



Heart of a Devil

Author: *Sadie Kincaid*

Category: Billionaire Romance, Adult

Description: You can't outrun your past—or so they tell me. It doesn't stop me from trying though, and that's how I end up here in London, a far cry from the Los Angeles sunshine and the weight of my family's name. And hopefully far enough away from my past that it can only haunt me in dreams.

Things are going well so far. My life is pretty normal, and normal—a little calm after the chaos—is exactly what I need right now.

Enter Sebastian Donovan. All easy charm and Daddy Dom energy, with a smile that could melt panties at twenty paces. It's a pity he's off-limits—not because he's a serial womanizer with a trail of broken hearts all over London, but because he's my best friend's dad. That's too messy, and I like to avoid mess. I'll stick to my no-strings arrangements, no matter how unfulfilling they've been lately. But what if we could have just one night? One debauched, filthy encounter that will still make me smile when I'm eighty? That can't hurt, right?

Wrong. Very, very wrong.

Sebastian Donovan isn't the kind of man I can just up and walk away from the next morning. He unlocks something deep inside me, something I buried a long time ago. If my tastes run a little on the dark side, Sebastian's run darker. He's the first man who's ever managed to tap into exactly what I want, and he's not afraid to give it to me.

But those demons I'm running from—

They're about to catch up with me, and now I don't know who I can trust. The one thing I need to be certain of is whether I can trust him. He can keep my body safe, but what about my heart? Because despite everything I've survived, Sebastian is the one person who possesses the power to break me.

I've never been the kind of woman who needs a knight in shining armor— I'm more than capable of saving myself, as I've proven more than once.

But a devil in a tailored suit? Maybe that's exactly what I need.

Total Pages (Source): 72

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:01 am

Prologue

LAUREN—AGE 10

“Bailey. Bailey, where are you? Come on, boy, dinner time.”

I wander around outside my house, shaking Bailey’s can of treats. He loves his treats, and he usually comes galloping over as soon as he hears the rattling sound they make against the metal. Papá says he’s greedy, and Mamá says he’s just a Labrador who can’t help being what he is. I don’t mind if he’s greedy—he’s my beautiful golden boy, and he’s been my best friend since my birthday last year. I’ve always wanted a dog, but until then, I had to make do with my stuffies. I begged to get a real one, promised I’d look after him, and I do. I feed him and walk him and brush his soft fur until it’s smooth. My sister helps, but she doesn’t like him as much because he slobbers. That’s another thing he can’t help, and secretly I’m glad he prefers me anyway.

I jump over the hula hoop I was playing with earlier and dodge the sprinkler that’s watering the lawns. Bailey normally likes the sprinkler, but today he’s nowhere in sight. I’m starting to worry because he usually stays close. We have a big yard, but I checked all his favorite spots and still can’t find him. It makes my tummy feel weird.

Mamá would tell me I’m being a worrywart right now. She tells me that when I’m freaking out about my grades or stuff at school. She says I need to relax because nothing will ever hurt me—because I’m safe here.

I don’t believe her anymore. Not since that day two weeks ago, when the Bad Thing

happened. School finished early because the power went out, and I came home alone. I shouldn't have—our driver Ernesto picks us up from school when Mamá can't make it. But my friends were all doing it, and I wanted to be with them. As soon as I saw my Uncle Carlos's car in the driveway, I realized it was a mistake.

Uncle Carlos scares me. I don't know why. He's my papá's baby brother, and he's never been anything but nice to me. My sister adores him, and he's at our house a lot. I should be used to him by now, but my tummy gets tied up in horrible knots when I'm alone with him.

After I saw his car, I snuck off down the side of the house to avoid seeing him. I headed past the pool house and down toward the garage and the shed where the gardener keeps all his tools. Nobody ever goes in there, so I thought I'd be safe hiding out until my sister or parents came home. I had my backpack with me and some snacks left over from lunch—I'd be fine.

I was halfway along the path when I first heard the sound. It was horrible, like nothing I'd ever heard before in real life—a man screaming and crying. It made me freeze on the spot, and I was so scared I couldn't move. I tried to tell myself I was just being a worrywart like my mom says, that it was probably a noisy movie or something.

Except I knew, deep down, that it wasn't. It was too real, and it turned my blood to ice. The screaming carried on, getting louder and louder, the howled words not making any sense. It was terrifying, and I thought I was going to be sick—but it was worse when the screaming stopped.

The door to the gardener's building flew open, and Uncle Carlos stepped out holding a pair of big scissors in his hands—the ones Emile uses to shape the rose bushes. Something red dripped from the blades, and it was all over his face too. He was grinning to himself, his teeth big and white like the picture of the Big Bad Wolf in my

old Little Red Riding Hood picture book. I've never been so scared in my life. It was worse than the nightmares that made me scream and scream until Mamá and Papá came into my room and sang me back to sleep.

He stopped dead when he saw me, and his grin got even wider.

“Come and see, princesa. Come and see what happens to people who disobey your tío.”

I shook my head and turned to run, but I was so frightened I tripped over my own feet and hit the ground. He came over, pulled me up by my arm, and dragged me with him. His grip was so hard it hurt, and he shoved me into the shed. My eyes were shut super tight, but I could still smell the coppery tang in the air. I could taste it on my tongue, and it reminded me of going to the butcher shop with Mamá on Sundays to get our meat for the week.

He gave me a rough shake. “Open those pretty brown eyes, little girl. Open them, or I will open them for you. I could chop off your eyelids, snip snip snip.”

He snapped the giant scissors open and shut right by my ears, and my whole body was shaking. He would cut me—I just knew it.

I finally did as I was told and immediately wished I hadn't. The man in front of me didn't look human anymore. He looked like a creature, a monster from one of my books, dangling from a hook on the ceiling. His fingers were missing, and I couldn't look at any of the rest. I forced my eyes away and found myself looking down at the plastic sheet, where I saw a fat, red lump of meat that I realized was his tongue. Uncle Carlos tortured this man and cut out his tongue, and now he was making me look. The disgusting sights and smells made my stomach hurt so bad I threw up.

“He’s dead, sweetheart,” my uncle said, sounding amused. “Away with the angels. And if you know what is good for you, you will never mention this, you understand? Not to your mamá or your papá or your darling sister—because if you do, then who knows? Maybe this will happen to you. Or to one of them. Or to your precious puppy. What do you say, Lauren—can you keep a secret?”

I had no idea why he did this terrible thing or why he did it here. My papá and his brothers were businessmen who owned hotels and companies all over the country. They weren’t murderers. Surely Papá and Uncle Mateo didn’t know about this. I wanted to tell them, but Uncle Carlos is crazy and cruel. He meant it when he said he’d hurt us. It seemed like he wanted to hurt us, that maybe he’d enjoy it.

If I tell, he will kill me or someone I love.

I nodded so hard my curly hair flew out of its bun, strands of it sticking to my cheeks. I was crying. “I promise, Uncle. I will never ever speak a word, I swear.”

“I believe you, angel. Let’s just make sure you understand though, sí?”

He grabbed my hand and pulled on my fingers. No matter how much I struggled and tried to keep them in a fist, he wouldn’t let go. I wasn’t strong enough to resist him, and he was laughing and squeezing until my bones squished together. Then he took those awful scissors, still bloody from the dead guy, and scraped one of the blades across my palm. It hurt so bad, and my blood dripped onto the floor. He smiled when I started to sob.

“Silly girl, Lauren. So very clumsy. You cut yourself in the kitchen, trying to make your old uncle a snack, didn’t you? Isn’t that what happened?”

I nodded quickly, and when he finally let me go, I ran away as fast as I could. Back to the house and all the way to my room. I tried to clean up the blood with tissues and

told myself that everything would be okay. Everything would be okay as long as I didn't tell.

Bailey had been locked inside the house, and he ran up the stairs after me, his tail wagging. I threw myself onto the bed and snuggled up with my stuffies, including the big one that looked like Bailey. At first, he thought it was a game and jumped around and barked, but then he jumped up on the bed with me and looked at me with his big brown eyes. I hugged his chunky neck while I wept, and he licked my tears away and made everything feel a little bit better.

That was two weeks ago, and I haven't told anybody anything. I'm too scared. I think about Uncle Carlos and those big scissors every night when I go to bed, and I'm scared all the time. I can't concentrate in school, and I don't care about my grades anymore. If I do manage to forget it all for a minute, the cut on my palm reminds me. I told my parents I cut myself by mistake, like he said to. I was so scared they wouldn't believe me, but I must have done a good enough job to convince them. They called Dr. Luther, and he came out and gave me some stitches and a lollipop and told me I was a very brave girl.

Except I'm not brave. I'm a coward. Nothing feels safe anymore. I don't enjoy anything now—not movie nights or our Friday family dinner or chatting with my friends. The only thing that makes me feel better is Bailey, and now I can't find him.

A bad feeling grows in my belly as I wander around looking for him. "Bailey! Bailey, where are you, boy?"

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:01 am

Mamá and Papá are both home. It would only take me two minutes to run back to the house and get them. Mamá is making dinner, and Papá is doing work in his office. But I don't want to bother them. I'm probably being silly. Bailey probably chased a bird and got a little lost. I'll find him any second now.

I don't want to go back down to the gardening shed. I hate it there. Even seeing it makes me taste blood and fills my ears with the sounds of that man screaming.

It's the only place I haven't checked, though, so I don't have a choice. "Come on, Lauren, stop being a baby," I mutter to myself, standing in front of the door. I'm really scared. The man isn't there anymore. Emile has been using the shed like normal and everything has been cleaned up, but I still think it smells weird. Probably my imagination.

Still, I am thinking about running back to the house and asking my parents for help when I hear him—a little woof, a little whine. "Bailey."

As soon as he hears my voice, he goes crazy, and I pull the door open. He runs out to greet me, jumping up and down and whirling around in circles and leaping so high he can lick my nose. I end up rolling around on the grass too, giggling, so happy to see him. "How did you get in there, silly boy?" He answers me with a big sloppy kiss that makes me laugh, but I'm still confused.

The door has to be pushed or pulled shut, and I frown as I realize Bailey wouldn't have been able to do that. He might have been hiding, and someone accidentally closed him in there...

Except Bailey is a big dog, and he's loud. He loves people, and he never hides from them.

I'm still trying to figure it out when I see my uncle walking across the grass. He wasn't here earlier. Has he been lurking around our house without us knowing? Does Papá know what a monster his brother is? He can't know, can he? If he knew, he'd stop him.

His big, scary shadow blocks the light, and I grab Bailey tight. Having my dog close makes me brave. "Did you trap Bailey in there, Uncle Carlos? Are you angry with me? I didn't say a word to anyone."

"Silly girl, what do you mean? Why would I do that? It would be dangerous for him in there, wouldn't it? Rat poison, blades, chemicals, all kinds of things that could hurt a dog. If someone left any of those lying around, if someone opened those poison boxes and left them for this greedy boy to poke his fat nose into, then who knows what would have happened? But it looks like he had a lucky escape. This time."

He winks at me and reaches out to pat Bailey. Bailey growls a little, but he's too sweet to do anything more. Still, I quickly pull him back and whisper soothing words. He's never bitten anyone, ever. He's a good boy. But if he did bite Uncle Carlos, he'd make sure everyone knew, and Bailey would have to go to the vet and not come home like my friend Sasha's dog last year.

"He seems fine to me, conejita. But if he had come to some harm, if I had trapped him in there and mixed rat poison with that chow he likes, then maybe it would have been to remind you to keep those pretty lips of yours shut. To make sure that we understand each other. Now, come on up to the house. You're late for dinner—but you're so spoiled, you girls, nobody will mind. If your pup did die, they'd probably just get you a new one."

No! I will look after Bailey, and I will keep him safe. And after that I will never have another dog. I will never give anyone the chance to hurt me like this again.

I follow Uncle Carlos into the house and run straight upstairs, shouting to my papá that I need to wash up and I'll be down soon.

When I walk into my bedroom, I freeze. Every one of my stuffies, some of which I've had since I was a baby, are destroyed. Ripped and torn, scattered around my room like Bailey used to do with the trash when he was a baby. Tears fill my eyes, and I get really cold when I look at my bed. One of my biggest toys was a stuffed dog that looked just like Bailey—a soft yellow Lab that I hugged every night before I got the real thing. His belly has been sliced open, and all of his stuffing is pulled out. I swallow my sobs because I know who did this. And I know what he is trying to tell me.

If I don't do as I'm told, this will happen to the real Bailey.

I clean up the mess, tears running down my cheeks. My mom lied. I'm not safe here. Nobody is safe here.

Chapter

One

LAUREN

TWENTY-THREE YEARS LATER

I've lived in London for almost a month now, and it's one hell of a city. Nowhere near as big or as sprawling as my native Los Angeles, of course, and the weather really can suck—but I still love it here.

I love the noise and the bustle, the history, the beautiful architecture, the way the gorgeous bridges span the River Thames as it makes its moody way through the landscape. I love the pubs and the black cabs and the accents. It's like being in a movie, which I guess is how other people feel when they walk down Rodeo Drive back home.

Sometimes I still can't believe I agreed to uproot my whole existence and fly thousands of miles to start all over again. I know my parents can't—they've made their feelings on the matter quite clear. They wanted me to stay close to home, like my sister Liza. They can't understand my wanderlust or why I left Los Angeles as a teenager and never went back for longer than a few weeks. After all these years, I still haven't said a word.

I look on as my old pal Samantha Donovan bustles around, passing out drinks and chatting with guests at her housewarming party. It's a gorgeous house to be warmed, in the lovely countryside outside London but close enough to easily commute.

She spots me standing alone and lifts an eyebrow. You okay? she mouths. I appreciate the check-in, but I'm fine, and I nod to reassure her. Samantha is the reason I'm in London in the first place, and it's been great to reconnect. We met when I was studying law in the UK, and I jumped at the chance when she contacted me to see if I'd be interested in joining her successful family law firm as a managing partner.

Nick Cook, the other partner in the firm, was also one of our university pals. He's walking toward me, and I head into the kitchen before it looks like I've noticed him. He's a little drunk and super chatty, and I don't much feel like discussing work or West Ham United right now, which are his two favorite topics of conversation.

He follows me and grabs himself a beer from the big fridge. "Enjoying yourself?" he asks, leaning against the counter. "Or missing the Florida weather?" He grimaces as he nods outside.

It's not a glorious day, but it isn't cold and it's not raining, which by English standards is a definite win. "Nope," I say, smiling. "All that relentless sunshine gets you down after a while."

I lived in Florida for years, but I wasn't sad to leave. Things got complicated—a polite way of saying completely fucked up. There was a case that went bad, people who were even worse, and my life took me down some dark and twisted roads. Things happened that even now I don't like to think about, things that changed me forever.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:01 am

I wasn't running away—I've vowed to myself that I will never let anyone make me run again—but I was more than ready for a fresh start. The States held too many ghosts, too many bad memories. Sam's email landed at the perfect time, and I thought about it for all of thirty seconds before I said yes.

"Really?" Nick says, frowning. "I can't imagine that. I took the kids to Florida once, to the theme parks, and we couldn't get enough of it."

"Well, Nick, I'm sure that's true—but real life isn't Disney World, even in Florida."

He shrugs, acknowledging the comment. "So you haven't regretted joining us?"

"Not for a moment," I say firmly.

Moving here was an adventure, and I try real hard to embrace adventure. I've spent way too many of my years on this planet doing what I'm told, being scared, living in fear of what might happen to me. Trying to play it safe.

These days, I'm a different person—or at least I try to be. These days, I try to take as many bites out of life as I can. I'm greedy for it, for all the new experiences, all the fun, all the passion. I want to live brave, loud, and proud, and I have a better chance of doing that here, where I can recreate myself and put my past behind me.

Since I relocated and added my name to the door at Donovan Cook, I've been having a blast. The work is tough but important, my colleagues are fantastic, and I have a great little apartment that overlooks the river. Pretty much everything in my new world is going well... with one small exception. It's not the kind of exception I want

to mention to Nick though—he might take it the wrong way.

Because the only thing bothering me about my new life is that I haven't had a single orgasm that wasn't self-administered since I arrived here.

Actually, now that I come to think about it, that is a pretty big exception. I like sex. I like men. I really like orgasms. It wasn't always that way for me, but now it's an important part of my life.

I'm not looking for love. No way. I'm not sure I even believe in love. I kind of see it on the same level as the Easter Bunny or Santa—a nice story we tell children and pretend to believe to make life sweeter. I certainly don't want anything long-term. I'm not looking to settle down. In many ways, I've only recently started living life on my own terms. I've tried going the big relationship route, and my fingers were well and truly burned. Like most things that are supposed to be secure, my marriage turned out to be less of a safe haven and more of a cardboard shack built on sand, right on top of a fault line.

Now, I like my relationships to come without a single string. And with lots of pleasure.

Nick gulps down beer, and his eyes go to my chest. He's not being lecherous, and I don't take it personally. "A few of us are going clubbing later, if you fancy it," he says, blushing slightly. He's sweet, which is one of the many reasons I'm not interested in him.

"Thanks, Nick, but I'll probably call it a night soon. Have a great time though."

He nods, apparently not at all offended, and I leave him in the kitchen and head back outside. I sip my wine and smile at the sight of Samantha and her husband, Gabriel. They're married, but they can't keep their hands off each other. They're like horny

teenagers who manage to also have the full loved-up dream domestic scenario. Living proof that maybe there is a kernel of truth to the love myth after all. At least for some people.

Samantha glides around the garden with her usual grace, despite the fact that she had baby Max only five months ago. Gabriel always has at least one eye on her wherever she goes, a possessive fire in his deep green eyes that makes me shiver a little. God help anyone who gets between those two.

I want that, I think as he pulls her in for a slow kiss. They kiss like nobody's watching, and it's hot as hell, especially when she gives his admittedly very fine ass a squeeze. Yeah, that's what I want. Not the baby or the wedding ring or the big house in the country, but the passion. The need. The look on her face that says she's a woman who is getting well and truly fucked on a regular basis. There's no orgasm drought in this house, that's for sure.

Since I've been in London, I've tried the apps and been on a few dates, but nobody has floated my boat. They've been too eager or too into their ex or too freaky. Or not freaky enough. It's possible that my standards are too high—or maybe I just need that spark. I need to feel that flame of desire when someone looks into my eyes, and I need to feel it right away. Life is too short to settle for anything less. I want to be able to look at a man and immediately be able to picture myself having a screaming orgasm with his name on it. Is that really so much to ask?

I sigh and go for a stroll around the pretty gardens. Maybe I'm doomed to be alone... and for my closest personal relationship to be with Roger Rabbit, my most trusted and loyal vibrator.

I head over to the chairs that are set around a decked area of the yard, intending to have a quiet moment to myself. Maybe I could use my phone to look online, see if I can find a pal for Roger and expand my collection.

That plan is shot to hell when I notice someone is already there. Someone big, with his extremely broad back to me. I take a few steps closer, then pause to admire the view. I grin at the wide shoulders, the brawny arms, the long, jean-clad legs sprawled out in front of him.

This, I know from her description, is Samantha's dad, Sebastian. "You can't miss him," she said. "He looks like a caveman but smells like Chanel."

Boy, was she right. About both. I go to stand in front of him, and there is a whoosh of liquid warmth in the pit of my belly when our eyes meet. Liquid warmth that spreads lower when he smiles. His dark hair is peppered with silver, I could easily drown in his warm coffee-colored eyes, and that cocky grin sets off little fireworks in my panties. The ridge of a scar on his neck, just visible above his T-shirt, gives him a grittier, more dangerous edge despite the domestic setting.

He has baby Max with him in a Moses basket, and that child is adorable—but nowhere near as interesting as his granddad.

I fight off laughter at the fact that I'm lusting over a grandfather. Sebastian Donovan is no ordinary grandparent. Sebastian Donovan is a stone-cold silver fox who is looking me up and down with blatant appreciation. This is the kind of man who would give as good as he got, which is always a turn-on. I'd like to climb onto his lap and ride him right now.

I've been searching for a flame of desire. Now, in the most unlikely of places, I seem to have found an inferno. Can I imagine that screaming orgasm with his name on it?

Hell yes.

Chapter

Two

SEBASTIAN

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:01 am

The evening is winding down, and Sam has disappeared to settle Max for the night. I feel the usual rush of happiness when I watch her carry my grandson up the stairs, so proud of who she is and what she's overcome in life. Having me as a dad probably wasn't the best of starts, but she doesn't seem to hold it against me.

It's good seeing her like this. Seeing her settled and happy and loved up. I wouldn't have predicted she'd marry my best mate and business partner, but life would be boring if we knew everything in advance, and I don't do well with boring. I prefer a few surprises along the way, a bit of spice to keep my interest levels up.

And right now, I can't stop thinking about the spiciest woman I've met for years—Samantha's new colleague, Lauren Hayes. The minute I laid eyes on her, I wanted her. And the minute she spoke, I wanted her even more. She blew me away with her confidence, her humor, the way she flirted with me without any shame whatsoever. Being a leggy brunette with killer curves and soulful brown eyes didn't hurt either.

She's a lot younger than me. Only a year older than Sam, in fact, which makes her fifteen years my junior. The age gap and the fact that she works with my daughter should put me off—I'm way too old and ugly for this level of trouble, and I have absolutely no doubt that Lauren Hayes is trouble with a capital T.

I have a funny relationship with trouble, though. I seem unable to stay away from it.

I look on as the law firm crowd say their goodbyes. Nick, along with the girls who work in the office, are sharing an Uber back to the city. I half expect Lauren to jump in too, to join in with their plans to go clubbing, but she stays behind. I notice because

I can't keep my fucking eyes off her in that barely there dress she's almost wearing. Jesus. She should come with a government health warning.

She looks up from saying her goodbyes and catches me staring from the other side of the room. She tilts her head to one side so her dark curls cascade over her bare shoulder and pops an eyebrow in my direction.

That one little look is enough to make my cock twitch inside my jeans. Fucking hell. She really is trouble. I've always liked women a bit too much, but it's been a long time since I met one I responded to like this. I thought I might be slowing down now that I'm a granddad, but it seems like nobody bothered telling my dick that.

I walk toward her, calling at the huge drinks fridge on the way. I grab a bottle of Bud, although I have no plans to drink it, and raise it up, asking if she wants one. She shakes her head, shimmying those amazing curls, then walks through the open patio doors and out into the dark garden. She glances back at me as she goes, and the look on her face is pure provocation. Complete catch-me-if-you-can, which is guaranteed to make my cock react. Sometimes I love the chase more than I love the capture, and the wilder and rougher, the better.

Don't do it, Seb. Don't follow that goddess outside. Don't trail after that stick of dynamite in human form and not expect something to blow up in your face.

I grip my beer and follow her.

She's leaning on the wall at the back of the house, her face and stunning figure lit up by the golden light spilling from the kitchen. Her legs go on forever, ending in red high-heeled shoes that scream "Fuck me!" Then again, I suspect this woman could wear a pair of neon-green Crocs and they'd still scream "Fuck me!" She's one hundred percent siren, and I don't seem able to resist.

I walk toward her and only stop when our bodies are an inch apart. She does that head-tilt thing again, and her mouth lifts at one corner as she smiles at me. “You took your time. Are you staying here tonight, Sebastian?”

“I wasn’t planning on it, no. I’ve only had one beer, so I can drive home soon.”

“Time for bed?”

“Maybe. Doesn’t mean it’s time for sleep though, does it? And what are your plans for this glorious evening?”

“Nothing. At least not yet anyway. I drove here too. It’s nice out here in the countryside. Fresh air. Stars. Lots of quiet places where two people could get to know each other better.”

She isn’t touching me, but I feel like she is. Every word from her kissable mouth is like a caress, and her gaze is crawling all over me. I don’t think I’ve ever been so thoroughly eye-fucked in my entire life. That twitch in my cock is now a full-blown hard-on, and I can tell the second she spots it. She licks her lips, and her pupils dilate as she looks back up at me.

“Is that what gets you going, Lauren? Fucking strangers in a field?” It’s crude and not the way I’d normally talk to a lady—but something about this woman brings out the animal in me. She might be the same age as my daughter, but the way I feel about her is a million miles from paternal, and there’s no doubt she feels the same. The air is practically crackling with the electricity that sparks between us. If this was a back alley in the city, I’d have her bare-assed, her face against the wall, with my cock inside her by now. But while I might be an animal, I do have some standards, and screwing a woman against the exterior wall of my daughter’s new house is out.

“That all depends on the fuck, Seb, as well as the stranger, don’t you think?” she

says, amusement in her voice.

If I thought I'd shock her, I was wrong. I rub my hand down my beard and pretend to think about it. "You make a fair point, Lauren. Are you always this direct?"

"I try to be. I don't see the point in playing games, and if I see something I want, I go for it."

"Is that an American thing or a you thing?"

"Can't it be both?" She puts a hand on the swooping curve of her hip and juts her magnificent ass to the side.

Fuck's sake. All I can think about is bending her over, dragging that tiny skirt up to her waist, and seeing how wet she is.

"I know that look. You want me too, so why be coy? Surely you're too old for games as well."

"I'm old enough to know better, sweetheart. Old enough to know that this is a mistake."

A brief flicker of disappointment crosses her face, and I enjoy seeing a little of her certainty slide away. I like a confident woman who knows what she wants, but I also like to be in charge—in every way possible. She might be making the first move, but it will be me who makes the rest of them.

"I'm also old enough to know that there's not a chance in hell I'm letting you go home unfucked tonight." I gesture to the door. "Shall we?"

Chapter

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:01 am

Three

LAUREN

We go to say goodbye to Gabriel and Samantha before we leave, and I have to work hard to look cool, calm, and collected as we talk to our hosts. I don't feel cool or calm. I feel like someone has doused my insides with gasoline and tossed a lit match on top. I can barely tear my eyes away from his rear view as I follow him through the house, and the front view is even better.

The man is as hard for me as I am wet for him, and an uncharacteristic flush creeps up my neck as I remember how forward I was. Like my usual honest self, but on a megadose of steroids.

I meant what I said though—I don't like to play games. What's the point of going through an elaborate mating ritual when both of us know what we want? It seems like a big, fat waste of time. I can't wait to feel those massive paws of his on my flesh, to taste his tongue on mine, to run my hands along those muscular forearms. And that little touch of dominance at the end of our chat? Hot enough to melt the polar ice caps. I'm not usually into being bossed around. Usually, I'm very much the one in charge, but this guy is different. This guy makes me want to try anything.

"You off, Dad?" Samantha says as he pulls her in for a bear hug. "I thought you might stay over."

"Nah, love, got a busy day tomorrow. Besides, I told Lauren here she could follow me back to the city."

Gabriel tries to hide his smirk, and Sam arches an eyebrow at me. “Really? She seemed to find her way here just fine.”

“I’m a little nervous about driving on the wrong side of the road in the dark,” I say. “Plus, my phone still seems to think I’m in the States when it comes to maps.” I bite my lip to stop myself from laughing.

All four of us are aware of what’s happening here, but none of us are going to talk about it. Sam knows what kind of man her father is—a player—and she knows the kind of woman I am. Still, she looks a little surprised. I guess it’s hard for any girl to see her dad as a hottie, no matter how good-looking he is.

“Okay,” she says, throwing her hands up in the air, “I suppose you’re both grown-ups, although it doesn’t always feel like it in my father’s case. Drive carefully, both of you—one wrong turn and you could end up losing control. Those roads can be treacherous, you know.”

“Full of dangerous curves,” adds Gabriel, earning himself a slap on the arm from Sam.

I laugh and give my friend a hug. “Thanks for a wonderful party. I had a great time. I hope Max lets you sleep through the night.”

Gabriel slides an arm around Sam’s shoulders, and she gazes up at him with undisguised desire. Yeah. I don’t think these two will be getting much sleep, even if Max doesn’t wake them up.

I walk outside with Sebastian, and we make our way to the big driveway inside the ten-foot-tall electronic gates. Security is a big deal for this family, and from the stories I’ve heard, I totally get why.

Seb stops in front of a black Audi SUV, stares at my bright red Porsche Cayman—known to her friends as Scarlett O’Hara—and whistles. “That’s a hell of a car you’ve got there. Why aren’t I the slightest bit surprised?”

“Are you saying I’m predictable, Sebastian?” I place my hand on my chest and fake a hurt-feelings look.

“I have a feeling you might be the least predictable woman I’ve ever met. My head’s been spinning since I met you, and you know it.”

God, even his voice is sexy—pure London gravel. I stand up on my tippy-toes and drop a quick kiss on his cheek, loving the feel of his neatly trimmed beard bristling against my lips. “I do know it, yeah. Now, are we leaving or not?”

His brown eyes flash at the demanding tone of my voice, and I can tell he isn’t used to being spoken to like this. He is undoubtedly accustomed to being the alpha around women who fall at his feet. I might want to sleep with him, but I definitely won’t be found anywhere near the vicinity of his feet anytime soon. Still, I find the darkening of his expression strangely exciting. It’s full of promise and equally full of threat. Both of them make my pussy throb.

He nods once, abruptly, and climbs into his car. He’s there for a few minutes, and I see the light of his phone screen shining in the front seat. Maybe he’s rearranging a hot date. I sure hope he’s clearing his schedule, because I want him to myself for the next few hours.

The gates open up for us, and I follow him down quiet country lanes lined with mini mansions behind their fences and trees. I wasn’t entirely lying when I said I was nervous about driving on the wrong side of the road in the dark, and I have to suck in deep breaths as his car screeches off ahead of me. Luckily, we seem to be the only vehicles on the road, and I stick close to the glow of his rear lights as we wind

through the starlit scenery.

After about twenty minutes, his blinker flashes on, and he turns off to the right. He heads down a single-lane road that eventually opens up into the courtyard of a picture-perfect thatched cottage. I stop the car but leave my lights on, taking in the cute yellow-stone building and the pretty rose garden outside it. Huh. This doesn't look like a field. It looks like the kind of place Kate Winslet might live in a rom-com.

I climb out of the Porsche and find him leaning against the door of his own car. "I prefer not to fuck in fields." He grins and gestures at the beautiful cottage before us. "This is ours for the night. But if you really insist on doing it outside, we have our very own field out back."

"How did you manage this? Do you have fuck pads scattered across the countryside just in case some crazy American chick comes on to you?"

His laugh is deep and sexy, and it does something to my insides that isn't at all unpleasant. "I don't discriminate. They don't need to be American. And no, I don't have 'fuck pads.' It's an Airbnb. I booked it while I was in the car. If you don't fancy it, no hard feelings."

The cottage is perfect, with ivy-clad walls and a bright red front door. It must have cost a fortune, and I'm flattered he went to the effort. Something inside me, though, won't let it go that easily. This man challenges me, and I don't like to back off from a challenge. Sometimes clinging on to that has been the only thing that's kept me sane. "It's nice, Seb. I suppose fucking alfresco is a young man's game, after all."

His brown eyes crinkle deliciously around the sides, which I love. It's further proof that he laughs long and laughs easy, and let's face it, laughter is often the only appropriate response to life.

“You trying to get a rise out of me, Lauren? Or do you just want to stand out here and chat all night? I’m beginning to think you’re all talk. I’ll be inside if you want me. If not, I’m sure I’ll see you around.”

He strides past me toward the cottage and, after pressing buttons on a lockbox, lets himself in. I stare after him, momentarily taken aback. If I want him? I don’t think I’ve ever wanted a man more. My poor vagina would never forgive me if I drove away now, and I suspect he knows it. Damn. He’s out silver-foxed me. I let out a laugh and follow him inside.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:01 am

I find him in the kitchen, which is all country chic, low-level lighting, and homely charm. He looks totally out of place there, his dark head skimming the beamed ceiling and his hulking physique filling the room. It's like finding a grizzly bear in a doll's house.

The cocky bastard assumed I'd be joining him all along and has already poured two glasses of wine. Sure enough, here I am. Alone with a man I barely know, who is looking at me like I'm his prey. His eyes rake over every inch of my body, and my heart rate speeds up like I just sprinted a mile.

He passes me the wine, and I take a quick gulp, suddenly needing it. I wanted this, but I feel out of my depth. Seb isn't the kind of guy who's going to let me take the lead, and I'm not sure how I feel about that.

He stares at me intensely, and his silence undoes me. The flirting, the banter, the back and forth I could handle—but him studying me like this, so dark and brooding? It's unnerving, and I can't tell if the fluttering in my stomach is from nerves or anticipation.

"Come here," he says simply, the words a low growl. I put the glass down and step toward him, unable to ignore the command in his voice. I stand before him, and he reaches out and puts one huge hand on the side of my neck. He keeps the pressure soft, barely there, the pad of his thumb running across the sensitive flesh between my ear and my jaw. "You nervous, Lauren?"

"No," I lie, leaning into his touch.

“Yes you are. Your pulse is sky high. Your lips are trembling. Your cheeks are flushed. You’re nervous, and you’re turned on. I bet if I slid my hand inside your panties right now, you’d be soaking wet, wouldn’t you?”

My thighs clench together in response to his question, and a wet heat explodes in my core. God, he’s right. The way he’s talking to me, the way he’s looking at me, that one huge hand stroking my skin... It’s all making my panties damp.

“Maybe I am,” I reply, desperate to keep my head. Desperate not to lose myself completely in this man’s powerful aura. “But the only way to know for sure is if you check for yourself.”

His nostrils flare, and he moves like lightning, tugging me toward him so fast and so hard that I slam into his chest. He twists his fist into my hair and yanks my head back, turning my mouth up toward him. His other arm goes around my waist, holding me against him like a metal bar. The rock-hard bulge in his jeans rubs against me, and I murmur at the contact.

“You’ll be wet for me, Lauren. And you’ll come for me. Over and over again. I’m going to make you scream for me, sweetheart. I’m going to fuck you until you think you’re broken, and then I’m going to fuck you some more. You understand me?”

I try to nod, but his grip on my hair makes it impossible. “Use your words, Lauren.”

“Yes, Seb. I understand.”

“And is that what you want? This is your last chance to change your mind.”

Between his cock pressing into me, his muscular arm restraining me, and his fist in my curls, I’m not sure I’ve got a mind left to change. I’ve had my share of sexual partners and I’ve experimented plenty, but nobody has ever had this effect on me. I’m

overwhelmed by the way he's making my body feel, by my arousal already seeping into my panties, by the breathless, booming pound of my heart. Never in a million years would I have expected to enjoy being under a man's control like this, not after the things that happened in Florida. But here I am—desperate, needy, more than ready. “Yes. I want it.”

He hums appreciatively. “That's my good girl. Before I do any of that, I think I need to do like you said and check how wet you are for me. I'm going to lay you down on this table, and I don't want you to move, okay?”

I nod, and he rewards me with a satisfied smile as he rubs his thumb softly across my lips, staring hungrily at my mouth. I've never known a man to be able to raise my temperature with only a thumb before, but this seems to be a night full of firsts.

Without any more warning, he pushes me face down on the pine tabletop and holds me there with one big hand between my shoulder blades. I turn my head to the side, my cheek flat to the cool, smooth wood. His body curves over mine, completely engulfing me. He brushes my hair to one side, and I feel his hot breath against my skin before he trails kisses along the back of my neck. Every touch of his lips is like fire, and the way he has me imprisoned makes me squirm and wriggle against him.

He laughs and lifts the perfect pressure of his body away. “Don't worry, sweetheart. I'll make sure you get what you need—but you'll get it when I decide and not a second before. Now, let's get a closer look at you.”

Taking his time, he sweeps his hands all along my trembling body, exploring my curves, tantalizingly stroking the sides of my breasts as he works his way down. Desperate to feel those hands on me, I try to turn around to give him access, but he immediately pushes me down again, growling his disapproval.

“I said don't move. I see what you're trying to do, sweetheart, and I promise you'll

get everything you're looking for—so long as you behave yourself. Can you do that, do you think? Behave yourself? Or do you want me to carry you out to your car and send you on your way back to the city?"

My palms are flat on the table, and I slap them against the surface once in frustration. I want to tell him to go screw himself, but I can't. My body is alight with need, and as he trails his fingers gently around my neck and to my throat, all I can do is nod.

"Good girl. Now, where was I..." He goes back to his delicious stroking, examining me like I'm a gift he's about to unwrap. "Your waist is fucking tiny," he says, enclosing it with his giant hands. "And this juicy ass is phenomenal."

He rubs his hands across my ass cheeks, squeezing them and kneading them through the thin fabric of my dress, and while he does it, he slips his thick thigh between my legs. I'm desperate to make contact with something, anything, to ease the pressure that's building in my core, and I rub myself shamelessly against him. "Seb!" I gasp.

"I'm here, babe. You can ride my leg like the horny slut you are, but don't move off that table, you hear me?"

"Yes."

He grunts, and in one movement, he pushes my dress all the way up to my waist. My legs are shaking as he lets out an appreciative noise and gives my cheeks a slap. It's not hard enough to really hurt, but it makes my flesh vibrate and my breathing hitch. I've tried spanking before, and it did nothing for me. In fact, I laughed the whole time and ended up back on top, as usual. I'm guessing now that it was with the wrong person, because this feels sensational.

"You like that, Lauren? Because you're fucking my leg like a bitch in heat right now."

He's right, and the rough touch of his jeans and the solid bulk of his muscle rubbing against my clit is bringing me closer and closer to the edge. Just as I feel the heat inside me building to a boiling point, he pulls away. I moan his name and almost cry as the wave of pleasure subsides.

He slaps me once more, then tugs my red lace panties off, exposing me completely. "These shoes, Lauren, are a fucking disgrace. How can you expect to ever keep your panties on when you're wearing these slutty heels? Step up now, one foot at a time."

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:01 am

I do as I'm told, and he removes my underwear. With the fabric held under his nose, he growls, "Jesus. You smell fucking incredible. I'm keeping these, by the way. Something to remember you by. Now, let's see exactly how ready you are."

He kicks my ankles apart, and I know I should feel humiliated, embarrassed. I'm spread out on the table, bare ass in the air, pussy dripping wet, too scared to move in case he stops doing whatever the hell it is he's planning on doing. I'm being held captive by needs I never knew I had and by the way this man so skillfully exploits them.

He runs his palms up my inner thighs, teasing me as he gets closer to the throbbing space between my legs. Every time I think he's going to touch me where I want him most, he pulls away. I'm practically in tears from the frustration of it, from knowing how close I am to the most incredible orgasm while being completely under his power.

"Even your thighs are wet, Lauren. You've made quite a mess. You're desperate for it, aren't you, dirty girl?"

With no warning at all, he pushes two thick fingers inside me, making me yelp and shoving me farther up the table. He lays one hand on the small of my back and holds me still while he finger-fucks me, driving in and out with no mercy. It hurts, but in a filthy way that makes my pussy walls clench around him and my legs shake. "Fuck, you're soaking wet, sweetheart, and I can feel you squeezing me with that tight little cunt of yours. You want more? You want me to fill you up some more?"

"Yes, Seb—please."

He adds another finger, and my pussy stretches around him, slick and greedy. Clawing at the table, I squeal at the delicious sensations flooding my body.

He continues to pound into me, but he starts to stroke my clit with the pad of his thumb as he slides in and out. Each touch sends me further into a frenzy, but it's not quite enough. He brushes against the swollen nub, but never for long enough to push me over the edge. It's absolute torture, and I don't know how much longer I can stand it.

"Beg for it, babe. Tell me what you want. Tell me what you need. You only have to ask for it."

Even in my fevered state, I hate the thought of begging for anything. I clamp my lips together and wonder if I can hold out. Or if I can sneakily rub myself against him and get the release I need.

He seems to read my mind because he suddenly goes still. His massive fingers stay inside me, sweeping and probing at my pussy, hitting all kinds of sensitive spots that I didn't know existed, but he's no longer finger-fucking me in that deliciously raw way. His thumb is no longer sending shockwaves through my eager clit, and my orgasm is slipping away. "Please, Seb. Please don't stop. Please don't leave me like this."

"Are you begging me to make you come, Lauren? I need to hear your words, sweetheart."

"Yes, I'm begging you—please make me come."

"You only had to ask." He moves those fingers in and out of me again, once, twice, three times, harder than ever, making my whole body shake with the impact. Then he slows down, his movements becoming more controlled, more deliberate, his thumb

going to my clit. The things this man can do with one thumb are unbelievable.

He rubs and teases and takes me up and takes me down, over and over again. Every time I think I'm going to explode, he pulls me back. I lose all track of time, all sense of who I am or where we are. The only thing that exists in the entire world is this man, my clit, and the mind-melting orgasm that I know is a mere touch away.

I don't know how long it goes on for, this sweet torture, and I have no idea how he manages it. Sebastian is the first man to control my body like this, taking me so close but knowing exactly when to stop. It's like he's inside my mind, inside my body, experiencing everything I am and timing his every move to perfection. I barely feel human anymore; my bones have turned to liquid, and I'm dizzy with pure pleasure as he strokes and coaxes and commands me. How can my entire essence be controlled by one teeny-tiny nub of swollen flesh? That's a goddamn design flaw right there.

"You're so fucking gorgeous, Lauren. I love watching this beautiful arse of yours bounce around while I do this, and you're so bloody wet my hand is dripping with your cum. Time for your reward, baby." He leans over me, his breath warm against the back of my neck. "Look at me. I want to see your face when I make you come."

I turn my head to the other side and have a moment where I wonder what the hell I must look like. There's no chance my makeup has survived this onslaught, and my eyes are practically rolling back in my head by this stage.

"Beautiful," he says, now concentrating all his efforts on my hypersensitive bud. He circles it gently, letting the pressure and pleasure build and build until I'm shuddering inside and out. The wave heads straight toward me, rising up, spreading like molten lava from my pussy to every other cell in my body. He senses my reaction and works me harder and faster. When the wave finally hits, I drown in it. I have never known anything like this in my entire life, and I fear I'll never be the same again. It goes on and on, rolling over me in a relentless tsunami of sensation.

I cry his name as the pulse of pure ecstasy rips through my body, and warm liquid gushes from my pussy and spills down my thighs. When my climax finally fades, I'm left damp and limp and confused, a trembling mess on the kitchen table.

He watched me throughout, and his dark eyes are shining with satisfaction as he pulls his fingers out of me with an embarrassingly wet sucking sound. I gaze up at him as he licks his fingers one by one. My ass is still hanging out, but I'm incapable of moving. I may never move again. I will simply stay here, half naked on this kitchen table, ready to greet the next Airbnb guests with an unexpected house feature.

Eventually, once he's finished licking my cum off his fingers, he grins at me. It's a grin that can only be described as cheeky, and it's a world away from the serious, masterful man he was only minutes ago. In fact, he looks like a naughty schoolboy.

I smile back, finally feeling some return of normality after having my brain melted by his wicked fingers. "You look like the cat that got the cream."

"That's exactly what I am, sweetheart. And your cream tasted delicious. You okay?"

"No. I'm not sure I will ever recover. Where did you learn to do that? Did you take a course? Study pussy in college?"

He laughs. "Nah. All-natural talent. That and a bit of practice. Can't say I've ever met a pussy I liked as much as yours, though. The way you came for me just then? Un-fucking-believable."

As he speaks, he smooths my dress back down over my ass and helps me to my feet. I'm still wearing my heels, and my whole body is shaking in the aftermath of what this man did to me. As soon as I'm upright, I get a head rush and stagger to the side like I'm drunk. I have been orgasmed to death, and now I will pay the price. I try to grab the edge of the table, but even my hands are floppy.

Seb catches me and swoops me up into his arms. He holds me there effortlessly, my head against his muscular chest, his bulging, tattooed biceps swelling out of his T-shirt. He's not just big, this man, he's strong. For a moment, I let myself relax into it, feeling safe and secure in his embrace.

He drops a surprisingly gentle kiss on my forehead and carries me out of the room. "It's okay," I protest. "You can put me down now."

"I'll put you down when I'm good and ready. Don't worry, I'm not going to drop you. You're safe with me."

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:01 am

Chapter

Four

LAUREN

Ha, I've heard that one before. Safety is a myth, along with love, but it's nice to play along for a while. Let myself dream.

I give in and allow myself to snuggle up to him, my hands around his neck. "I could get used to this," I say as he carries me up the stairs. "I may never bother walking again. Will you be my slave, Sebastian?"

"Anytime, sweetheart. I will carry you around and worship your cunt whenever you ask."

My eyes widen at his language, but there's a ripple of pleasure down below in response. What is this man doing to me?

He steps into a bedroom and throws me onto the bed without any attempt to make it gentle. I bounce twice, and he bursts out laughing. "There you go, madam. Comfy?"

"Perfectly, thank you. This is nice."

He gazes around the room, taking in the chintzy curtains and floral wallpaper. A big vase of fresh pink roses is on the dresser, and the whole place smells of their sweet floral fragrance.

“I suppose so. But I prefer the view from here.” He stares at me hungrily, and I shiver at the intensity in his eyes. I’m excited, but also a little scared. This man completely unraveled me with one hand on a kitchen table while he was still fully clothed. What the hell is he capable of in a bed?

“Me too,” I reply, hoping he doesn’t hear me gulp. I’m not lying. He really is gorgeous. I want to see his body, to touch his skin, to feel him move inside me. I want everything, and I want it now. I’m greedy for him in a way I’ve never been greedy for a man before, and I can’t tear my eyes away.

“Like what you see, Hot Sauce?”

“Hot sauce? Are you seriously comparing me to something you’d put on a taco?”

“Well, not going to lie, I do love tacos. That’s why I’m about to eat yours.”

“Ha. Funny. But my pussy is tired. Gloria needs a little break.”

He laughs. “Your pussy is called Gloria?”

“She certainly is. What’s your dick called?”

“I’ve never given him a name. But if I did, I’d have to add ‘the Magnificent’ after it. You know, like an emperor or some such shit?”

“Really?” I say, laughing. “He’s an egomaniac, is he?”

“Nah. Just knows his worth. Do you have names for any other parts of your body, Lauren?”

“I do,” I say, stretching out on the bed, luxuriating in the feel of the soft fabric of the

sheets. “Maybe I’ll introduce you to them if you’re lucky.”

“I think we both know that luck has nothing to do with it—and that me and your whole body will be the very best of friends by the end of the night.”

I wonder what Thelma and Louise will have to say about that, but even as I do, I can feel my nipples hardening under my dress. I’m guessing they’ll be very pleased to make his acquaintance.

The flirtatious conversation has helped me get my balance back, and I wonder if that was his intention all along. He must have known how intense that whole thing was for me, even if he doesn’t know how much of a surprise it was.

Giving up control does not come naturally to me, but I can’t argue with the results. I might hate myself for it later, but being Sebastian’s good little girl and begging him to make me come was the most fulfilling sexual encounter of my life. So far, at least. Something tells me it might be topped before the night is out.

“Before we go any further, sweetheart, we should discuss logistics. Do I need condoms?”

“I’m clean, and you don’t need to worry about me getting pregnant. But thanks for asking. You?”

“Clean, and even less likely to get pregnant.”

Funny too. Could he be any more perfect right now? “Now that we’ve cleared that up, is there any chance you might take your clothes off? Or do I have to beg for that too?”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:01 am

“Not this time, sweetheart. I’ll give you a freebie.”

He pulls his top off over his head, and I grin at the sight of his bare chest. He’s absolutely massive and as impressively built as I hoped. His broad shoulders are slabs of muscle, and his chest and abs look rock hard. “Somebody works out.”

“Somebody does. Gotta look after yourself, right? Especially at my age.”

I giggle at that, because he’s in better shape than most much younger men. His body is not the pretty, perfectly chiseled form of a Hollywood star, but the solid, brawny, and irresistibly masculine physique of a man who knows how to use his body in the real world.

He runs his company, Archangel, with Gabriel, and although they’ve now branched out into boutique hotels and clubs, it started as a small two-man security setup. My familybackground means I know “security” is often a forgiving term for many different ways of doing business, not all of them legit. No, I have zero illusions about what kind of man Sebastian Donovan is or how he’s made his way in the world. That sexy body of his isn’t just for show.

He’s now standing at the bottom of the bed in a pair of black boxer briefs, his cock and balls struggling against the fabric as his eyes devour me. “To answer your question, yes. I like what I see very much.”

I’m desperate to pull that fabric away and feel the solid heft of him in my hand, to run my tongue along his shaft and drive him as crazy as he drove me—but I also want to tease, to play for a while. Maybe it’s because I need to take back a bit of control.

Perhaps just because it's fun.

I slide to the edge of the bed, looking up at his face. His nostrils flare, and his pupils are blown out with desire. There's a tremor in his thick thighs, and it's clear he's having to exert a lot of self-control to keep himself from pouncing.

I very slowly pull my dress up my thighs to my waist, spreading my legs wide and putting on a show. He stole my panties earlier, so my bare pussy is on full display, making him suck in a deep breath. I let my hand wander down there, briefly brushing my folds, and run one finger along my wetness. It's all for him—I'm way too sensitive for anything more than a gentle touch—but I can tell from the sudden twitch in his boxers that it's having the desired effect. I love watching men jerk themselves off, and most men love watching women play with themselves too.

I push my finger inside myself, letting him get a good view of it all, thrilled by the effect it's having on him. Then I carry on pulling my dress up, taking my time, enjoying every moment of his attention as he stares at each little scrap of flesh I reveal to him. I finally tug the fabric over my head and sit there in only my black lacy bra, my curls flowing down my shoulders. "Fuck me, Lauren," he says with a sigh.

"That's the general idea, Seb."

I reach behind and take my time unhooking my bra. I may look calm and in control, but my fingers are shaking, and I fumble the simple action I've done a million times before. I'm just as turned on as he is, and seeing that huge bulge is making me wet again. I want him inside me so much my pussy walls are contracting at the mere thought of him filling me up.

My bra falls from my chest, and I cup my breasts in my hands and squeeze them together, the flesh spilling out of my fingers. My plan is to tease him until he can't stand it anymore. He deserves a little sweet torture after what he did to me on the

kitchen table.

It's a good plan, but Seb has other ideas. He lets out a low growl, and in a flash, he's on me. He pushes me down onto the bed until I'm flat and naked beneath him, straddling me, his thighs clamped on either side of my hips. His cock presses against me, still infuriatingly trapped inside his boxers. He takes my wrists in one big hand and pins them firmly above my head. I am completely at his mercy, and it's one of the hottest things I've ever experienced. "Such a little tease. Trying to drive me crazy, are you?"

"Yeah. And I'd say from the feel of you that it worked." I grind myself up against him and am rewarded by a shudder that runs through his whole being.

"God, that feels good, sweetheart. But I need to explore this hot fucking body of yours first. I will be fucking you, don't worry—but I'll be fucking you when I say so and not a moment before, understand?"

"Are you always this bossy?"

"Only when I'm with someone who needs discipline—and you obviously do."

He thrusts his hips, and his rock-hard length hits my sweet spot so perfectly that I throb with need. I want to throw my legs around him, tug him closer, rub up against him until I climax, but I can only move as much as he allows me to.

He rocks his hips back and forth a few times, applying a slow pressure that drives me wild. I don't recognize the sounds coming from my own mouth, and every ounce of feeling in my body seems to be throwing a party in my clit. He's grinning as he watches me try to writhe closer, and part of me hates him for it—but part of me is relishing his dominance. This is a man who knows what he is doing, who knows how to play every inch of a woman's body to perfection, and all I can do is enjoy the ride.

He leans down, his bulky body blocking the moonlight that floods in through the window, and kisses me. The pressure of his lips is incredibly soft to start with, a complete contrast to the firm grip he has on my wrists and the muscular thighs holding me in place. He coaxes and caresses, and his tongue slides to meet mine in a rhythm that echoes the thrusts of his erection against my pulsing clit.

His mouth trails along my jawline, my neck, the skin beneath my ears. He nips and nuzzles and licks, and I see stars as he works his magic. “You taste amazing, Hot Sauce. I think I’m going to lick you all over. Your skin is addictive.”

“Please, Seb,” I murmur as he explores me. “Let go of my hands. I want to touch you too.”

“How can I resist when you asked so nicely?” He releases me, and I wrap my arms around his neck. I bury my fingers in his thick silver-streaked hair and pull him closer. My enthusiasm ignites him, and he kisses me much harder, his tongue demanding, our lips battling. It goes on for so long that I’m gasping for breath when he finally pulls away, my fingers left resting limply on those brutish shoulders of his.

“Wow! That was a hell of a kiss.”

“It was, sweetheart. And now I’m going to kiss the rest of you too. I’ve been fantasizing about getting your nipples into my mouth since the moment I met you.”

He sits up, places my arms down on the bed, and pushes my legs wide apart so he can kneel between them. He’s all hard muscle and intensity, and seeing him move my body around so effortlessly and with such confidence has my core contracting.

He runs his hands up either side of my waist, then smoothly up my ribcage, coming to rest directly under my breasts. I’m breathing way too fast now, my chest heaving as he draws little circles with his fingers on the sensitive flesh. My nipples are already

hard, and I strain upward in an attempt to catch his wandering fingers.

“The more you do that, the longer I’ll make you wait, sweetheart. I want those big brown nipples of yours begging for me first.”

I groan, wanting to argue, but he means it. I force myself to calm down, to be still, even though I can feel the wet heat building up between my legs.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:01 am

He shakes his head and winks at me. “This is killing you, isn’t it? I can practically hear you screaming at me.”

