerk-offs even handle one simple fucking task?”

There was a quick mumble that was immediately cut off by the dominant man. “No.” His tone was harsh and commanding. “Don't you say a fucking word, Vince.”

Their silence was brief, making me wonder if the man was holding the gun to his head, too. Vince was begging, his plea shaken and filled with fear.

Quiet words went soundless through the air, the man's voice filling the empty space. "I don't care. You fuck up anymore, and I swear . . ." Vince let out a weak but audible yelp. "So help me, Vince, I will kill you too."

Shit! What the hell do I do now? Burying my head into my knees, I tried to think.

But I was empty. There was nothing to do but wait.

Footsteps clicked beside me, stopping with a heel scuff. "Get up."

I didn't move or open my eyes. I let the numbers keep rolling. Fifty-one, fifty-two, fifty-three . . .

The voice came in again, louder and more demanding. "Get up."

Bracing myself, I opened my eyes and looked up. Drawing in a quick breath, his face was no longer dark and unknown. I knew the man who saved me. And my heart sank like lead deep into my chest, my pussy clenching for a momentary second.

Dante Pisani.

I remembered him and the night his soft lips had left their mark on my skin. It was the only memory that hadn't been tainted by pain or torture in the past month. He seemed so unlike the person whose name had been mentioned in distaste and hatred.

That night I felt a side to him that went unseen. And all that was left by an introduction and kiss to the back of my hand.

Right then, right in that dusty room, I saw what everyone else talked about. The room was dark but his presence was darker. The air was thick and warm, but it was his breath that caused it.

He was the oldest son to the biggest crime family around, a man whose reputation for instilling fear went far beyond his name. Dante was part of a line of Pisani's who ran the city and everything in it.

A bright gray suit painted his body, hugging his broad shoulders, and curving perfectly in at his ribs. It looked like it was made specifically for him, trimmed to fit every trench and arc of muscle his frame had to offer.

His skin was a deep olive tone, hair black as night. But it was his eyes, the deepness I saw, and the stillness beneath; that was what scared me. The brown was highlighted in gold sparks, pupils so black I could see my reflection hovering inside.

Shoving my palms into the harsh ground, my back slammed deeper into the cement wall. “You?”

His gaze bore into my gut, holding me frozen in place. “Did you hear me? I said get up. Don't fucking piss me off any more than I already am.” His hands were hanging by his sides, fingers still wrapped around the butt of his gun.

“Why are you doing this?” Fear had kept me down, leaving my legs numb, and my skin crawling with millions of tiny bugs. Sweeping my arms over each other, I tried to wipe the feelings away.

They didn't leave, only enhancing into tremors that I couldn't stop.

Squatting down, his eyes were ice across my skin. Goosebumps shot over my flesh, my lungs engorged and failing me at the same time. Leaning in, his lips rested beside my cheek. “This is the last time I'm going to tell you to get up.”

The heat off his mouth radiated over my skin, forcing my body to warm. Swallowing hard, I pressed my hands into the floor and pushed myself to my feet. “Did Remo

send you for me? Is he behind this?" Any thought I might have had before about my current state of dress had completely dissolved.

I was naked from the waist down, dirt layering my knees, sand sticking to my cheeks where the tears had spread. But I didn't care, I wanted answers.

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I deserve answers.

Chuckling in a deep tone, Dante shook his head, dragging a hand through his hair. “Let's go.”

“Answer me! Did Remo tell you to do this?!” My fingers dug into my palms, the nails burying so deep I felt the skin pop.

“Alright, looks like we're doing this the hard way.” Shoving his gun into the trim of his pants, he lunged forward, scooping his arms around my waist, and slinging me over his shoulder. “If you can't follow directions, then we'll do this my way.”

I tried to fight him, kicking my legs and pounding my fists against his back. But it did nothing. There wasn't a damn flinch in his stride. He was a wall of hardened rock, thick muscles built his long back, strong arms wrapped around my hips, holding me in place.

“Fuck you! Fuck this! Let me go!” Tossing my body around, I did everything I could to try and get him to drop me.

I didn't care if I landed face first on the ground, breaking teeth, and crushing my eye sockets. I wanted to be as far away from him and from this place as I could get.

Squeezing me tighter, Dante kept his pace long and firm. “Scream all you want, no one is going to hear you.” His voice was laced in humor and threat, teasing my freedom.

Red glazed my insides, turning any fear I had into a torture chamber of pure rage.

Fuck him!

“You're going to pay for this! You're fucking dead!” Squirming and shrieking, I jostled my body across his shoulder, scratching and clawing at any piece of him my hands could touch. “Do you know who I am?”

Dante didn't say a word, the only sound he made was a deep, hollow laugh.

My threats weren't felt, they weren't feared. He wasn't afraid of me.

And why would he be?

I was a woman who was owned, who wasn't loved. I was a slave, and not worth the life I had been given.

Lifting my head, I wanted to look and see where I was. Maybe it was somewhere I'd recognize, someplace I'd be able to catch my bearings and know which way to run if I had the chance.

I wasn't giving up on the idea of getting away. He might be holding me now, but he couldn't hold me forever.

The hall was dark, the air still thick and soiled with dust. The walls were dirty and made of worn down brick, the floor a mirror image of the room we had just left.

Passing an open doorway, my eyes scanned inside, and a scream caught the back of my throat. The room was covered in plastic, dimly lit and shadowed. But I knew what I saw.

And it was something I couldn't un-see.

Vince was hovering over Tony's body, holding a hand saw. Tony had gone from a monster to an arm-less torso.

The scream I held onto faded away, my stomach twisting and taking its place making me gag.

“You might want to shut your eyes again.”

“You're fucking sick, just like your asshole friends.” Covering my lips, I forced my stomach to steady. I wasn't sure how long these men had me, but I didn't want to lose what was left in my stomach all over Dante's back.

“No, that's where you're wrong. I'm nothing like them. I'm the one you should be afraid of.” The way he said it sent chills up my spine.

That wasn't a threat, or some weak excuse to instill fear inside me. His statement was spoken with truth, with certainty.

“Why are you doing this?” Speaking into his back, I let my body go limp. Dante didn't answer. I guess I wasn't privy to that information. “If you just let me go I won't say anything.”

“Shut up.”

“I promise, I won't. Please, just let me go.” I had no clue what he was planning to do with me, or where he was taking me.

Why the fuck am I here?

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What the hell is going on?

My eyes closed tight again, forehead pressing into the firm muscles surrounding his spine. I didn't want to give up, I wasn't ready. But I was tired.

The tears began to fill my eyes, the fear of losing myself again to another man made me sick. I hated crying, and I had gotten really good at locking away the tears.

But all of this . . . It was just too much.

Haven't I been through enough?

What the fuck did I do to deserve this shit?

“Let go of my shirt.”

Opening my eyes, I hadn't realized in my momentary collapse that I had curled my fingertips into the fabric of his back, bunching it up in my palms.

Releasing my grip, I let my body dangle. I didn't want to admit defeat, but he wasn't letting me go. I was trapped—again.

The clank of a door broke the quiet of the hallway, the fresh air zipped in and filled my lungs. It felt good to be outside and out of that dungeon.

But how long would this last?

Taking a deep breath, the scent of mint and musk filled my nose. His cologne was enticing and infuriating all at the same time. I had this urge to breath him in more, and the need to push him away. I didn't like having that turmoil float itself into my brain.

This man had taken me, this man was holding me hostage. And I was supposed to hate him, not enjoy the way he smelled.

The energy I felt drain from my body came back in a wave of fire. The adrenaline purged my veins, wreaking havoc on my muscles. My legs flailed wildly, arms raining down on his back.

And still it did nothing.

Fuck! Fuck!

Dante's free hand dug in his pocket, the sound of keys jingling rang in my head. I heard the pop of a door, and felt his body start to lean over. Lifting a hand to my lower back, he flipped me over like a rag-doll, tossing me into the trunk of a car.

“No! No! Stop, please!” His glare set on my face, eyes empty but whole, lifeless yet alive.

Then black.

The lid was slammed shut, his feet making gentle taps as he walked around the car to the front. The engine surged to life, and I felt the ground shift beneath me.

This was day one to the end of a life I hated to begin with.

This was day one to a new life I never saw coming.

This was day one.

The day he made me his.

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Dante

Driving down the road, the sky was a milky hue of mop water gray. The night was claiming the sunshine, stealing away the day, and replacing it with the fucked up situation I had found myself in.

None of this was supposed to happen.

Stupid fucking assholes.

I was supposed to check on them, make sure it all went smooth. But those fucking numb-skulls couldn't handle it, they couldn't handle themselves. Now I was here, driving to our safe house, and inside my trunk was the bartering tool.

Those fucking idiots couldn't even keep it in their pants long enough to get the deal done. And my father wanted to make Tony a capo . . .

Guess that's not happening now, too fucking bad.

Chuckling to myself, I drew my thumb across my jaw, and shook my head. My father thought he knew the man, looks like he was wrong again.

It certainly wasn't the first time his judgment was tainted.

I could hear the heavy thump of her feet against the trunk, the thick pounding of her heel against the lid was starting to make me real fucking annoyed.

And I didn't need to be annoyed, especially not with her right now.

Fuck!

Glancing in the rear-view mirror, I knew I wasn't far from the safe house, but I also couldn't get there fast enough. I had to keep a level head. If I got pulled over right then, I'd be fucked. I'd end up right beside my brother, which was the last thing I wanted.

He was another fucking asshole who ran his mouth and would eventually get what he deserved. For now, he was safer than he'd ever be again.

Just thinking about him made my blood boil. Sesto wasn't family, not anymore.

Not after what he did.

Gripping the steering wheel tighter, I dug my fingers into the leather wrap. I had to cool myself down. I was already pissed off, and if this fucking girl ended up giving me a hard time . . .

She'd be real sorry, and I didn't want to do that to her.

I didn't normally have a weak spot, but when I saw her all laid out like that . . . Her hair was splayed in the dirt, arms and legs spread open without her consent; and the look in her eyes . . . It lit a fire inside my gut that turned me into more of a monster than I already was.

And to top it all off that motherfucker had the balls to tell me that he deserved to have her, that he had earned the right . . .

No fucking way.

Tony was the scum that I scraped off the bottom of my shoe, he deserved nothing.

Especially her.

The gravel kicked up into the wheel wells, pinging off the metal. Slowing to a stop, I threw the car into park, and shut down the engine. I wasn't too sure what my plan was going to be, but I knew Ivy needed protection.

There was no way in hell I was leaving her in the hands of those animals. I knew it wouldn't stop with Tony, I could see the gleam in Vince's eyes, the way he devoured her inside his head.

She was gorgeous, and from the first moment I laid eyes on her, there was something that just stuck with me. This wasn't the first time I'd seen her, she'd caught my eye when I saw Remo trolling her around like a fucking prize.

He didn't deserve her. And I couldn't understand why the hell she was with him to begin with. Maybe his money, maybe the power he tried to act like he had, I wasn't sure.

But it made my insides cringe with hatred for the man who already deserved to die.

Her hair was the color of copper, eyes a mix of green and blue. The woman had hips I could ride for days, and an ass that could use a heavy slap or two.

But for now, her purpose was with our family, for payment and to prove a point. He'd have no choice but to hold up his end of the deal if he wanted his woman back.

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His woman . . . What a fucking joke.

The men that worked for my father, they would never lay a hand on her. I wasn't going to allow it, that wasn't why we had her, that wasn't the purpose she served.

If it had been up to me, I would've just killed Remo myself. He was a sick fuck anyway and his business wasn't that important. But my father was the boss, so it wasn't my decision to make.

Dragging my fingers through my hair, I rested my chin on the back of my hand and stared off into nothing. Taking Ivy here wasn't a good idea, but I had no choice. I needed her safe, I needed her out of the reach of the dicks that worked for the family.

Taking in a deep breath, I opened the door and stepped to the trunk. The silence of the woods around us and the quiet from inside the trunk was eerie.

My hands came down hard, resting on the cold metal. Feeling the lid, I tried to sense any movement inside. There was none.

Hopefully she was asleep, it would make it so much easier for me to move her inside the house. My heart lurched, a fear settling in my chest.

What if she's dead?

Yanking the key from my pocket, I jammed it into the lock. The trunk opened with a quiet pop, a softthunkechoed around me, and faded into nothing. Glancing around over my shoulder, I checked to make sure we were alone.

Which was ridiculous. Of course we were alone, we were out in the middle of nowhere, not another soul around for miles.

It wouldn't be a safe house if it was set up in suburbia with neighbors, and businesses a holler away.

The stiff hand of my job could never get shit done that way.

Slowly I lifted the edge, leaning over as it rose towards the sky. I was hoping she wasn't dead, deep down I didn't want her to be staring back up at me with frost colored eyes, and cold skin.

It was a look I was all too familiar with and it never left you. The last thing I wanted was to see her like that. There was a crushing feeling that wafted through my veins, sucking the air from my lungs as I cautiously lifted the steel.

Suddenly, the trunk shot open, her small frame shooting forward with a violent snap. "No! Fuck you!" Ivy let out a loud angry screech. Her hands were clenched together as she whipped them at my face in one giant swoop.

The punch stunned me, leaving my head spinning and a ringing in my ears. I didn't expect it, I had let down my guard for a second of stupid fucking fear that she might have died on me.

Jumping out of the car, Ivy made a mad dash up the gravel driveway. Her small feet were quick, thumping with gentle taps against the small rocks.

The fear I felt before melted away, growing into anger and coiling around my ribs to strangle my lungs. I still needed her, my family still needed her, I couldn't let her get away.

Shifting on my feet, I found myself laughing. She wasn't going to get far.

Fuck, this whole situation was screwing with my head.

I had forgotten where we were for a brief second, letting my emotions screw with my brain.

“You're not going anywhere!” Taking long steps, I picked up my pace and started to run. “We're out in the middle of nowhere! You'll die out here before you find one fucking person to help you!”

My heels drove into the dirt, gaining on her small weak body. I had to give the girl credit, she was faster than I thought and packed quite the punch. But that didn't change anything, she was still mine for now.

I could hear her breathing, the heavy thrusts of her lungs trying to keep blood flowing to her limbs so she could keep going. But it was too late, I was on her.

Throwing myself forward, our bodies collided, falling to the hard ground. “Gotcha.” Ivy's arms wriggled in my hands, her body twisting and turning as she kept fighting against me. “You ain't going anywhere, Sweetheart.”

Gripping her wrists, I yanked them behind her back, jamming my knee in between her shoulder blades. Putting pressure on her spine, I held her in place.

Her grunts came out hard and fast, muscles never seizing. “Fuck you! Fuck you!” Flailing her body around, she wiggled under me.

Flipping her over, I straddled her waist, clenching her wrists tight above her head. “Stop fighting.”

“Never! I'll never stop fighting you!” Her lips pressed together, eyes veering in rage.

There was so much strength in this woman, and I couldn't lie . . . I was getting turned on. My cock jerked beneath my pants, coming to life the more she resisted me. I couldn't explain where the feelings came from, but they were there.

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And I liked it.

Ivy's face was shining under the moonlight, gleaming in sweat and blushing the sexiest shade of red. Her tits bounced as she moved under me, hair whipping all around her head as she sent hatred-filled words in my direction.

“You're fucking sick! You can't do this to me! Prick! Asshole!”

“Keep moving like that and you're bound to pop your shoulder out of the socket.” Smirking, I held her tighter, moving my waist down over her mound.

Her hips bucked beneath me, slamming up into my balls. Her back was arched high, arms tugging forcefully between my fingertips. If this had been any other time, she wouldn't be resisting.

This would be foreplay, her hips would be moving to beg for me to be in her. Ivy's mouth would be moaning erotic demanding words, and her eyes would be filled with arousal instead of hatred.

But that wasn't what this was. And I was still turned on, cock hard, chest buzzing with need.

Maybe I am a sick motherfucker.

Flaring her nostrils, Ivy breathed in slowly through her nose. “Let me go. I won't tell anyone this happened if you just let me go.”

Shaking my head, I said, "I can't do that."

"Yes, you can."

"I can't." I felt her body go loose, the adrenaline slowing down and slipping away.

Shutting her lids, Ivy licked her lips before opening her eyes again. "Why? Tell me why you're doing this." Her eyes met mine, and for a second I truly felt for her.

She hadn't asked for any of this, and it wasn't my plan to begin with. What she didn't realize was how much of a role she really played.

"I'm going to get up, and you're going to come with me. Fight me anymore and I swear you'll regret it." Loosening one of my hands, I kept the other still firmly wrapped around her wrists. "Do you understand me?"

"I know who you are."

"Everyone knows who I am, Sweetheart." My lip curled up, brows dipping in. "Is that supposed to scare me?" She didn't answer, she just kept her eyes steady on mine. "We're done talking, let's go."

Standing, I tugged her up by the arms. A weak yelp expelled from her mouth as she tried to steady herself on her feet. A piece of me wanted to cradle her in my arms, stroke her hair and tell her this would all be over soon.

All she had to do was be good for me and this would all go away.

But I couldn't let myself be weak to this woman. This wasn't my choice and it wasn't hers. We both had a job to do, even if she didn't realize it.

“So, is this it? Are you going to kill me now—here?”

“I said we're done talking.” Leading her forward, we headed back up to the house.

“You're really not going to tell me what the hell is going on?” Ivy asked, attempting to look back at me over her shoulder.

I wasn't answering her anymore. The more I talked the easier it would be to give her too much information. She didn't need to know anything, it wasn't her place.

Her job was to stay put until the deal was done, that was it. It wasn't difficult, and if she kept fighting, the harder shit would get for her. She had to be good for me.

I wasn't going to be nice, I wasn't going to go easy on her. If she kept running her mouth, I'd have no choice but to put her in her place.

Watching her ass shift as we walked over the gravel made my cock twitch with excitement. I had this woman at the mercy of my ways, and the idea of that was starting to stick to my brain like molasses.

I wasn't a monster like those other assholes, I'd take my time with her, show her who she needed to please.

And in the end, she'd beg for me, she'd beg for my mercy.

And I would give it to her.

I'm not a man who just takes what he wants . . .

I'm a man who earns the desire behind it.

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Ivy

The house came into view as we walked up the driveway. And sadly, it looked just like any other normal home you'd see set in a plat with nothing to give away what might happen inside.

The front was well groomed with bushes tucked snugly under the windows. Small pots of flowers rested beside the front door, a dog house was set off to the side.

If I'd passed by this house at any other time I wouldn't think twice about it. But right now, it looked like hell on earth.

Dante was bringing me here for a reason, and I had no idea why. There were no lights on inside, no other cars in the driveway.

We were alone, away from civilization, away from help. Looking through the trees I tried to make out any faint glow of a neighbor or sign of life. And nothing.

Motherfucker! Where the hell am I?

The tree line looked thick, surrounding the entire property. But I couldn't tell how deep they actually went, it was way too dark for that. I knew I couldn't make it through them like this, not without shoes or clothes. It was too cold out, I'd freeze to death.

I'll find a way. I'll get out of here alive.

Peeking out of the corner of my eye, Dante was still holding a death grip on my wrists, walking with his head straight. “Can you just tell me what this is all for? Don't I have a right to know why I'm here?”

Flicking his eyes in my direction, his parted lips sealed tight, head snapping back straight.

“What, you're just going to go mute now? You're not going to talk to me at all?” Stumbling over a hidden rock, his strong arms held me up, pulling me back from falling. My pussy pulsed, warming over the small amount of concern I felt in his touch.

It had been a long time since anyone showed even the slightest care for my well-being. The small tug to keep me upright was enough to send my stomach into a tumbling ball of knots.

“Here's something for you, watch where you're walking.” Shoving me forward, he made sure to keep our pace steady.

“Oh yeah, cause it's my fault I'm shoeless in the dark.” Huffing under my breath, I whispered. “Asshole.”

Walking the rest of the way in silence, Dante opened the front door and pushed me inside. He wouldn't let go of my arms, holding onto them like I was going to bolt any second if given the chance.

He was right to do that. Because my mind kept running through the ways I could escape, the ways I could try and hurt him so I could get free.

But he knew that, he wasn't stupid.

Flipping on the light that glowed over the stairs, he forced me forward and up the steps. Looking around quickly, I tried to get a grasp on my surroundings.

There was a living room to my right with a flower embroidered couch that looked like it stepped out of the seventies. A recliner was tucked in the corner facing an old dirty fireplace with a small table pushed level with the arm.

But there were no pictures or photos on the walls. Not a newspaper or magazine, no trinkets lined the mantle, nothing to show this was a real home.

Twisting my head, there was an archway to my left that looked like it led to a hallway, and a small bench rested halfway down the hall. But still there was a lack of personality. No one lived here in the true form of the word.

I felt Dante's hand around my wrists, his thumbs were digging into my skin as he forced me up the stairs. His hands were strong and possessive. I could feel his pulse beat through his fingertips, speeding up and slowing down.

The feelings rushing through my body were like a fucking roller coaster. I was scared, angry, and secretly yearning for his touch.

I hated how he made me feel that way. My pussy was clenching, and the only reason I could find for it was because he saved me. The feelings felt wrong, but the desire was knotting around my stomach, twisting and making my knees buckle.

But did he really save me?

I was still trapped here, still being held against my will. But he didn't let Tony and Vince rape me. For that I was grateful. I didn't want my first time to be on a dirt floor, with a man who was forcing himself on me.

Not that way.

I had the opportunity years ago with a boy from school. I froze, and told him no. I regretted that now. Remo was only working up to it, he hadn't forced that on me yet.

I guess there were rules to buying a virgin. Funny, right?

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He could buy me from my family for a promise of a better life. He could buy me for money, do what he wanted to me, treat me like I was a fucking dog . . .

But to steal my virginity he had to follow the terms placed before him. He was expected to flaunt me around—which he did—he was expected to train me and make me obedient to his commands. And he tried, he tried like hell to make me crumble.

I hadn't been submissive like he wanted. But the beatings came, and I learned to control the situation. I knew how far to take it, and I knew when to back off.

I became stronger, better at reading people and what they were thinking. I also knew that Remo wanted the one thing from me he had paid for.

The sex was coming, I had been with him for two months. And after he had proven that I was broken beyond repair and subservient to my new handler, I was his and he was free to do what he wanted. And that included taking the last bit of innocence I had left.

The smooth and weathered stairs creaked under my feet. I could feel the pad of my foot scuffing against cracks in the worn surface, catching on small frayed splinters. “So, this is where you'll do it? You're going to kill me up here?”

“Do you ever stop talking?”

“Does it matter? If I don't talk, you're going to kill me. If I do talk, you're going to kill me.” Pausing for a second, Dante pushed his fist into my lower back to keep me moving.

“I didn't say that. But you're really testing my limits, Doll.” His hand tightened around my wrist, tugging my arms down hard. “Don't push me, that won't help you.”

“Help me, what the fuck is going to help me? You're leading me to my death, do you need to drag it out? Just do it already.”

I felt the life draining away. Well, what life I had left. Remo had done a great job of breaking me down for this motherfucker. I was strong willed, but there was only so much one person could take.

How the hell I would ever get out of this, I wasn't sure.

And what was I going back to? Turning into a sex slave?

Fuck that.

“You don't sound like someone who's afraid of death.”

“Maybe that's because I welcome it.” Reaching the top, he led me into the first door on our right. “It's not like I have much to live for.”

Dante cleared his throat, yanking a chain out from behind the dresser. Wrapping it around my waist, he pulled it tight, and locked it. “Most people are begging for their lives by now. You should be crying for mercy and forgiveness.”

“I won't beg.”

“You're going to beg.”

“I won't, not for my life. If you were going to let me go, you would've by now.”

“If I was going to kill you, I would've by now.”

“Maybe you want more, maybe you want what those other assholes tried to get.”

His laugh came out full and thick, thumb tapping his jaw. “Maybe you shouldn't have met those other guys, maybe they were out of line.”

Rolling my eyes, I snarled. “Maybe. But meeting you hasn't turned out to be much better either.”

His face locked on mine, eyes settling over my lips. “Sit tight, I'll be back.”

“What? No. Don't leave me here like this.” Holding the thick chain in my hands, it felt like ice cold torture. I was trapped.

Why is he doing this? Why is he keeping me here like this?

His lips thinned as he turned and walked out of the room, closing the door behind him. I watched the handle jiggle, heard the clank of the lock setting in place.

My chest started to thud as my heart sped up. My pussy was hot, and I felt sick about it. I should be hating this man, but I couldn't stop the wetness from seeping down and coating my inner thighs.

Dante was evil, and pantie melting, cold, and filled with fire. His jaw was firm, solid, covered in light stubble that I couldn't stop from picturing between my thighs. A sick twisted need had started to fill my stomach, and buzzed over my most delicate parts, wanting him in the worst way possible.

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What the fuck is wrong with me?

Had I been so consumed by my hatred for Remo that the first man to sweep in and take me away had become my dark and horrid sweat dream?

My body was deceiving me, going against my mind and doing what it wanted. And I couldn't stop it.

Flicking my head down to the chain, I pulled on the metal leash. There were several feet of it hidden behind the dresser. The chain was long enough I could move around the room with ease, and not really get caught on anything. Flipping the leash over the mattress, I walked to the window.

It was the only other exit I could see. There was a door against the far wall, leading into a bathroom, and that was it. At least there was one viable way I could possibly escape.

The curtains were drawn and thick as a fleece blanket, sealing out the world. Coiling my fingers around the hem, I pulled them back. To my surprise, there were no bars. I was certain there would be bars to keep me in . . . Or anyone else who happened into this room.

The chain was bolted to the wall, so I wasn't the first person to end up here. I knew that much.

Tapping my lips, I felt the edge of the sill for a lock. There was nothing.

Could it be that easy? Could I open this window and jump out?

Leaning into the glass, I looked down at the dark ground. I couldn't tell exactly how far up I was, but I didn't care. I'd take a broken leg over being tortured or killed. It was a small price to pay for freedom.

Fiddling with the chain, I tried to shift it over my hips. I couldn't squeeze out, twisting and dipping my waist, I tried to force it down over my body. But it was too tight, locked, and unbreakable.

Glaring at the window, I looked back at the door and listened. There was nothing but silence and the occasional creak of the house. Pressing my palms to the glass, I pushed up. It felt stuck, not budging.

Taking a deep breath, I used my fingers to wrap over the top of the frame and pushed again. Grunting, I bent at the knees and used every bit of muscle I could find to open that window.

And still nothing.

I slipped to the floor, my back pressed against the wall, head falling into my hands.

Shit. What now?

Snapping my head up, I looked around the room. The walls were all bare, just like the downstairs. There were no knickknacks, or tiny decorations to give away whose room this might have been at one point in time.

What kind of house is this?

The room was blank, deprived of touch. The walls were so bare and placid that I

found myself wondering what stories this room was hiding.

Was it filled with bloodshed and tears, people begging and merciless beatings?

Or was it once filled with the loud churning of children and laughing of a family that was enjoying escape from their reality?

Does it matter?

I was in a chamber; my last memory was this, and nothing about this was mine at all.

There was a single dresser against the wall near the door, a bed, and a wooden chair set in the corner.

As I sat there staring around the room, my eyes kept getting drawn back to the chair.

Break it. I can break it.

Standing quickly, I walked to the chair and ran my fingers gently across the smooth ridge. Then it hit me.

What good is breaking it if I'm still chained to the room?

Staring down at my leash, I tried to pry the motherfucker off my body. Pushing and rolling, the metal scraped against my skin, leaving deep red scratches. But I couldn't get it over my hips.

Laying on the bed, I bent my knees and lifted my ass up. I was determined to get this fucking thing off me. The pain was the least of my worries.

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I wasn't going to die, not tonight, not here.

If I could get away, I could run. I could run for help, I could run and keep running until I was far away from here, far away from Remo, far away from hell.

Gritting my teeth, I forced the chain to move down my hips. It hurt like hell, feeling like I was being squeezed in one of those old-fashioned clothes dryers you'd see from the twenties. The metal pinched my skin, tearing it at the surface and turning it raw.

With one final push, I felt the leash pop, loosening its hold as it passed onto my thighs. The pressure faded, and I wanted to yell out with excitement. Biting my lip, I held in my joy and focused.

I need to get out.

I can celebrate when I'm free from this.

Slipping free, I picked up the chair at my side and softly stepped back to the window. Holding it out to the side, I took in a few heavy breaths. I was going to slam this thing so fucking hard that I knew it wouldn't be quiet.

But I'd have a few seconds before Dante was able to make his way back in. He'd have to unlock the door and that would slow him down for a little blip of time.

As if a light went off inside my head, I flicked my eyes to the dresser.

I can get more time if I block the door.

Gently placing the chair back down, I tried to not make a sound. I didn't want to draw any attention to myself. At least not until I was ready.

Tip toeing across the wood floor, I tried to avoid making the ground speak to my movements. Standing next to the dresser, I wasn't sure how the hell I planned on moving it across the floor without it making a shit ton of noise. Just pushing it would definitely draw attention.

Holding the corners, I attempted to see if I could lift it. It was heavy, but it felt empty, so there was a bit more give to it than I expected. Holding up one side, I shifted it around side by side, until I had walked it in front of the door. And it was a lot easier and quieter than I thought it would be.

Thank you, thank you.

I had this surge of power flood my veins. I was taking control of this, I was working the situation and going to make it out. Dante had underestimated my abilities, and left me in here alone.

No matter what feelings were floating around inside my body, he had taken me. I couldn't forget that, I wouldn't forget that. In my head, I was giving Dante and his family the middle finger.

Fuck you Pisanis.

Fuck you.

Stepping to the window, I picked up the chair again, gripping it like it was the last thing I would ever touch in my hands. Holding it with a death grip, I swung.

The sound was deafening. The pop the wood made against the glass as it shattered

into bits around me was unmistakable. And as I lifted my head, brushing the hair from my eyes, I stood in sheer panic.

The glass was still whole. There wasn't even a fucking crack, a split, nothing. It was crystal clear, gleaming at me with an unbroken smile.

Fuck! No! No!

The buzzing in my head was growing softer, the pounding of the door behind me filled the empty space between my ears.

“Ivy! Fuck, Ivy!” Dante's fists rained down on the door, the weak material breaking away with his rage. Busting through, the dresser fell forward with a loud bang.

Throwing himself inside, his eyes were wide and shining like glass. “What the fuck are you thinking?!” His yell came out thick and fierce.

My body ignited, prickles lifting off my skin and taking me hostage. I was afraid and hot, scared and turned on by the way his voice slithered to my core.

And I felt sick about it. I couldn't honestly be excited by him, his demeanor, his hard muscles and rippled chest.

The control he possessed over my body's reaction was like nothing I'd ever felt before. My heart was racing and excited. A deep need to feel him punish me however he saw fit was strangling my brain.

But I was afraid—afraid of how much that thought warmed me on the inside.

Raising my head high, my shoulders shot back. “What? Did you think I would seriously just give up?” Crossing my arms over my chest, I held my chin towards the

ceiling. “I warned you.”

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Anger painted his face, his brows furrowed, nose wrinkling as his lip curled. “You warned me?” Lunging forward, he grabbed the remaining fabric of the shirt on my shoulder. “You warned me?”

“Don't touch me!” I yelled, trying to step back. I refused to let fear take me, I refused to let him think he scared me.

If I was going to die, I would do it trying to escape, I would be the one who set my demise. Not him, not Remo, not anyone else.

Me.

And if he did it now, at least I went out trying to get free.

His mouth went razor thin, nostrils flaring. “You—you don't fucking speak.” Throwing my body onto the mattress, Dante hovered over me. “You are going to listen to me.” Grabbing my wrists, he yanked them painfully above my head.

“What are you doing?” Trying to wiggle free, I bent and twisted my arms to break his grasp. It was fruitless, I wasn't escaping his hold.

He didn't speak. His eyes were enraged, the color draining to black. Yanking hard on my wrists, I felt the cold first, followed by the sealed clank of metal.

He had cuffed me to the bed.

Standing over me, Dante's chest heaved breaths of hot air. His jaw cocked out to the

side, lids expanded. “This is where you get to spend your night now.”

“You can't leave me like this!”

Drawing a hand over his jaw, he shook his head. “I can.”

“Fuck you!” Screaming, I tugged my arms, trying to yank them free of the bed.

“I don't want to hurt you, Ivy, I don't. But if you keep defying me, keep pulling this bullshit . . .” Dragging his fingers through his hair, his lips parted. “I won't have a choice. Don't make me choose.”

Staring at him, I couldn't stop my eyes from shifting over his body. His muscles were perked, fighting against his shirt, his massive hands were open, resting by his sides. And again, a wave of heat washed over me.

My pussy pulsed, clenching and releasing with desire that was so wrong, and so hard to ignore. The air around me turned to searing pins, pricking my lungs as I tried to force the oxygen down.

I couldn't breathe.

His hand gripped the base of his neck, eyes static. “I killed one of my own to keep you safe. Don't make me regret it.”

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Dante

Twirling the glass in a soft circle, the smell of scotch breached the air. Taking a long sip, I let the liquid burn against my tongue before swallowing hard.

I could still hear her, still see her, and I wanted her gone. If anyone else had pulled the shit she just did, I would have fucking killed them without a second thought.

But this girl was different.

I didn't like the way she made me feel, I hated how she tugged at something inside me that I had shutdown years ago. Emotions didn't play well in my line of work.

They are not welcome. Ever.

People make mistakes when they start to feel shit. If you think about what you're doing, then you let it seep in and turn your dreams into nightmares. I refused to have nightmares.

It was bad enough that the memories were there to begin with. I didn't need to deal with my conscience too. It was easier to think of people as objects, an obstacle to jump in order to get what was needed.

Dragging my fingers across my forehead, I squeezed my temples. My head was pounding with a fierce headache, crushing and constricting my brain.

Ivy made me want to punish her, to fuck her. I wanted to make her scream, make her

beg. I wanted the power to bring her so close to coming that she'd be dangling on the edge and wouldn't be able to take it.

Then I wanted to send her over that edge, watch her body tremble as the feeling washed across her body, and made her melt beneath me.

Fuck. This is going to be problem.

The cell in my pocket went off, the ring slicing through my ears, and helping to feed the pain in my skull.

Tugging it out, I hit the button. “Yeah.”

“Well, is it done?”

“Yeah.”

“That's it? That's all you have for me?” My father sounded pissed, and he didn't even know the half of it yet.

“What do you want me to say? Yes, we have her. There, you feel better now?” Sliding deeper into the chair, I took another long swig of the drink.

“Don't be an ass, Dante. Is it done?”

Letting out a loud sigh, I grumbled. “It is, but it wasn't smooth.”

“What happened?”

“Tony is a fucking idiot, that's what happened. So, now he's gone.”

“What the hell do you mean gone?”

“What the fuck do you think I mean, do I need to spell it out for you?”

“Fuck, Dante, what went wrong? This was an easy job, how the hell did you fuck it up?”

Of course he wanted to blame me. How convenient. He sends his stupid fucking men, but it's somehow my screw up. I told him what I thought, he didn't want to hear it.

“Me? I didn't fuck up shit. It was those two dumb fucks you sent.”

“You know what, I don't want to hear it right now. You have her, that's all that matters.”

“Is it? Because right now, I'm at the safe house with her.”

He didn't say a word. His breathing was thick and filled the speaker. I knew he was trying to figure out in his own way what the hell had gone down. But I couldn't tell him over the phone, and he knew it.

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That was a conversation we needed to have in person.

“I’ll be there in two hours.” The line clicked, and I was left with dead air.

Shit.

Standing quickly, I paced around the living room, unsure of what he would think or what he would want to do. My father ran things with a strict fist. Which should be expected considering his position. But this time it wasn't all black and white.

My father had every excuse in the book for not letting me order the hit. Remo made us money, his business was a huge part of ours. Without his hand in the game, we wouldn't have access to the containers, and our shipments wouldn't come through as smoothly as they had been.

That was until shit went down a month ago, and we lost quite a few guys.

Remo owed us, he owed us more than I think he wanted to admit. But him and my father went way back, I think that's why he didn't want to whack him right off the bat. Since I was a kid, Remo and my father were as close as brothers.

That changed years ago, when he screwed with the wrong people. Now he worked for us. It was his fault that family had to go through what it did.

And for that . . . He didn't deserve second chances.

But for me, relationships didn't matter if you weren't blood. And even that ran thin.

Maybe it was how I was raised, maybe it was how I thought our business should be run. I wanted him dead, he didn't deserve any of our time.

Friend or no friend, brother or no brother . . . It should have been dealt with the right way.

He wouldn't give me a straight answer as to why we couldn't just take him out. There had to be a good reason, there better be a good reason.

Otherwise all of this was for nothing. And when I asked my father what would happen if Remo did this to him again, and again . . . His words were cold.

'You know whose fault this is. Dante, when I'm in the ground you can do shit your way. For now, I call the shots. Don't question me, I won't tolerate it. Don't make me lose another son.'

The faint scream of Ivy from upstairs made its way down into the living room. I needed her to calm down, she had to be on her best behavior when my father got here.

Placing the glass down, I stormed up the stairs. She needed to listen to me, I had to make her listen to me.

Throwing the shattered door open, her eyes gaped wide. Curling her legs into her chest, she tried to pull herself up on the bed, but the cuffs made it impossible for her to hide.

Her pussy was exposed, glistening and hot. I had the urge to jump her, take her for myself and let the entire night melt away into the heat between her thighs.

Just seeing her that way made my cock stiff. She was helpless . . . And yet she wasn't.

Ivy had fire that ran through her veins—she was wild in the best kind of way. She wouldn't make it easy, she wouldn't let me just take her. And the idea of having to fight for what I wanted made me so hard it hurt.

Her face was still flushed, chest lifting quickly with rapid breaths. “What? Is it time to chain my mouth too?”

Damn her filthy mouth. It was music to my ears.

She wasn't begging, she wasn't throwing herself at me like all the other women who added notches to my belt.

I couldn't wait to make her beg.

“I need you to listen to me, and listen to me good.” Stepping to her side, I gripped the base of her hair and forced her to look up. “Someone's on their way here right now, and if you don't shut the fuck up, I won't be able to save you from him.”

“I told you I'm not going to beg for my life.”

“I'm not asking you to beg for your life, I'm asking you to shut up for your life.”

“I don't understand, you're going to kill me anyway, so—”

Cutting her off, I wanted her to understand what was at stake. “Do you really want to die tonight? I'll try to keep him away from you, but if he insists on seeing you then you need to behave.”

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Ivy's eyes lowered, her teeth biting down on her lip. "I'm not a dog."

"I didn't say you were. But if you can't follow simple instructions then you'll end up like my employee."

"You're employee." Letting out a sarcastic laugh, she said, "Your employee was a fucking sick, twisted pervert. Maybe you should try a real line of work."

"You really don't think before you talk, do you?" Watching her chest rise and fall, her nipples were hard, poking out and inviting me in to bite them. "You should learn to think before you speak."

"I told you I'm not a dog." Her lips went thin, drawing in air through the corner. "When I get loose—and I will get loose—I'm going to fucking make you wish you let me run outside."

"Don't be difficult, we both know that's not true." Gritting my teeth, I coiled my fingers tighter against her roots. Snapping her neck back, her eyes opened on reflex. "This is the only warning I'm giving you. If you don't listen, then it's out of my control. I'll make this easier for you to understand. You're going to listen to me, you're going to follow what I say, and you're going to do as you're told." Cupping her chin between my thumb and forefinger, I stroked the curve of her jaw. "We can make this all go smooth and painless."

Laughing, Ivy rolled her eyes. "My God you're as fucked up as you're employee. I understand that whoever is on their way makes you uncomfortable, but that doesn't mean shit to me. I'm a dead woman, aren't I?"

“If you haven't realized by now that I'm not here to kill you, you never will. But the man who's on his way . . . He will kill you, and he won't think twice about it. I told you not to make me regret saving you, so don't.”

Her face went soft, eyes falling to her stomach, then raising back to mine. “I still don't understand. Tell me why I'm here, tell me what you're doing.” She searched my face, trying to read my thoughts.

But there was nothing there for her to see. I was a wall of grit, coated in thick steel. I was a trained killer. She could look all she wanted, but Ivy wouldn't get shit from me.

“I just need you to listen. Can you do that?”

For the first time, she didn't resist, she just nodded. There was an understanding I felt we shared, and a feeling that drove me to keep her safe.

I could see it in her face, in her eyes. She finally realized I was trying to help her survive.

“Alright.”

“Alright,” I said back. Loosening my grip on her hair, I ran my fingers through it softly. The strands were silky, twisting around my fingers and slipping away.

Her face fell to her shoulder, a single tear streaking over her cheek. “I still think you're a fucking asshole.”

“You're right, I won't tell you you're not. But I'm the only asshole who can keep you breathing.” Turning towards the door, I held it in my palm. Staring at the floor, I spoke firmly. “For your sake, I hope your mouth doesn't get the best of you.”

My fingers pricked against the splintered wood, and I knew I couldn't leave this place looking like this. The door was cracked and split, the dresser was face down, the chair was broken into a million tiny shards.

“This place is a fucking mess, and I can't even let you up to clean it.”

“I'm not your house wife. Clean it yourself.” Ivy's head turned away, staring off into blank space.

Curling my lip, I grunted in frustration. The woman had a mouth on her, and I wanted to shove my cock down her throat to shut her up.

Heading downstairs, I went and found the hammer and broom. My father was pissed, I couldn't have him walking in that room and seeing it like that.

He already thought I was a fuck up and that would only cement his belief.

Freeing a door from downstairs, I carried it under my arm back up to the room. Kneeling down at the first hinge, I hammered the pin up to free it. Ivy watched me quietly from the bed, her face swollen and bruised.

I didn't say one word to her. I was afraid if I did and she snapped back I might do something stupid. I wanted to kiss her, I wanted to fuck her, I wanted to break her.

Putting the new door in its place, I swept up the wood bits on the floor and made a pile of the larger pieces.

“Why do you care about that? Does a broken chair and door really fucking matter? Look at what you're doing to me.” Shaking her wrists, Ivy's brows arched high. “Don't you think this is just as bad?”

Taking a long stride forward, I held out my arm. “This shit right here . . .” Shaking the dust pan, the wood jostled around inside. “This is the shit that is going to get you killed. No more bullshit, Ivy, or it will be your last day on earth.”

After removing the mess, I stood in the doorway. “I’m warning you, when he gets here, do not say one fucking word.” Slamming the door, I kept my hand pressed against the wood. She was difficult, and had a whole lot of fucking balls. Balls bigger than some of the guys I’d dealt with in the past.

But a mouth like that would get her killed, and if she didn’t play the game the way I was telling her to then she’d be sleeping next to Tony.

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I'd doubt she'd like that much. I don't think she realized that this was out of my control now, all I could do was wait and see how things played out. I was going to try my hardest to keep her alive, I'd work my father and do everything I could.

I just didn't have any guarantees.

Tony fucked this for us and for her.

Walking towards the stairs, I stopped short. I couldn't answer her questions, I couldn't let her go, but there was one thing I could do for her. Slipping into the second bedroom, I sifted through the closet hoping to find something that might bring her a little comfort.

Spotting it tucked away in the corner, I nabbed it quickly and headed back to her room. Instinctively I knocked, and as my knuckles grazed the wood I felt stupid for even doing it.

Opening the door, Ivy stared at me with empty eyes. "So, you knock now? How polite." Rolling her eyes, she let her head drift to the window.

"Some things are a habit. There is a half-naked woman in here, I'm not a complete fucking prick." Holding out a blue sundress, I fiddled with the straps. "I got you this to put on."

"What am I now, your fucking baby doll? Wanna do my hair too, maybe pose me in a position you'd like to fuck me in?"

“Watch your fucking mouth, that attitude of yours isn't going to fly much longer.”
Walking to the bedside, I laid the dress by her feet.

Lifting my hands to the tattered shirt on her body, I started to peel it up, revealing a small hint of her stomach. Her muscles were shaking, eyes watching my every move.
“This isn't going to work like this.”

“Nope.” Shaking her arms, the metal rattled against the headboard. “You should probably undo my wrists.”

“Nice try, but no.” Grabbing the base of her shirt, I held it firmly between my fingers.
“I promise I won't look . . .” Scrunching my lips, I said, “Too long, I can't say for sure my eyes won't find their way to your chest. I am a man, after all.”

“Don't try and be fucking sweet and courteous. You think that'll change anything? That if you try and show some decency I might listen to you?” Huffing under her breath, the loud rush of air from her lungs whistled behind her tongue. “You're not a man, you're a fucking pig.”

Clenching my teeth, I tensed my fingers around the fabric, and stared deep into her eyes. “Fine. I'm an asshole and a pig, you called it.” Tearing the shirt right up the middle, the remaining bits fell onto the bed.

Her tits were exposed, nipples perked and firm. Goosebumps broke over her skin, riding her ribs and spotting her belly. She was shaking, her stomach a rolling wave of nerves as she laid there vulnerable and completely naked.

My eyes followed her body, taking in every inch of her as she watched me with a shocked but warm expression. Her eyes were huge, but it was her body that spoke to me.

I watched her thighs cross over each other, calves twisting with ease around the end of the bed. Her lips had parted, tongue gliding over her teeth. “Well are you going to leave me like this, or put the dress on?”

Scooping it into my hands, I crinkled it up, starting at her feet and working my way over her legs. Letting my knuckles touch her skin, the warmth of her flesh was enticing.

She was hot, smooth, and at my mercy. I could take her right here, right now. I don't know why the thought turned me on so much, but it did. She was my trapped vixen, arousal painting her skin in flesh colored bumps and cold sweat.

And by the look in her eyes . . . I didn't think she'd resist me if I tried.

Her blue stare was crushing, sparking my chest with electric need. “Excited?” she asked.

“What?”

Flicking her eyes to my dick, she asked again. “Excited?”

Glancing down, my cock was rock hard, pushing up high. “Shut it.” Yanking the dress up the rest of her body, I let the top snap around her tits, leaving the straps to dangle. “He'll be here soon.” Taking in a deep breath, I left her, walking back downstairs and letting my body fall weightlessly back into the chair.

Fuck! What the hell am I thinking?

I had to get away from her. She made me want her so badly I was second guessing myself. Ivy was turning me into a fucking hot mess, eager to just get a piece.

Chugging the last gulp of scotch, I made a loud hissing sound as the remaining liquid hit my throat. Tonight had just gone from sucking to down right fucking horrible. And all I could do was talk to my father.

He would make the final call. None of this was up to me.

And in the end . . .

She didn't really matter to my father.

But I had to find a way to keep her alive.

To keep her for myself.

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Ivy

I stared blankly into nothing. My body was strained and tired, but I refused to let my eyes close. I wasn't going to sleep, not here.

Defeat had pained every muscle in my body, I was sore and uncomfortable. But there was nothing I could do to change that. The idea of giving up was dangling like a spider on a web in front of my face.

But my mind was still racing with ways to get free, to hide, to fix this.

A door slammed somewhere downstairs. The bang vibrated the walls, window mimicking the shake with a wave of ripples. My eyes zeroed in on the door, waiting for it fly open.

Dante started speaking first, his words low and inaudible. I couldn't make out what he was saying.

Fuck! What the hell is he saying?

Glancing up at the shackles on my wrists, I tried to roll my body closer to the door. I wanted to hear them, I needed to hear them. My arms bent unnaturally, twisting and popping at the joints.

Sweat had started to form on my brow, wiping it away with my shoulder, I strained my neck to lean closer to the door.

Inhaling a sharp breath, I naturally forced my body to slow down so I could hear anything and everything around me. I wanted to be prepared, it was important.

Life had thrown me so many fucking curve balls, I'd grown accustomed to anticipating the worst. I always found that if I expected the worst then I wouldn't be blindsided.

But this shit was different. The past few months had been fucking different. I hadn't seen any of this coming.

Then again . . . Maybe if I had paid more attention, I would've noticed something.

The meetings my father had with Remo would've been a start. I chose not to notice, going about my business like he wasn't even there. If I could've known then what I know

now . . . I would've run.

I replayed that day in my head a million fucking times, the day he came for me. And the look in my father's eye was one of sadness, regret, and relief.

Money talks, especially to those who are desperate.

You can't change it. What's done is done.

All you can do is survive it.

I could hear Dante talking, his voice was going in high and low tones, raising and dropping with precision. The other man was obviously someone of power. After spending these past couple months around Remo, I had developed a sixth sense to those who had authority, and those who knelt before them.

Dante's voice was calm but confident, he was speaking in a way that seemed to heighten then drop in submission. He wasn't afraid of this person, but he was well aware of his position. The man who showed up was definitely higher in the chain.

There was a level of respect in Dante's voice that wasn't there earlier with Vince and Tony. Around those guys, Dante was the big dog, but not now, not with that man.

That made me nervous. I didn't want to see anyone else. Especially if they were the one holding the cards. I wasn't sure where in the pecking order Dante fell exactly, but just knowing he didn't have all the control scared me.

I should be scared! I should be scared out of my fucking mind!

So why am I not afraid of Dante?

The look in his eyes should be enough to send me over the edge into a state of pure fear. But it didn't. I was willing to challenge him, I willed him to kill me.

But he wouldn't.

That had to count for something. Right?

They were discussing something important. Their voices drifted between anxious beats and exploding in words. A loud crack rang out and I shuddered.

Did he hit him?

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What the fuck is going on?

The other man's voice grew loud, his words unmistakable. "She should be dead by now! After what she's seen, Dante, you thought it was a bright fucking idea to bring her here?"

They weren't just discussing business. It was about me.

Shivering to his statement, my eyes snapped shut. I wasn't doing to die, I wasn't going to let that happen.

But how am I going to stop it?

Dante was talking but I couldn't make out what he was saying. The other guy wasn't trying to hide his intentions, and he was sure as hell making his point.

"If Tony wanted her, you should have let him. She means nothing to us, Dante, who the fuck cares about some whore? You violated my orders, she was supposed to stay there. Not here, not in our home, not anywhere someone might find her. This is our safe house, not hers."

Their voices were growing in volume, the stairs creaking and cracking as pressure came down on them. Each step of their feet caused the lump in my throat to jump. Swallowing thickly, I forced myself to breathe the closer they got.

That was all I could do. I couldn't hide in some corner, bury my head, and pretend I was someplace else.

This was real.

Dante must have stopped somewhere in the man's way. "Get out of my way, Dante."

"No, you wanted this deal, so we'll do it, we still can."

"No, we can't. She's seen too much. She's seen you and what you did. She's a loose end, she needs to go, end of discussion."

"Dad, we don't need to."

Shit. His father.

Bane

Bane Pisani was the cream of the crop, he was the man who ran it all. It was his word that would create the ending to my story. And his reputation wasn't all candy and pink ribbons.

I only knew from Remo a little bit about this man. And none of what I knew was good. They worked together and Remo always made it seem like he was what kept Bane going.

But Bane was a cold-hearted killer, no remorse, no compassion.

Fuck, I need to get out of here!

Frantically I yanked on the cuffs, hoping they would break away and crumble around my skin to set me free. But that was a wish I knew would never happen. Their feet crept closer, one step then two, till they were right outside the door.

“Move, Dante.”

I stared at the handle, waiting. The knob turned in slow motion, door creeping open. My eyes expanded, body wiggling without me consciously trying. Feverishly I yanked down on the cuffs, small whimpers escaping my lips as I tried to break their grasp.

But I couldn't do anything to snap the metal. I was completely stuck, no way to run, no place to hide. I was a sitting duck laying in the middle of that bed, and there was nothing I could do about it.

Bane stepped inside, his face stone still. He stared at me from a distance, stepping gingerly over the floor till he was right beside me, hovering with a dark presence. “Ivy, do you know who I am?”

I didn't want to speak, I couldn't. Shaking my head, I curled my body up to make it as small as possible. His eyes were inky black, bleeding into red veins that popped against what white I could see.

His head was shaved bare, a thin trickle of a mustache crested his upper lip. Bane was dressed in a charcoal colored suit, with a bright red handkerchief peeking out of the left breast pocket.

As nervous as I was, I couldn't help but find it comical how well-groomed these gangsters were. Were suits a requirement for the job? They must all have closets full, one for each day.

It was ironic in a way. To be so well dressed when you're going in to spill blood. Most men dressed like that would do anything to dodge a fucking splash of wine, but these guys were ready to blow you away with one click.

And I was sure they didn't even have to think about it.

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Dante made that clear when he pulled the trigger without hesitation.

Inside I wanted to yell and scream, but Dante had warned me to behave. His warning had been heard loud and clear. I wanted to listen to him, I wanted to do anything and everything I could to make sure his father didn't kill me right there.

The men from earlier were fucking dirt, they were sloppy and careless.

But Bane . . . He wasn't a man who made those mistakes.

“Good. Then you know what I am. Unfortunately for you, tonight you saw more than you were supposed to. For that, I am sorry. Ivy, I would suggest closing your eyes, I'm a firm believer that will make it easier on you. Watching will only hurt you more.” His hand slipped free from his pocket, the shine of silver sparked as he lifted a gun chest high. “I want you to know this isn't personal, it's business.”

All the strength I had, all the anger that had built up inside of me melted away.

This was a man to fear.

He was death, he was the devil in the room.

Closing my eyes, my mind flashed through vivid images of my life. And I was happy they weren't the bad memories. They were bright and at the same time meaningless.

They weren't the memories I would've expected to have in that moment. I guess I had imagined the idea of your life flashing before your eyes as being filled with mile

stones that you've gone through, and memories you never wanted to live again.

The first kiss, the first time I sat in a car after I got my license, all the firsts . . .

Then the darkness, the day I was taken, the day I woke up in Remo's house, the first strike from his fist, the basement from earlier . . .

But it was nothing like that.

I saw the small town in Maine I grew up in, the horses of my neighbor as they trotted around outside, and the apple pies my grandmother would bake every year in the fall.

The smell was on the tip of my tongue, the cool air was on my face. I could feel the breeze as it swept through my hair, and hear the faint sound of the rooster I used to dread hearing every morning.

The pictures I saw were peaceful and soothing. I even felt the faint hint of a smile on my lips as the wind cast shadowed memories against my skin.

Then I felt the muzzle of the gun against my forehead. It was cold and hard, the smell sharp and like burning metal mixed with charcoal. Reality cracked like a whip across my face.

My memories snapped to black, returning me to the bedroom and the cuffs around my wrists, the two men standing over me and the darkness they harbored.

This was it, this was the moment everything would change. I wouldn't grow old, I wouldn't have children, I wouldn't see my mother again . . .

Taking a deep breath, I let my body relax. There was nothing I could do but accept the punishment brought upon me for doing nothing but ending up here.

Bane had said this was business. This is Remo's fault. Deep down I knew he had something to do with this. I did nothing to deserve dying here this way.

He stole my life.

He stole everything.

Ivy

Everything around me was gone. There were no sounds but my own heart beat thudding against my ribs. The pounding grew louder and louder, and the numbers just started on their own.

Counting each thump brought a sense of relaxation to my body. There was a level of control in every number. Each digit solidified my impending fate, but every number came when I said it would.

As the world washed away, I drifted into this hollow space. A warm feeling spread over my body as I excepted the weight being cast down on me. Inhaling a deep breath, I lifted my head towards Bane.

I wasn't going to go out cowering like a weak, frail invalid. This man would see my face, he would remember my eyes, my lips, my voice.

Because I was strong, because if I let him think he could hold any power over me it would only fuel his ego.

He was going to take something from me and I wanted to do the same in return.

I wanted Bane to leave that room knowing and feeling what he had taken. He wasn't just taking care of business, he was taking my soul.

Opening my eyes, I stared beyond the barrel, straight into his. Bane's brow lifted, the deep wrinkles in his forehead arched up. The thick lines running with his lips

smoothed out. Rolling his finger over the trigger, I thought that for a brief second there was a twitch in his hand.

With my head held high, I gave him one final thing to remember me by. “I might know who you are, but I'm the lucky one, because I'll forget you. But you . . . I want you to see me so you can remember me forever. Because after you pull that trigger, I'll never see you again, but you'll see me every time you close your eyes.” Letting my lids lower into a calm silence, I waited for him finish me off.

The clouds surfed through the mental pictures in my head, filling in with the faces of everyone I used to love, and who used to love me. I felt light, I felt weightless, I felt free.

“Dad, just listen to me!” Dante's voice was demanding, silencing the click of the gun as it forced its way into my quiet space of death. “Tony fucked this up, and we didn't take her just to kill her. You want what's owed to you, do you think Remo will pay if you just kill his woman?”

Hearing him say his name made my heart stop inside my chest. Remo was the reason I was here.

I fucking knew it!

That fucking asshole!

He had taken enough from me, and now I was about to lose my life because he fucked with the wrong person.

I knew right then that if there was an afterlife . . . I was sure as hell going to haunt that motherfucker for the rest of his days.

“Remo will do what he needs to do, with or without her.” There was no fault in his words, Bane wanted me dead.

“We can still use her, trust me.”

“I've trusted you enough and look what it got us. A fucking woman who needs to be removed. I'm not taking any chances, not with this. MOVE, DANTE.” Bane's voice was just below a full yell. It sounded like he was trying to hold back his rage.

Or maybe he wasn't. Maybe that's what made him who he was. His level voice, his ease to take out anything that got in his way.

My muscles shuddered, heart racing a million miles a minute. The other guys were sick, but this man was the hand that feeds the beasts.

He held my fate.

Cracking my lid open, Dante was standing between his father and me. His arms were up, blocking my view of his dad. I couldn't see Dante's face, but his stance had a protective nature.

Is he trying to save me?

Does he care if I die?

Why would he care, no one seemed to care.

A warm fuzzy rush flooded my veins, stomach bucking in wild knots of fear and comfort.

If Dante hadn't been here, if he had never shown up at all . . .

Where would I be?

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“NO. I'll take care of this, it was my fuck up, so I'll do it. This is how you wanted it done. You don't want to kill Remo, if we snub her too, then what? Do we kill them both?”