I screw up my face and nod. I can’t risk speaking, and his fingers are getting nearer and nearer to where I want them to be. His touch is delicate, soft, teasing—completely at odds with how he looks. My lips part, and I sigh at the first brush of his rough skin against my taut peaks, the way he skims them and makes them sit up higher.

His expression is fierce enough to make me feel like a goddess. I don’t think a man has ever looked at me with such concentration, such committed passion. It’s like all that matters to him in the world right now are my nipples and what he can make me feel through them. The answer is: absolutely everything. I’ve always been sensitive there, but this is next level crazy.

His smile is served up with a shade of wolf as he rolls one nipple between his thumb and finger, kneading it with exactly the right level of force. The sudden pain sends a delicious wave of pleasure down to my clit.

He leans down, pulls the other nipple into his mouth, and sucks with a deep, insistent rhythm. He carries on rolling one, sucking the other, then flicking at it with his tongue until I’m almost delirious. At some point, he swaps, paying each nipple the same delicious attention, and my whole body shakes as he works me over. With my hand on the back of his head, I press him closer, never wanting this to stop.

His free hand roams the rest of my body, stroking and probing and molding, his fingers drifting between my legs and finding the wetness that lies between them. I

thought I was too sensitive, but as his thumb gently circles my clit, I realize I was wrong. None of the normal rules apply anymore. This man seems to know my body better than I know it myself. Between his tongue, his teeth, and his fingers, I'm building again, murmuring his name as he skillfully sucks and strokes me to the edge of climax.

He lifts his mouth away from my nipple with a filthy wet popping sound. "Look at me, sweetheart. I want to see you come again. Soak my fingers in that gorgeous cum of yours."

He slides one finger inside me and pumps in and out while he keeps up the perfect pressure on my slick, swollen bud, and I buck my hips up to meet him. I can't help it, he's driving me out of my mind, and I need to come more than I've needed anything before. My body is a swirling vortex of sensations, all of them heading in a tingling mass down to my center. I'm so close, and he senses it, leaning down to give one of my nipples a firm and unexpected bite. The shock pushes me over the edge, the pain and pleasure flooding me with liquid bliss. I melt inside, and for a second, I think I'm going to black out. He continues to rub at my clit, slowly and gently, managing my comedown, muttering my name as he eases me back to reality.

"That's my good girl. You've soaked my hand and the sheets. You're so fucking gorgeous, Lauren. Every part of you is fucking perfect, and the way you respond to me... fucking hell. I need to be inside you now."

"About damn time," I murmur cheekily.

He laughs as he tears off his underwear and throws them to the side. "Don't push me, sweetheart, or I might change my mind."

I prop myself up on rubbery arms, feeling like my bones have been liquefied, and gaze at his groin. Jesus. I knew it was big, but now that it's released into the wild, I'm

slightly intimidated. With most men, you get a choice between length and girth—but this bad boy? He’s got the lot, and he’s more than ready to go, standing proud, pearls of pre-cum oozing from his crown. “I really don’t think you’re going to change your mind, Seb.”

He laughs again—I was right, he does laugh easy—and shrugs his door-busting shoulders. “I think you could be right. I’m going to sink myself so deep into you, you’ll feel me in your cunt all week long.”

I blush, which is ridiculous given the fact that I’m naked and spread-legged, covered in my own juices. Seb and his dirty talk just does it for me.

I expect him to be rough or to flip me onto all fours and take me from behind. I wouldn’t have objected—I remember how intoxicating those ass slaps were. Instead, he lowers himself between my thighs, one arm on either side of my face, muscles bulging with strength and control. Our eyes meet, and there’s a flicker of something unexpected between us. Something more than lust. I’m not sure I’m ready for those kinds of flickers, so I wrap my legs around his ass and pull him down toward me.

The head of his cock nudges against my opening, and I’m so wet he slides inside easily. He takes it slow, edging in inch by meaty inch, his eyes on mine throughout. I’m guessing with a dick this big, he’s learned to be careful. It’s a chivalrous idea, but I really don’t need—or want—chivalry right now.

“You okay?”

“I’m more than okay. I’m not fragile, Seb. I want you inside me. All of you. Stop trying to pretend you’re a gentleman and fuck me.”

Something seems to snap in him, and he drives into me so hard I’m shoved up the mattress and my head collides with the padded headboard. I feel a delicious stinging

stretch as he fills me and let out a yelp when he rails into me a second time—and a third and a fourth.

He grunts and hoists my legs over his shoulders, tugging me closer and holding my hips firmly. His balls slap against me, and my pussy walls contract at the relentless friction. I don't usually come from straight fucking, not without any contact with my clit, but the tingling deep inside me says that might all be about to change. Each thrust triggers another wave of pleasure, and my head is spinning with the unfamiliar sensations.

He uses one hand to squeeze my breast, all the while keeping up that never-ending, brain-jarring pace. I am literally being fucked senseless.

“I feel you squeezing my cock, Lauren. I know you're close. Let go, sweetheart—come for me.”

He increases the speed of his thrusts, his hips pistoning into me, his eyes full of need as he stares down at the place where we're joined. The sight of him is what pushes me over the edge yet again—this big, brawny man and his huge cock, the way he's looking at our bodies as though he's witnessing something sacred.

My eyes roll back in my head as the pulsations in my pussy spread through my whole body, engulfing me in an ocean of ecstasy. “Seb!”

“I know, baby, I know.” He keeps hold of my legs, and my body shakes beneath him. With one final thrust, he finds his own release, throwing his head back and roaring as he empties himself inside me.

He collapses, his head landing beside mine on the pillow, my legs still wrapped around his firm ass. I drop them onto the bed, spread on either side of him, as breathless as he is. “Fuck me, sweetheart. That was intense.”

“You think?” I pant.

“I think. You tell me you’ve had more intense than that, you’re lying. Christ. I think I might stay here forever.”

Stroking his hair, I drop a kiss on the side of his head. I can think of far worse ideas. He reluctantly pulls himself out of me, flips onto his back, and tugs me close. I’m wrapped in strong arms, my face against his mammoth chest, his heart hammering. He strokes my shoulders and sighs contentedly.

The mood grows intimate now that the sex is done. Too intimate. His hand glides through my curls in a way that’s overly familiar, and his breath is warm against me. When I glance up, I see those laughter-crinkled eyes half closed. I’m tired too. Exhausted, in fact, and suddenly a little freaked out as well. This man has done things to me that nobody ever has before. He made me beg and he controlled me, and I enjoyed every damn second of it. This is all so out of character that I don’t know who I am anymore.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:01 am

I slide out of his arms and start to gather my clothes. He sits up, wiping his sleepy eyes. “What are you doing? I told you we had the place for the night. Come back to bed.”

I hook up my bra and pull my dress on. I’m sure I look like a tramp, but my walk of shame will only be as far as my own car.

“Sorry, Seb, but I don’t do sleepovers. You can keep the panties though.” I give him a wink. “Like you said, something to remember me by.”

Before he can answer, before I can lose myself in the disappointment I see on his face, I rush downstairs. I’m too vulnerable. Too exposed. I race toward the waiting arms of Scarlett O’Hara and concentrate solely on the dangers of navigating the dark and unfamiliar roads.

Chapter

Five

SEBASTIAN

“You all right, Boss?”

I glance over at Alex Brodie, one of Archangel’s toughest employees, and raise my eyebrows. “What the fuck are you asking me that for? You’re the one with a black eye and a split lip.”

He grimaces and rubs his hand across his jaw. “Yeah. I am aware. It’s just that, well, you were a lot more...”

“A lot more what?”

“A lot more everything today. Not to brag, but I can hold my own in a fight, and you don’t usually knock seven shades of crap out of me as easily as you did then. You were like a man possessed, and when I fight like that, it’s usually because I’m working through some shit. All I’m saying is, if there’s anything I can help with, let me know, okay? Even if you just need someone to listen.”

I know he’s being sincere, but I still want to punch the cheeky young pup in the face. He’s also right. Alex and I work out together at least once a week—and by work out, I mean fight. He’s ex-Special Forces and hard as nails, so he gives me a good run for my money. Gabriel used to be my sparring partner, but he’s understandably got a lot less spare time these days, and what time he does have, I’d rather him spend it with my daughter and grandson.

Alex usually does more than hold his own, and there’s never been a clear winner between us in these sessions. Until today. Today, I had hefty old demons I needed to exorcise, and Alex happened to be on the receiving end. And now he’s sitting there and offering to be, what, my spiritual counselor? Fuck that. “If I need someone to listen? Who do you think I am, Alex, some cunt who suddenly wants to talk about his ‘journey’ and cry on your manly shoulder? Give it a break, numbnuts.”

He laughs and waves his hand in a gesture of surrender. “All right, all right, no need to get your knickers in a twist—it was just a thought.”

“Yeah, well. I don’t pay you to have thoughts, do I? How are you and Jacob getting on with the McIverson situation?”

I stand up on the mat and roll my shoulders. He might look worse than me, but I took a few knocks too, and I'll feel it later if I don't get in the shower or ice bath soon. In days gone by, I'd have been lucky to manage either, but as Archangel has grown, one of the few luxuries we've invested in has been this gym and training suite at our HQ. It's a staff perk and an essential part of keeping my head on straight. I offer Alex my hand and he takes it, pulling himself upright. He's the same height as me, a shade over six foot, but built a lot leaner. What he lacks in bulk, though, he makes up for in technique. He knows more dirty tricks than anyone I've ever come across, including pro fighters.

He's not been with us as long as some, but he and Jacob Cavanagh proved themselves in the best way possible—by helping me and Gabriel rescue Samantha from a scumbag who kidnapped her while she was pregnant with Max. After that, I'd trust him and Jake with my life.

“Work in progress, guv,” he says, shrugging. “As we thought, seems to be the dipshit younger son who's causing all the bother. McIverson senior and his older lad are reasonable men. They might not like the deal on the table, but they know they're all out of choices. Young Jimmy's looking to make a name for himself, though, even if that name is only ever going to be useless twat. You know the type.”

“I do. Skinny streak of piss who wants to prove himself by playing the big man.”

“Exactly that. Leave it with us though. We can be very persuasive.”

I nod. The shooting pain in my left kidney is proof of how persuasive he can be.

Archangel has been branching out, starting with clubs and bars, a few small hotels. We've also recently started the process of acquiring a chain of London gastropubs from the aforementioned McIverson family. It's not quite what you'd call a hostile takeover, but it also isn't the best deal in the world for them—basically because

they're desperate. They took a perfectly decent business and ran it into the ground with sloppy management, too many favors for mates, and piss-poor decision-making. They ended up borrowing money from the wrong types, and now they're deep in the shit. It's reached the stage where either they take our cash offer or they start looking forward to life with less working limbs than they're used to. If they're lucky. The blokes they borrowed from aren't the kind to repossess their car—they're the kind to run them over with it, then piss on their bleeding bodies.

We'll have our lawyers sort out the finer details, but we let Alex and Jacob take the lead on the initial process. It's a step up in responsibility, and they'll get a share of the profits, assuming all goes well. I trust them, but I'm keeping an eye on the thing, just in case. Frank McIverson is okay for a complete screwup, but Jimmy has been making noises about fighting us off and "blowing us up to the world" if we don't sweeten the deal. Fuck knows what that means. Maybe he's got plans to out us on his YouTube channel or whatever.

I doubt the idiot knows anything that could harm us, but it's best to keep a lid on that kind of shit—in any way necessary. Gabriel is keen to go more legit and I understand why, but I'll always be a bit of a thug. Always have been, always will be. Like my dear old pa used to say between swigs of vodka and lashing out with his belt, I have the heart of a devil and the soul of Satan.

"And how's the new lad working out?" I ask.

Alex nods, unable to hide a grimace when his lip starts bleeding again. "Taylor? He's good, Boss. Bit green around the edges, thinks he's the dog's bollocks, usual stuff for a dumb fuck in his early twenties, but I think he's got what it takes."

Taylor joined us a few months ago, straight from a similar firm in Manchester. He was looking for a fresh start in the big city and came highly recommended for his complete commitment to using whatever violence was needed without enjoying it too

much. It's a fine line to walk, and I'm glad to hear the boy is doing okay. So far, he clams up whenever he's around me, and I need to get him in here on the mats one day soon, see what he's made of. You're not part of the Archangel team until one of the bosses has beaten the shit out of you.

Alex makes his farewells and sets off. I wait until he's gone before I give in to the pain, doubling over slightly and swearing. I'm the only one here right now, so I can afford to drop the tough-guy act a notch as I head to what the fella who installed it called the "recovery suite." I think he had in mind recovering from a strenuous workout, but truthfully it's been a useful spot when some off-the-books medical treatment has been required as well. We don't keep essential oils and exfoliating body scrubs back here, but we do have a decent stash of suture kits, bandages, and local anesthetic.

I rinse off in the shower, then head to the sauna. Maybe a bit of heat will help. That and possibly a giant mallet to the brain to stop it functioning for a few hours. The fighting was a good distraction, but now I'm back to having too much time to think.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:01 am

Alex hit the nail on the head when he said he thought I was working through some shit. Specifically, I'm working through some Lauren Hayes-shaped shit. The woman has messed with my head, and I can't stop thinking about her. It's ridiculous after one night, no matter how spectacular that night was, and I need to shake her off. I'm a busy man, and I don't have the kind of job where I can afford to go pussy-blind and make mistakes. I've already been out to spend the night in my cabin in the woods, which is normally all it takes to clear my head.

I get into the sauna stark-bollock naked, because it's my fucking sauna and I can, and pour water on the coals. The sizzle of warmth seeps into my skin, and I massage my quads as I settle down on the bench. Why the fuck am I so fucked up about this one? What's so different about Lauren Hayes that she's snuck under my skin like this? Is she really that special, or is it just that she walked out on me like she did?

Got to admit, I'm not used to that. No woman has walked out on me since Samantha's mum, Alice, when I was only sixteen years old—and she didn't so much walk as get scooped away by her parents. They hit the roof when they found out she was pregnant and whisked their daughter away from the bad boy who'd done the damage: yours truly.

Since then, I've been in and out love so many times I've lost count. I genuinely feel it at the time, but looking back now, I don't think any of it was real. I've been engaged five times without ever making it up the aisle, last time to the perfectly lovely Kayleigh. I found out later that the lads in the office wererunning a cheeky sweepstake on how long it'd be between the engagement party and me dumping her. Sounds funny on the surface, but I don't like what it says about me. I'm not a young man anymore, and I'm a fucking granddad—there's no glory in being an eternal

playboy. I've seen what Samantha and Gabriel have together, and who wouldn't want that for themselves?

The problem is... Well, dammit, the problem is me. I grew up under the thumb of psychopaths until the age of twelve, and when things finally got bad enough for me to be taken off them, I was in the care system for years. After the first few foster parents showed signs of being even more mental and abusive than the biological set or sent me packing because I was too much trouble, I made up my mind that I wouldn't give a shit anymore. If nobody wanted to love me, that was fine. I'd make myself even more unlovable, and the world could go fuck itself. I might have the heart of a devil, but nobody would ever get to break it.

Now, here I am—feeling my years and brooding over a slip of a girl I've only just met. It's infatuation, I tell myself. No different from all the other times I've been here, wondering if I've finally met “the one.” Crap. I sound like a teenage girl. Worse actually, because there's no way Sam would have talked like that when she was a teenager.

What the fuck has Lauren Hayes done to me? All I can think about is the way those soulful brown eyes of hers clouded over when she came, like she was having some kind of spiritual awakening. The way she cried my name when I was inside her. The way she submitted to me despite being ninety-nine percent spitfire—I could tell submission didn't come naturally to her. The way her tight pussy walls squeezed my cock so well it felt like we'd been purpose built to fuck each other.

I groan and punch the wooden wall of the sauna as the cock in question springs to life. I stare it down, the traitor—why is it reacting like this at the mere memory of that woman? Of hersoft, golden-brown skin, her thick, dark curls, her taut nipples dancing beneath my fingers. My hand goes to my shaft, gripping hard. I don't know if I want to jerk off or pull it off, I'm so messed up. I've shot my load thinking about her several times in the last few days, and I always feel annoyed with myself

afterwards. She walked out. She hasn't been in touch.

She's made it pretty clear that it was a one-night-only deal, and she doesn't want anything more from me. So why am I still rubbing my cock and hearing her voice in my head all the bloody time?

This is obviously more of an ice-bath situation. I march angrily out of the sauna and force myself to sink completely under and only emerge when I run out of breath, completely soaked and shivering at the subzero temperature. I glance down at my now far less enthusiastic cock. Well. That's one problem taken care of, at least. All that's left is for me to get through a full day of planning meetings, then take care of the bigger issue. I have to see Lauren and get some closure. Fuck. What am I turning into?

Chapter

Six

SEBASTIAN

I chat to Beth, the receptionist at the Donovan, Cook, and Hayes office, as she prepares to leave for the day. She's used to me dropping in like this and always flirts with me when I perch myself on the edge of her desk and ask how she's doing. I don't read anything into that. Beth is the kind of girl that flirts with everyone—it's just her way of being nice. Besides, she really is too young for me. She drinks her coffee out of a One Direction mug, for fuck's sake.

I make my way through to the offices in back, pausing to check out the camera system as I go. As relatively recent events have shown us, you can't be too careful when it comes to personal safety. Archangel security takes all its clients seriously, but this client is top of the list. These ordinary looking offices contain precious cargo, and

I never want anyone to be able to hurt Samantha again. She insisted on no cameras inside the offices, for client privacy, but I did persuade her to accept the installation of panic buttons in every room.

If it was up to me and Gabriel, we'd probably wrap her up in cotton wool and lock her away in a padded room to keep her safe for the rest of her life, but she's fiercely independent. Before Gabriel and the life she leads now, she spent years married to a psychopathic cunt who fooled the world into thinking he was a loving husband. He even fooled me, which I'll never forgive myself for. What she went through would have broken other women, but Sam came out of it stronger than ever. She's a fucking walking miracle, that kid of mine.

I smile at an unexpected but familiar sound from her office—baby Max letting us all know that he's in the building. This was supposed to be one of Sam's days off. She usually only comes in on Mondays while she's phasing back in from maternity leave, and I suspect I'll be in for a grilling now. Fuck. Might as well get it over with.

I find her trying to change a nappy while also talking on her mobile. The phone is tucked under her chin, and Max is on her desk, kicking his pudgy legs in the air and squalling.

“Yes, I do understand that the judge is a busy man,” she says, her businesslike tone not at all affected by the fact that she's wrestling a baby. “And as you can tell, I'm a busy woman. And yes, again, I'm also aware that it's almost six on a Friday—which means we've now been waiting all week to hear from him. I'll expect a call back within the hour, or I'll be taking this matter further. He might be a judge, but he's not God, and rules apply to him as well. Goodbye.”

“Trouble?” I ask, taking over for her on the nappy front. I missed out on all of this with Sam—she only came back into my life when she was twelve and her mum died—and I find that I weirdly like it. I chuck Max under the chin and he gurgles at

me. He looks innocent enough, but some sixth sense warns me that there's trouble afoot, and sure enough, I manage to dodge out of the way just as he sends a spectacular arc of pee flying up into the air. Nice try, little fella.

“Nothing I can't handle. Thanks, Dad. Like you, I enjoy a good fight, just different kinds. What are you doing here anyway? Not that I don't appreciate the help.” I finish the cleanup routine and fit Max snugly back into his little sleepsuit, then strap him into his seat and rock him gently. He's tired but battling against it. Enjoying a fight must be in the genes. “Can't a doting dad pay an impromptu visit to his favorite daughter every now and then?”

She narrows her eyes at me. “I'm your only daughter, and yes, of course you can. Except I saw you yesterday for lunch, and you didn't know I was here today because it was a last-minute thing. Channeling my inner Sherlock Holmes, I'd deduce that you're not here to see me at all. Nick's off sick and you two aren't close, so that leaves... Oh, let me think—could it be Lauren?”

I shrug. I actually feel fucking embarrassed about it. When it comes to my love life, Samantha acts more like my disapproving mum than my kid. “I can neither confirm nor deny that allegation, ma'am. But if I was here to see Lauren, is she in?”

“Yes, but two things to mention—one, you're out of luck because she has a hot date tonight with a cello player. And more importantly, she's with a client, and it's a difficult case, so don't go barging around like a bull in a china shop. There's a traumatized woman in there with her, one who is trying to find the courage to leave her abusive husband—and you don't exactly give off a non-threatening vibe to anyone who doesn't know you.”

She's right. If I had my way, I'd beat the shit out of any man who raised a hand to a woman or child, break every bone in their worthless, cowardly bodies, and dump them in a landfill with the rest of the garbage. Men who abuse their families are scum

of the lowest order, and if I ever retire from Archangel, I'll make it my life's mission to hunt them down for free. Vigilante granddad. But I understand that I don't exactly look reassuring from the outside, what with my tattoos and intimidating size. "Fair enough, love."

She pats my arm reassuringly. "You're a big softie at heart, Dad, and one of the most protective people to ever walk the planet. Looks can be deceptive. But I have to say—this thing with Lauren, whatever it is?" I stay silent. I have no idea what it is either. "Please don't fuck it up. She's a friend, and she's a great lawyer. A real asset to the firm. It's your own business if you want to be a manwhore, but don't drag me into it, okay?"

"That's not fair, Sam. Do you know how many women have been in my life since Max was born? I'll save you the effort—none."

"Okay. Well, I didn't know that." She smiles up at me, and her big brown eyes melt away any hurt at her accusation, no matter how true it might be. "Are you trying to tell me that you're finally growing up, Sebastian Donovan? Should I be calling the paramedics?"

"Cheeky madam. Still on for next Tuesday?"

"That depends. Are you still cooking that green Thai curry?"

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:01 am

I laugh and head out of her office. I love cooking, especially for my girl. It's one of the greatest joys in the world to see someone so special to you enjoying food you've prepared for them. I wonder what Lauren's favorite dish is and whether I could make it for her. I bet whoever she's seeing tonight isn't as good in the kitchen—or anywhere else—as I am. Why the fuck is she going on a date at all?

I stop dead in my tracks in the corridor and slap myself on the forehead. What the hell? I came here to clear the air, to get her out of my system. I planned to see her, prove to myself she was nothing special, and move on. Not to plan a romantic night in with her. Maybe Sam's right—she should call the paramedics.

I don't have long to think about my impending mental decline, because a human whirlwind comes steaming down the hallway and crashes right into my legs. At least I'm assuming it's human from the fact that it has a mop of curly blond hair, two arms, and two legs. One of the arms is encased in a plaster cast, and I'm careful to avoid it as I squat down on the floor next to the kid. There's a playroom set up for children at the back of the building, where they can hang out while their mums and dads sort out the grown-up stuff, but he must have got bored. He looks the type—fizzing with energy and mischief.

He's maybe eight or nine, his big blue eyes looking up at me with a mix of concern and curiosity. "Bloody hell, son, where are you going in such a hurry?"

"Nowhere. I was just seeing if my new trainers had superpowers." I glance down at the box-fresh white tennis shoes at the end of his skinny legs. "Right. Well, looks to me like they do. I've never seen anyone move so fast in my life."

His face lights up with delight, those cautious eyes now bright. “Honest? You’re not bullshitting me?”

“Nicky,” a woman calls from down the corridor. “You know what I’ve told you about that word. I’m so sorry, is he bothering you?”

“Nah,” I reply. “No problem.” She nods but doesn’t go back inside the office. She hovers in the doorway, keeping a careful eye on her lad. The kid pulls a face and whispers to me, “That’s my mum. She says she doesn’t like swearing, but she does it all the time when she thinks I’m not listening, so I call bullshit on that one.”

I laugh and help him to his feet. He swipes blond curls away from his face and looks me up and down without any shame. “You’re a big man. I think you’re even bigger than my dad.”

“Well, you’ll be a big man one day too. It just takes time and a bit of effort. Maybe a few steaks. What happened to your arm, pal?”

His faces shuts down in an instant, all that energy gone, and he stares intensely at the floor. “I fell over. I’m really clumsy.”

I suck in a harsh breath as a ball of pressure slams into my chest, hitting me as hard as one of Alex’s punches. Yeah, I was a really clumsy kid too. I was always accidentally falling on my dad’s fists, boots, and lit cigarettes. One time I was so fucking clumsy, I tied myself to the radiator and beat my own back with a cane until it bled. “Come on. Let’s get you back to your mum, eh?”

As we approach, her eyes fly over him as though she’s checking for new injuries. She’s a pretty woman, petite with fair hair and a cute button nose. Exactly the type those assholes often seem to go for. There are dark circles around her eyes, and she’s wearing a cuffed long-sleeved blouse buttoned right up to her throat. Assuming she’s

not Amish, I can think of two reasons for that—the husband is a controlling bastard who’s told her to keep herself covered, or she’s hiding bruises. Fuck, looking at the nervous way she’s chewing on her lip and wringing her hands together, could be both.

The idea of what these two are going through makes me so mad I want to punch something, but I make an extra effort to be quiet and respectful as we all walk back into Lauren’s office. I knew it was hers, obviously, but it still takes my breath away when I see her again. She has her curls pinned up, and she’s wearing a plain little black dress that should look perfectly businesslike, but on her looks like pure sin. I nod at her once, abruptly, and look away again. This really isn’t the time for getting yet another unwanted hard-on.

“Seb. I see you’ve met Nicky, and this is his mom, Caroline.” I consider offering her my hand to shake, but I suspect she’ll bolt at the slightest movement. Being in a room with a man like me is probably difficult enough for her. “Nice to meet you, Caroline. Sebastian Donovan. You’ve got a great lad there.”

Her face lights up, and she tugs him to her for a cuddle. He pretends to hate it, but it’s obvious he’s proud and pleased. That’s what these two should always be doing—beaming away like this. It burns me that some bullying twat is reducing them to rubble just because he can. “Look, this is undoubtedly a complicated situation, Caroline, and we’ve only just met—but what can I do to help?”

Shock crosses her delicate, worried features, followed quickly by suspicion. “Are you a lawyer too?”

“I’m not. I leave that to the clever types like Lauren here. But there are other ways to be helpful. Maybe if you ever need protection or a secure place to stay? Even if Nicky here fancies a kickabout with a football in a safe space—a space where he won’t be so clumsy—then you could call me. I don’t expect payment, and I won’t

ever tell you what to do. Only you can decide what's right for you. But if you need me, I'll be there, no strings attached."

I've avoided Lauren's intense gaze ever since I walked into this room, but I can feel her staring at me. I have no clue if I've overstepped here or if she thinks I'm a prick for trying to be a white knight with one of her clients. I turn around, expecting to find a mocking smile or a cynical quirk of her eyebrows. I'm completely unprepared for what I actually find—a tortured look in her eyes and tears oozing from their corners. She shakes her head and swipes the tears away, and before I can say anything, she waves me off. I hate seeing her distressed and fight the urge to leapfrog over that desk and take her in my arms.

"Caroline, don't dismiss what Seb is offering," she says, her voice unsteady. "I'm a lawyer, and I believe in the legal process. I know you haven't decided what to do yet, and Seb's right, only you can decide that—but I hope you agree to move forward with us. I'm confident we can get you out of this situation using the courts—but from what you've told me so far, there's a chance that things might get more... complicated." Her eyes are on Nicky as she speaks, and she's obviously being careful about what she says around him.

Caroline pulls her boy closer. "And you trust him, Lauren? You trust this man?"

I'm interested in the answer to that one too. In this situation, with this woman and her kid, I am one hundred percent trustworthy. With women, in my life so far? Definitely not, and I'm guessing Lauren might know that about me already. She and Sam will have talked. Can she separate that from everything else?

Lauren looks intently at me, as though she's measuring up every scrap of my soul, counting every grain of decency. "I do, yes. I trust him, and I think you should too. Do I have your permission to discuss your case with him?"

Caroline nods gently, a barely there gesture that reminds me of a sparrow pecking for food. “Yes. If you think it could help, then yes. Now, we’d better go. He’s busy in the city today, but if I’m away from home for too long, one of his men will tell him. Thank you. Both of you.”

Lauren asks her to look at some paperwork before she leaves, and I use the time to crouch down in front of Nicky. I take a pen off the desk and scrawl down my number. Then I gently raise his arm and tuck the scrap of paper beneath his cast, where it fits flat and snug and hidden. “That’s our secret, Nicky. Nobody will see that there, but if they do, you tell them it’s Dua Lipa’s number, okay? I’m also going to give that to your mum, and maybe we could get you a phone of your own that nobody else knows about. Just for you, so you can call me whenever you like.”

“Will it have games on it?”

“Sure. Now, I’m going to give you some advice, all right, kid?”

He experiments with his cast, satisfied that the paper is concealed, and nods. “Yeah.”

I sweep back his unruly curls and look at him full-on. I want him to remember what I’m about to say and wish somebody had cared enough to say it to me when I was his age.

“Nicky, if ever you feel like you’re in danger, like someone is going to hurt you, I want you to run, okay? I know we’re told we’re supposed to be brave and fight. But fighting isn’t always the best idea. When someone much bigger or stronger wants to hurt us, we need to run. We run, we find a safe space, and we hide. We call for help, and we survive. Because when we survive, son, we get stronger. And when we get stronger, we get our revenge. I’m not making this up, it’s not bullshit, I promise—because what’s happening to you and your mum once happened to me, when I was a kid. But I survived. I got stronger. I got my revenge.”

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:01 am

His eyes shine with curiosity, and I guess he's imagining guns blazing and action heroes swooping through broken windows on ropes. "How did you get your revenge, Seb?"

"I lived, Nicky. I built a whole world for myself where I feel safe. And that, my little buddy, is the sweetest revenge of all."

Chapter

Seven

LAUREN

I escorted Caroline and Nicky to the reception area and then fled to the ladies' room. I've been in here for a good fifteen minutes now, and I still don't feel quite ready to leave my sanctuary. It's nice in here—apart from Nick, all the staff are female, and we keep toiletries and changes of clothing around. It smells of perfume and hand lotion and feels cozy and warm. Hell, I might stay here for the weekend, call in some takeout.

The main office doors have opened and closed a few times, and there have been no other sounds for the last few minutes, so it seems everyone else has left and I'm alone in the building. Good. I need time to pull all my loose threads together and stitch myself back up.

It's been a hell of a day. I've spoken to Caroline on the phone a few times, but those were clandestine, snatched conversations, and she often had to hang up without

warning. I didn't expect her circumstances to be pleasant, but the details she revealed today turned my stomach, and I am no stranger to the dark side of life. Seeing her and that beautiful little boy so cowed, so broken, was enough to drag me down into a pit of despair. Her desperation and fear were infectious, and although I managed to keep up a professional facade, inside I was drowning. I play a good game, but my own fear is always right below the surface, waiting to reclaim me.

Seb, of course, had no idea what he was walking into, but he responded to it all with such kindness, such quiet ferocity, that it touched more than a few raw nerves. He didn't know what their situation was, but he saw the damage straight away and didn't hesitate before offering to help.

That was enough to bring those irritating tears to the surface. Since I last saw Seb, I've persuaded myself our night together was a one-off, a harmless bit of fun and nothing more. He's a player, a shallow guy who cannot commit to anything other than the superficial.

I don't have a problem with that, because being superficial is a logical response to a world that can hurt so deeply. But now, he's shown another side to himself. One that's much more unnerving and makes it harder to dismiss him. It's a side of him that scares me, because I've never met a man who affects me this much, who strips away my control so easily. Who makes me wonder what it might be like to ask for more than a world-class fuck and multiple orgasms. What would it be like to have a man like Seb on my side, fighting in my corner? Protecting me and keeping me safe...

Screw it. This is all too much, and I won't solve anything by sitting on a toilet seat behind a locked door. I force myself to emerge and study myself in the mirror. It could be worse than a moderate case of panda eyes. I grab my makeup bag and repair the damage. I was supposed to have a date tonight, but there's zero chance of that happening now. I get out my phone and quickly send a message, hoping it gives the

guy enough time to find someone else for a precious Friday night hookup. I swap my heels for comfortable sneakers and give myself permission to go home, drink a bottle of wine, and pass out watching something fluffy on Netflix.

When I open the bathroom door, though, I realize it's not going to be so simple. Sebastian Donovan is standing right outside, leaning casually against the wall, his massive arms crossed over his chest as he looks me up and down. My lady parts tingle immediately, and I'm furious with them. Gloria has no sense of loyalty, damn her.

"I was starting to wonder if I was going to have to kick the door in," he says, unsmiling.

"Seb. I was just... Well, that doesn't matter. Why are you still here?"

"I'm taking you to dinner, obviously."

"There's no obvious about it. I don't remember you asking me, and I definitely don't remember saying yes. Besides, I have a hot date with my couch tonight."

I try to walk past him, but the man is as big as a goddamn tree trunk. A sequoia trunk at that. He blocks my path, his head tilted to one side as he surveys me. "No, you have a hot date with me. Or a nice dinner between friends. I don't mind which."

"Seb, if I don't want to go out with you, I'm not going to, okay? We might have fucked, but that doesn't mean I now obey your every word."

A range of emotions flicker across his face, and it's like watching one of those big spinning wheels on a game show—I have no idea which one it's going to stop on.

He sighs loudly and rubs his hand over his face like he's washing it. "Lauren, let's

not do this. Let's not fight for no reason, okay? This doesn't need to be a big deal. I saw how upset you were in there, and I'm guessing Caroline's story wasn't easy to stomach. Being on your own tonight isn't a good idea, especially when you don't need to be. Let me take you out to dinner. We can talk it through, see what I can do to help. It doesn't have to be more than that. It doesn't need to be a battle of wills or verbal foreplay, or whatever the fuck this is. Sometimes dinner can just be dinner."

He's wearing a plain white cotton shirt, open a few buttons at the neck. His muscular arms are almost busting out of it, and his black pants might be perfectly tailored, but they do little to hide the bulk of his thighs. Gloria gives a little squeal, and I shake my head. "I'm not sure that's true Seb, not with us. But okay. Just this once, I give in. I'll let you take me to dinner. I warn you, though, I plan to choose the most expensive thing on the menu and order champagne."

He throws his head back and laughs, and I want to nip at the strong column of his throat. "No worries, sweetheart—whatever my lady desires. Now come on, I'm bloody starving."

Chapter

Eight

LAUREN

He pays particular attention to locking up the building, and then he insists on driving. He settles me into the passenger seat and leans across to fasten my belt, giving me a whiff of his Chanel cologne and a scent that is entirely his and one hundred percent man.

When we arrive at the restaurant, a cute little Italian joint tucked away on a side street, the place is already full. I'm not sure we'll get a table, but Seb knows the

owner, Vincenzo, who soon makes a quiet corner booth available for us.

“I’m disappointed,” Sebastian says once we’ve ordered. “Pasta arrabbiata instead of the lobster tails? A beer instead of the Bollinger?”

I shrug and sip the beer in question. “Yeah, I know. Sorry to disappoint. I’m a simple girl at heart.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:01 am

“We both know that’s not true.” His eyes flash at me, and his sinful mouth quirks up at one corner. “So, first things first. Let’s clear the air.”

“Do we have to? I prefer the air a little murky.”

“We have to. Sam gave me a right telling off earlier. Doesn’t want me to mess things up at the firm. So truthfully? I’ve been thinking about you a lot. I get the feeling you’re not looking for anything serious, and being brutally honest, I’m not so great at serious myself. But I have to tell you, I enjoyed our time together... And there are still a lot of things left on the list.”

“The list?”

“The list of filthy things I’d like to do to you. The list of ways I want to make you come. The list of your body parts I’d still like to fuck.”

Every cell in my body sits up at attention and screams at me. I squeeze my thighs together to relieve the pressure that suddenly builds between my legs, and my vision goes a little blurry. I suck in a deep breath and hope I don’t look as aroused as I feel. “That’s not friendly dinner talk, Seb. Did you bring me here under false pretenses?”

He laughs and rubs his beard, grinning at me cheekily. “Maybe, although I didn’t plan it that way. I had every intention of being the gent tonight, but something about you seems to bring out the animal in me... I’ve got a rock-hard dick just sitting across from you in public, for fuck’s sake. But I’ve had a hard dick before, and that will pass. Friendship lasts longer, and I do want us to be friends too. Whatever you want from this, I’ll be fine with it.”

“Are you sure about that? You’re saying the right words, but you’re looking at me like you want to throw me over your shoulder and carry me off to a cave.”

“I strongly suspect you wouldn’t mind that at all, sweetheart. But that’s a game for another day. How about we take this one step at a time? Dinner, drinks, conversation.”

I nod and sip more beer, unwilling to open my mouth because I’m still stuck on the image of him carrying me out of here, complete with his hard dick. I’d like to slip a shoe off and run my toes over it under the table. Hell, I’d like to run my tongue over it under the table.

The waitress arrives with food as I’m imagining licking those heavy balls of his and picturing him shooting his load on my breasts. That’s a thing I don’t typically enjoy much, but the idea of him finishing on me is enough to make my pussy contract.

He gives me a smug look. “You look distracted. Something on your mind?”

The damn man knows exactly what’s on my mind. He knows exactly what he’s doing to me, and I fight to regain control. “Just how delicious this dish smells. Nothing on earth sexier than a plate of good pasta.”

“If you say so, Hot Sauce. Now. Do you want to tell me about Caroline, or would that ruin your sexy pasta?”

His tone is more serious and businesslike, like he’s flipped from playful Seb to security firm-owner Seb, and I wonder if that’s his way of coping with difficult emotions. I’m not an idiot. I saw the way he was with Nicky and heard the things he said to him while he thought I wasn’t listening. I can’t imagine anybody being able to hurt this big man now, but he was a once vulnerable little boy, a boy somebody took advantage of. Probably someone he should have been able to trust. I don’t let myself

go down that heartbreaking rabbit hole, and instead follow his lead of being professional.

“No, let’s talk about it. I’m worried about her, Seb. She’s been with her husband for eleven years, married for ten. They met when she was working as a personal shopper in Harrods—he was a high-roller client. At first, he was charm personified, and it was all a fairytale. I’m pretty sure you can guess the rest.”

“Sadly, I can, yeah. He’ll have cut her off from her family and friends, started with the odd slap, persuaded her it was all her fault for setting him off. Usual blood-boiling bullshit.”

I nod, saddened but unsurprised at the weariness in his words. Caroline’s story isn’t a unique one. Far too many women have similar stories to tell. “Exactly that. But things have escalated beyond the usual. For the last few years, he’s been sharing her out among his friends, forcing her to endure gang rape. His favorite game is to throw a party, tie her to the bed, and invite friends and business colleagues to take their turns. They’re allowed to do whatever they want to her.” I swallow down the bile that works its way up from my stomach and force myself to go on. “The last time, it was over twenty men, and she ended up in the hospital with horrific internal injuries. It was a private hospital, paid for by him, so everybody turned a blind eye.”

Reciting the awful details like this is actually helping me distance myself from the trauma of it all. I learned long ago to compartmentalize with my job, to separate my emotions from my words—there’s a place for passion in the law, but it’s mainly a world of logic and reason. I won’t be helping Caroline or Nicky if I can’t clearly describe what she’s been subjected to without bursting into tears. Seb obviously isn’t quite there yet and slams his massive fist down on the table so hard the plates shake. “The evil piece of shit. How about I tie him up and do the same to him? Cut off his cock, cover it in barbed wire, and shove it up his arse until he bleeds out.”

I nod, not at all distressed by that image. “Believe me, I hear you Seb—but that can’t be our first choice. She’s so scared, she isn’t even sure what she wants to do yet. I need to try to get her out of this the right way.”

“And if you can’t? If the civilized crap fails her? This probably doesn’t come as a surprise to you, Lauren, but I don’t exactly have a huge amount of respect for the law or the system. They both let too many people down.”

“Like you?” I ask quietly. “I heard what you said to Nicky.”

He shrugs and looks away before he speaks. This is hard for him. “Yeah. Like me. Not going to give you the whole sob story—Samantha doesn’t even know the details. My dad was an ex-con who liked hurting people, and my mum was... Well, fuck knows what she started off as, but by the end, she was his partner in it all. The pair of them were at me from the day I was born, right up until I was taken into care.”

“And how was that? Any better?”

He gives me a bitter smile. “I’m sure you’ve seen the care system in the States, and I’m guessing it’s not much different from here. I was almost thirteen. I was too old, too angry, too everything. I was never going to be adopted by some cute couple who nurtured me, was I? Weirdly, it was getting Sam’s mum pregnant that changed things. When her parents took her away from me, I let them, because I was only a child myself—and because I knew I had nothing to offer them. I genuinely thought the girl I loved and my own kid would be better off without me. It made me feel worthless, pathetic, and I decided I never wanted to feel like that again.”

There is unguarded pain in his dark-brown eyes, but it’s the strength in his voice I focus on. This is a man who has suffered and has overcome, and I, of all people, respect that. I place my hand over his. “Is that when you started Archangel? When you were that young?”

“Nah, that didn’t come ’til later, when I met Gabriel and was ready to turn my back on the wild days and really achieve something. No, back then there weren’t a lot of options for a kid like me, so as soon as I was old enough, I joined the army.”

I’m surprised—Seb doesn’t really seem like the army type. “Huh. How did that work out?”

He flashes me a wicked grin. “About as well as you’d expect. I was shit at doing what I was told, but it gave me a little discipline, taught me a few tricks. Made me grow up a bit, I suppose—though Sam would argue that part is still a work in progress. Anyway. Enough about me. Nicky’s broken arm. The dad?”

He’s obviously had enough of digging into his own past, and I get that. I’ve turned avoidance into an art form. “The dad, yes. At first, she didn’t know. Genuinely believed he fell the first few times the bruises showed up. You’ve met him, he’s a lively kid, always on the go. But when his arm was broken, he finally told her who’d been hurting him. Even more than that, she started to suspect he was being prepped for something else. One of the men who came to the parties, she said, only ever liked to watch as the others raped and abused her. She heard him saying his tastes ran much younger. She suspects the beatings are a way of breaking Nicky down, making him more malleable, that he’s getting ready to... getting ready to sell him to some sick pervert. His own damn father. Who, by the way, is a Russian ‘businessman’ named Ivan Volkov. He’s protected by layers of powerful connections. The kind that carry AK-47s and own private helicopters. It’s only the threat to Nicky that’s made her take the steps she has. When it was only her, I think she was willing to tolerate it...”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:01 am

I finally lose it, and all my professional calm disappears. What the fuck is wrong with the world? I swipe the angry tears away from my eyes and realize my hand is now wrapped in Sebastian's bear paw. He squeezes my fingers. "I don't care if he's Bratva, the KGB, and Joey fucking Stalin all rolled into one, Lauren, we'll help them. We will not let anything worse happen to that kid or his mum. If your route doesn't work, mine will. I'll kill the fucker and track down every single cunt who ever went to one of those parties and kill them too. I'll make them suffer, and I'll fucking well enjoy every moment of their pain."

I have no doubt he means it or that he's capable of it. Part of me wishes we could skip right to that step now, because I would enjoy every moment of their pain as well. I'm not exactly an innocent.

He frowns. "You're a lawyer, but you don't seem shocked. In fact, you look quite keen. Most women would be repelled, and they certainly wouldn't nod in agreement when I talked about cutting off his cock earlier."

"Yeah, well, I'm not most women, I don't suppose. And being a lawyer doesn't negate everything else about me. My life, my family... It's complicated."

"How so?"

I look into his eyes and remind myself that earlier, when Caroline asked me if I trusted this man, all my instincts screamed yes. I might not have known him for long, but I trust him.

I take a deep breath. "Okay. So, I'm originally from Los Angeles."

“Really? Sam said you moved here from Florida.”

“I did, and Florida is a whole different story. The brief version: I was born and raised in LA. Left there at eighteen. Spent some time studying here. Got married and moved to upstate New York. Got divorced, traveled around, settled in Florida.”

“Married?”

“Yep. Married. Not for long. I thought we were in love, which was a sweet delusion, but we were never compatible. That’s an understatement—we were a total shitshow. Not going to get into that now, though.”

He doesn’t look happy with the shutdown, but nods at me to continue. “Back to my family. I use the name Hayes. That’s my mother’s maiden name, which I legally changed mine to. I love my parents, my sister, my cousin, all of them—but I needed distance from them. I needed to build a life for myself that was removed from their world and its... darkness.”

I feel disloyal even saying that. My family’s business practices, both legitimate and not so legitimate, paid for the home I grew up in, my education, my privileged start in life. I’m not such a hypocrite that I ever condemned them, but I also knew I didn’t want to stay there and live that life. Especially not while Uncle Carlos was on the scene.

“What’s so dark about your family, Lauren? Did they hurt you?” The anger in his voice is barely suppressed, and I know he is imagining the worst. Who can blame him, given his background?

“One of them did, my Uncle Carlos... He was a sick fuck. He gave me this.” I hold out my palm and show him the thin crescent-shaped scar that is still visible on my flesh.

He traces it with his fingertips, then soothes it with a gentle brush of his lips, like a father kissing away the pain. “Tell me where he is. He’ll be the first one I end.”

I shiver slightly, at both the touch and the words. “He’s already gone. He died last year, and he died like the pig he was. I felt so liberated when I found out. My cousin and his friend, who are not men you mess with, rid the world of that particular evil. I’d left LA at least partly to escape him, but it wasn’t that simple. It wasn’t only one bad man, it was the whole culture of my family. Their past, their present, probably their future. The violence... This will probably mean nothing to you, but my birth name is Lauren Maria Montoya.”

I see immediately that the name does mean something to him. Of course it does. My family might be based in LA, but it’s known the world over, and depending on what side of the law you’re on, the Montoyas are viewed with either fear or envy for the way they have combined ruthless origins and enforcement with a multibillion-dollar business empire. Seb straddles both sides of that moral and legal line, I suspect, which might be why I’m so drawn to him. Despite my desire to escape, I’m obviously drawn to the familiar. Perhaps it’s a part of my DNA.

“You’re a Montoya?” he asks, frowning. “A fucking Montoya?”

“Only half a fucking Montoya, to be fair.”

“From what I’ve gathered, the Montoyas don’t do anything by halves. Shit. Does Sam know?”

I shake my head. It’s not something I talk about easily, even with close friends. I mean, it’s a bit of a conversation killer: Hi, I’m Lauren, and my family is in charge of the West Coast Mafia. I like cozy nights in, long walks on the beach, and torturing my enemies to death with power tools.

“That must have been one crazy-ass childhood. I’ve heard stories,” he says, looking at me intently. “Always thought Alejandro sounded like a guy not to be messed with.”

“Alejandro’s my cousin, and we’re close. And he’s a total badass. Despite that though, despite what circumstances sometimes force him to do, he’s a good man at heart.”

He nods, accepting this for the truth. It makes sense that he would understand how a good man can also be capable of terrible acts. “Well, I can see now why you have so much fight in you, sweetheart.”

“I do now, yes, but I didn’t always. Not for a long time. I ran away from Carlos and what he did to me.”

“And what did he do, Lauren? You don’t have to tell me, but it’s supposed to help isn’t it, this sharing bullshit? Just pretend I’m your therapist.”

That actually makes me laugh out loud, and then, even though it’s hard, I force myself to talk. To share some of this for the first time ever. I don’t know why I’m choosing Seb to confide in, and he certainly doesn’t look like any therapist I’ve ever encountered, but between his own scarred past and the straightforward way he discussed it, I feel comfortable enough to finally open up.

“He tortured me for years. He effectively ended my childhood at the age of ten, and on the day it started, he sliced my hand open to keep me quiet about something I saw. I never told, but I guess he must have developed a taste for it. He got a real kick out of keeping me permanently scared.”

I pause, shaken by how vividly I remember it all. The mutilated stuffed toys were only the start of it. “He’d leave me sick notes on my pillow or make up stories about

me to my mom or lock me in the pool house for hours on end. I'd find my underwear drawer reeking of urine, and he'd stalk me on the way home from school. He told my first boyfriend I gave great blowjobs, when I hadn't even seen a penis in real life, and he stole my sister's favorite necklace and hid it in my room so she thought I stole it."

“He isolated you.”

He’s right, of course—that was one of the worst aspects of what happened to me as a child. The loneliness.

“Yeah. He always had me worried. Sometimes he’d leave me alone for a while, and I would hope he lost interest. But then he’d send me photos of myself in bed at night, with him holding a knife to my throat. Once, he cut off my hair while I was asleep, and I had to pretend I did it. It was endless, and it turned me into a nervous wreck. Nobody suspected a thing and put it all down to me being difficult.”

“Fucking bastard. Why would he do that to an innocent girl? His own family, for fuck’s sake.”

“There’s no answer to that. Now, I know there wasn’t a reason—he was just a psycho. But back then, I blamed myself. I assumed I was weak, or maybe downright bad. Why else would he be doing those things to me? I never told a soul, he had me so wrapped up in terror. He ruined me, made me distrust my parents, isolated me. Made me realize our whole family business was built on blood when I was way too young to handle the complexities of it all. Uncle Carlos dominated my life for too long, and it was running away from him, and from the Montoya legacy, that drove me into the arms of my husband. The safe bet. The boring, ordinary guy who ran an accounting firm and seemed to offer me a world a million times different from the one I grew up in. I made a lot of bad choices based on fear, based on the way Carlos Montoya manipulated me, and once he was dead, I swore to myself that I would always try to be fearless from that point on.”

I look at my half-eaten plate of food. My almost-empty glass of beer. Anywhere but at Seb. Talking about my childhood is hard, like using a muscle that has atrophied, and I don't have any more words. I'm deflated and sad, and also pissed that, even from beyond the grave, my scumbag uncle is still exerting power over me. I feel like crying and only hold it together because I'm in public. Because I'm with Seb, and I don't want him to pity me.

"And are you?" he asks, touching my chin and turning my face so I'm looking at him. The expression in his brown eyes is intense, and he props his elbows up on the table as he leans forward. His lips are inches away from mine, his breath a warm caress on my skin.

"Am I what?" I murmur, losing myself in his gaze.

"Are you fearless? Right now, Lauren, are you fearless? Or do I scare you a tiny bit?"

Just like that, he has flicked a switch, and the mood has gone from confessional to inferno. It's exactly what I need to drag me out of my low mood, and he seems to instinctively know that. Turns out that my nipples tightening with arousal is an excellent distraction from the pain of my past.

My pulse speeds up, and I wonder if he can actually hear my heart crashing against my rib cage. The way his eyes swoop over me leaves me in no doubt about his intentions, and none of them are honorable. Fearless? I'm goddamn terrified.

The waitress returns to clear our plates, giving me a merciful moment of respite. She leaves us with dessert menus, and I study it with way more commitment than tiramisu and zabaglione merit. I risk a glance at him over the sheet and see him smiling smugly. He understands how he makes me feel, damn him, and he enjoys it.

I slam the card down on the table so hard he jolts. "Yes, you scare me a tiny bit. I can

admit that without it making me weak, and you can get that shit-eating grin off your face as well, buddy. You feel it too, this thing between us, and I don't care how much you pretend to be the tough guy—we both know you want me as much as I want you. Or is it just the chase?" I lean forward, wrapping a lock of my hair around my finger and licking my lips. "You seem like the kind of man who is all about the chase. Is that what I am? A challenge?"

His nostrils flare, and he grabs my wrists with both his huge hands, holding them tight in front of him. I can't move without snapping one of my forearms, and he knows it. "Yes, you're a fucking challenge, Lauren. And yeah, I love the chase. I really love the chase, and I think you do too. It's been a tough day, and I've spent most of it with blue balls because you're right, sweetheart—you are lodged in my mind like a splinter, and I can't stop thinking about you. I want to flip you over on this table right now and fuck you 'til you scream. I want to eat your pussy until you forget your own name. I want to fill every single hole you have and mark you with my cum. I want to make you mine, Lauren Maria Montoya Hayes, to possess you in every way a man can possess a woman. But first, I have a very important question to ask you."

I'm trembling with arousal, my panties wet and my clit throbbing a needy beat. His grip on my wrists is tight, painful, unrelenting. I have no doubt he could do all of those things and more, and my body shamelessly wants him to. He sucks one of my fingers into his mouth, swirls his tongue over the skin, then kisses his way down to my captive wrists, nuzzling the butterfly-wing pulse point that is giving away my excitement.

"What kind of shoes are you wearing?"

Chapter

Nine

SEBASTIAN

Her face is a picture of confusion and desire, and both are fucking delicious. We're sharing quite the dance, both of us jostling for control and power. Physically, I win that game, but there are many other types of power.

Hearing the anguish in her voice while she talked about her evil fuck of an uncle almost broke me. She's overcome so much trauma she hides beneath layers of cocksure confidence, and I feel privileged that she opened up to me. Now she's fighting to help others who are trying to escape domestic abuse, and I couldn't admire her more. Coming from her background, she'll be under no illusions about the threat that the Russian mob brings, but she's scrapping for Caroline and Nicky anyway. Taking on a man like Volkov could unleash a world of pain in her direction, but if she's worried about that, she's doing a damn good job of hiding it. Now she has me on her side, though, and if anyone lays a hand on her, that hand will not remain attached to the owner's body for long.