There was a long, excruciating pause between both men. I found myself leaning closer to the edge of the bed, trying to find the answer myself. My ears were popping, a ringing inside my head had sprung to life and was making it hard to hear anything at all.

I wasn't ready to die. And all I could hope was that Bane would lower his gun and let me live. Just a little while longer, that was all I wanted.

As if the force above had heard my prayers, the gun lifted off my skin, leaving its impression in memory.

“Fine, you fix this. Get me what's owed to me, and make sure you don't screw up anything else, Dante.”

“I will, don't I always?”

“I'm serious, Dante, take care of it. And when you get what's owed to us, take care of her.” Bane stuffed his gun back into place, and both men walked out the door as if I hadn't been in the room to begin with.

No one looked at me, no one said a word to me. They just left as if this was all normal, just another conference call about business.

But this was nothing like that. This was about me, about a person who ended up in the wrong place because of circumstance.

Their feet thudded back down the stairs, leaving me to keep breathing. I felt numb. I was here because of Remo, but not for the reasons I thought. He hadn't grown tired of me, this wasn't some trick of his to get me to crack and give him my virginity.

The Pisanis didn't have me because he asked them to take me . . . Remo had screwed up, and I was left to mend the pieces he had broken.

Could it still be a game?

The idea made me flood with feelings, too many to sift through. But one stood out, one took hold and consumed me.

Anger—it came in and swept my body. I was being used, a slave to another owner for money. For a second time, someone had killed who I was to gain in their own lives.

My name was no longer mine, my life no longer meaningful, my world no longer a choice of my own. My hands were tied, literally.

I felt like I had sat there inside my own head forever. I wanted to cry, I wanted to scream, I wanted to curl into a ball and disappear. I was so wrapped up in my hatred for being forced here that I hadn't heard Dante come back in.

“Ivy?”

Slowly lifting my head off my chest, I looked up at my captor. “What?”

“Here.” Shoving a plate onto the bed, Dante sat on the corner of the mattress.

There was a sandwich on the plate, a handful of chips, and a bottle of water. “And what am I supposed to do with that?” Shaking my wrists, the cuffs clanked against the headboard.

Hanging his head, a tight smirk peeled to one side. “I’m not un-cuffing you.”

“I’m not hungry then.”

His thick fingers wrapped around the sandwich, tearing off a bite-sized piece. Lifting it to my mouth, he nudged it against my lips.

He was lucky I didn't bite his fucking finger off.

I wasn't taking his food. I didn't want anything from him, not a fucking thing. I didn't want to give him any reason to hold anything against me. If he fed me I might owe him more. Wasn't that how this shit worked?

They give you things and you're forced to repay them in some twisted mind game. Work in order to get food, cleaning to gain more string on my leash.

One task for another breath of air.

Fuck that.

I wasn't going to owe anyone shit.

I would starve to death before giving this family one fucking ounce to hold over my head. Dante could keep his food, keep his clothes, and I was going to keep my self-preservation.

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There wasn't even a guarantee that any of this shit was still real. Maybe he was just fucking with me too and trying to screw with my head. According to Remo they all worked together. What if this was a game? What if Remo had asked them to scare me into submission for him?

There was so much about this whole thing I couldn't quite grasp. I didn't know exactly how I fit into this puzzle, or why they would try and use me to get to Remo.

I was just a pawn. But the nature of my place still wasn't clear to me.

Remo could be involved by his own hand. He could have put this whole fucking thing together just to make me crack.

How was I supposed to know for sure?

I still didn't have all the answers. I knew they were serious, but how could I know they would give me back?

What if it didn't matter, what if they did decide to kill me anyway?

“Just take it, you have to be hungry.”

“I don't want anything from you. You can take this fucking dress back too.” Wiggling my hips, I rocked my shoulders. “Get it off me.”

“I just saved you for a second time, you might want to show me a little respect.”

Furrowing my brows, my mouth crinkled, pursing tight. “Are you serious? Respect?” Shaking my head, I jingled my wrists. “I’ve been kidnapped, thrown in a trunk, and

chained . . . Fuck you.”

“Yeah, but you weren’t raped, you haven’t even been tortured, and I stopped my father from blowing your head off. I could easily make you cry for your life, Ivy.” Dante’s face drew in, a thick breath filling his lungs. Scooting himself closer, he danced his fingers over my thigh.

“Don’t touch me, you piece of shit.” How dare he even lay a finger on me.

“I’ll do what I want, and you’ll let me.”

“You’re a spoiled sick fuck, and you will never touch me.” I wanted to scream in his face, but the anger I felt went deeper than just letting the words fly out in a storm.

If I was stronger I would’ve torn these fucking cuffs off by now and made him sorry he even thought he had the option to take me.

“What are you not understanding about this?” His demeanor was eerily similar to his father’s. Calm, collected, smooth.

Dante didn’t know fear.

How do you inflict fear in someone who isn’t afraid of death?

As the thought fluttered through my head I realized that we weren’t that different. We both had seen enough and been through enough to know that sometimes death was a friend holding their hand out to help you up.

“You're just like them, just like Tony and Vince.” Veering my stare, my lips drew in paper thin.

“If I wanted to be like them, I could. If I wanted to take you right now, I would.”

His eyes fell over my body, settling on my neck, my breasts, my sex. Licking his lips, his fingers teased the edge of the dress. “Do you want me to take you? Is that what this is?”

“No.” Bending my knees, I tried to move away from his touch. But I found myself warming, tingling, hoping he wouldn't stop.

What is wrong with me?

As much as I wanted to disappear, I wanted to be felt and caressed. His touch was welcomed by every inch of my skin while inside I fought with my body to resist him.

But my lashes went unheard by the sparks that ignited, they fell on deaf ears as my muscles loosened and my sex twitched with arousal and need.

“I don't believe you. I see how you look at me, and you don't have hate in your eyes. There's something else there, something more.”

Could he read my body better than I could?

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Could he see my heart racing, feel my pulse speed up, smell my sex grow wet as he laid his fingers on my skin?

“I want nothing from you.” Flicking my eyes to his face, I wanted to push the feelings away. “Why the fuck would you even think that?”

I shouldn't have had this sick desire for the man who stole me.

But I did. And no matter what I told myself, my body deceived me.

His fingers made my skin heat, the way he looked at me made my sex melt. My chest was buzzing and doing flips as his hand gently touched my body, and I liked it.

I didn't want him to stop. Inside my muscles were begging him to stroke me harder, to wrap his fingers tighter. His touch wasn't hurting me, it wasn't causing me pain. It was soft and delicate, inviting and needed.

No one touched with a tender hand, the only thing I'd felt recently was pain and suffering.

Biting his lower lip, his head lowered. “Then why is your skin so hot right now?”

Cocking my jaw, I clenched my teeth. I wasn't going to answer him, he didn't need to know how much that gentle stroke of my flesh sent fire into my core.

“Are you having trouble finding the words, Ivy?” Shifting his waist, he was right beside me. I could feel the material of his pants brush my thigh. The coarse fabric

scuffed against my skin, sending tingles cascading all over. His scent tugged on my senses, turning my head upside down.

“You did good tonight, you listened for the most part. Besides that little shot off at the end—which you're lucky he didn't just pull the trigger right there.” Bouncing a single finger in the air, he glared at me through hooded lids. “I'm impressed and you should be happy.” Dante's hand drifted up over my hip, cupping my lower belly. “You're shaking.” Watching my face, he tilted his head. “But you're not afraid, are you? Do you like when I touch you?” Turning away from him, I looked down at my feet. “You do, don't you?”

My nipples hardened, scraping the thin material. Goosebumps sprung over my arms, riding my ribs, and making my body shiver. “Stop.”

“Stop what . . . This?” His strong hands slipped higher, tracing my ribs, and gently brushing just under my breast.

Inhaling a sharp breath, my lips parted. “We ca—I won't do this. It's wrong.” I could feel the juice coating my thighs, eager and willing. So fucking willing for him to take me.

I didn't know why, but being cuffed to the bed and at Dante's mercy made me fucking hot. It was so wrong, I knew. It was the worst kind of desire to feel. To want what you know is evil and bad.

But I couldn't shut it off.

“It's only wrong if you don't want it. Tell me what you want, Ivy.”

“I want to go home.” Spitting out the first thing that came to mind, I realized my answer didn't even sound believable.

It slipped out because my mind had been trying to drift to different places so I wasn't here. But my voice wasn't convincing, the answer wasn't strong.

I wanted something else, something more.

“Are you sure about that?” His fingertips ran over my shoulder, curving up my throat.

“Is that what you really want?”

No.

I want you to take me.

I want you to give me what I've never had.

I don't want to go back to Remo, I want to choose who I give myself to.

But Dante obviously didn't know about the arrangement between Remo and my father. His entire family thought I was precious to him. They had no idea how wrong they were.

At least that was what I was hoping. If they did know and this was all part of Remo's game, the Pisanis deserved a fucking academy award for their performance.

It was a sweet idea to think I hadn't watched the murder of another, or that I wasn't going to be killed just then. That this was all a play being put on for the amusement of another.

I wasn't that lucky . . .

“Remo won't pay for me.” I wanted him to think I was useless, that my existence here was only a burden on him—because it was. “Just let me go.”

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“If he cares for you, he'll do what we want.”

If Remo did pay to get me back it wouldn't be for love, it would be for his own benefit. I was just a line on his bucket list. He didn't give a fuck about me and he never would. To Remo I was disposable once he got what he wanted.

I needed Dante to know that.

A meddling smile crept up my face, lids half opened. “You really have no fucking clue about what I am to him, do you?”

Cocking his head a hair, a grin split across his cheeks. “You can't threaten me, it won't work.”

“It's not a threat. Maybe killing me is a better option.” Shrugging my shoulder, I picked nervously at my thumbs over my head. “Giving me back to him is just the same as pulling the trigger yourself.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” Dante's brows dipped down, wrinkles rippling over his forehead. “Do you think I won't pull the trigger? That I'd shake and cry if I had to snuff your existence right here?”

Shaking my head no, I said, “You don't get it. I was never his, and he'll never be mine.”

My arms were starting to hurt, cramping and going numb. The blood had drained away, and I was left with pins and needles stapling their way through the muscles.

Adjusting my arms, I grimaced. “Can you at least cuff these lower? My arms are fucking killing me.”

“Don't change the subject. If you're not Remo's, then what are you? A hooker, a whore, a paid friend with benefits?”

Veering my stare, my nostrils flared in anger. “No. I'm none of those things. I'm not fucking him, and if you let me go, then maybe I can keep it that way.”

His laugh made my heart hammer inside my chest. “Wow, wow.” Drawing a hand through his hair, he gripped the base of his neck. “You're trying to work me. Lucky for you I'm not fucking stupid.”

“Obviously you are.” Calling a Pisani stupid wasn't the best decision, but I had nothing to lose. “Do you think I'd lie to you? Do you think I'd basically ask you to do me the favor of killing me, knowing you could without a fucking second thought?” Arching a brow, I eyed him through thin lids. “So yeah, stupid looks good on you.”

Freezing, I watched him closely.

As Dante's hand glided down my cheek, cupping my chin, and tickling across my collarbone, I felt my body breaking. His fingers gripped firmly around my throat, squeezing with just enough pressure to show me he could crush my esophagus with one snap.

And as sick as it sounds . . . It turned me on.

I liked the way it felt as he constricted, holding my impulse to breathe in his touch.

His eyes were solid, staying glued on my mine. “I'm far from stupid, Sweetheart. And I don't like when people try to control a situation that is mine to own.” Bringing his

lips to the shell of my ear, he whispered. "I own you now."

Desire was strangling my insides, holding me to him, making me want what I shouldn't ever crave. His chest was lifting rapidly, the space between us growing smaller and still it felt like he was so far away.

His eyes were piercing, drawing me in deeper.

I couldn't look away. I couldn't tell him no.

Want had taken over.

And I wanted Dante Pisani.

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Dante

She felt so hot beneath my fingertips. Every curve of her body, every inch of her skin was smooth and soft.

If she wasn't Remo's, then I was making her mine.

My adrenaline was still in overdrive after watching my father hold a gun to her head. And that feeling had turned me wicked. My word had kept her alive.

I won.

I won her for another day, for another moment.

There was no way I could ignore how fucking hard that made me. To take on someone who could cut the lights out in one snap, and win . . .

It was a powerful feeling to hold someone's life in your hands, and I wasn't ashamed to admit I fucking loved it. I wasn't the good guy here, I was the keeper of need.

And I needed her for myself.

My entire body was reeling with fire and ice. Running a finger over her cheek, I leaned into her ear. "Tell me."

"Tell you what?" Ivy's voice was soft and unsure as I loosened my hand from her throat.

“Tell me what you want.” Blowing hot air over her lobe, I watched the shiver scale her body.

Turning her head to the window, she stared at the black glass. “What I want doesn't matter. I'm never going to get it.”

“You don't know that.” Brushing the hair from her face, I twisted a thick lock into a tight spiral. “Do you want me to stop touching you?”

Her lids closed slowly, lashes fluttering as she thought about what I asked.

I liked that she had to think about it. It meant she wanted it even if she didn't think she should. There was a level of danger to my question, a thin line that she could easily cross and never look back.

But that's what was alluring. To want what you're not supposed to have, to have what you think is wrong.

I was the wrong.

I was so wrong it was only right.

“Tell me to stop and I will. Tell me not to touch you here . . .” Pausing, I slid my finger from her cheek to her shoulder. “Tell me not to touch you here . . .” Gliding lower, I dragged my fingertip over her nipple, just barely touching, but just enough pressure she knew where I was. “Tell me not to save you and to let you die in the hands of a man I can see you despise.”

Ivy's chest lurched, jumping as she inhaled an audible gasp. Licking her bottom lip, she bit down hard. Her eyes stayed shut, fingers gripping tight around the chain of the handcuffs.

“Let me give you something to help you relax, let me take your mind off everything for a second.” My finger slid down between her tits, circling her mound.

The urge to bring life back into the depleted eyes of this woman, whose face was filled with sorrow and body was damaged began to consume me.

Every move her body made I watched carefully. There was nothing there to tell me she didn't want this. I wanted to pleasure her, I wanted to give her a release that would help her calm down.

She had been through enough tonight, and all I wanted was to give her something good to remember.

Rubbing my finger up and down the fabric where her pussy was hidden, she pinched her eyes tighter. Ivy wasn't allowing herself to look at me, and I didn't like that.

“Open your eyes, Ivy. Look at me.”

Shaking her head no, her lip tugged in harder.

“Look. At. Me,” I demanded.

No wasn't an option.

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Slowly her eyes peeled open, head rolling to meet my gaze.

“Good. Now you need to tell me very clearly, do you want me to stop?” Pushing down for a brief second on her clit, I curled my fingers around her thigh. “Tell me, do you want me stop?”

Her head twisted just a hair side to side.

“Say it. I need to hear you say it.”

Ivy's voice was a whisper. “No.”

“Louder, I can't hear you. Do you want me to stop?”

“No.”

Slipping my fingers under the dress, I gently walked them up her thigh. “Can I give you this?”

Her lids expanded, eyes darting between mine with confusion.

Pressing between her heated lips, I slid my finger up and down her slit. She was soaked, her pussy drenching with need. Twirling around her clit, Ivy's back arched, head falling back.

Her moan was erotic, slowly drawing out over her tongue. “Fuck,” she breathed out, her thighs squeezing around my hand as every muscle in her body tensed.

“I’ll take that as a yes. This is for you, and only you.”

Teasing the opening, her hands tugged down on the cuffs, thighs opening easily as I played with her hot cunt.

Fuck I wanted to be in there. I wanted to tear the damn dress off her body, throw her legs open and slam my cock deep inside.

But not yet, she needed this.

A delicate moan escaped her lips, her eyes crinkled at the corners, prickles jumping across her skin. Rocking her hips, she tried to guide me inside.

“You like that. I knew you would.” Flicking her clit, her thighs clamped around my hand. “I can take this slow or I can send you over the fucking edge right now. I’m in charge, I control this.”

Her eyes fell on mine, head nodding gently.

My cock was solid, crushing the engorged head into my pants. Stroking my shaft over the fabric, I felt like I could pop already and I wasn’t even inside her.

Her back arched deep, ass pressing further into the mattress. Hovering around her entrance, I let my finger slip in. Her moan was loud, needy, yearning for a good fuck.

And I wanted to give her that, give her every inch of my dick I could stuff deep inside her.

This is only for her, Dante.

You’ll have her, just not yet.

I had to remind myself of what I was doing. Ivy had been so fucking tense, so worked up, she was in need of this way more than I was.

Gyrating her hips, I slid my finger all the way inside. Thumbing her clit, I let her fuck my finger. Her pussy was growing wetter, clenching around my hand like she needed it to live.

Ivy's breathing became short and erratic. Her moans were drawn out, pussy pulsing as I drove her to the edge of insanity. Pinching her nipple, the hardened bead perked, igniting a fiercer yell from her lips.

She was so close I could feel it. Her clit had swelled, pulsing against the pad of my thumb as I circled the sensitive button.

And then I felt her. I felt her muscles tighten, going rigid and stiff. Her spine dipped, chest lifting to the ceiling. Her skin grew red, flushing as it warmed.

Grabbing her throat, I squeezed, applying just enough pressure to help intensify what her body was about to go through. Ivy's head fell back, lids snapping shut. A quick gasp hit her lips as the world around us faded away.

It was crazy what a little aggressive coddling could do to someone if delivered at just the right moment. If she was looking for vanilla territory . . . She wouldn't find it here.

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I liked to push the boundaries.

The pressure would make her heart pump harder, her lungs would strain to get the air they needed.

And as her body was fighting for what it desperately wanted, the sensation would build and explode through her small frame.

Ivy's eyes started to gloss over, her mouth forming a perfect O as she lifted her neck into my hand and pushed it harder into her throat. Squeezing down with my thumb and fingers, her back was curved, thighs trembling. The orgasm grew and melted over her body as her pussy clenched around my finger and her muscles went limp.

The convulsion her body made was not only visible, but I felt it ride my arm, hitting my dick with raw desire. I was going to fuck her—not now—but when she was ready.

This was just a taste of what I could give her. A sense of release that she needed in order to succumb to what I wanted.

Her pussy would call for me, it would desire me.

She would need me to keep going.

She would need me to live.

And I would help her to realize that.

Ivy

Rolling to my side, a slight shimmer of day break peeked through the curtains. A sharp pain hit my shoulders as I stretched my arms above my head.

My arms are free. I'm not cuffed anymore.

Sitting up straight, I rubbed my arms and rocked them side to side. I was sore as shit, but at least I wasn't confined to the bed. I wasn't sure when Dante removed them, I must have been out cold.

Oh, thank God. Shaking my shoulders loose, I looked around.

The room was still shadowed, slowly coming to life as my eyes adjusted to the low lighting. I was alone. The door was shut, but Dante wasn't here.

It was strange to wake up and feel the way I did. I felt sad that what happened wasn't just a dream, and at the same time, I was happy to not wake up in Remo's bed. A part of me was wishing that Dante was beside me, holding me gently like he had last night.

I didn't expect that from him, but I welcomed it.

His arms had wrapped my waist, his chest was pressed firmly into my back, and the last thing I remembered was his soft-spoken words.

"Things can be different, Ivy, they can always be different. Sometimes things aren't as

bad as they look, try and look deeper.'

Just thinking about that moment again sent shivers up my spine. He was gentle, soothing me to sleep. The man who had ravished my body with just his touch, had shown me a glint of his softer side.

I wasn't sure what he was trying to say. Did he mean he was different? Was he talking about this entire hell that had blanketed my small town world?

And to make it all even harder to grasp, my insides were tearing up and fraying with raw emotion . . . Feelings, real true feelings.

It was all too confusing to process and understand.

How do you crave your captor and despise him all in the same breath?

Last night was the first time any man had made me come like that. He touched me in just the right way, he caressed me with a tender and strong hand. I might still be a virgin but I'd had a few experiences to know that he had done it perfectly.

What I didn't expect was how fucking turned on I got when he gripped my throat. That was a whole new level of sensations I never imagined.

My body had come to life, it was amazing. I felt the orgasm in my toes, my stomach, my head. Tingles had surged through every part of me, and the resonant tone of the music my body played was still sitting right there. I'd never felt anything like it.

And now the curiosity was dripping around my brain, making me wonder.

What more could he do to me?

There was a glint of hope in my eyes; I wasn't trapped to the headboard anymore, maybe I was able to make him feel something more for me than he expected.

Maybe he would let me go.

I couldn't ignore there was something between us, a raw emotion that surged like wild fire. I was still floating from the orgasm, my body was loose and relaxed.

Balling my fists, I dug them into my eyes and rubbed them hard. I had no clue what the hell I was feeling, but I felt different.

Flipping the blanket off my body, I let my feet slip to the cold wood floor. And that's when I felt it, the chain locked around my ankle.

Fuck.

Obviously what happened wasn't enough to gain any sort of trust from him. He didn't trust I wouldn't run, and for right now I was okay with that.

Could I tell you why? No.

But the urge to flee had subsided. There was a sense of safety with Dante that I couldn't explain. He had saved me.

Twice.

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My life with Remo fucking sucked. And even though I wasn't here by choice, I still felt safe, untouchable. Safer than I was outside these walls, safer than I'd ever be with the man who bought my body.

As I sat on the edge of the bed, I swept my feet back and forth against the floor. My fingers slipped over the fabric of my borrowed dress, tracing the designs.

It really was a beautiful dress. The deep blue reminded me of the ocean on a bright day, the small flowers speckled over the skirt had a touch of an oriental hand.

Whose it was and where it came from started to twirl around inside my head. It could have come from another captive woman, or it could have been worn by someone who hadn't seen the light of day in years.

Whoever this belonged to obviously didn't need it anymore.

The thought made me cringe. Because I could easily have the same fate, I could disappear tonight and this dress could end up on someone else tomorrow.

The door creaked open over my shoulder, knocking me out of the horrible images plaguing my mind. "You're awake, good. Want breakfast?" Holding a plate, Dante walked over and placed it on the bed. His broad shoulders were tucked snugly into a fitted black t-shirt, jeans replaced the gray pants from last night.

I felt myself start to blush, my skin warming to his presence. He had touched me, he had given me the best orgasm of my fucking life. My sex began to tingle, growing wet again with just the sight of him.

Still stroking the dress, there was an overwhelming need to know where it came from. I wasn't sure if I was going to like the answer or not, but I couldn't keep wearing it if it was a garment of darkness.

“Whose dress is this?”

“Doesn't matter.” Walking to the bed, he stopped as he watched my eyes scan the silky blue material.

“Did it belong to someone who's dead?”

Frowning, his eyes tore from mine. “Yes.”

“Did you kill her?”

“No.” Snapping his head back up, his face was intense and serious. “Enough questions—here, eat.”

I had struck a nerve. But pressing him about it could end ugly, so I stopped. I didn't need to cause myself any more beatings . . . Or worse. I've seen what he could do.

Smiling with thin lips, I shook my head. “I'm still not hungry.”

“You need to at least try and eat something.” Pushing the plate closer, he sat opposite of me on the bed. “It's mostly canned fruit, and I threw on a few crackers. We don't have much here, I'm never usually here this long without prepping for it.”

His body language changed, muscles relaxing as he let my wonder and curiosity slip away.

But I couldn't look him in the eyes, there was more I needed to say. A tender flutter

stormed my stomach, making me feel like I had to say something about what had happened between us. “Look, last night—”

Holding his hand up, Dante cut me off. “Was for you.” His thumb brushed under his strong jaw, rubbing the stubble. “You don't need to explain it away, just let it be.”

“I . . .” Glancing around at everything but him, I said firmly, “I just don't want you to get the wrong idea. I was emotional, scared, had a gun pointed at my face . . . I wasn't thinking straight.” Finally letting my eyes connect with his, I swear I saw a shimmer of disappointment glaze his eyes.

But it didn't last long, it faded into thought and disappeared behind his rough exterior.

Smirking, his teeth broke through his lips as he started to laugh. “You weren't thinking straight, so that's what last night was?”

“Yeah, that's exactly what it was.”

“You can tell yourself that. But you want to know what I saw?” Leaning closer, Dante grabbed a grape off the plate and held it to his lips. Slowly the tip of his tongue drew tight circles over the ridge, flicking it as if it was a woman's most delicate part. “I saw someone who needed to feel something other than just the shit from the night. I saw a girl who was begging to be taken and wanted it just as much as I enjoyed giving it.”

Cocking my head, my jaw hung open. “That is not what you saw!” Raising my voice, I felt it crack against the back of my throat.

My mouth felt dry like I had been sucking on cotton balls for hours. Swallowing hard, I tried to stop my ribs from aching. My heart was pounding in my chest, slamming around like a caged bird that needed a way out.

The pain in my jaw started to throb, beating against my cheek. Rubbing the tender area, I tried to massage the ache away. What I didn't feel last night was definitely showing itself right then.

His chuckle cut through my bones. Arching his head back, he popped the grape into his mouth and made a soft moan. “The juice is dripping down the back of my throat, are you dripping yet? You're blushing like your pussy is on fire right now.”

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“Fuck you, Dante! I don't want you, I'll never want you! You're no different than the monster you work for.” I wished my words could turn into razor blades and slice him as he sat there grinning like a fucking school boy. “Ah,” I moaned under my breath as I captured the swollen area of my face again.

How could he even think that I was turned on?

But I was. Damn him!

How could I control my body and make it realize that this was not an arousing situation?

I was breaking from the inside out. My body controlled itself, I had no say over what it did, no matter how much I screamed on the inside.

Sitting there with a smug grin on his face, he finally broke the silence encasing the room. “You should never say never, Sweetheart. The best thing to walk into your world could be the last thing you wanted.” Holding up his hand, he held a small plastic bag of ice. “Thought you might need this too. I saw how bad your mouth looked this morning, here . . .” Stretching out his arm, he nudged the ice at me. “Take it.”

My lips pouted on reflex, teeth grinding down into each other, making my jaw hurt even more. He didn't know me, he didn't know what I wanted.

But right now that didn't matter. He had me locked up, hidden away and blanketed from the world. Where do we go from here?

Play the game, Ivy.

Stay one step ahead.

Stay alive.

Snagging the bag, I gently placed it against my cheek. Walking my fingers over a small pile of clementine slices, I picked one up and let it sit in my grip. “What's going to happen to me?” I asked, popping the fruit into my mouth.

The sensation that single piece of fruit sent through my taste buds was electric. The juice dripped over my tongue, and it tasted so much sweeter than any other piece of fruit I had ever had.

I guess facing death could have its benefits. Everything seemed better no matter what it was. The sun seemed brighter today, the air cleaner, and knowing I'd made it through the night was giving me the chance to truly appreciate things I took for granted.

For the past few months I cursed the sunrise because I didn't want to see it. I would gag at the scent of food, and my lips would pucker with any liquid that made it into my mouth.

Because life before had been worth nothing.

But now I wanted what had been stolen from me.

Glancing at the ceiling, Dante rubbed his hands down his thighs. “Well, if everything goes as planned, we'll make the trade when I get the call, and you'll be helping my family.”

“How can I help your family? I'm not worth the money you think you'll get.”

Dabbing his finger in the air, a smile peeked across his face. “You're worth it, trust me you're worth it. And Remo will pay it. Besides, it's money he owes my father anyway. The bastard took more than he was giving back, now it's time for him to pay up.”

Glancing back down at the plate, I twirled my finger around the food. “That bastard likes to take more than his share, I already know that. But I can't go back to him.”

“Look, Ivy, I can make sure my guys don't do a fucking thing to you. But when the deal is done, I can only do what my father orders. That's how this shit works.”

Rolling my eyes, I kept my face on the plate. “You have no idea what I've been through. If you want to take out Remo, go ahead, you have my blessing. I won't go back there, this can be my way out.”

“What the fuck did that guy do to you?” Dante's brows crinkled as his head tilted towards his shoulder.

A frown curved over my lips, eyes snapping shut. “It doesn't matter, I won't go back.” Leaning my head into my hands, I scratched at my forehead. “If I go back to him he'll just take the last thing in the world I have that's mine.”

Scooting closer, Dante's thumb massaged gentle circles into my lower back. “What did he do, Ivy?”

Shaking my head no, I said, “You said it yourself, I need to go back. What do you care? It won't change anything. If you don't kill me, your father will. And if not, then Remo will.”

Before he could say anything else, his phone went off in his pocket. Tugging it out, he looked at the screen and stood so fast the bed bounced with his absence. Dante walked right to the door and disappeared behind it into the hall.

As he closed the door behind him, he started speaking to whoever was on the other end. “What?” Pausing for the response, his words became deadened behind the wood. “What does he want? Are you fucking with me?”

Slumping my shoulders forward, I bit the corner of my cheek. I didn't like being treated like just an object. It wasn't fair.

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Standing, I walked towards the window, chain dragging behind me. The sound it made was like the soft jingle of an ice cream truck bell. The links chimed against each other, cementing in my head how trapped I still was.

Pushing back the curtain, I leaned against the wall and stared out into an endless sea of trees. He was right, there wasn't a thing for miles. I couldn't see this image in the dark, but now I could see the forest was just as good as fucking walls.

Clearing his throat, Dante stood in the doorway. "I need to go out for a bit. I'll be back later."

"Wait, what? Where are you going?"

"Out."

"Don't leave me here like this." Shaking my foot, the chain danced like a ribbon in the air.

"You'll be fine. It's long enough to reach the bathroom, and you can finish what's on that plate if you get hungry. If you get thirsty, drink from the sink." The door quickly slammed shut, and the lock clicked into place.

My chest began to heave, the air thinning and getting harder to force down.

Where is he going?

How long am I going to be here before he gives me back?

I can't go back . . . I won't go back.

Gripping my chest, I tried to calm myself down. But it was happening, and this time I couldn't stop it.

A heaviness settled in my lungs as I struggled to breathe. Collapsing to the floor, my hands tugged at the dress.

The numbers started to fill my head, and I tried . . . Fuck did I try.

But it wasn't working.

Clawing at my neck, I could hear the wheeze as I tried to take in air. My throat was closing, my ribs were on fire, and everything around me was growing hazy.

Let this be it.

Let this be how I go.

Natural.

Dante

Holding the phone against my ear, I stared into the thick glass with narrowed eyes.
“Talk.”

“Not like this and you know it.”

“Then why am I here?” Squeezing the receiver, I wanted to jump through the glass and punch my brother in the fucking face.

And if no one came rushing in to stop me, I would wrap my arm around his fucking neck and feel the life get sucked from his body. Sesto was a fucking piece of shit.

He did the one thing he wasn't supposed to do, the one thing that would get him killed.

Sesto talked.

“I need protection, Dante.” His hard, damaged hand raised and lowered submissively onto the table. I could tell the joint hadn't been nice to him. His skin was tensed against his forehead, the remnants of a black eye barely visible except for the yellow and green tint the skin held around his socket. A year wasn't that long, but he'd aged like he had been in here for a lifetime.

Every inch of him looked nervous, visibly shaken—as he should be. His fingers were twitching one by one, each single digit pulsed against the colorless steel, tapping soundless notes.

I wasn't planning on ever coming to see him, the fact he even asked for me to come was insane. At least he knew better than to call me himself. After everything he did, all the information he gave up. I didn't even know why I was actually even here.

I guess I wanted to tell him to go to hell in person, I had the balls to do that for him. But inside I was hoping he would come clean, tell me everything himself. It wouldn't change the way I felt about him, but at least he could die a man, and not a coward who was too weak to be honest with me.

He owed me that much.

He owed our father that much.

If he had any respect for us, he'd tell us the truth. I shouldn't have had to hear it on the news, or read in the paper the shit he told the cops.

Fucking rat bastard.

We were brothers, but right now that was the only thing we had in common. And it meant nothing to me. He broke that bond the second he turned on us.

“Fuck you. How's that?”

“Dante, we're brothers, you should know me. You know I had nothing to do with what went down.”

Letting out a sarcastic laugh, I shook my head. “Good luck in there. Hope no one else gets you before we do. You know what's coming your way, hopefully I'll be the one you're looking at when it happens.”

Slamming his fist on the hard metal table, Sesto growled through the phone. “Fuck

you, brother, fuck you.”

“Don't call me that. We're not brothers, not anymore.” Glaring at him through slit lids, I ground my jaw so hard I thought I felt teeth start to crack. How dare he use that word with me? Brother . . . Fuck him. “So this is why you wanted me here? To ask me for help?” Leaning back in the chair, I looked around the room. No one else seemed to be watching, but I knew they were always listening. “You'll never get another thing from me or the family. You burned that bridge when you grassed, man.”

Sesto looked agitated as shit, his voice growing with rage. “I didn't—” Shooting a look over his shoulders, he leaned in and lowered his voice. “I didn't fucking talk, you have to know that.”

He was really starting to piss me off. Some of the shit the cops knew was only known by a handful of people in our family. We never told all our guys our every move or where we had our hands. Some of that shit was only for the family to know.

But they knew.

The cops came and took a lot of shit, impounded more than half of one of our biggest hauls. Then they raided a few warehouses that weren't on the radar, and took down a few of our father's top guys. A dozen men got busted, but my brother was the only one who seemed to get off easy.

So who ratted?

Yeah, he made it easy to figure out.

“I don't have time for this.”

“Well you need to make time. I need protection, I'll need you when I get out, I didn't do this shit.”

“Do you have any idea what we lost? Do you have any idea what you've done to the family? And now dad had to take things into his own hands to get back what was ours. Do you even realize how fucked up this all is?” Sesto stared at me, his eyes light and worried. “You have no idea, do you?” Shaking my head, I clung to the phone, ready to throw it at the glass. “If you didn't, then who did? Because what went down went far beyond our jockies, it went way over their heads.”

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Sesto hung his head, tilting the phone away from his mouth as his hand cupped his jaw. “I don't know, I swear I don't. I need to talk to dad.”

“Sesto, the shit that happened is too much to ignore. Only a handful of us knew about it, and you're one of them. Explain why you got off light, tell me why your time is so much less than the rest, huh?” Cocking my jaw, Sesto held a blank gaze. “Yeah, that's what I thought.” Slamming the phone down hard, I shoved out of the chair and didn't even look back at him as I left.

That was the last time I was ever going to see my brother. He could sit there behind those bars for the rest of his life, I didn't fucking care. You don't rat, you don't sell out your family to save yourself.

That's how we worked, that's what was expected.

But my brother broke that trust, he broke our family.

And there was nothing he could do to fix what he had done.

I didn't have a brother anymore.

He took that from me, he took it from us both.

* * *

Sitting in the driveway, I stared up at the window holding Ivy, sealing her inside. I'd been gone for a few hours, but I knew that was enough time for her to try and figure a

way out. The chain I attached to her ankle was tight, I was certain she couldn't get it off unless she cut her foot off.

Hopefully that wasn't the route she took.

Running quickly through my head a tallied list of what she had access to in the room, there was nothing that could do that kind of damage.

But she was smart enough to try and find something for protection or to inflict pain on me, smart enough to take the opportunity to use it to her advantage. And from what I'd seen her do already, it was time she would use wisely.

I hope she didn't do anything stupid.

Neither of us needed that.

I had to be cautious. I didn't want to get slugged with something when I stepped into the house.

And I didn't want the anger from my meeting boiling over and coming down on her.

It wasn't her fault, none of this was her fault.

But I was still so fucking amped up about my brother, I couldn't think straight. My head was pounding, my muscles were snapping, ready to explode in a violent rage.

I didn't need this shit, I didn't need his shit, and none of this was what I wanted.

The only thing I knew was I wanted her.

Her pussy was hot, tight, and wetter than any other pussy I'd ever touched. Her juice

had dripped over my hand, leaving its scent on my fingers.

She was still there, lingering on my skin, leaving me frustrated and blue balled. Yes, I jerked off after she fell asleep, but it wasn't enough.

I wanted to keep her chained up, fuck her till she couldn't feel her legs. There was something about her that drew me in.

I didn't want to let her go. Was I selfish for wanting her all to myself?

Maybe. But it was so hard not to want what I shouldn't have.

The first time I saw her back at the restaurant with Remo I couldn't take my eyes off her. She sat so delicately at the table, her hands folded up tightly in her lap. Every move she made was soft and angelic.

I watched her dab the napkin at the corner of her lips as her mouth made a perfect O shape, and all I could imagine was stuffing my cock deep inside.

She didn't speak when they had dinner that night. Instead I watched her fiddle with her plate, knocking around pieces of broccoli and carrots. The only food I saw her put in her mouth was a couple pieces of bread and a few spoonfuls of soup.

Remo would speak and Ivy would just nod, or flash a forced smile. When I think back on it now, there were subtleties to her movements that I didn't pay attention to. Her body was rigid and she looked anxious. Her hands shook tenderly when Remo would touch her from across the table.

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Why didn't I see it then? Why didn't I notice how fucking uncomfortable she looked?

The more I thought about that moment, the more I saw. Remo became upset at one point, slamming his fist on the table, and Ivy jerked in her seat.

At the time, I didn't recognize what it was, but now I did.

It was fear.

I had ignored that, or was blind to it, at least, because of how fucking gorgeous she is, and how much I wanted her. That night was when I realized she should be mine, not his. And that was where my focus was.

Jealousy had traversed my bones and turned me wicked. Hating Remo even more than I already did.

Her shoulders were bare, the dress she had on scooped down in the front, her breasts pillowing up over the edge. And as she sat there so unaware of my roaming eyes, all I wanted was her.

That was the reason I didn't want to be a part of this job from the beginning. I wasn't sure if I'd be able to control myself. I was afraid I'd lose it and just steal her away. And if she needed to die, I didn't want to be the one to do it.

Now everything seemed more complicated. I had to make this deal work to keep her alive. My father wants her dead and, from what she says, so does Remo. If not now, he will later.

What the fuck does he have her for?

Why does she desperately want to stay away from him?

I figured out myself from what little she said that they didn't have a regular relationship. He had her, but she wasn't his, yet they were still together.

What does that make her?

Standing at the bottom of the stairs, I held the railing and listened. It sounded quiet, her feet weren't patting around the floor, she wasn't screaming or yelling in frustration.

But I needed to be careful. I knew what she did after dumb and dumber walked in, she had it in her to do some damage.

Walking up the steps, I tried to do it as quietly as possible. As I stood at the door, I brought my hand up to knock, then stopped myself. She wasn't a guest here, she was my hostage.

I have to keep my head straight! She's a fucking hostage, a captive, a tool for us to use. That's it!

She can't be mine.

And I shouldn't care what she is or isn't to that piece of shit.

Unlocking the door, I threw it open and stood just outside the entrance. But nothing came, no crazy swing from some object she gathered, no gorilla sized scream followed by flailing arms. The room was dark and silent.

Peeking my head in, I glanced around and noticed a lump on the bed. Making my way to the bed, I felt the bump and it deflated under my hand.

Where the hell is she?

Nervously I looked around until I spotted her laying on the floor.

Ivy was splayed out on the wood, her body limp, breathing ragged. Running to her side, I knelt down and shook her. "Ivy—Ivy!" Scooping her up in my arms, I laid her down on the bed.

Brushing her hair back with my fingers, I felt her face. She was breathing hard, sweat had beaded up on her forehead, but it was cold to the touch. I wasn't sure what the hell was happening to her, but I had to do something.

Running to the bathroom, I turned on the cold water and dampened a face cloth. As I sat beside her on the bed, I pressed the cool cloth to her skin and tried to get her to wake up. "Ivy, wake up. Come on, Ivy, wake up."

Quiet moans started to make their way out, her head rolling gently on the pillow. Her eyes were fluttering behind her lids, opening to slits then closing again.

Fuck! What the hell is wrong with her?

"Come on, Ivy, open your eyes, let's go, open them up." Giving her cheek a delicate slap, I shook her again. "Ivy," I said anxiously as the nerves began to stretch around my brain and turn me frantic. "Ivy, wake up!"

"Hm?" she asked, blinking and starting to come around. "What's going on?" Opening her eyes wide, her muscles went rigid and shot her up straight. "What's going on?" she asked again, confused.

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“I don't know, I came in to find you on the floor. What happened? Are you alright?”

Cupping her forehead, Ivy closed her eyes and rested it against her hand. “Ugh, it happened. It really happened.”

“What happened?” Holding her cheeks, I forced her to look at me. “What happened, Ivy?”

“Panic attack, I had a panic attack. I must have passed out.”

“Shit, Ivy, does that happen a lot?” Bringing my thumbs right below her eyes, I pulled down her lower lids and tried to look deep into her stare. I'm not a doctor, so I had no fucking clue what I was looking for.

Her skin looked pale; the skin under her eyes was slightly puffed. She felt clammy and cold, not warm and vibrant like when I had left.

Wrapping her thin fingers over my hand, she smiled softly. “They come and go. I'm alright, really, I'm fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“Why? If I said no, would you take me to the hospital?” Peering at me under hooded lids, she laughed.

It was the first time I had heard her laugh, a real laugh. I couldn't stop myself from laughing with her. “Funny. I'm glad you have a sense of humor.” Stroking her hair, I

teasingly said, “And no, I wouldn't take you. But we do have a doctor that works for us, so yeah I'd call him for help if you needed it.”

“Well, shit. You thugs have it all figured out, huh?”

“Us thugs don't fuck around.” Flicking her chin with my thumb, I rested my hand on her thigh. “But you're sure you're okay?”

Leaning over her, she looked so beautiful. Her mouth was parted, breathing slow and casual. Her body relaxed, snuggling into the pillow and letting the bed consume her.

Rubbing her shoulder, I dragged my fingers between her shoulder blades. “Ivy . . .”

Making a sweet, soft moan, she asked, “Yeah?”

“Do you want to shower?”

“You're going to let me shower? You'd have to unchain me to do that, I can't reach the tub, I tried.”

“I will, but you have to promise to be good. Can you promise to behave?”

“I can't promise you anything.”

“Then you stay where you are.”

Rubbing her eyes, she stretched her arms up. “Why are you being nice to me? I mean you fed me, you gave me clothes, now you want to let me shower. Why?”

“I'm a bad man, Ivy, I know that. I've done shit you couldn't ever imagine, but I'm not a complete asshole. I do the things I do because I have to, not because I want to.”

Shaking her head, her lips scrunched to the side. “That's not true.”

Arching a brow, I pulled out the key for the lock and lifted her leg over my lap. “Oh yeah, and how do you know that?”

“Bad men do things because they want to.” Glancing up at me with large doe eyes, her fingers anxiously twined together. “I think you're just lost.”

A single laugh hit my lips as I looked at her with disbelief. “You wouldn't say that if you knew half of what I've done.”

“Try me.”

I couldn't tell her about who I was. There was no way I could let her in on the horrible things I've had to do to get where I am. If she didn't already think I was evil, she would after I spilled that shit.

“No, you don't want to know.” Letting the lock pop free, I held her ankle tightly in my hand. “Now you're not going to do anything stupid, you understand?”

Shaking her head yes, she kept her hands in her lap.

“I'm serious, I won't put up with it.”

Ivy shook her head again, letting her eyes fall to her waist. “I won't.”

Nodding towards the bathroom, I stood to let her up. Her small frame slipped past me, so delicate and completely breakable. Her feet hit the floor so lightly it was as if she was floating, the weight of her body was barely noticeable against the wood.

Following her closely, I wanted to make sure she did only as I said. I still didn't know if she had planned anything while I was gone. Had she contemplated a way out, a means to escape?

My feet were practically on hers as she walked. I could feel the small amount of heat off her body as my chest crept closer to her back. Ivy's head rolled over her shoulder, looking up at me. “You don't need to watch me, I'm not going to do anything.”

“I wish I could believe you, but I can't just yet.”

“Are you expecting me to shower with you in there?”

“No.” A look of relief washed over her body, her shoulders slumping slightly. But that quickly disappeared as I told her what I would be doing. “I'm going to shower you.”

“What?” Her tone was laced in disapproval and anger. “You're not doing that.”

“I am.”

“What the fuck? Why?” Stopping short, Ivy spun on her heel to meet me head on. Her thin arms flew to her hips, fingers coiling deep into the bone.

Fuck this woman had balls. And it was making me hard.

“I’ve already seen you naked, if you forgot that part.” Holding up a single finger, I pointed towards the window she had tried to blow out with the chair. “And with your little explosions, I’m not taking any chances.”

“I told you I won’t do anything.”

“And I told you, I don’t trust you.” Snapping my chin in the air towards the bathroom, I said, “Go.”

Folding her arms into her chest, Ivy veered her stare. “No.”

“Fine, then don’t shower.” Quickly lunging in, I grabbed her around the waist and threw her over my shoulder. “I’ll just put you back where you were.”

“No, no. Okay, fine, we’ll do this your way. Please, I really need a shower, I can still feel that creep on my skin and I don’t want him there anymore.” Her fingers bunched into my shirt, tugging hard.

Lowering her back down, I held her for a moment to make sure she had her footing. If that panic attack she claimed she had was real, I wanted to make sure she didn’t fall. The last thing I wanted was for her to get hurt in any way.

“Good. And just so you understand me . . .” Pressing closer, I let my size hover over her. She thinks I’m not a bad man, she has no idea how wrong she truly is. “Let’s get one thing straight. I’m running this, I call the shots.”

Ivy's lips turned down, her face pulling taut. "Yeah, I kinda figured that out, thanks."

Stepping into the bathroom, I reached over her shoulder and flicked the light on. "Sit," I said, pointing to the toilet. Keeping her in view from the corner of my eye, I leaned in and turned on the water.

"This is ridiculous, you know. I'm really not going to do anything. What if I just get in and close the curtain? You could come in after and just monitor me."

"Ivy, there are no options here. I know what you did with that pipe, I'm not taking any chances. You're not weak, and what you did to Tony was gutsy. I can't risk it."

Her face brightened for a second like I had just given her a compliment about how she looked. She did look amazing still, even with the swollen jaw and dirt covering her skin.

"Fine, you win." Holding up her arms, her palms were flat in the air.

"I always win," I said with a smirk.

Tapping her fingers against her thigh, she nervously looked all around the room. I wasn't sure if she was doing that because she was worried about the shower or if it was to take in what the room had to offer.

But there wasn't anything in here for her to just reach out and grab. The only thing she'd ever be able to get might be a pipe off the sink . . .

I'll keep my eyes on them, too. She can swing one hell of a pipe.

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“Alright, come on.” Holding out my hand for her to take, she stood and stepped back.

Staring at the ground, she let the dress slip off and pool around her ankles. Stepping out of the silk puddle, she let her fingers twine around my hand and climbed into the shower.

The moment her fingers touched mine a warmth spread through my gut. My heart hammered in my chest, muscles twitching with need.

The water sizzled over her skin as it ran down her body, washing away the brown dirt stains from the night before. I watched the water break off into thin streams, dripping off her pebbled nipples, and following the curves of her body.

Letting the water wash over her face, Ivy rested her forearms against the tiles, lowering her head. “Thank you, I needed this.”

I was never really a full-blown gentleman, I never really got close enough to someone to even try. But I couldn't look away from her even if I tried, she was mesmerizing. My dick jumped as the water rolled over her ass, turning into droplets as they fell off her cheeks and splashed onto the floor.

Clearing my throat, I grabbed a facecloth from under the sink and lathered it up with the bar of soap. Pausing, I was stunned by what I saw. “Did they do this?”

The closer I looked at her the more I noticed the discolorations on her skin. Her entire body was spotted in bruises from her mid-back to her ankles. All the bruises varied in size, some lighter than others.

I hadn't seen them before, but in here, with the harsh blast of bright bulbs . . . Nothing was hidden.

“Some, I'm sure, are from them . . . But not all.” Closing her eyes, she held her face directly in the water. She spoke low so I almost couldn't hear her. Her voice trickled with an uncertainty of what to say.

Rubbing light circles over her back, I washed her body, exploring and taking her in. There was a level of shock that coated my brain with all the damage to her flesh. Thin, long scars riddled her back, so light that I might have missed them if I wasn't examining her so closely.

Fingertip shaped bruises wrapped her biceps, and her hips. Even her inner thighs were spotted with the same pattern. Looking closer, my mouth dropped open. “Are those bite marks?”

Snapping her head up, she whipped her face in my direction. “Stop looking at me. I don't want your questions, I don't want to talk about it, just hurry up so I can get out.”

Spitfulls of water spurted out and hit my chest as it splashed off her shoulders. “Ivy, who did this to you?”

“Does it matter?” Cocking her jaw, her lips pursed tight. “I'm done, can I have a towel?”

“No, tell me who did this?”

I knew who did that to her, but I wanted to confirm the suspicion. Remo.

That rat bastard had harmed her, he put his hands on her in a way no man should ever touch a woman. A deep seeded rage scorched my insides, forcing the blood in my

veins to boil.

I'm going to kill him.

I might be an evil soul who didn't take shit. I might lay a motherfucker out right for even glancing at me the wrong way.

But I would never do something like that. You don't inflict pain to show dominance, and never to get what you wanted from a woman.

That . . . That was a bad man.

“Why? Are you going to go rough him up?” Holding up her hand, her palm was firm as it pushed against my chest. “Or maybe you'll just kill him?” Shrugging her shoulders, she crossed her arms. “Right? You're a bad man, go kill him, then come back and kill me too. That's what you guys do, isn't it?”

My chest began to fill with steam, her heated words making me want to grab her and kiss her, and show her how bad I really could be.

“Do you want me to kill him?”

Ivy stood frozen, her eyes trying to read my face to see if I was being serious. Her tits began to lift rapidly, nostrils flaring as she breathed in hard quick breaths. “Fuck you.” Stepping into the shower, I grabbed her arms with force. “What are you doing, Dante?”

She tried to move away, but she only backed herself against the wall. A level of fear settled over her expression, brows shooting up, eyes open wide.

“Do you want me to?”

“What?”

“Kill him.” Digging my fingers into her hair at the base of her neck, I grabbed her roots hard. “Say the word, Ivy, and it's done. I won't stand for that shit.”

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I watched her body shudder, lips parting. “Stop, I don't want anyone dead, I didn't even want you to kill Tony.”

“No?” Tilting my head, I eyed her curiously. “That's not what your eyes said, but good thing it wasn't up to you. He deserved it, Ivy. And now he's burning in hell where he belongs.”

Arching her back off the tiles, her head rocked in my hand. “And where do you think you'll go when you die?”

A deep laugh rolled out, my tone low and thick. “You don't scare easy, do you? You're not afraid to die, you're not afraid of me. What are you afraid of?”

Turning her chin up high, the base of her skull pressed harder into my palm. Her lips plumped up, tongue running across the bottom. Her voice started to come out, but I stopped it.

I didn't want to know. Ivy didn't need to fear a thing as long as I was here. No one would touch her, no one would even look at her crooked with me around.

Crushing my lips into hers, I kissed her hard. My hands drove deeper into her hair, tightening and curling around the wet locks.

And Ivy kissed me back. She started off tempered, cautiously letting me control the intensity. But she didn't try to stop me.

Her mouth opened, tongue finding its way to mine. The passion turned on, heating

into arousal, lust, desire.

The water drenched us, making our kiss liquid fire. Gripping the neck of my shirt, I yanked it over my shoulders and threw it to the floor. Ivy held on, kissing and licking, never letting go.

“I won't let anyone hurt you, Ivy.” Whispering into her mouth, I spoke the truth. “I won't let it happen, not now, not ever.”

And I meant what I said.

Never again.

Feverishly, her hands stroked my hair, raking my scalp. Her wet body pressed against my chest, hardened nipples pricking my skin. My cock thickened, turning rock solid. Popping the button on my jeans, I tugged the heavy material down over my legs, kicking them off. My cock bounced free, standing firm and aching to feel her.

Dipping into her neck, I kissed and nipped her skin. Planting kisses up her throat, I bit her lobe, and licked the shell of her ear. The sexiest moan slipped out of her mouth, head rolling off to the side.

With one hand in her hair, I dragged the other down over her ribs, and stopped at her hip. My fingertips dug into her skin, holding her tight as she rocked and gyrated against my thigh. Licking her collarbone, I made my way to her tit, taking her nipple between my teeth and biting it softly.

Ivy's hands scratched down my back, piercing my spine. I could feel her nails in my skin, and I knew I'd still be able to see her pleasure tomorrow if I looked at my back.

I was so fucking turned on, so hard and eager to slide deep into her hot cunt. Stroking

up her slit, I felt her arousal. She was wet and warm, her pussy pulsing against my finger and clenching at nothing.

Flicking her clit, Ivy moaned louder, her legs trembling to hold her body up. “You're so fucking wet. Fuck.” The air-filled words met her hair as I cupped her cheeks and kissed her head.

“Dante, I . . .” Moaning again, she gasped as I slipped a finger into her heat. Her thighs clenched around my arm, back snapping square.

“You like that, Princess? You want to feel a real man?” Fingering her cunt, I let her juice drip over my wrist. “I'm going to fuck that pussy, I'm going to make that mine.” Quickening the pace, I brought her right to the edge of coming.

“Ah! Mm, Dante! Fuck!” Her head fell into my chest, tits rising and falling with need. “Dante, you need to know—”

“Shh, Sweetheart, just enjoy this, enjoy right now.” Slipping in a second finger, I fucked her with my hand. Her legs shook, goosebumps jumping off her skin.

And just as her body was about to crash and explode, I yanked my touch away. “Not yet, not yet, Princess.”

Flashing her bright eyes, her thick lashes fanned like canopies. “Dante—”

“Don't talk, just tell me you want this. Tell me you want this and that's all I need.”

Biting her lower lip, Ivy nodded, her fingers gripping around my shoulders.

Scooping my hands under her ass, I lifted her up, pushing her back against the wall. Kissing her hard, I positioned my cock against her pussy, and slid in slowly.

Burying her head into the side of my neck, a pained moan hit my ears. “Are you okay?” I whispered into her ear.

Nodding, she lifted her face, and stared into my eyes. “Just go slow for me.”

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Holding her up with one arm, I pushed the wet strands of hair off her face. Pulling out, I pushed back in. My pace was slow, her pussy tight and squeezing so hard around my shaft.

She felt amazing, and I wanted to live here, inside of her forever. Her skin was shining under the hot water, turning a blushed pink. Her nipples pricked my chest, back arching as I pumped in and out of her.

Her thighs crushed around my waist, moans growing louder as her walls clenched around my cock. The orgasm rushed through her body. Ivy's head fell back, hitting the tile, her mouth hung open, eyes rolling up into her skull.

As her muscles went limp, I yanked my cock from her cunt, resting it against her belly. The hot come spilled from my tip, purging in forced spurts that coated her skin in pearl white.

And as we stood motionless, breathing heavy, and at a loss for words, I knew.

I knew this woman needed me.

I knew I needed her.

Ivy was the one who finally spoke first. Her eyes were still, lips holding a small smirk. "Congratulations."

"What?" Setting her down, she kept her hands on my shoulders.

Her eyes shot to her feet, and snapped back up. “You took the last thing I had to offer.”

Tilting my head, I scrunched my lips. “What are you talking about?”

“Well, let's just say I'm not worth the money now.”

What the fuck is she talking about?

I took the last thing she had to offer?

She wasn't worth the money?

What the hell did any of that mean?

Ivy was speaking in fucking tongues, talking in puzzled words that I had to put together.

But it didn't make sense.

And as I watched her rinse her body, gently massaging her most sensitive area, I put her coded words together.

Ivy was a virgin.

Ivy

“Yeah?” Dante's voice was muffled and quiet as he leaned over the edge of the bed to distance himself from me. “When?”

I tried to stay still and pretend like I was asleep so he didn't think I was listening to his conversation. I was laying on my side, facing away from him. But my eyes were wide open.

“Alright, I'll be there.” I heard the phone beep as he hung it up, his hand coming down to settle on my hip. “Ivy, are you asleep?”

I didn't answer. In all honesty, I didn't want to know what the phone call was about. Staying silent, I kept my breathing steady and closed my eyes again.

The bed creaked as Dante shifted his weight around, twisting to his back. His arm stayed draped over my side, hand rubbing my lower belly. The gentle stroke sent tingles over my body, my stomach dipping in as it tickled with how light his fingers were grazing my skin.

Rolling to his side, he wrapped his arm over my shoulder, and tugged me against his chest. That was a feeling I liked, one I wanted. Being in his arms cast a sense of comfort over my nerves.

In his embrace, there was safety and a sense that not everything was wrong, that some of this felt right.

Wrapped up in him felt right, his muscles felt right. I fit perfectly into that nook between his arms like it was made just for me.

But I shouldn't feel this! It's wrong in so many ways.

What's that condition called . . .

Stockholm syndrome?

Was I being manipulated by him? Could I really be falling for my captor?

No. I might be in a fucked up situation, but my head wasn't charred and mangled. I knew what I was feeling. If it was some condition I suffered from then I should have been feeling it for Remo, not Dante.

There was no denying what I felt. It was there, settling nicely over my body.

Tugging the covers over my thighs, I felt his lips hit the base of my neck as he dotted it with kisses. The stubble of his jaw brushed against my skin, causing my head to tilt.

“Are you awake now?” he asked, using the tip of his tongue to lick my neck.

“Maybe.” The word came out soft, riding a quick gasp as he bit down on my shoulder.

“Good.” His hand massaged my back, squeezing deep into the muscles. “Can I tell you something?”

“Is it something I need to know?”

“It's something I want you to know.”

“Alright.” Turning my head over my shoulder, I looked up into his eyes.

“When I saw you with Remo awhile back, it made my skin crawl, and I hated you for it.”

Searching his eyes, my brows furrowed. “I think that's a thought you should keep to yourself.”

“No, that's not what I mean. I don't hate you . . .” Running his thumb down the curve of my jaw, he pinched my chin and lifted my face higher. “What I'm trying to say is that seeing you with that piece of shit made me angry. He doesn't deserve you.”

“You don't know me or why I'm there to begin with.” Flipping to my back, I rested my head against his chest. “Just like I'm not here by choice, I wasn't with him by choice either.”

“Tell me what you are to him, tell me so I can end it.”