This has been a lot for both of us. Our friendly dinner turned into a soul-searching session way more intense than anything either of us is used to, and I know how it's made me feel—jagged, exposed, vulnerable. I rarely feel any of those things, and it sucks balls. I can tell it's the same for her, and I'm determined to change the tone of our night. In fact, my cock is already stirring at what I have in mind, and the bewildered look in her eyes is only adding to it.

“Shoes?” she echoes. “You want to know what shoes I'm wearing?”

I nod as I scoop out my wallet to pay the bill. “I do, yeah. Or shall I climb under the table and take a look for myself? Who knows what else I might get up to while I'm down there.” I wink at her and am rewarded with a sweet blush creeping across her cheeks.

“No! Don’t do that. I’m, uh, I’m wearing deeply unglamorous sneakers, Seb. Sorry to disappoint.”

“What makes you think that’s a disappointment? That’s actually perfect. Much as I loved seeing you in heels while I had my fingers in your soaking wet pussy, what I have in mind for tonight calls for something more practical. Like you said, we both enjoy the chase, and I think we both deserve a little fun. So how about we take the chase a step further? How about we make it real?”

She fights to keep her cool, capturing her plump lower lip between her teeth in a way that makes her look like a nervous schoolgirl. It makes me more feral for her, and I let go of her wrists before I’m tempted to drag her into my lap. “How would that work?” she finally says, her head tilted to one side.

“Pretty simple, sweetheart. You run, you hide, then I hunt you. You’re my prey. If you want to try to fight me off, give it your best shot.”

Her pupils blow wide, and she sucks in a breath. “What happens if you catch me?”

“I think you already know the answer to that. You get fucked, any way I choose. I do whatever I want to you, no holds barred.”

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:01 am

“No holds barred?” There’s a flicker of something deeper there, but she clamps down on it. “What if I want you to stop?”

“Then you tell me to stop. You can trust me to listen. I might act like an animal sometimes, but I’m not one. If it makes you feel better, we could use a safe word.”

She turns it over in her mind, and I’m surprised that this all seems new to her. I would have expected a woman with her enthusiasm and experience to have experimented with the darker side of sex before now, but it all seems fresh to her. Which, of course, makes it even more fucking exciting. There’s a whole world of play I can introduce my little virgin to if she’ll let me.

“My safe word can be ‘chainsaw’ then,” she replies, arching an eyebrow at me.

“Okay, I’ll bite—why chainsaw?”

“Because that’s what my family will use to dismember your still-breathing body with if I ask them to.”

It’s a decent attempt at a power play, but I’ve been threatened by bigger and nastier people than Lauren. “Understood. So, what do you say? Feel like giving it a try, Hot Sauce? Or are you too scared?”

She stands up abruptly, hands on her curvaceous hips and a wicked smile on her lips. “You’re very sure of yourself, Seb. Maybe I’ll be the one who wins the game and gets to fuck you any way I choose instead. Wouldn’t that be fun? Now, I assume I get some kind of head start? Are there any rules I need to know about?”

And there she is again, all fire and fury. The way this woman goes from wide-eyed to warrior in seconds is intoxicating. “Your head start lasts as long as it takes me to throw cash on this table. What are you standing there for, Lauren? Run.” I slam my hands down flat on the surface with the last word, and she jumps in shock.

Her curls tumble out of the loose bun on top of her head, and she laughs as she grabs her purse and saunters to the door of the restaurant. She doesn’t run, oh no—she leaves in exaggerated slow motion, sashaying those hips, swaying that killer behind from side to side like a metronome. I stare at her juicy, round ass, mesmerized by her, just like half the men in the room. She pauses in the doorway, looks over her shoulder, and gives me a little wave before she bolts across the street. The minx knows exactly what she’s doing, and now I’m stuck here for a few minutes longer while I wait for my raging erection to die down. Well played, Ms. Montoya.

I concentrate on unsexy thoughts, pay up, and leave a generous tip. I clocked exactly where she was heading, so I have time to go to my car, which I parked in a secluded spot behind the restaurant, and shove a few items into my pocket. I pull a black sweater on over my shirt and jog at an easy pace across the road. It’s dark, the way lit only by the moon and the glow spilling from bars and clubs on the main street. I stop and look around to get my bearings. This place is busy, so she’ll have headed somewhere quieter, more private. She wants to be caught as much as I want to catch her.

I have home-turf advantage and know where each and every alleyway in this neighborhood starts and ends. Methodically, I make my way down all of them, finding nothing more interesting than overflowing dumpsters and a young lad taking a piss. I check creaking fire escapes and shadowed doorways and all the other little hiding spots that a city at night offers. I look inside the pubs in case she’s hiding in plain sight, then check out a nearby car park. Lots of spots to shelter there, as well as lifts and staircases. She could be crouching down beside one of the vehicles. I imagine grabbing her, throwing her against a car bonnet, and slamming my cock

inside her.

She's not there, though, and the only thing I end up with is a stiff dick. Fuck's sake, this is getting annoying. I've been at this a while, and I expected to be balls-deep in her by now, not wandering around the streets like a clown.

I go still and remind myself who I'm dealing with. She's clever, she's competitive, and she's not going to make this easy for me. Just because I saw her heading off in this direction doesn't mean she stayed here. It could have been a deliberate bluff, and she could easily have doubled back. She could have played me for a fool, and if she has, I'll have to take my revenge in a way we'll both enjoy.

I retrace my steps, passing Vincenzo's again, and instinct tells me that's exactly what happened. I don't know whether it's a lingering whiff of her perfume or something more primal, but I suddenly know she's nearby. Not letting my excitement show on my face, I school my expression into one of annoyance.

I stand on the street corner, huffing and puffing and staring at my watch as though I'm about to give up. Then I stroll slowly toward the quiet spot where I left the car, holding my phone to my ear even though it's switched off. It was no lie when I said she was going to be my prey, and like all good hunters, I can tell when my prey is close. The weight of her eyes is on me as I click my car keys and listen to the beep of the locks. If she's watching—and I know she is—she'll be delighted with herself. She'll see exactly what I want her to see: a frustrated man who has had enough of this game and is chatting on the phone as he prepares to leave. I glance down at the side mirror and catch a fleeting glimpse of movement behind me. I'm tempted to let her have this win—I'm curious as to what she'd do with her prize. The temptation isn't quite strong enough though, and as I slide my phone back into my pocket, I allow myself a small smile of anticipation.

I whirl around and catch her about to pounce, her hand stretched out before her as

though she was going to tap me on the shoulder. The look of shock on her face when I confront her is perfection. She lets out a squeal, then quickly turns to run. Not quickly enough to avoid being grabbed and slammed into my body though. I tear her purse from her shoulder and throw it into the car, keeping a tight grip on her. Her shocked look is now edged with panic, her eyes rolling wildly as I crush her against me. It goes straight to my cock, that panic, that squeal, that rapid-fire breathing and the way she struggles against me. She flails around in my arms, trying to lash out and discovering I have her pinned so tight she's trapped. She raises a knee, aimed at the traditional area, but expecting it, I block her. Next, she stamps down on my foot as hard as she can, which might have been more effective if I wasn't wearing tough boots.

"Gotcha," I whisper, nuzzling her hair, completely inflamed by her efforts to escape.

She bares her teeth and seems furious enough to try to take a chunk out of me. I spin her around, slam her against the car, and drag both arms behind her back. I hold her wrists with one hand, tugging them slightly upward to let her know who's in charge here. It has to hurt, but she's still fighting, so I slip my other hand around to the front of her neck.

"You're mine," I mutter, gently squeezing the slender column of her throat. "And the more you struggle, the more this will hurt. Or is that what you want, eh, sweetheart? You want a big bad man to fuck you while you fight? You want a stranger to take you in the dark?"

I slam my groin into her as I speak, and she whimpers as she feels my cock press against her. "Yeah. That is what you want, my dirty little slut."

I'm so distracted by the scent of her fear, by our bodies pressed together, that when she slams her head back and tries a reverse headbutt, I barely dodge it. She manages to catch my chin, and the flash of pain makes me angry. Another twist of her arms,

not enough to harm her but enough to make her cry out, and I take a pair of zip ties from my pocket. Within seconds, she's trussed up, and I clamp my hand over her mouth to stop her yelling out any objections. We're in a sheltered spot here, but I don't want any good Samaritans getting in the way of our fun and games.

I pull open the back door of my SUV and shove her roughly inside. She lands on the back seat face first, her ass in the air exactly how I want it. I climb in behind her, close the door, and lean down over her trembling body so my mouth is right by her ear. "Say that safe word. Tell me to stop. Or carry on fighting and see what happens."

Tears are flowing from the scrunched-up corners of her eyes, and her breath is coming in short, ragged gusts. Of course, I'll stop if she wants me to, but it will use up all of my self-control and possibly be the biggest letdown of my entire fucking life. She shakes her head, still looking furious, her eyes darting everywhere like she's looking for a way to escape. My hand is on the seat beside her, and I pull it away before she manages to bite my finger. Growling, I wrap my fist in her hair and pull her head up sharply, making her yelp. "You can't win. I'm bigger than you. I'm stronger than you. You are nothing more than my prey."

She glares at me and manages a muffled "fuck you."

I fight back a smile at her spirit and push her face down into the upholstery. "Unless you want me to gag you, those better be the last words coming out of your filthy mouth."

I climb behind her, and she kicks out, catching one of my thighs with a decent shot. Her arms are safely zip-tied behind her, but her legs are still a threat. "Keep fighting, Lauren. Keep struggling. It only makes me want to fuck you harder when I see your ass bouncing around like that."

I grab the hem of her little black dress and tug it up over her backside. The sight of

that tanned arse in the air, her bound arms, the scrap of lace she calls panties... Fuck. I wanted to take my time, to torture her and make her beg, but this is too much. I slap her ass repeatedly, feeling the sting on the flat of my hand and loving the sound of her yells as I turn her skin red. God, what I'd give for a paddle or the space to use a belt properly. She's squealing and wriggling as I lay into her, and the scent coming from her pussy is fucking amazing.

With her legs spread, arousal spills from her opening, her thighs growing slick already. I unzip my pants and pull out my cock, which is the hardest it's ever damn well been, then slap her ass with it. Her breath catches in her throat.

I'm so desperate, I don't bother to take her panties off. I shove the flimsy material of the thong to one side and drive myself straight into her. There's no gradual, there's no careful, no easing her in—I just slam my dick as far inside her as I can, my balls slapping against her wetness as I bang her. “You're mine, Lauren. I can do this to you whenever I want. Wherever you are, whatever you're doing, I can find you. I can hunt you down, and I can take you.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:01 am

I grip her hip with one hand and put the other on the back of her neck, holding her down like the predator I am, nailing her as hard as I can. I'm usually more considerate with my women, but right now I'm all animal. She lets out low moans and cries, her hair spilled over the seats, her flesh jiggling as I hammer her into oblivion. Her pussy walls clench around me, and her breathing hits a desperate rhythm.

"Come for me, sweetheart." I squeeze her ass cheeks so hard I'll leave fingerprints. That's what I want. I want to leave my mark. I want to claim her. Her pussy is tightening around my cock, and we're both so close now. I shove her dress higher, running my hands along her sweat-slicked skin, pushing her flatter down on the seats. I'm firmly on top of her, her wrists tied, her legs parted, her whole body at my fucking mercy.

I sweep back her long hair and, without warning, sink my teeth into her shoulder. I bite down hard enough to taste the coppery tang of her blood on my tongue, and she screams at both the bite and the orgasm that now rips through her. My dick is milked, her whole body juddering beneath me, and it seems to go on forever—one big, long ripple of pleasure rolling through her. I finally shoot my load into her, letting out a yell of my own as I come.

Holy fucking shit. I think that was the most powerful orgasm in the known world of orgasms.

I stay where I am for a few moments, trying to drag myself back to reality. Eventually, I pull out of her and sit up behind her shaking form. Her quivering body is a disaster zone: Her ass bears my rough paw print in the middle of skin that is

spanked cherry red, and her spread legs reveal a pink pussy that is drenched in our cum. Her hip is already bruising from where I grabbed her, and the dress is ripped, showing the blood-tinged bite mark on her shoulder. I've never seen anything so fucking gorgeous in my life. "Seb... Please. Please untie me."

Her voice is low and pleading, and I cut the ties loose and help her upright. I rub her wrists gently, helping her get the circulation back in her veins, and smooth her wild hair away from clammy, tear-stained cheeks. "Ouch," she says as her backside hits the seat. "What the fuck was that?"

"That, sweetheart, was a whole lot of fun. Are you okay? Want me to kiss anything better? Gloria must be sore." She glares at me and then bursts out laughing. I love this aspect of Lauren. The way she so nimbly moves between dark and light, like she's made of both.

"Aw, you remembered her name—how sweet. And she's just fine, thank you. That was... intense. Who the fuck carries zip ties around in their trunk, by the way?"

I shrug, slip my arm around her shoulders, and pull her in for a cuddle. "You do know I run a security firm, right, babe? And sometimes I need to make sure things are... secure."

Her eyes narrow as she turns the information over in her mind. "What else do you have back there?"

I laugh and squeeze her closer. "Maybe, if you're a very good girl, I'll share my whole bag of tricks with you. But for now, that was enough. Would you like to come back to my place? I make a mean full English breakfast."

As soon as I ask, I realize it was a mistake. This woman might unravel beneath my fingertips where sex is concerned, and we definitely connected in a different way

over dinner tonight, but her rules are not there to be broken. She's more likely to scream "chainsaw" at the thought of a cozy night in than she is while getting tied up and violently fucked.

"I told you, I don't do sleepovers, Seb."

And just like that, the shutters come down again. Maybe, I tell myself, it's for the best. She's Sam's colleague, she's young enough to be my daughter, and she's a fucking Montoya.

It might be for the best, but it fucking hurts in a way I can't quite explain. Again, I have offered her more than sex, and again, she's rejected it. That should make her the perfect fucking woman, but it stings.

"Then I'll take you home."

She shakes her head, her curls bouncing around her face. "I'd rather call a cab."

"Lauren. You can't let me..." I scrub a hand down my face and blow out a breath.

"Can't let you what?"

I stare at her, the woman who drives me crazy. The paradox that is Lauren Montoya Hayes. Vulnerable and confident. Wild and sensitive. Damaged, yet as strong as anyone I've ever met. "You can't let me fuck you like that and not take care of you afterward."

She grabs her purse and shrugs it onto her shoulder. "I can take care of myself."

"I only want to drive you home, sweetheart. I won't ask to come in, and you don't even have to speak to me. Please, can you let me do that?"

“Fine,” she huffs, pulling her dress down to cover her thighs.

I climb into the driver’s seat, and she stays in the back while I drive her home, like I’m her cabbie. She doesn’t speak, and I don’t push her. What we did was intense. Maybe this is how she deals with it. I’d much rather be running her a warm bath and tucking her up in a nice soft bed, curled up next to me, of course, but who am I to know what’s best for her?

When I pull up outside her building, she opens the door. I want to ask if she’s okay but don’t want to get into another argument, so I simply tell her goodnight. She offers me a breezy goodbye in return, and I watch her window until her light goes on and I know she’s safe. This woman is in an enigma. And she is going to be the ruin of me.

Chapter

Ten

LAUREN

I spend a restless night in my cute little apartment by the river, unable to process exactly what’s going on with me. I’m a confident woman who’s not afraid to experiment when it comes to sex, but this feels like more than an experiment. This feels life-changing. I, of all people, should be repulsed by what happened tonight. I should be sickened at being hunted, being bound, and then being fake-raped in the back of an SUV. So why did I agree to any of it? Why did I love it so much? Why is my clit throbbing at the memory of being thrown onto the backseat and screwed by a man who enjoyed hurting me?

I’ve showered, slipped into my favorite PJs, and I’m sitting on my little balcony, watching the water flow by in the moonlight. I have a glass of wine to help the thought process, and a pile of work files to go through if I start to bore myself. I

wonder if I should treat this mystery like a case and make notes on one of my big yellow legal pads. The thought of trying to describe Seb and the way he so effortlessly controls my body is hilarious. I concentrate on the wine instead. I'll probably never figure it out, and I probably shouldn't bother trying. Maybe I should just go along for the ride and enjoy it.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:01 am

If only it were that simple. I like Seb. Our conversation tonight was, in many ways, more intimate than the sex that followed. There's a danger that I could grow to feel more than "like" toward him, and I can't let that happen. I can't give my heart to another man only to see him trample all over it like my ex-husband did.

Marshall—the safe, boring accountant—was actually a gambling addict who was also screwing half the croupiers in Atlantic City. I escaped that one with a crack in my heart and a bigger dent in my savings. But with clarity of hindsight, I realized that he wasn't right for me anyway. He certainly never fulfilled me the way Seb does. Gloria's had more orgasms with Seb already than I did in two years with Marshall.

No, I can't risk falling in love again. I am free of Carlos, free of marriage, free to be myself. I need to be careful, because a man like Sebastian Donovan could jeopardize all of that. A man who's been engaged five times and is, according to Sam, incapable of committing to a faithful long-term relationship. Casual I can do—more than that? No way.

He's a failed serial monogamist, and I've made it clear to him that I'm not interested in that. I'm confused as to why he doesn't seem to want to accept that, and the only answer I can come up with is, yet again, that I'm a challenge. It's all a bit of a headfuck, and I'm glad of the distraction when my phone rings.

I smile when I see that it is an incoming video call from my cousin Alejandro. Alejandro might be the head of the Montoya empire, but he will always be my surrogate big brother, the handsome boy all my friends had a crush on, and the only person I ever considered telling about Carlos. He is also, right now, rocking two super-cute babies to sleep in little bouncy chairs in his office.

I laugh out loud when I see him, his million-dollar suit disheveled, his normally perfectly groomed hair askew. “The great Alejandro Montoya, defeated by a pair of one-year-olds.”

He pulls a face. “These are no ordinary one-year-olds, prima. These are pure devils. They must get it from my wife’s side.”

“Claro esta! Except I hear your wife is an angel and you are a direct descendant of el Diablo himself, my friend. Now let me see them properly please.” He smiles and brings the camera closer to the two sleeping boys, Dario and Tomas. I sigh at their chubby cheeks and unruly hair. “Beautiful. Now, why are you calling me so late?”

“It’s not even five in the afternoon here, Lauren. And I needed to let you know that there’s been an incident.”

“An incident? That could mean anything from a missing nuclear warhead to Mamá losing her car keys again.”

“It does involve your mamá—but don’t worry, she’s fine.”

I’m glad he added that quickly. My heart lurched when he mentioned her. Neither of my parents is exactly younger anymore, and I’ve reached the age where late-night phone calls from home carry a certain weight. “Okay, good. So what’s the problem, and why does it involve me?”

“There’s been a cybersecurity breach. You know Jax normally has us nailed down and safe, but your mamá... Well, your mom decided to go rogue.”

Jax is Alejandro’s right-hand man, best friend, and expert on all things tech related. It’s hard to imagine how Mamá managed to sneak anything past him.

“She got all fired up by some silver surfers’ course she attended with your tía Maria,” he continues. “And she went and bought herself a brand-new laptop without telling anyone. She didn’t even have a basic commercial security program on there, never mind one good enough for us.” I can hear the frustration in his voice, but I have to smile.

My mamá, the rebel—words I never thought would go together. “So what’s the issue, cousin? Has she been approached by a playboy billionaire, because I hear that can be a pretty wild ride.”

He pauses, looks at the babies, and smiles when he sees they are asleep. It’s nice to see this master of the universe so content with his home life, and I vow that I will make the effort to meet his wife, Alana, very soon. He turns his attention back to me, and I notice he has more stubble than usual. Still disgustingly handsome though, damn him—he always had longer eyelashes than me, and my fifteen-year-old self still hasn’t quite forgiven him.

“It’s serious, Lauren. She had everything on there—everything. Names, addresses, dates of birth. Even security codes for our homes, bank details, credit cards, the lot. She said she was trying to go paperless.”

This time I can’t hold the laughter in, and he glares at me all the way from California. “It’s not funny. You’ve kept your distance, and I’ve respected that, but your details were on there as well. Whoever this hacker is, they’re good—both Jax and a cyber specialist we know in New York say so. They used her email and accounts to sneak into ours. We barely noticed they were there to start with, they were so subtle. Chunks of money here and there, car rentals, credit cards being opened in my name—used to rack up huge charges on sex chat lines, for fuck’s sake. Then it took a more sinister turn. My dad answered the door to a funeral director who came to collect his body. The address of the center for abused women and children that Alana runs was leaked to clients’ former partners, and we had to send a small army in to

keep them safe from the asshole parade. And today, I received a notification from a fake news site—a damn convincing one—that said an American citizen named Lauren Hayes was killed in a terror attack in London. I knew logically it wasn't true, because there's been no terror attack, but just for a moment, Lauren..."

"Alejandro, all of that is awful—I'm especially sorry about the women's shelter. But I'm safe and well, I promise you. Have you found out who's behind it? Have you caught them?"

He leans forward and presses a few buttons on his keyboard. "Almost. Do you remember Rafe Torres?"

I shiver slightly at the name and the memory it dredges up. "Big guy. Tattoos. Lived permanently up Uncle Carlos's butt crack."

He nods. "Yeah. Right up until we killed him. Anyway, turns out he has a kid—Diego. Not a muscle man like his dad, actually has brains and was studying computer design at Columbia until he got caught falsifying test papers. He's twenty-nine now, old enough to know better, but the brat lives in Rome as part of some kind of cyber collective. Sounds like an excuse to live in a squat and fuck people's lives up long-distance to me. We sent a team, but he was already gone. Jax has been tracking him and thinks it's possible he's on his way to London. Which, in case you hadn't noticed, is where you live. Any chance at all I can persuade you to fly home to LA for a while?"

"Nope. I know you have my best interests at heart, Alejandro, and I will be forever grateful to you for what you and Jax did for me in Florida, but I have a life here. I can't run home with my tail between my legs at the first hint of trouble." I see him struggle with my refusal and know that this is hard for him—Alejandro Montoya is not a man who hears the word no very often, plus he loves me very much. We were close growing up and have remained so over the years, as much as our lifestyles

allow.

“Can I send someone to keep an eye on you, then? Someone I trust?”

“I know what you mean by ‘keep an eye on me,’ and it involves twenty-four-hour surveillance and some strange guy going into the ladies’ room with me. It’s a hard pass, I’m afraid. But I’m not stupid, and I’m not dismissing this, I promise you. If you’re worried, then I should be too. I just want to handle it my own way, all right? If I struggle, you’ll be the first to hear, but I think I’ll be okay. I know some people.”

He raises his eyebrows. “You know some people? You want to send me their names, I’ll run some checks? Or... Hmmm, you have that look in your eyes, cousin. Have you been running checks yourself? The up-close-and-personal kind?”

“That would be telling,” I reply, grinning at him before we say our goodbyes. I know full well that he’ll have it all figured out in hours. Jax will look into my new job, and then they’ll come across Samantha, and that trail will inevitably lead them to Archangel. There’ll be a fat dossier on everything from what their current contracts are through to what Seb likes for breakfast by the time they’re finished.

I sigh and sip more of my wine. I love my cousin and the rest of my family, but it’s exactly this kind of bullshit that I was so desperate to get away from. Enemies around every corner, constant threats, the lies and the subterfuge, the never-ending need to have one eye looking over your shoulder. It’s what I was born into, but that doesn’t mean I have to like it.

I stare down at the moonlight reflecting off the water and wonder if I’ll ever have a simple life. Nah, probably not, I decide, standing up to go back inside—and who would want that anyway?

Chapter

Eleven

LAUREN

When I wake up the next day, a package has been pushed through my mailbox, delivered by courier. I open the padded manila envelope, and a SIM card falls out, along with a typed note from Jax, advising me on how to be careful with my digital footprint and telling me to insert the SIM into my phone. It will, apparently, be the same phone number, but unhackable. I don't understand the details, but I trust Jax enough to do as he asks. The smiley face he drew at the bottom of the page makes me laugh.

Today is Saturday, and I'm meeting Samantha at a health club between her house in the country and my apartment in the city. We're calling it work, but I'm not sure if it counts if you do it in bathrobes while sipping cucumber water. As I do my face before heading out to Surrey, I notice the bite mark on my shoulder, and a little tremor of desire flutters through me at the memory of the man who marked me. Even if it never happens again, I'll never forget the thrill of last night. The primal way he took me, the delicious threat in his voice when he told me he could hunt me down any time he wanted. Everything about it, including my war wound, was sensational. I apply foundation over the bite, feeling like a teenager with a hickey, and hope I remember to keep my robe collar pulled high.

I find Sam already in her robe by the time I arrive, sitting at a table by the window in the restaurant. After getting changed, I join her, and we decide to order a light lunch

and dive into the work part of the day first. I fill her in on our current cases, and together we come up with strategies and update our action points. She's still only working one day a week and plans to keep it to four after her maternity leave ends. I can't help thinking, though, that a part-time Samantha is worth a full-time anyone else. She has a laser-like ability to see through bullshit and cut to the heart of cases, and her passion for helping her clients is undiminished by motherhood, marriage, or any of the other demands on her time. I don't have all the gory details, but I do know she was previously married to a man who abused her and eventually tried to kill her. I'm sure that left its scars, but she has taken the pain and turned it into a mission in our family law practice.

After a couple hours of discussion and note-taking, we've managed to get through the whole stack of case files we brought with us. They're in a giant heap under our table, ready to be put back into my rolling briefcase. I remember what Alejandro said about the women's shelter being hacked and ask Sam if Donovan, Cook, and Hayes will ever go paperless.

"I like the idea," she says, poking the pile with her bare toe. "Now I've got Max, I'm a lot more interested in saving the planet. And yes, we have started to digitize some of the files, closed cases in particular. When it comes to the ongoing ones, though, so far we've stuck to doing it the old-fashioned way. Why do you ask?"

"Paranoia about being hacked," I say honestly. "There's a situation with my family back in the States. I should probably tell you about it."

"Go for it. I'm a captive audience."

I plunge right in and give her the abridged history of the Montoyas, who thankfully she at least hasn't heard of. She looks surprised but unfazed when I share my family highlight reel and fill her in on the recent cyberattack.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about my family years ago, Sam. I thought you’d be more shocked.”

She laughs. “My life so far has taught me to never be shocked at anything, Lauren, and as for telling me years ago—we were kids. We were at uni. We were all trying to reinvent ourselves to some degree or another, weren’t we? And look, I get it. I grew up around Archangel when it was a lot less civilized than it is now. Talking of which, you should speak to my dad and Gabriel about all of this. I’m sure they can help. I warn you, though, they do have a tendency to overreact to the smallest threat.”

“I was planning on speaking to them, yeah. I feel better for sharing it with you, anyway. I’m sure it’ll come to nothing, but...”

“You never know?”

“Exactly.”

“Right,” exclaims Sam, tightening the belt of her robe. “That’s that sorted. Let’s stow these and get our Jacuzzi on. I feel guilty when I have too much time away from the boys, but the fact that we’ve worked as well means I’m allowed to sauna myself silly for the rest of the day. Ah, pure bliss.”

We make our way around the spa circuit, getting thoroughly warmed, cooled, and steamed as we go. We finish off on heated beds at the side of the swimming pool, luxuriating in the warmth seeping through our skin.

“I know we’re supposed to have finished work, but I wondered how the Volkov case is going?”

I blow out a puff of air. “Not going to lie, it’s a tough one. There’s no doubt at all in my mind about the way that woman has been treated, but the problem is going to be

proving it. None of his staff will breathe a word because they're all too scared, and he made sure she doesn't have friends."

"Of course he did," she murmurs, shaking her head. "Have you spoken to her about diary keeping and safe evidence gathering going forward?" I nod and assure her that I have. As much as it breaks my heart to think of her there in that terrifying environment, the more proof Caroline can collect of the abuse, the better. The balance is making sure she and Nicky stay safe while she does it. Plus, she hasn't made her mind up completely about what she wants to do next—I suspect part of her is simply hoping things improve despite knowing they won't.

"How many cases do you think you've handled that have the same storyline as this one?" Sam asks. "Maybe not as dramatic, but basically the same. Ten? A hundred? A thousand?" I'm not sure she needs an answer, and I'm right. "I just... I get so sad and so angry, you know? So many of these women are sucked in by the surface charm, by the promise of a happy ending. By the attention they're showered with at the beginning. For ages after what happened to me, I thought I was weak. I thought I did something to attract him, my ex-husband. I even managed to convince myself that it was my fault—that something about me screamed victim and pulled him in. But is it so wrong to want love? To trust? To believe the fairy tale could come true?"

I reach out and touch her hand. "Of course it isn't. And it wasn't your fault—I'll say that even though you now know it. We can't say these things enough—it was not your fault. Anyway, the fairy tale can definitely come true. Look at you and Gabriel." She blushes, and her smile leaves no doubt that she's found her happy ending in every way possible.

"Can I ask you something, Sam? If it's too personal, just say so, I won't mind."

"I won't know until you ask," she says. "Go for it."

“Okay. I was wondering... After what you went through with your ex, how did you feel about, uh, well, about sex? Was it hard to overcome the ghosts of the past? Were you so traumatized that it was an issue for you?”

She sits up, and I get the feeling she can read my mind. “I’m happy to discuss that with you, if you can explain why you want to know. Personal goes both ways, and I’ve learned to be careful with myself when it comes to Jackson and everything he did to me.”

I take a deep breath. Time to be a big girl now, Lauren. “Fair enough. I won’t go into all the details, but last year I was kidnapped and assaulted by a group of men in Florida. I was representing one of their wives, and they decided the best way to deal with the situation was to hold me hostage in a cabin out in the boondocks. I was there for three days, and it was... Well, it was as bad as you can imagine. After that, I was determined not to let them win. Determined not to let it destroy my life, to define me, you know?”

She nods firmly. “I do know. And I’m sorry, Lauren. I’m so sorry that happened to you. To answer your question, yes. I did have a lot of hang-ups. Until I met Gabriel, obviously, who I’ve basically been in love with since I was a child. It’s not always been easy, navigating our way through both our pasts, both our problems, but I have to say... sex is definitely not one of those problems.”

I can’t help but laugh at that. Anyone can see how hot those two are for each other; it’s pretty much written on their faces in neon letters every time they’re together. “What about you, Lauren? How has it been for you since then?”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:01 am

“Fine. Good. Okay. I mean, I’ve carried on dating. Not all men are kidnapping assholes, and I’ve had a lot of fun. I was married, briefly, before Florida, and the sex with him was so boring I thought my clit had given up and atrophied. After we divorced, I got my mojo back. I started to really enjoy it again, and I couldn’t let those redneck assholes steal that from me. That said, I’ve always preferred sex a certain way. Energetic, loud, and usually with me in charge. Until... Well, until I started enjoying something else, which is kind of freaking me out.”

“What kind of thing are we talking here?”

“Um... I suppose stuff that involves being controlled. Tied up. Restrained. Dark shit. Stuff I should hate, that I should be traumatized by, that I should never in a million years enjoy.”

Sam laughs, shaking her head at me. “There is no ‘should’ when it comes to sex. The body and the mind are complicated beasts. This might be too much information, but I also enjoy those things with Gabe. At first, I couldn’t understand it, and it set all kinds of red flags off in my feminist brain, but then I made a deal with myself—if feminism is about equality, then why shouldn’t I have as many orgasms as a man, any damn way I want to have them? When I was with my ex-husband, it was abuse. With Gabriel, it’s... Well, it’s bloody mind blowing, to be honest. The things that man does to me...” She fans her flushed face. “Anyway, enough of that. The point is, yes, maybe right now with you, it’s a way of reclaiming. Of processing.”

“Maybe. Maybe I can fuck all the pain away.”

“If you’re both consenting adults, why not? Like I said, it’s complicated. If you ever

need me, I'm here to talk, and I also have the name of a good therapist. For the time being though, you seem to be having a great time. Don't think I haven't noticed the bruises or that bite mark on your shoulder. Now that I know you got them the good old-fashioned way, through delicious rough sex, it's time to tell me all. Who knew cello players had it in them?"

I freeze, my cheeks blazing and my hand going self-consciously to my marked shoulder. Should I lie? Tell her cello players are indeed wild in the sack?

I obviously pause too long, and a look of horror settles on her pretty face. "Oh god, no," she mutters. "Please tell me I'm wrong. Please tell me you haven't been talking about my dad all this time. I think I might be sick."

Part of me wants to laugh at her reaction, although I totally understand it. "Sorry, Sam. What can I say? Your dad's hot."

"No, he's not. He's my dad. And he's so much older than you. Can't we pretend it was someone else? Like, I don't know, Daniel Craig, maybe?"

"I think Daniel Craig is actually older than your dad."

She looks frustrated. "That doesn't matter—at least he's not my father. Look, I'm being silly, and I know I am. I'm under no illusions about my dad being a saint, and if you two really like each other, then go for it. Just be careful, okay? I love him to bits, but the man collects women like they're butterflies. I don't want you to get hurt. Plus, yuck, double yuck, and triple yuck to the images you've put in my head." She shudders. "Come on, let's go back to mine. I need to drink all the alcohol in the entire world right now. I might have to bathe my eyeballs in vodka."

I smile, partly at her reaction and the image she just conjured in my mind's eye, but mostly because it's because I'm thinking about her dad—and how much I'd like call

him Daddy.

Chapter

Twelve

SEBASTIAN

I'm not in an especially good mood today, and the update about the McIverson takeover isn't helping. "What the fuck do you mean, he needs more time? Does he need more time as much as he needs a working brain stem, the dickhead? I'm sick of their shit. I'm starting to think this deal isn't worth it. Let's fuck them off and leave them to whatever fate has in store. I'll dance on their fucking graves."

Gabriel gives me that look that says, "chill out you asshole." He might be younger than me, but he's the calm one, and that look usually works. I trust his judgment, and if Gabriel thinks I'm losing the plot, then I probably am. Today, though? Today I'm in the mood for a fight, and I don't really care where I find it. It's been days since I dropped Lauren off after our night at Vincenzo's, and she's been radio silent. Maybe I was being arrogant, but I was convinced I'd hear from her. Convinced that she'd be back for more. The fact that she's ghosting me is driving me crazy, and I have a strong urge to punch someone in the face.

"What are you looking at?" I snap at Taylor, the new lad. He's a big, blond brute lurking at the back of the room, watching me so intensely I'm starting to feel like an exhibit at a freak show.

He jumps to attention and does a double take. "Umm... Nothing, Boss. Just, you know, learning?"

"Learning? What is this, fucking uni? Go and make yourself useful, kid. And make

me some coffee.” He actually gives me a salute before he leaves and looks thrilled at the chance to do something for me. Bloody hell, when did I start running a kindergarten?

“There’s no point blowing the whole deal just because they’ve pissed you off, Seb,” Gabriel says, leaning on my desk with his arms crossed. “Alex and Jacob reckon they’re stalling in case they can find a better offer. We both know they can’t, and they’ll come crawling back to us in a week or so.”

I slam my fist down, still furious—with the McIversons, with Gabriel, with Lauren. Mainly with myself for giving so much of a shit. “That’s not the point though, is it? This business is full of sharks. If we look weak, we are weak, and some wannabe fuck knuckle will come sniffing at the blood in the water. Is it that little weasel Jimmy again?”

“Probably, Boss,” says Alex, looking to Jacob for confirmation.

“Is it or isn’t it, lads? And how about you give me some facts rather than eye-fucking each other?” Both men bristle, and dammit, I’m pushing their buttons on purpose.

Gabriel shakes his head wearily. “What crawled up your arse this morning? Sort your shit out, will you, because this isn’t helping anybody.”

Gabriel is my best mate, my son-in-law, and the father of my precious baby grandson. Right now, though, his still looks like a face I want to punch. I stand up, knocking over my chair behind me, and the tension in the room ratchets up. I’m considering who to swing at first when Taylor hustles back into the room, carrying a tray of drinks. I’m so wound up, I want to slap the damn thing in his face. He stares at me again, in that borderline creepy way of his. “There’s someone here to see you, Boss.”

“Well, tell them to fuck off, son—can’t you see we’re busy?”

“Yeah, I can, but she said you’d want to see her. She was pretty insistent.”

“She? Did you ask her what her name was?” Taylor nods and says he did, looking proud as punch about it. “And? What was it?”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:01 am

“Oh! Sorry.” He shakes his head. “She said to tell you Gloria was looking for you.”

The name hits me like a fist to the gut, and I straighten my chair to buy time. I don’t want the lads here to see me swooning like a lovesick arsehole. “Right. Okay. Let’s pick this up later. And... Well, I’m sorry for being a prick, all right?”

“It’s okay, guv,” Alex pipes up as they leave the room. “We’re used to it.”

Cheeky bastard.

He does a double take as he encounters Lauren in the doorway, and fuck me, I can’t blame the man. She’s wearing a skin-tight black pencil skirt with a little slit on the side and a red silk blouse that clings to her breasts. She looks completely edible, and my jeans suddenly don’t feel big enough.

“Lauren,” Gabriel says, nodding politely. “Nice to see you again.” He makes no comment about the Gloria thing, which is lucky—I’d never forgive him if he made me discuss her pussy with him. He makes a move to leave the office, but she holds up her hand. “Actually, this might be something you both need to hear.”

Now I’m intrigued as well as horny, and I shrug as he stays behind. This has got to be business, and I need to stop imagining what it’d be like to bend her over my desk and fill her with my now-throbbing cock.

She takes a seat and crosses one elegant leg over the other in a way that doesn’t help the throbbing. “I might need a little light security,” she says. “I thought I’d come to you guys first.”

“Why? What the fuck is wrong? What’s going on?” It comes out as more of a snarl than I intended, and Gabriel looks surprised. I’m furious at the thought of her being in any kind of danger, and I’m unable to hide it. She looks at me with those dazzling amber eyes, and her knowing smile leaves me breathless.

“There’s probably nothing wrong, and this is just a precaution. Seb, have you told Gabriel about my family?”

I shake my head. Of course not. That was private.

She flashes me a smile that makes me feel like I passed a test. “Okay, Gabriel, my father is Phillippe Montoya. My cousin is Alejandro Montoya,” she says, watching him for his reaction.

I know him better than she does, so I see the slight widening of his eyes, the way he stays completely unresponsive for a few moments. That’s his I’m-cool-as-a-cucumber fake out. “I see,” he replies calmly. “That’s interesting. What do you, or the Montoyas, need from Archangel?”

My blood rises to the temperature of hellfire as she explains what happened, detailing the cybersecurity breach in a matter-of-fact way that somehow makes it all worse. She sounds so steady, so unaffected, that I wonder if she realizes how much danger she could be in.

Or maybe, I remind myself before I blunder in there as Mr. Shouty, she’s been a Montoya her whole damn life and none of this is new to her. Fuck. My childhood was no tea party, but hers wasn’t either. I manage to keep my mouth shut until she’s finished and don’t bother asking why she’s reaching out to us and not her own family. I already know how independent she is, and she’d hate running back to them.

I look at Gabriel, and he nods solemnly. Unfortunately, we’ve both got bitter

experience of the women in our lives being threatened, and neither of us will allow it to happen again. “You can count on us,” he says. “Are you open to us coming up with a protection plan?”

“Of course she fucking is, why else would she be here? And this is the plan—we don’t take our eyes off her. Ideally, we move her out to a safe house, maybe that place in Chelsea? Once she’s there, we’ll set up guards twenty-four seven, both outside and inside. She has a driver, someone to take her to and from work, and probably someone based at the law firm as well. I’ll do most of it myself, and we’ll bring in Scott or one of the others for the rest. Plus, we need to install cameras, panic buttons, the full works. I’ll need access to her diary so we can decide which appointments she can keep and which need to be canceled. No new clients at all. Until this guy is found, there won’t be a minute that she’s not watched and protected.”

“Have you quite finished?” Lauren asks, glaring up at me with fire in her eyes. “Or did you forget I was here?”

Ha. Fat chance of that. I see the woman in my sleep.

“First of all, I will not be moving out of my apartment under any circumstances barring cockroach infestation or an army of flesh-eating rats. I will accept the panic buttons and cameras, apart from in my bathroom and bedroom. I will accept extra security at the office, because I certainly don’t want anyone else caught up in this. As for taking on new clients, we’ve already decided to put a pause on those while Sam is on leave. I will ask for a driver when I feel like I’m entering a high-risk situation—and before you interrupt, I will be the judge of what is high risk and what isn’t. But I will not—and I cannot stress this enough, Seb—I will not be kept prisoner. Nobody will be in my apartment with me unless I invite them in. Nobody will be telling me where I can go and what I can do. Nobody will be running my life except for me. Understood?”

I've practically got steam coming out of my ears by this stage, and I'm not sure if I want to fuck her or shake some sense into her. Both. Definitely both.

Gabriel stands and cracks his shoulders. "Remind you of anyone?"

He means Sam, of course, who is just as infuriatingly stubborn. "It does. And I remember how that turned out too." With her being grabbed while she was pregnant with Max and almost breaking all our hearts.

He gives me a serious look. "That won't be happening again, Seb. We'll make sure Lauren is safe and that there's no threat to anyone else. I was thinking of beefing up security at the law firm anyway, after Sam told me about this Volkov case. Our own house is already like Fort bloody Knox, but we could definitely tighten things up at the firm. I'm going to leave you two to sort out your differences, because something tells me I really don't want to get caught in the middle of this shitstorm. See you later, Seb. Nice to meet you, Gloria."

She laughs at that one, and I hate how the sound of it melts the worst of my anger. I feel so damn unstable around this woman, and I have no clue what to do about it.

She looks at me from across the desk, a little less cocky now we're alone together. "I know you're pissed at me, Seb, and that you'd like to lock me up and keep me safe, but I can't live like that. I meant what I said the other night—I won't live my life based on fear anymore. I've already had the lecture from my cousin, and I won't be reckless, but I refuse to let this control my life. If this is too hard for you, say the word, and I'll look into a different security firm."

She sounds sincere, but the thought of her reaching out to anyone else for help breaks me in two. I shake my head and force myself to take deep breaths. "No. We can do it your way if that's what you want. I'll need more information, though, all the details you can find for me, plus a contact in your family's organization to liaise with. And

before you object, I won't be sneaking around behind your back. It's just so we can stay up to date on developments with this Mafia-baby hacker bullshit. Plus, if I talk to someone who actually knows you, maybe they can give me tips on how not to strangle you before all this is over."

She nods her agreement, but her eyes tell me she's elsewhere. "You strangled me a little on Friday night."

Boom, my cock goes hard. I'm surprised it doesn't hit the desk. "Fuck, Lauren. Why would you say that, just when I was trying to be professional? Now all I can think about is fucking you."

"Maybe that's what I had in mind. Except I think I'd like to fuck you this time, Seb. What do you say, big man? You up for it?"

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:01 am

Fuck. I'm always up for it with this girl. Sure, I prefer being in charge, but it wouldn't kill me to let her take a turn. Maybe, in a complicated, bullshit psychology way, it might help her feel more in control of her life. It couldn't have been easy to ask us for help. I'll be doing her a kindness and getting fucked as part of the bargain. Win-win.

"What did you have in mind?"

She grins wickedly at me. "You'll see. Now, I'd like you to stay in that chair and not move unless I tell you, okay?"

"I'll do my best, sweetheart, but I make no promises."

She rolls her eyes. "I guess that'll have to do. Are we likely to be disturbed, and will anyone hear us?"

"Not if you lock the door, and yeah, possibly, depending on how much noise we make."

She gets out her phone, and the next thing I know, Donna Summer's sultry disco number "Love to Love You Baby" blasts out at full volume. "This is my music to fuck to playlist."

"What? Have you fucked other men listening to these songs? Because if so, I'd rather listen to fingernails being dragged down a chalkboard."

"I'm joking, Seb. It's just a playlist. Background. A little bit of rhythm."

She locks the door, then struts around to my side of the desk, her body moving gracefully in time to the music. She pushes my chair back against the wall to make space and tells me to sit on my hands. There are plenty of other places I'd like to put my hands right now, but I go along—for the time being.

She starts to dance in front of me, a slow and sensual flow that involves a lot of hip action, shimmying, and hair tossing. She runs her hands up her body, slowly exploring every curve, then starts to unbutton her silk blouse. I suck in a tortured breath, desperate to tear the flimsy fabric away from her with my teeth. Button by button she goes, taking her time in revealing large, perfect tits spilling out of a red lace bra. Tanned, supple skin, perky nipples showing through the material... Fuck me, definitely good enough to eat. "You want a taste, Seb? You only have to ask."

I nod, my nostrils flaring as she lowers the cup of her bra and hovers in front of me. "You can look. You can taste. You cannot touch—not until I say so. Okay?"

Willing to agree to anything, I nod, and she dances between my spread legs, closing the distance between us. I suck that big beautiful brown nipple into my mouth, consumed by the taste of her, the smell of her perfume. The dark curls swaying around her face. I suckle and nip and swirl my tongue, keeping up the steady rhythm she likes, enjoying her little moans, working her over hands-free. She clutches the back of my head, pulling me closer and giving me access to the other nipple. "God, Seb, the way you do that... I swear you could make me come just by doing that."

Sweet mother of fuck, I'm definitely willing to try, but she suddenly pulls away. "Not quite yet though, I'm afraid. First we need to make sure you're nice and hot for me."

"Fuck, Lauren. My cock is about to explode. I don't think I could be any hotter for you. Are you trying to give me a fucking heart attack?"

"What a way to go, though, huh?"

The music changes to something slow and sensual that I don't recognize, and she slinks out of her blouse. Her breasts are still exposed, nipples red from my mouth, and her pupils are huge. She reaches behind herself and undoes a zip, then starts to slowly smooth that skin-hugging skirt down her hips, inch by frustrating inch. Soon, she's naked apart from the red bra, a matching thong, and her black stiletto heels. "Lauren. You're so fucking beautiful."

She slides her butt back onto my desk, scattering the papers and sending an empty mug to the floor, and hoists her feet up in front of her, heels on the surface. She spreads her legs, her eyes on mine as she teases, revealing a little more with each second. My pulse jackhammers as she shows me her soaking wet thong, a flash of dark hair between her legs, a glimpse of the perfect pink pussy beneath it. Her scent floods my senses, and I want nothing more than to bury my nose in her folds and lick her creamy slit until she comes for me.

Again, she times it to perfection—right as I'm about to lean forward and take what she's offering, she slides her feet back down on the floor and flips over so her front half is spread on the desk and her rear is facing me in all its glory. Her ass is enormous in the best possible way, her juicy round cheeks filling my vision and begging to be bitten. She sways her hips in time to the music, and the moisture from her pussy shines on her thighs. Her toned legs stretch on forever, and I genuinely don't think I can take much more of this lap dance without breaking my promise.

She peeks at me over her shoulder, eyes twinkling. "Want me to fuck you yet, Seb?"

I nod grimly, staring at the gyrations of her backside and imagining what I'd like to do to it.

"Then beg for it, baby."

She lifts herself up from the desk, then turns around and takes off her bra. Continuing

to move in time to the music, she slides her thong down those curvy hips, those luscious legs. She balls up the fabric and holds it under my nose. “Beg for it, Seb. Beg for it, and I’ll give you the ride of your life.”

I glare up at her, inhaling the scent of cum and woman from her panties like it’s a class-A drug. We both know I could throw her on that desk and fuck her whenever I wanted to. We both know she couldn’t fight me off, even if she tried. So what’s stopping me? I was rough enough with her the other night, and she loved it. Except... That’s clearly not what she needs right now. She needs to feel her power. I grit my teeth and growl, “I’m begging you. Please, sweetheart. I need to be inside you.”

She strokes my cheek, and I turn my head to kiss the warm skin of her palm. Something seems to melt inside her, and she leans down to kiss me properly. Her tongue dances against mine and her lips drive me crazy. With a woman like Lauren, kissing is more intimate than fucking. “Thank you,” she whispers. “Thank you for this.”

I’m about to tell her she’s welcome, but her hands go to my jeans, and she eases my cock free of its boxer-short jail. I’m left speechless as she kneels down between my legs and takes it into her mouth, running her tongue along my shaft and licking pre-cum from its head. She holds my balls in her hand, gently squeezing them as she starts to suck. I glance down, see her lush red lips stretched around my engorged dick, and almost come there and then. “Fuck, Lauren. Stop, or I’ll be finishing in your mouth.” With a final flick of her tongue, she moves her head away, looking up at me with a face as flushed with need as I imagine mine to be. “Well, maybe we’ll save that for another time.”

She climbs on top of me, her hands on the back of the chair at either side of my neck, her pussy hovering above me. Slowly, she lowers herself down, groaning as my rock-hard cock spears her. I slide into her smooth as silk, her opening slick with arousal, her gorgeous flesh stretching around me as she sinks all the way onto my lap. Seeing

stars as she rocks against me, I moan her name.

Her tempo increases, and before long she's riding me like I'm a bucking bronco, her hair wild and her skin coated in sweat. She keeps a grip on the back of the chair, riding me faster and faster and harder and harder until... Fuck bollocks wank! I come with such intensity I think I might have blacked out for a second. My cum explodes inside her, coating her tight pussy walls, and I quake and quiver for what feels like hours in the aftermath. Her hair is draped around my shoulders, her bare breasts pressed against my face, and Gloria is still tightly gripping me. Fuck. I've only just come, but I feel like I could go again straight away. Not like this, though. This was most definitely a one-off.

I pull my hands free, grab hold of her ass, and stand with her legs still wrapped around me. "Seb. What are you doing?"

"I'm doing something I've wanted to do since the moment I met you, Lauren. I'm eating that perfect pussy of yours."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:01 am

She squeals and slaps at my arms, but her heart's not in it. The hands clinging to my biceps and the little squeeze of her internal walls tell me she's not going to fight this. I lay her down on the desk and fasten up my jeans. This is going to be all about her. I nudge her legs open and run my hands up her inner thighs. She trembles beneath me, and I gaze at her gorgeous center. Her neatly trimmed bush of dark curls glistens with my cum and her juices, and when I run my pointer finger along her folds, she sighs my name.

"This," I say, "is going to be the most delicious pussy I have ever tasted."

"Are you sure? My ex wouldn't come near me once he'd come, said he didn't like the smell."

I give her thigh a gentle slap. "Well your ex was obviously a prick, and I don't want to hear him mentioned while I'm anywhere near Gloria, okay? You smell fucking delicious. Your cum and mine, together. It's fucking perfect. Now shut up and let me eat."

Her giggle, sweet and innocent, goes straight to my dick.

I kiss my way along her inner thighs, her flesh trembling beneath my lips as I work my way higher. I'd normally torture her, drag this out, make her weep for it, but I'm feeling generous. She did, after all, give me the world's sexiest lap dance.

I use my fingers to open her up, pulling her pussy lips aside so I can see her properly. A gorgeous swollen clit right there, sitting up and begging for attention. I smile at the sight and blow on it before I run my tongue all the way up and down her slit.

“Seb! Oh god, that feels so good.”

Her body squirms beneath me as I keep up the motion, her breathing building up to a pant. I slip my tongue inside her, exploring and tasting her salty sweetness before going back to her bud and sucking it gently into my mouth. Holding it there, I lick up and down and swirl my tongue around it, making her whole body tremor. She’s close, I can tell, and I want to feel her come. I slide a finger inside her and keep it there, rocking back and forth while I go back to swooping my tongue over her soaking wet pussy and her desperate clit. “Come for me now, sweetheart. Come all over my face.”

The dirty talk works its magic, and she obliges, screaming my name and tearing at my hair as her legs spasm on either side of my head. I keep licking and sucking, keep fingering her until the final last wave of pleasure sweeps through her. Her walls ripple around me, and her juice gushes out around my hand, drenching my face and beard in her delicious cum. I lick her clean and relish the sight of her naked, quivering body splayed out across my desk.

“You look good there, Hot Sauce,” I say. “So good I might just chain you to that desk and never let you go.”

“Promises, promises.”

I help her sit up, and we stare at each other for a moment before bursting out laughing. Twenty minutes ago, we both looked like normal human beings going about our working days. Now, we look like a pair of sex addicts who’ve fallen off the wagon. She reaches out and touches my face. “You’ve got a bit of something in your beard there...”

“I know. Someone squirted on me. It was fucking unbelievable. There’s a bathroom over there if you want to clean up. Personally, I’m happy to walk around smelling of your cunt for the rest of the fucking day.”

“Did anyone ever tell you that you have a filthy mouth, Sebastian Donovan?” she says, standing up and kissing me firmly on the lips. “And I love it.”

She disappears off to my bathroom, giving me the chance to gather as many of my wits as I have left. I think I get less intelligent every time I fuck her.

She emerges looking almost as good as new, her hair up in a tidy ponytail and her makeup restored. “Have you stolen my panties again?”

I shrug, knowing they’re safely tucked away in my pocket. “No clue what you’re talking about. You must have lost them. You’re very careless with your knickers—I’ve noticed that about you.”

“Knickers!” she exclaims with childish delight. “One of my all-time favorite Britishisms words.” She drops a quick kiss on my cheek. “Thanks for that, Mr. Donovan. I really needed it.”

“You’re very welcome, Ms. Hayes. But now I feel a bit used.”

“I didn’t hear you complaining.”

And she never will. “Shall I call round at yours later to sort those cameras? And did you drive here or walk over?” I’m keen to move away from the subject of sex and back to something that doesn’t have me acting like a lovesick schoolboy. Her protection should be a safe topic.