I wanted to give him answers, I wanted to give him my secrets, I needed him to know. But I felt ashamed of what I was. There's no humanity in being just a body. My mind had been discarded the moment I woke up in his room.

Remo erased who I was, and turned me into his puppet.

“There's nothing you can do, Dante. I'm not his because I want to be, I'm his because he made me that, I'm his because money can buy the world and everything in it.” My eyes dulled, glossing in lost tears and shameful memories.

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“He's hurt you, I know he's hurt you. I won't have it, Ivy, I won't let him hurt you anymore.”

Scanning his face, my lids slit tight. “Why do you care?”

Biting his lip, he shifted his gaze to the ceiling. “Are you okay with what he did to you? Do you want him to keep treating you like a piece of property?”

“No, it's disgusting and degrading, but—”

Cutting me off, Dante pressed his finger against my lips. “That's why, right there.” Slipping his finger over the soft skin, he let his hand fall back down to my waist. “Because you don't deserve that.”

Was he trying to somehow right the wrongs from his past?

Dante was a self-proclaimed bad boy, he'd done things—horrible things.

I couldn't shake the idea that this was his way to clear his heavy heart and make him feel like he was walking in lighter shoes.

Was this his confessional?

Was I the one who would help him to gain a clean slate to keep going on?

That's not what I wanted if it was. I wanted him to do this for the right reasons—because my life was wrong, because Remo was wrong, because I deserved

something better.

“But it's not up to you, it's your father's decision, right?”

“I'll figure out what to do, Ivy, I can't let him get away with this. I can't put you back in his hands.”

“Dante, neither of us have a choice in this. You have your orders from your father, I have an obligation to fill. I've come to terms with who am I now, I'm not Ivy . . . I'm no one.”

His strong arms held me tighter, pulling me in hard. “He can't have you.”

“It doesn't matter, he won't get what he wanted . . .” Glancing down, I flicked my eyes back to his. “Not now anyway.”

“So I was really your first? That's the honest truth, no bullshit?” Narrowing his eyes, Dante's stare burned into my heart. I could feel the way he was looking at me, and it was warm and exciting.

Butterflies began to spin around my stomach, my sex melting and growing wet to the intensity of his deep brown eyes. And at the same time, I felt embarrassed.

I had given myself to this man. To the man who stole me, to the man who was holding me hostage. And in the same thought, there was no place I'd rather be.

What the hell is wrong with me?

I must be fucked up in the head. I had to be.

None of this shit was normal, none of it was acceptable. But I was drawn to Dante's

commanding presence and ability to make me feel that rush only true emotions can cause.

“That's the truth. That's what Remo paid for and you took it.” Stroking his chin, I ran my hand up his cheek and into his hair. “I never wanted that man, but like you, I never had a choice.”

Dragging his thumb over my bottom lip, his other hand curled into the small of my back. We were pressed so tightly together that I could feel his heart beating against my chest. Thump after thump ricocheted between us, his face frozen on mine.

“We're not living the same life, Ivy. What I do is completely different from what you're supposed to do. I do this for my family, for my life. Your arm is being twisted by an evil bastard who thinks he can just go out and buy perfection.”

I didn't have any words for him. His voice was sincere and full of truth.

“You're so beautiful, Ivy, you don't deserve what he's done to you, and the position he put you in.” Cupping my cheek, his face softened. “I wish things could be different.”

Dante looked genuinely saddened by what was going on. He didn't want this anymore than I did.

But choices had been stripped from us both.

He had an obligation to his family, to his father. I was contracted to be with Remo, and if I ran away from him or didn't give him what he had paid for . . .

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My family would bear the burden.

He had warned me that first night. If I did anything to try and escape, to try and run, he'd kill them all. I couldn't risk that.

Dante thought that we weren't on the same playing field. He had no idea how wrong he was.

The safety of my family was more important to me than my own self-preservation. Dante had to understand that. He did understand that.

At least when the hands changed and I was given back to my owner, Remo wouldn't get the virgin Ivy. He could never take that from me.

Dante had claimed that part of me. He had me, and I chose to give myself to him.

I had taken back my choice and I would never forget Dante had given me that.

But Dante and me . . . We could never be.

“What are you doing, Dante? Is this what you want?” Pushing myself up, I rested my hands in my lap. “Don't feed me lines of how you wished this—or that—I don't fucking need it. Shit is fucked up enough without you filling my head with all these false dreams of what things could be.” Throwing my arm up, I dug my nails into my hair. “Things won't be, and that's it. You'll hand me over just like you're told to, and I'll go back to being a fucking slave, a sex slave. So just stop already with all this bullshit. I don't want to hear it.”

I could feel my heart starting to hurt. It was breaking and cracking, and filling with pain. I didn't want the pain.

During the first few weeks with Remo I let my mind race and wander to all the things that could have been in my life. And that hurt too fucking much to let it all in again.

All the dreams I had about finishing college, all the plans to move into the city and open my own veterinary clinic were stomped on and shattered into dust sized chunks.

My father had taken his money, he had allowed that man to steal me away, and for what?

That was an answer I didn't have. And I refused to speculate why.

“Ivy, I don't want to give you back to him. I want to fucking kill him for what he's done to you. I can see it all over your body and it makes me sick.” His hand captured my chin, forcing me to look into his eyes. “I'll try and find a way out of this, I will.”

Licking my lips, they felt dry and cracked. My nerves were running wild with all the regret I had for not being smarter, for not being wiser when Remo first stepped foot through my door.

“Trust me, if there was a way out, I would've found it. But he'll kill my family if I don't do what he wants. Everything I've put up with was done to save them. I'm his, he owns me. He paid for me, and now I'm not even me anymore. I'm just . . .” Letting out a weighted breath, my eyes began to well with tears. “His.”

Dante sat quiet, his face scrunched in thought. Shaking his head with a stern, 'no,' his expression turned sour. “You're not his. You never were. From the first moment I saw you, you were mine.”

Crushing his lips onto mine, Dante slid his teeth over my bottom lip, plucking it with harsh demand. Finding my neck, he laid hard bites, nipping and breathing hot air over my throat. My body shook, nipples turning hard and stiff as his cock pushed into my thigh.

There was so much desire between us that I felt the room jump ten degrees. It went from cool to hot, the air turning stuffy and thick with lust.

His mouth found my lips again, tongue licking and riding the ridges as it danced around my tongue. We kissed with passion, the feeling purged my veins, hitting my chest with electric sparks.

His strong arms flipped me in his direction, our lips never parting to even take in air.

I didn't need to breathe, I didn't need air or water or food to survive.

I needed Dante.

Rolling to his back, Dante lifted me onto his waist. His cock slid between my ass cheeks as he raised his head to my chest and suckled my tender buds. Prickles broke over my skin as his tongue twirled around my nipples, teeth biting down with gentle force. Dropping my head back, a throaty moan fell from my lips as I closed my eyes tight.

He had no idea how much I wanted this, how much I needed him.

But I wanted him to know. Even if we were together by a twisted fate, I was bound to him now. And no matter what happened in the end, a piece of me would always belong to him.

Gripping my hips, Dante gyrated up, his thick dick slipping up and down my ass. The

thick fuzzy patch of hair at the base of his cock tickled my clit, making me pulse and clench at just the idea of having him inside me again.

His hand climbed up my side, scooping into my hair and tugging my head back hard. “I said you're mine. That's all it takes, that's all that matters. You're no one else's.” My back arched, pushing my pussy into his waist. “Tell me you're mine, say it so I can hear you.”

“I'm yours, Dante, I'm yours.” Rolling my head in his hand, I felt his cock throbbing. His thumb circled my clit, the pad pushing down and dipping into my heat. “Fuck, Dante, I'm yours!”

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I wanted to believe it. I wanted to believe that he could save me from my life and that I would only wake to his face from here on out.

Right then . . . That was the truth. But when this was done, when I was passed back . . . This would be nothing but a fuzzy dream that I could escape to.

“That's right, Princess, you're mine. And I'm going to make you mine again and again till you can't feel your legs. Do you like the way that sounds? Do you want me to take you and keep you for myself?”

Rocking my hips against his lower stomach, his thumb flicked my swelling button, making me shiver. “Please . . . Please make me yours. Keep me, keep me here and never let me go.” Reaching my hand back, I gripped his shaft and stroked it from base to tip.

He was solid, thick, and growing harder by the second. Pushing him between my ass, I let him grind against my tight, puckered hole.

I was so fucking turned on, I wanted him to fuck me anyway and anyplace he desired. If he wanted my pussy he could have it, if he wanted my ass, that was his too.

He could take me however he desired and I knew in the end I'd only be begging him for more.

“Princess, I already claimed you as mine before all this.” Dante's hand squeezed my ass, his finger teasing the entrance, slipping in up to the first knuckle then pulling away swiftly.

My sex was on fire. I was drenched, seeping arousal all over his lower belly, and into his thick mane. Rolling my hips, my pussy rocked and pumped over his skin.

Lifting his back off the bed, Dante grabbed me by my shoulders, pressing my tits into his chest. His lips found every ounce of skin, dancing up my neck and to my mouth. With his hands firmly planted against my back, he used his legs to lift me up.

In one quick thrust, he was deep inside me. I could feel him hitting me in the stomach, his big cock driving harder and deeper as I rode his length.

There was a sharp pain that pierced my pussy, quickly melting away as my walls formed around his member. Being a virgin had been worth it. Experiencing Dante was a dirty pleasure come true.

Bucking his hips, he met my pace as I lifted and lowered. Digging my knees into the mattress, I held his shoulders tight. My pussy clenched hard around his dick, squeezing his shaft to keep him buried inside me. My orgasm was building, turning my skin hot.

Sweat had started to run down my back and sides, pooling at the crease of my hips. Our bodies were slipping over each other as he fingered my ass while we fucked.

And it felt incredible. There was extra pressure against my clit as his finger dipped in and out. Moaning loud, my muscles tensed as the rush came in and swept me away.

The bed squeaked as he pounded over and over into my pussy. The creaks were a mix of metal springs and loud heated breaths. My arms wrapped tightly around his neck, holding on so I wouldn't collapse.

I wanted to feel him, all of him. From his pulse, to his heart beat, to the air that filled his chest. My fingers raked and clawed at his damp skin and sweat drenched hair. I

couldn't stop touching him.

Dante's lips hovered over my ear, his words built off air and greed. "You are mine, and no one will touch you ever again." Shortening his thrusts, I felt his cock pulse inside me. A deep growl hit my ears as his head fell onto my chest.

His dick thickened and jerked inside my body. A warm surge filled my sex, his come spilling and heating me from within.

He came in me. And I didn't stop him. I wanted it. I wanted to feel him and his pleasure.

And right then that's what I needed.

Because tomorrow could bring sorrow and death.

But today I gave myself to him completely.

Ivy

Standing at the window, I stared out into the vast expanse of trees and complete isolation. I had counted my time here, trapped in this house by sunsets. I arrived in the dark, so every night as the sun crept down over the horizon, it solidified another day.

Today . . . Today was day nine.

Dante hadn't really left me alone, not for more than an hour or two since the first two days. And I wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. Hidden deep inside me was that dangerous feeling of enjoyment when he was here. I didn't want to be alone because there was safety in his company.

But I never asked where he went or when he'd be back. And for some reason he felt the need to tell me. As if my quietness and looks were a calling for information. It wasn't much information, usually just a sliver of insight. He'd tell me about how long he'd be gone or what he was leaving for.

In all honesty, I didn't really care. So long as it wasn't to make the trade for me, I was content right where I was.

His father hadn't come back yet, but I knew when he called. Dante would get all stiff and he'd tuck his head into his chest, then he'd leave the room without so much as a glance.

Bane's hand was squeezing Dante, manipulating him, moving him like his own living

marionette. He pulled the strings and Dante did as he was told. I hated that. I could see that Dante wanted to do this all differently, he didn't want me involved at all.

But here I was, enemy number one to the most notorious and dangerous man in the state.

My guard had started to waver, balancing on my need for survival, and my need for comfort, attention, and . . . Love.

I wouldn't say that Dante loved me, and I certainly wouldn't put my feelings into a basket and call them cheery floating petals of emotion.

But it was better than what I had been getting, a hell of a lot better.

“How's the view?”

“Same as it has been,” I said, snuggling my arms into my chest. There was a draft blowing in from the window seam, making my body chilled. “You know, for such a strong window, it isn't sealed tight.”

“Yeah, well, you certainly tested its limits. But that's what you get with old houses.” Walking up beside me, he buried his hands into his pockets and stared off into the same nothingness I was. “I put some new clothes on the bed for you.”

Closing my eyes, I rubbed my elbows. “Okay.”

I felt him turn to look at me. His eyes threw off enough heat to let me know when they were on me. My skin would grow warm, prickles would spring to life and surf my body.

“What?” I asked, still keeping my lids shut.

“You're quiet.”

Opening my eyes, I turned to face him. “What do you want me to say, Dante?”

“I don't know.” Shrugging his shoulders, he leaned into the glass. “Ask me something, ask me questions about myself, about my life.”

“Why? What good would that do?”

“Ask me so I can ask you.”

What the hell is he doing?

“I thought you already knew about me? You knew my name, you obviously knew where I was so your guys could snatch me. You don't care about my past or where I came from.”

Rolling his eyes, Dante stepped in closer. “I'm trying to figure this out, Ivy. Maybe knowing more about you will help me make up my mind.”

Snapping my hands to my hips, I veered my stare. “You already have it all figured out, Dante. Your daddy made that decision for you when he held the gun to my head. Why are you doing this? Why are you screwing with me?”

“I'm not trying—”

Cutting him off, I threw my hand into the air, letting it fall to slap my thigh. “Yes, you are!” I felt all the anger I had stuffed down and away resurface. Yes, there was safety here, but that didn't erase the fact I was still a caged animal.

I was still having my life dangled before my eyes in a game of cat and mouse. Maybe

he'll help me, maybe he won't. Maybe Dante feels something for me he didn't want to or maybe this was still all part of his mind games.

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But trusting him wasn't something I was going to do just because he wanted me to. If I started talking about my family, he could use it against me.

Just like Remo did.

Watching him, his face softened. His eyes batted sympathetic lashes, lips frowning in understanding sorrow for my pain. "I won't threaten your family, Ivy. I'm not out to hurt them."

How did he know I was thinking that?

"Yeah, I've heard that one before." Twisting back to the window, I tried to forget all the pain I felt from being torn from them.

"I'm not Remo. Stop treating me like I'm him." His chest pushed into my shoulder, muscles wrapping around me and warming my skin. "I would never hurt you like he did, I would never hurt your family like he promised to do. I might be evil, I might be a fucking bastard, but unlike him, I actually do what I say I'm going to." Grabbing my hair, he forced my eyes onto his. "Don't shut me out, Ivy, I'm your only hope."

Through thin lips, I gritted my teeth. "And yet you still don't have your mind made up. What am I supposed to do, Dante?"

"Tell me who you are." His fingers traced my shoulder, sending shivers up my spine. "I'll make a deal with you . . ." His nails scrapped over my arm, following the contours of my back.

“I don't do deals.”

“You're doing this one.” Curling his fingers around my hip, he yanked me into his arms. “A piece of you for a piece of me.”

Arching a brow, he had me curious. I wanted to know him, there were questions I had and if I could get them without striking a nerve, I shouldn't pass up the opportunity.

“Anything I want to know?”

“Anything.”

“How do I know you're going to be honest?”

“How do I know you'll be honest?” he countered, smiling to his ears.

“You don't.”

“Exactly.” His lips touched the curve of my shoulder, goosebumps going off instantly. “Ask away.”

Thumbing my chin, I glanced around outside. “Alright, whose house is this?”

“It's my family's.”

“But—”

Tisking, Dante wagged a finger in the air. “One for one, I answered you, now it's my turn.”

Nodding, I took a deep breath, waiting for him to jump in feet first. I anticipated the

worst. My nerves were skittish, stomach coiling around inside like a boa constrictor had taken hold of my organs and was squeezing the life out of them.

What did he want to know? What would he ask me?

And can I even give him an honest answer?

“Where are you from, Ivy?”

What? Seriously?

“That's your question?”

“Yes, why? Is there something wrong with my question?”

“No, I . . . I just didn't . . .”

“Then answer.”

“Maine.”

“Good, see? That wasn't so bad.”

My head moved to say no, my mind already running through all the things I wanted answers to. I stood silent for a long time, trying to sift between the important questions and the ones that I wanted just for me.

How long would I be here?

Why won't you just let me go?

What darkness do you cling to that you won't tell me the things you've done?

Whose dress was that?

Do you feel something when we make love . . . No, not love.

Do you feel something when I give myself to you? That's better.

“Your turn, Ivy.” His fingertips slid softly over my arms, lips placing another gentle kiss on the back of my neck.

Plucking at my lip, I asked, “Is there a girl waiting for you outside this house?”

Chuckling, he wrapped his arms around my waist and tucked his chin into my neck. “No.” Suckling my earlobe, he whispered. “I'll give you a little more on this one, I

don't get close to people, I run from them.”

Is that his fear? Getting close?

“Do you need more?”

“Yes.”

“Me too, how long—”

“Uh, uh.” Dabbing my finger in the air, I stopped him from asking the question he had. “It's my turn now, you just asked me a question.”

Smiling into my neck, he laughed. “You're using my rules against me.”

“Rules are rules, my turn. Why do you run?”

“I don't do commitment, there's too much risk in it. Look where you are right now, imagine the pain some poor girl would feel if my enemies tried this. It'd be a whole lot worse than the shoes you're in right now.” His fingers pulled gently at strands of my hair, twirling them tight. “Did you like the life you had before?”

“Yes, very much, and I'd like to live to see it again.” Tilting my head, I let the heat of his body wrap me up like a thick blanket. I couldn't help the way he made me feel. There was comfort in his touch, a raw desire in his lips, and every piece of it was welcomed.

I tried to keep myself distant from the feelings slicing through my body, but I couldn't push them away.

Secretly I wanted him to take me right there. Let the questions turn into kisses, let

them turn into his hands caressing my entire body, his tongue tasting every inch.

Dante was more than just the wall of muscle and pain he tried to encase himself with. His eyes were highlighted in curiosity, feelings, and a twinkle of downright dirty.

“Come on, Princess, ask another.”

“Whose dress was that?”

His muscles jerked, lips drifting off my skin and pulling tight. Dante didn't speak, he seemed to climb inside his head and go off to somewhere else. I knew it was risky to ask that again after how he was the first time.

But this was his game, not mine.

Releasing my arms, he walked into the center of the room, keeping his head low.

“Dante?”

“We're done, no more questions.”

“Wait, you can't—”

Whipping around, he stabbed the air with his hand. “I can, I just did.” Rubbing his forehead, his chest lifted rapidly. “I don't need to know about you, forget it, it was a dumb idea.”

“No, it wasn't. I shouldn't have asked that, I won't do that again.”

Shit!

Don't shut down!

I felt stupid for going right to that. I shouldn't care who the dress belonged to, it didn't matter. But I was too fucking thick headed to just see the kindness of what he had done.

He had given me clothing to cover up, he didn't leave me completely bare and vulnerable for his father.

Why did I ask that?

It was a gesture of kindness that I wanted to see as death. The dress could have belonged to someone who owned the house before his family, maybe it was extra clothing they had just lying around.

Did it really matter?

Dead woman or no dead woman, he did that because he wanted to.

“Ask me something else, Dante. I’ll answer.”

His eyes licked my body, moving up my legs, over my sex, and resting on my lips.

“Do you enjoy when I fuck you, Ivy?”

Swallowing the lump that had formed in my throat, I kept my face on his. How was I supposed to answer that?

Be honest.

He was looking for honesty, and after everything he had done for me, I knew he earned it.

But what would he think if I told him the truth?

What would he say if he knew how I felt?

Would he run?

Lowering my eyes to the floor, I quietly spoke into the air. “Yes.”

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Dante

Time had disappeared.

I had been held up in this house with a girl who made me forget the hours completely. And not once did I think about what was coming. There was a meeting I had to be at, one I couldn't miss.

The message pinged off in my pocket, a deadly reminder that my time with her was drawing to an end. But I couldn't accept that.

Has it really been two weeks already?

I didn't want to leave Ivy, I hated leaving her. I had only left the house a couple times since I brought her here. Today I was leaving for a reason that I honestly didn't want to consider; giving her back. It was time to force Remo's hand.

My father had given him the benefit of the doubt, his deadline had come and gone, and now it was time to throw our weight.

But this woman had started to consume me. When we talked, it was real. A real conversation that wasn't made up of false curiosity or some dick just trying to stay on my good side.

With Ivy, I wanted to know about her, I wanted to hear her talk. Which was a first for me. Her voice sent my heart into double beats, the way her lips moved made my cock stiff.

When I asked her to tell me about where she came from, she didn't have to pause to find the words.

She told me stories of the dairy farm she grew up on, and how she loved the smell of manure. Gross.

I had grown up on a completely different end of the spectrum. We lived in the city, played baseball in an old rundown parking lot. Our evenings consisted of big family meals, and my father started breeding my brother and I for the business when we hit our teens.

Most childhoods are made of stories like hers, but mine . . .

My stories were made of torture, money, and silver lined events.

But a twinkle of that nostalgic childhood happiness was all I could see when she reminisced about her life, and it drew me in. It was exactly what childhood stories should sound like. Her mother and father were good people. But Remo had given them promises he never planned on keeping.

Ivy told me how he had promised her father that he would care for her, love her, and always keep her happy.

And her family believed him.

But I didn't believe the bullshit he fed her. I knew that man, I knew what he was built of, and none of it was good.

And she knew it now, too.

It was the money that talked, that was the nail in her coffin. Her father never gave her

an explanation to his decision, but she refused to think it was because he didn't love her.

Deep down, Ivy felt he didn't have a choice.

I wasn't so sure about that.

Did her father really love her?

How does a man sell off a piece of his own flesh and blood for profit? It didn't make sense. I could never imagine a day where a scumbag like Remo could walk into my life and convince me to sell my child.

I would've killed him if he came to me with an offer for my daughter. There had to be more to the story. Maybe her father had debt to him or needed the money to save something else in his life.

But money could turn people wicked in the worst possible way. It had the power to consume you to the point where nothing else mattered.

I saw that now. For the first time ever, I saw who I had become.

Power, money . . . They bled together. With money, you had more say; you had more control.

And that need to have it all was toxic.

I had been poisoned by greed.

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Holding my bicep, Ivy pleaded with me to stay. “Dante, can't you send someone in your place? There has to be someone who could fill in for you.”

If only I could. My job since this whole thing went down was to make sure she didn't get away. I did my job. But I hated it. I couldn't keep her safe if I didn't do as I was told.

I wasn't going to risk her life, not for me, not for anyone.

My father was ruthless, he warned me not to get close to her.

He wielded his gun in my face, letting the metal taste my skin. My fate would be the same as Sesto's if I went against my father.

Life wouldn't exist for me.

He wasn't going to risk his entire empire, he'd kill me before that could happen. My father was willing to loosen his rope with Remo, but only because it didn't involve a set of bars.

Remo kept his pockets full, he thought we needed him. I felt totally different.

And I ended up doing exactly what he told me not to.

I let Ivy in.

“There isn't, Ivy, I'm sorry. I'll try and get back as soon as I can, but I don't know how

long this is going to take.”

“Is this meeting about me?” Her eyes gaped large as saucers, shining like she was holding back tears.

God this woman is strong.

I didn't want to lie to her, and I wouldn't. But I couldn't tell her everything.

That would crush her.

“Yes, it's about you. But it's not the deal today, today's for talking.” Sitting back down on the bed, I gripped her wrist and tugged her onto my lap. Wrapping my arms around her belly, I laid my head on her back. “I'm still going to try and fix this, Ivy, I am. But I can't promise you anything, and that kills me.”

“I don't want promises, I want something that's real.” Twining her fingers into mine, she squeezed hard. “How do I know you'll come back?”

“You don't . . . You just have to trust me.”

“Do you trust me?” she asked, rolling her head on her shoulders and resting it against mine.

“I want to.”

“It goes both ways, Dante. If you want me to trust you, you need to trust me.” Holding up her ankle, she wriggled it softly so the chain jingled. “Trust me.”

Biting the inside of my cheek, I raised my eyes to hers. “Can you promise me you won't do anything stupid, that you'll stay right here and wait for me?” Her eyes

drifted, flicking between mine. Cupping her cheeks, I spoke sternly. “Promise me, Ivy.”

“I promise.”

Kissing her soft lips, I curled my arms around her waist. “I’m going to fix this, somehow someday . . .” Brushing my nose against her chin, I let the warmth of her skin seep into my bones. She was so delicate, her skin felt like velvet against my face. “I’ll keep you safe from him and from my father. They won’t get to you, I’ll do everything I can to make sure of it.”

“Just make sure you come back. I don’t like being here alone.”

“No one’s going to hurt you here, no one even knows where you are.” Running my thumb across her lips, I inhaled a deep breath. “If someone did find you and tried anything—anything at all—I’d fucking kill them.”

“What if your father comes back to finish what he started?”

“He won’t, this is all on me.”

“How can you be sure? He wants me gone, he thinks I know too much.”

How do I tell her?

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How do I tell her that it would be me who pulls the trigger?

“Because I’m sure. But, Ivy, no one is going to kill you. I’ll kill them all if I have to.”

“That’s what scares me, Dante. I don’t want blood spilled because of me. What’s your father going to say about all this?”

“He doesn’t have a choice.”

Turning, Ivy straddled my lap, draping her arms over my shoulders. Running her nails up and down my back, she sat quiet for a moment. “Don’t do anything stupid, Dante, I’m not worth the trouble. You’ll do what you need to, but not for me.” Her fingers found the back of my neck, scraping up into my hair. “Do what needs to be done for both of us. If that means I need to go back to Remo, so be it. I won’t let you risk your life for mine.”

Her eyes filled with sadness, the blue turning dark gray. As she stared at me through glass coated eyes, I felt my heart sink. She really couldn’t see the beauty I did.

“Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Don’t put yourself down, Ivy. I’m going to do what needs to be done, that’s it.” Stroking her hair, I tugged it back into a tight ponytail so I could see all of her features. Her nose perked at the end, cheeks high and rounded. And when she smiled, a single dimple would imprint her right cheek.

I fucking loved that dimple.

“You have no idea the things I would do to keep you safe.” Kissing her neck, I planted my lips up her throat. Moaning, Ivy's head fell back, her eyes rolling shut. “You're not his anymore, you need to realize that.”

Lifting her off my lap, I laid her gently onto the bed. Reaching into my pocket, I pulled out the small key for the lock. Holding it next to my face, I ran my finger up and down the slim metal, and placed it down onto the blanket. “Here. I'll be back later.”

Ivy's arm was bent up near her head, her face so perfect like a porcelain doll. Her lips were a natural pink shade, face flushed and flustered from my kisses.

A small smirk pulled to her ear, her eyes brightening again with life. I watched the spark ignite. She was gleaming on the inside. “Trust, Dante.”

“I can't unlock you myself. But if you decide to run, head east. I'll understand if you're not here when I get back. But just know I won't be able to protect you if you go. If you run from here, it's all out of my hands.” Digging my hands into my pockets, I headed out the door, closing it behind me.

I had to trust she'd stay. There was something between us and I was certain she wasn't just playing me to get what she wanted.

If she wanted to fight me, she would have. There was no doubt in my mind about that.

That key had been in my pocket every day. She could have taken it at any time and she hadn't.

Trust was what she had from me.

Trust was what I was giving to her.

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Dante

Watching the lot from a distance, I saw several guys go in and out of Remo's. I knew most of the faces, but a couple of them I didn't recognize.

Which was a big 'no, no,' in our agreement. He was supposed to run all of his guys through us first. We had to make sure they were who they said they were. That was the rule, and right now I could see he wasn't following it.

Two of the guys looked shifty. Their eyes scattered around the yard, looking a little too closely at things that weren't their concern. My family owned four of the containers they were studying.

I didn't like that one bit.

Picking up my phone, I took a couple pictures of the guys, trying to zoom in as best I could. They weren't looking in my direction at all, so I wasn't worried that they spotted me.

Hitting send, I sent the images to my dad.

'You know these guys?'

Resting the phone on my leg, I waited for him to respond. Scrunching my face, I leaned in over the steering wheel to try and see what the hell they were doing.

One of the guys was standing with his arms crossed, his head glancing around in

every direction. He was wearing a black leather jacket, his hair slicked back tight. Bobbling on his heels, he twisted his waist to look over his shoulder.

Ducking my head lower, I kept my eyes just above the rim. But he didn't linger very long where I was parked. He didn't see me.

His head flicked to the entrance as the door cracked open. Nodding his head at the other guy, the two started walking towards the door, disappearing behind the thick metal barricade. I sat puzzled and pissed off. It had been opened for them to go in without question.

They were invited.

But I didn't have a fucking idea who they were or what the hell Remo was doing bringing in guys we didn't authorize.

My phone buzzed, picking it up, I read the message.

'No. Who are they?'he asked.

'Fuck if I know.'

'Take care of this, Dante. Get him to understand we're serious. And don't take no for an answer.'

'Done.'Tucking the phone back into my pocket, I cracked my knuckles and stretched my arms across my chest.

The game was on.

Ivy had disappeared from his home long enough for him to start looking, to start

wondering. And we knew from our inside informants that no one had reported her missing. Which was good.

Really good.

That meant no one other than her handler was looking for her. The cops weren't involved, there were no news stories about her going missing, no articles in the papers about the petite copper-colored-hair woman who had vanished into thin air from her living room.

And that was exactly what we needed to happen.

If the world was looking for this innocent lost soul, it would make things much more difficult. We didn't need things to get any more complicated.

Closing the door softly, I walked casually across the street and into the lion's den. It was time to let Remo know what we wanted, and what would happen if he didn't take care of his end.

Gripping the gun in my pocket, I stood outside the door and knocked.

One knock, two knocks, then three rapid taps in one procession. It was our calling card.

The Pisanis are here.

A beady eyed little man, who went by the name Del, opened the door and stuck his face out. "Mr. Pisani, Remo's in a meeting right now, you'll have to come back later." His square glasses were two sizes too big for his head, turning his tiny eyes into giant popping disks.

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A thin smile spread over my face, head turning down in his direction. “Open the door, Del, or I'll open it for you.”

“He can't see you right now . . .” Bumbling over his words, he scratched his nappy black hair. Tapping my leg, I waited for him to finish his sentence properly. “Sir.” His face trembled, knuckles turning white against the door.

If I was a nicer guy I might feel bad about making him so nervous. But I wasn't, so I didn't care. I fed off it, letting it consume what was left of my soul to make me grow larger.

I would always be a bad man. It's who I was, it captured my name in lights and left dead men in my wake.

“Don't make me tell you again, Del.” Puffing my chest, I straightened my back. “Open the door.”

His eyes circled my body, hand still holding firmly in place.

Alright . . . We're doing this my way then.

Del started to answer, but I didn't give him any time to finish even the first letter of whatever the hell he was about to say.

I knew he was just trying to do what he was told. But it was me he was talking to, not some lower level scum who took orders like the local street walkers took dick.

Grabbing the edge of the door, I shoved it open and walked right through Del. His small body jerked to the side, trying to get out of my way.

He wasn't fast enough. His feet twisted together as my shoulder connected with the side of his face. I wasn't normally so intense with my arrival. Under normal circumstances I might have given him the extra time.

But not today.

Keeping my head straight, I walked to Remo's office and almost walked right through the door. Throwing the door open, I stood in the entryway, eyes firmly set on Remo.

Snapping his head in my direction, he looked stunned. "Dante . . . Wh—what are you doing here? This isn't a delivery week."

Taking a second to scan the place, the two men I had seen outside were sitting in front of Remo, both intently holding a piece of paper and a pen.

"Hello, gentleman. Time for you to leave." Pressing my back against the door, I fanned my arm out. "Please don't make me ask again."

Standing quickly, Remo's hands came down hard on his desk. "No." He spoke to the men, then let his eyes drift up to mine. "Dante, you're out of line here. This is my place, I run it from inside these walls."

Cocking my head, I smiled. "Is that right?" Stepping in, I let the door swing shut on its own. The handle clanked into place, echoing against the empty walls. Walking behind the two men still seated at Remo's desk, I leaned down over the greasy haired man's shoulder. "What are you fellas reading? Is it interesting?" Plucking the paper out of the man's fingers in one quick snap, I held it up.

Holding my jaw, I nodded as I read the contract. “Hm . . . No kidding,” I said under my breath with a sarcastic smile. Continuing my walk to the side of the desk, I read the last lines out loud. “‘The business conducted behind these walls is confidential. At no point should it be discussed, repeated, or written down to any party that is not part of this establishment.’ Is this what I think it is?”

“Dante, this has nothing to do with you or your family. These men are an outside hire for my own personal business.” Waving his hand in the air, his fingers danced with each word.

I hated that about him. The way he used his hands constantly in conversation to say what his mouth was already spewing. It irked me, and I wasn't sure why.

It was just one of those things you notice and single out about someone who you hate. I could name off everything I hated about Remo, but nothing went up my ass more than knowing what he had done to Ivy.

To my Ivy.

“That's where you're wrong, Remo. Personal business is conducted at home, not here. Here, in this building, it becomes my business.” Crumpling the paper in my hand, I dropped it into the trashcan beside his desk. “No one gets hired without our permission. You know that's the rule, and you just broke it.”

“It's not what you think, I need these men for something else. It doesn't involve you or your family.”

“I think it does.” Arching a brow, I veered my stare. “I think it does.”

Remo's lips puckered like an old asshole. Crinkling in at the corners, the edges drooped down and sagged over each other. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

Turning to the two men, I nodded my head towards the door. “Out, I need to talk to him in private.”

They both looked between each other, turning up to look at Remo. Tilting my head, I spoke clear and firm. “You don't need to look for his permission. Out.”

The guy on the right had a short buzz cut, his face holding a faded scar across his jaw. “Remo, want us to take care of this guy? I will, free of—”

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Gritting my teeth, I cracked the bones in my neck with a quick hard tilt. “I told you, you don't need his permission.” Stepping in front of them, I threw my hands out and grabbed each one by the throat. Pinching their necks between my fingers, I lifted them off the shitty chairs that held their pathetic fucking bodies.

Their eyes bugged from their skulls, fingers clawing at my arms. Gurgled sounds spilled off their tongues as they tried to breathe and swallow. But I wasn't letting them do a fucking thing till they were out that door.

This was my time with Remo.

Tossing them out the door like garbage, their bodies bounced off the cement. Instinctively, they both massaged their necks, scooting up on one arm and looking at me with the best expression I could ever get.

Fear.

Fuck. I love that look a little too much.

“Don't look at me crooked, don't let your mouth run wild, don't fuck with me.” Pointing a single finger down at the pieces of shit scrambling back, I said, “I will not tolerate it.”

Taking one step backwards, I was back inside the room. Slamming the door shut, I stood for a moment in silence.

Remo and I had a few things to discuss.

Dante

Remo studied me from across the room. His eyes angled into pin points, his face sharp and peeling back like a hungry lizard. Tilting his chin up, he pressed his palms meticulously onto the desk, the tips of his fingers bending up at the knuckle.

We both stood quiet, just observing each other. This was a battle of more than muscle, this was some serious mind fucking.

And I was going to blow his out of his fucking skull and into the ceiling.

My hands were open and by my sides, chest hammering with adrenaline.

If I had no control the guy would already be dead.

He was lucky I had self-restraint and respected my father enough to follow orders. But that restraint only went so deep—it was hanging on by a thread.

“Dante, would you care to explain what this little visit is all about?” There went his hands again. One finger swirled imaginary circles over the desk, the other whirling in the air before coming back down to rest.

If I had to torture that man I knew I'd go for his hands first.

Walking to the desk, I held the back of one of the chairs. “May I?” I asked.

Holding out his arm, his lips closed tight as he nodded. “Of course.”

Sitting down, I steepled my fingers against my lips, and arched my brows for him to sit too. It took him a second to catch what I was waiting for.

Taking his seat, Remo cleared his throat and scooted himself in. “Those men out there have nothing to do with our business, Dante. I need them for something else, something . . .” Pausing, his hand circled the air. “Private.”

“Tell me, Remo, this private business you have—what is it?”

I was playing cat and mouse, ready to bait him. I was putting the pieces together, who those men were, and what they were here for.

Bounty hunters hired to find his fugitive.

The woman he lost, the woman he craved to keep for his own sick games. He wanted Ivy, and he had no idea he was never getting her back.

“Please, let's not mix our business with such foolish questions. You don't need to worry about this, it won't impact our contract. You'll have your load in on time, and these men will never be here again.”

A deep laugh rolled out of my mouth, head shaking side to side. “That's where you're wrong. You see, our business has already been affected, and those men will have nothing to do with you. I want you to go out there and tell them you changed your mind, tell them to leave and never come back.”

Holding out his hands, he fanned the blank space. “No, no, no, I can't do that. I need them, I've lost something that needs to be found—immediately.”

“I know.”

His face went static, lids expanding. “What do you mean you know?”

“I know.”

“Be specific, Dante. What do you know?” I didn't answer. Instead I smiled the cruelest and most devious smile I could. “You know where she is?”

“We want what's ours, what you owe to us. You lost us over a quarter million dollars, Remo . . . You did that. And you let Sesto roll on us without one fucking word to my father.”

“Dante, that's not how it went. Sesto went on his own, I had nothing to do with that.”

“You mean you didn't give him the copies of our receipts, or access to transaction dates and delivery locations? He pulled that shit out of his ass with no help from you? My father might take your word on things, but I don't trust you for a second.”

“I wouldn't do that to your father, he's been good to me, Dante.”

“Too good, if you ask me.”

“Good thing no one is asking you then.”

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He's pushing me. He's really walking a thin line.

My nails burned into my palms, digging in to keep steady. I wanted to launch myself across the desk, clock him in the jaw, and hold my gun to his head. But I kept my cool the best I could.

“Right now, no, but that won't be forever. You owe us, we want our money, and until you give us what we want . . .” Clicking my tongue against the roof of my mouth, I let my teeth shine. “Your little toy is ours.”

“You took her—you took my Celia?”

“Celia? Who the fuck is Celia?”

“I gave her a new name, I didn't like the one she came with, especially after you said it. That is my property and I want it back.”

Remo remembered that night, it had stuck with him the same way it stuck with me. Except it was for completely different reasons. I remembered that night in the restaurant because of her, he remembered it because of me and our introduction.

He spoke about Ivy like she was bought at a store, like she wasn't even real. That went up my ass.

It shouldn't bother me, I shouldn't care for that fucking girl . . . But I did.

“Property? How do you turn a sweet girl into a piece of property?”

“That's none of your concern, just give her back.”

Grabbing a pen from the holder, I pressed the tip into one of my fingers. “Did you actually even pay her family?”

Grumbling under his breath, his head hung into his chest. “How many times do I have to tell you it's none of your fucking business?”

“Call it curiosity. Tell me, how did you get her? How did you find her?”

“Dante, you’re really starting to piss me off . . .” His jaw shot out, teeth grinding together so loudly I could hear the grit flaking off. “Her father actually owed me, but I compensated him well, paid him a good chunk to keep his head above water.”

Digging the end of the pen into my chin, I nodded. “Is he still above water?”

“For now.” Remo's hands shook against the table. Pressing his palms flat, his fingers separated and look like they were about to split off.

Plopping the pen back into place, I angled my head up. “Alright, you have two choices, Remo.”

“No,” he snapped, cocking his head up. “You have to return what's not yours.” His eyes danced inside his head, flashing with the true evil he held inside. “Give. Her. Back.”

“I don't remember telling you your options, let me finish.” Leaning into the desk, I met his buried threats head on. “One—you pay what you owe us, and I'll think about returning her to you. Two—you let me buy her from you, you let me take her off your hands, and then you pay my father so he doesn't kill you.”

“No.” Flapping his hand, he waved me away immediately. “Those are shit options, Dante, and I don't think your father agreed to them either.”

“It's because of you that we even have her, Remo. My father could give two shits about what happens to her, all he wants is what's his. And . . .” Pausing so he could let every word sink into his small useless excuse for a brain, I eyed him under heavy lids. “All I want is what's yours.”

“Don't you touch her, Dante. Do you know what I've done for your father? Do you know why I know he wouldn't dare keep what's mine?”

“I don't fucking care. What I do know is that without my father, without our business, you'd be done, Remo.” Slamming a finger into the desk, I leaned in closer. “What you did for him couldn't even stand up to what he's done for you. You're lucky he hasn't killed you yet.”

Remo's eyes lit up, his smile growing and pinning against his ears like he had earned it. “You're a pathetic excuse for a Pisani, your father would be infuriated if he saw the way you were talking to me.” Pushing his hands into the desk with all his weight, he shifted in his seat. “Give me back my Celia, Dante.”

“Well your Celia is now my Ivy. And let me tell you she tastes delicious, she's so sweet I can't get her flavor off my tongue.” Licking my lips, I winked and ran a finger under my nose, taking in a deep breath. “I think she's still there, you want to tell me if I'm right?” Holding out my hand, I bounced it in his face. “Do you smell her? Is that the scent you remember?”

“Don't you touch her, don't you lay a finger on her!” Remo jumped from his seat, his feathers all ruffled and red. I hit him where it hurt, just like I knew it would. “I want her back, she's mine, I paid a lot of money for her, Dante, too much for someone like you to taint her with even your smell. When I get her back she better not even have

the faintest hint of you on her skin or I'll kill her right there.”

“Get our money and we'll talk. No money, no girl, it's that simple.”

His cheeks puffed up, turning cherry red, the steam practically pouring from his nostrils in waves of thick ocean fog. “If you even—”

Standing slowly, I snapped my back square, cutting him off. “If I even what?”
Leaning over the desk, I laid my massive hands down. “What, Remo?”

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Pursing his lips, he growled under his breath. “I need some time to get your money, Dante.”

“One week.”

“Are you fucking with me? That's not long enough. I don't have that kind of money laying around.”

Holding up a single finger, I repeated my words. “One week.” Flicking his tie, I watched his body shudder. “And if you pay, I'll think about giving her back.”

Leaving him to worry about his lost virgin, I couldn't stop the grin from forming when I turned away.

The asshole had no clue that he would never lay another finger on her.

I claimed her, I took her, I made her mine.

And her virginity . . .

That was mine too.

Ivy

The key was right there, shining like it was coated in gold. But I didn't want to touch it at first, the idea was foreign. I had grown used to the ornate jewelry that clung to my skin; it was safety in a sick comforting way.

There was help in that lock and chain, an escape that I couldn't explain. The chain kept me here, but it also kept me protected from the one man I despised with every inch of my body.

Dragging my finger over the edge, it felt cold and hot to the touch. I wanted to pick up, I really did . . .

But what will I do once this weight is gone?

Do I take off and risk getting lost?

Do I run and risk getting caught?

Dante said he'd understand if I ran, he told me which way to go. But I couldn't bring myself to physically lift the key to free myself.

Stroking the shiny metal, my chest tightened with worry. If I unlocked the chain, and escaped from these walls, where would I go?

Remo would find me, he'd kill me, then he'd kill my family anyway. And if he didn't find me first, Bane would.

My fate still ended with me getting buried six feet under.

But not with Dante, he kept me whole.

Taking a deep breath, I curled my fingertips over the end, letting the small object sizzle in my palm. This was what I wanted, it was what I had begged him for.

And now that it was sitting so delicately in my hand, I had no idea what to do with it. Twisting it in the light from the window, it cast glowing beams against the plain walls, dancing anticipated freedom in quick bursts of bright flashes.

Trust.

Trust.

I needed to trust Dante was telling me the truth, that he didn't want me to die, that he was going to do anything to keep me alive.

He left the key hoping he could trust I wouldn't flee, that I would still be here when he got back.

And that's what I decided I would do.

I'd stay because I was safer in here than out there.

I'd stay because I wanted to.

This was my choice.

Bending my ankle into my thigh, I turned the lock until its cavern was sitting on top. The opening was thin, its mouth begging for me to give it a meal. The meal that

would forever end its hunger, a key to make it whole.

Pushing the end into the opening, I twisted until I heard the soft metallic clank. The curved rim popped, and a sharp pain ignited in my chest. My ribs were tight, eyes darting around waiting for someone to jump from some hidden corner to punish me for actually doing it.

But no one came.

Letting the chain slip off my ankle, there was still an imaginary imprint of it on my skin. I could still feel it there, holding me in place. I didn't leap off the bed in joy or flop to the floor and cry in happiness.

No, none of those emotions came.

I was still sitting in fear and uncertainty. I wasn't free in the true sense of the word, I was still bound to the hand of Remo, bound to the gun of Bane.

Death had stared me in the face, taunting me in a game of peek-a-boo, and I couldn't ignore it. Until I knew that none of these men were standing outside the door, waiting for me to surface just to finish me off, I couldn't be happy.

Rubbing the dents on my ankle, I listened for any sounds downstairs. Reality was a hard thing to find in my situation.

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My mind was full of thoughts and images. They raced around my head making me wonder what horrible thing was coming next. Whose face would emerge from behind the door, whose eyes would engulf my body if I took one step out of that room.

Nothing had been what it was supposed to be. And it took seeing it, living it, and feeling it, to know it was real.

Ivy, you're stronger than this.

You can be saved, you can out live this nightmare.

Swinging my legs off the bed, I danced the tip of my toes over the floor. It felt different, not nearly as cold as it had been every time before now. The wood was warm, inviting me to enjoy the flurry of movement.

Holding the edge of the mattress, I pressed up, my head automatically snapping to the door. Waiting.

One breath, one blink; nothing.

The door was still sealed, the quiet house making soft noises as the wind shuffled around its exterior.

Stepping to the window, I pulled back the curtains and looked out at the driveway. It was empty. The impressions of tires were visible in the gravel, but the vehicle was gone.

Letting my feet find themselves again, I walked to the door. Resting my hand against the barrier, I pushed my ear into the wood.

I'm alone. I have to believe I'm alone.

Holding the knob, I turned it as slowly as I could. My chest was on fire, nerves spiraling around my body and making me feel weak. I was scared, unsure, tempted to just crawl back to my safety and pretend the lock never came off.

It was sad how much I wanted to believe that Dante was going to do what he said; but how do you believe when your life has been solidified in lies.

I was trained to think that nothing was ever as it seems, that evil overpowered good, and what I wanted didn't matter.

Gripping my wrist, I felt the old scars that were hidden against my skin. The rope that damaged my body had done more than just keep me stagnant.

It was a reminder.

A reminder of what my life would be, it was a reminder of who owned my body.

And a reminder that I was never in control.

Poking my head out into the hall, I felt a draft bellow up and braid its fingers through my hair. It was a sensation that brought me comfort, to feel the uplift of something that flowed so freely but had no voice.

I was a lot like the air.

And it was sad.

Air was all around us. But it lacked all the same things I did.

It didn't get to choose where it went, it was told where to go. It was invisible, unappreciated, and taken for granted.

If mother nature desired to beat the air, she would. She could force the air to spill its blood on others, and take away its power to help.

Remo had stolen who I was, and turned me into a voiceless apparition of myself. His hand told me my options, his hand told me my punishments. He had made himself my mother nature.

There was nothing I could do. There was no place for me to go.

I had no choice.

Until now.

The surge of finally feeling like my body was no longer tied to the one man who bought it was euphoric.

With Dante, I could speak, I could eat, I could live again.

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I had the urge to explore and be curious, I wanted to learn and observe my surroundings. But not to try and escape.

I wanted to indulge myself in mystery and figure out more about the man who claimed to be dangerous, but showed me sympathy.

Looking around the hall, I saw another door just off to my left. It was partially open and calling my name.

Tip toeing over, I barely touched it with my fingertips to nudge it open. The room was dark and had a musty scent. The air was thick and dense.

This room is filled with sadness.

Running my hand over the wall beside me, I found the switch and flicked it on. The glow from above ignited in a gray dust ball, encasing the room in a white haze. As the dust cloud settled and my eyes adjusted to the bright light, I was able to see that this room was very different from the rest.

There were pictures hanging on the walls, furniture that held age and showed wear like it had been used. A small desk was tucked under a boarded up window, the top was still tousled in papers and books as if whoever used it last just got up and never came back.

A large king size bed jetted out into the middle of the room. Slowly I stepped to the bed, letting my toes dig in and enjoy the soft carpet.

I couldn't stop staring at how intricate the frame was. Huge posts came out of each side, almost touching the ceiling. The wood was dark like a chestnut or mahogany. But it was the designs that kept me staring. Each one had spirals cut and etched into it, small leaves were scribbled around like vines had grown into the wood and turned to fossils.

I was awe struck. Confusion sat in the front of my mind, making me wonder why the hell this room was so well preserved, and the rest of the house was empty.

Standing at the desk, I found several small frames with aged and weathered pictures. The images were covered in a thick layer of dust, the once glossy photos now warped and tarred in orange stains.

Picking up the first one, I blew off the dust and rubbed it clean with my thumb. Holding it closer, I inspected the people.

It was two men and a woman. Both men were dressed in tailored suits, a cigar clenched in their teeth, and arms resting over each other's shoulders. The woman was in a deep blue ball gown, the tail flowing out to her side and wrapping around her ankles in the front.

Her hair was pulled up tight, a huge cascade of pearls lined her neck, one arm draped over the guy on the right. She looked happy, enjoying whatever moment was captured right then.

The smile of each man was giant and not forced. As I examined closer, I realized that I knew who both men were. The years between the photo and now had taken their toll, but there was no mistaking it.

It was Remo and Bane.

“You found your way out.”

Jumping, my hands released the picture and dropped it onto the desk top. “Dante, you scared me.” Picking up the frame, I checked it over. “Good, it didn't break.”

“I'm glad you're still here. I was pretty sure I'd come back to an empty house and you'd be long gone, on your way to protective custody and a witness protection program.” Slumping his shoulder into the door frame, his thumbs jerked from his pockets as he shrugged.

“Yeah well . . . It took me a little while to get the lock off.”

“Really? You don't strike me as the type of girl who can't figure out a lock.”

“It wasn't that . . .” Pausing, I felt the same worry about leaving flood my veins. “But I got it off eventually.”

His big brown eyes examined me. It was like he was trying to read my mind, figure out why the lock had been difficult. Darting my gaze back to the picture, I didn't want him to figure it out. I didn't want him to know how uncomfortable it was for me to actually unlock myself.

There was no point in letting him into my troubled brain, sharing my feelings about leaving that room, and being free from my leash.

If he knew then there was a chance he'd lock me back up, that he'd enjoy the idea of me being at his mercy and under his spell.

I wanted to change the subject, that turmoil was just for me. “Who's this?” I asked, tilting the picture in the light.

“You don't know?” Angling his head, he rested it against the doorframe.

“I know who these two are,” I said, pointing to Remo and Bane. “But the woman, who's the woman?”

“That's my mother.”

“She's beautiful.” Glancing back down, I ran a finger over her face.

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“She was.”

“Was?” As my eyes met his, my mind made sense of what he was saying. “I’m sorry,” I said immediately, filling with sadness for his loss.

“It’s okay, it was a long time ago. Seventeen years . . . Wow, it’s been seventeen years. Shit, that’s crazy to think about.”

I felt sorry for him, to have lost his mother at a young age must have been horrible. “I didn’t realize your father and Remo went back so far.”

Stepping into the room, he stood behind me and looked over my shoulder. I could feel the weight of his chest against my spine and the heat off his muscles as they pulsed under his clothes.

His closeness hit me, sending goosebumps over my arms and making my body heat and chill in one rapid beat.

It felt good to have him there, it felt incredible to feel so small and so protected.

“Yeah, they go back years. But it’s not a good thing, and it hasn’t been for a really long time.”

Arching a brow, I looked up at him from over my shoulder. “But they work together, it can’t be that bad? Can it?”

“Ivy, you know who we are.” Stroking his hands firmly down my shoulders, he

cupped my belly. “And nothing with my family is ever a good thing.”

“But they look happy here, there had to be a time where it was good, right?” Tightening my grip around the picture, I looked back down at it. “You don't smile like that if it's bad.”

“Smiles only last so long, those smiles ended that night, and they never came back.” Digging his fingers into my hips, he turned me around, pulling me closer into his chest. “My life has been nothing but pain and violence, Ivy. Smiling in my family hasn't ever been the same, not since that night.”

“I don't understand.”

Dante dragged his thumb over his jaw, eyes snapping up to the ceiling. “It doesn't matter now, that was a long time ago, and things have settled . . . Mostly.”

My heart was pounding, pulse speeding up as his heart raced against my chest. I could feel him living it all over again through his body, through his emotions. But on the outside, he was completely calm, hiding what he was truly feeling.

“Dante, you don't have to pretend you're not hurt. You don't have to act like these bad things are nothing and are normal. Because they're not.” Resting my hand over his heart, I felt the muscle beat like a drum. “You feel it and no matter how much you try and act like it doesn't matter, your body is telling me that's a lie.”

Taking a step back, he lifted my hand to his lips and kissed the back of my palm. “It's in the past, you can't change the past.” Squeezing my hand harder, he braided our fingers together, holding a gentle smile. “So, did you explore anywhere else in the house?”

His smile was intoxicating, even if it was uncomfortable and forced to move past the

conversation. I could tell it was something that he didn't do every day, but it made me happy to see he could.

“No, I only made it in here. This room is like a time capsule, it's like it hasn't been touched in ages.”

“That's because it hasn't been.” Sitting on the edge of the bed, he tugged me in between his legs, wrapping his arms around my waist. “That dress, the one you were so curious

about . . .”

“What about it?” Stroking his hair, I played with the tips and ran my fingers around his ears.

“That was my mother's, this was my parents room a really long time ago. The night she died, my father sealed it off.” Pressing his cheek into my chest, he spoke softly. “I'm glad you decided to stay.”

That answer made sense. It was truth, it was one puzzle piece in the thoughts my mind was sorting through.

Raking my nails through his hair, he tucked his head under my neck, resting his face against my breasts. “Who said I decided to stay?” I asked with a smirk dangling off my lips.

“You're here, that says enough.”

Pushing the hair away from his forehead, I ran my fingers over the rough stubble of his jaw. “How did your meeting go?”

Tilting his head up, his eyes darted between mine, but he didn't say a word.

I wasn't sure how to take that. Was he hiding his feelings about that too?

Was he harboring information that could free me or cost me my life?

“Dante, what happened at the meeting?”

Dante

What was I supposed to say?

Ivy expected her freedom, she expected to be protected and vanquished from that despicable man.

But did she expect that her freedom would come at a cost?

That for her to be free of Remo she'd be signing her life to me?

No.

I warned her that I was a bad man, she just chose not to believe me. She thought she saw a lost boy, a man who had staggered off the beaten path and was derailed by choices out of his control.

She was wrong. I knew who I was—I'm a Pisani. We breathe, feed, and devour power.

Ivy wasn't going home . . .

She was already there.

“I'm not sure yet.” Leaning back, I rubbed her sides.

“What the hell does that mean? How can you be unsure?” I felt her muscles tighten and pulse pick up in speed as she began to take in deep breaths. “What's going on? I

need to know, Dante, you can't keep me in the dark. This is my life we're talking about here.”

“It's not that simple, Ivy, it's not. There are other factors, I need to do this right.”

“Or what? What the fuck are you talking about?” Pushing herself out of my arms, she folded her hands around her torso. “Enough with these cryptic explanations, tell me what the hell is happening right now.”

Fuck.

Standing quickly, my hands flew up in the air. “Fuck, Ivy, this shit goes a lot deeper than just you! There's a business here, there's a level of authority that needs to be followed.” Taking a lunge forward, I gripped her arms. “Trust me, I won't let that man have you, but that doesn't mean you'll win freedom from this. Do you understand that?”

Her eyes began to well up, the tears balancing on the edge of her lids, hovering and glazing her stare. “I trusted you.”

“No, don't twist this. I told you I could keep you safe, I told you I wouldn't let him touch you again. But not once did I say you'd be free.”

“You told me to leave!”

“And I warned you if you did I couldn't protect you. That wasn't me setting you free, that was me giving you a choice of life or death. With me you'll live, out there,” I said, pointing my finger into the vast tree line. “You won't.” Disappointment stained her face, sadness weakened her stance. “Do you really think my father would just let you run away and not pay a price for escaping?”

Ivy's head drooped forward, all her hope and dreams fizzling away in one blink. "I trusted you."

My chest began to twitch with pain, heart physically hurting with every beat. The feelings I had tried to bury, tried to hide, tried to dissolve into nothing all flooded in.

I didn't want to hurt her.

I wanted her for myself.

That came at a cost, having her meant taking her, it meant spoiling her future and breaking her again.

And I had been so willing to do that before.

Now I actually felt for this girl in a way that scared me. I wanted her to be happy.

But my father was in charge, and I had already done enough to earn a bullet in the head. I might be his son, but that didn't spare me from his anger.

Especially if the fuck up was big enough. He had already lost one son; with everything I was doing he was about to lose two.

I just couldn't stop myself. There was something about her that kept me wanting more, kept me needing more. I wasn't willing to give her up and that was dangerous.

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For both of us.

“You need to realize who I am, Ivy.” Scooping her face into my palms, I forced her head up. “Say my name.”

“No, I'm done with you. If you want to enslave me the same way as Remo then fine, but you'll get what he got . . .” Her voice trailed off as her eyes turned to stone. “Nothing.”

She had turned bitter and I couldn't blame her for it. But I wasn't like Remo, this wouldn't be the same. I needed her to see that, to feel it.

I could give her everything she'd been looking for.

“Say my name.” Pinching her chin, I held her face tight.

“No.” Her teeth bit down on her cheeks, hollowing her face.

Her defiance to follow my order heated my nerves. But it wasn't in anger or rage . . . My body flew into a roaring inferno of arousal.

Ivy had challenged me.

Pushing my body against hers, her chest lifted hard, eyes staying open and firm. I fucking loved the strength that coursed through her veins. It was intoxicating, drowning me in wanton need to make her say my name one way or another.