“Yes, you can come install the cameras. And I walked. It was a nice day, and I needed to clear my head.”

I fight back a sharp retort about how she should be taking her own safety more seriously and instead pick up the phone. I ask Scott, one of our most trusted men, to

give her a lift back to the law office.

“Thanks,” she says. “These heels were killing me anyway. See you later.”

When she’s gone, I sink down on my chair and let myself breathe. Being around that woman is not good for my sanity when I have so much on my plate. Running Archangel is challenge enough without adding in the McIverson bullshit, the cyber threat against the Montoyas, and the potential upcoming conflict with the Russian mob. There are a lot of plates spinning right now, and I need to be able to think about something other than her delicious pussy.

Right, I decide, first things first. The McIversons. If I get them sorted, I can pay more attention to the stuff that matters. They’ve had enough time, and no matter what Gabriel says, it’s a situation that needs sorting. I’ll take Taylor with me, see what he’s made of. I give my beard a quick wipe down—I don’t want any other man getting the slightest hint of her scent—and head out of my office. The other guys have desks out here, and there’s a little kitchen and bar area where we hang out and talk about whatever shit happens to be on our minds.

As I saunter toward it with an admittedly smug spring to my step, they all look up, glance at each other, and in unison, they start to sing. It begins with an extended sigh, and then they all serenade me with a rousing rendition of “Love to Love You Baby.” The sight of all these big bruisers dancing around and singing the disco classic, complete with sounds lifted straight from porno movies, is enough to crack me up. I laugh until I’m fit to bust, shaking my head at their impudence.

Once the hilarity has died down, I point at young Taylor, who played a pretty mean air guitar throughout. “Get your coat, kid. We’ve got work to do.”

Chapter

Thirteen

SEBASTIAN

The McIverson chain is six strong, all the gastro pubs located in smart areas of London. Even without the business itself, the properties alone are worth a fortune, so once this deal goes through, Gabriel and I will be playing real-life Monopoly. And this deal will go through, no matter what they think to the contrary. I'm sick of hearing excuses from them.

I explained to Alex and Jacob that I was going in person to let the McIversons know how serious we are—deadly serious. I think the lads felt like I was stepping on their toes a bit, but that's tough. They don't work in the kind of game where the boss gives a shit about their feelings or offers them spa breaks to deal with their stress.

Gabriel had already left, so I told him by text, then added:

Don't worry. Got my calm head on.

He'll be at the law office, checking on the security measures. What threatens Lauren could potentially threaten Sam. We both know that, just as I know Sam is in safe hands with my partner. He'd tear the world down to protect her, and he knows I feel the same.

Taylor has been weird on the drive, chatty one minute and tongue-tied the next. I can't get a bead on this kid, and I'm not one hundred percent sold on the idea of keeping him around. In my line of work, I need to be able to trust the man watching

my back with my life, and right now I'm not sure I'd trust Taylor with watching the fucking car.

"So, why'd you leave Manchester?" I ask, trying again to get some sense out of him. I'm at the wheel because I bloody love driving. I lost my license a while back, and now it's been reinstated, I can't get enough of the streets of London. The more road rage, the better.

"Um, yeah, well, I wanted to try London."

I nod. That much is fucking obvious. "Right. You still have family up there? Mum, dad, siblings?"

He stares out of the window, his face suddenly made of stone. "My mum died six months ago. No dad on the scene. No other family."

"I'm sorry, mate. That's a tough call. But look—lots of us had rough starts in life at Archangel. It's not where you started that matters. It's where you end up."

"It wasn't a rough start," he snaps, showing a spine around me for the first time. "She was brilliant, my mum. Couldn't have asked for better." He seems to realize how he's spoken and adds, "But yeah. Thanks. I appreciate that. Will I get to hit someone today?"

I laugh out loud as I swerve around an erratic courier driver on an electric bike, giving him a loud beep and getting the finger in return. Ah, how I love my city. "I admire your enthusiasm, but hopefully not, son. If it does go down that route, though, I expect you to be ready."

"Born ready, Boss. My mum always told me I came out of the womb punching."

He certainly looks the part, I think as I park up near the McIverson's flagship pub on the south side of the Thames. He's taller than me, with the build of a rhino. The blond hair gives him a youthful look, but that's okay—he could be a baby-faced assassin for all I know.

When we enter the pub, it's half empty despite being lunchtime in the middle of a busy business and tourist area. The place should be buzzing, but instead it feels lackluster. The girl on reception barely glances up from her phone, and the bar staff are more interested in chatting to each other than serving the few customers waiting for drinks.

“Got a table for two, love, for me and my boyfriend here? He's been dying to try your filet mignon.”

She looks from Taylor to me uncertainly. “Umm... I don't think that's on our menu? But if you still want a table, I can check if one's available.”

“Don't worry about it. I'm here to see Frank anyway. Is he in? And is Jimmy around?”

Her face twists a little at the mention of Jimmy, nervousness flickering in her eyes. I know that look. It's a look that says she'll do anything to avoid being alone with the guy. I guess he's as popular with his staff as he is the rest of the world. “Yeah. They're in the office. Want me to ring through?”

“Nah, that's okay, Chantal,” I say, clocking her name tag. “Wouldn't want to spoil the surprise, would we?” Taylor almost falls over his own feet as we walk away, gawping back at her. “Never seen a girl before, pal?”

“Yeah. Loads. She's just an especially hot one.”

“Fair enough. Just don’t let a pretty face distract you from business, all right?” He nods but looks amused. I suppose it is pretty hypocritical advice after I spent the morning fucking Lauren in my office.

I slam through the doors to the back offices, scaring the living daylights out of a woman carrying a tray of coffee mugs. “Sorry, darling,” I say. “Just here to see Father Frank and his family of angels.”

On cue, the older son, Kenny, appears, popping his head out of the back room to see what the fuss is about. His face is a picture when he spots me striding toward him. I find Frank sitting with his feet up on his desk and little Jimmy, the scrawny bastard, glued to his phone. He’s the runt of the litter and ugly with it.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Jimmy bleats. “This is trespassing. We could call the cops.”

“The cops? What do you think this is, a fucking American TV show? Calm yourself, you piece of shit, or I’ll shove that phone down your pissing throat. I came to see your old man, not you, so get fucked.”

He opens his mouth to argue, but his dad holds up one hand to silence him. “Shut your mouth, Jimmy. Mr. Donovan is our guest.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:02 am

“Mr. Donovan is a scum-sucking gangster, a cunt, and a thieving bastard.”

I’ve been called worse, but Taylor takes offense on my behalf. In a flash, he’s across the room and has Jimmy pinned to the wall by his throat, the lad’s body dangling from one meaty paw, feet kicking.

“You gonna behave, or do I have to crush your windpipe?” Taylor says, and I have to admit it—I’m impressed. He sounds deadly serious, and Jimmy waves his arms in surrender. Taylor drops him to the floor and turns to me. “Should I give him a kicking, Boss?”

I shake my head. “No. That’s not why I’m here.”

“Why are you here?” Frank says, ignoring Jimmy’s spluttering while his brother helps him to his feet. “I thought I explained everything to Alex and Jacob. We need a few more days.”

“Don’t worry, Frank, they did tell me. I just wanted to call by and show you something, purely out of courtesy. It was the Carney brothers you borrowed the money from, wasn’t it, Frankie? Now, as your delightful progeny here pointed out, some people see me as a gangster, a meathead, and a thieving bastard—but next to the Carneys, mate, I am a fucking angel. Here. Take a look. You too, boys.”

I pull up a video on my phone and place it on the desk. An associate of mine sent the video my way. Leverage. It’s not a pretty watch, showing as it does a gang of men beating a teenaged boy with lead pipes. The kid is curled up in a ball trying to protect his head, and his mum is screaming off to the side, held back by two other heavies.

By the time they finish, the boy's face is a mush of broken teeth, exposed bone, and blood, and the empty look in his eyes leaves no doubt that he's either dead or near to it. The camera turns to the mum, a middle-aged blond woman with tears pouring down her face. One of the men slaps her hard, and when she falls to the floor, he kicks her in the stomach with a steel-toed boot. While she's writhing in pain, he drags down her leggings and shoves one of the lead pipes he used to beat her son inside her. Her screams fill the room, and the man who did it to her holds up the blood-coated pipe to the camera, showing it off. He, like all of them, is wearing a balaclava, but I know it's Darren Carney. They do too.

"You have two kids left, and your wife's still alive," he says to the camera. "Get us our money by the end of the week or that all changes, you cunt."

There's a stunned silence in the office, and Frank in particular looks shaken, his hand trembling as he reaches for a mug on his desk.

"That," I say, swallowing down the bitter acid that burns the back of my throat, "is what happened to one of their clients when they were late paying up. That was Carney's version of a warning notice. Now, it's entirely up to you if you want to back out of our deal, Frankie. If you do, I will walk away, no hard feelings. Maybe the Carneys will have found God by this time next week. Who can say?"

"Don't listen to him, Dad. We have no clue who that was, and it could all be fake anyway." Jimmy is really starting to irritate me now. He's like a buzzing little fly in the corner of your vision—essentially harmless but needing a good swat.

Frank is pale, and Kenny stares at him with horror in his eyes. From what I've heard, Kenny is the creative, the one who masterminded the menus and the decor and all that good stuff. He won't have the stomach for any of this.

"Okay," Frank finally says, blinking slowly as he makes his decision. "You've got

your deal. I'll have the papers to you by the end of the day."

"Wonderful, Frank—and I'm a man of my word. The cash will be with you as agreed. Right. Now, I'll leave you to your day."

On our way out, I stop by Chantal's desk. She's staring at us with open interest now, obviously wondering why we're really here. "Why don't you like him?" I ask. "Jimmy? And don't worry, you can speak freely—he won't be in charge much longer."

She pulls a disgusted face and says, "He's a peeper. He's got cameras all over the place, including in the ladies' loo. We only found out when there was a leak and the plumber came across them. The sicko had been watching us pee for god knows how long. He's fucking disgusting, he is."

I nod. I couldn't agree more. "Thanks for telling me. Now, before we go, my lad Taylor here is going to write down his number for you. He's new in town and is looking to make some friends, find some new hobbies."

She looks him up and down in admiration. "I'd guess his main hobby is going the gym, but yeah, okay, why not?"

I let Taylor drive us back because I have a few calls to make. I don't like the sense of threat I feel circling us at the moment, and I need to take action. I'm not a subtle man, and I've always believed the best thing to do with threats is face them head on. Then burn them with fire.

Chapter

Fourteen

LAUREN

At my kitchen table, I go through a few files, reply to some queries, and confirm a couple meetings. I inherited some of Samantha's clients and have familiarized myself with their cases. One of them, Patrick Galway, has emailed her asking for a face-to-face to discuss custody arrangements of his kids after a nasty divorce. She already successfully brokered an agreement, but apparently his ex isn't playing fair.

Sam gave me her notes, along with her more personal assessment—lovely bloke, wants the best for the children, wife is a piece of work. She did the same with all her ongoing cases, and I smile as I read through the comments. It's like having an abridged version of her in the room with me.

Work is busy, which is good. I don't do well with too much free time. Eventually, I reread what I have so far on Caroline Volkov, who is now officially a client. She wants to take it slow, be sure of every step, and that's difficult to navigate—I'd much rather act quickly and get her out, but it has to be her decision. I read the pages of notes, shaking my head at the abuse she's suffered.

We got pictures of some lingering bruises the last time she was in the office, and of course, we have Nicky's broken arm. She's understandably reluctant to involve him, though, and doesn't want to put him through the trauma of testifying against his own father. That would also make him more of a threat and paint a target on his back. Caroline, like most good mothers, is happy to wear that target all by herself if it helps protect her child.

Seb gave Caroline a burner phone and has prepared a safe house for them if they need to flee, but for the time being, the bastard causing all this trouble is still away traveling on business. Probably the kind of business that involves women and children being illegally moved around the globe in cramped shipping containers. For now, Caroline feels safe and wants to maintain some normality for her son while she

decides what to do next. We all know that once we file the legal papers and Ivan finds out, that safety will evaporate, and we'll have to carefully choreograph the timing to extract them before shit hits the fan. It's good knowing that Seb and Archangel will be there to help with that. Much as I might rail against any restrictions on my own freedom, when it comes to my clients, safety comes first.

I head to my personal email account using the encrypted browser that Jax got me to install on my laptop and work my way through the usual selection of shopping offers, spam, and ticket sales websites. Damn, I think, these things work—I'm seconds away from buying tickets to see *Wicked* for like the tenth time. My sister sent me photos from her holiday in Cabo, and my dentist wants me to schedule an appointment for a checkup. So far, so normal.

There are a few emails from Mamá, which actually landed days ago, before Alejandro contacted me. I've spoken to her on the phone since, and she was full of contrition for her maverick ways and the trouble she caused. I suspect she was sneakily proud of herself until it became obvious that she unintentionally compromised the safety of her precious family.

I click another email open and immediately realize that this is not from my mother. It might be her address, but she would never send me this, not in a million years.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:02 am

The screen is filled with a montage of photos of Bailey, the yellow Lab I had as a kid. She knows that after he died at the ripe old age of twelve, I never wanted to talk about him again. I got rid of all my keepsakes, took his photos down in my old bedroom, and locked his leash and collar away in a drawer. My parents didn't understand why—they probably put it down to grief—but they do know how much talking about him upsets me.

Even after all this time, my eyes fill with tears at the sight of his big goofy face, the way he always seemed to be smiling. I can still remember his velvety ears and the feel of his tongue on my skin. I loved that dog so much, but every day he was in my life, I was scared of losing him.

I'm still swiping tears from my cheeks when my intercom buzzes. I go to the screen by the front door and see Seb lurking outside. He looks like the kind of man you should cross the street to avoid on a dark night, but his hulking presence makes me breathe more easily. I press the entrance button and leave the front door open before going back into the kitchen. I'm glad he's here, which is unsettling in itself.

"What the fuck are you doing leaving the front door unlocked?" he demands a few minutes later as he walks in and drops a big black bag on the floor. He's angry with me, and maybe I deserve it.

"I knew it was you. I saw you on the camera."

"So what? Anyone could have been waiting outside or hiding in the building. Use your fucking head, will you?"

I stare down at my hands, unable to bring myself to look at him because he's so furious.

He puts his hand under my chin, forces my head up, and frowns at what he sees. "You're crying. Please tell me that's not because of me. I'm a shouty prick, but don't take it seriously. It's my way of showing I give a shit."

I laugh and lean my cheek into his palm. "No, it's not you... Although you are a shouty prick. It's... these emails. I think they're from Diego Torres."

He drags a chair over so he can sit right next to me and slips an arm around my shoulders. "RIP Bailey," he reads aloud. "Is this the dog you had as a kid? The one Uncle Arsehole threatened?"

"Yeah. Do you like dogs?"

"I bloody love them, unless they're trained Doberman guard dogs with their teeth sunk in my shins. So, I'm guessing your mum wouldn't have actually sent this?"

"No way. She knows I never got over losing him. Over the years, my sister had a few pets, and they tried to persuade me I should have more—I think they were worried about me, you know, because I was going through that 'difficult' stage. They suggested another dog to keep Bailey company—a cat, hamster, pony... They would have gotten me anything, but I always said no. While I was living there, while Carlos was still around, nothing I allowed myself to care about would ever be safe."

"Jesus. That's fucked up, sweetheart, feeling that terrified when you're a kid, especially when nobody else knew about it." The gentle kiss he places on my hair nearly takes me out completely, and I'm beyond relieved when he quickly moves on. "So. There's more emails. You up to looking, or should I do it? Then we'd better send them to this Jax fella and keep him up to date."

The comforting weight of his arm around me gives me the strength to nod and click on the next email. Bailey was my weak point, and he clearly still is. Not only because of how much I loved him, but because remembering him means remembering that time in my life. The way it all began—those years of torment, years of isolation. It was the beginning of Uncle Carlos undoing me, turning me into a coward who fled from her own life. I will not be a coward now, I vow, and I certainly won't run from some overzealous little douchebag whose dad was a low-level enforcer with no heart and even less brains.

The next email from my “mom” flashes up a wedding photo—me and Marshall at the courthouse in Buffalo. We don't look happy, not even on what was supposed to be the most joyous day of our lives.

“That's him, your ex? Looks like a cunt. No, I take that back. It's an insult to cunts, and cunts are among my very favorite things. Especially yours.”

He's trying to lighten the mood, and I'm thankful because the next picture is a screenshot of a news piece from a local paper. “Disgraced accountant jailed for defrauding clients,” the headline reads.

I blink, surprised. It's only from a year ago, and I had no idea. “He was a gambler,” I explain to Seb. “Despite seeming so dull and safe on the surface. I left him way before this happened. I can't imagine he's doing well in prison.”

“Does it bother you? Because I'm guessing the whole point of these emails is to upset you.”

I consider it and shake my head. “No. He made his choices. He's a grown man, and he isn't my responsibility.”

Seb nods approvingly, and with a shaking hand, I move the cursor to the third and

final email. I have skeletons in my closet, and I can hear the old bones rattling. Do I really want to do this with Seb here?

I glance up and meet his deep brown eyes. I love the crinkled corners where his laugh lines live and the little squeeze he gives my shoulders. Yeah, I guess I do. I open the message, and my heart does a cartwheel. I half expected it, but it still takes my breath away. It's a mug shot, very obviously taken in custody, showing a skinhead in his thirties. His blue eyes are bulging and angry, his lips curled into a snarl that shows crooked, yellowing teeth. The top of a Nazi swastika tattoo is clearly visible under the neckline of his filthy T-shirt. It's a face that haunts my nightmares for all kinds of reasons. Beneath the shot are the words "Still missing—Brad Schmidt" and a hotline number to call.

"Lauren?" Seb's voice drags me back from the memories. "Are you okay? Who is this bastard? And who the fuck only has a jailhouse mug shot to use when they go missing?"

"Men like Brad Schmidt. And believe me, he's going to be missing for a while. Seb... There's something I need to tell you, and you might not like me very much when I do."

He sees how serious I am and nods. "Okay. We can talk about it. But first, I'm going to send these to Jax, all right?"

I nod. It has to be done, and it will lead to a whole new round of questions from my family. I'll just have to deal with it. "You go and get settled on the sofa, sweetheart. I'll bring the wine if you like. Is this a needing-wine conversation?"

I smile sadly. "It's a needing-a-whole-distillery-of-bourbon conversation. There's homemade paella on the stove if you want some."

I do as he suggested and make my way on shaky legs to the living room. It's a cozy space, dominated by a big comfortable couch covered in pretty pink-and-gray cushions and matching throws. I've moved around a lot, and I like to build a little refuge for myself in my home—an adult version of a blanket fort. Within minutes, Seb joins me, looking spectacularly out of place in this ultra-feminine environment. He sets two glasses of wine on the coffee table, then looks around and nods appreciatively. “Nice. Feel like I should have brought you flowers now.”

I laugh. “I think we're way past the flowers stage, don't you?”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:02 am

“Never. Next time, I promise.” He sits on one end of the couch and pulls me toward him. I squeal but don’t object as he manhandles me, settling me onto his lap like a little girl. He drapes us both in one of the blankets and snuggles me into his arms. My hands wrap around his torso, and I wriggle until I’m perfectly comfortable. “That’s enough of that, madam. I don’t want a boner right now, so keep your gorgeous arse still. Now, tell me everything—it won’t be anything I haven’t heard before, and nothing on earth could stop me liking you.”

I let my head fall against his firm chest, taking strength from the scent of him. Chanel, freshly washed cotton, Seb. His big hand goes to my hair, stroking and playing with my curls, soothing me like a nervous animal. I’m cocooned in him, and he’s all around me, filling my senses. I’m not sure I’ve ever felt so completely protected. I know it can’t last, it never does, but for now I will take the comfort that this surprisingly kind man is offering me.

“So, when I was living in Florida,” I begin, gratefully accepting the wine, “I took on a case in Jacksonville.” I take a deep calming breath. “A woman who was trying to divorce her scumbag husband, a neo-Nazi prick by the name of Brad Schmidt. She’d gotten knocked up by him when she was fifteen, didn’t know any better at the time, but she hated the lifestyle. She wanted out, and I was trying to help her.” I take a sip of my wine, and my hands shakes as I lower the glass from my lips. The thing I recall most about Jennie was the desperate look in her eyes. It’s a look I’ve seen far too many times.

“She was a lot like Caroline, but with trailer parks and moonshine. I suppose I underestimated him, and he grabbed me from outside my apartment building and took me to this creepy cabin in the woods.” My heart rate spikes at the memory, and I

remind myself I'm safe. I'm here with Seb, and nobody is going to hurt me now. "It was miles away from anywhere, and he kept me there for three nights, chained up like a dog. He and his buddies took it in turns to rape me, to beat me, and to torture me." I recall the vitriol they spewed at me, calling me all kinds of horrible names. All they had inside them was hate and violence, and I was their punching bag.

Seb stiffens behind me and sucks in a long breath. I don't need to see his face to imagine the fury—I feel it in every tense line of his body. His arms come around to the front of me, holding me even tighter to him. "Sweetheart, I'm so sorry. How did you get away?"

"They got sloppy. They thought I'd run out of fight and left me unchained one night." The memories try to pull me under, but they won't win. I was dehydrated, half-starved, and lying in my own filth and blood, so I must have looked like I was done. But I won then, and I'll keep on winning.

I drag in a shaky breath. "They used to take it in turns watching me, and the night I escaped, it was Brad himself. God, Seb, I can still smell him sometimes. When I'm asleep, I think I can still feel his foul breath on my face, his fingernails digging into my skin..." I don't tell Seb that after he raped me, Brad liked to urinate on me. Even now, the stench of urine makes me break out in a cold sweat. Instead, I simply say, "He was evil. Pure evil."

"Fucking hell. I'll kill him. I'll kill all of them."

I run my fingers over his huge hands, feel the angry tremble in them. He means every word. I have no doubt this man would murder for me without a second thought. "You can't, Seb. He's dead. They all are. When I told Alejandro what happened, he and Jax came to Florida and made them all disappear."

"I hope it involved a lot of fucking pain."

I nod. “Knowing those two, yes, it did. The only one they couldn’t find was Brad Schmidt himself. They couldn’t find him because he was already dead—and I was the one who killed him. That night, when he rammed his filthy dick into my mouth, I bit it so hard I tore his foreskin.” I was aiming to bite it off completely, but that’s harder than it sounds. Still, it was enough. All the blood and his screams... He was caught completely off guard and fell flat on his ass.

Seb holds me tighter, his warm breath dusting over my hair while he patiently waits for me to continue. “While he was down, I pulled the gun he always carried out of his waistband, and I... Well. I failed to bite his dick off, so I shot it off instead. Then I watched while he bled out, screaming and begging for help, just like I had. It wasn’t quick and it wasn’t easy, but eventually the life just... The life went out of him. That’s another thing I still see in my sleep. His eyes, the way that they died in front of me. The way his story ended, at my hands. Logically, I don’t feel guilty about it—the man got what he deserved. In my heart? It’s not quite so clear cut. I killed a man, and you’re the first person I’ve ever told about it.”

He kisses the top of my head and tries to turn my face up to his. I struggle because I don’t want to meet his eyes. I expected to feel better after telling someone, thought it would be cathartic, but reliving it all only makes me feel dirtier.

“Look at me, Lauren,” he commands. “Now.”

I do as I am told. I seem incapable of disobeying when he uses that tone. He wipes tears from my cheeks, which is odd because I didn’t notice I was crying. I’ve kept this crap bottled up for so long I got used to ignoring it. Got used to pretending it didn’t take up a corner of my soul.

“I’m only going to say this once, sweetheart, but I need you to believe me, okay? It was not your fault. What you did was self-defense. In fact, I’d go so far as to say you did the world a favor by taking the scumbag out of play. I don’t like you any less—I

like you more. You protected yourself. You survived. You did what you had to do. I know that killing a man isn't as easy as it looks on the TV. It's messy and hard and brutal, especially the way you did it. It takes a little piece of you, I get that—but you do know, don't you, that it was the right thing to do?"

I nod, my lips trembling as I look up and see the truth of what he's saying in his eyes. "Yeah. It was me or him. I do know that. And his wife... Well, she got away with her kids. She stayed in touch, married a dentist, and lives in Orlando. She's on the PTA and plays tennis. Her life is completely different, and that makes me feel better. I mean, I know I can't go around killing all my clients' asshole partners, but it might save time."

He laughs and clutches me tighter. "It bloody well would. We could form a hit squad, love. Take out the Volkovs and Schmidts of this world one by one. What did you do with him afterwards, by the way? Why is he still missing?"

"Alligators. Florida's gift to the killing kind. We were out near the swamps, and I loaded him up in the bed of his own truck and dumped him. Then I set the damn cabin on fire and drove back to the city. I took off the license plate and abandoned the car in a part of town where I knew it would survive about as long as his body. When I was done, I called my cousin because I wanted them all dealt with—I knew from their fucked-up conversations that I wasn't the first woman they'd brought out to that cabin, and there was no way I was going to let it happen to another. I never told him about Brad, though—I don't know why. I suppose I was so used to keeping secrets by then, from everyone. Carlos trained me well. I might not have taken an active role in my family business, but I've picked up a few tips along the way. It's like... I don't know, Seb. I tried so hard to keep my distance from the Montoya world. I tried to walk in the light, but the darkness tracked me down anyway. Recently, I've been wondering if it's just part of who I am—if instead of being scared of it I should just embrace it."

He picks me up and maneuvers me around so my legs are on either side of him and we're directly facing each other. Even now, after this ultra-heavy chat, I'm aware of his size, his shape, how good it would feel to slip my hands underneath the soft fabric of that T-shirt and touch his muscular chest. He takes a deep breath and runs his hand over his face before he speaks. "We've all got darkness inside us, Lauren. Some more than others. And... Fuck, I need to say this or I'm going to blow a fuse. What I did the other night—with the zip ties and the force. The way I fucked you on the back seat... If I'd known about this, I wouldn't have done it that way. I feel bloody disgusted with myself now. I wanted to turn you on, not traumatize?—"

"Stop!" I yell, and he blinks in surprise. "Do I have your attention now, or are you still too busy self-flagellating?"

"I don't know. What the fuck does it mean?"

"It means beating yourself up, you asshole. Look, what happened the other night—the hunt, the restraints, the game we played? I. Fucking. Loved it. Every goddamn second, okay? I'm a grown woman who knows what she wants. I had a safe word. I had choices. And what I chose was to let you treat me like prey because it was hot as hell. Don't you dare start behaving like I'm some delicate flower now. Don't make me regret confiding in you."

He starts to grin, and it is infuriating. I'd like to slap him across the face, but he'd probably enjoy it. "All right, Hot Sauce. Message received and understood. You did seem to enjoy it at the time from the way you came all over me and screamed my name so loud." He sobers and continues. "It's just that hearing what happened to you... It made me think I screwed up, okay? That I went too far."

I tilt my head to one side. "Truthfully, Seb, I don't think you went far enough. I wasn't lying when I said I loved it. But I... God, I don't know how to explain this, but it touched something pretty deep inside me. It felt liberating to give up control.

Like I was reclaiming something from those abusive bastards in Florida. With you, I want the darkness. I want to be tied up and spanked and whipped. I want you to abduct me and drag me into seedy alleyways and screw me. I want you to break in here and hold me at knifepoint while you fuck me in the ass. I want it all. If that makes me fucked up, if that makes me a pervert, then so be it—because a wise woman recently told me that as a feminist, I should expect nothing more than equality when it comes to orgasms.”

He raises my captured hands to his lips and gently skims them across the sensitive skin of my palms. “I don’t want to ask who gave you that advice, sweetheart. But it doesn’t make you a pervert. It makes you fucking perfect. Now, what hole would you like me to fuck you in right now?”

Chapter

Fifteen

LAUREN

My eyes widen, and I feel the outline of a rock-hard erection pushing up against my core. He listened. He understood. He’s ready.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:02 am

“Can’t I have all of them?”

With my wrists tightly held in one of his hands, he runs the other up to my breasts and pinches my nipple on the way toward my neck. He wraps his long fingers around my throat and lightly squeezes. “No, you greedy girl. You get to pick one, and I will fuck it until you can’t think straight. Choose quickly, or I’ll do it for you.”

I lift my chin, loving the pressure of his hand on my neck. “Mouth,” I say. “Fuck me in the mouth, Seb.”

He nods sharply, and I expect him to tell me to kneel in front of him. I want to kneel. I want to be on my knees, sucking his cock, serving him. Instead, he stands and carries me with my legs still wrapped around his waist. He opens the bedroom door and throws me down on the bed. Without a word, he goes to the drawers in my closet and emerges with several pairs of pantyhose and stockings. My pussy throbs at the sight of him, so determined. His face is a dark cloud of intent, and he approaches me with a snarl.

“You’re going to have your mouth full in a little while, sweetheart, so there’s no way to say your safe word. If you want me to stop, kick the bed three times. Understood?”

I nod, delicious licks of anticipation running from my core to the rest of my body. He peels my yoga pants from my hips and tugs my tank top up over my head, then stands and surveys my body as though it’s a problem he needs to solve. He removes a Swiss army knife from his pocket and flicks it open to reveal a small but wickedly sharp blade. I stare up at it, fear causing my blood to pound in my ears.

Dear god, I know I said I wanted this, but what the hell is he going to do to me? I leap from the bed, intending to run, but he easily catches me in one brutally strong arm. He slams me back down so hard I bounce, then straddles me, grabbing my hands and holding them above my head. “Don’t fucking move, Lauren. You asked to be fucked in the mouth, and that’s what you’ll get—when I’m good and ready.” He strokes his fingertips tenderly down my cheek. “Safe word?”

“Chainsaw.”

“Good girl.” He winks and climbs off me, and within a minute he has my wrists and ankles tied to the corners of the bed. There’s enough give to allow me to move a little, to kick against the bed if I want to stop, but enough restraint to make me tremble with excitement.

He grins at me, his teeth glinting and his eyes shining, looking like a wolf in human form. “That’s better,” he says, looking down at me. He takes the knife and runs it along his own thumb. A thin line of bright red blood seeps out, proving exactly how sharp it is. I gulp, and my lower lip trembles from fear—the kind that has other parts of me trembling too.

He smiles at my response and shoves his thumb into my mouth. “Suck it clean, sweetheart.”

I do as I’m told, and the coppery taste turns me on more. Damn. This man is showing me things about myself I never suspected.

He nods as though he’s satisfied and trails the knife between my breasts. The pressure isn’t hard enough to cut, but it’s firm enough for me to feel it. I pull in jagged breaths as he slides it down, lifts my bra, and with one quick slash, slices it free. The huge bulge in his pants leaves me with no doubt that he likes what he sees. He heads lower, his fingers and the blade burning a fiery path down my needy body. Palming my

pussy, he grinds into me, making me moan. “Fuck. You’re already soaked. Let’s get rid of these panties. I want you bare for me. I want to see and smell exactly what a dirty girl you are.”

I gasp his name as he slides the little knife along my inner thighs. Again as he cuts through the fabric of my panties and pulls them aside. He runs his pointer finger through my folds, gliding through arousal that’s already seeped from me, and rubs at my clit until I’m shaking beneath him. One finger, one tiny nub of flesh, and this man has control of me—mind and body. Every fiber of my being screams for more as he circles and pinches and manipulates. “I need you inside me, Seb, please.”

“I don’t care what you need. You chose mouth, and that’s all you’re getting.” He slaps the side of my ass so hard it makes me cry out, then goes back to working my clit. I strain to lift my head and watch him. Damn, it’s quite a sight. Kneeling between my spread legs, he plays with me, his lip curled in a feral snarl, his eyes glued to the wet triangle between my legs.

He senses my eyes on him and looks up. “I can do this all night. You’re tied up, at my mercy. I can make you come, or I could decide not to. I could leave you here, wet and desperate. I could take you up, take you back down, take you so close you can almost touch it. I can keep you right on the edge of that orgasm for hours. Maybe I will.” His fingers go still, and I want to cry at the loss of stimulation—I was so close, and the way he stared at me was almost as hot as his touch. “Please, Seb. I’ll be good. Please let me come.”

The smile on his face is pure predator. “Maybe I’ll just eat you all up, Lauren. How does that sound?”

“Yes, please—eat me.”

He pushes my legs farther apart and picks up his small knife. The sharp blade skims

the sensitive flesh of my trembling inner thigh, but this time he applies enough pressure to pierce the skin. I yell out, not from pain, but shock. Shock... and something else. Pure pleasure. He smears the thin trickle of blood onto his thumb and licks it, giving me the world's most evil grin as he does. "Every part of you tastes fucking delicious."

He puts his head to my center and nuzzles my slick folds with his nose. The first lick from his skillful tongue swoops over my swollen bud, and my hands clench into fists. I want to grab his hair, to shove him deeper and hold him there until he makes me come, but I'm too well bound. He holds my bucking hips to the bed and carries on exploring me with his lips, his tongue, his teeth. He never probes inside me despite knowing I'm desperate for it, instead keeping all of his masterful pressure on the surface. I'm delirious from the sensations, every cell in my body lighting up in response to his touch, the constant lapping of his tongue pushing me closer and closer to release. "Please," I murmur. "Please, Seb... I'll do anything you want."

"Oh, I know you will, sweetheart." He grips my hips harder and lifts me so his face is pushed deeper between my thighs, sucking my clit into his mouth.

He did something similar this morning, but now he's gone to the next level, holding it captive between his lips and sucking so hard that I teeter along the delicious edge of hurt and heaven. My teeth are chattering and my eyelids are fluttering and my breath is coming in ragged pants and oh sweet lord.

The world explodes, and I'm carried away in a blast zone of ecstasy. Wave after wave of pleasure wash over me, drowning me in an ocean of bliss that keeps flowing. I'm a shaking, pulsating mass of physical joy, crying out his name and shuddering underneath him, my bound arms pulling against their ties. He keeps my clit in his mouth until it is almost painful, only releasing it when the very last ounce of sensation has been milked from my body.

He climbs off the bed and sheds his clothes. Standing before me naked, Sebastian is huge in every way. His muscular body is all raw, brute power, and his huge cock is engorged and twitching. His eyes devour my captive body, his hand on his shaft as he looks at the wet mess between my legs. With a growl, he climbs onto the bed and rests his knees on either side of my shoulders. "Lick my cock," he commands. "And do it like you love it."

Not needing to be told twice, I eagerly open my mouth to taste him and lap him with my tongue. I suck him enthusiastically until he groans and pulls away.

"Open your mouth," he commands. I do as I'm told, but he grabs my face, squeezing the sides of my jaw to open it farther. "Come on, you can do better than that. I'm a big man, and you're going to take all of me, aren't you? I'm going to fuck that pretty mouth of yours so hard you choke."

He lets me suck the crown of his dick first, and I lick off the pearly drops of pre-cum, loving the salty taste. Then he inches inside me, filling me with his cock, his scent, his strength. He wraps a fist in my hair and tugs my head, forcing more of himself into my mouth. I gag, but he doesn't stop. "Stop fighting it. This is happening whether you like it or not. You asked to be fucked in the mouth, so that's what you're getting. Calm down. Breathe through your nose and relax your throat muscles. You can do this."

I fight back my panic, squeezing away the tears that have gathered in the corners of my eyes, and do as he tells me. With a grunt, he shoves his way down my throat. His balls slap my chin, and I feel a sense of triumph when I realize that I've actually swallowed that colossal cock of his.

"Such a good girl," he says encouragingly, starting to move in and out. "I knew you could take all of me. You look so good with your lips stretched around my dick, baby, and those tears in your big, gorgeous eyes make me want to fuck you harder."

He slams in and out of me, holding on to the top of the headboard as he thrusts. I concentrate on my breathing, on staying relaxed, on letting him do what I asked him to do. It gets easier once I know I can take him, and he drills into me with full strength and speed. This isn't like any blowjob I've ever given before. I can't lick him or suck him or tease him. I can't use my hands on him. All I can do is lie here, tied to a bed, while he uses my mouth. It's insanely dirty, insanely good, and my pussy throbs in time to his thrusts.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:02 am

He speeds up, and I can tell he's close. Right as I think he's going to come, he pulls out of my mouth and takes his hard, glistening dick in his hands. He pulls it once, twice, and shoots his load all over my breasts. With his head thrown back, he roars his pleasure, more and more of his cum spraying across me as he jerks to completion.

"Fuck me," he groans. "That was something else. You really are a good girl, aren't you? And now I get to rub my cum all over these gorgeous tits of yours." He does exactly that, massaging my tender flesh, spreading his seed around my skin like it's lotion. He captures my nipples between his thumbs and forefingers and rolls them around until I moan. "You like me coming on you, Lauren?"

I sigh and nod. "Yeah. I love it."

"You want more? You sound like you want more, the noises you're making." I nod, barely able to speak. "Right. Well, let's see what we can do with these nipples, shall we? God, they're so responsive. It's like you feel the whole fucking world through them. I'm going to get clamps for these soon, see how far we can push you..." He sucks both of my nipples in turn, hard, all the while squeezing and twisting the other.

I cry out, which only seems to encourage him. "Seb, you're hurting me."

He glances up, his eyes dark. "I know, baby, and I think you're enjoying it as much as I am. You know how to end this, don't you?"

He puts a knee between my spread-eagled legs and nudges it right up to my pussy. I rub against it greedily, like he knew I would. I want him inside me—fingers, cock, anything, but it looks like he's sticking to the deal. One hole only. He carries on

biting and sucking my nipples, so rough it takes my breath away, all while I slide my wet opening against his knee. It doesn't take long. Between the sweet nipple torture, the memory of him throat-fucking me, and the feel of him shoved up against my pussy, I come again, throwing my head back and screaming his name. Afterward, I melt into the mattress, exhausted, and he gets off the bed and grins down at me with genuine amusement. Dominant Seb is always there, lurking below the surface, but this is the other side of him—the silver fox with the kind eyes and laugh lines.

“I don't know why you're so bloody tired, baby—all you did was lie there. I did all the hard work.”

I smile up at him. “Could you untie me now? I really need to throw a pillow at your smug face.”

“Nah, I don't think so,” he says, pulling on his clothes. “I've got these cameras to install, plus the panic buttons. I brought a few good old-fashioned deadbolts for the door as well. That'll take me a couple of hours. I reckon. Plus, I might heat up some of that paella you mentioned, grab a beer, watch the footie highlights...”

“Seb! No. We've stopped playing now—you can't leave me tied up like this.”

He smooths a stray curl from my sweat-soaked face. “Oh, sweetheart. It's adorable how innocent you are. We stop playing when I say so, and not a second earlier. I'm sure you can get out of those restraints if you really want to. Plus, your mouth isn't busy anymore. Use your safe word if you need it.”

With that, he saunters from the room, leaving me torn between tears and giggles. When it comes to Sebastian Donovan, neither is ever far away. Maybe that's what makes it work for me. I can embrace the darkness, safe in the knowledge that laughter is right around the corner.

I lie still for a while, simply allowing myself to recover, to regain my composure. Before he arrived, I was sitting alone in the kitchen, crying and afraid when I saw that awful email about Bailey. Then I was pouring my heart out and finally confessing about killing a man. Both of those things should be huge headfucks, but since then, I haven't given them a second thought. Seb came up with the world's most effective distraction technique, and I am beyond grateful.

My mind wanders back there now though, until a power tool kicks on in the next room and distracts me once more. I imagine him wearing a tool belt and nothing else. Maybe a hard hat... Damn, I really am becoming obsessed.

I close my eyes, reminding myself that while Seb is a black belt in the sack, he's still just a man. And men cheat, lie, and threaten. Men are not safe for me, which is why I decided years ago that I'm better off alone in the long-term. A wave of melancholy threatens to take me back to a dark place, so I force myself to relax and try to rest. Sleep will be impossible, but I can be still and calm and breathe deeply for a while. He'll be expecting me to freak, and if I wait him out, I will win this round.

I manage my competitive zen mode for longer than I expected, listening to him clatter around and swear outside my room. Every now and then, he goes silent, and I wonder if he's coming back. He doesn't.

Eventually, I am overwhelmed with the need to be free, and I tug my wrists, testing my restraints. He twined two pairs of nylons together for each rope, and they're weirdly strong. I can move my hands a little, but when I pull in an attempt to snap the ties, I end up more tightly trapped. I try biting them and working them against the wood until they fray, but none of it works. It's as though he knows what he's doing. I struggle like this for a while, listening to him work outside, becoming more and more annoyed at how he left me.

I'm getting uncomfortable with the nylon cutting into my skin, my limbs are going

numb, and I need to pee. Is he enjoying this? Is he out there laughing at me? The bastard.

I wait until there's a lull in the proceedings and shout, "Seb? I need you." I put a bit of a sob into my voice, because I know he'll respond to that, and truthfully, it's not that hard by this stage. There are real tears in my eyes and real red marks on my wrists, neither of which is fun when there's no sex involved.

He comes and leans against the doorjamb and raises his eyebrows. "Something you need to say to me, sweetheart?"

I grit my teeth and bite back the tirade of curse words that threaten to pour out of my mouth. "Chainsaw," I mutter. "Fucking chainsaw."

He grins. "Good girl. I've been listening. Took you a while though—why am I not surprised?" He pulls out his pocketknife again and sits on the edge of the bed so he can slice through the tangled twists of nylon. Once my arms are free, he gently rubs my wrists, helping the circulation return, then drops softkisses on my palms. "Got yourself into a bit of a pickle, did you, sweetheart?" His tone is mild and reassuring—almost paternal.

I don't want to, but I find myself melting inside. Okay, so he made me use my safe word—but that is what it's there for. "Yeah. I did. And I'm cold, and I need the loo."

He laughs and unties my feet. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. I didn't intend to be gone for so long. I got distracted. But I was listening out for you the whole time. Here, let me help you."

He wraps me up in a blanket and cradles me against his chest. I inhale, enjoying all his usual scents with the addition of some well-earned sweat and wood shavings. "Your legs might be a bit wobbly," he says, explaining as he carries me to the en

suite bathroom. He places me down on the toilet and tucks the blanket around my shoulders to keep me warm. “There you go. Give me a shout if you need me.”

“Are you leaving me here?” I am shocked at how needy I sound.

He tilts his head. “Of course. I’m not going to stay and watch you pee—what do you think I am, some kind of pervert?”

By the time I’m done and dressed in my pajamas, Seb has finished his work and is sitting on my couch with his feet up, sipping from a bottle of Bud. The TV is on, and a soccer match is being played out on a rainy field.

I stop dead in the doorway and stare at him. Somehow, seeing him like this is more threatening than seeing him holding a knife to my skin. I haven’t let a man this close to me since my ex-husband. I haven’t had any serious relationships or shared my space with another person or made any connections deeper than fun and friendly hook-ups. Now this big man is sitting here, taking up my whole living room, looking like he thinks he belongs here. I glance around and see the new cameras subtly placed on my walls, the small red push buttons by the doorway and in the kitchen. And I feel my privacy and freedom and safety being drained away from me.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:02 am

“You okay?” he asks, seeing my expression. I nod and pick my way around him. I don’t want to sit next to him. I don’t want him to touch me at all, because if he does, I’ll lose myself. After filling up a glass of water, I sip it at the kitchen sink. I don’t want to feel like this. I hate feeling like this. I want to be able to cuddle up with Seb on my couch, to ask him to stay the night, to see where this whole thing leads. To be goddamn normal for once.

He joins me in the kitchen, which now feels dominated by him. I back up against the sink, and of course he notices. His eyes flash with first anger, then sadness, and he shakes his head. “That time again, is it, Lauren? The time when you shut down and kick me out?”

I close my eyes, wishing he were wrong. “I think it probably is. Don’t be mad. I never promised you anything more.”

He slams his bottle down on the counter. “No. You never promised me anything at all, did you? And like a fool, each time I hope it will be different. But no matter how much you trust me physically, the shutters come down as soon as the fucking is over, don’t they?”

“I didn’t hear you complaining when your dick was in my mouth,” I retort, my anger surging to the surface to match his. “Let’s not pretend that this is anything other than sex for either of us. How many times do I have to tell you that I don’t do sleepovers before you get it through your thick skull? I’m not in the market for a boyfriend, and I never will be.” I hate myself for lashing out, but I can’t seem to stop myself.

He takes in a deep breath, nostrils flared, obviously trying to keep himself in check.

His rage is directly under the surface, shining in his eyes. The smile he gives me is a bitter and twisted thing. “You know what’s really fucked up about all of this? We talk about the deep shit we talked about at dinner and then again tonight. We share secrets. We do all the crazy stuff we do in the bedroom, which by the way is the best sex I’ve ever had. We both come from worlds full of danger, and we both have our scars. But me sleeping over? That’s what scares you? That’s the most fucked-up thing I’ve heard all night, which is saying something. You say you want to reclaim what’s been taken from you. What those cunts in Florida took from you, what your uncle took from you, even whatever your twat of an ex took from you. What you don’t seem to understand is that now, there’s only one person taking anything from you—and that’s Lauren Hayes.”

I gape at him as he storms out of the kitchen. I want to hit him with a snappy comeback, but I can’t find one. Shit. He might be right.

He shoves his tools back into his tool bag and turns to leave. “Cameras are working. I’ll get the feed diverted to Gabriel’s phone, my phone, and Archangel HQ. Don’t do anything in these rooms you don’t want a bunch of horny bruisers to see. Bear in mind the system is digital, which means it’s not foolproof, so I’ve left you some gear as well. Keep it with you. And Lauren? Just to let you know, I wasn’t planning on sleeping over. I already have plans tonight.”

What kind of plans? With another woman? Is that what he’s telling me? And why should I care anyway? But the thought of him with anyone else eats me up with jealousy.

Chapter

Sixteen

SEBASTIAN

There are dive bars, and there are dive bars—and this one is the kind you'd need a deepwater submarine to find. The place is tucked away in a quiet corner of Soho, and there's nothing on the door to indicate what's inside. No sign, no lighting, not even a bell to ring. Just a grungy old door painted a grim shade of puke green, hidden in a graffiti-covered alleyway. Any tourist who wandered down here by mistake would soon come running out, chased away by the smell of stale piss and the rats scurrying around beneath piles of garbage. It's a shithole, and a dangerous shithole at that, which means it perfectly matches my mood.

I check my phone, part of me hoping she's called, but all I see is a message from Taylor asking me if I need any help tonight. Jeez, that kid is clingy. I ignore him and instead fire my own message off to a mate of ours, a retired cop called Phil Campbell who is the dog's bollocks when it comes to digging up dirt and doing background checks that go deeper than your average mineshaft. Something about Taylor Grant is setting my spider senses tingling, and I've learned to trust them over the years.

After that, I hammer my fist on the door, knowing that someone is already watching me from the camera that's hidden on the first-floor window ledge. I look right up at it and give it the finger. Within seconds, the door opens, and a woman wearing a rainbow-colored turban on her head smiles at me. She was probably a knockout once, but these days, the lack of teeth and yellowing eyeballs have caught up with her.

"Evening, Larissa," I say as she gestures me inside.

"Sebastian. Long time no see. Handsome as ever, darling." She offers her hand up for a kiss, and I oblige. I've never figured out where she's from or what her story is, but she's been a fixture here for as long as I've been knocking around. A wise man will always kiss Larissa's hand, even if he's unsure where it's been. "Our friend told me you'd be coming, sweetie. He's in his usual booth. Do watch out for the girls, won't you? They look especially hungry tonight, and you're such a tasty morsel, my angel."

I nod and make my way down the dingy steps to the basement. It looks like a bomb shelter that's been dressed up as a theater, all faded red velvet and gold tassels, little tables and alcoves set up at discreet distances from each other. The bar features some of the world's most expensive wines and spirits, because no matter how shabby this place looks, the people who come here have money, and they don't mind spending it on small luxuries. Every shelf is top shelf, and privacy is king. This place doesn't have a liquor license—it doesn't even exist, and that's the way its clientele like it.

I nod at a few people I recognize and make my way to the corner booth. The man I'm meeting is flanked by two bottle blonds, both with huge fake boobs and equally fake smiles. At least I assume the smiles are fake—I might just be in a bad mood. Lauren is messing with my head, and it's got to stop. It's not even her fault, because she's right—she's been honest with me from the start. She didn't sell herself as the girl-next-door, settling-down type. It's me who wants more and me who keeps thinking we've made progress only to watch her pull away. It's pathetic, and I've had enough. I need to get back to being my usual shallow self.

“Evening, Sasha. Ladies,” I say, sliding into the red velvet seat. “What are we drinking tonight?”

Sasha Stepanov is blond, handsome, and elegant. He's always dressed like a fashion model, and I've never seen him with a hair out of place—not even after shooting a man in the face at point blank range. He's a rare find, a Russian gangster who usually works in a gang of one. He grew up a street kid brutalized by the criminal crews in his native Moscow, and as soon as he could, he escaped first to Barcelona and then to London. He took what he learned on those streets and perfected it, turning himself into one of the most ruthless killers I've ever met. Although he looks like a pampered society brat, he's one of the hardest men I know—and one of the best connected. We've worked together a few times when it's suited us both, and while I wouldn't call us buddies exactly, there is a bond of mutual trust.

“We are drinking vodka, of course, my old friend,” he says, gesturing expansively to the two women. “Come and join us. Elizabeth, pour Sebastian a drink would you, my darling? He looks like he needs a drink. Trouble, Seb?”

The girl fills up a shot glass for me, and I hold it up and clink glasses with Sasha as we both say “cheers.” I say “cheers” anyway—he says something long and Russian that probably translates to “May your children have plentiful rabbits and live forever in the light of the space station.”

I glance at the ladies and raise an eyebrow, which he interprets correctly and shoos them away. “They’re not here against their will, are they, mate?” I ask.

He clutches his hand to his heart. “My friend, you wound me. Elizabeth is from somewhere grim and rainy up north, looking to find a way into the adult film industry, and her friend Carla is an off-duty lap dancer. Both lovely ladies, I assure you, and both here willingly to make connections, and yes, possibly earn the gratitude of a few generous gentlemen along the way.”

I shrug and nod. I’m not one to judge on either count. As long as this is what they’ve chosen, not what some sick fuck has chosen for them, then fair enough. “Sasha, I’m looking for information. Anything you can give me about a man called Ivan Volkov.”

A flicker of distaste crosses Sasha’s refined features, and he pours more vodka. “Ivan Volkov is two things, Seb. He is dangerous, and he is scum, even by my standards. He trades in flesh and the drugs that control the flesh. Men, women, boys, girls, any combination, any age. Nothing is too nasty, nothing is too low. If your thing is masturbating over the freshly killed body of a beautiful young woman, he’s your man. If you enjoy watching children get raped, call Volkov. If you are into inserting red hot pokers up the anuses of rent boys?—”

I hold my hands up to stop him. I’ve heard enough sick and twisted shit already

tonight. “Okay. I get the picture. He’s a sick puppy who caters to other sick puppies. What are his weaknesses?”

“What makes you think that I would know, Seb? And even if I did, what makes you think I would want to have a man like that as my enemy?” His eyes have narrowed, and some of the surface bonhomie has dropped away. He’s intrigued, at least.

“You know everything, Sasha, about everyone. As to why you’d help me... Just to cause chaos, I suspect.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:02 am

He laughs long and hard and waves a finger at me. “You know me too well, my friend. I do love chaos—it’s good for business. On a more personal level, it was sick puppies like Volkov who made my childhood a living hell, and helping you deal with him would be a pleasure. What did you have in mind?”

I outline the situation to him, and a dark cloud passes over his handsome face when I tell him about young Nicky. He drinks vodka steadily throughout, and I match him, which I will regret tomorrow. He asks a few pertinent questions about my interest and seems satisfied when I tell him Volkov represents a threat against my daughter and her colleagues.

“Ah, the lovely Samantha. I would walk on hot coals and swallow poisonous asps to keep her from harm,” he says.

“You’ve only met her once, Sasha. Give it a rest.”

Again he feigns hurt feelings and replies, “Once was enough. She slapped me in the face for being inappropriate and said she would let me off with a warning that time, but next time, she would tell your large friend Gabriel. Delightful. Anyway. I can help with this, Sebastian. I know people inside his organization. I know where he lives and the tricks he is likely to play. I even know some of the people he is blackmailing. If the legal options fail, and we both know they will, then that is when men like you and I come out of the shadows, no? We shall drink to it.”

He calls the girls back over, and they bring another bottle of vodka. The glass is encrusted with diamonds and seems to be made from crystal, so I’m guessing we’re out of bargain-booze territory. The four of us drink and chat and dance to the live

band that takes to the tiny stage later in the night, Carla swaying against my hips and wrapping her arms around my neck. We drink some more, we play cards, and we drink again. I have no clue how many bottles we get through, but I'm so drunk I eat caviar, and I fucking hate caviar—give me a doner kebab from a street corner van any day.

I'm probably only there for about three hours, but it'll feel like a week to my liver. I don't give a shit, I decide as we spill out onto the wet London streets right after midnight. This is exactly what I needed. I needed to forget about Lauren fucking Hayes and her magic pussy for a night. I needed to forget about that gorgeous big ass, and those big brown nipples that crinkle up like walnuts whenever I look at them. I needed to forget about the way she looked with my cock in her mouth and tears in her eyes, and the flush of protective warmth I felt when I carried her out of the bed.