It wasn't that I wanted to control her, it wasn't that I wanted to keep her for just my own personal enjoyment. There was so much more to what I was feeling, but there would always be rules, life had rules.

She just needed to understand the fire she was playing with. For her to live, she had to give in. Disobeying me would only hurt her further. And it wasn't my word that would cause her suffering.

It would be my father's.

Stepping with force, my legs caused hers to sway, knocking her off balance. Grabbing her by the hips, I kept her upright and made her walk backwards, forcing her against the wall.

“If you won't say my name on your own, I have other ways to do it.” My lip curled up playfully, twitching at the corner.

“Am I supposed to be scared?”

“No.” Palming her mound, I squeezed. “But I know how to help you, I know how to make your tongue dance between sweet words and sin.”

Ivy clutched my hand, her fingers twining delicately around mine. She wasn't shoving me off, she didn't try to hit me and run. I felt her heart skip as her eyes shined in liquid desire.

“I'm nothing like Remo, I won't hurt you, I won't scar you. I want to keep you to make sure you're safe, Ivy.” Lowering my mouth, I hovered just above the most delicious lips I had ever tasted.

She exhaled across my face, the warmth spreading over my body making my cock

pulse. “And what makes you think that I want you to save me?”

A devious smile spread across my lips. “Because you're still here.”

Ivy

“Ivy, Ivy come down here.” My father's voice bellowed through our old farm house, ping ponging off the walls as it finally came to settle at my door.

Huffing under my breath, I rested my book on the bed and took the stairs by two to see what he needed.

I was slightly annoyed that he was calling me, I had already finished everything around the farm I needed to. But as long I just listened and yes'd him to death, I'd be back to it in no time.

Rounding the corner, I stepped into the den and stopped short.

He was here again . . .

That man with the devilish black eyes.

A shiver ran up my spine, spiking at the base of my skull. He gave me the creeps every time I saw him.

And now he was staring me down like I was a fucking meal.

Shifting my eyes between the unknown man and my father, my skin dampened with a cold sweat. “What's up?” I asked, cautiously skirting around the couch and moving closer to my father.

My father's hands were clutched tight between his thighs, his face pale and lacking any visible emotion. It was strange, he almost looked like he was made of plastic. My dad always wore his feelings on his face.

If he was happy you could see it, if he was angry you would feel, no emotion went blind.

Not this time.

Right then he was completely sober, every muscle loose and hanging. He wouldn't look up at me; his gaze kept shifting between my feet and the rat-faced man sitting across from him.

From the corner of my eye I could feel the man's stare. It burned into my back, making me heat with unease.

The guy's face was sunken in at his cheeks, dark bags pillowed under his eyes. His hair was shaggy and dirty. Drawing a hand up, he brushed it over his ears and smiled through dried lips.

I couldn't help but notice how thin the man was. His arms were long and lanky, legs no bigger around than my calf.

But none of that mattered . . . It was the way he looked at me that made me so uncomfortable.

“Ivy, we need to talk.” Digging his thumbs into the underside of his chin, my father stared past me and at the wall.

“Alright . . .” Folding my arms up into my chest, I wanted to shrink myself smaller so that fucking guy couldn't see me anymore. “What's wrong?”

“Honey, this is Mr. Levoi—”

The man held his hand up, silencing my father. “Remo, please call me Remo.” His smile crept across his face like a slow slug.

“Remo, of course. Ivy, this is—”

“Remo, yeah, I heard him. Why am I here?” My senses had kicked in, flipping from curious to protective. I already had the feeling floating around my insides that this wasn't good, that there something off about this whole thing.

And my gut instinct was about to hit the nail on the head.

“May I?” Remo asked, standing with his hand against his chest. “Ivy, I'm here on business, business that myself and your father have been working very hard on arranging.”

“Okay, but why are you telling me this?” I didn't look at him, I looked straight through his slinky form and at my father.

“Ivy, Honey . . . This wasn't an easy decision, and I . . . I . . .” For the first time since stepping into the room, my father's eyes connected with mine. He looked sad, torn, and hidden in his gaze was the most delicate twinkle of relief.

Relief . . .

That one stung.

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“Let me, Phillip, I can already see the toll this conversation will take.” Remo took a long step forward, invading my personal space. But I didn't move.

I think he expected me to, that he wanted to draw some sort of reaction from me. But he wouldn't see what he wanted, I'm not a girl who responds to intimidation.

Tapping the tips of his fingers together, Remo stalked around me, looking me up and down. “I've been waiting for this day for some time now, Ivy, and I'm having a hard time believing it's even here.”

Scrunching my eyes, I watched him move and his eyes lick my body. “I don't know what you're talking about.”

“You don't know?” Flicking his glare to my father, he whipped his head back in my direction. “Of course you don't, that wouldn't work at all.”

Cocking my head, I looked between the two men. “What the hell is going on? Dad, tell me what this is?”

“Hon—”

Slicing a hand in the air, Remo stopped my father from speaking. “Enough, Phillip, she's no longer yours to speak to.”

“What? What did you just say?” My jaw hit my chest, eyes trying to read the scene before me. “What the hell is he talking about, Dad?” Reaching for my father, I tried to walk to him.

I needed him, I needed him to hug me and tell me this was all a joke. That this guy was really just going to be our new farm hand or our new supplier.

My heart was racing, anxiety had crept up and began to steal the air around me. I could feel the tension in my chest as my ribs closed around my lungs and the world around me began to wash away.

The room turned upside down as I dropped to my knees and clawed at my throat. I needed to breathe, I needed to get the air in so I could understand what these men were talking about.

I heard the soothing sound of my father's voice as it whispered numbers into my ear. And the last words that I could remember hearing him say as everything went black was:

'I love you. I'm sorry, Ivy.'

Opening my eyes, I rubbed them vigorously, trying to force that forsaken dream from my head. I hated the memory of that moment the most. The need to find out answers had been torn away from me as a panic attack stormed in and stole my conscience mind.

I had been left with a set of last words that meant everything and nothing all at the same time.

If my father loved me, how could he do this?

What was he sorry for? For letting Remo take me or for what he did to land me there?

Those questions ran through my head every moment I was awake, and every night they played on repeat in my dreams.

“Morning.” Dante's voice smothered the quiet buzzing around me, forcing me to realize the nightmare was still going strong.

“Did you sleep there all night?” I asked, pointing with a weak and groggy finger at his seat.

“No.”

“So you slept somewhere else?”

“No. I didn't sleep at all. I wanted to make sure you didn't get any bright ideas during the night.”

Rolling my eyes, I flopped back down and covered my head with the pillow. Speaking from beneath my feathered buffer, I said, “You're pathetic.”

“No, I'm cautious. You're still the bartering tool, Ivy. I need you.” His tone was playful, eyes flickering with a spark. “Besides, watching you sleep, watching you toss and turn . . . It kinda makes me hot. You looked so vulnerable, I loved it.”

“What's wrong with you? Why can't you just do something good for once? Let me go, set me free. Do one thing in your life for someone else.”

“I did already.” Leaning over, he rested his arms on his thighs and thumbed his jaw. “I freed you from giving yourself to that prick, I saved you the trouble of having your first time be with some dirt bag who doesn't care for you at all. I kept my father from blowing your head off and spilling you onto that mattress. I did that for you. But that doesn't mean I can just send you on your way.” Leaning back in the chair, he tucked his hands under his arms. Watching him was hypnotic, he was a hard man to take your eyes off of.

His muscles perked up and flexed under his shirt. My stomach clenched with nerves, my pussy tightened and squeezed around nothing but the idea of him having been inside me.

“Why? What's the point of all that if you don't let me go?”

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“There's rules, Ivy. Laws inside our family business that I can't break.” Dante's brows arched high, lips parting with sadness. “I have a job to do.”

Was he trying to fuck with my head?

I wasn't sure what to believe anymore. Was he going to help me, save me, keep me out of the hands of the man who turned my flesh into his personal stress ball?

Or was he sending me back?

He hadn't made that clear. Dante seemed to keep toying with me. He was tugging on my deepest wish to be free of Remo, but dangling his power over my head. I had no place to go and he knew it.

And deep inside me, someplace so far down and tucked away, Dante had me. He took my virginity, he held the last thing I had to give.

I was his.

The butterflies were unreal, storming my gut and turning my skin into a sun kissed glow. “I didn't thank you for what you have done, but I am grateful. But I need to know if you can give me my life back?”

Walking to the bed, Dante lay beside me, resting his hands under his head. “What would you say if I told you this was me giving you your life back?”

“I'd say that's fucked up.”

Turning to face me, he kept his eyes static. “Why is the idea of being here with me so awful?”

It's not . . . But it is.

How do I explain it so he can understand, so he can feel what I feel?

I was tired of being lost and forgotten. I was sick of being just a person with no direction but the options being forced down my throat.

I wanted to see my dad, my family. I had so many questions about why this all happened. And being here would give me none of that.

But as I lay there next to him, his cologne swirled up and hijacked my senses. Dante made my muscles grow weak and my body hum with feelings that warmed me to the bone.

I wanted this man, I wanted to be with this man, and I couldn't understand why or deem any of the emotions hitting my nerves rational.

But I wanted Dante.

I'd be lying if I said the idea of waking up to him every day for the rest of my life hadn't crossed my mind. I'd be lying to myself if I tried pretend that he didn't make my toes curl and my heart beat a million time harder than it should.

But I also needed my family, my freedom . . .

Myself.

“Dante, I need my family. You said you do these things for your family, what if

someone removed them from your life?"

Closing his eyes, he let out a long breath. "I've had my family torn apart, it's not what it should be, it's not what it was." Reaching his arm to my face, he stroked my cheek. "My innocent princess . . ." His thumb traced my jawline, caressing my throat. "You see what you think you have to, but have you really looked at my life? My mother is dead, my brother forced us to turn him away. All I have left is my father, this business . . . My legacy."

"But what if it was all stripped from you? What if you had nothing?"

His face was turned to the ceiling, his words floating up and falling down to cover me in lettered ashes. "If you leave, I will have nothing."

My chest thudded, heart hammering so loud it was drowning out the words inside my head. He really feels for me.

"Why can't we have both?"

Chuckling, he let his fingertips glide down over my breast, circling my hardened nipple. "Sometimes sacrifices need to happen." Slipping lower, Dante swirled around my bellybutton and smiled. "I won't let you go."

"So what are you going to do to fix it?" I wanted to reach out and touch his face. Feel the stubble that had taken over his jaw, feel the twitch his muscles made as my hand pressed down.

But I didn't. Folding my hands together, I coiled them on my lap, braiding my fingers. I was nervous for his answer and what he thought he should do with me.

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“Trust . . . Just trust me.” His eyes held mine, stealing me away. I had fallen so far in I was swimming in nothing but him.

Dante's fingertips fluttered over my sex, drawing more delicate circles. My legs rattled under the soft touch, shivering in pure desire.

His face was still, eyes burning in carnal need. Dragging his tongue over his lip, Dante bit down hard. “How does it make you feel when I call you mine?”

“I don't know.” My eyes hovered under hooded lids, lashes flirting with the danger beside me.

“Yes, you do.” Crawling up closer, his lips brushed my shoulder as he squeezed my inner thigh. “Tell me.”

“Dante, I—”

“Ivy.” His voice was harsh and demanding, flooding my nerves in excitement. “Tell me or I'll punish you, tell me or I'll make your body so fucking delirious with need that you won't be able to take it.”

There was something about him when he took control that turned my head upside down and made it hard to think. I loved him dominating me, I loved him taking me how he wanted.

His grip would grow firmer, his fingers more intense and rough. But he never really hurt me. Not like my body knew hurt. There was no pain, there was no heavy hand.

With Dante it was passion.

“It makes me feel good, it makes me feel wanted. I like feeling wanted.”

A deep growl rolled from his throat, his hand dropped to his waist to stroke his hard erection. “You are mine.” Plucking at his button, Dante tugged his pants down. “And if you'll let me, I'll be yours.”

His hands flew up and scooped behind my neck. Grabbing my nape, he tugged me down, kissing my lips feverishly. His tongue slid over my mouth, teeth nipping and biting my lip.

My breathing picked up. Exhaling a hard rush of air, I whispered, “You already are.”

The strength of his arms lifted me onto my knees. Kneeling in front of me, Dante slipped free of his boxers, his thick cock pouncing out and ready to dive inside me. Palming the tip, he squeezed around the crown and down his shaft.

Pressing my lips to his chest, I kissed my way down his steel stepping stones. Dragging his fingers through my hair, he gripped the back of my head and guided me to his cock. Flicking the engorged head with my tongue, his fingers drove deeper, tearing at the roots.

“Fuck, Ivy,” he moaned, using my hair to pump my head up and down his cock.

My pussy was hot, tingling, and aching to feel him.

Dante's hips thrust harder and faster, slamming his cock into my mouth and down my throat. He was so big that it was hard to breathe, making me test how long I could go without air.

His grunts were animalistic, growing louder and louder. In one quick slurp, Dante had freed himself, releasing my lips with a wet pop. “Fuck, Princess, I need you.” Grabbing my hips, he flipped me around.

The ease at which he turned me, the way his strength had just whipped me into position, was incredible. It did something to me, igniting a fire in my belly that made my sex seep arousal.

His hand glided up over my ass, massaging the curve. Moaning, Dante leaned over and spoke softly into my ear. “If I hurt you, tell me. If you like it, show me.”

I wasn't sure what he meant, but I wasn't scared. He had given me a choice, a voice to use if I didn't approve.

That . . . That meant everything to me.

A voice.

I felt his hand lift off my skin, another deep moan hit my ears. And as I waited for his cock, I felt an intense singe of sparks.

A loud smack rang out, my ass igniting in a wave of pins and needles.

Dante had just spanked me.

Arching my back, I braced myself on the bed. My fingers curled into the blanket, nails digging into the mattress.

His chest came down on my back, lips hovering over my ear. “Did you enjoy that, Princess? Did you enjoy me punishing you?” His palm rubbed the area, followed by a second slap.

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My belly was clenching with a rush of emotions. It felt great, it felt euphoric . . .

It made me feel alive.

I couldn't speak, all I could do was rock my hips back into his cock. His swelling member slipped through the juice dripping down my thighs. I needed him inside me.

“Good girl, you didn't scream.” Dragging his cock over my tender button, I moaned. “But I'm not done yet.” Tapping my clit with the head of his dick, he chuckled. “I want to hear you beg.”

Another slap came down harder as his free hand clung to my hip, holding me in place. “Beg for me, Ivy, beg me to fuck you.”

Rolling my head over my shoulders, I stared at him through slit lids. I wasn't angry that he had spanked me, I wasn't pissed off that he wanted me to beg for him. The seed had been planted, he had taken me in a way that I never thought I would want.

And now I never wanted to imagine myself without him.

“Fuck me,” I said through air filled words.

“You've got to do better than that. Beg me, Ivy.” Thumbing my clit, Dante teased the entrance. A devilish grin painted his face as he watched me shudder under his touch. “Beg me.”

“Please fuck me, please. I can't take it, Dante, I need you.” My hips swayed, trying to

force him inside. “Please fuck me.”

“Good girl.” In one thrust his cock was deep inside me, hands curling over my hips and holding me up. My shoulders fell forward, ass rising higher in the air.

Dante started off slow, his shaft working me open wider for his girth. I could feel all of him. From his swollen head as the crown pressed inside, to the thick veins running down the sides of his cock as he pulsed inside me.

Quickening his pace, I heard his breathing deepen, the moans becoming louder and more drawn out.

My body was in overload. Electricity surged over my skin, penetrating my brain. Dipping my head into the mattress, my eyes closed tight. Fireworks shot off in the darkness of my gaze, the bright colors exploding into beautiful sensations.

Thrust after thrust, Dante took me. Harder and harder he fucked me till my legs were turning into jello and I could barely remember my own name.

“Say it, tell me who I am.” Slamming into me, his balls smacked my clit. Stopping briefly, he spoke low and deep. “Say it.”

“Dante—Dante Pisani, fuck me, don't stop.” Clawing at the blanket, I buried my face into my arm. “Please don't stop.”

Dante grunted, his fingernails digging into the skin around my hips. I felt his body shake, cock pulsing its life into my heat.

Prickles jumped across my skin, the orgasm flooding my body like static. Every hair, every pore, every piece of me was completely awake.

The rush had started in my lower belly, stampeding through my muscles and making my toes curl. Moaning, my head rolled to the side as I fell forward onto my chest. “Oh my god, Dante.”

With a heavy hand, Dante gave my ass one last smack. “I told you.”

Flopping to my back, I threw my hands up over my head. “You told me what?”

“It's only wrong if you don't want it, but we both want it.” Dropping to his haunches, he dragged a hand through his hair. “Now all I need to do is keep it.”

Dante

A sharp pain cracked through my head, forcing me awake. The room around me was still blurry and hazy, I couldn't see a fucking thing.

A loud ringing pierced the inside of my head, blocking out the sounds around me, and putting the world on mute.

A voice was grumbling off in the background, the words all jumbled together as I tried to shake my head clear.

“I thought I told you!” Another thud of something hard as cement hit the side of my head. “Get the fuck up, you stupid fucking idiot!”

Shooting up in the bed, I felt Ivy jerk, gasping in fear. Instinctively I positioned myself in front of her, making sure whoever was raising hell on my skull right then couldn't get to her.

No one was going to hurt her. I meant that when I said it.

I didn't give a shit who was here for me, but they wouldn't lay a finger on her.

“Fuck!” I yelled, holding my arms out to block the intruder from her. “What the hell!?”

“I warned you, I fucking warned you.” My father's voice shattered my eardrums, his tone enraged with more anger than I had seen since Sesto screwed us over. “Get up.”

Grabbing my arm, he yanked me from the bed and let me drop to the floor.

“Dad, what are you doing here?”

“How dare you question me.” His eyes swelled, lids disappearing into the sockets as the white of his eyes took over. “What the hell are you doing? I knew I shouldn't have listened to you! I knew I should have just killed her!”

“No, you can't kill her! Dad, Remo is going to pay, he's going to.” Waving my arms side to side, I shook my head no.

“Yeah, you're right, he is. He did already, last night. I tried calling you, but obviously you were too deep in her cunt to see that.” Scraping his hand over his head, he rubbed his forehead. “What the fuck were you thinking?”

Climbing off the floor, I stood inches from my father's face. “Does it matter? So I got laid, so what? Is that such a bad thing? It doesn't change anything. You didn't care if Tony wanted her, so what the hell is the difference?”

I needed to calm him down, I wanted him to think it was just sex. But even as the words came out, I felt how wrong I was.

It wasn't just sex, I didn't just fuck her. She had claimed a piece of me just as much as I claimed her. I hated that she even had to hear me say it that way. I didn't mean it all, but this was the game. All I could hope was that she knew I was playing a role, feeding him lines to help settle his anger.

I had to keep him from killing her. If my father thought that for one second I was weak, that she had wiggled her fingers around me and was using me to her advantage
...

Ivy would be done.

And I didn't fight this hard to make her mine for him to end it right here like this.

"Is that right?" An ominous chuckle rolled through the room as he clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. "Do you think I'm stupid?"

"No, I—"

Cutting me off, he growled. "Shut up. I didn't give you permission to speak." Thumbing the side of his gun, my father eyed me through thin lids. "Do you think I don't know what you did? Did you really think that your little stunt wouldn't find its way to me?"

Looking at Ivy, she tilted her head in confusion. Her lips drew in, growing razor sharp, brows furrowing deep into the bridge of her nose. "What did you do, Dante?"

Raising a finger in her direction, my father spoke low and firm. "I don't want to hear you say another word." His face stayed on mine, voice bubbling with delirious rage. "You really thought you could change the rules in this? That you could throw your weight where it didn't belong?"

"No." Balling my fists, I couldn't hide how fucking pissed I was. My father wasn't right this time, he was playing with an open flame that he kept dousing with gasoline.

I've always done what he said and never asked more questions than I deserved. I've moved the freight through barred doors and pulled the trigger so many times I couldn't count.

But this time I couldn't do it.

I won't do it.

“You asked Remo if you could buy her. You want to purchase his slut, Dante?”

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Snapping my head over my shoulder, I looked at Ivy. Her face was filled with sadness, eyes large in shock and disappointment. I never meant for her to find out about the offer I gave Remo.

I just wanted to find a way to keep her. It wouldn't have mattered how much Remo wanted, I would've paid it.

But I fucked up.

Ivy knew now, she knew I had tried to buy her just like he had. I knew she wasn't some ornate object that you could trade and barter for. But I did it . . . I tried.

And I failed.

Remo gave in, he wanted her. The idea of her being back in his hands made me sick to my stomach. He couldn't have her, there was no way in hell I would do that to her again.

“Dad—”

His hand flew up, palm almost smashing into my nose. “Shut up, Dante. I don't care what excuse you want to give me, this girl is going back. I hope you got your dick wet enough to forget she ever existed.” Circling in front of me, he kept glancing at Ivy.

Pacing, he took a lunge toward the bed. Ivy's body was trembling as she held the covers up to her chin. She was watching him with desertion, reading him, and trying

to read me. Her eyes were begging me to help her, but they also turned sour, hating me for what I had tried to do.

Her skin had turned milky, muscles convulsing under the blanket. Her jaw was askew, chattering her teeth together as if she was outside in the cold.

And the worst part of it all was I could feel her pain. It cut me deep, making me hate myself for what I wanted so badly.

I had never truly felt sorrow or disgrace before in my life for anything I had done in my past. But right then all those feelings ate me from the inside out. My heart was being stabbed repeatedly over and over, my stomach was curdling and leaking its hate into the back of my throat.

What have I become?

My father tapped the bed frame with the end of his gun, humming under his breath with an evil laughter. "And as for you . . ." Bouncing the gun in the air in her direction, he shot a glare at me over his shoulder. "I know what you're trying to do, don't think I don't. He can't help you, you're going back to Remo, you're going back to your owner."

"Wait!" I exclaimed in confusion. "You knew? You knew he owned her?"

"Dante, I know a lot of things. And there's a lot of things I don't tell you."

"How could you know that and not do something about it? You know he's a fucking bastard and you bend over backwards to keep his dirty secrets. Why, why would you let him do this? I thought you were human in some form, what would Mom think if she saw you today?"

The words barely left my lips before my father whipped the gun across my face. “Don't you dare do that! Don't you ever use your mother in our business!”

I knew he expected me to cower, to bend my head and lower to a knee to show repentance for what I said. Fuck that, not this time. “Look at her! Look at her scars, look at her bruises!” Yelling, I stepped into him and not away. His gun was pointed at my chest, finger tucked snugly around the trigger. With the barrel flush against my skin, I pushed back, causing it to dig into my flesh. “Do it. If you can stand here and tell me you're alright with what that man has done to her . . .” Holding my breath for a second, my face softened. “Then kill me now.”

I knew my dad was hard, I knew he held very little sympathy for human life. I'd seen it enough times. But he was always fair. He never harmed someone who wasn't involved directly with fucking him over.

Ivy was innocent in all this. She had no part in anything that Remo owed us, and she never deserved what he put her through.

My father's brows dipped in, wrinkles forming across his forehead. “It's not my business, Dante, and it's not yours. I only get involved when it concerns me, she doesn't concern me. But now that you obviously took what he wanted her for, I hope you know what his punishment could be.” Lowering the cold metal, it flashed and twinkled as the sun beat against the steel.

He can't do it.

“He's not going to fucking touch me, I'll kill him.”

An evil smile filled his face as he laughed softly. “Not to you . . . To her.”

I felt the air leave my lungs as my father just stared at me. The room seemed to fade

in and out, his face turned fuzzy and gray. The idea of Remo killing her . . . That hit a nerve.

No. I won't let that happen.

He can't have her and he can't kill her.

Tears streaked Ivy's cheeks, her chest rising and falling fighting for air. Her quiet breaths turned into loud sobs. The silence she kept slipped away into tiny droplets and desperation.

Everything I wanted was right there, right there in that woman.

And now it was about to be snuffed out.

“Why do you let him control you?” Holding my arms out, I wasn't backing down from him giving me my answers. I was tired of that prick Remo getting away with murder and my father just letting him.

“Don't, Dante, it's non—”

“Right, it's none of my business.” Shaking my head, I drew my hand over my jaw. “Well now I'm making it my business. Tell me.” Bridging the gap between us, I put myself right between him and Ivy. If he wasn't going to care for her and her life, then I didn't want him even looking at her.

Cocking his jaw, my father sat silent for a moment. His eyes danced over mine, serious and stone cold. “Dante, I don't think now is the time to get into this.”

Forcing my back to grow taller, I stood my ground. I wasn't taking no for an answer, I had to know why he bent over backwards for that man. “Tell. Me.” Lowering my jaw into my chest, I glared at him through slit lids.

Dropping his head, he fiddled with the cuff links on his suit. “The night your mother died we were all at the grand opening for Remo's father's shipyard. It was a great night, it was fun actually.” I watched his eyes fade away, leaving us in that room as he remembered that night, remembered my mother, remembered the love he lost.

He never spoke about my mother's death in detail. The only thing he would say is that she was killed, and that it was Remo's family's fault. But as he continued, as he gave

me the short version of what went down, I saw the hatred he carried with it.

His eyes softened, and I was almost waiting for him to cry. Bane Pisani doesn't cry.

But the tears he held back weren't just because he lost his wife, they held more. Shame. "Remo's father had offered us a hand in it all, but he had another family that wanted the deal. Well, they came in, stormed the place with guns blazing. Your mom didn't make it, that you know. Remo, the man you can't stand— he shot the guy who killed your mom, he did what I couldn't do. But it goes further than that. What I haven't told you was how Remo's father had hired the guys to do it. I wanted to kill him, Dante, I did that man for what he did. But

Remo . . . I saw him raise his gun in my direction, holding it right at my face. And right then all I thought of was you and your brother. Your mom was gone, I didn't want you to lose me, too. Then one of the assholes who were hired came up behind me about to fire off." Shaking his head, he lifted his face to mine.

"What, Dad? What happened?"

"Remo saved me. I almost shot him, I had my gun raised, trigger cocked. But he fired first, and it wasn't at me. He hit the guy square in the forehead." Sticking a single finger against my temple, he pulled an imaginary trigger. "Remo made sure you didn't lose both parents that night. He could have killed me and he didn't. He went against the orders he was given. I owed him for that."

My jaw clenched tight, anger and disgust riding my spine in waves. "So that gives him a free pass for life? He saved you from something his father ordered? I thought it was blood for blood? Isn't that how you raised me? How many other guys have saved you over the years? And how many of those guys have you also ended up killing because they fucked with you?"

“That's not the point, Dante.”

“That is the point.”

“Look, after that we came to an agreement. We'd work together, I'd provide him with protection and he'd help us with our shipments. Your mother 's death was an accident. According to Remo, no one was supposed to get killed. He helped me remove the problem, together we killed them all. So yeah, when he failed to pay us after the bust, I had to do something, but we can't kill him, Dante.” My father's jaw jetted out, a loud huff of air left his lungs. “This conversation is over.” Whipping the gun back to the woman behind me, he said, “Have her at the yard in two hours, Dante.”

“And if I don't?”

“Then you'll be dead to me forever, just like Sesto. The only difference is your brother is still breathing. You won't be.” Turning in one quick burst, he stormed out of the room.

Fuck! Fuck!

Gripping the sides of my head, I let out a loud angry growl.

He wasn't giving me any choice. It was her life or mine.

And he meant what he said. My father couldn't kill me himself, but that wouldn't stop him from having someone else take care of his loose ends.

Without Remo, he'd lose his entire empire. It would take him years to rebuild a connection like that.

But I'm disposable!?

How did that make sense? How could he see that prick as being more valuable than his own son?

My father was dangling my world on a hook, hoping I'd take a bite. I never thought he'd actually want me dead if I disobeyed his orders.

I was his son, I was his legacy.

This was a deal that didn't have a happy ending.

Give her back and her life is over. Remo would probably rape her then dispose of her like a piece of trash.

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Keep her and my life is over. My father would have me killed by someone hiding in the dark. I wouldn't know when, I wouldn't see it coming . . . And he wouldn't take credit for it.

I'd end up on the front page as the poster child for other parents trying to keep their kids in check. A poor mishap that had it coming from a life of crime and violence.

I could see it now: 'The right deal gone wrong. Son of prominent figure Bane Pisani found floating in the Hudson.'

Stretching her arm out, Ivy brushed my forearm. "Dante, what are we going to do?"

I knew what I had to do.

Ivy wouldn't like my decision, she'd hate me for what I was about to do.

But I don't have a choice.

Ivy

Dante paced backand forth by the bed. He wouldn't speak, he wouldn't even look at me. "Dante, talk to me." Pleading with him to stop the silent treatment and tell me what the hell he was thinking, I anxiously hung onto the air around me.

What is he thinking?

What's he going to do?

You know what to do, I know you do.

Inside I was willing him to see the answer. In my eyes it was easy, just send me home. I knew the direction I had to go, just close your eyes and I'd be gone. But he wasn't sending the message my way that he saw things like I did.

Snapping his neck up, he kept his face flat and emotionless. Dropping his head back to the floor, he continued walking, burning a path into the wood.

I had no idea what the hell was running through his head. But I had to crack the shell he had climbed into. "Talk to me, say something . . .Anything."Climbing up onto my knees, I tried to figure out what the hell he was planning.

There was definitely something going on inside that fucking skull of his. His pupils were huge, flicking around the floor. The muscles around his lips kept lifting and tugging in different directions.

He can't give me back. I can't go back.

Plucking at my lip, I kept talking. It was the only thing I could do. It had worked in the beginning, turning split decisions into emotion. He felt for me, I knew he did.

And I felt for him.

This wasn't an easy decision for him to make, I could see that. He was being tossed between the right thing to do and what his father was ordering him to do. I'd like to think I'd make the right choice if I was in his shoes, but I couldn't be sure.

Family was a hard thing to turn your back on. Especially if they were the ones holding the leash and dragging you along.

My father had made a choice, he chose to put me in the hands of a monster. Why?

I might never get that answer. But I wouldn't ever give up on him. I knew deep down he had absolutely no option. His hands were tied somehow, and now Dante was in the same position.

“I can't go back to Remo, I know your father feels he needs to own up to his end, I know that he thinks he owes Remo his life—but not like this.” Scooting closer to the end of the mattress, I rested my hands on my thighs and kept the words flowing. “Don't let him do this, don't let him control you and force you to do something I know you don't want to.”

That caught his attention.

“Don't tell me what I want or don't want to do, Ivy. You have no fucking clue what that man is capable of. He's my father, he's my boss, I have orders.” Scraping his forehead with his palm, Dante stared into my eyes with the same look I saw the first

night. "I fucked up, now I have to fix it. I shouldn't have gotten close to you, that was a mistake."

My heart broke, cracking open and spilling inside my chest. "You don't mean that." I felt the room start to shrink, my breathing picked up and became loud and heavy. "How can you stand there and say that?"

His tone was stale. "Because it's true." Stepping in, he started to lift his arm to my face. "Ivy—"

"Don't you dare touch me." Throwing my arm up, I slapped his hand away. "I can't believe you, you're a fucking coward. You feel the same thing I do, I know you do." Jerking my legs out from beneath me, I jumped to my feet. "How can you stand here and act like there was nothing between us?"

"It doesn't matter." Shaking his head, Dante drew thick air into his nose. "None of it matters. It comes down to surviving."

"Don't you dare try and talk to me about surviving!" Yelling, I stood on my tippie toes and looked as closely into his eyes as I could. "You don't have a fucking clue what it means to actually survive. So you're giving me back, is that it?!"

"What choice do I have, Ivy? I don't want to be the reason you get killed. I understand what my father is feeling now."

"Fuck your father! Fuck you!"

Grabbing my arms, Dante pressed me into his chest. "Don't you get it, Ivy? My father's the way he is now because he couldn't save my mother. That's why he doesn't want to take a chance with you, that's why he didn't want me to get close to you. He's trying to protect me from what he already knows is inevitable. You're not safe with

me, not while I do this work, not while I'm a Pisani. I'm a bad man, Ivy, and with that comes terrible shit. I can't have you on this end, I couldn't handle what would happen to you if my enemies found you." Wrapping his arms around my back, he whispered. "If I lost you, it'd kill me."

"No." Curling my lip up, I spoke through gritted teeth. "This is different. You're about to be the reason I die, you're about to be the reason your father will still owe Remo. Can't you see that? You have the chance to do what your father couldn't, you can save me."

It didn't matter how much I tried to talk him out of it or how much I wanted him to see my view of this whole thing. Dante couldn't look past what his father had gone through.

He couldn't stand the thought of not being able to save me. I could see the pain in his eyes as his brows dipped in and his chiseled jaw twitched with sadness.

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“I can't be the reason you die, I can't kill the man who's hurt you. I'm not saving you, Ivy, I'm only prolonging what I can't control.”

Letting my muscles go limp, I said, “No, that's not it at all.” Lifting my chin up, I said, “You just don't know how to take control. You only know how to follow orders.”

Releasing my waist, Dante stepped away, leaving me wishing for his touch. It didn't matter what he was thinking, I still wanted him, I still had feelings for him.

My time here had been worth it, I made choices and had a voice even if it was only for a brief second in time. I had to be okay with that.

There was nothing I could say to change his mind, he'd already made it up.

Walking out of the room, Dante came back after a moment with his hands behind his back. “I don't want to do this, but I have to.”

Nodding yes, I kept my eyes trained on the floor. He was a lost boy like I thought. I could hear it in his voice that he didn't want to follow his orders, but he didn't see any other option out of this.

I didn't want him to die either, I didn't want him to lose his life because of me. Enough blood had been spilled in my honor.

Dante's hand came in and scooped my jaw, turning my head up. “I wish things could be different.” His lips grazed my nose, setting the most tender kiss against the tip.

“I’m sorry, Ivy.” The clink came in first, followed by the recognizable feel of cold metal.

My hands had been cuffed.

I was done fighting. There was no point.

Guiding me downstairs, Dante led me outside and to the car. I didn't say another word, there was nothing more for me to say.

I wasn't running, I wasn't going to elude my ending any longer.

The trunk popped open as he hit the button from his pocket, leading me back into the darkness. There would be no more tantrum, no more hate filled words.

This was just my time.

I wasn't giving up, I was accepting where fate had decided I go.

Dante's hand came in and touched my lower back, slipping up and settling between my shoulder blades. “I’ll help you in.”

“I don't need your help, take your hand off me.” Lifting my foot, I flopped my body into the trunk. Keeping my eyes off him, I stared at the sky. Tears were nestled and pooling in the back of my eyes, making the sky look swirly.

But I wasn't going to cry, it was time to shut myself off; turn away the emotions that wanted to take hold, remove the feelings that I had let leak in and come to life.

As he hovered over me like the shadow of a hawk flying over its dying prey, Dante held the lid and peered down. “I really am sorry, Ivy, I tried.”

“Yeah, you tried. I hope that makes feel you better.” My soul had sunk into my gut, all my emotions following it down and cowering beside it.

I had nothing left.

No more hope.

No more gratefulness for being here.

No more belief in freedom.

Breathing heavy through his nose, Dante lowered the trunk lid slowly, pushing it down to click it in place. Slapping the roof with one heavy hand, I heard his feet crunch over the gravel and the driver's side door slam shut.

The sound of angry heavy metal barreled through the speakers, turning the quiet space into a vibrating room of hatred.

And as I sat in complete darkness, I closed my eyes, and let the rest of who I was fly freely from my body. I was just a pile of muscle and bone now.

My life was over, but no one would takeme.

That was something no one could have, I would make sure of that.

In this trunk, I freed myself.

Ivy didn't exist anymore.

Ivy

Laying in the blackness that consumed me, my body jumped and rocked as we drove over bumps and dips in the road. I didn't know how far we had to go to get to the yard, and I didn't know what we'd find when we got there.

But I did know whose face I'd see.

And that made my blood boil.

Remo wouldn't let me go, he wouldn't give in and relinquish his control of me.

No. He wanted what he wasn't ever going to get.

My virginity.

Dante had that, that was the one piece of me he would always have.

I felt the car roll to a stop, the music was still going strong, but it was the first time the vehicle wasn't moving.

Anticipation clawed its way through my body. Waiting for the trunk to open, my nerves electrified, I wondered what face would greet me.

But then we started driving again, and every inch of me was still crawling with nausea. I didn't want to see anyone else, I didn't want to be met with the eyes of pure evil; I only wanted Dante.

The engine still hummed just enough for me to feel its strength through the thin carpeted floor, the jerk of the car caused my body to rock violently as Dante turned a sharp left.

How much longer will this last?

I searched the trunk when we first started the trip for anything at all that I could use. Call it instinct kicking in and the feral need to protect myself had slipped out. The thought of killing myself had briefly crept into my mind and as sick as it sounds, the thought made me momentarily happy.

The idea that if I could control my own death and take that from Remo, too, just like I had chosen to let Dante take my innocence, I'd be the one in control. I'd hold the power that Remo wanted to wield over my head.

But as the thought entered and fluttered around for a second, I slapped it down.

I wasn't going to do that even if I could. I'm strong and I can still survive this. That I was sure of. If I had made it this long, I could go longer.

I'll admit it was a weak moment. But you have to understand what I was up against. I was about to be handed back to the man who beat me, broke me, and stole all the humanity I had. He turned me into his pet, a woman that was being groomed for the ultimate betrayal: contracted rape.

And I was sure that after all this, Remo would have no problem taking out his anger on me. He'd blame me in some way for what the Pisanis did.

Why wouldn't he?

And once he learned that my captor—the trader to his associate Bane—had the

luxury of taking the one and only he thing he wanted . . .

I was dead.

I wasn't proud that I allowed my mind to drift to such an ungodly release of myself.

Strength had been my only weapon. I wasn't going to let it fail me now.

It was my every day that I wouldn't have power over, it was the world around me that I wouldn't ever be able to control again.

But my life . . . That was mine.

My soul had been released, my body was Remo's to take.

Let him have the empty shell that once breathed and lived. He couldn't touch me on the inside, I was in hiding deep within these walls.

Suddenly the music shut off, the car slowly stopped again, and I felt the engine shut down.

My heart started to race inside my chest, my mind scrolling through images of what the next moments could be like. The moment I was handed over, the second Remo's skin touched mine again.

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Shivering, I felt my body break into a cold sweat. When Remo touched me it was like he was touching something that was made, something that wasn't living and breathing.

Then I remembered what it felt like to have Dante's hands on my flesh, what it felt like to feel his lips touch my neck, and his hands caress me with a tender and rough need. One stroke and I was on fire, his touch could turn me into ashes.

That was what I wanted to remember, that was what I wanted to burn into my memories to help me go on.

He would always have me, even after I changed hands. Nothing would ever stop me from being his.

I belonged to Dante Pisani and I was going to make sure Remo knew that.

I felt the door shut softly, the sound of feet followed, tapping against hard ground. There wasn't the rustle of grains of sand or tiny chirp of rocks clinking together as they were shuffled around.

Are we here?

Staying still, I waited for more sounds. But it grew quiet for what seemed like minutes. A voice came from someplace further away than the car, the words all muffled and blended together in one drawn out sound.

Who's talking? Who's out there?

Fuck! I don't like this!

Curiosity was a killer in itself . . . And curiosity was holding my lungs stagnant.

Straining, I tilted my head up, pushing my ear against the side of the trunk. I could still hear the voice, but it was only one. No one else was talking back.

Are we waiting?

Is Remo not here and on his way?

Or is Dante just listening to orders being given by some other man?

I hated this the most. The between time, where I was left in the dark, alone, having to figure out what was being played out around me.

The voice had stopped, and I heard the gentle feet again. Metal sparked against the back of the trunk, filling the lock. It was another hungry stomach being fed its dinner and I was in the belly of the beast.

The lock clunked, a shimmer of daylight slipped through the crack as the lid was lifted with deadly slowness. The sun glared down on me, burning into my eyes and blinding me.

Holding up my cuffed hands in front of my face, I blinked rapidly to try and get my vision back.

A large, dark figure leaned in, turning the sun into a forgotten fire. His face flickered between smiles and uncertainty. Dante held out his hand, palm open flat and offering me one more touch of the only man I've ever truly wanted.

“Come on.” His words were encouraging, laced with strength and conviction.

Staying silent, I took his fingers in mine and let him pull me up. Looking around, we were parked in an empty parking lot. I felt confused and scared. I didn't see Remo and that made me happy.

But the anxiety of when his devilish face would appear sat in the front of my mind, searing my brain with sharp pins and deadly needles.

“It's alright, come on out, we're alone.”

“But for how long?” I asked, throwing my feet over the edge of the trunk. Searching his face, there was something different about him.

He looked relaxed, comfortable, not nearly as agitated as he was when we had left the house.

“Forever, Ivy.” His fingers brushed the trim of my bangs, pushing them away from my face. A delicate smile rested against his cheeks as his eyes darted between mine.

“What the hell are you talking about? Remo's not coming? Did he decide I wasn't worth it?”

“No.” Shaking his head, Dante's thumb curved down my jawline, cupping my chin with his massive hand. “I decided you were worth it.”

“Wa . . . Wait, what? What do you mean?” Twisting my head over my shoulder, I scanned the small parking lot. “I don't trust this, it doesn't feel right.”

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“I told you before to trust me.” His thumb drew circles against my skin, talking quietly, Dante smiled. “We're leaving . . . Together, Ivy. I can't give you back to him, you deserve better. I'm going to give you better.”

I wanted to be happy and I was pissed at myself for not being as excited as I thought I should be. But the fear was still there.

Dante was a Pisani. That meant his father would be after him, Remo would be after him.

And caught up in the middle of this mess was me.

He wasn't just risking his life, he was risking it for me.

“Dante, they're going to kill you, your father—he's going to be out for blood if you disobey him.”

Wrapping his arm around my waist, his face crept closer to mine. “I don't care, Ivy, let them come for us. I won't give you back, you're mine.” His lips grazed mine, barely touching. “I love you.” Grabbing my wrists, he unlocked the cuffs, and they fell like paper to the ground. I didn't hear the metal hit the pavement, I didn't hear the sound of the steel as it broke away. All I heard were his words. “I never thought I'd say that, but I do. I love you and I'm not giving away what I found. If my father can't accept that, then fuck him.”

Staring into his eyes, I wondered if he was really ready for what he was saying. “Are you sure about this? Are you really willing to die to save me?”

His smirk seemed to be a permanent fixture on his face. Reaching into his pocket, Dante pulled out a phone. It was different than the one I had seen him with before. I wasn't sure why it surprised me that he had two phones—maybe even more than that. The idea made sense considering his line of work. “Here,” he said, placing it into my hand. “Call your family.”

My chest began to tighten, heart pounding loud as crashing cymbals against my ribs. “Are you serious?”

“Do I look like I'm playing a joke on you?” Brushing the tip of his nose against mine, he said, “I've never been more serious about something in my life. But you need to know you won't be able to go home. . .” His eyes flicked down then up, searching my face for some sign of acceptance. “Maybe one day, but after all this, it'll be too dangerous. They'll look for you there and I won't risk losing you.” Cupping my cheek, his thumb glided over my jaw. “You can understand that, right?”

Forcing my mouth onto his, I kissed him. I kissed him like I'd never felt lips on my face, like the air was new and my body was finally finding out it was alive for the first time.

“I love you, Dante. I love you for stealing me away, I love you for making me yours, I love you.” Tears pricked my eyes as I realized that this love was more than just two people.

We were two people who were going to have to learn to live again. And I was more than willing to learn life all over with this man.

We were two lost bodies living in a world of rules and orders. But now we would be living in a world we would create together.

Nothing was what I had.

Now everything had finally found me.

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Dante

My phone kept shooting off in my pocket, but I ignored it. I chose to disregard the man on the other end . . . My father.

He was looking for me, he was looking for Ivy. He was waiting.

And no one kept my father waiting. But I had decided to make him second to this.

Ivy needed me, and I wasn't going to let her down. The woman had been tossed into my world by sheer coincidence. She was the end result of bad business, and now she was mine.

I couldn't give her back, no fucking way.

If I sent her back to live the life Remo had mapped out for her, I could never call myself a man again.

Because a real man wouldn't stand by knowing the abuse she would be put through, a real man wouldn't let that motherfucker break the only thing that had ever slipped through the cracks and made them whole.

I was a real man. And I wouldn't apologize for doing the right thing.

Pulling into the parking lot just outside of the city, my heart was stampeding with adrenaline and excitement. For the first time in my life I went against the orders I was given.

And it felt great.

The phone vibrated again for the tenth time and this time I couldn't ignore it. Thinking back on how screwed up it was how my family learned of what Sesto did, I couldn't stomach it. The fact he hadn't told us himself was worse to me than actually knowing that he ratted.

My father at least deserved some explanation from me. I wasn't going to leave him wondering, I owed him that if nothing else.

Slamming the door shut, I walked out into the parking lot, staring at the broken and faint lines painted into the cement. This place was desolate and far enough away from the yard that no one would get here before we were long gone.

Instead of driving to the yard, I drove an hour and half in the opposite direction. We'd have a three-hour head start and not one of my father's men would be able to touch us.

Flipping the phone open, I didn't even have the chance to spit out one word before I got a complete earful. “Where the fuck are you? You're already half an hour late. What the fuck didn't you understand about be at the yard in two hours? Fuck, Dante, I swear sometimes I feel like I'm talking to a fucking child with you.”

“Tell Remo I'm sorry—wait, no, tell him that he can go fuck himself. Make sure that last part is really drawn out. Even flip him off if you want to, that would be good too.”

“What the hell is wrong with you? You know what you need to do, stop screwing around and get here. We don't run on your time, you run on mine.”

“We? What, is he holding your hand right now?”

“Dante.” The harsh sound of his voice sent a spike into my skull. “This isn't a fucking joke. Get. Her. Here. Now.”

“No.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me. I'm not giving her back to him, he doesn't deserve her.”

A loud burst of air scratched through the speaker, the audible yells of Remo were distant, but there. “Dante, this is the last time I'm going to warn you, if you don't get here now, I'll have no choice.”

“That's where you're wrong, you decide the choice. But not this time, this time it's different. I'm sorry, Dad, but I'm out.”

“You're what?” His teeth ground down as the words trickled out like sand. “You're not out, you're never out unless I take you out. You don't get to call the shots, Dante, I do. Do you really want to lose your life because of that woman?”

“I'm not losing anything, I'm gaining everything.” Rubbing my chin, my hand shook slightly as I pressed the phone to my head. “You won't see me again, you won't have to deal with my fuck ups anymore. Isn't that what you wanted? You always held me to a higher standard, you always compared me to Sesto until he fucked you over. I was never good enough for you, you made that clear. Now I'm making it easy on you, I'll disappear, I'll evaporate into thin air, and you won't have to see me ever again.”

“That's not true.” His voice fell flat as the world he had created was crumbling around him. “You know that's not true, you're my son, that won't change.”

“But it changed with Sesto . . . Him going to the cops was enough for you to put out a

hit on him, he was your son too. When does the line get drawn? When is blood thicker than water?"

My father had always dreamed that my brother and I would take over once he was gone. He had groomed my brother to take his place, fed me all the nutrients I needed to be the second hand. Bane Pisani had created our world, he made himself into an empire that he claimed was for us.

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It was always for us. Now it was gone. He had no one left to carry on his creation.

“Yes, it is. Look, I'm not going to dive into the emotional troubles I felt as a kid. This isn't a fucking therapy session, but I did take one thing from my life, the one and only thing I ever saw you show real feelings with. You loved mom, you loved her more than life itself. I finally understand what you meant when you said a love that strong hurts. I hurt . . . I hurt for Ivy. Remo can't have her, she's mine.”

Lowering the phone to my waist, I could hear my father still arguing with himself. But I was done, he heard what I had to say, that was all that mattered to me. He had an explanation for my actions. I loved Ivy.

Ending the call, I held the phone for a moment. This phone had been the life line to reach my father, but I wasn't going to need it anymore. Breaking the burner phone in half, I tossed it out into the empty lot. The plastic clanked as it came down hard, echoing through the desolate space. Throwing that phone sent a surge of freedom through my muscles.

Ivy and I had more in common than I thought. We were both slaves to the men who held our lives, we were both living for others without a choice.

We were both finally free.

I was done being who I was, I was done living for a man who didn't see any value to his own son. I was done being a Pisani.

That wasn't me . . . Not anymore.

I found what fed my veins and breathed life into my soul.

My Ivy.

And that was enough for me.

Epilogue

Dante

Sliding the card into the lock, I heard the beep and felt the lock slip free. Popping the door open, I pushed it with my hip and walked in.

My arms were full, holding two paper sacks of groceries . . . And a book Ivy pleaded for. It was hell to find, but I got it done. I always did.

“Ivy, you are one lucky girl.” Dropping the bags on the small table by the door, I flipped the lock into place and double checked it twice to make sure it was secure.

We had been on the run for a month now, but nothing would ever be safe for us. Ivy asked me if I was going to go to the cops . . . I said no.

And she wasn't going either.

I might have just done one of the most fucked up things to my father. But the cops—that was a blatant death sentence. My hope was that he'd just chalk this up as a lost cause, and forget I ever existed.

My mother was the rational one. If she had been here, none of this would have happened. There was no way in hell she would've let Ivy get stuck in the middle of this. My mother would have ordered my father to help her, she would have thrown herself into the pit of hell to help Ivy.

Maybe it was my mother that had helped me open my eyes and see what I needed to do. Maybe it was her hand reaching down and giving me the strength to do what's right.

Lord knows that I had never been weak . . . Until her.

As for Remo, he would try and find us, there was doubt about that. But I already had a plan for him. All I needed was a little more time and he'd have his day.

“I already knew that.” Winking, she rolled onto her belly on the hotel mattress and kicked her heels into her ass.

Fuck, I loved that ass.

“No, I don't think you do. Do you know what I had to go through to get this fucking book?”

Propping her chin up on the back of her palm, she smiled through those gorgeous lips I couldn't get enough of, teasing me with that grin. “Did you have to kill some little old lady? Because if you did, I'd say you have no idea how worth it it was.”

Chuckling, I pulled a bottle of water from the bag and tossed her book onto the end of the bed. “All I'm say is that you owe me.”

“Shit, I know what you want.”

Cocking my head, I asked, “Oh you do?”

“Anal.” Pointing her finger at me, she twirled it in small circles. “I know that look and that one right there says anal.”

“What? Come on.” Fanning out my arms, I pursed my mouth to the side and made a loud raspberry sound with my lips. “I don't have an anal look.”

“You do, and that face is it.” Bending up on her knees, Ivy bounced her ass generously into the air. “And it's totally worth it, you deserve my ass for the find.” Rolling her hips, her ass jiggled and danced.

“Fuck, woman, you're not even going to get to read that thing if this is your thank you for it.” Lifting the book up, I flipped the pages. “I might take you up on that, then I'll just bring it back.” My lips pulled back, baring my teeth. “Then I'll go find it again and again.”

“I don't think so.” Snapping her body upright, she plucked the book from my hands. “Besides, it's not like you never get it.” Shaking her ass again, she pushed her hips back and lifted her backside towards my face.

My dick thickened, the blood draining from my head and filling my pants with delirious quickness. I suddenly felt light headed, the air seeped slowly into my lungs, defying gravity and never making it to my brain.

Stepping closer to the end of the bed, I drew long letters over her cheek. 'M. I. Swirling to the next voluptuous curve arching high, I kept tracing the imaginary letters. 'N. E.'

“That's right,” she said, whispering over her shoulder as her eyes turned sultry, sparking with desire. “I am yours.”

Bringing a heavy hand down hard onto her ass, I let the jiggle settle against my palm. “Fuck.” The air whooshed out of my lungs, my hands slipping up her back and sliding back down to grab the edge of her shorts.

Tearing them over her ass, her wet pussy glistened, eager and clenching the air around it. But I wasn't going for pussy tonight . . .

Ivy said anal.

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“Fuck me, Dante.” Grinding back, her hips rolled side to side, making a perfect figure eight. “You know you want this, so take it.”

“Maybe I want to see you sweat a little.” Unbuttoning my pants, I shifted them down my legs and kicked them off. “It's fun to watch you beg for me.”

A soft giggle played off her tongue. “You're so bad,” she said, licking her lips as she moaned.

Digging my fingers into her ass, I leaned over and spoke firmly into her ear. “My bad behavior is what you love most . . . Isn't it?”

“Dante, your bad behavior is what makes my toes curl, it makes my head spin, and my heart skip.” Drawing her tongue across my jaw, she bit the side of my neck. “It makes me love you.”

Growling deep, I raked my nails into her skin, leaving long thick tracks. Licking my palm, I wet the tip of my dick and placed the head of my cock against her tight hole. Thumbing her clit, I rolled the pad against her swelling button.

Her moan was euphoric, sending prickles over my body. Lifting her ass higher, Ivy pressed back, the tip of my cock popping into her ass. I let her take the lead, she was so fucking hot that her body was moving and I wasn't sure she even realized it.

Rocking back, she slowly took my length, her head dropping to the mattress as it disappeared inside her. Every move she made was begging me to push her harder and faster.

Keeping my thumb against her clit, I let her ride my cock at the pace she desired. Her ass was tight, squeezing around my dick. Slipping some of her wetness over my shaft, she glided easily up and down as she bounced gently.

Her moans were growing louder, eyes locking shut as she let her chest fall forward, fingers twining around the sheet.

“Mm, Dante, fuck, I'm so close.”

Swirling my thumb faster and faster, I bucked my hips and fucked her ass. I felt my lower belly start to tingle, the sensation riding my muscles and turning my dick into steel. My balls tightened, pulling in as I felt the load move through my cock.

Hitting the tip, I let my juice explode into her ass. Ivy screamed, pushing her face deeper into the bed, her knuckles turning white as her body rushed with electric sparks. I watched the goosebumps jump off her skin, sweat dripping down the trench of her arched back and pooling at the base of her back.

The two dimples over her ass filled, resembling tiny ponds, and making me laugh.

“What are you laughing at?” she asked, flattening her body against the sheet.

My cock slipped free with a wet slurp as I lowered beside her. “Your ass.”

“My ass? Thanks, thanks for the confidence boost there.”

Patting the tip of my finger in one of the tiny pools, I flicked the sweat with a quick tap. “Your ass would make a perfect still if we were ever trapped and needed water.”

Giggling, Ivy rolled to her back and rubbed her backside. “Good to know. Let's hope we never have to do that.”

“Hey, we're on the run, life can throw you curve balls.”

Rolling her eyes, Ivy pushed herself up on the bed. “I think I've had enough curve balls in my life.”

Laying down next her, Ivy lifted the book off the nightstand and flipped it open. I couldn't stop staring at her, she was so beautiful. She was the most fragile and gorgeous thing I had ever laid eyes on.

And she was mine.

Peering at me from the corner of her eye, Ivy said, “What?”

“Nothing.” Resting my head on my arm, I tickled her shoulder in slow strokes.

“I can't read with you staring at me like that.”

“It bothers you?”

“It distracts me, I keep thinking you're about to mount me again.”

“Round two already?” Smiling, Ivy shook her head no. “Fine, I'll watch T.V. then. It won't be as much fun, but it'll do.” Grabbing the remote, I turned it on and started to surf through the channels.

It was the same old boring shit as always. Reality show after reality show after reality show. Until I hit the last station.

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Shooting up in the bed, I scooted to the end and watched the screen with disbelief.

The man's voice came through in that low baritone you only get with a news anchor. “Our top story tonight is one of sadness and justice. A little less crime might infiltrate the streets of Hoboken, but a man's life has been brutally cut short. The prominent business man, Vincent Pisani, also known as Bane, was found dead earlier this evening. His body washed up on the southern bank of the Hudson river, and the police report that his death was not accidental or natural.”

My father is dead. He's dead.

As he kept speaking, I knew I was listening to what he was saying, but my mind had started to shut down. Every muscle in my body tensed up, my breathing grew shallow, and the room seemed to tunnel so that all I could see was the television.

“Dante . . . Dante, are you alright?” Ivy crept up beside me, rubbing my back. “Did they say what I think they said?”

Nodding yes, my fingers pinched the sides of my lips and tugged down. The news anchor kept talking about the 'Top Story,' the media frenzy was probably through the roof.

“They're not releasing all the details as of yet, but they are looking to speak with his son, Dante Pisani. Vincent, whose oldest son, Sesto, was incarcerated last December for charges of money laundering, piracy, and robbery, is also being looked at for any connection to his father's death. Right now, they have no leads or understanding as to why this heinous crime took place, but they have all the right men on the job and they

assure us they will have more answers soon.”

I watched in shock. I knew who had done this, I was well aware of who decided to be the judge on my father's life.

My fingers curled into my palms, knuckles growing tight and thin as I kept the pressure firmly embedded in my skin. “That fucking asshole. That fucking piece of shit, scumbag, motherfucker.” Growling through gritted teeth, I stood in a sudden burst, leaning forward and slamming my fist into the wall. “Remo's going to die, Ivy. He was already on my list, but now, he drew blood.”

“Dante, how do you know that? Your father was involved with some really bad people, maybe it was someone else.”

The anchor cleared his throat, tapping his stack of papers on the table. “The police have released one detail about this death, one that they are hoping is going to point them in the right direction. There was a note left with the body, a name of someone who they are hoping to speak with. They are reaching out to the community for help. If any of you know a woman named Celia, please call the Hoboken police, any information would help them.”

“Do you doubt it now?”

Ivy's face drained to white, her eyes static on the screen as it flicked to a commercial. “What do we do, Dante? What's he going to do?”

“I'm going to kill him.”

Snapping her head in my direction, she wasn't telling me no. There was no debate in her mind either. He had gone too far, he took the life of a man he had no right to.

Bane was my father and he deserved justice for this.

I had stolen Ivy.

I had taken her virginity.

I refused to give her back.

It was me who had taken what he claimed as his and now running wasn't an option anymore.

Remo had to die.

* * *