Shit.

I haven't forgotten any of it even after drinking a bathtub full of premium Russian vodka.

Sasha and Elizabeth announce that they're going to a club for some kind of showbiz after-show party, but I call end of time on this adventure. Carla, though, has other ideas, and she looks up at me with a promising gaze as I flag down a cab. "Give a girl a lift on a rainy night, eh, Seb?" she says, clinging to my arm.

"All right. Where do you want to go?" She eyes my dick and licks her lips. "I want to go wherever you're going, big fella."

It's a mistake. She seems to be looking for something, and I might be drunk enough to give it to her, but I bundle her into the cab with me. As I suspected, she dives at me, wrapping her arms around my neck and smashing her lips against mine. But no amount of vodka could make me want to kiss anyone but Lauren. She has well and

truly fucked me.

I push Carla off, and she pouts. And then she turns an unusual shade of green and promptly vomits all over the back of the cab.

The cabbie swears up a storm, and I tell him to calm the fuck down, promising him an extra couple of hundred quid to get his cab cleaned. From the smell of the thing, she's not the first person to have thrown up in it.

He refuses to take her any farther than my house though, and truth be told, she's no longer in any state to go anywhere alone. The fresh air seems to knock her for six.

"Come on then, princess," I tell her, scooping her into my arms and carrying her up the steps to my front door. "You can sleep it off in the spare room."

She mumbles sleepily, her head lolling against my chest. This was definitely not how I was hoping my night would end.

Chapter

Seventeen

LAUREN

After he leaves, I try to stay busy with a bit more work and washing the dishes. When I'm done, I amuse myself by dancing the Macarena in front of one of the cameras, complete with all the actions. I even call my sister, which is something I rarely do as we aren't particularly close. Carlos often pitted us against each other when I was growing up, and we never quite recovered from that dynamic.

Jax messages me to say they lost track of Diego Torres after he landed at

Heathrow—or Dover or Gatwick. He appears to have arrived in all three on the same day.

He's a sneaky little bastard. Might not be in London at all, but stay alert Lauren. He's interested in you and having a different name won't protect you now.

I probably know the reason he's interested in me. Carlos was technically part of the Montoya family, but I later learned his own brothers were wary of him, and one of the reasons my dad kept him so close was so he could keep an eye on him. Ha. That didn't turn out so well for me, but I suppose my father had no way to know that Carlos would look so close to home for his sick kicks.

He had a small cabal of men who were loyal to him and not to the family, which later allowed him to go rogue and try to take control from Alejandro. The result of that was Carlos dead and his men rotting alongside him in an industrial-sized acid bath at a facility at the LA docks.

Rafe Torres was one of those men. It's feasible to imagine that my uncle told him about the games he played with his niece. Maybe he showed him the photos of me sleeping, maybe they laughed together at the video he faked of me masturbating with a big black dildo, my head superimposed on a porn star's body. It's possible Rafe was involved. There were definitely times I sensed I was being watched and followed on the way home from school, my skin prickling and my eyes darting all around me. But when I got back to the house, Carlos would be there, sitting at the kitchen table and smiling at me knowingly, making me wonder if I was going mad.

And if Rafe was in on it, is it impossible to assume that he went one step further and let his only son in on the game? Diego is four years younger than me, but Carlos tortured me for years. What if he wasn't only in on it, but part of it? I puff out a frustrated breath and head to the shower. I'm going round in circles and coming up with more questions than answers. All I can do is put my faith in my family, remain

vigilant, and remind myself that I am nobody's victim. If Torres wants to come after me, I'll be ready.

I also, of course, have Seb, Gabriel, and Archangel watching my back—quite literally now that the cameras are in. I shampoo my hair and lean against the tiles as the water sluices over me. My wrists still have faint red marks, and there's a visible red line of now-dried blood on my thigh from where Seb cut me. Thinking about it has heat building inside me, and my hand drifts between my legs without me telling it to.

No! I tell myself firmly, snatching my fingers away. I can't afford to be like this right now. I have clients to take care of and Torres to deal with. I have a million and one more important things to think about than this bullshit with Seb. I quickly dry off and dress in fresh clothes before heading back into the living room.

It's not only the sex that's distracting me—it's everything about Sebastian Donovan and the way he makes me feel. The fact that he makes me feel at all, that he has bulldozed his way through all my layers of defense. I'm usually comfortably numb when it comes to men—I enjoy the sex, and the rest doesn't matter. They can't touch me any way but physically. At least they never used to be able to, but now I'm sitting here, staring into the distance in my little apartment, wondering how I can make things right with him. Wondering what it would be like if he were still here with me. Wondering why the hell I miss him so much.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:02 am

I can't help going over the things he said to me before he stormed out. Can't help thinking he might have been right. Yes, he comes with a reputation—his own daughter warned me off him. And yes, we were definitely drawn together by physical attraction when we first met, the kind of chemistry they don't teach in high school. The kind that can set you on fire. But it's more than that now. We've opened up, confided in each other. Comforted each other. He told me about his broken childhood, and I trusted him enough to tell him about Brad Schmidt—and that little piece of information could potentially land me in prison.

I let him inside in every way imaginable—so why did I react like I did when I saw him sprawled on my couch as though he were an actual part of my life? Is he right? Am I making myself a victim now by letting everything that's happened to me in the past ruin my present and steal my future? It's never mattered before now because there hasn't been a man I felt anything for. This man, though? Well. He's a whole different ball game.

I stand up, frustrated at yet again thinking my way into a corner. I need to do something, not just think about it. I hurt Seb earlier, I could tell. He hid it with anger and aggression, but beneath that was pain, and he did nothing to deserve it—he simply made the mistake of being there for me. He listened to me, provided me with spectacular sex, and he then made my apartment safer for me. And after all of that, I basically kicked him out and told him I was only interested in using him for sex.

I was an idiot. What can I do to fix it? It's just after midnight—surely he's done with whoever he was meeting. I consider trying him on the phone, but some conversations are better had in person. I know where he lives, and it's a cab ride away. I've probably had a bit too much wine to risk driving, especially in my car, which tends to

attract attention.

Once I've made my mind up, I move quickly, grabbing my bag and keys. I already have an attack alarm on my key chain, but I notice a small can of pepper spray has been left out on the kitchen counter, along with a wicked-looking fold-up baton. I take both with me. Seb left them for a reason, and I won't hesitate to use them if I feel threatened.

It's raining outside, and it takes me a few minutes to flag down a black cab and direct the driver to Seb's house. I've never been inside, but Samantha showed it to me when we drove past once—a pretty red-brick home with a neat garden and a big garage off to one side. It's a bit too ordinary and tidy to fit with my version of Seb, but we all have several versions of ourselves living in the same skin. The perfectly respectable house fits the version of him that is a dad, a business owner, and a grandfather, but I'm guessing there might be a few things in the garage that fit with other, less genial versions.

I use the journey to try to figure out what I want to say to him, which isn't easy because I have no clue. I want to say I'm sorry. I want to say I care about him. I want to say that I'm scared, anxious, but that I'm willing to try for more if he is. Mainly, I want to ask him if I can sleep over, because that idea no longer fills me with dread.

It took him walking out like he did, saying those things, to make me really think about it all. Now, the thought of waking up in his bed doesn't make me feel trapped, it makes me smile. Spending the night with a man you like who blows your mind in the sack doesn't equate to marriage, and I need to stop making it all such a big deal. I need to accept the fact that I will sleep better tonight if I am with him than if I am away from him. Wow, this is a real personal growth moment right here.

I get the driver to drop me at the end of the road so I can take a few calming breaths as I walk toward his house. My hair will frizz in the rain, but I need the space, need to

feel my heartbeat slow. Like most women alone at night, I grip my keys between my fingers, walking steadily, constantly aware of my surroundings. Life has taught me enough lessons by this stage to realize that even the most innocent-looking situations can turn nasty fast.

Another black cab whooshes through the rain from the opposite direction, splashing to a halt right outside Sebastian's place. I take shelter behind a parked van and watch as Seb steps out, looking a little unsteady on his feet, his T-shirt plastered to his muscular physique in a way I'd normally admire. Not tonight, though, because he reaches back into the cab and pulls a blond out of it. She giggles as the cab drives away, throwing her arms up around his neck. Say no, I think. Please send her away. Send her packing. Please, Seb, don't be this person, not now. Holding her close to his chest, he staggers up the steps of his house.

I hold my breath, praying that this is all some kind of misunderstanding. He's obviously drunk, but is that excuse enough? And really, does he owe me anything anyway? As I've taken great pains to make clear to him, he is not my boyfriend. He has no obligation to keep his hands off other women.

It still hurts as I watch him fumble with his key before carrying her through his door. It hurts when he kicks the door closed, and I imagine his big hands—the hands that hours ago were all over me—being shoved roughly under her skimpy top.

Right up until he closed that door, I was holding out hope—thinking there was still time for him to stop. That there was time for him to show me he isn't the man everyone has warned me he is.

I stay where I am, frozen to the spot, soaked to the bone. Tears are flowing down my cheeks, and I'm gripping my keys so hard they dig into my fingers. A light flicks on upstairs, showing the silhouette of two bodies in a bedroom. That's enough. I've seen everything I need to see.

I feel sick.

I turn and run back to the main road, back to safety. I don't care where I go, I just know I have to get away from this place. Away from Seb's bedroom and the woman he's fucking in there right now.

I find a late-night diner and sit at a booth nursing a black coffee that scalds my lips. I am cold and wet and sadder than I ever remember being. The waitress pats my shoulder sympathetically. "Men, eh? Bunch of wankers." I want to tell her that she's wrong, that I'm not so pathetic as to be sitting in public shedding tears over anything so trivial as a man. I am not like that, not the mighty Lauren Hayes. I am independent and tough, and I need nobody.

Except... She's right, dammit. My stomach is twisted in knots, and I feel so damn foolish. So fucking stupid. I actually believed him. I actually came all the way here to make some kind of grand romantic gesture, thinking it could be the beginning of something different for me. I trusted him.

Now, as I attract pitying glances from strangers and shiver alone in a corner, I see what a terrible mistake that was. Samantha warned me. She told me what he was like. I knew all along that he was a commitment-phobe, that he's been engaged five times without once getting married. I knew, deep down, that he was all about the chase, the challenge, the pursuit. He tricked me with warm big brown eyes and those unexpected moments of kindness. He made me believe that what we had could be different, if only I could let go of all my defense mechanisms.

I lay my keys on the table, the attack alarm dangling next to them, and add the pepper spray and steel baton. If someone tries to physically grab me, I have the tools to take them down. Emotionally? I feel vulnerable, exposed, and most of all, stupid.

Sebastian Donovan is a player. I saw the evidence with my own eyes. Now I need to

let this new pain wash over me, give myself one night for a pity party, then remind myself that I'm a player too. And I play to win.

I don't even know why I'm crying. In reality, I have lost nothing. How can I miss what was never really mine to begin with?

Chapter

Eighteen

LAUREN

Nicky Volkov is a live wire of a kid, even with his arm in plaster. Big Nick—the one who co-owns the law firm—has volunteered to keep him occupied while we talk with his mom. Nick has two kids of his own and has plenty of experience with nine-year-old wrangling. He lurks in the doorway of our meeting room and casually says, “Anyone here fancy a trip to the skate park, followed by a Big Mac?” Before anyone can answer, he shakes his head. “No? What a shame. Guess I'll have to go on my own.”

The boy glances desperately at his mum, and she smiles and nods. “Me! I want to come, me!” He jumps to his feet and flies across the room, knocking chairs out of his way as he goes.

“Oh, okay. You're Nicky, right?” The boy nods, blond curls bobbing. “Well, I'm also Nick, so I think we're going to have to change your name. I was thinking we could call you Major Fart Face, what do you think?”

“No way. Not unless you're Captain Poo Head.”

Their argument provides us all with a brief moment of levity. Samantha is here, along

with Gabriel and Seb. Seb and I haven't had any personal contact for over a week now, and I'm trying my hardest to ignore him.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:02 am

Obviously, he makes that difficult dressed as he is in a muscle-skimming designer suit that perfectly offsets his gentleman-thug physique. It's difficult not to notice the strain his thighs put on the fabric or the way the jacket clings to his wide shoulders. I make myself a deal—it's okay to notice, but it's not okay for him to notice me noticing. Apart from anything else, we are all here for one thing, and that's to help Caroline and Nicky.

“How are you, love?” Seb asks, crouching down so he's at her feet, deliberately making himself smaller and less threatening. Gabriel has no such luck, but at least he keeps his distance. “He's been home, has he?” He gazes up at her pretty face, holding her shaking hands in his. He hasn't missed the scab on her ear, and neither have I.

“Yes, briefly,” she murmurs, her voice croaky and hoarse. “He... He wasn't happy. Something went wrong, I don't know what. I didn't want to know. The less I hear about his business, the better. He was mad, though, and he was screaming at Nicky for making too much noise. He wasn't, honest, he was just watching videos on his tablet like a normal kid—he's not a naughty boy.”

“Don't care if he was making more noise than a fucking jet plane landing in the middle of a Foo Fighters gig, it's no excuse to scream at him or lay a finger on him. You got in the way, did you?”

Her hand flutters up to the roll-necked sweater she's wearing, and she hesitantly pulls it down to reveal livid finger marks all across her throat. That explains the voice. “I sent Nicky off to his room and told Ivan I lost one of the diamond earrings he bought me. It wasn't true—I'd taken it off and put it in my pocket. I knew it would distract him. After he did this to me, he tore the other one out of my earlobe and rammed it

down my throat.”

I hear Gabriel gasp from the back of the room, and Samantha shoots him a soothing look. We all know exactly how he feels, but we need to keep Caroline as calm as we can. Seb nods and stands up, meeting my eyes for the first time.

“What would they do to him in Florida?” he asks. I know what he’s referring to, but nobody else does. They probably think he’s talking about different legal systems.

“They’d do what they had to do—but only when there was no other option.”

Sam follows our conversation with a mild frown on her face but wisely keeps her concentration on the matter at hand. “So, are you sure now, Caroline? You want us to move forward?”

“I’m... Sometimes I am. I need to protect my son, and that’s getting harder every day. Ivan is unpredictable, and I’m never sure when he’s going to be home, when he’s going to stay away, when he’s going to throw one of his parties...”

“We understand. Can we convince you to leave the marital home now, for your safety?” Sam asks.

“No. Not yet.” She shakes her head. “I’m watched too closely. I couldn’t pack a bag or any of Nicky’s toys, and he’d have to drop out of his school, and... It’s complicated. I know I need to leave, but everything feels too dangerous.”

“We get that,” I say calmly. “We’re here to help. How long do you have today, Caroline?”

She glances at her phone. “Maybe another hour? I said I was bringing Nicky into town to buy a birthday gift for his father. The driver brought us to Mayfair, and we

arranged to meet him later.”

“Will they check?” I ask quickly. “Will they expect shopping bags, gift boxes?” She looks suddenly horrified, and I call our receptionist in and hand her the company credit card with instructions to go shopping. Beth looks thrilled and promises to find exactly the right kind of thing.

“Make it flashy,” Caroline adds with a weak smile. “He likes flashy.”

“Talking of which,” she says, reaching into her Prada bag. “I have these for you.” She places a handful of necklaces and rings on the table, gaudy diamonds and rich gold chains glinting under the overhead lights. “I don’t have any cash of my own to pay you with.”

“That’s not something you need to worry about right now,” I assure her. “Let’s get this done and think about payment later. In the meantime, though, we’ll keep these safe for you. It might be a nice nest egg for you and Nicky in the future.”

Her face lights up at the idea of building a future with Nicky, and my heart constricts in my chest. She doesn’t want much, this woman. She told me that she hopes for a small house in a place where nobody knows her, near a good school, away from unlawful wealth and the abuse that underpins it all. She wants to feel safe and to be able to raise her son in peace. Her dreams are small, and everyone in this room wants to make them come true for her.

We discuss timing and our legal options. All she wants is a divorce—she has no interest in taking half of her husband’s properties or capital, but we’re here to protect her, and we insist she should at least seek enough of a settlement to secure her short-term future. Samantha and I have discussed this in advance, and we both recommend applying for a restraining order at the same time she files for divorce. “He won’t take any notice,” Caroline argues. “He says the law doesn’t apply to him.”

“I know that’s what he thinks,” I reply. “But we’ll prove him wrong. Before you leave today, Caroline, we’ll need pictures of what he’s done to you since you were last here.”

She laughs bitterly. “Pictures of my neck, my ear? That’s easy. I can’t help you with pictures of him raping me with the barrel of his Makarov pistol though. Didn’t have time to whip my phone out and capture the magical moment.” She immediately apologizes for her outburst and starts to cry, huge sobs racking her slender body.

I go to one side of her, Samantha to the other, both of us murmuring words of comfort and stroking her arms. “Oh god, what have I done?” she wails. “Why did I let that man poison my life? My son’s life? We’ll never be free of him. You don’t know what he’s like.”

“Caroline, love, look at me,” says Seb, his tone sharp. It’s like a slap across the face, and she obeys straight away. It hurts me to see how broken she is, but Seb has no intention of doing more damage. “I know a lot about your husband, actually, Caroline. I know a lot of his dirty little secrets, and I know you’re not the only person who hates him. Not by a long score. There’s a queue of people who’d like to see him go down, and a few of those people are equally powerful. He might have friends in high places, but he has enemies there too. In the police, in the legal system—even in his own household.”

I share a look with Samantha, and she shrugs in a clueless way. Gabriel doesn’t look surprised, so I’m guessing this has been a boys-only deal.

Caroline has at least stopped weeping. “In his own household?” she echoes as I pass her a box of tissues.

“Yeah. Do you know Irina and her husband, Vladimir?”

Looking confused, she nods. “Of course. Vladimir does the gardens, and Irina is his wife. She cooks and cleans, that kind of thing. They’re not my friends. They don’t speak English. That’s one of the ways he controls me, you see? He surrounds me with people I can’t communicate with.”

“I know. But just because people can’t speak English doesn’t mean they don’t have eyes. They’ve seen what’s going on. And yes, they’re scared, but they’re also angry. Irina has suffered at his hands too. She was working one of his dinner parties, and one of the bastard guests took a shine to her. Next thing she knew, she was forced into his car, driven away, and raped in the woods. They told her they’d kill Vladimir if she went to the police.”

Caroline sucks in a shocked breath and holds her hands to her mouth. “Oh no. Oh no, no, no. I think I remember that night. She was just doing her job, and the guy was clearly making her uncomfortable. I was so worried about what might happen to me that I didn’t give it a second thought, and when I was allowed to go to bed earlier than usual, I remember feeling relieved. It didn’t occur to me that some other poor woman was suffering instead. Oh, poor Irina. I feel terrible.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:02 am

“No,” Sam says firmly. “Don’t do that. Don’t take responsibility for that. I know that’s how he’s made you feel, but it’s not your fault. Will she help, Dad, this Irina?”

“Apparently she will. She and her husband. We’ll need to plan the timings, but I have a guy who is liaising with them.”

Samantha thinks about this for a moment, then a dazzling smile breaks out on her face. “Let me guess. Your guy is Sasha Stepanov.”

I have no clue who that is, but Seb winks at her, a twinkle in his eye. “Yep. One of your biggest fans, Sam.”

“He better not be too big a fan,” Gabriel grumbles. “Or he might not live to liaise another day.”

The news that she’s not quite as isolated as she thought seems to bolster Caroline’s spirits, and she agrees that the next time he’s away for a significant amount of time, she will allow us to proceed. The timing will be key, but with Irina and Vladimir’s help, we can make sure she isn’t stuck at home with him ever again once he finds out she’s filing for divorce. We warn her that she must be careful, that she mustn’t give any indication she knows she has an ally, and then we call Nick to tell him we’re done. I’m locking the jewels in the office safe when the Nicks saunter back in, still sucking milkshakes through straws.

“Thank you,” Caroline says from the doorway. “I know I’ve said it before, but every single one of you is so kind and so brave. You give me hope.” Nick looks embarrassed and offers to drive them back to Mayfair, where they’ll meet up with

Beth and whatever expensive crap she's bought. I notice the way Nick looks at her and wonder if he has more than purely professional feelings toward our lovely client. That, I decide, is his business—I am not in a position to comment on anybody else's love life.

A heavy silence falls over the meeting room once they're gone. Finally, Gabriel stands up and cracks his knuckles. "Fuck me. I'm half hoping the legal path fails. I'd love to give that fucker a taste of his own medicine."

Seb nods, as do I. Samantha is the only one who looks even vaguely distressed at the idea.

Seb smooths down his suit jacket and makes to leave. "See you all later?"

Tonight, everyone is invited to a soiree at the nearest branch of the McIverson gastro-pub chain Archangel recently acquired. It's a big deal for them, and whatever my personal feelings toward Seb, I must concede that they are a huge asset to the firm. I offer a noncommittal shrug, and he shoves his hands in his pockets, looking as though he's about to say something else but changes his mind and leaves.

I hate this. The distance between us, the polite way we deal with each other, the pretense that we're nothing but colleagues. It's like nothing ever happened between us at all. Like it was a figment of my imagination.

"Right," says Sam, standing up and stretching. "Come on, woman. Let's make a move. Gabriel's aunt and uncle are staying overnight, so I have childcare for once. Let's get ourselves dolled up and head to the pub. Something about taking on Russian crime bosses leaves me parched."

Gabriel grabs hold of her as she heads to the door, pulling her effortlessly against him and holding her ass with one big hand. "Get your paws off me, you Neanderthal," she

says, playfully swatting him on the chest.

“No way. You love it, Mrs. Sullivan. And I’m looking forward to getting you back to our hotel room later and showing you exactly how much of a caveman I am.”

She slips out of his grip and squeals when he slaps her backside as she skips past him. I have to laugh. These two still act like horny teenagers. They didn’t get much of a honeymoon when they got married because Sam was heavily pregnant, but before her maternity leave is up, they’re planning a proper trip to Italy. I wouldn’t be surprised if they don’t leave the hotel room once.

“You’re so lucky,” I tell her on our way to the ladies’ room.

“Oh, believe me, I know.” She gives me a sly grin that quickly fades. “Are you okay, Lauren? You’ve seemed a bit down this last week. Not quite your normal self. Anything I can help with?”

I raise one eyebrow, and she nods. “Ah. He’s messed up already, has he? I’m sorry. Please don’t take it personally. The old cliché really is true—it’s not you, it’s him. I’ll set aside the fact that I’m biologically related to him and say the same thing I would to any woman—screw him. Move on.”

“That’s exactly the plan. In fact, I’ve got a date tonight.”

“Not the cellist again, is it?”

I shake my head. “No. That one felt doomed after I blew him off and went out with your dad. This guy’s a math teacher who runs ultramarathons and breeds prize-winning guinea pigs in his spare time.”

The look she gives me is completely deadpan.

“Seriously. It’s a wild world out there, Sam.”

Shuddering, she grabs her makeup bag from the shelf. “Clearly. You’re welcome to it. Is he... Is he safe? I mean, with everything that’s been happening with your family, are you sure a random guy you met online is a good bet?”

“He is who he says he is. I found him on a few running websites, and I actually called the school where he works too, just to make sure. I’m not being reckless, I promise.”

“Okay, good. Anything else going on?”

I shake my head firmly, but I am hiding a few things from her—mainly because they might be nothing. I got an email confirming my subscription for a magazine called Labrador Lover, which might of course be spam, and I got a delivery of dead flowers at my apartment yesterday morning. The courier who dropped them off seemed normal enough and was probably innocent, but when I opened the box, all I found were rotting lilies. Funeral flowers.

I told Jax and Alejandro about it, but I’m trying not to freak out. If Torres is behind these pranks, then that’s exactly what he wants, and I refuse to give him the satisfaction. I should probably tell Seb, but I’m not going to run to Daddy every time some asshole tries to mess with my head. Especially when Daddy is such a manwhore.

“Look,” Samantha says as she brushes her long dark hair, “this isn’t my business, but I have to say it. Bringing a date to this thing tonight might not be such a good idea. My dear old dad... Well, he’s got a temper, as I’m sure you know. I have no clue what happened with you two—please don’t tell me—but try not to push his buttons, all right? It’s supposed to be a celebration, not a punch up.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:02 am

I unzip my little red dress from its dry-cleaning wrapper and hold it up against my body in the mirror before heading into one of the cubicles to change. “You shouldn’t worry, Sam. He already moved on to some trampy little blond. No, I take that back—that was bitchy. She is probably perfectly lovely, and anyway, we didn’t make each other any promises. I was more reluctant than he was to make it anything bigger, so I have no right to complain now. It’ll be fine, honest.”

I walk out of the cubicle, and she gapes at me. “Lauren. That dress is indecent on you. Frankly, I’d fuck you, never mind your date.”

I study myself in the mirror and have to admit she’s right. As dresses go, there’s not much of it, and what there is, is covered in sequins. I turn around and admire my rear view. After I do my hair, add the makeup, and slip into my pumps, I’ll be ready for my close-up.

“All this effort for a maths teacher?” Sam says, giving me a dubious look. “I’m sorry—he might breed the best bloody guinea pigs in the known universe, but I’m not buying it.”

Chapter

Nineteen

SEBASTIAN

I’m wearing a tie, and as usual, I feel like someone’s strangling the life out of me. They’ve never made any sense to me, ties. It’s like providing your enemies with a

ready-made killing tool—or maybe, as Sam says, I’m overthinking it.

The tie, the new suit, the freshly trimmed beard, it should all be making me feel better. It all fits in with my developing image as a legitimate businessman, club owner, hotelier, and now restaurateur. I’ve never bought into that shit about the clothes making the man, though, and beneath the designer duds and fancy shoes, I’m the same old Seb. The body of a thug and the heart of a devil. I’m not really in the mood for this shit, but it needs to be done. People need to know that the deal has gone through, that we got what we went after. It’s important in our world to look as tough as you are.

We’re holding the shindig in the location nearest to Archangel, which is on a busy high street packed with bougie little bars and places that sell you Spanish chorizo for the same price as a whole pig in the old-school meat market. Like ourselves, the area has gone upscale in the last few years. We invited the McIversons, giving them the opportunity to save face and make it look like they chose to sell rather than the reality—that they sold to avoid the loss of life or limb at the hands of the Carney brothers. Only Kenny has turned up, and I can’t say I’m upset at his fuckwit little brother giving the proceedings a miss. Kenny can be useful, and I get the feeling he’s still invested in the business and wants it to succeed. Gabriel and I have discussed it, and we might give him a job as a manager—his name is still on the front door, after all.

The place is packed mostly with locals, along with all the Archangel staff and their other halves if they have them. Not many do. I guess it’s not exactly the most stable of industries, and Gabriel is the exception, not the rule.

Taylor Grant is here, as ever his eyes glued to me from the other side of the room. I’m waiting for our former detective buddy to see what he can find on the kid. He makes me uncomfortable. Maybe I wasn’t far off the mark when I called him my boyfriend that time we went to see Frankie. The boy could have a crush on me—in

which case I'm flattered, but not interested. It's possible that something deeper is warning me about him, a gut instinct that I've learned not to ignore. He's hiding something for sure, which isn't necessarily a problem. We all are. But secrets make me nervous, and I hate feeling nervous.

Sasha has turned up, accompanied by Elizabeth and Carla again. The latter looks a little sheepish when she walks in, so I go over for a chat to put her at ease. After our reckless vodka session, she ended up spending the night in my spare room. She tried it on in the morning, though, crawling naked under my covers, looking for action. She's a nice enough girl, and I told her not to take it personally when I explained I wasn't interested.

I chat to them for a while, make sure the drinks are flowing, and then start to circulate. Samantha is here with the gang from the office, and from the looks of them, they got an early start at O'Malley's, the pub nearest to the firm. I had one of the lads in there, keeping an eye on things, making sure nobody got into any trouble.

The meeting with Caroline today was fucking upsetting for everyone, and it made me and Gabriel edgy. Abused women and kids are a sore spot for both of us, and although I couldn't be prouder of Sam for the work she does, I sometimes wish she had a boring job, like working in a library or writing fucking instructions for vacuum cleaners or some shit. But what she does is part of who she is, and I love who she is, so I suppose I'll have to deal with it. She's safe enough with Gabriel, I know. Unlike Lauren.

As soon as her name pops into my mind, I frown. What the hell am I going to do about her? Since that night in her apartment, I've tried to shut down all thoughts of her. She might think I have a thick skull, but her message has well and truly sunk in. She's not interested in anything more serious, and that's fine. That's good. That's absolutely fucking fantastic. Except, of course, that it's not.

I keep sneaking peeks at her on the surveillance system, which is on permanently but only sends us an alert when the motion sensors are triggered. I've seen her cooking, working out, lying on her couch and using her phone. Most days, she gives the cameras a little wave when she gets back from work, a kind of "Hi honey, I'm home," thing, and it makes me smile every time. I tell myself I'm looking out for her safety, that I'd do the same for any client, but I know different. It's because I can't get her out of this thick skull of mine, and it makes me feel like a voyeur. I never watch for more than a minute or two, and I'm damn glad she banned us from installing devices in her bedroom. I'd be walking around with a stiff dick twenty-four seven.

Today was the first time I've seen or spoken to her in person since I walked out on her to meet Sasha. If she'd contacted me, maybe I'd feel different about it all. We were both angry that night, both lashing out, but it was nothing we couldn't figure out together. Figuring shit out, though, requires two willing participants, and she clearly wasn't willing.

So we blanked each other like a pair of kids for a whole week. I was in a foul mood for the lot of it. I'm not used to feeling like this, and I can't say that I like it. Finding women has never been a problem for me—sticking to one has been the problem. Now I go and finally meet the one I want to stick with, and she's more of a fucking psycho about relationships than I am. Go figure.

It was tough seeing her earlier. She looked so damn beautiful in one of her little black business outfits. She was as polite as I was, both of us setting aside our personal feelings while we concentrated on Caroline. Afterward, though? Afterward, I went back to Archangel, got out of my fine new suit, and punched the shit out of an innocent hanging bag. That poor bag will never play the violin again, and neither will I—I didn't bother with gloves, and my knuckles are paying the price.

It was what I needed. A little good old-fashioned physical pain to deal with. Now I'm

here, and I'm working this room and doing everything a good host should do—but the only person I want to see isn't here yet. She said she was coming, but it's possible she changed her mind. Maybe she went home or went out for the night. I hate the thought of her wandering around the city without protection and hope she's at least carrying the pepper spray I left for her.

I pick up a bottle of Bud from the bar and approvingly note that the staff are all being attentive and polite. Gabriel grins at me from the other side of the room, and I raise the bottle in acknowledgment. It might have taken a bit of a push but we got here in the end, and I know he's thrilled about it. It seems like a very long time ago when it was just the two of us against the world, scrapping our way to the top with our little security firm.

Things seem to be entering a new phase, and it's one we both feel is better for Samantha, Max, and any future kids they might have. Still, I can't help wondering what might be next for me. Truth be told, I find the business stuff boring. I like the rough and tumble. I like the conflict, the push, getting my hands dirty. Could be I branch out, start something new. Something a bit less... civilized.

I've been watching the door since I arrived, which is partly habit and partly because of Lauren. When she finally deigns to make an appearance, I clock her immediately. My first reaction is fucking hell!

She looks stunning. Red is most definitely her color, and the tiny scrap of a dress she's wearing emphasizes her tan skin and breathtaking curves. Her hair cascades over one bare shoulder, and her legs end in the same high-heeled red shoes she was wearing the first night we met. The ones she was still wearing when I fucked her. All of this registers in a split second, and my dick goes hard right away.

The next thing I notice is the man who walks through the door behind her. He's staring right at her ass, and why the fuck wouldn't he. It's the best ass on the planet.

He trails behind her, and she waves at her friends before settling on a table for two. My blood starts to boil as I realize that she has in fact brought a date. She brought a date to my fucking restaurant launch. Not only is that enough to make me want to rip this guy's bollocks off and shove them down his throat, it's just plain rude. I stay where I am, trying to calm my breathing, telling myself that I can handle this. That we're not a couple. She's a free agent and can do whatever the hell she likes with whoever the hell she likes, even a prick like this with his little glasses and his floppy Hugh Grant hair and his stupid athletic-looking build. What a cunt.

She looks up unexpectedly, instinct telling her I'm watching. I want to do more than watch. I want to chase her, capture her, pin her down, and screw her. Show her she belongs to me and nobody else. She nods once, her face showing signs of anger I don't understand, and goes back to her date.

I fully intend to walk away. To get her out of my line of sight and out of my head. I might need to leave the building to do it, but so what? I've showed my face; I've played nice. Now I feel like fighting, and I know plenty of places where that isn't hard to come by. I'm sick of pretending to be a man I'm not, sick of swallowing down my instincts. If I stay, I'll say or do something that we all regret, and I don't want to spoil the night for Gabriel.

I glug down the rest of my beer and fasten my jacket, ready to slip away. It's a good plan, but it all goes to shit when I glance at Lauren's table. The dickwad she's with is holding her hand and has got her fingers spread out. It looks like he's reading her palm or some such crap. She laughs, throwing her head back in a way I'm achingly familiar with. The sight of her laughing with him stabs as deep as him touching her, and the fucker doesn't let go of her hand. He keeps it in his, and I know exactly what he's thinking. He's thinking he's on a promise. He's thinking he's in. He's thinking about getting his mouth on her tits, his hands on that ass, about spreading those luscious legs of hers.

I slam the bottle down and try to count to ten. I get as far as two before my phone is in my hand.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:02 am

I type, stabbing the screen like it's the enemy.

End the date right now.

I hit send and lean back to see her reaction. Her eyes widen when she sees the message, but she stays calm and doesn't look back at me. Her fingers fly, and her reply lands.

The fuck I will.

She puts the phone down again and carries on chatting to the guy as though nothing happened. As though I don't bloody exist. He leans forward, whispers something to her, and wraps a strand of her curly hair around one of his fingers. Fuck me! It takes every scrap of control I have in me not to march over there and break his damn wrist. I glance at Samantha and Gabriel, reminding myself why I can't do that, why I need to resist the urge to grab the cheeky cunt and slam his head down on the table until every bone in his stupid face is smashed to pieces. I take a deep breath and go back to my phone.

End the date now, or I end him. I'm not joking here Lauren. Get rid of him or I'll do it for you.

She looks shocked when she reads it and looks over at me. I guess whatever she sees convinces her that I'm not playing. She looks back at the asshole who is ogling her like she's dessert. I'm too far away to hear anything, but she stands up suddenly and gestures to her phone. She's probably making up a story about an emergency or whatever. I don't actually care, as long as she does what she's told. She looks furious.

There will be hell to pay for this little stunt, but I don't give a fuck. Better she gets mad and yells at me than I get mad and kill someone just because he dared touch her.

He argues a bit but eventually shrugs and gets the message. I consider following him out the door and still beating the crap out of him simply for looking at her ass, but I don't get the chance because Hurricane Lauren is striding toward me, hair flying and eyes sparking. Fuck. She's hot when she's angry.

"Don't cause a scene," I say quietly as soon as she's by my side. "Gabriel and Sam don't get out together often—let's not spoil it."

"I had no intention of spoiling anything until you started acting like a possessive asshole. What gives you the right to say who I can see? I thought we agreed we were both free agents."

"I didn't agree to anything, and I certainly didn't agree to you acting like a bitch and flaunting your latest fuck buddy in front of me and everyone I care about."

Her eyes flash and her nostrils flare, and for a moment, I genuinely think she might be about to take a swing at me. Annoyingly, all that temper and passion goes straight to my dick. "Don't you dare call me a bitch, you hypocritical jackass. One rule for you and another for me, is it?"

I glare back at her, feeding off her energy. "I don't know what the hell you're talking about."

She turns to look at the corner booth where Sasha is sitting with his lady friends, a predictably empty bottle of vodka in front of him. "Her," she announces, pointing in Carla's direction. "She's your new squeeze, isn't she? And before you bother to deny it, Seb, I saw you together. I saw you outside your house. Couldn't wait to carry her to bed, could you?"

I blink in confusion, then feel like someone has punched me in the gut. “What? You were at my house that night? Why?”

“What does it matter why? I was there. You were busy. I left. End of story. And now here she is again, presumably waiting until you’ve finished up being a dick to me so you can get back to manhandling her again. Well, feel free. I don’t give a shit anymore.”

Angry tears shining in her eyes, she spins around and tries to storm off, but I grab her arm. She slaps at my hand, swearing and struggling, and I remember how much fight she had in her the night we played our hunting game. “Behave yourself, sweetheart. Sam’s watching, and you’re coming with me.”

She calms slightly at the mention of Samantha, fakes a smile, and replies, “I’m going nowhere with you. Go screw yourself, douchebag.”

I’ve had enough of talking. I grip her hand in mine and tug her toward me. “You’ll do as you’re fucking told. If I have to pick you up and carry you over my shoulder, I will. Might be tough for your colleagues to take you seriously once they’ve seen your arse dancing in the wind though. We need to talk, and we need to talk now.”

For a split second, I think she’s going to go for option B, and part of me hopes she does. But she obviously knows me well enough to realize I mean every word—she nods once, a sharp, staccato jolt of her head. I keep a firm grip on her arm in case she tries to bolt and drag her behind me through the crowd, toward the corridor at the back of the room. We’re doing up the rooms at the back, renovating the staff rooms and what used to be the ladies’ toilets. For now, the door has a “no entry” sign on it. I shove her roughly through it, and she staggers on her high heels, almost falling.

God, she’s gorgeous. All spit and fire, sky-high heels, and sparkling dress, fury in her eyes that seems to dare me to touch her. I growl and close the distance between us,

loving the flash of fear that crosses her face as she backs away. She lands hard against the tiled wall, her eyelids fluttering and her breath coming in panicked little gusts. She's trapped and she's mine, and she knows it. "Seb! You said we needed to talk."

"Yeah, well. I changed my mind." I lock the door behind us and walk very deliberately toward her. She tries to shimmy past me, but I catch her and spin her around so she's facing the mirror above the sink. I yank her head back with a rope made of her own hair and run my other hand down her throat, squeezing it in that way she loves. Our eyes meet in the glass, and I don't think I've ever been so turned on. My big hand on her delicate skin, the trembling of her full lips, the single tear that is flowing down her cheek. I need to be inside her, now. I need to fuck this pain away and remind her who she's dealing with.

I let go of her throat and use my free hand to shove her tiny dress up over her ass. Fuck. I want to choke her and slap her and roll her nipples. I want to stroke her and caress her and run my fingers over her hot, wet pussy. I want to touch her everywhere, all at once. I just don't have enough goddamn hands for everything I want to do to this woman. She groans as I tear off her flimsy panties and shove the soaking wet fabric beneath her nose. "You want this as much as I do, sweetheart. Don't lie to me or to yourself."

That's as far as it goes for foreplay. This isn't a foreplay situation, and she's wet enough already. I take my cock out, huge and hard for her, and slam it straight inside her tight, soaking pussy. She yells at the sudden invasion, and I press her neck down so she's bent over the sink, her fingers grabbing onto the porcelain as I slam into her. Keeping one hand on her hip, I put the other in her hair and tug her head up so she can see her own face in the mirror. So she can see herself getting well and truly fucked. Her eyes don't leave mine, not for a second.

Neither of us looks away as I grunt like a rutting animal, her body shuddering with

the force of each ferocious thrust. It doesn't take long for me to feel the delicious rippling of her internal walls, the telltale squeeze around my shaft that lets me know she's about to orgasm. I'm desperate to shoot my load inside her but make myself hold on until she finds her release. She screams my name, her perfect pussy clenching and vibrating all around my cock, her cum rushing out to coat us both as she trembles and shakes beneath me.

"Fuck," I yell, my own climax ripping through me so bloody hard I forget to breathe. So. Damn. Good.

I collapse on top of her, and she yelps at the extra weight. "Seb, I'm done. I can't hold us both up."

I laugh into her neck and inhale her familiar jasmine-scented shampoo and the sweat of freshly fucked Lauren. When I stand, I drag her with me and stagger toward the big chair in the corner of the room. She lands in my arms, and I clutch her tightly. We're always good during the sex. We're good in the immediate aftermath too. Beyond that, we tend to screw things up, and I don't want her running before I've had the chance to explain a few things.

"This is super romantic," she says, glancing around. "Very sexy."

There are bags of building supplies, a stack of cleaning products, and one random green rubber boot standing next to a tin of paint. "You're sitting in here, sweetheart, therefore it's the sexiest place on earth. Now we've both got that out of our systems, we need to talk."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:02 am

She squirms on my lap, trying to escape, and I clamp down on her so hard she squeals. “Nope. You’re going nowhere, Hot Sauce. Why did you come to my house that night? I don’t care if the answer is to set it on fire—I just need the truth.”

She bites her lip and gazes down at her hands. She looks uncomfortable, almost embarrassed, and I don’t think I’ve ever seen that on her before. I wonder if she’s about to lie to me, which I’ve also not seen on her before—she’s usually way too honest for comfort. “I wanted to apologize for the way I behaved. For the things I said.”

“Like saying I had a thick skull?”

She gives me a quick smile and runs her hand over my head. “Well, it is pretty thick, to be fair, but... Yeah. I shut you out and was harsh, and you were right. After you left, I missed you. It freaked me out, but I missed you, so I jumped in a cab and went to your place, and I intended to ask you if I could sleep over. Which now that I say it really makes me sound like a teenage girl.”

I take all of this in and feel sick to my stomach at the thought of what she accidentally saw. I know how much it must have taken for Lauren to even consider admitting she was wrong, to take a step back from her deeply engrained and ferocious sense of independence. She reached out, and I unwittingly slapped her away. I stroke her curls back from her face and kiss her forehead. She feels good on my lap. I think I might keep her here permanently.

“Lauren, sweetheart. Nothing happened. She wanted it to, and I knew that she did and maybe that’s why I let her get into the cab with me. But I didn’t do anything, I swear.

Besides, she threw up all over me and I had to carry her to my place because the cabbie wouldn't drive her. She slept in the spare room, baby."

"But you took her home knowing she wanted something with you?" There's no accusation in her tone. She sounds like she's fact checking. Like a good lawyer.

I wince. "Yeah. She was warm and willing and she wanted me, and... Well, I needed that."

"Because I was cold and unwilling and didn't want you?"

I shrug. No use sugar-coating it. "Maybe. Look, it's not a black-and-white situation. We both played our part in that fight. I reacted like a prick and got my head turned by the first woman who showed an interest. I'm sorry for that. I never meant to hurt you, but I'm old enough to understand that actions have consequences, and it was a dick move. I felt rejected by you and pissed off at how much that stung, and I suppose I wanted to feel like me again. Like a man who listened to his body more than his fucking feelings. I hate how many fucking feelings you make me have, Lauren. But I did not sleep with her, I promise you. I didn't even kiss her."

"Why, then? If she was willing, and that's what you wanted, why couldn't you sleep with her?"

"Well, she was practically passed out by the time I got her home. I might be into some questionable kinks, but consent is number one on my list of must-haves. But... I wouldn't have slept with her anyway. She wasn't who I wanted. She wasn't the woman I couldn't get out of my mind. She's not the woman who makes my dick hard with one raised eyebrow. She's not the woman I want to laugh with, to play with, to talk to every hour of every day. She's definitely not the woman I'm falling in love with."

Her head snaps up, her eyes going wide. I know exactly how she feels. I surprised my fucking self with that little speech. This could go either way. She could run screaming into the night, never to be seen again. And if she does, so be it. I've had enough of this bullshit now. Enough stupid games and dancing around reality.

"Am I that woman?" she asks quietly, winding her arms around my neck.

"No, I was talking about Taylor fucking Swift—of course you bloody are, Lauren."

She raises her lips for a kiss, which I am more than happy to provide. Afterward, she shakes her head and says, "If we're going to try to make a go of this thing, Seb, I really need to ask you to do something for me."

"Anything, baby."

"Never take Tay Tay's name in vain again."

Chapter

Twenty

LAUREN

When we eventually emerge back into the packed restaurant, Samantha is by our side in about twenty seconds flat. I tried to tidy myself up, but I likely still look like a woman who has been freshly fucked. The fact that we are very much together, Seb keeping a delightfully tight grip on my hand, probably also helped tip her off.

"Thank god," she says, hugging us both. "I thought you'd never get your acts together—for two intelligent people you can both be really stupid, you know? Lauren, you've been sad all week, and Dad, Gabriel says you've been an absolute

nightmare too. And now here you are, grinning your heads off after what I presume was some hot... hmmm, let me guess—bathroom sex? Back-office sex? Alleyway-behind-the-fire-escape sex?”

She’s definitely a bit drunk, her pretty face flushed and her eyes sparkling. There’s no way she really wants to know where her father just banged me and would never have asked if she weren’t tipsy. Gabriel joins her, grinning knowingly at the two of us. “Lauren,” he says, looking respectfully away, “your dress has a tear down the side. And Seb, you have red sequins stuck to your beard. Congratulations.”

He leaves us with a wink, dragging Samantha off to dance, and before long, Seb and I decide it’s time to sneak away from the party. Before we make our escape, he introduces me to his Russian friend Sasha, who turns out to be a slickly good-looking blond guy in a Tom Ford suit. He comes across as charm itself, but I can sense the steel underneath, and I’m glad we have him on our side. His female companions for the evening are on the dance floor, which is a relief. I believed Seb when he said he hadn’t slept with Carla, but it’s an uncomfortable situation. I catch a glimpse of her as we walk to the door, watching us as she does some kind of burlesque bump and grind to a Christina Aguilera track. I stare right back at her, hug Seb’s arm tighter around my shoulder, and let my hand drift to his ass.

He laughs as we walk outside. “Marking your territory, sweetheart? Felt like you were going to piss on me for a minute there.” He scans the area, alert to any potential threat.

“If that’s what you’re into...”

We laugh and flirt all the way back to his place, deciding against my apartment because of all the damn cameras. As soon as we arrive, he makes us each a mug of hot chocolate, and we settle down on the couch and talk for hours on end. It is a revelation, the way I enjoy such a simple act. We don’t discuss anything serious or

have one of those “relationship” talks—we just chat in the lighthearted way of two people relishing being together.

I yawn as he finishes telling me a story about Samantha sneaking out to a night club when she was only fifteen, and laugh as I say, “Sorry, Seb—you’re not boring me, honest. It’s just been... Well, it’s been a day, hasn’t it?”

“It has. A lot of ups and downs. But I’ve got to say, I’m fucking thrilled with the way it’s ended.”

I raise my eyebrows at him. “And has it? Ended?”

“You tell me, sweetheart—you’re the one yawning.” He stands and holds out his hands. After he helps me up, I lean into him, exhausted but as thrilled as he is. He kisses me lightly on the forehead and, without a word, scoops me up into his arms. He cradles me against his chest exactly the way he did that first night we met, back at the cottage. This time, though, everything feels so different. This time, when I look into his eyes, I’m not dreaming—I actually do feel safe.

“Bedtime?” he asks.

Reaching up to stroke his cheek, I nod and smile.

He carries me up the stairs and into his room, and instead of throwing me down so hard I bounce, he lays me carefully on the mattress. The sheets smell of him, and I stretch out, loving the feeling of being in his home. In his bed.

He takes my shoes off and crawls up next to me. “Turn over,” he says gently, and I twist to my side so he can slide down the zipper of my dress and ease it off me. Next come my panties and my bra, and before long, I lie before him completely naked. He pulls back the covers and helps me get under them, his every move and gesture so gentle, so kind, that I feel cherished beyond belief.

He sheds his suit and climbs in next to me. We both turn onto our sides and gaze into each other’s eyes. I can’t quite explain how I feel in this moment. How precious this thing is between us. How perfectly he says everything without saying a word.

I slide my hand along the side of his face, stroking his beard and caressing his cheekbones. He presses his fingers over mine, then holds them up to his mouth to kiss.

“I love you, Lauren. I’m not just falling for you—I’ve already fallen.”

I move closer, needing to feel his big body against mine. “I love you too, Seb. I love you, and I want you. I’m pretty damn scared that I might even need you.”

His eyes blaze, and he pulls me tight, kissing me in a way he’s never kissed me before. It’s gentle, reverent, his lips demanding nothing more than contact. I open my mouth and let my tongue tangle lazily with his, losing myself in the sweetness of it all. We kiss for so long, pouring so much feeling into every touch. From the feel of him pressed against me, it’s obvious that he’s ready—he’s as hard as ever—but this feels different. It feels magical.

He caresses me and strokes me and dusts light kisses on my skin, taking his time and treating me like I’m made of delicate porcelain. I murmur against his skin, delighting in every tender touch. It’s the complete opposite of what happened earlier in the night, but every bit as consuming. When his fingers finally slide between my legs, I’m more than ready. He languidly rubs the pad of his thumb across my swollen bud, his eyes fixed on mine, and I sigh at the feeling. At the connection.

“Seb, I want you inside me. Take me over the edge with you.”

“Always, baby—always.”

I wrap my legs around his waist, and he slips into me, whispering my name as he sinks deeper.

Our rhythm builds, slow and soft and sensual, bodies entwined, breath mingled, eyes

locked. When I come, it takes my breath away, sends me tumbling into an unknown land of pleasure that isn't merely physical. He quickly follows, mumbling words of love as he finds his own release.

He falls down against me, his head on my chest, and I hold him close, tears of happiness stinging the backs of my eyes.

Seb and I have fucked, and we have fought. But that felt like the first time we made love.

I can't get enough of the wild sex he's introduced me to, and I'm always going to be up for a chase, a capture, a dark and disturbing trip into the taboo side of my desires. But this was something else. It was, in its own way, even more spectacular.

I stroke his hair, feeling the emotion run through him too. We've allowed ourselves to be vulnerable, physically and emotionally, and the orgasm I just had was slower, deeper, than anything I've encountered before. A whole-body experience that reached all the way to my heart and soul.

I'm going soft, I realize. One night with Seb, and I'm turning to mush for the man. Maybe this is why I've been so scared of sleepovers. I knew, deep down, that Seb was different. I never felt this way about my ex-husband, and I've certainly never felt this way about any other man. For all of my surface confidence, I never had enough belief in anyone or anything to fully trust or commit.

Carlos started that process early on, and my experiences with men later in life only served to confirm that I was safer alone. Safe is, I'm starting to suspect, overrated—especially when compared to how I feel right now. At peace. Lying here with my man, enjoying the simple miracle of loving and being loved in return.

Chapter

Twenty-One

LAUREN

I wake up in Sebastian's arms, and it's glorious. Sunlight streams through his bedroom window, birds are singing in the trees, and all is well in our world. I stretch a little, not wanting to wake him, enjoying the luxury of gazing at his sleeping face. His hair is tousled, and one meaty leg has kicked itself out of the covers, his thigh thrown possessively over my body. He looks so peaceful, and I feel a rush of love toward him that threatens to overwhelm me.

This is all new for me, every single second of it, and I need to try to enjoy the ride instead of looking for ways to get off. I stroke his hair and place a soft kiss on his exposed shoulder, then carefully extricate myself from his embrace. With all the skill of a highly trained ninja, I manage to slide out without disturbing him, and I pull the covers up to keep him cozy. Pulling on his shirt from last night, I make my way to the bathroom, loving the feel of the soft fabric on my bare skin, the scent of his cologne, the smell of the man who wore it. It's like wearing Seb himself, and I can't get the stupid grin off my face as I tiptoe downstairs.

Once I'm in his kitchen, I make a coffee, looking around his well-stocked kitchen and smiling at what a man of contrasts he is. Tough, protective, violent—but also someone who has fresh avocados in his fruit bowl, shiitake mushrooms in his fridge, and a chef-level spice rack. I settle down at the table and sip my drink, unable to get the goofy smile off my face. My fingers toy with the collar of his shirt and now I'm wondering if I should go upstairs and wake him up in a very special way. Nothing says good morning quite like a blowjob.

"There you are. I thought you'd done a runner already." Seb walks into the room in nothing but his boxers, and I take a moment to appreciate the view. I think he has the best thighs I've ever seen, and my eyes drift from them to his already thickening

cock.

“Why would I do that?” I ask innocently. “That doesn’t sound like me at all. I was actually about to come back upstairs and serve you coffee and a blowjob.”

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:02 am

His eyes pop open wide, and he grins. “Don’t let me stop you, babe.”

I pull a face. “Nah. I’ve lost the element of surprise now. I’ll sneak up on you sometime when you least expect it. Sleep well?”

“Like a baby,” he says, rooting around in the freezer and coming up with waffles. I look on as he works, admiring the broad shoulders, the powerful arms, the firm, round ass underneath his boxers. “I can feel you staring at me, you deviant.”

I move behind him and slide my arms around his waist. “Fuck,” he says on a sigh. “That feels good. And I like you in my shirt.”

I lean my face against his back and drop little kisses across the faint lines on his skin. “How did you get your scars?” I ask. “These, and the one on your neck.”

“Would you believe shark attack in the Thames?”

“No, I wouldn’t.”

He turns around to face me, his arms crushing me against him, his hand running up my side. “Well, the neck scar was earned the old-fashioned way—from a bloke who brought a knife to a fistfight. The others... Well, they’re older. They’re little reminders of who I used to be. A scared little boy who couldn’t defend himself when his old man had too much to drink.”

I touch his back, caressing his flesh as though I can rub the marks and the memories away. “I’m sorry that happened to you. It breaks my heart to think of you so

vulnerable.”

“It’s okay, sweetheart. It all helped make me who I am today. And you and I both know it’s the scars you can’t see that hurt the most. They take a lot longer to heal. How are you this morning?”

I press myself against him. He’s right, we both carry scars—but we also have the ability to heal each other and ourselves, and sex is one of the ways Seb and I seem to do that. It seems like we both need some of that sexual healing right now.

“Oh, you know—horny as hell.”

Laughing, he guides me toward a chair and gestures for me to sit at the table. “As usual. Me too, but I want to talk first.”

“Are you sure?” I ask, spreading my thighs wide enough for him to see everything between them. I desperately want him to touch me there, with his tongue, his fingers, his cock, anything at all. I need to feel him on me and inside me and all around me.

His dark eyes stare down, and his lip curls as he lets out a growl. “Fuck, look at you... You’re dripping all over that chair. Use your fingers and open your pussy lips for me, Lauren. That’s it, let me see what’s mine...”

I do as I’m told, sucking in a needy breath as my fingers slip and slide on my wet folds. He kneels on the floor before me, staring intensely. “I’m going shopping today, sweetheart. Going to buy a whole new set of toys for us to play with. I really want to fill that gorgeous cunt of yours up with something and watch you fuck yourself with it.”

Shuddering at the images his words plant in my mind, I trail my fingers over my clit, knowing he likes what he sees. “Mmm,I’d love that. Get something big. Something

that makes me scream.”

“Oh, I will.” He slips one of his fingers inside me, then quickly adds another, probing the sweet spot that only he ever seems to find. “And maybe I’ll fuck you up the ass at the same time. How does that sound?” I clench against his fingers while I continue to work my swollen bud, my inner walls vibrating with pleasure.

“It sounds so good, Seb. I want that. I want you to take me everywhere. I want to do every bad thing in the world with you.”

He adds another finger, stretching my opening around him and sliding firmly in and out. His tongue traces his lips as he watches me play with myself. “There are no bad things, baby, as long as we both want them. Now, come for me, Lauren. Imagine me chasing you through the woods, taking you down, binding your hands. Imagine me lifting that big ass of yours up and pushing myself inside it while you try to fight me off. You can’t stop me. You have no control. You just have to take it.”

“Oh god, Seb!” His filthy talk always does it for me, and he’s speeding up his finger thrusts as he speaks. On the next thrust, he keeps them inside me and slowly rotates them against my trembling pussy walls, setting off a chain reaction that flows straight to my clit, then on to every cell in my being. As soon as the last shockwave hurtles through my body, he picks me up and lies me flat on the kitchen table so my quivering legs dangle down to the floor.

He quickly spreads them, grabs my hips, and slides his cock into me while sighing my name. “Fuck, you’re so tight and so wet. I can still feel you squeezing me.”

He fucks me like a demon, and when he gets close to the edge, I watch his face, enjoying every micro expression as he comes, his eyes rolling and his mouth twisting in ecstasy. The way we make each other feel seems impossible.

He hoists me up into his arms, still inside me, and my head flops down onto his bare shoulder. Both of us start laughing. “Well. That was better than a blowjob,” he says, finally setting me down. “Now all we need is more coffee, these waffles, and five minutes where we’re not going blind with orgasms. Tell you what, you go back to bed, and I’ll be up in a few.”

“Okay. I’ll do as I’m told, but only because I want to.”

He slaps me on the backside as I skip past him, and before long, he joins me in the bedroom, carrying a tray. I grin at him. “Now, this is what us ladies like—breakfast in bed served by an almost-naked hunk.”

“Yep. You’re one lucky girl.” He passes me a waffle covered in Nutella, which makes me even luckier, and climbs into bed next to me.

“So. About last night,” he says, laughing as I lick chocolate off my fingers. “Did you bring that asshole to the party to annoy me?”

“Hmmm... Not consciously. It’s not like I sat down and decided, right, I’m going to do this to rub Seb’s nose in it. But I definitely saw that as an appealing by-product. I guess I wanted to hurt you. I wanted you to feel the same way I did when I saw you with your hands on Carla.”

“I get that. Again, I shouldn’t have done it. I knew it was a mistake, but in my defense, you’d pretty much told me to fuck off.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:02 am

“I had, I know. I’m not... Look, I’m not saying you did anything terrible, Seb. I’m just saying it hurt. That might not make sense, but none of this does, at least not to me. I’ve never felt like this before about anyone. I have threats from Diego Torres, a family that’s knee-deep in violence, and I’m about to take on a psycho Russian criminal so I can save his wife and child. None of that scares me anywhere near as much as how I feel about you.”

He takes my plate and moves it to one side, then pulls me into his arms. My head rests on his bare chest, and his huge hands run soothingly down my back. “I hear you. I feel the same, Lauren. I might have been engaged a few times?—”

“Five.”

“Okay, five,” he huffs, making me laugh before he continues in a serious tone. “But I don’t think I’ve known what loving a woman is until now. When I met Alice, Sam’s mum, I felt that same spark for her, but I was only sixteen, and I let her go.”

“You sound like you still feel bad about that.”

“I do, in a way. I let them go because I was a kid myself. What the fuck did I know about being a parent, with my background? I was still working out how to be a human being. Anyway. Water under the bridge. Since then, there have been women I thought were special at the time. I genuinely always wanted it to work, but then my cock would get bored and go rogue.”

I smile at the image but also feel unnerved by what he is saying. “Is your cock some kind of separate entity, then? Mind of its own?”

He shrugs. “It’s felt like that in the past, yeah. And I didn’t say any of that to freak you out. I said it to reassure you. My cock is very much at one with my mind where you’re concerned. And both of them are only into you, Lauren Hayes. I’m in, one thousand percent. No hesitation, no doubt, no part of me wondering if I’m wrong. I’m yours, Lauren. Completely and utterly yours. I might have the heart of a devil, but it belongs to you.”

I stroke the side of his face, and his beard softly bristles against my fingers. “The heart of a devil? Why would you say that?”

“My old man drummed it into me. From the time I was a baby. He’d say it, then hit me, then make me repeat it over and over again. Like I said earlier, it’s the scars you can’t see that do the damage.”

“Well, fuck your old man. Is he dead?”

Seb nods.

“Good. I don’t care what he told you. You don’t have the heart of a devil. You have the heart of an angel as far as I’m concerned—even if we both have some pretty devilish tastes. I love you too, Seb. So much. You’re the first man I’ve ever felt this way about. The first man I’ve ever trusted with my heart. Just promise me you’ll take care of it.”

“Always,” he replies, kissing the top of my head. “I promise.”

Chapter

Twenty-Two

SEBASTIAN

I know myself well enough to understand that I can be a bit of a prick. All of the women I've been in serious relationships with have been great, and the fault for the breakups never lay with them. The only mistake they made was to trust a man like me. I promised Lauren I would take good care of her heart, and I fully intend to do that. She's the best thing that's ever happened to me, and I'm not going to fuck it up. I spent a lot of time in my last relationships thinking about other women, and now—well, Lauren occupies almost every waking thought. This is entirely different from anything I've felt before. After more than thirty-five years of chasing women, I've finally found the one.

Of course, it helps that the two of us are fucking each other's brains out every chance we get. My house, her apartment—carefully, because I don't want the lads getting an eyeful—the car, both offices, out in the sand dunes on the coast. I'm thinking it's about time to take her to my special place, a bit of secluded land I bought a few years back in case I needed a safe space. I think she'd love it there, and it's the perfect place to hunt. She'll definitely be up for that. The woman is insatiable, into trying every twisted little game I suggest.

She's in court all day today, and I've sent Scott to keep an eye on her. She won't like it, but it's a public building, so she can't stop him. We'll both get an earful, but I'm all out of fucks on that front. Jax and Alejandro have so far failed to lay eyes on this Diego Torres cunt who's been bothering her, and since she told me more about her uncle and how they were connected, I've been even more worried. The little things like the dead flowers could easily be a prelude to something bigger, and it's my job to worry about that. If some psycho has been obsessing over my woman since he was a kid himself, then I'm going to take care of her any way I can.

I've got my own work to do, but first, I'm going through a report that Phil Campbell emailed over. The file is accompanied by a note: Sorry this has taken a while, Seb. I kept digging but couldn't find much. Wondering if maybe your instincts are wrong on this one?

“I don’t bloody think so,” I mutter to myself, staring at the pages on my screen. Try as I might, though, I can’t see anything that Phil couldn’t see. Taylor Grant was born in Manchester in 2002, which is the kind of birth date that still freaks me out—how can grown-ass humans have reached adulthood when they were only born yesterday? His mum was a school dinner lady and died of breast cancer exactly when Taylor said she did. No dad on the scene at any point, and no stepdads either. Looked like she was a good mum, worked hard and kept him safe, which is more than a lot of kids get.

He got into a bit of trouble in his teens, mainly for fighting. Kicked out of school for breaking the PE teacher’s jaw, which seems fair enough as most of them are sadistic bastards. Nothing serious, just the usual anger management issues I see in a lot of my men. He moved here exactly when he said he did, all his references checked out, and he doesn’t have so much as a blemish on his credit history or his criminal record as an adult. All the scraps he got into when he was younger were with other men, no sign of him being an asshole to women, kids, or puppies, and basically fuck all to go on. But still, those instincts are screaming at me. There’s something not right, and I plan on finding out what.

While I’ve been reading, another message has landed from a nonsense email address that’s all letters and numbers. Normally, I’d kill it off. Talking to Jax has made me realize we need to take our cybersecurity a lot more seriously at Archangel as well.

The only reason I don’t delete it right away is the subject line, which contains three eye-catching words: Lauren Getting Fucked. I suck in a breath and immediately assume it’s Torres—this kind of shit is right up his alley. I might regret it, but I open the email and skim it. £200k into this account by midnight, or this goes viral above a string of numbers. Nothing more, nothing less. Based on everything I learned about Lauren’s situation, I never got the impression Diego was in this for the money.

There’s a video file attached, but I hesitate. I should probably forward the whole

damn thing to the experts, but I can't bear the thought of invading her privacy that way. If this really is an intimate video of Lauren, she wouldn't want Jax and Alejandro seeing it. She ran from her family, and she never told them about all the shit that's happened to her over the years. She has boundaries, and I need to respect them.

I press play, my nostrils flaring and my fists clenching on the desk as I watch. Bollocks. It really is a video of Lauren getting fucked—by me. I have her bent over the sink in the ladies' room at McIverson's, her dress is shoved up around her waist, and I'm railing into her. Any other time, I might find it a turn-on, but not when it comes with a threat attached. How dare this piece of shit threaten her like this?

I don't give a damn if the internet is full of videos of me shagging—but Lauren? She has a career where that crap matters. She has clients who respect her. She has a lot to lose, and I won't allow her to be humiliated. I stand up and throw my chair across the room, where it crashes against the wall and falls to the floor in pieces. Fuck!

Trying to calm myself, I rub the bridge of my nose between my fingers. I'm not going to help by wrecking the place, but I'm so angry I could kill. How did Torres get this? Will he actually go away if we pay? It's a lot of money, but I can afford it, and I'd pay anything to protect her. Except I already know the answer to that—blackmailers never go away. They just slink off under a rock for a while, then as soon as the cash is gone, they crawl back out for another bite of the cherry.

The door to my office opens slightly, and Taylor pops his head in. Of course he does. "You okay, Boss?"

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:02 am

I point at the chair. “Do I fucking look okay? Is Gabriel in?”

“No. He said he’s working from home until after lunch. Anything I can help you with?”

I have no bloody intention of letting anybody else see this video, but the kid could come in useful. “You’re young. You know anything about email addresses, how to trace them, that kind of shit?”

“Not a lot, sorry. From what I do know, it’s tricky because you can set up webmail accounts anonymously, then use an IP address that’s bounced off different servers. Or just go to a library or a café and use their Wi-Fi.”

“Right, well, now you’re speaking a foreign language, mate. Some prick has a video of Lauren. And me. I’ll leave the rest to your imagination. I don’t know how the fuck they got it, but it was taken at the McIverson restaurant launch.”

His blue eyes widen, and he literally looks like a light bulb went off above his head.

“Well, go on.” I wave my hand at him. “Spit it out.”

“You know Chantal? The girl we met that time? Well, we’ve been talking. Gone on a few dates, like.” He actually blushes, and if I wasn’t so mad, I might think it was sweet.

“Okay. Well, that’s very nice and all, Taylor, but I don’t see how your love life is relevant.”

“It’s not, but you remember she said she hated that little Jimmy wanker because he was secretly filming the female staff in the ladies’ loos? Now, I don’t know where this video of Lauren was taken—none of my business, guv—but if it was at one of the McIverson pubs, could it be possible he had the same scam setup in all the branches, not only the one where Chantal worked?”

He goes to pick up the wreckage of my chair as he speaks, as though he’s embarrassed at daring to have an original thought. I stare at him as I turn the idea over in my mind. Fuck me, the kid might be onto something. The cameras in Lauren’s place are motion activated—what if the ones in the restroom were as well? There was definitely a lot of motion that night.

Plus, there’s the matter of the cash, which really doesn’t fit with Torres’s MO. He stole from the Montoyas, but he could have taken a lot more. They reckoned it wasn’t about the money, that it was more about messing with them, exerting control. This isn’t his style.

I know exactly whose style it is though—Jimmy’s. He’s still spitting about the deal and the ways we wronged his family, and according to Kenny, he was still making noise about getting his revenge. I dismissed the bastard out of hand, convinced he couldn’t possibly be a threat. That was arrogant, and I should have known better—everyone can be a threat if they try hard enough. Hell, a mosquito can give you fucking malaria. I bet the twat couldn’t believe his bloody luck when that footage landed in his lap.

The more I think about it, the more I see that Taylor is right. This is down to Jimmy—and his luck is about to take a change for the worse.

Chapter

Twenty-Three

SEBASTIAN

Iring Lauren before I set off but it goes straight to voicemail. I try Scott next and tell him to find her and tell her to call me. “No,” I add before he hangs up. “Ask her to call. She’s picky about that kind of shit.”

“Sure thing, Boss,” Scott says, unable to keep the amusement from his voice. “Shall I tell her you said pretty please with sprinkles on top?”

“Fuck off, you knob,” I reply, even though he made me smile.

Taylor is hovering outside in the drizzle, waiting for me to emerge. He looks pumped up and ready to go, and I recognize that feeling—the tingling excitement you get when violence is on the cards. I’ve seen him in action, and although it’s unlikely I’ll need backup to deal with Jimmy, you never know. I underestimated him once, and I won’t repeat the mistake.

“Can I trust you, Taylor?” I ask, staring at him.

He meets my eyes, no hesitation. “You can, Boss. One hundred percent.” He’s still hiding something, but I believe him on this.

It wasn’t hard to find out where Jimmy lives, and I let Taylor drive while I stare out at the wet and gloomy streets of London, my fury hidden beneath the surface but ready to explode anysecond. This vermin has seen my girl at her most vulnerable. He’s seen her gorgeous flesh exposed, and he watched her come. Nobody gets to do that except me. And now he’s got the nerve to threaten to share that private moment with the fucking world? He thinks he’s going to get away with this bullshit? I’m going to kill the little bastard.

My phone rings, and I’m relieved to see it’s Lauren.

“Hi,” she says, the cheerful purr of her voice enough to make me feel like the world’s a better place, even if it does contain Jimmy McIverson. “Weird thing happened—Scott turned up at the courthouse. What a coincidence, eh? Anyway. He says you begged me to call.”

“I don’t know about begged, sweetheart, but I do need to speak to you. What have you been up to?”

“Lots of things. Most importantly, I convinced a judge to allow us to file on behalf of Caroline under an assumed name when the time is right, as there is a credible threat to her life if she’s exposed. What about you?”

“Hot Sauce, you are a force for good in the world. Listen. I have a situation here. The night we, uh, enjoyed ourselves at the McIverson launch?”

Her laugh soothes me enough that I can draw a full breath for the first time since I got the email. “You mean the night you threatened to kill my date and then fucked me senseless? Such romance...”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:02 am

“Yeah. A tale as old as time. I thought it was pretty fucking cute, anyway. Look, just to let you know I’m in the car with Taylor. You’re not on speaker phone, but I’m guessing from the look on his face that he heard that last bit because he’s blushing like a virgin bride.”

Taylor has the good sense to avoid my eyes and concentrate on the road.

“Oh. Hi Taylor. Anyway—what’s your situation?”

“It was caught on camera, and now someone is threatening to make it public.”

She’s silent for a few moments, and I can picture her face as she calmly processes it. She has as much of a temper as I do, it just takes longer for her to get there. “Is it Torres? I kind of hope it is. I’m sick of knowing he’s out there and wondering if or when he’s going to step things up.”

“That was my first thought, but I don’t think so. I think it’s Jimmy McIverson. Apparently he had a thing for filming the female staff.”

“Well, that’s not nice. What are you planning to do to him?” I can hear different background noise now, beeping car horns and human traffic, which means she’s gone outside to avoid having this kind of conversation in a courthouse.

“I kinda thought I might kill him.”

“No. Please don’t do that. Look, I don’t give a shit about a man like that on any moral level—the world would probably be a better place without him. But I do care about

you, and it's not worth the risk. I couldn't bear it if you got sent to prison."

"I thought you might say that, but Lauren, I can't let it lie. I'd kill him for watching the video himself, never mind going public with it."

"Seb, he might have watched—but you got to touch. He's just a sad little man who gets his kicks spying on women, probably because none of them will go near him in real life. He's not worth it. If a sex tape gets leaked, I'll survive it—if I lose you, I'm not so sure. So don't kill him. At least not yet. Maybe give it a year so nobody links him to you."

I have to laugh. She really is something else, this woman—the perfect combination of Montoya and lawyer. "Is that your legal advice, Miss Hayes?"

"Yup. You can pay me in orgasms later and make it official. Look, I've got to go. I have a meeting. I'll call you later—be good, now, you hear?"

Taylor stays wisely schtum as he pulls up outside Jimmy's apartment block. We get out and climb the stairs to the first floor, which is sadly not high enough to be lethal if I throw him out the window. "Can I get a crack at him too, Boss? Don't like the thought of him watching Chantal with her knickers down either."

"You can be my fucking guest, Taylor. But as my lady friend said, we shouldn't actually kill him. It'll be messy, and there are too many ties between us. He's not exactly kept his trap shut about the way he feels, and I'm pretty sure some forensic IT boffin could find out he tried to blackmail me. I'm mad as shit, but she's right. He's not worth doing time over."

"Doesn't mean we can't hurt him, does it? Make him wish we had killed him."

There is absolute conviction in his eyes, making it clear that he was born for this kind

of work. We reach Jimmy's door, and I can hear sounds of porn in the background. It better be professional and not another one of his homemade efforts or Lauren's advice will evaporate from my brain. I nod at Taylor and silently count to three, then kick out at the door, aiming my heel below the lock. The wood splinters. There's a shriek from inside, and I finish the job and bust it wide open. Taylor follows me and closes the door behind us while I advance on Jimmy, who is sitting in front of the TV with his dick out.

I glance down at his rapidly diminishing hard-on. "Oh dear. Don't worry, Jimmy. I'm told that happens to a lot of men."

He shoves his shriveled member back inside his pants and tries to stand up. Gotta give him his due, he manages a good bluster even though he must be shitting himself. Taylor turns the volume up, which creates a pretty fucking weird soundtrack, but it will drown out any screams. Jimmy yells at me to get out, and I shove him hard in the chest. He falls back into the chair, all the wind knocked out of him.

"Find his laptop and his wallet," I say to Taylor while I hold Jimmy down. He's struggling and swearing, and I punch him once in the face. "Shut the fuck up, you twat." His eyes start watering and his nose is bleeding, and he looks comically shocked. I can't believe a man like this has made it so far in life without someone punching him in the face before.

I get my duct tape out of my bag and secure his hands to the sides of the chair, then punch him again just for fun. His nose cracks this time, which is a sweet sound. "I said shut up."

He whimpers and chokes on his own blood, snot, and tears, but apart from that, he does shut up. Taylor passes me his wallet, and I shake the contents loose on the table—the usual shit, plus a wrapped condom that looks like it's been there since they were invented. There are three bank cards, and I check each one of them. Sure

enough, one matches the account details in the email.

“Jimmy, Jimmy, Jimmy... You’re not exactly a criminal mastermind, are you? Didn’t you think we’d figure it out? Now, what’s the passcode to this laptop?”

He snarls and shakes his head, displaying an admirable level of stupidity. His eyes widen as Taylor stalks toward him. The boy grabs hold of one of his taped hands and pulls back the pointer finger until it breaks. “I could really get used to the sound of your bones snapping, Jimmy. Passcode?”

Once he stops crying, he tells us, and we’re in within seconds. Jimmy snivels in the background, telling us he’ll delete it all, that he’s sorry, that he’ll do anything if we leave him alone. I ignore him and flick through the video files on his computer without opening any of them. They’re all nicely labeled, detailing date, time, and who’s on them.

Lauren’s is right at the top. He really did have all the bathrooms wired, the sick fuck. Taylor’s face darkens when he sees Chantal’s name, and I lay a hand on his shoulder. He looks at it like he’s considering snapping it off, and I stare him down until he nods. Jimmy starts shouting for help, but his voice is drowned out by the porn film. “Do the honors, mate,” I say to Taylor, who punches him in the gut so hard he can barely breathe.

“Right, we’ll be taking this laptop with us, Jimmy. I’m sure you won’t mind.”

“We need to find out if he has a backup, or if it’s on the cloud, Boss.” I acknowledge Taylor with a wave to go ahead and check. I still don’t understand what the fucking cloud is, but I’m sure he’s right. Jimmy is doubled up and looks like he’s about to be sick. “No. No, it’s not on the cloud, that’s the only copy, honest.”

“I don’t believe him,” Taylor says, snarling. “Bet he had them all backed up so he

could wank over them any time.”

The thought of this sick little fuck watching that video of me and Lauren while he jerks off makes me want to kill him and then bring him back to life so I can do it all over again. Not only her, but all those women who were violated so Jimmy McIverson could get his rocks off. Suddenly, taking his laptop and slapping him around a bit doesn't feel like enough punishment—nowhere near enough. He looks up at me and starts to cry as I walk toward him. “No, please, I'm sorry...”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:02 am

“Sorry you filmed those girls? Sorry you watched my woman come? Or just sorry you got caught?”

“No, all of it—I’m sorry for all of it. I’m ill, it’s a condition—I need help!”

“What would really help,” I say, looming over him, “would be if you couldn’t watch anymore. What good’s a peeping Tom if he can’t fucking see?”

I slam my fist into his eye socket so hard his body lifts off the chair. If he hadn’t been taped in, he would have flown. His head wobbles back down, and I hit him again and again and again. I think of that night with Lauren. I think of Chantal. I think of every other neatly labeled little file on his computer, and I keep hitting him.

Eventually, Taylor pulls me back. “You said not to kill him, Boss. If you’ve changed your mind I’m in, but...”

I whirl around, fist raised, my temper so high I almost punch him too. When I look back at Jimmy, I see that his face is mush with one eye is hanging out of the socket at an unrepairable angle. He’s gibbering away, lips trembling, blood seeping from the corner of his mouth. Fuck. Taylor’s right. He can’t take much more.

“All right, Jimmy. I’ve left you one eye, so think yourself lucky. If you go to the police or so much as think about looking in the direction of another woman again, I’ll be back to take the other, and this time I’ll use a knife. Or maybe a spoon. And if that video of Lauren ever sees daylight, I’ll fucking well kill you, you understand?”

He nods, his damaged eye bouncing like a rubber ball. It’s not pretty, but I don’t feel

a scrap of sympathy for the twat. He brought it all on himself.

Taylor strides over and snaps all of the fingers on Jimmy's right hand, one by one. His screams are pathetic now, like he's endured so much pain he's given up. "Just to make sure he's not back on a computer anytime soon, Boss. That was his wanking hand."

We leave Jimmy to enjoy the sound of strangers climaxing in glorious surround sound. From the car, I call Kenny McIverson, holding the phone under my chin as I use alcohol wipes on my skinned and bleeding knuckles. Stings like a bastard, but it was worth it.

"Kenny, it's Seb. Did you know your little brother was secretly filming the girls who work for you?"

"No, of fucking course I didn't! Are you sure?"

"Yep, the proof is all over his laptop. He could do time for it, no doubt, but I've helped him out. I'll keep that laptop safe for him. You'll find him at his place, bit worse for wear. Looked like he was going into shock when we left, mate, so if I were you, I'd get there quick as you can. Or leave the prick to die—I don't give a shit."

I hang up and open the message that just came through from Lauren.

Did you kill him?

No. Might have been some maiming.

Perfect compromise.

I lock my phone and grin. I fucking love that woman.

Chapter

Twenty-Four

LAUREN

I arranged to meet Patrick Galway at a pub after work. It's not something I would normally do, but he explained that he works night shifts at a warehouse, and this is basically his breakfast time. Not ideal, but the poor man sounds like he really needs my help.

I told Seb where I plan to be and assured him that Samantha knows the man already and describes him as a lovely bloke. If he passes the Sam test, he said, then that's fine by him. As usual, he did make sure I was packing my homemade anti-asshole kit before I left the office. The incident with Jimmy McIverson seemed to bother him more than me, putting him more on edge. Although at least one of our problems seems to have faded—Jax got in touch to let us know that Torres has moved on to Istanbul, and I'm relieved he's no longer in the country.

He's likely responsible for my brand-new BDSM subscription membership and the graphic photos of their products that get sent to me every week. Little does he know, instead of scaring me, it's given me a few new ideas. If all Torres is going to do is prank me, I'm more than happy to ignore him.

I've got better things to do with my life than give assholes like him power over me anyway. It's been three weeks since Seb and I made it official, and it's been quite the rollercoaster. It's not like some magic wand has been waved and both of us are suddenly low-maintenance individuals who mesh together perfectly. There are still conflicts, still clashes. He can be overbearing and protective. I can be stupid and stubborn. We both have tempers that run hot, and our time together has not been free of shouting—but it has also not been free of make-up sex. Or in-the-middle-of-a-fight

sex. Or sex that involves those toys he bought and late-night drives to secluded spots in the countryside.

Basically, there's been a whole lot of sex, as well as shouting, tenderness, and joyful moments of relaxing into this new and exciting world we're sharing.

This is my last meeting before the weekend, and I'm looking forward to going back to his place. Seb has been looking after Max all day while Samantha and Gabriel are busy, and I really enjoy that side of him. I love how easily he can slip between doting granddad and the man who effortlessly dominates my body. The man who ties me up and chases me and talks such a dirty game that my pussy gets wet from listening to him.

He holds me hostage to my own desires, desires that he completely understands and that I wholeheartedly trust him with. Yesterday at work, I had a butt plug up my ass all day. It was uncomfortable to start with but eventually exciting. He still hasn't fucked me there, but he's played around with me, torturing me, making me wait. He knows that the more he holds back, the more desperate I become.

One of these nights, he might "break in" to my apartment wearing a balaclava and carrying a bag of tricks. I'll wake up to his gloved hand over my mouth, his knife to my throat, his knee between my legs. It's so thrilling, and the thought of it makes me shudder. I'm completely past the stage of wondering whether I'm a sick pervert. As Sebastian says, as long as we both want it and we both enjoy it, nothing sick or perverted is happening. Everyone has their kinks, and ours happen to perfectly complement each other.

When I arrive at the pub, I switch off thoughts of game-playing with Seb and make my way through the crowd to find my client. I recognize him from the photo of him and his kids that was included in his file, though he looks older and shakier than I expected. I'm surprised to see that his breakfast is in a pint glass, but to each their

own. He said he hasn't seen his children for almost two months now, and if he's as loving a father as Sam says he is, that must be taking its toll. I'm glad I made time for him, even if it is delaying the start of my weekend.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:02 am

I introduce myself and sit down across the little table from him, frowning as he gulps down his beer. His hands tremble around the glass, and he can't quite meet my eyes. "Patrick, are you okay? Please don't worry. I'm here to help, and I'm sure we can find a resolution for you. Your kids must miss their daddy, and I can see that you miss them."

He stares at me and swipes his hair back from his face. "That's... That's very kind of you. And I'm really sorry."

"Sorry? About what?" Getting a bad vibe, I place a hand on top of my purse. This place is busy and very public, but I will defend myself if the need arises.

"There was a man. He contacted me out of the blue. He knew all the details about my case, every last thing. And he knew where my kids lived, had pictures of them. Getting dropped off at school, in the park. He sent them to me, along with photos of little white coffins draped in flowers... Oh god, I'm sorry!"

I swallow down my own flash of panic and stay as calm as I can. "Okay. What did he want, Patrick, this man?"

He pushes a manila file across the table. "He wanted me to give you these. I looked. They're of you. Outside your house, at work, at the gym. In that pub near your office. He's been watching you. He told me I had to give you these and tell you he'd be seeing you very soon. And that your Uncle Carlos sends his love."

I don't open the file. I don't need to see those photos, not right now. The mention of Carlos has turned my stomach and sucked the joy right out of me. I was right—Torres

was in on it all along. There's no doubt in my mind that the man who manipulated Patrick Galway is Diego, but I still ask, "The man who spoke to you—was he American?"

"Uh, I think so... Maybe? His accent was strange. Like an American trying to sound European, if that makes sense. Is he... Is he dangerous? Is he planning to hurt you? Do you think he'll hurt my kids?"

I don't have it in me to be angry with this poor man. He was used and is clearly still traumatized by it all. I'm not sure how he got sucked into it until I remember what Samantha said on our spa day—completed cases are archived digitally. Torres must have rummaged around in those archives until he found one that was useful. Damn him! I'll need to tell her and Nick so they can beef up security. And maybe I'll have Seb put a little security in place for Patrick and his kids for the time being.

"I'm sure he won't hurt your kids, no. You were just a pawn, and now you've served your purpose, don't worry. I understand why you had to do this. I'm going to leave now, all right?"

He nods, and I cut him off before he can apologize yet again. I walk out of the door with my pepper spray in my hand and my head held high. Yes, I'm scared. Yes, Carlos's name can still get to me. But I'm also pissed. In fact, I'm furious. Coming after me is one thing, but involving this innocent man and his children? Violating clients' confidentiality? That's way over the line. I scan the street, half hoping to get a glimpse of him lurking nearby. I'm pretty sure he is. He'll want to see this, won't he? Want to see me crying, see me panicking. I glare out at the world, my face set into a mightyfuckyou.

I flag down a cab and head to Seb's instead of going home to get my car. If Diego is out there watching, there's far less chance of him being able to follow me if I'm in a black cab. It's a basic precaution, but I wonder if there's any use when it's obvious

he's had me in his sights all this time. Flicking through the photos only proves me right. He knows my routines, knows my places. He's not an idiot—he won't try anything while I'm with Seb. But looking through the images leaves a sick feeling in my stomach.

My anger builds at the way he has infiltrated my life and soiled everything that is good about it. So much for Istanbul. I need to tell Jax and my cousin, but I'm not ready. Right now, I want to feel my rage.

I get dropped off a couple of streets away and take my time walking to Seb's house. No sign of another black cab or any other vehicle following me. Looks like I'm clear.

By the time I arrive, I've forgotten that the baby is there with him, and I laugh when I discover my silver fox alpha male being completely ruled by a creature that is a fraction of his size and not yet seven months old.

Seb kisses me quickly on the cheek and gets back to feeding Max his bottle. He looks frazzled and worn out, and the house is in chaos. It's pleasant in its own way, but it's a million miles from where my head is at right now. Seb is cooing and singing, and Max keeps giggling up at him from around his bottle.

I don't want to spoil this beautiful moment, so I head into the kitchen and clean up some of the debris that tornado Max left in his wake. It's good honest work and helps to distract me from wondering if Torres is outside in the street right now. I wasn't followed, but he knows who Seb is. He knows where he lives. Am I putting them in danger? So far, he hasn't shown any propensity for actual physical violence, but there are all kinds of danger—as Patrick Galway now knows. Sometimes the threat of violence is as bad as violence itself.

I need to tell Seb what happened and work with him to come up with a plan. I feel about as eager to do that as I do talking to Jax, but it's not fair to be in his life like

this and not be honest, especially when it could affect him. He thinks he could snap Torres like a twig, but what if he were babysitting when the threat came? What if something happened to Samantha or Max? Neither of us would ever forgive ourselves.

On cue, he walks into the kitchen, running his fingers through his tousled hair, and takes me in his arms and kisses me properly, his hands settling on my ass. “He’s asleep at last. You okay? How was your meeting?”

“It was interesting. When is Max going home?”

“In about an hour. Why?” he says, smirking and waggling his eyebrows. “Can’t wait to get me into bed?”

Under normal circumstances, that would absolutely be the case. Tonight’s circumstances are anything but normal. I can’t bear the thought of talking about all of this while the baby is here. While Seb is so peaceful and happy in his domestic environment, enjoying switching off from his work and the turmoil that lurks beneath the surface of his mind. His quality time with Max is like therapy for him, and I don’t want to rain on his parade with my bullshit.

“Of course. That’s my main purpose in life, Seb, getting you into bed. You don’t exactly make it difficult for me, though.”

Growling, he slaps my backside and runs his lips down my neck. Despite everything, the touch of his mouth against my throat makes my pussy throb. “You taste fucking delicious,” he says, kissing his way back up to my mouth. “I want to eat every damn inch of you.”

The hard length of his cock is pressed up against me, and I grind myself against it, making us both moan. I’m wondering if there’s time for a quick-but-awesome fuck

when Max lets out aloud wail, and Seb freezes against me. We both laugh, and he reluctantly pulls away.

Alone, I pour myself a glass of wine and sit at the kitchen table. There's a loaf of freshly baked bread laid out next to a plate of delicious-looking muffins. Looks like Seb has been busy. I take a bite out of a muffin and sigh in pleasure. Life might not be perfect, but I've really lucked out in some ways—like finding a man who fucks like the Terminator but bakes like the Cake Boss.

A few minutes pass before he sits down opposite me. “You have a nice day, Granddad?” I ask.

“Yeah. I really did. I love all this stuff, you know? I wish I'd been around for it with Samantha. Sometimes, if I'm honest, I wonder if it might not be too late for more kids in the future.” He looks at me speculatively, and I freeze at the realization of what he's suggesting. What the actual fuck?

“I know, I know,” he says, holding up his hands. “It's early days. It's just a random thought. Max is so great, and I see how happy he's made Sam and Gabriel. I never wanted to take that step with anybody else, but you and me... We're different. Is it completely crazy to think that one day, that might work for us?”

My appetite has disappeared, and I put the muffin down. He doesn't understand what he's saying—he can't possibly understand its significance. He's thinking out loud. Maybe he thinks it's something I want to hear. Because all women want to be moms, right?

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:02 am

“Yes, completely crazy,” I say quietly but firmly. “And I don’t ever want to hear you talk about it again. In fact, don’t even think about it.”

He stares at me, obviously shocked by my cold tone, and a fire blazes to life in his eyes. “What? Why? And since when do you get to tell me what to think?”

“Since you started making plans for my body, you chauvinistic asshole.” I stand up and slam my hands on the kitchen table, and he follows suit. Within seconds, we’re glaring at each other like mortal enemies. This really was not what I needed tonight, and telling him about my meeting with Patrick Galway and showing him the photos is becoming less and less appealing.

“That’s not fair, and you bloody know it. I wasn’t making plans for your body. I was trying to have a conversation with you. Is it so fucking bad that I want to discuss the possibility of starting a family with you?”

“Well, that shows how little you actually know me, doesn’t it, Sebastian? Just because a woman is young enough to have kids doesn’t mean she wants them or needs them. Not every woman thinks her life is incomplete if some big, strong man doesn’t fill her with his seed. If you’re with me because you’re looking for a prized heifer to breed the next generation of Donovans, you’re going to be very disappointed.”

I grab my coat and pull it on. I’m angry and sad, and I’m not going to stop being either of those things if I stay here with him. I’m a mess and I need to leave.

“Where the fuck are you going?” he shouts, trying to block my way.

“Anywhere away from you. Now get out of my way before I pepper spray you. This isn’t a game—I mean it, Seb. Let me past, right now. And lock the door when I’m gone.”

He steps to one side, his face contorted with fury. “Be my fucking guest, Lauren.”

Chapter

Twenty-Five

LAUREN

I storm out of the house in tears, tears that I managed to control until my back was turned. I didn’t want him to see me like this. I didn’t want to talk about why I was so upset, or why I was so shocked by his suggestion. I’m sick of feeling vulnerable, and I need to go back to my default setting: When the going gets tough, Lauren gets going.

It’s all been too much today, and it’s time for me to lick my wounds. Once he calms down from our fight, he will be hurt that I walked out instead of staying and “having a good scrap,” as he calls it. He’s a man who would rather see a fight through to its conclusion than let it fester. Normally, I like that about him, but I had no choice but to leave. It’s not forever, I tell myself. I will call him later and explain. Maybe I’ll come back or invite him over, and we can get right to the make-up sex.

Or maybe not. It’s possible I’m too broken for all of this domestic crap. That I’m not cut out for a life like this, with a partner and routines and babies. Part of me wonders if I can’t ever be fixed because part of me will always be halfway out the door.

I walk briskly down the street, keeping a constant eye on my surroundings but noticing nobody lurking, watching, or in a parked car. Seb can look after himself, but

he's got the baby with him, so I need to make sure. The photos indicate that Torres is only interested in me, but I won't risk any collateral damage.

It's raining again, which is fine by me as it washes away my tears and suits my mood. I decide to get the bus back to my part of town, purely to delay getting there. Once I'm home, I'll have to think about cameras and surveillance and the fact that my life doesn't feel like my own anymore. Sure, I can hide in the bedroom, but doing that makes me feel worse. I curse the fact that I was born a Montoya, that I ever crossed paths with Carlos. That no matter how hard I try, I can never completely sever the ties that bind me to them.

On the bus, I force myself to handle the necessary chore I've been dreading and message Jax and Alejandro, telling them I don't think Diego Torres is in Istanbul.

The first response comes from Alejandro.

Are you safe?

Then, my phone dings with a message from Jax.

Are you with Sebastian?

Fuck that. I can look after myself. I send the same response to both of them:

I'm safe, don't worry.

The other people on the bus all look like they have ordinary lives. Like they're going to or from work, maybe headed for a night out with friends, or whatever it is that normal people do. None of them are constantly looking over their shoulders, checking for a psycho stalker while messaging their Mafia boss relatives. Shit, maybe they are. Who knows? Not like I can tell from looking. I probably look pretty normal from the

outside too.

I get off at my stop and walk through the rain toward my apartment. Every bar and café I pass seems to be full of lovey-dovey couples laughing and enjoying each other's company. Other people make that shit look so easy, and I wish I could be one of them. I wish I weren't so fucking messy.

This whole love thing is still so new to me, and I'm discovering that the amazing highs come with their share of remarkable lows. Loving someone means being at least a little bit scared of losing them. Seb didn't deserve my outburst tonight.

Yes, I was stressed because of what happened with Patrick Galway. Sure, I was deeply unnerved by seeing photos taken of me by a stalker. And yeah, Sebastian was a presumptuous ass when he talked about us starting a family.

But he didn't know about the first two things, and as for the third... Well, was he being unreasonable? Was he being malicious? Was he actually being a chauvinistic asshole? No, he wasn't, but the cumulative effect was too much.

I reach my apartment building and glance around cautiously, paying particular attention to the small café across the street. Some of the pictures of me were taken from that angle. The place is closed, windows dark, and there's no sign of anybody loitering nearby.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:02 am

I head inside to the elevator, already looking forward to a hot shower and blessed solitude. I'll call Seb after I get my head on straight and try to put things right between us. He knows my temper is almost as bad as his, and hopefully we can work our way through it.

I'm still thinking about that, planning what I need to say, when the elevator pings on my level. The doors slide apart, and I am immediately confronted with the unexpected sight of a tall, heavily built man wearing a baseball cap and a mud-brown delivery uniform. He looks me up and down with dark, beady eyes, his face twisted into a cruel sneer. A face that matches the pictures I've seen of Diego Torres.

"Hi Lauren. Surprise!"

I gape at him, horrified, trapped inside the elevator with nowhere to run. I hit the button to shut the doors, but he sticks his foot inside so they won't close. He grabs a handful of my hair and drags me toward him, making me stagger and trip as he pulls me out into the hallway. Mine is the only apartment up here, but I scream anyway. My lip splits when he slaps me viciously across the face, making me taste blood. "Shut the fuck up."

I shove his chest as hard as I can, but he's a big man and doesn't budge. He takes after his father like that, and I feel sick at the unhelpful memories my mind conjures up:

Uncle Carlos and this man's dad, sniggering when they arranged for a delivery of heavy-flow tampons to the house while my friends were over.

Rafe “accidentally” pushing me off my bicycle when I was going home from school, then kicking up my dress as I lay in the dirt.

The two of them finding me in the pool one afternoon and forcing me to stand in front of them, shivering in my bikini while they discussed how fat I was getting and how huge my ass was.

All of this rushes in on me at the sight of Diego, paralyzing my usual survival instincts and turning me into a scared little girl again. It gives him the time to take control. He spins me around so my back slams into him and puts his arm around my neck, crushing the breath out of me as he drags me toward my home. I have my keys held between my fingers as usual, but I’m so scared, so panicked at the lack of air, that my arms flail uselessly, slapping ineffectually against him.

“Ah, the keys—how helpful,” he says, tearing them from me. “It was easy enough to get in the building, you know. It’s amazing how stupid people are around a man in uniform, and now you’re practically inviting me in too.”

He unlocks my door and tugs me inside, towering over me as he forces me to walk toward my living room. Please let someone be watching. Please let someone see what’s happening here.

“Don’t worry, beautiful. I already got into the camera system. Nothing that happened outside or in the hallway has been captured. Now we’ll make it look like everything’s nice and normal, eh? Wouldn’t want that rhino of a boyfriend to come roaring in and interrupting us now, would we?”

My heart sinks, and he smiles. That’s exactly what he hoped for—for me to have hope so he could crush it. He releases the awful pressure around my neck and pushes me forward, deliberately sticking out one of his feet to trip me. I fall to the floor and slam my head against the wall. That’s exactly the kind of thing Carlos used to do, and

my nausea threatens to cripple me as I lie curled in a ball on the ground.

He nudges me in the stomach with his shoe. “I expected more fight from you, Lauren. You always seem so sassy on the surface, but I guess that’s all fake. No surprise, though. I mean, you were weak as a kid too. Pathetic, really. My dad used to come home and show me the photos of you sleeping that he and Carlos took. Did you know they used to drug you? Didn’t you ever wonder why you slept through it all despite being so paranoid?”

Staying in my protective ball, I suck in air and try to calm myself down. I can’t be that kid again. I can’t go back to being some sick fuck’s emotional and physical punching bag. Diego is bigger than me, yes, but that doesn’t mean he has all the power. I need to breathe, to think, to play this game to win. As much as I hate hearing all of this, he clearly loves the sound of his own voice. If I want to buy myself time, I need to engage with him.

I shake my head. “No, I didn’t know that. Why did they do it? Why did they do that to me?”

He hoists me up with his hands under my armpits, and I let myself become a dead weight. “Ooof! You need to go on a diet, chica. They did it because it was fun, didn’t they? One night when you were sleeping, they unbuttoned your pajama top—the one with the pink rabbits on it, remember? I was only eleven, but boy, I still remember that. My dad snapped a picture and showed it to me—your gorgeous teenage tits, your big brown nipples, so perfect and perky. I asked him for more. I asked him if I could come along too, but he said no. Said that Carlos only allowed him to look, not touch. The next week, though, they pulled down your pants and spread your legs for me. Showed me your pubes, your pretty pussy. It was the first thing I ever masturbated to, that photo. Don’t you feel honored?”

He’s pulled off my coat and bag and placed them on the floor next to me. After he

takes out his phone, he frowns at the screen, his fingers flying over the keyboard. I still feel nauseated. I still feel like a scared little girl—but I no longer feel paralyzed. “There!” he exclaims. “Now, let’s get this looking all nice and cozy.”

He puts the coat and bag on the couch, goes back to his phone, and smiles. “All done. Now anybody who checks in on you will see that and think you’re in your bedroom, safely tucked up. And who knows? Maybe that’s where you’ll end up—but definitely not safe. I’ve waited a long time to see you again, Lauren. You disappeared off the radar so well, didn’t you, moving around, changing your name. Even leaving the country. It was real nice of your mamá to let me in on the details of all the Montoyas’ lives like she did. I’d almost given up. You know, when your bastard cousin and his redneck friend Jax killed my father, I decided I wanted nothing more to do with any of you. We couldn’t bury him—were you aware of that? Didn’t even have a body to honor... My father, the only man who ever loved me.”

He kicks me in the side, and pain radiates from my kidney. I cough and choke, wiping tears from my eyes, then hold my hands up in supplication. “Please don’t hurt me. I’m sorry about your dad. You must know that had nothing to do with me. They’re all monsters—I ran away from them myself. I moved to the other side of the world to get away from the Montoyas.” There’s a flicker of doubt on his face, as though he’s considering my words. I wonder briefly if there is any humanity left in there for me to appeal to.

“Maybe,” he says, his eyes running over me hungrily. “I did always like you. I used to follow you home from school. I was younger than you, so I was invisible. But I’d walk behind you, watching, knowing exactly what your breasts looked like under your uniform.”

I suppress a shudder. “You don’t need to hurt me, Diego. You have all the power here.”

“Oh, I know that,” he says, laughing. He grabs my hair again, bunching it up and pulling me upright. The pain is excruciating, but I can’t let it distract me. I can’t let it blind me. “Lie down on the couch here. Show me those titties again. Then we’ll see.”

He spreads my legs and kneels between them. “Come on, Lauren. Do as you’re told. Don’t make me go after Samantha or her beautiful baby.”

“No, please! They have nothing to do with your father or the Montoyas—they’re innocent.”

The risk to people I care about is more painful than my throbbing scalp and the shooting pains in my back from his kick. He’s a coward, but he’s a dangerous coward, threatening to go after a woman and her child like that.

“Nobody is innocent. Unbutton that top. Now.”

I screw my eyes shut but still hear his heavy, excited gasps and feel his intrusive weight between my knees. His fingers squeeze my thighs painfully, and his foul, fetid breath gusts across my face. I force myself to look up at him. He morphs into Carlos, into Rafe, into Brad Schmidt. Into Jimmy McIverson and Ivan Volkov. Into every man who has ever hurt me. Every man who has ever hurt a woman. Every man who has looked at a female and assumed that he has the right to take whatever he wanted, no matter the cost to her.

He punches me in the stomach so hard I cry out, and with trembling hands, I begin to unbutton my blouse.

Chapter

Twenty-Six

SEBASTIAN

I can't believe I let her leave like that. Or how quickly we went from normal to nuclear. And I can't believe I'm stuck in fucking traffic, that she's not answering her phone, and that she ran from me. I'm worried, pissed off, and sad, and those emotions are taking turns at the wheel of my brain.

Samantha and Gabriel got stuck in the same traffic as me—bloody London is forever being dug up and messed around—and didn't end up collecting Max until after eight. I stayed as normal as I could during the handoff. The last thing I wanted was to drag them into my drama.

It's not a good look, moaning to your daughter about your girlfriend. Especially when your girlfriend is basically the same age as her. They stayed for a quick coffee, chatted about their day, and then it took an everlasting age to pack away all of Max's gear and wave them off. As soon as they were gone, I tried her phone again, and predictably enough, I got the same result as I had the last fifty bloody times.

Checking her cameras felt like a violation of her privacy, but I did it anyway. Not that it helped—her coat and bag were there, but she must have been in the bedroom. I have no clue if she's in there crying, stabbing a Seb-shaped voodoo doll, or fuckingsomeone else. No. That's not fair. She wouldn't do that, no matter how angry she was. That's more the kind of dick move I'd pull.

Not knowing is making me crazy, and I drive like an absolute cunt all the way there,

beeping, bullying, and flashing my lights at anyone who dares get in my way. I finally escape the bottleneck that sprung up between my place and hers and pull into the underground parking garage. It took me over an hour to get here, and now I am, I need to calm down. I can't go up to see her still raging. I want to talk to her, not fight with her. It's important to find out why she reacted like she did, why she ran, and sort it all out. I hate this feeling that there's distance between us, and I also hate that I seem to have turned into a giant pussy whose sense of wellbeing is dependent on a woman.

I notice her car—it's hard not to—still parked in one of the bays and jog up the stairs to her place on the top floor. I have excess energy to burn and don't fancy being confined in the lift with strangers. I might scare them to death.

As soon as I reach the landing, my blood freezes in my veins. The floor is scattered with photos haphazardly thrown to the ground. Every last one of them is a picture of Lauren. Lauren at work, at the gym, in a café. At my place. None of them look like they were taken with her knowledge or permission. Something is very fucking wrong.

I fight down my panic and stride toward her apartment. I should probably listen against the door. Find out what is going on before I rush in like a fool.

Except I am a fool when it comes to Lauren. The woman I love is in there, and she's in trouble. Every instinct I have is screaming at me to help her, so I kick the door in. My heart is racing, and I'm terrified of what I'm going to find inside. Did McIverson find a way to strike back? Has Volkov discovered that she's helping his wife escape? Is Diego Torres even in Istanbul? They're all threats to her. Any one of them could take her away from me, and if they do, I will lose my heart, my joy, everything that makes my life worth living.

The door slams back hard in its frame, rattling on its hinges, and I'm ready to fight, to kill if I need to. I race inside and call her name.

Maybe I should have gone for stealth, but I'm too pumped up for that. Too desperate. "Lauren," I yell again as I thunder past the bedroom and the bathroom, kicking doors open as I go. Both rooms are empty.

"I'm in here," she shouts back from the lounge. I fly toward her, my heavy boots slamming onto the wooden floors, heart in my mouth. She's talking. She's here, and she's alive. All of that is good.

I burst into the living room and stop dead in my tracks. She's standing in the middle of the room, her face white and drawn. Her blouse is open, revealing her lacy bra, her breath coming in agitated gusts that make her chest heave. A chunk of her scalp shows red where a patch of her hair has been ripped out at the roots and she has a busted lip. She stares at me, her eyes wide and fixed, shock setting in. The skin of her chest and her pale cheeks are splashed with blood, and her hands tremble uncontrollably.

Disturbing as all of that is, she doesn't look as bad as the other person in the room. The man is tied to one of the dining chairs and has a gag in his mouth. There are cuts and bruises on his face, and he's out for the count or dead. I can't tell which, and I don't care right now. All that matters is he's no longer a danger.

I run over to Lauren and pull her into my arms. With trembling hands, I stroke her hair carefully back from her face and examine every inch of her for damage. "You're okay, sweetheart. I've got you. Are you injured? Do you need a doctor?"

Her hands flutter on my back like butterflies, as though she doesn't have the ability to keep them still or to grab hold of me. "I don't know. I don't think so."

I run my hands gently over her shoulders and fasten up her blouse. I have no idea how far he went before she defeated him, my warrior woman, but there will be time to talk about that later. Using my T-shirt, I wipe her hands clear of blood and hold her

shaking fingers in mine. “I think you’re okay, Lauren. Shall we go and get you cleaned up, and you can tell me what happened?”

She nods and stares at the guy tied to the chair. “What about him? Have I... Have I killed him? Oh god, please say I haven’t killed him.”

I leave her side long enough to check his pulse. His eyes are bright red and swollen, and his face has taken a beating. A couple of teeth litter the pool of blood at his feet. The wound below his ribs looks to be the likely culprit, but when I check it out, I find that it’s not too deep.

Personally, I don’t give a shit if the cunt dies or not—but she does, and that’s what matters. I grab a towel from the kitchen, wad it up, and shove it roughly against the wound. She points to a small backpack, and I find a roll of black tape inside. I bite a strip off to secure the makeshift bandage and add one over his mouth as well before checking the zip ties on his wrists.

Satisfied that he’s going nowhere, I go back to Lauren, who is trying to pull herself together, but the shock is still wreaking havoc. She takes a step toward me on wobbling legs and collapses into my arms. I scoop her up, kiss her forehead, and carry her through to the bathroom. “It’s all going to be okay, sweetheart. He’s not dead, don’t worry. We can sort all of this out together. Do you trust me?”

She clings to my shoulders and manages a shaky nod. “I trust you. I shouldn’t have left you. I’m so sorry. I should have been more vigilant...”

“No. Enough of that. No self-blame allowed here tonight. Is that Diego Torres in there?” I’ve seen photos of the guy, but his face is no longer recognizable. She nods weakly, and I keep hold of her as I turn the shower on, getting the temperature right for her.

“I thought so. Well, whatever you did to the fucker, he deserved it and probably more. He takes the blame, not you. Hell, Jax and Alejandro can have some too for believing he was in Istanbul. And me, I’ll take my share as well—I should never have let you leave like that. But you? You don’t get any of it, you understand?”

After getting her settled on the tiles, I position the spray so the warm water sluices away the blood, keeping her face held up and her eyes locked on mine. I don’t want her looking down. I don’t want her seeing the bright red evidence of violence swirling down the drain. My boots get kicked to the side, and I get in with her and help her out of her clothes. “I’m going to run you a bath, sweetheart. Nice and hot, lots of bubbles, just how you like it.”

She nods and closes her eyes, letting me undress her. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her so weak, so subdued, and I hate it. I’d rather she try to slap me in the face or knee me in the balls. From the state Torres is in, it seems she used all the fight she had on him.

When she’s naked, I see more damage—scratches on her arms and bruises where it looks like she’s been kicked in the side and the back. Biting back a growl, I run the bath, adding her favorite jasmine-scented bath soak and whipping up the bubbles with my hand. I’m soaking wet myself, but I don’t give a shit.

Once the bath is perfect, I go back to the shower. She holds her arms up to me, waiting to be picked up, and whatever calluses were left on my bitter old heart melt into oblivion. She is my woman. My perfect, crazy girl. She is battered and bruised and brilliant, and I will never leave her side again.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:02 am

I lift her up, trying not to notice the way her perfect breasts brush against me. The last thing she needs is another guy manhandling her. I place her down gently in the water, and she sighs as the warm liquid soothes her body. Her curls cascade down, floating around her shoulders, and my gut clenches in fury when I see a bare patch where he pulled her hair out. That alone is enough to make me want to go back in there and finish the job she started.

Her hand reaches for mine, and I perch on the edge of the tub and take it. She smiles up at me, starting to look human again. “I know what you’re thinking,” she says quietly.

“Oh, do you now? Mind reader, are you?”

“I don’t need to be telepathic. I only need to know you. You’re worried about looking at my tits in case you get an inappropriate hard-on, and you’re so angry with Torres you’re considering ripping his arm off and beating him to death with it.”

I glance at her bubble-coated nipples. “Guilty as charged, ma’am. Though I hadn’t considered the arm thing—that’s a nice touch. Do you think you might be up for telling me what happened?”

She passes me a cloth and the bottle of soap. “Wash me, please, Seb?”

Fuck. Between her nakedness and the pleading look in those big brown eyes, I’m really not doing well on the inappropriate hard-on front. But I lather up the cloth and tenderly begin with her face. Her cut lip starts bleeding again when I clean it, and she winces slightly when I dab at the sore spot on her scalp. “The bastard,” she says. “He

dragged me by my hair.”

My fury is squatting inside me like a boulder in my stomach, and I have no idea if I’m going to be able to stop myself from killing him. I’m imagining all the long, painful deaths I could impose on the fucker when she speaks again, pulling my hand down to her chest. “Wash all of me, Seb. Please. Wash him away and make me feel clean again.”

Groaning, I trail the washcloth down to her tits, watching the soapy water trail between them like a river in a valley. She breathes deeply, her eyelids fluttering as I move to her already-stiff nipples. I softly stroke them, massaging the supple skin of her breasts until she purrs like a kitten. “Oh. Thelma and Louise like that.”

I smile at the nicknames and continue to lavish gentle attention on them. She moans, and the water splashes over the side of the tub as she parts her legs. Complete trust and absolute yearning shine in her eyes as she gazes up at me.

“It’s all right, sweetheart. I know what you need.” I move my hand beneath the water and stroke the flesh between her thighs, finding her swollen bud. There’s no torture this time, no making her beg, no sweet and sexy dance. It’s just me, giving her the release she needs. Washing him away and making her feel clean again. Her orgasm is a drawn-out and delicate thing, her body shuddering as it flows through her, her eyes shut and a long, deep moan sighing out from her lips.

When it’s over, she leans back against the rim of the tub and smiles up at me. “Thank you. I needed... I needed to feel like me again. And I needed to feel your hands on me instead of his.”

I lean down to kiss the top of her head. “My hands are always available for you, sweetheart. So, what happened? If you feel up to talking about it, that is.”

She nods and briefly disappears beneath the bubbles. When she emerges, she looks like a mermaid, her dark hair sleek against her tan skin.

“I didn’t get to tell you earlier, but that meeting I had, with Samantha’s client? Well, it wasn’t what it seemed to be. Torres had hacked his file and threatened his kids. He made him deliver a file of photos. I was already upset by the time I got to your place, and then... Then we had a fight.”

“We did, baby, and under different circumstances we’d be about to have another one. Why the fuck didn’t you tell me straight away?”

“Don’t be angry, please, Seb. I don’t think I can take that right now. I’m sorry, I should have told you. But you were with Max, and you’d been baking, and you were in your happy place, you know? I intended to wait until he went home and then I was going to tell you. Things kind of got away from me, though, and I headed back here. He was waiting by the elevator. He grabbed me, dragged me inside. Did something to the cameras.”

I take a deep breath and rub my face. Fuck. I need to rein it in. This isn’t the time or place to go ballistic. She doesn’t need shouty Seb right now. “All right, it’s okay. It’s not your fault. What... What did he do to you?”

“He talked. A lot. He was in on it all, the stuff with my uncle when I was younger. He saw the photos, knew what they did. They used to drug me to make me sleep, Seb, and then they... did things to me. Took my clothes off, posed me for photos. Then his dad went home and shared them with his eleven-year-old son like it was some kind of special treat. The sick fucker.” She smacks her fist down on the water, splashing me. It’s good to see some of her fire returning.

Naked and glorious, she stands up and climbs out of the bath. With her body wrapped in a towel, she rubs her hair dry and stares at herself in the mirror. Everything she

sees there will heal—the lip will scab over, the hair will grow back, the bruises will fade. It’s what’s inside I’m more worried about. She catches me staring and meets my eyes in the mirror.

“He didn’t rape me,” she says simply, her voice firm now. “He tried, but I was lucky. He underestimated me, didn’t keep a close enough eye on me. I managed to grab the pepper spray while he was faking the cameras, and I kept it hidden until he was distracted. He threatened Sam and Max to control me, and I made him think I was going along with what he wanted. I waited until he was busy looking at my tits and trying to get his dick out of his pants, and I went for it. After that, it was a bit of a mess. He fought, but I guess I fought harder. I was so pissed. It was like... like all the anger, all the pain—it all poured out of me, you know? Like I reached back through the years and gathered it all up and used it. You saw how it ended.”

I am in awe of her in so many ways. Torres is a big man, and he came prepared. He always intended to hurt her, but she took that chance away from him. She stole his power, and now he’s the twat tied to a chair.

I sweep her into my arms and hold her tight, sighing into her damp hair and inhaling her scent. “Fuck, Lauren. I was so scared when I got here. I don’t know what I’d do if I lost you.”

She slides her hands around my waist and kisses my neck. “I know. I feel the same. I knew that you’d be here at some point. That you’d come for me.” She blows out a breath. “Now, I’m going to get dressed, and I suppose the question is—what do we do next?”

Chapter

Twenty-Seven

LAUREN

I tear off the tape that's covering his mouth, and he squeals as it pulls away some of his scruff. His eyes are still red and watery, and he's in desperate need of a trip to the dentist, but Seb is right—he's very much alive.

"My rhino of a boyfriend wants to kill you, Diego," I say, pulling up a chair and sitting opposite him. The baton I used to beat him with is on the ground, the kitchen knife I stabbed him with not far away. I'm going to need a special kind of cleaner to get the stains out of the rug. It's not a pretty sight, but I can't bring myself to regret what I did. It was me or him, and I owe him nothing.

He glares at me, still managing to sneer despite his precarious situation. He might technically be smarter than his father, but he still reminds me of him. Now, though, I'm not scared. Rafe, Carlos, all of them? They're pathetic, cowardly bullies, picking on the weak and the vulnerable to make themselves feel like big, strong men. Truly strong men defend the weak; they don't exploit them. They don't need to abuse others to make themselves feel good.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:02 am

“Nothing to say?” I ask, tilting my head to one side. “You were full of talk earlier. What was it you said—that you were going to go after Samantha and her baby? You do know that’s his daughter, don’t you?”

He pales, and his eyes shoot to the door. He’s right to look concerned—I’ve never seen Seb so angry. He’s working hard at containing it, at keeping the monster under control, but it could escape at any moment. “I wouldn’t have done that,” he says quickly. “That was just to scare you. They’re not Montoyas. It was you I wanted.”

“Because you had some kind of sick crush on me when you were young?”

“Because of that, and because of your blood. Your family was responsible for the death of my father, and you were the only one I could get to in the flesh. You’re not surrounded by an army like the rest of them.”

“Well, that’s where you were wrong, isn’t it, Diego? I am my own army of one, and that was all I needed to kick your pathetic ass. You know, I actually feel sorry for you. Your piece-of-shit dad made you think the things he did were normal. You grew up seeing the world, seeing women, through his sick lens. But then again, a lot of people had crappy childhoods, and they didn’t all grow up to be scumbags. I guess it must be genetic—apples, trees, that kind of thing. Out of curiosity, what do you think we should do with you?”

He blinks his sore eyes and spits blood from his mouth. “Kill me. Let me go. I don’t care.”

He’s aiming for bravado, but the tremor in his voice makes him fall short. His eyes

dart behind me.

“Just got ahold of Alejandro on video,” Sebastian says as he comes into the room. He ignores the bleeding man on the chair and focuses all his attention on me. “Fuck, he’s a good-looking bastard, isn’t he? Made me feel a bit like one of those trolls that lives under a bridge.”

“Aw, but you’re my troll, honey. What did my cousin say?”

“He said he’d understand if I wanted to finish things myself, as long as I kept you out of it, but his preferred option would be for this sack of shit to be sent back to LA. I didn’t get the impression that particular trip is going to end in a visit to Disneyland for Mr. Torres here.”

“No!” Diego shouts, struggling against his ties and kicking his feet but achieving nothing at all for his efforts. “No, don’t send me back to that crazy bastard. You can’t do that to me.”

Seb strides over to him, grabs him around the throat, and lifts him up, chair and all. “You laid hands on the love of my life. You threatened my daughter and grandchild. You manipulated fuck knows how many innocent people as part of your twisted game. You have no clue what a crazy bastard is, you shitbag.” He shakes him by the throat, and Diego’s eyes start to bulge, his lips turning blue.

“He’s not worth it,” I say, placing a calming hand on Seb’s bulging bicep. “Plus, if you kill him now, Alejandro won’t get to play his game, and knowing my cousin like I do, his game will involve a lot more pain for our friend here.”

Seb’s eyes are locked on Diego’s mottling face, and for a second, I don’t think he’ll come back to me. Without a word, he throws him, and Diego crashes to the floor, the chair leg breaking underneath him and sending him sprawling.

“You’re right. Alejandro promised me as much. I said we could get him to a private airfield outside the city. And by ‘we,’ I mean me and Gabriel or me and one of the other lads—I want you to get some rest and to stay as far removed from this shady bullshit as possible.”

“Why?” I frown. “Because I’m such a delicate woman?”

He snorts out laughter as he drags Diego up by his hair, which is extremely satisfying to watch. He screams more than I did. “I think we have living proof right here that there is nothing delicate about you, Lauren Hayes, and I fucking love you for it. But you’re a lawyer. And you’ve been trying to escape this family legacy for the whole of your life.”

“Well, maybe I can’t escape it, Seb. Maybe it’s part of who I am—and I’m sick of running. Is it wrong that part of me wants to get on the plane with him and give my cousin a hand?”

“Nothing wrong with that at all, babe. But if you go, I go.” He directs his attention back to Torres. “Now, asshole—I’m going to cut those zip ties off. If you struggle or shout or you so much as breathe in a way that offends me, I might accidentally slip with the knife and cut your balls off instead, you understand? I promised Mr. Montoya I’d send you back to LA. I didn’t promise I’d send you back whole.”

Torres nods, but I keep a careful eye on him as Seb walks behind him with his knife. A wet patch spreads across his uniform pants as he pisses himself. Must have been the thought of having his balls sliced. I hate that he’s here in my cute and cozy haven, stinking the place up with his blood and his pee and the stench of his dirty, rotten soul, but I will not let him corrupt it for me. He’ll be gone soon, and it will be mine again. If there’s one thing I’ve learned over the years, it’s that whatever is taken must be reclaimed.

Torres rubs his wrists, looking up at me through his red, pepper-sprayed eyes. “Did you do anything else with the information from the law firm?” I ask. “Share with any of your buddies?”

“No,” he mutters, shaking his head. “This was all personal. You know you’re sending me to die, don’t you? You know Alejandro will kill me?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t be so sure about that, Diego. My cousin is supremely skilled at keeping people alive and in pain for an amazing amount of time. It’s incredible, really, he probably could have been a doctor. He seems to know exactly how far he can push someone without their heart exploding.”

Relishing the psychological torment, Seb grins at me over Torres’s head and punches him with a massive fist so hard that the lights go out. “He’ll be easier to get out of here if he’s unconscious. Plus, that was a lot of fun. Are you sure you want to come with me?”

“I’m sure. I need to see him gone.”

Chapter

Twenty-Eight

SEBASTIAN

Ifilled Gabriel in on the night’s events, and he immediately headed around to help, no questions asked. That’s pretty much my definition of a good mate—someone who will drop everything and come help ship a lowlife scumbag bastard off to get tortured by the LA Mafia.

Lauren is determined to see this through, but I explained to her that I needed the

manpower. We need to carry the asshole out of the building, get him in the boot of my car, and out again at the airfield. She is mighty, but she's not that mighty.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:02 am

Gabriel took in the scene with a quick nod, arriving right as Torres came back to consciousness. “Did you say he threatened Sam and Max?” he asked, glaring at him. When Lauren confirmed, he punched him even harder than I had. Lights out again. It was easier that way, anyhow. Meant he couldn’t struggle or shout for help as we carried him down to the garage. He’s too bloody big to wrap up in a rug, and sadly we’ve agreed to leave all his limbs attached so we can’t chop him up and chuck him into trash bags.

Lauren left me and Gabriel to do the heavy lifting and buzzed ahead of us, ready to deflect any passing interest. Fuck knows how she was going to explain it, but I was confident she could. In the end, we lobbed him into the back of my car without anybody crossing our path.

Now, after driving for the best part of an hour, we’ve arrived at this tiny airstrip, which turns out to be a few miles from Samantha and Gabriel’s new home. It’s deathly quiet at this time of night, with a reception area manned by a security guard who looks as though his nose has been broken multiple times. This isn’t the kind of place where Hollywood A-listers board their private jets.

We’re expected, and the guard waves us through right onto the tarmac, where a jet is waiting, all lit up against the night sky. The steps come down, and two extremely hard-looking men emerge, both dressed in black, both dark-haired with intelligent brown eyes, both from the same Hispanic crime lord supermodel agency as Alejandro.

“Ms. Montoya?” one of them says to Lauren, nodding respectfully.

“Yes,” she replies, “that’s me. I presume my cousin sent you?”

“He did. We’re, uh, colleagues of his, based in Barcelona.”

“Colleagues, huh?” She gives him a dazzling smile. Jealousy stirs unpleasantly as I watch her flirt with the guy, and I remind myself he’s only doing his job and that she needs to feel normal again.

“Well, admittedly not the kind who hang around the water cooler and gossip about Kevin from accounts, but we’ve worked together on projects for many years now. I’m Antonio Rivera, and this is my twin brother, Javier. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

He shakes her hand and lingers a bit too long for my taste. A low growl emerges from my throat without me telling it to, and Javier laughs. “Baby brother, behave yourself,” he chides. “We’re here to work.”

“I’m only your baby brother by five minutes. But you’re right.” He turns to me and Lauren again. “I apologize for my sheer charm and handsome good looks. I use them far too often.”

Lauren grins at him but places a hand on my arm. “This is my boyfriend, Sebastian Donovan, and his business partner, Gabriel Sullivan. If you ever need friends in London, they’re good men to know.”

“I see that.” Antonio nods at each of us. “Now, shall we get to the matter at hand? I believe you have some cargo for us?”

The Rivera twins walk with us to the back of my car, and when I pull up the lid, Diego Torres immediately starts yelling for help. We wait, letting him scream himself hoarse, waiting for him to get the message that nobody’s coming to his rescue. Eventually, Antonio shrugs and punches him, rendering him unconscious yet again.

“That’s better. Okay, let’s load him in—big bastard, isn’t he? Was he hard to take down?”

“Ask Ms. Montoya,” I reply, helping heft his legs out. “She’s the one who took him. Had him zip-tied to a chair and bleeding by the time I turned up to rescue her.”

He laughs and shoots her an appreciative look. “I’m impressed.”

“Well, now my life is complete.” She holds her hand to her heart, but there’s no sting to her snark. “Do say hello to my cousin for me, won’t you?”

None too gently, the two brothers drag and bump Diego across the tarmac before hoisting him up the steps, swearing in Spanish all the way. Once he’s in, Antonio turns toward us, gives us a salute, and retracts the stairs. We watch as the plane taxis down the runway and takes off.

“Bit anticlimactic,” I say as we gather back at my SUV. “But I’m glad he’s gone. Gabriel, should I drop you at home, mate, and you can get your car from town tomorrow? Seems daft to drag you all the way back.”

He agrees, and we let him out at the edge of his driveway. I note with approval the additional cameras in the trees around the property and that the code on the security gate now involves a retinal scan. My daughter is in safe hands.

“So,” I say to Lauren as I start the car up again. “You fancy stopping off somewhere? Bit of food, a drink, whatever? It’s been a batshit-crazy day and I’m fucking exhausted, but if you’re hungry or you just need to take your mind off things... Or how’s this for an idea—I could see if that cottage is available? The one from that first night?”

I glance at her profile as I drive, not sure which way she’ll jump. “Yeah. Actually,

that might be nice. I know I've got to go back to my place and sort it out at some point, but I really don't have the energy for it right now." She groans. "I hate that his blood and guts and piss are all over my living room."

"Not to mention a couple of his teeth. You did quite a number on him. You want me to send someone round, start the cleaning?"

She shudders a little, and I turn the heating on in case she's cold. "Maybe. Let me think about it. Part of me feels like I should do it myself—like I need to face up to what I did."

"I'm going to take that as a yes and sort it. I don't want you having to go back in there to deal with that shit. It's your home, and he invaded it. You have nothing to feel bad about, nothing to face up to. You know he deserved it, don't you? And whatever else is coming to him?"

"My brain knows it, logically, but my emotions haven't quite caught up. I'm sure some of it's the adrenaline and stress, but I keep remembering how close I came to killing another man. How easy I would have found it. Is there something wrong with me?"

"No. Not one damn thing. You're perfect. Or at least you're perfect for me."

I pull over onto the side of the road and log on to Airbnb. "Shit," I say after a few moments. "It's booked. Some other cunts are probably fucking each other on our kitchen table."

The sound of her laugh fills me with happiness. All is well in the world as long as she can still laugh. "Don't worry, Seb. Let's just go home."

"I do have another option, if you're up for it."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:02 am

She arches an eyebrow, obviously intrigued. “I’m usually up for most things, but I warn you, I am bone-tired. I don’t think I could deal with a chase and capture right now.”

“Of course not. But I have this place. Out in the woods, miles from anywhere. Some land, a little cabin. It’s pretty simple, but it has all the basics. You know, running water, electricity?—”

“Sex dungeon?” she quips.

“Not yet, but it’s a work in progress. Basically it’s my secret refuge. Nobody knows about it, not even Gabriel and Sam.”

“Why not?”

I shrug. I’ve asked myself that before and don’t have a satisfying answer. “I’m not sure. I think I like the idea of having a safe space I can hide away in, a place that’s only for me. Or maybe I’m just a twat, who knows?”

“Do you go there often? Do you... take women there?” She narrows her eyes at me, and I enjoy the flare of jealousy. She deserves it after all that flirting with the Spanish bruiser.

“I used to go there a lot more, every other weekend or so, but the last time was right after we first met. The day after we met, specifically.”

“Ah. I have that effect on men. Send them running for the hills,” she jokes.

I start the car up again. “To answer your other question, no. I’ve never taken another woman there. You’re the only one I ever want to take there. The only one I want, full stop. I love you. You know that, right?”

She puts her hand on my thigh and runs her fingers up and down my jeans. “I do know. And although I don’t say it enough, I love you too. I’m honored that you want to show me your secret hideaway, and I’m excited to be there with you, away from the rest of the world and its bullshit. Is there any phone signal or Wi-Fi?”

“It’s slow but reliable. There’s enough food and drink there to last a year, though, if the zombie apocalypse kicks in.”

“Good. Maybe we’ll stay a couple of days, then. I think I need a bit of R&R... and maybe a little nap. It’s so nice and warm in here now, and I finally feel safe again.”

My heart contracts at those words, and I’m glad she’s not looking right at me. If she was, she would have seen the sheen of tears in my eyes, and then where would my reputation be?

Chapter

Twenty-Nine

SEBASTIAN

The cabin is back the way we came, on the far side of London. It’s only about forty minutes from Archangel, but it feels like a different world. I drive through the night, letting her drift in and out of sleep, only waking her up when we’re finally there. It’s down a dirt track, and the entrance is barred with a massive wooden cattle gate. I have a surveillance array set up around the perimeter, but other than that, it’s low tech.

Lauren yawns and stretches when I gently nudge her awake, smiling at me and reaching up to stroke my face. I lean into her touch, kissing her palm. I climb out of the car and grab a torch from the back so I can light our way down the path. The whole place is like an enchanted forest from a fairytale, the trees surrounding the cabin on all sides and protecting it from the real world. It's quiet at night, only the cries of owls and rustles of nocturnal animals piercing the silence. I've seen foxes here, badgers, all kinds of birds, and I once came across a solitary stag, his antlers proud against the sunlight.

"Seb," she says, holding onto my hand as I lead her along the path. "This is so beautiful. It's magical."

"I'm glad you like it, sweetheart. I know tonight's not the right time for it, but I've often thought what a great place it would be for a good old-fashioned chase."

She stops and looks around. "Damn right it would. But no, not tonight. Tonight, I need to talk to you about something."

"Oh shit. That doesn't sound good. Am I in trouble?"

She smiles. "No, you're definitely not in trouble."

The cabin is chilly and has the musty smell places get when they've sat empty for too long. I switch on the lights and bring in some chopped logs so I can get the fire going. Before long, it's casting a flickering orange glow around the cabin and warming the whole place up nicely. The main room doubles as both a living space and a bedroom, and Lauren wanders around it, inspecting my books and belongings, smiling at a framed photo of Max and Sam that I keep by the bed.

"You know," she says, closing the curtains against the moonlight, "I could get used to this. Especially if I got to watch you chop logs with an actual axe. That's kind of

hot.”

“Too damn right it’s hot. I’m like a Viking warrior when I get going with my axe.”

“Oooh, I like the sound of that. So little time, so many games to play.”

I let out a manly roar and chase her around the room until she collapses giggling on the bed, hiding beneath the covers and pretending to be scared. “Big strong Viking warrior, please don’t ravish me—I’m just a little virgin girl from the countryside. Don’t spear me with your giant sword.”

“I definitely will, little virgin girl. Right after I make you hot chocolate and get you snacks.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:02 am

“That’s not a very Viking thing to say.” She pouts, her curly head popping out from the duvet.

“Well, I’m one of those Renaissance Vikings, aren’t I? Raping and pillaging one day, baking cookies the next.”

I use the time in the kitchen to catch my breath and calm myself down. It’s been a hell of a day—and night, I guess, seeing as how it’s almost four a.m. I feel like someone smashed me over the head with an anvil. I’m keeping it together for her sake, because she needs to feel safe and secure, but I’m a wreck. Coming so close to losing her shook me to my core, made me realize exactly how important she is to me. Torres is gone, but I’m not so naive as to assume that our lives from now on will be plain sailing. Neither of us is exactly conventional, and neither of us ever backs down from a fight or from doing what we think is right. That means that there will inevitably be trouble ahead. And I need to be ready for it.

I sprinkle the top of the chocolate with marshmallows and take the drinks through with a box of cookies. Her eyes light up, and she comes and joins me on the rug by the fire.

“So,” I say. “What did you want to talk to me about?” She sips her cocoa and sighs. “Aaah, that Viking dude sure knows how to make a girl happy. I don’t especially want to talk about it. I feel I have to. It’s about earlier.”

“Okay. But there was a whole lot of earlier, so you need to be more specific.”

“Earlier at your place, when you mentioned us having kids together.”

I nod and stay quiet. The way she reacted shocked me and later hurt me. Is it so repulsive a concept, the idea of starting a family with me? Is it too much of a commitment, something she's not ready for? Or did I ambush her, catching her unaware?

"I don't want you to think that I hate the idea. Or that my reaction reflected the way I feel about you. It's actually nothing at all to do with you. I can't have kids, Seb. Brad Schmidt and his pals did a number on me. I'm messed up, physically, and the doctors said it's impossible to fix the damage. I'll never be able to give you children." She stares into the fire as she speaks, a blanket tucked around her shoulders and a chocolate mustache on her upper lip. The expression on her face is a heartbreaking blend of sad and nervous.

I ignore the rage that curls in my stomach at what those sick fucks did to her, what they took from her, because that won't help. Instead, I slide my arm around her shoulders and hold her tight. "I'm so sorry that happened to you, sweetheart. And I'm sorry I blundered in and said what I said. That was insensitive of me."

She smiles up at me, but her eyes are still tearful. "It was, yes, but it's not like you're the only one guilty of that. People assume they have every right to talk to a woman about this stuff—if you have kids, if you want them, when you might have them... Like it's totally acceptable to ask about a deeply personal issue to do with their wishes and their reproductive health. Some women don't want to be moms, and they shouldn't have to explain that to the world. Some of us maybe do want to be moms, but it's not possible for us. When you're in your thirties, it becomes even more obvious. My own mother is constantly on my case about it. I don't have the heart to explain why I'll never make her a grandmother. It would break her; it would break all of them. Not even Alejandro knows what they did."

"I'm sorry, babe. I can only imagine how hard it must be to be constantly asked those questions. I wish I hadn't been one of the idiots who made assumptions. I remember

asking you that first night in the cottage whether I needed to use a condom.”

“You did. And my answer was that you didn’t need to worry about me getting pregnant. I never said I was on birth control.”

It’s a subtle difference, and I’m not surprised I didn’t pick up on it at the time. I had other things on my mind that night, for sure. Now, though, I’m living in a different world. I don’t only want to fuck this woman—I want to treasure her. Cherish her. Make her happy for the rest of our lives together. I hate the fact that I played a part in upsetting her.

I kiss her curls and stare into the fire alongside her. “You do know, don’t you, sweetheart, that you are enough for me? What I said... I was being an idiot. It was a stupid fucking idea, and it only popped into my head because I had Max all day. I don’t need more children. Hell, I’m not sure I want more children. What I am sure about is the way I feel when I’m with you. I feel alive. Loved. I’m excited about all the possibilities the world holds for us, and I feel lucky to have ever met a woman as incredible as you. You, Lauren Maria Montoya Hayes, are enough for me in every single way.”

The vulnerability in her eyes takes my breath away. “Is that true, Seb? Or are you saying all that to make me feel better?”

I place my palms on either side of her face and kiss her tenderly on the lips. “It’s true, babe, I promise. All I need is you.”

Chapter

Thirty

LAUREN

We end up staying in the cabin through the weekend until Monday. It means missing a day of work, but I decide I deserve it, and I have holiday time to use up anyway. A lot has happened, and I needed to process.

The first night we spent here was tender, gentle, and loving. Seb held me in his arms for hours, helping me fall asleep to the sound of the birds and the crackling logs on the fire. It was incredibly peaceful and did a lot to heal my soul—as did telling him about my situation. Until I shared it, I don't think I had any idea how much of a burden it was, how heavy it was after carrying it around with me alone for so long.

Now I feel its weight lifted, and although I'll always be sad about it, I at least don't feel as isolated. Every secret we carry has the power to isolate us, I've found—and I've carried more than most. I let Carlos separate me from my own family; I let the pain and disappointment of my marriage separate me from pursuing relationships beyond sex. And I let Brad Schmidt and his cronies separate me from myself. I've been so busy pretending that I'm okay that I forgot to ask myself if I actually am.

Now I'm with Seb, I'm genuinely happy, and the time before him seems like a different world. Everything feels so much more meaningful now. I find myself looking at him all the time, when he's cooking or reading. When he's chopping logs or doing something simple like trimming his beard, getting dressed, checking his phone. Whenever he catches me, he winks like he knows exactly what I'm doing. It's almost embarrassing how much I enjoy looking at him. Or at least it would be if not for the fact that it's mutual.

Yesterday, we went on a hike around the land, and Seb showed me a few quirks of the place. He doesn't know much about the previous owner, but they were obviously into survivalist stuff. The cabin has an underground cellar that Seb filled with supplies, and the woods around it are dotted with small wooden structures called hides that can be used to watch wildlife from. Or, as Seb pointed out, are the perfect place to launch a sniper attack. I'm down with both. Seb being the kind of man he is,

he also fortified parts of it “just for fun”—pits dug around the bases of trees, a carefully placed tripwire here and there.

When I asked him why, he shrugged and said, “Dunno. Maybe I’m paranoid. Maybe I watched too many movies. Or maybe one day I’ll turn it into a corporate retreat for paintball wankers.”

The tour took a fun turn when Seb disappeared off into one of the hides and started counting. I didn’t need to be told what that meant, and I ran for my life. He gave me a decent head start, and I’d been paying attention during the tour, so it took him over an hour to track me. I’m fast and sneaky, and I have a lot more experience at this game now. The longer it takes him to catch me, the angrier he will be. And the angrier he is... Well, what can I say? I like it when he’s angry.

The more authentic the game feels, the more the blood thunders through my ears as he chases me, and the more my heart races as his strong hands tear away my clothes and take control of me. He fucked me up against a massive oak tree, my arms tied against the bark as he nailed me from behind and I screamed for help I knew wouldn’t come, help I didn’t want. It was absolutely glorious and worth every single scrape and scratch. If there’s a better way of cleansing myself of the memory of Diego Torres’s fingers on my flesh, I can’t picture it.

We came back to the cabin laughing and giggling, the hands that only moments before were manhandling me now showing me nothing but affection and respect. This is why it works so perfectly for me—Seb is a man who fulfills all my sexual fantasies but also treats me like a princess. Damn, I got lucky.

This is our last night here, and Seb is catching up on work in his office. It’s really more of a bunker—a basic room dominated by a bank of screens, all connected to cameras around the property, along with a computer he’s currently using.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:02 am

For once, I cooked, managing a basic pasta dish spiced up with chili flakes and dried porcini mushrooms, and we ate together in front of the fire. Since then, though, he's been locked away in his den, doing who knows what. I peek my head around the corner a couple times, but he seems determined not to be diverted.

"I'm really sorry, sweetheart," he says, barely glancing up from his screen. "I have to crack on. Can you entertain yourself without me for a bit tonight?"

I try to hide my disappointment, not to mention my surprise. This is the first time he's chosen work over me, and it sucks. I tell myself off for being a brat. Seb has a business to run, and he has responsibilities to the people he works with. I can't expect him to be at my beck and call twenty-four seven.

"Don't worry, Hot Sauce. I know this is our last night here, and I won't waste it, I promise." He looks up at me with dark eyes, and I shiver at the promise in them. "Now do as you're told and scarper."

I do as I'm told with a smile on my face. I don't know what he has planned, but I'm excited about it.

After taking a shower, I climb into bed with a Lee Child thriller. Seb's reading material doesn't exactly skew on the varied side, and all of his books seem to feature violence, vengeance, and very large men. It's engaging enough, though, and I read until I fall asleep a bit after eleven without Seb once emerging from his office, showing no sign of delivering on his earlier promise. It's probably for the best, anyway. I'll be playing catch up at work for the rest of the week, and a night of solid rest will refresh me.

I don't know what wakes me up later or what time it is. My eyes open, and I'm confused in that way you get when you've been disturbed from a deep sleep. I feel around on the other side of the bed, instinctively reaching for Seb and finding the sheets cold. A creak comes from the hallway, and I'm instantly more alert, sitting upright and rubbing my eyes. I listen carefully and hear the sound of a door banging. "Seb? Is that you?"

Silence. Huh. I switch on my phone and see that it's almost one in the morning. He should have finished work by now, surely. I climb out of bed and tiptoe across the room. Maybe he went outside and left the door open or is moving around in the bathroom. Maybe?—

Before I can finish the thought, I'm grabbed and lifted off my feet. My back slams into a solid body, my chest crushed by arms made of steel. I scream and kick out, slamming my heels against his shins and struggling furiously.

"Shut the fuck up," he snarls in my ear, squeezing my throat so I can barely breathe and dragging me bodily across the room. He throws me down onto the bed, and I immediately scramble to climb off it and run. Growling, he pushes me flat and places one big hand on my chest to hold me in place while he straddles me. He's dressed entirely in black, a ski mask covering his face, his hands encased in leather gloves. The blade of his knife glints in the darkness as he holds it in front of my face.

"Be quiet and do exactly what I say. Don't try to fight me. You know you can't win."

I slap at his arms, bucking and kicking and trying to throw him off me. Just like I knew he would, he grabs my wrists and pins them to the mattress as he bears down on me. The knife flashes again when he raises it to my throat, and the sharpness of the metal against my skin gives me a moment of primal panic. What if it isn't him? What if it isn't a game? What if I've got it all wrong? I suck in a shaky breath, inhaling his scent of Chanel and masculinity, and the smell of him is all I need to fully commit to

the game we're about to play. The game I suspect he's been planning all night when he deliberately ignored me and made me wait.

The point of the knife bites into the soft flesh under my chin, forcing my face upward and exposing my throat. He leans down and puts his mouth to my neck, biting and sucking at me hard enough to make me cry out. Hard enough for me to feel the first rush of wet heat seep from my pussy.

I'm wearing one of his shirts, and he roughly shoves it up to my waist while I scream and thrash. I score a few hits before he slaps me across the face. Tears spring to my eyes, and he snarls again. "I told you to keep fucking still. You're mine, all of you, and I'll do whatever I want to you."

He keeps my hands pinned with one of his and slides the other between my legs. I try to keep them tight together, try to deny him access, but he's too strong. He jams his fingers between my thighs and pushes them apart with brute strength. I gasp as he parts them and, without taking off the leather gloves, enters me. The smooth leather fills me, the alien sensation triggering waves of pleasure that cascade from my core to every cell in my body. He drives his finger in and out of me, growling as I contract around him.

Fuck. I'm already about to come. He lets go of my wrists and places his hand on my throat instead. He compresses it in perfect time with the tightening of my pussy walls, and the touch of the leather is enough to push me over the edge. My hips rise up beneath him, and I fight for breath, the orgasm ripping through me even as he chokes me. I slap at his arm, feeling dizzy from the lack of air, the delicious fear, the rippling aftermath of my release.

He suddenly lets me go and flips me onto my stomach. I'm still breathless, still trembling, still unbalanced as he grabs my wrists and tugs them behind my back. My face is crushed against the duvet, and I struggle against him, writhing and lashing out

with my feet. He puts his hand to the back of my neck and holds me down. “Stop fighting or I’ll cut you. I’ll cut my name into your skin and fuck you while you bleed.”

Oh lord. Part of me so wants him to do that. I want him to carve his name on me, mark me, take me any way he likes. I want it all.

He ties my hands together behind me and climbs off my legs. As soon as I’m free of his weight, I try to roll over, intending to try to run for the door while I can. He predicts it, of course, and slams me back down on my belly as I curse and yell. Then I can’t scream anymore because he has pulled off his leather glove and rammed it into my mouth to shut me up. He twists my head around and glares down at me through the eyeholes of the skimask. “Can you taste yourself, you filthy slut? Can you taste the cream you squirted all over me?” Oh my god! I absolutely can.

He uses his knife to slice the shirt off me, leaving me naked and vulnerable, my skin shivering in the night air. He tears it away and throws it to the floor. “Look at that ass,” he growls, running one leather-clad hand over my cheeks. “That’s an ass I’m going to fuck, right now.”

My eyes go wide, and I try to scream, but it comes out as a muted squeak as he grabs my hips and raises them up so I’m face down and on my knees in front of him. The knife skims my inner thighs, the sting telling me he’s cutting into the skin. It’s so damn good, so damn scary, and I’m growing wetter by the second. I’ve wanted this for so long, and now that the moment is here, I’m terrified. Terrified in a way that makes me vibrate with need.

He rubs his hand down my butt again, then pulls my cheeks apart. There’s a rush of shame when I imagine how I must look, how vulnerable I am. How this part of me that should be private has been so embarrassingly exposed.

“Fuck. Look at your hole, you dirty little slut. All puckered up and tight, just waiting for me to fill it. Just waiting for me to shove my massive cock right in there. I’ve wanted to ass-fuck you since I first laid eyes on you. I warn you—this is going to hurt.”

He reaches between my legs and wipes his fingers through the folds of my pussy. I’m so wet that it makes an audible slurping sound, and he rubs my own arousal around my back entrance. I feel his breath suddenly there as well, and he spits to add to the moisture. My stomach tenses into a knot of anxiety. Despite the butt plugs and the homemade lube, this will be painful. Maybe if we’d done it some other way he would have been gentle, eased me into it, let me get used to the sheer size of him. But this is not a time when he’s capable of gentle. And I don’t want gentle.

He grunts as he spreads me wide with the crown of his engorged dick, sliding just inside me. I stretch to accommodate him, and my skin stings as he pushes farther and farther into my ass. This will be easier if I relax. If I breathe deeply. Except that’s hard to do when your hands are zip-tied behind your back and your mouth is crammed full of leather.

I know I could stop him. I’m in complete control here despite the situation. I can kick the bed three times and he’ll stop. It’s that simple—three little kicks, and all the pain goes away.

Instead, I suck in a breath through my nose and thrust my ass as high as I can to meet him, shoving myself around him. He snarls, utters a rumbled “fucking hell,” and slams himself all the way inside me. My scream is muffled by the glove, and he reaches around and tugs it out, thrusting into me with all his strength.

“I want to hear you crying, Lauren. I want to hear you scream.”

He holds my hips to steady himself, then rails into me as hard as he can. His cock is

huge, driving in and out of me, the pain and the pleasure and the tears and the joy all merging inside me. I feel so full, so completely possessed, so totally taken by this man. He reaches one hand around underneath me and rubs his fingers against my swollen clit. “I’m going to come, sweetheart. I’m going to shoot my load in this beautiful juicy arse of yours. And you’re going to come with me.”

His fingers sink deep into the flesh of my hips, all the while he’s pounding into me. My orgasm builds, pussy walls clenching, my vision blurring. He crashes into me one final time while yelling my name and finds his release the same moment shockwaves of ecstasy flow through my body. We ride it out together, both of us convulsing and jerking in spasms of pure physical bliss.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:02 am

“Fucking hell,” he says a few minutes later, his head resting against the small of my back. “I don’t know who won that particular game, babe. I think you might have beat me though. You okay?”

He uses his knife to slice my zip ties free and clambers into bed at my side. When he tugs off his ski mask, he’s grinning at me. “Bloody hot in that thing.”

“I can imagine. And you cut up your own shirt.”

“It was worth it.” Suddenly, I’m cocooned in his arms. “You okay?” He checks on me again, running his giant hands down my body. “You need anything?”

I sigh contentedly, my entire body humming with satisfaction. “Yes. I’m more than okay. And I have everything I need right here. That was amazing, by the way.”

He nuzzles my neck. “You’re amazing, sweetheart.”

I know he means every word of that, and I don’t think I’ve ever felt so content as I do at this moment. “You’re pretty amazing too, Seb. Have you been planning that all night?”

“Yeah. We’re going back to reality tomorrow, and I needed to make tonight special for us, now, didn’t I?”

Special—that’s one word for it. The more time I spend with this man, the less I ever want to be apart from him.

Chapter

Thirty-One

LAUREN

I'm on video call with Alejandro, and I am not enjoying it.

Seb has repeatedly argued that I should come clean with my cousin and my parents about what Carlos did to me when I was young. He's convinced that I'll never really move on from it while I keep it secret from them, that I have nothing to be ashamed of, that I will feel the power of the past diminish once I share it with them. For a big thug, he can be remarkably nuanced, and I don't always appreciate it. In fact, I think the exact words I used were "screw you and your hippy-dippy bullshit. It's not your choice to make." Or something equally insightful, anyway.

It might have happened organically at some point or another, but circumstances have forced my hand. It should have occurred to me sooner, but now that Diego Torres is in my cousin's very capable hands, he's talking. A lot. And the things he's been saying have made Alejandro very curious indeed.

His dark eyes pin me down via the screen of my laptop, and even from thousands of miles away, I can feel his commanding presence. There are no cute babies in the room, no family banter, no chitchat about his wife or his daughter, Lucia. Nothing but those serious eyes and an expression that doesn't seem able to choose between disappointed and angry. Hell, he's probably both.

"I think, mi prima, that you need to fill me in on a few things. Like why Diego Torres keeps apologizing for looking at photos of you when you were a girl. Why he keeps telling me he never touched you. Why he keeps saying it was all because of his father and our late and unlamented Uncle Carlos."

Staring at my hands for a moment, I pull my resolve together before I meet his eyes. “It was all a long time ago, Alejandro, and both men are dead. What does it matter? It’s ancient history.”

“Ancient or not, it’s your history. Which means it’s my history too. You know I love you like a sister, Lauren.”

These simple words move me more than all of his disapproval, and I melt as I realize his expression isn’t disappointed or angry. It’s just sad. “Tell me what happened. What did the sick bastard do to you?”

I tell him everything, starting with that very first day when I found Uncle Carlos torturing someone at our home, how he threatened to hurt my sister and my parents. How he cut me.

“You told everyone you got that scar cooking,” he says, shaking his head.

“I know. That’s what he told me to say. He was always making me lie, making me cover for him—making me culpable, you know? It’s why I seemed so difficult to the rest of the family. You remember that, don’t you?”

He nods and has the good grace not to argue. “Yeah. I remember that. My mamá and yours, chatting away over coffee, talking about how you were going through an awkward stage.”

“A stage that lasted for years. He tortured me for so long, Alejandro, and I hid it from you all. I look back now, older and wiser, and wonder why I didn’t just tell. If I had, my whole life would have been different. Carlos wouldn’t have been allowed to go on and do the things he did.”

He bangs his hand down on his desk, and I jump in surprise. “No. That is not on you.

Carlos was a grown man psychologically abusing a young girl. He was always wrong in the head, you must know that—our fathers did, and it was their job to protect you, not the other way around. What Carlos chose to do, kidnapping my wife, that was his call and his alone. Now, hearing all of this from you, I only wish I could go back and kill him all over again.”

I laugh, swiping tears from my eyes. No idea where they came from, the sneaky bastards. “That’s what Sebastian says too.”

“Ah. The famous Sebastian. My friends from Barcelona were impressed. With both of you. Although I’m not surprised that you took out Diego single-handedly—I’ve seen that temper of yours too many times. But I’m glad that Sebastian was with you afterward and that you’ve found someone who cares for you the way you deserve to be cared for. It’s not easy, coming from our family, to open yourself up to love.”

“No, it’s not. And Sebastian really does care about me. He wanted me to tell you about all of this. He thought it would, I don’t know, cleanse my soul or some such bullshit.”

He raises his eyebrow, not fooled by my bravado. “And has it?”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:02 am

I consider the question. To some extent, it has.

He must see my uncertainty. “Is there anything else you need to tell me, Lauren? I’d ask Diego, but as of tomorrow he won’t have a tongue.”

I shudder a little at the image, but then I remember his stinking breath in my face as he forced me to bare my breasts to him. “There is something, actually,” I reply quietly. No sense holding back now that I’ve started. I pause, trying to find the right words.

“Am I supposed to know what it is without you telling me, cousin?”

“No, you asshole, just give me a second, will you?”

“Did you just call me an asshole?”

“Yeah, I did. You don’t scare me, Alejandro Montoya—I’ve seen you naked.”

“Not since I was seven. What is it? Do I need to be worried?”

“No, it’s nothing to worry about. But do you remember when that thing happened to me in Florida, and you and Jax came down to... help me out?”

His eyes flash with fury, his lips pressed together in a thin line of contempt. “Of course. Those cabróns who assaulted you. We were happy to help.”

“Well, it wasn’t quite as simple as I made out at the time. I told you they attacked me

on my way home and that I was scared they were going to do it again.”

“I remember. Is that not the truth?”

I puff out some air and close my eyes for a second. This is a lot harder than I thought it would be. “It was worse than that, Alejandro. They kidnapped me and held me prisoner for days. I don’t think I need to spell out what they did to me while they had me, but it was as bad as you can imagine. I almost died, and now... Now I can’t have kids because of it. I haven’t told anyone apart from Seb, so please don’t be pissed at me.”

His eyes widen. “Pissed at you? That’s a million miles away from what I’m feeling right now. It breaks my fucking heart to know that you’ve been alone with this for so long. I would go back and kill them all over again if I could. And there is more than one way to be a mama, prima.”

Alejandro and Alana adopted their daughter, Lucia, and Alana needed fertility treatment to get pregnant with the twins. Theirs has not been a simple journey into parenthood. “I also don’t have to be a mama at all, if that’s what I choose, Alejandro. But there’s something else that I didn’t tell you. The men you and Jax dealt with? They needed to die. They’d done it before and they would have done it again.”

“You’ll get no argument from me there. The world is better off without them in it.”

I nod and bite my lip. Here goes. “So, long story, but I managed to escape from their ringleader, a guy called Brad Schmidt.”

He frowns, obviously recognizing the name. “He was your original client, yes? The cabróns we dealt with kept telling us that the person we really needed was Schmidt. We never could find him, though, and in the end we decided they were just covering their asses. I wondered why Torres sent an email that mentioned him.”

“You couldn’t find him because he was already dead. I killed him myself the night I got away. I have no idea if Torres knew that part or not, but... yeah. I shot his dick off, and he bled to death.” I thought it would be more difficult to tell him that, but it comes surprisingly easy. It’s as though saying the words somehow gives the whole situation less power over me. An unburdening of sorts.

My cousin is not a man who is easily shocked by life, but surprise flashes across his face at my words. He leans his chin onto steeped fingers, and I feel his silence so painfully, wondering what it signifies. One of the reasons I didn’t tell him about this is because I thought he would be horrified, possibly even disappointed in me. After claiming for so many years that I wanted nothing to do with the Montoya way of life, I go and kill someone?

“Are you angry with me?” I ask. “Are you disappointed?”

“The only thing that makes me angry is the way you keep jumping to conclusions about how I’m feeling. No, I’m not angry, and why the hell would I be disappointed? If anything, I’m proud of you—you did what you had to do, and that’s all that matters. I am, though, a little upset that you didn’t come to me for help with the cleanup. You are aware that I have experience with that kind of thing, yes? What if you left evidence? What if you were somehow linked to what happened? It could mean the end of your career, or worse, prison.”

I have to smile—only in my family could someone be more disturbed by you potentially leaving evidence than by the fact you murdered a man in the first place. “Don’t worry. I have two words for you—fire and alligators.”

He grins at me and nods. “Okay then. I feel better now. Is there anything else you want to tell me? Any more confessions?”

“That time when you were fourteen and learning how to shave? When someone

replaced your shaving foam with mayo? That was me.”

He hums. “I smelled like a deli counter for days afterward. But it’s okay, I forgive you. Look, I’d better go—the twins need a bath before bedtime. But Lauren? Sebastian was right. It’s good that you told me, and I think that when the time is right, you need to tell Uncle Phillipe and Aunt Rachel about everything too.”

“Maybe. I’ll think about it. I’m worried that I’ll make them feel bad, make them think they should have noticed.”

“And maybe you’re right—but they’re your parents. They love you more than life itself. Have a little faith, prima.”

I stare at him through the screen and realize he’s right. It is time to stop letting my past define my future.

Chapter

Thirty-Two

SEBASTIAN

I don't think I've ever felt so out of place in my whole life, and that includes the time I went to a birthing class with Samantha and practiced deep breathing to a soundtrack of whale song. I glance up from the glass-coated display cases and smile nervously at the assistant, Meredith. She tosses her glossy blond hair over her shoulder and smiles back, revealing her shiny white teeth. She's exactly the kind of girl I would have gone for not so long ago.

These days, though, all I see when I look at her is a woman I have no interest in fucking. She could climb over that counter and beg me, and I still wouldn't be tempted. Maybe that's why she's here, as a bit of a honey pot. If a customer can't resist her charms, he really shouldn't be in this store at all. We're tucked away in an exclusive corner of London, and it's not the kind of place you pop into to browse. Inside, it's all dark wood and plush carpet, antique furniture, and a swanky drinks cabinet stocked with top-shelf liquor. Appointments are required, and only one customer at a time is allowed in. Right now, that customer is me.

"What kind of jewelry does she normally wear?" Meredith asks. "Have you gifted her anything in the past that she especially likes?"

"Uh..." I shake my head. "It's been what you might call a whirlwind romance, so nothing like that. In terms of what she wears now, it's pretty simple. I've seen her in a plain gold chain with a little cross on it, and one of those, what do you call them, tennis bracelets? But none of it's been especially flashy."

“And what kinds of clothes does she go for?”

“For work, very plain, but also stylish—little black dresses and suits that look simple, but probably cost a fortune. When she’s on a night out, though, there’s a bit more bling. And a lot less material.”

“Ah. She sounds like a classy woman who knows how to let her hair down, then.”

“That’s it exactly,” I say, getting out my phone. “This is her, if it helps.”

Meredith gazes at the picture and smiles appreciatively. “Congratulations. She’s stunning. And this does help, because now I have an idea of skin tone.”

I decided I was going to ask Lauren to marry me on our last night in the cabin. She blows my mind and thrills my body, and she fills my soul. No other woman has ever come close, and it seems just plain stupid to pretend I’m anything other than crazy about her. It’s no secret that I’ve been engaged before, so this whole ring-buying process shouldn’t be a mystery to me. The difference is, with the last five women, I didn’t care that much. I bought them flashy diamonds from the same store each time, a bog-standard place on the high street. Last time I was there, the owner joked he should give me a loyalty card so I could collect stamps toward the next one.

This time, everything is different. This time it’s real, and I want the ring I choose for Lauren to reflect that. Nothing in this place comes with a visible price tag, which I should be worried about—it’s probably along the lines of “if you have to ask the price, you can’t afford it.” But I only want the best for her, no matter how much it costs.

Meredith has made me a coffee, and I sip it as she selects various trays from the cases and pulls individual rings from them. She assembles a new tray for me, with five choices laid out on black velvet. All of them are gorgeous, but one in particular

catches my eye. It's tiny on my palm and relatively simple with a huge red stone and little diamonds winking around it.

"Ah. A good choice, Mr. Donovan. A ruby would look beautiful on her."

"Yeah. She does like red."

In particular, she likes red underwear, but I keep that to myself. I don't want to let those kinds of images into my brain right now or poor Meredith will be getting an eyeful.

"Did you know that precious stones have symbolic value?" she asks. "Going back to ancient times. In the case of the ruby, it's associated with passion, protection, and energy." She looks me up and down and gives me a cheeky smile. "I'm guessing that all fits for you two as a couple."

"Do you make that shit up to suit the customer?" I ask, grinning.

"Of course not. Now, do you want me to put this on hold for you, give you time to think?"

I gaze down at the beautiful ring in my hand and imagine sliding it onto Lauren's finger. Okay, so there's the small matter of asking her first, and if there's one thing I can predict about my girl, it's that she can be unpredictable. But it feels right. My gut says yes, and my mouth soon follows. "Nah. I'll take it. How many kidneys am I going to need to sell?"

"At least one, and possibly a lung, but I'm sure she's worth it. This is made in the average size, but if you want to find out hers, obviously we can adjust it for her. I'd suggest sneaking into her jewelry box and stealing a ring, then bringing it here for us to look at. Or, obviously, just asking her—but that seems a lot less fun."

She's not joking about the kidney, and I could probably pay for the wedding, the honeymoon, and a brand-new Audi for the same amount as this one piece of jewelry. But I can't bring myself to give a shit. I've never felt more sure of anything as Meredith takes payment and boxes it up for me.. I haven't told a soul—I know what Sam and Gabriel would say, and who could blame them? They've seen this all before on too many occasions. But this is different.

We're finishing up when a call comes through on my cell from Sasha Stepanov. Sasha and I have been talking a lot recently as the Ivan Volkov situation has grown more pressing. Caroline found travel documents in his briefcase that showed he was planning a ten-day trip to Albania. I don't want to imagine what he's doing there or how many lives he might be destroying—that could be a question for another day if Sasha has anything to do with it, but for now, our focus is on Caroline and Nicky.

As soon as Caroline was confident he was gone and staying gone, Lauren filed the legal papers. That was three days ago. Even though it's been done under her assumed name, I still feel twitchy about her being in his home with his men. I want to get them out now. Everything could all too easily go bad. Getting to this stage has been a long, drawn-out process with too many false starts, and I don't trust him to stay away. Like most predators, he probably has some lizard-brain instinct that's warned him she's up to something, and I wouldn't be surprised if he comes home early or if he's instructed his people to keep her under close watch while he's away.

Irina and her husband, Vladimir, are fully on board, and along with Sasha, they came up with a plan to place a sedative in the guards' food. Tomorrow night, when Irina serves them their evening meal, there will be an extra little seasoning in the form of horse tranquilizer. Never make an enemy of the cook, I suppose.

Once that's done, Vladimir is going to drive all four of them to Archangel, and we'll take it from there. Sasha has ulterior motives—this is undoubtedly part of a bigger power play on his part—but he also seems to get a great deal of personal satisfaction

from helping the victims.

“Sebastian,” he says as soon as I answer. “We have a problem.”

“That’s not what I want to hear. How big a problem?”

“Vladimir and Irina are dead.”

Chapter

Thirty-Three

SEBASTIAN

Shit. My heart jackhammers in my chest, and I don't have time for small talk with Meredith as she passes me the bag. After nodding my thanks, I leave.

"How do you know?" I ask, climbing into my car and starting the engine.

"I'm here right now, keeping the place under surveillance. I'm a distance away, but I can see it clearly with binoculars. They've both been shot in the head, and their bodies have been dumped outside the house, like he's leaving us a message. I think we have to work under the assumption that Volkov knows what's going on."

"You think? Of course he fucking does, why else would he have them killed? Shit... We need to think. Are Caroline and Nicky still in there?"

"I don't know. About ten minutes ago, four SUVs sped past, but the windows were blacked out so I couldn't see inside. Could be he's moved them, could be he was sending out soldiers. I think we need to plan for the worst here, my friend. Volkov didn't get where he is today by showing restraint. If he's found out, it will be scorched earth, and nobody who has touched this will be safe. That includes you, and that includes?—"

"Lauren and Samantha." Slamming my fist down on the dashboard, I let out a roar. I

need to get to them right now. I need to keep them safe. Caroline and Nicky matter to me, but I won't be any use to them if all I can think about is my girls being in danger.

"Keep calm, Sebastian. We don't really know what has happened yet. I suspect a leak at the courthouse or possibly in your team."

"No fucking way! I trust every single man at Archangel with my life."

Even as I say it, doubt creeps in. Is that really true? Most of them, yes, but there is one that I've had persistent questions about. Could it be Taylor Grant? Does he even know enough to tell? We've kept Irina and Vladimir's involvement on a strictly need-to-know basis, but there's always a way for information to get out. Torres showed us that. I shelve the questions for now—I have bigger things to worry about.

"Do you think he knows everything?" I ask.

"We need to assume so. The couple was shot, but that doesn't mean they weren't tortured beforehand. If that's the case, then Volkov will be aware you and I are involved and know which law firm was involved. He'll want to send a message, prove he isn't weak. He probably suspects someone is watching, which is why he left the bodies in clear view. I'm going to try to get inside the house later, see if Caroline and her boy are there."

That's a dangerous move. "You sure?" I ask. "You need help?"

"It's probably best done with stealth. I'll be careful, and I'll call if I need a blunt instrument. I just need to know he's not... playing with them."

We are both silent for a moment, picturing the horrific scene. My rage builds, and although he sounds calm enough, I know Sasha feels the same. "I need to make my people safe," I say quietly. "Once that's sorted, I'll be with you and we'll do whatever

needs to be done. Just stay alive in the meantime, all right?”

He actually laughs, the crazy Russian bastard. “Better men than Ivan Volkov have tried to kill me, Sebastian, don’t worry. Now go do what you have to do.”

My next call is to Gabriel, who’s at home with Samantha and Max. We decide the best thing for him to do is stay there because the place is a fortress. He’ll see anyone coming from miles away and is confident he can look after his family. Not once have I doubted Gabriel’s ability to look after Sam, and I’m not going to start now. “What about you?” he asks. “And Lauren?”

“Don’t worry.” I maneuver in and out of traffic. “I’m on my way to her now. At least it’s the weekend, so there’s nobody in at the law firm. Nick’s away, isn’t he? Not that anyone else is likely to be a target, but maybe let him know. And contact the lads, will you? This is why we pay them to be on call. We need everyone in on backup, even Taylor.”

“What do you mean, even Taylor? He’s fucking good in a fight.”

I beep my horn angrily at some twat in front of me daring to drive at the actual speed limit. “I know he is. Look, I can’t explain it, but something about him feels off, all right? But yeah... Okay. We need them all.”

“We do. I’ll start ringing round now. And I’ll see if I can persuade Sam to go down into the basement.” The basement of their home is essentially a panic room, which she hates—she wanted a cinema room instead.

“Good luck with that, pal. My advice? Sell it to her as keeping Max safe from harm. She’s more likely to go along then. I’m going to get Lauren safe, then see what I can do to help Sasha find Caroline and the boy.”

“I wish I could come and help you.” There’s regret in his voice, but we both know where his duty lies.

“No. Your job is to protect Sam and Max. I’ll keep you updated, okay?”

After what feels like a whole day, I finally reach Lauren’s place. My messages have been going to voicemail, and I’m halfway to panic when I run up the stairs. Last time I did this, I found her battered and bruised, traumatized by Torres even though she’d taken him down. Volkov and his men won’t be as easy to defeat, and my heart is in my mouth as I stand before her door. It’s locked, but I have a key now, and I don’t hesitate to let myself in.

“Lauren. It’s me. You okay?” I shout as I walk inside. There are no sounds of a struggle—in fact, the only sound is the cheesy dance music she likes to work out to. Sure enough, I find her in the living room, her Lycra-clad ass toward me as she jumps out of a burpee. Any other time...

She whirls around, her face coated in sweat, and gives me a huge smile. “Hey handsome. Didn’t expect you ’til later. What’s wrong?” She can tell straight away, of course, that this isn’t a social call. She’s more finely attuned to my expressions and body language than anyone else.

“You need to pack a bag,” I say, taking her arm and leading her toward the bedroom. “We need to get to the cabin.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:02 am

She plants her feet firmly and slaps my hand away. “Seb, talk to me. Don’t just push me around—we both know that won’t end well.”

Part of me wants to yell at her, drag her out of here, knock her out and hoist her over my shoulder if I need to. I take a deep breath and remind myself that she’s entitled to know. I want to protect her, but that doesn’t mean I own her.

“Volkov knows.”

She frowns. “Knows what, exactly?”

“Probably everything. About Caroline filing for divorce, about you representing her, about us helping, about Vladimir and Irina.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because they’re fucking dead, Lauren—Vladimir and Irina are dead. Sasha’s there right now, he saw the bodies. We have to assume they told him everything before he finished them off. Which means we’re not safe.”

“What about Caroline? Nicky?” Her face has gone pale. I’ve had time to think this through, but it’s all new to her. I love the fact that her first fear is for them, but I’m also getting frustrated by the delay. What if Volkov’s men know where she lives? There could be a hit squad on their way here right now.

“Sasha is looking for them, and I’ll help him. As soon as I have you safe. Please, babe, get what you need—you must know I’m useless unless I know you’re safe.”

She throws her arms around me and kisses me on the cheek. “I know. I’m sorry. Give me five minutes.”

She’s as good as her word, and I break the speed limit all the way to the cabin. After we drive through, I get out and double-check the gates and locks. Inside the house, she immediately heads for the kitchen and puts the kettle on. Looks like living in the UK has infected her already.

“What’s the plan?” she asks, leaning against the counter. She’s remarkably cool, and again I am reminded of her heritage. Montoyas don’t spook easily. “Should I contact my cousin, see if he can help?”

“That’s an interesting idea. If we need more boots on the ground, then yes. But for now, we don’t know where Volkov is, or where Caroline and Nicky are. We might be completely overreacting by stashing you here, but your name was on the court documents.”

She nods thoughtfully. “That could be where the leak came from, the court offices. The person I’ve been dealing with seems like a straight shooter, but there’s a whole world of bureaucracy in the legal system, people who might be vulnerable to bribes or threats.”

“It doesn’t much matter at this stage. Irina and Vladimir knew who you were. They knew about Archangel. We’ve got to assume that Volkov now knows everything. Look, I want to get back out there. Sasha’s dangling in the wind at Volkov’s place. He’s a sneaky sod and pretty good at taking care of himself, but I need to join him. See what we can find out about Caroline and Nicky. Now I know you’re safe here, I can concentrate on them.”

She nods once, all no-nonsense calm on the surface.

“I’m surprised you’re not arguing with me. You feeling okay, sweetheart?”

Laughing, she wraps her arms around my neck and pulls me in for a deep kiss that leaves me wanting more. “This isn’t my first crisis, big guy,” she says, rubbing against me and smiling when she feels I’m hard. “And I know you won’t be able to function if you’re worrying about me. Caroline and Nicky need you more than they need me right now, and the very best thing I can do for them is let you get out there and do your thing. So go. Find them. I’ll be waiting here for you at the end of the day. I’ll always be waiting for you. I love you.”

She looks up at me with those big brown eyes, that gorgeous smile, and the way I feel about this woman floors me. Fuck it. This isn’t the right time for it at all, but what if the right time never comes? Life is chaos, and none of us knows what happens next. We have to grab our moments whenever we find them.

I drop down to one knee, and initially she laughs. When I stay silent and raise an eyebrow at her, she realizes I’m serious, her hands moving to cover her mouth. “Seb! What are you doing?”

“What the fuck do you think I’m doing, sweetheart? I’m trying to be romantic—so shut up and let me get on with it.”

Her eyes are as big as the moon, and her fingers are visibly trembling. I’m not sure if it’s from excitement or horror, but either way, I need to do this. “Lauren Hayes,” I say. “I love you. I didn’t even know what loving a woman was until you walked into my world, and now I can’t imagine my life without you in it. Every minute I’m away from you is a minute wasted. Every minute we’re together is happier than the last. You challenge me, you thrill me, you fill me with joy.”

She’s full-on crying by this stage, her brown eyes shimmering behind the tears. “Not to mention, you have the juiciest ass in the known universe, and you suck my cock

like you've been in training for it your whole life. Lauren, will you marry me?"

I offer up the open box, and she falls down to her knees in front of me. Her hands go to my shoulders to steady herself, and I gently wipe the tears from her skin. "That was quite the speech, Seb. Did you rehearse it in front of the mirror?"

"No. If I had, it would've been a damn sight better than that. That was all from the heart. I meant every word. So... are you going to keep me hanging on?"

She tilts her head to one side, her curls flowing over her shoulder, and I'm reminded of the night we first met. The way that one flash of her eyes, one glimpse of the curve of her neck, was enough to reduce me to rubble. I knew then she was trouble with a capital T, this woman. Thank god I didn't listen to my own advice and avoid her.

She stares at the ring and releases a sigh. "It's beautiful. Exactly the kind of ring I would have chosen for myself."

I'm pleased she likes it, but it hasn't escaped my attention that she hasn't actually said yes. Shit. Have I made a terrible mistake? Is this all too soon? She knows my history, maybe she doesn't fancy being fiancée number six.

"I'm curious, though—why now? Why when you're about to go off to war?"

"What better time? I get the feeling our lives together are never going to be simple. There's always going to be something to fight for, and we're always going to be the kinds of people willing to fight for it. Waiting for a quiet time feels like waiting for hell to freeze over. I love you now, and I want to marry you now. More than anything."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:02 am

“Right answer.” She kisses me again, then pulls back and waves her hand in my face. “Now put that damn ring on my finger and go be a hero.”

I do as I’m told, and as luck would have it, the gold band fits perfectly. It must be the only thing about Lauren that can be described as average. I stand up and pull her to her feet, and she yelps as I shove her back against the wall and pin her wrists above her head, then moans as I bite at her neck.

“Just to let you know, I haven’t gone soft,” I say.

“Definitely not soft,” she replies, grinding against my groin.

“Fuck,” I groan. “I’ve got to go. Save that thought, okay?”

Tearing myself away from her, I try to ignore my raging hard-on. I swear when my phone rings and pick up immediately when Gabriel’s name pops up. “Everything okay?” I ask. “Sam and Max all right?”

“Yeah, all’s good. I did what you suggested, and it worked. They’re safe in the basement, though I don’t think she’s happy about it. Listen, I’ve done like you asked and called in the troops. They’re all on standby, but the problem is I don’t really know where to send them. I don’t know where you are, mate—are you and Lauren okay?”

“We’re fine. I’ve got a place I never told you about. I’ll drop you and Sasha a pin, but so far, so good. Let me try to get ahold of him, see how the land lies, and we’ll take it from there.”

If he's upset I've hidden this place from him, he doesn't show it. We all have our secrets, and I guess he understands that. "Good. One thing to mention though, Seb—Taylor."

"What about him?"

"He's the only one I couldn't get hold of. I spoke to the others, and nobody knows where the fuck he is. He knows he's supposed to be on call at all times, but he's gone AWOL. Probably off shagging his bird, but I thought you should know. I left him a message saying we needed him, that it was an emergency, but that was more than an hour ago, and so far, no response."

I blink at this information, wondering how or if it fits into anything else that's going on. Our work often involves unsociable hours, working nights and weekends, and because of that, we make it clear to all our staff that they need to keep themselves available. They get adequate financial compensation and work phones we can contact them on. Taylor going missing isn't a massive deal, and under any other circumstances, I'd give him a bollocking and make sure he never forgot again. But right now? Right now, I'm paranoid. Right now, I don't have a fucking clue who betrayed us to Volkov, and everyone is under suspicion.

"All right," I say to Gabriel. "Probably just what you said—he'll be balls-deep in his girl. You get back to my babies. Good luck, mate, and I'll see you on the other side."

He hangs up, and I find myself still staring at the phone.

"What is it?" Lauren asks. "What's wrong?"

"I'm not sure, but my spider senses are tingling. I need to check out the cameras, but I need to call Sasha as well..."

“I can check the cameras. You make your call. Teamwork.”

I nod and give her ass the barest of squeezes as she goes past me. I message Sasha first, not wanting a ringing phone to give him away if he’s hiding.

Can you speak?

Almost straight away, he calls me and starts talking as soon as I answer. “I can speak. I’ve already left—the whole place was empty. I started off sneaking around, skulking in hallways and hiding in dark corners, expecting to be caught. But the house is abandoned, at least for now. No staff, no soldiers, no Volkov. Sadly, no Caroline or Nicky either. I tried to find clues as to where they are, but no luck. The only things left out were things I can’t help thinking he wanted us to find.”

“Like what?” I ask, a sinking feeling in my stomach.

“Like a file of photographs. You, Gabriel, Samantha, Lauren. Myself, looking very dashing, I have to say. He knows we’ve been helping Caroline. The question is how long he’s known. Was today’s execution and evacuation spontaneous, or did he know the timing of everything—and if so, how? Not a question we’re going to be able to answer straight away. For now, I’d suggest you stay on high alert. He is armed, he has men, he knows way too much about you—and he is, above all else, a ruthless bastard. I’m going to call in a few favors with some mutual acquaintances. Did Caroline ever mention any place she was taken to? A venue for the parties she was shared at? Anywhere other than their home?”

I frown as I try to remember and tell him I’ll check with Lauren and get back to him. “Gabriel is safe with Samantha and the baby,” I tell him. “And for the time being, I’m at my cabin—I sent you the location just in case. But I’m probably going to head out soon, and if you let me know where you are, I’ll get a couple of my men to meet up with you. The more of us looking, the better.”

We agree, and I spend a few minutes on a flurry of messages. I've just finished when Lauren yells my name from the office, and I take off toward her voice. "What is it, babe? Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm all right," she says, sounding a little breathless as she points at one of the screens. "But there's something you need to see. I don't think we're quite as safe as you thought."

Chapter

Thirty-Four

LAUREN

I'd been looking at the screens for a few minutes when they arrived—two big black vehicles, parked up by the gate at the top of the path. The path that leads straight here, to the cabin. I don't shout for him immediately in case I was mistaken. Of course I wasn't though. This isn't the kind of place you happen to pass by mistake. I have no idea how people have found Seb's retreat, but someone has, and they don't look friendly.

He swears and stares at the screen as a man dressed in black climbs out of one of the vehicles and pushes hard on the gate. The chained padlocks hold firm, and after what looks like an angry exchange through an open window, another six men emerge, half of them openly carrying weapons.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:02 am

“Fuck. Unbelievable. They’re going to come down here on foot,” he says. “Which means we don’t have long. It’ll take them about twenty minutes. The question is whether we run or fight.”

“You have enough weapons in your basement to fight off a small army, right?”

“Yeah. We can get tooled up, but there are only two of us, and...”

“One of us is a girl?” I ask, finding a smile from somewhere despite our circumstances.

“No. I meant one of us is the love of my fucking life—and also a civilian. Unless this is the part when you tell me you went to some kind of top-secret Montoya training camp and have the firearms skills of a Special Forces operative?”

“Sadly not. But I can use a gun. I’d rather not, but I can if I need to.”

The way he studies me tells me he’s trying to weigh the options and decide which one would be safest. He opens his mouth to speak when a bang echoes through from the front of the cabin. Someone is thumping their fists against the door, and Seb checks the camera feed. “Stay here,” he says urgently. “Let me... Oh, fuck.”

“What is it? Are they here already?” My heart races. I don’t panic easy, but this feels like a tough spot for both of us. Outnumbered, outgunned, and out of options.

“Dunno. It’s that sack of shit Taylor Grant.”

I peek my head out of the makeshift office in time to see Seb throw the door open. Without saying a word, he punches the man hard in the gut. When Taylor doubles over, Seb catches him and drags him into the cabin.

He throws him up against a wall, and Taylor gasps as Seb wraps a big hand around his throat and pins him there. “Was it you, you little fuck? Did you grass us up? Are you in Volkov’s pocket?”

Taylor slaps at his hands and tries to talk, but Seb’s grip is too tight to dislodge.

“He can’t speak.” I rush over to them, concerned by the familiar faraway look Seb gets when his blood is really boiling. The look that means someone could die. “Let him speak and maybe he can tell you.”

After a few beats, he finally seems to hear me and nods as he drops the young man to the ground. He places a boot on Taylor’s chest to keep him there. “You heard the lady—speak, you fucking cunt.”

“It wasn’t me,” Taylor says quickly, his voice croaking and his eyes wide. “I came to warn you, Boss—I’m here to help.”

“And how the fuck did you know about this place, eh? Gabriel says he hasn’t spoken to you, so how the hell did you know where to find us?”

“I... I got Gabriel’s message saying there was a full alert, that you were going underground, and I knew where you’d have gone. I drove straight here, and I passed those Russian fuckers on the way. I did a full circle and broke in on the other side of the property. You have a hole in the fence there now—sorry. Look, I’m here to help, honestly. I’m not with them. I’m on your side.”

Seb is still furious, his nostrils flaring, but he’s at least listening. Personally, I think

Taylor looks and sounds sincere, but the jury is still out for Seb.

“And how did you know where I’d be, shitbag? Nobody knew about this place until today, and suddenly I’m overrun with bloody visitors. It’s like the world’s most fucked-up tea party.”

Taylor clambers to his feet, cautiously eyeing Seb. He’s a big guy, and I’ve heard he can handle himself, but he seems reluctant to take on Sebastian Donovan in a full rhino rage. Can’t say I blame him. “I followed you here once, all right? I’ll explain everything later, I promise, but for now you have to trust me. I’m here to help you, and we don’t have long.”

The force of Sebastian’s glare alone would knock a normal man over, but Taylor stands firm, meeting his eyes. “Let me help you both. Please. You know there’s not enough time for anyone else to get here.”

I see the second Seb makes his mind up. He shakes his head and says, “All right. I’ll trust you... For now. But if you’re lying, Taylor, you won’t leave these woods, you understand?”

“I understand, Boss. Now, do we run or do we fight?”

“I only counted seven of the fuckers. So obviously, we fight. I’ll let Gabriel know what’s happening, and in the meantime, we better get ready.”

He turns to me with regret in his eyes. “I’m sorry about all this, sweetheart. I promised to protect you, and I’ve put you right in the line of fire.”

“Uh, don’t be an idiot. It’s actually me who put us both in the line of fire by taking on Caroline Volkov as a client. Do you blame me for that?”

He looks shocked at the very idea. “Of course I fucking don’t. What a stupid thing to suggest.”

I wink at him, and he smiles. “Yeah. Okay. I’ll stop apologizing. Me and Taylor are going downstairs for weapons. Can you keep an eye on the cameras?”

After I assure him I will keep an eye on things, he heads for the basement, and I take a deep breath and do my part, flicking through the different screens and camera angles. Six of the men have stuck together and are working their way through the wooded landscape as quickly as they can. It’s not easy terrain for anyone who doesn’t know it, and I watch with grim satisfaction when one of them stumbles and falls right into one of Seb’s booby traps, shrieking as he tumbles into the hole.

They’re still a ways off from the cabin according to the camera map pinned to the wall, but I’m relieved when Seb and Taylor rejoin me. Both have guns tucked into their waistbands, and Taylor is also wielding a wicked-looking knife.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:02 am

“We have a plan,” Seb informs me. “Taylor’s going to stay here and pick off as many as he can, and I’m going to run to the hide—you know the one I said would make a good sniper assaultpoint?” I nod, remembering it well. “The idea is we split them up, make it easier for us. I’d like you to stay in the basement, as far away from trouble as you can. How does that sound?”

“That sounds like crap,” I answer honestly. “I’m coming to the hide with you. If your plan works, we all get away. If your plan fails, we all die—so there’s really no point cowering in the basement and hoping nobody notices me. They’ll probably set the place on fire, and I’ll burn to death. No thank you.”

Taylor averts his eyes, but not before I catch the hint of a smile on his face. Seb glares at me, sees my determined expression, and shakes his head. “You’re so fucking stubborn. You’re going to make my life hell when we’re married, aren’t you?”

I lean up to kiss him. “Damn right I am, handsome. Now, I just saw six of them about a half mile out, making their way here. One is AWOL. How do we do this?”

Seb hands me a revolver from the back waistband of his pants. “We let them see us.” He goes to look out the window. “And then... They chase. You’re familiar with being chased through these woods, aren’t you, babe?”

Even now, a whisper of desire curls through me at the memory of how our last chase concluded. “Oh, I am. I’m assuming this one won’t end with you fucking anyone up against a tree, though.”

“Fucking them up, maybe. Taylor, you good?”

“Yes, Boss. You two run, and as they pursue, I shoot. Easy peasy.”

Ah, the confidence of youth. Seb’s brown eyes are reassuring. We’ve got this, they seem to say. Well, at least I’m already wearing my workout gear.

We creep out of the back of the cabin, and I tug his Viking long axe out of the thick log it’s wedged in and heft its weight. I can run with this if I’m careful, and it’s better than the gun, which I hate. Thankfully, Seb doesn’t argue when I hand him back the pistol.

He holds up a hand, and we pause at the corner of the cabin. It takes me a second to identify the eerie feeling I have, but I eventually put it down to the complete lack of birdsong. The woods are usually alive with their calls, and they’ve been replaced by an ominous silence and the occasional crunch of leaves underfoot. They’re trying to be quiet but not really managing.

He looks at me and mouths, Ready?

I nod, and we both take off for the forest. We make plenty of noise as we go, which was all part of the plan, and a cry immediately goes up from our pursuers, who shout back and forth in Russian as they give chase.

They have no clue that there is someone waiting in the cabin we vacated, and they predictably move in, running straight for us. That all changes when Taylor fires his first shot and catches one of them in the leg. I risk a glance behind me, see blood spurt as he goes down. I don’t know this man, but he means us harm, and his bloodcurdling scream moves me not at all.

The men chasing us scatter, taking cover now that they know they’re vulnerable. Taylor manages to wing one more, a shoulder wound that I’m sure hurts like hell but doesn’t take him down. Then come more shots, more shouts in Russian, followed by

the sound of glass smashing.

“Is he okay?” I ask, panting as we run.

Seb looks behind us. “Yeah. He just knocked the window out on the other side of the cabin. I’m guessing he’ll make a run for it, try to flank them. Come on, we need to make the most of the distraction.”

He grabs my hand, and together we run, jump, and stumble through the woods. He knows where his traps are laid and guides us around them, but it’s still hard going over challenging ground. My ankle turns after one leap, shooting jagged pain up my leg, but I force myself to run through it. I’ll have worse than a twisted ankle if I don’t keep moving.

I’m not in bad shape, but the pace Seb sets is taking its toll. Gunshots are still cracking and booming behind us but become fainter with every step we take. I finally spot the hide we’re heading for as one more shot echoes through the forest, scattering the remaining birds from the trees in a squawking mass of flapping wings.

Seb pushes me inside the small wooden structure and shoves my head low. There’s a slit cut into it at eye level, presumably so nature lovers can watch the wild world go by without being seen, and he crouches down to look through it. I sprawl across the floor, heaving in oxygen and rubbing my sore ankle. “You okay, babe?” he asks when he notices.

“Yep. All good here. Can you see them?”

He goes back to his surveillance. “Not yet. No idea how many Taylor managed to take out or where he’s got to... or what the fuck he’s doing here. But that’s a puzzle for another day. For now, I’m just glad he is here. He wounded at least two of those motherfuckers, hopefully more now. How many did you say there were in total?”

“Seven, but only six of them were approaching the cabin.” Suddenly, a flush of fear invades my mind, ratcheting up my pulse. It’s like now that I’m still, my anxiety has caught up with me, ambushing me and making my insides tremble. “Do you think... Do you think we’ll be okay?”

He kneels in front of me and places his big hands on my cheeks. Our eyes lock. “We are going to get through this, Lauren. I promise you. We only just found each other, and I’m not going to let some Russian scumbags get in the way of our future. We’re getting through this. We’re getting married and going on honeymoon, where I will be fucking you ’til you can’t stand up straight. Is that clear?”

Rubbing my face on his callused palm, I murmur, “Crystal clear, sir.” I drop a kiss on his fingers and decide not to be scared anymore. It won’t help, and anyway, I believe him. If anyone can protect us, this man can.

Right at that moment, there are more gunshots, and Taylor comes hurtling through the greenery like an enraged bear. There’s blood smeared on his face and oozing thickly from a wound on his arm. He’s holding that knife of his, and it looks like it’s been busy.

“Four of ’em are down, Boss,” he pants after skidding inside. “One permanently. He went over a trip wire as I was aiming at his legs, and I got his head instead. The other two followed me here, so I thought I’d give you the chance to have a go.”

“Nice of you to save them for me, mate. Now sit yourself down before you fall down. Is that serious?” He gestures to Taylor’s arm, and the blond man shakes his head.

“Nah. Need a bit of duct tape when I get home, that’s all.” The gash is about six inches long, and it’s deep. I pull off my fleece jacket and fashion it into a makeshift bandage, which at least stems the blood loss.

“Thanks,” he says, wincing. “And congrats, by the way. Nice ring.”

I grin up at him. “Yeah, it is, isn’t it?”

“Here they come,” Seb mutters, pulling his gun out. It’s an awkward angle, but he manages to position the barrel at his line of vision by poking it through the viewing slot of the hide. I’m desperate to see what’s going on out there, but I do as I’m told and stay down. He doesn’t need me distracting him right now, and Taylor is looking decidedly pale sitting next to me. I pat his hand, and he offers me a wan smile.

I know it’s coming, but when the gun fires twice in rapid succession in such a small space, the noise is deafening. I flinch and belatedly slam my palms over my ears.

“They’re down.” There’s a note of satisfaction in Seb’s voice. “For good. Can’t be arsed going for the legs. The cunts wouldn’t show us any mercies. Lauren, stay where you are, sweetheart, while me and Taylor double-check. I mean, their heads are splattered, but it always pays to make sure.”

I acquiesce, for once completely passive. Those shots are still ringing in my ears, I’m exhausted, and my adrenaline is doing a tap dance around my nervous system. I have zero desire to get up close and personal with splattered brains on top of all that. Taylor climbs to his feet and follows Seb outside.

I manage to get upright and watch through the slot in the wood as they cautiously approach the two fallen Russians. Even from here it’s a grim sight, the trampled grass painted red with shining blood and gore. Seb kicks them both hard and seems satisfied when there’s no response. He looks at Taylor and holds out his hand to shake. Looks like he’s finally satisfied that the boy is on his side. In our messed-up world, it’s a real Hallmark moment.

As he reaches out to take Seb's hand, Taylor's face changes—his pleased smile transforms into a look of shock and fury, and he throws himself bodily at Seb, screaming his name and knocking him flat to the ground. Seb yells at him and pushes him off, rolling him onto his back.

“What the fuck, Taylor?” he says, before his face goes pale. I follow his line of sight to the bright red stain spreading across the younger man's T-shirt, turning the once-white fabric a sickening shade of crimson.

Chapter

Thirty-Five

LAUREN

Seb looks up and around, on full alert, and meets my panicked eyes through the peephole. He doesn't speak but gives a barely noticeable shake of the head. I get the message. He wants me to stay hidden and stay quiet. I look on helplessly as Seb cradles Taylor's head in his lap, trying to apply pressure to the wound and stem the bleeding. “You're all right, mate, stay with me,” he says.

His hands are covered in blood. Too much blood. How can anyone lose that much blood and live?

That bullet was meant for Seb, and now Taylor is spilling his life essence onto the grass. My hands claw against the wood, and I suck in a breath as I see what Taylor obviously saw, what Seb has also seen—the seventh man. Ivan Volkov himself strolls out from a gap in the trees, a rifle in his hands. He's dressed head to toe in black like his men were, but there's no mistaking his face up close. The photos I've seen didn't really do him justice—he looks even more like a rat in person, his narrow buck-toothed face perched on top of a bulked-up body. I wonder how a woman like

Caroline ever looked twice at him, but a little charisma goes a long way. He made her feel special, like a princess—right up until he locked her away in his tower and started abusing her.

“Mr. Donovan,” he says, smiling smugly. “We meet in person at last. I spent the last few days getting to know you and your associates really very well. Your beautiful daughter. Your partner, Mr. Sullivan. And, of course, Ms. Hayes herself. All of you seemed to think it was acceptable to interfere in my marriage, in my family life. You all seemed to think there would be no consequences. How foolish of you all, and thatmudakStepanov, to assume such a thing. He will be dealt with, I promise—but for now, I will settle for you and your friend Ms. Hayes. We know she was here with you.”

Seb spits on the ground in front of Volkov. If he expects Seb to be scared, he clearly hasn’t studied him all that well. “She’s gone,” Seb says. “Sent her packing at the first sign of trouble. She was a fucking liability, and I wanted rid of her. She’ll be halfway to a police station by now.”

Volkov raises an eyebrow and seems to be trying to decide whether to believe him or not. “I see. Well, not to worry, I’ll search this place very thoroughly before I leave. One way or another, I’ll track her down. And when I do, I’ll teach her a few lessons about respecting the boundaries of other people’s marriages, the interfering bitch. I have clients who will pay well for a fiery beauty like her.”

He looks at his dead men and shrugs. “Impressive. You’ve led us all on quite the merry dance, Mr. Donovan. But it is over now, yes? You can join your brave friend there in the afterlife.”

Seb keeps his eyes on Volkov, refusing to spare a glance in my direction. Will he fight? Will he risk attacking Volkov or trying to run? He won’t have a chance from his position on the ground, pinned down by the other man’s weapon.

I know what Seb wants me to do. He wants me to stay silent, stay hidden, stay safe. Above all else, he wants me to survive. But as Volkov walks toward Seb, raising his gun and pointing it at his head, I can't stand the thought of doing any of those things. All my life I've tried to be safe, and it hasn't worked. Danger and darkness find me wherever I go, and maybe that's okay. Maybe it's good, because how can we ever appreciate the light if we don't also walk in the dark?

If I stay hidden here, I might survive. But what will my world look like without him in it? How would I ever recover from watching the man I love get his head blown off by a wife-beating, child-abusing, human-trafficking psychopath?

The two of them continue to talk, but I'm so distressed and hyped up that I can't make out individual words. They're just a dull buzzing sound at the edges of my hearing. Seb looks up and smiles at the trees overhead. Volkov raises his gun. His finger is on the trigger, and he can't possibly miss at this distance.

No. I am Lauren fucking Montoya, and I will not hide.

Chapter

Thirty-Six

SEBASTIAN

I am running every possible angle through my mind as I glare up at the bastard. Everything has gone wrong so quickly. I'm struggling to make sense of it, and Taylor's blood flowing red and warm and sticky around my fingers isn't helping. The kid saved my life, and now I can't tell if he's breathing.

Worse than that, Lauren is vulnerable. There's only a flimsy bit of wood between her and this lunatic. I have no doubt that he means every word he says—he'd throw her

to the wolves and let the predators he mixes with tear her to pieces. It might take hours, it might take years, but they would tear her to pieces. My beautiful, brave girl deserves so much better. It's that thought breaking me, not the sight of the gun barrel or the fact that I'm about to die. We all fucking die, and getting shot in the head in the woods isn't the worst way for a man like me to go. But leaving her to Volkov's nonexistent mercy? That's making my guts churn and my mouth go dry. I need one more play. I need one more way to neutralize this cunt and keep her safe, even if it means the end of me.

I could tell him who she is—that she's a Montoya. Or does he already know? Would he care? I wouldn't want Alejandro as an enemy, but Volkov is arrogant. Like Caroline said, he doesn't think the rules apply to him, and it looks like she was fucking well right. We underestimated him, and now the only thing I can do is make sure that Lauren doesn't pay the price.

I grab up a handful of dirt as I crouch there before him. Rolling it in my hand, I wait for my moment. All I need to do is get some in his eyes. If I can distract him for even a second, I'm in with a chance. In that second, I could get to my gun, or I could tackle him—the man's big, but I have no doubt I can take him. But while he has that Makarov pointing right at my head, I'm helpless.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:02 am

“I can almost see your brain working, Mr. Donovan. Are you trying to figure out what to do next? Wondering if the cavalry will be coming any time soon? Imagining that you could throw me to the ground before I manage to get my shot off? My advice would be to simply ask forgiveness from any god you believe in, because this game is over.” I don’t suppose he lasted this long without good instincts. He narrows his eyes at me. “Whatever you’re thinking, don’t. You are going to die, but it can be clean with a bullet to the head, or I can take my time with you. Keep your hands where I can see them.”

Fuck. I don’t want him taking his time with me. I don’t want to be tortured by this sick cunt, and I don’t want him here any longer than he needs to be. He needs to get gone so Lauren has a chance. At all costs, I want her to live. I blink as I look up and around me, at the green canopy of the woods, the sunlight dappling down onto the earth. The birds calling, the breeze whistling through the trees, the scent of grass and green.

It’s beautiful here, and if this really is the end, then at least I knew love. Real love. I turn back to Volkov and grin. “See you in hell, you fucker.”

He drops his chin in acknowledgment, and his finger tightens on the trigger. This is it. Please, Lauren, stay still. Stay hidden. Stay safe.

As if thinking her name summoned her, she explodes from the wooden hide with a sudden burst of wild energy, her curls tumbling and her feet flying as she leaps down the grassy slope toward us in a blur of speed and fury.

“No!” I shout as Volkov twists around to meet her head on. The gun moves from me

to her, and I scramble to my feet, desperate to stop him.

She looks so unwavering, so determined that I don't even recognize her face, not an ounce of fear in her as she hurtles toward a murderer and his gun. She is a warrior on the war path, an avenging angel bearing an axe. She comes at him, screaming full blast, the sound shrill and ear-piercing, an aural assault. She throws the axe, and it spins, two, three times and lodges itself in his body with a crunching thud.

He stops dead in his tracks and looks down. The pistol falls from his fingers, and his hands fly to his chest to be immediately covered in gushing blood. Skin pale and eyes wide, he stares at her, and blood trickles from the corner of his mouth as he mutters something in Russian.

I run over and kick the gun away just in case, then whirl around to watch Lauren calmly approach him. Her eyes are blazing and her lips are parted, giving her the look of a feral animal as she reaches Volkov, who by some miracle is still standing.

She stares him in the eyes and says, "You are nothing, Ivan. Nothing but a cruel piece of shit who nobody loves. This man here is worth a thousand of you, and nobody messes with him, you hear me?"

His mouth opens, but no words come out, just blood pouring from his lips. She shoves him hard on his shoulder, and he topples to the ground, the axe sticking up from his chest like a prop in a horror movie. She looks on as his eyes glaze over and the final seconds of life seep out of him, and I take her in my arms, remembering how affected she was by the same moment with Brad Schmidt.

"You saved my life," I murmur, kissing her hair and inhaling her scent. "You're a goddamn miracle of a woman. Don't waste any guilt on this bastard."

"I'm not," she replies, relaxing into my arms as the adrenaline fades. "It was easier

the second time around. Not sure that's a good thing. I just wish... I wish I'd been able to make him tell us where Caroline and Nicky are. You okay? What about Taylor?"

Shit. Taylor. We both crouch down by his side, and it doesn't look good. His whole torso is painted red, and his skin is pale and clammy. "There's a pulse," Lauren announces, her fingers at his neck. "We need to get him to a hospital right now. It wasn't only me who saved your life, Seb, it was him as well."

She looks distraught now, like everything is catching up with her physically and emotionally. Tears stream down her cheeks, and she holds Taylor's hand, squeezing his fingers as though she can bring him back with touch alone. Maybe she fucking can—she's so magnificent, I wouldn't rule anything out.

It goes against all my instincts to involve the police, but we need an ambulance here right away, and I can't mess around when Taylor's life is in my hands, no matter how much explaining I'll have to do. I'll call the emergency services first, my lawyer second.

As I'm about to dial the number, a cry comes from the direction of the cabin, and I'm instantly on my feet, gun out, ready to go again. "Seb! You out there, my friend? I'm finding a trail of injured Russians so I'm guessing you might be."

I smile with relief. Thank fuck, it's Sasha.

Chapter

Thirty-Seven

SEBASTIAN

He emerges into the clearing with Jacob and Alex alongside him, dragging an injured Russian between them. Their captive appears to have been shot in the leg, and they're taking extra special care to bump into every dip and ridge on the ground as they go. He's yelling in pain and trailing blood and only shuts up when he sees Volkov lying dead before him. I can't imagine a man like Volkov inspired any genuine loyalty in his people, but he was at the top of the tree for a long time. Seeing him defeated is clearly a shock to this man.

"We need an ambulance." I gesture at Taylor. "He's still alive, and I'd like to keep him that way." Lauren is still crouched at his side, showing no signs of letting go of his hand. I want Taylor to live because I'm not a twat and because I owe him—but I also need him to live for her sake. This has been a day of death and loss and too much spilled blood, and she needs a victory. Needs to keep some hope. It's unlikely that Caroline and Nicky are alive, but I could be wrong, and I won't give up on them until I know for sure.

Sasha makes a call in Russian while Alex and Jacob join their fallen comrade. "Fuck, Taylor," says Alex, stroking his hair back from his face. "Don't give up on us, mate."

"Help is on the way," Sasha says, staring at Volkov's corpse.

"Real help?" Lauren asks, glaring up at us both. "I know this is messy, but he needs a real ambulance and a real hospital, not some shady-as-fuck field medic bullshit."

"Don't worry, my dear," Sasha says reassuringly. "It will be real help. A private company I deal with on a regular basis, and they'll do their very best for him. He is young, he is healthy, he is clearly a fighter. He'll pull through, I'm sure of it."

"You really think so?" The wobble in her voice breaks my heart. A warrior queen one minute, a scared little girl the next. I couldn't love her more.

“Yeah, he’s right, babe,” I say, kneeling down beside her. “I reckon Taylor’s too stubborn to die. Now, listen to me—I’m going to go with Sasha and see what we can find out about Caroline and Nicky, okay?”

Lauren glances at the injured Russian on the ground. She obviously knows that us finding out about Caroline and Nicky won’t be something that he enjoys. He knows it too and tries to crawl away. Jacob kicks him hard in the leg wound, and he howls. Unless he gets wise quickly, there will be a lot more of that before this night is over. “Yeah, okay. Take him away. I’ll stay here with Taylor.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:02 am

I pull her to my chest and hold her tight, engulfing her whole body in my arms and wishing I never had to let her go, not even for a minute. My arms are empty without her in them, and my skin feels sad when I release her. I smooth a wild strand of hair away from her face and hold her chin, spearing her eyes with mine. “I love you. I’ll be back as soon as I can. Let me know where you end up with Taylor.”

“Don’t rush back—if you need to take your time with this asshole, take your time. He worked for Volkov, so as far as I’m concerned, he’s guilty. I don’t give a shit about him, I only care about finding Caroline and Nicky. And Seb? I love you too.”

Chapter

Thirty-Eight

LAUREN

Five hours have passed since the showdown in the woods, and after accompanying Taylor to the hospital and making sure he was stable, I am yet again trudging through a forest. It’s full night now, the place illuminated by moonlight, the branches painting eerie shadows against the dark backdrop of a star-studded sky.

We are making our way around land that Ivan Volkov owned through a shell corporation near Dover. In the end, torturing the last man standing back at the cabin wasn’t much help because he was hired muscle who knew very little. A mess of blood, broken bones, shattered teeth, and missing fingernails, he was willing to betray his own mother by the time Seb and Sasha finished with him. From what I’ve heard, torture is one of Sasha’s very favorite things, and he’s quite good at it.

Still, all the guy knew was that Volkov kept a place in Kent, near the ferry port. It was a waypoint for his illicit cargo before leaving the country or upon entering it. The guy did solve at least one mystery by telling us about the tracking device that was placed on Seb's SUV the day before.

The new nugget of information about Dover was enough for Sasha to mine his contacts in the criminal underworld, and nowhere we are—desperately searching for a little boy that we all know is probably dead. Or worse, I remind myself. He could be in the hands of predators who will turn his young life into a hellscape of abuse.

Unable to put one foot in front of the other if I allow myself to think like that, I shut the thought down. It won't help Nicky, and it certainly didn't help Caroline. We already found her body, and it was a sight I will never forget in a million years. She was dumped naked on a dirty mattress, like a ragdoll with her limbs splayed and twisted at unnatural angles. Every inch of her body was striped with whip marks, and blood was crusted between her legs. Her once-pretty face was caved in, almost unrecognizable, beaten to the point where her facial bones had collapsed in on themselves.

I was almost sick right then, and it was only Seb's steadying hand on my back that stopped me. He hadn't wanted me to come with them, obviously, and now I understood why. He'd wanted to protect me from this.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," he said, turning me around to face him as his men covered her with a discarded blanket. A small show of respect for a woman who had clearly fought to the last.

"Me too," I replied, my breath shuddering against his chest. "We let her down. I'm going to feel awful about that later, but now isn't the time. Now, we need to find Nicky."

After turning the ramshackle house at the center of the compound upside down, we found nothing—no trace of him at all.

“He isn’t here,” Sasha announced sadly. “I fear he has been taken. He could be anywhere, with anyone...”

I know from Seb that Sasha’s own childhood was one of pain and torment, and he was visibly distressed.

“No.” I shook my head firmly. “We don’t know that. There are more buildings here. Shipping containers. A lot of land. We don’t give up until we have nowhere left to look. Until we’ve searched every inch of it, all right? We owe him that much. We owe Caroline that much. And if he’s not here, we keep on looking. I don’t care how long it takes or where that search takes us—we find him. We find the sick bastards who have that child, and we end them. We do not give up.”

I only realized at the end of my speech that I was yelling. Gabriel, Alex, Jacob, and a few others whose names I don’t know were all staring at me. Tough men, all of them, and I was screaming at them like they were children.

“Yeah, you’re right,” Seb said, looking back at them and daring them to disagree. “We will tear this world apart to find him.”

Sasha laid one hand on my shoulder and smiled. “So fierce. And also so correct. We do not give up.”

That was a couple hours ago, and since then, we have torn through every part of this evil place. We found the remains of other women, some recent and some skeletal, rotting in one of the shipping containers. The sight and smell were enough to make these men gag, and we stood at the door, shouting Nicky’s name. When no answer came, Sasha walked inside the pit of death and checked for signs of a much smaller

body. When he emerged again, he was whiter than a sheet, but he shook his head and we all breathed a sigh of relief.

A basement that had obviously been used for rape and torture was found next, chains hanging from the bare brick walls and blood-stained blankets scattered on the filthy floor amid used syringes. “This is where they would have been broken,” Sasha announced, his face calm but his eyes furious. “Beaten. Abused. Addicted. Treated as garbage. All in the name of profit.”

“No more, mate,” Seb said, guiding him out. “Volkov’s gone, and we’ll make sure all the women we found here get a proper burial.”

“Volkov might be gone, but there will be more to take his place. There always are, like mushrooms springing up in shit. But thank you—for the time being, his death will have to be enough. As for Nicky, I think we only have the woods left to search.”

Now, we’re here, walking a grid across the darkened land, all of us exploring our own patch in an attempt to cover a lot of ground quickly and thoroughly. Every once in a while, I catch a glimpse of a flashlight in the distance and hear the voice of one of the others as they call Nicky’s name.

“Nicky!” Seb yells, kicking aside a dense patch of bramble and checking behind it. “Nicky, buddy, it’s Seb—if you’re here, give us a shout.”

I echo his cries, carefully clambering over the obstacles that mother nature has put in our way, desperate to hear a reply. We’ve been out here for a while, and it’s getting harder to cling to hope.

“I don’t think he’s here,” Seb says, trailing behind me. “And if he is...”

“No. We don’t give up. Ever. Promise me.”

He pulls me to a stop and wipes away tears I didn't know I was shedding. "I promise you, Lauren. I promise you."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:02 am

I lean into his big, solid body, allowing myself a moment of respite. I'm running on pure adrenaline after a day that emptied me out of all strength. It's only the thought of that little boy out here alone, scared and suffering, that's keeping me going.

I drop my forehead to his chest, feel the steady beat of his heart. Seb is here. Seb is real. Together, we'll find him.

He strokes my hair with one hand and pulls me tight against him with the other. It gives me the courage and the energy I need to go on.

His body goes tense. "Did you hear that?"

I pull away, not daring to breathe.

"Nicky," he shouts again. "It's Seb and Lauren—you're safe now."

I listen intently, and I finally hear what Seb picked up on—a rustling and scraping sound a few yards away, deep inside an especially thick patch of oaks. We both react at once, scrambling over collapsed branches and tangled vegetation to follow the sound, but he gets there before me.

I catch up and find him on his knees next to a massive fallen tree trunk. He's scooping dead leaves and twisted stems away with his bare hands. I shine my flashlight along the space he's cleared and gasp. Small fingers have emerged from the end of the trunk, and an even smaller voice says, "Seb?"

"Yeah, it's me, buddy." His voice cracks with emotion. "You're okay now."

He scooches down and pulls Nicky from the hollowed-out trunk he was hiding in. The poor kid looks dreadful, pale skin marred by scratches, his injured arm dangling lifelessly at his side, eyes wide and drained.

I rub the traces of the forest from his face, grimacing at how cold his skin is to the touch. Seb encloses him in his arms for warmth, and I tuck my jacket around his skinny shoulders, alarmed at how quiet he is.

“How long have you been there, Nicky?” I hand him my water bottle and stop him when he glugs too greedily.

“Um... I think maybe three nights?” His voice is croaky, likely from a combination of dehydration and being silent for too long. “It was all my fault. Everything was my fault.”

Seb passes him to me and goes off to use his phone, and I cuddle him close. His clothes are soaked through, and he’s shivering.

“No, it wasn’t, sweetie. Whatever happened wasn’t your fault, okay?”

He clings to me, his body racked with silent sobs, and my heart breaks for him. “He came home early. My dad. I was making noise. I was just playing soldiers. But he was so mad. He put us in the car and brought us here. He locked us up in that horrible room. My mum made me promise to run. So I did.”

His face crumples at the memory.

“Then he came back. He was angry. He called her horrible names. He hit her. And then he punched me in the tummy and made me be sick. He said if she didn’t tell him everything, he’d carry on hurting me. I should have protected her instead of running away.”

My heart breaks wide open. “Darling, no. She wouldn’t have wanted that. Your mom loved you more than anything in the whole world.”

He gazes up at me with hollow eyes. “She’s dead, isn’t she? He killed her while I ran away like a baby. She told me to, she screamed it at me, but I shouldn’t have listened. I should have stayed with her.”

Seb has finished his phone call and clearly overheard the last sentence, and a twitch of his jaw betrays the effort it takes him to stay calm. “You did the right thing, Nicky, and I want you to always know that. You did exactly what you should have done—you found a safe space, and you hid. That is all your mum wanted you to do. You did her proud. Now, do you remember what else I told you?”

Nicky frowns. “You told me I needed to survive and get stronger, and then I could get my revenge.”

“That’s right, son. And you did survive, because you did what you needed to do. What your mum wanted you to do. Look, we can talk about it all more soon, but for now we need to get you warm, get you fed. Get you somewhere safe. How does that sound?”

Nicky’s lip trembles. “Will you stay with me?”

“We’ll never leave your side, mate. Never.” Seb carries the boy out of the clearing, and it is no wonder at all that my heart follows.

Chapter

Thirty-Nine

SEBASTIAN

We take Nicky to the same hospital we took Taylor. It's a fucking amazing place, a private facility hiding in plain sight in central London. From the minimal amount of form-filling and lack of personal questions, it's obvious this hospital is for people who want to stay beneath the radar while also receiving the best medical care. It crosses my mind that it's exactly this type of establishment that would have ignored Caroline's injuries at the hands of Volkov and his pals, but I have to put that out of my mind so the people I care about can reap the benefits.

We were able to get Taylor here fast and without any awkward conversations about bullet wounds. Lauren called her cousin, and the Montoyas provided cleanup back at my cabin. I could have sorted it myself in time, but making seven bodies disappear isn't easy, even if you could bury them where they lie. There were loose ends to be tied up, like their vehicles and their phones, and I was happy to let someone else take charge. I have no doubt that Alejandro Montoya knows the right people to make it all go away.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:02 am

That left us free to concentrate on the search for Nicky and left me free to concentrate on Lauren. She was doing a magnificent job of not only keeping her shit together, but also of motivating the rest of us, but I could tell she was suffering beneath the surface. I wanted—no, needed to be with her in case she crashed. And really, who could blame her? She fought for her life, saved mine, killed a man, and was exposed to that fucking house of horrors near Dover. If we hadn't found Nicky when we did, I'm not sure how she would have coped.

Standing outside Nicky's room, I watch the two of them through the window. The boy is doing well, and the docs here say he'll make a full recovery. His arm has been re-cast, he's on a drip for fluids, and he's finally warm. Physically, he's going to be fine. The rest will be a work in progress, the poor kid.

He was hiding in that tree trunk for three nights while Volkov got what he needed from Caroline and cleaned house. I'm sure he sent men to look for him, but Nicky outsmarted them all. He's clever and brave, but right now he feels broken, and I understand that. He won't even have his revenge to look forward to, because Volkov is already dead. Still, I'm glad we saved him from that. Killing your own dad, no matter how evil, isn't ever going to be a simple thing.

Lauren showered after we got Nicky here, and her dark curls lay damp on her shoulders. Although the boy is asleep, she continues to hold Nicky's hand. She must be exhausted herself, but she refuses to leave. Refuses to stand down in any way.

Like I said, fucking magnificent. She's still wearing my ring, and I can't wait to make her mine—as much as a creature like her can ever be anyone's—and slide another one onto her finger.

“You’re a lucky man.” Sasha catches me by surprise, joining me by the window and nodding in Lauren’s direction. “She is an incredible woman. I think I might be in love with her.”

“Yeah? First my daughter, now my woman? Are you deliberately trying to get me to smash your face through this plate of glass, pal?”

He laughs and holds up his hands in surrender. “I apologize. What can I say? I have a generous spirit when it comes to women. But in all seriousness, she is marvelous, Sebastian. I love her ferocity, her loyalty, Plus, she has an absolutely amazing a?—”

“Stop right there, or we’re going to have a problem. I know she does, but I don’t want to hear those words coming out of your mouth. Fuck. I can’t believe she killed Volkov.”

Sasha’s face lights up at the memory. “I know. Axe to the chest. Couldn’t have happened to a nicer man. I was hoping to have a little more time to play with him, but I’m not complaining. I meant what I said earlier though—he will be replaced. They always grow back.”

“Like mushrooms in shit?”

“Yes. It’s one of my missions to be there to cut them back down. If ever you or your lovely fiancée would like in on that action, say the word. The law doesn’t work for pigs like this. It takes scum to wipe out scum.”

“You’re not scum, Sasha. You’re a good man, and you’re my friend.”

He looks genuinely moved and envelops me in an unexpected bear hug. Sometimes I forget how emotional he can get, but it usually only happens when he’s a bottle of vodka in. I find myself wondering, too, about what he said regarding his vigilante

approach to the Volkovs of the world. It's not entirely without its appeal.

We're interrupted by the arrival of Gabriel, who's holding a sleeping Max, and Samantha, who nods to Sasha. He politely makes his farewells and leaves us to it.

"Dad, I'm so glad you're all okay and that you found Nicky. Gabriel's only just let me out of the house," my daughter says, giving me a hug. It must be my lucky day—or maybe I look like a man who really needs a hug.

"Good," I reply. "I'd have been disappointed at anything less. We weren't being overprotective, Sam. The threat was real. You and Max spending a few hours in the basement is a small price to pay to keep you safe, you know that."

She kisses me on the cheek. "I do know that, yes." She glances through the window at Lauren and Nicky, who looks tiny in an adult hospital bed. "Oh, look at him... He's got a tough road ahead, hasn't he?"

"That he has," I say, following her gaze. "But at least he's alive to walk it. How's Taylor?"

Gabriel has been checking in on him and keeping me up to date. "He's good. He's out of surgery, and the docs say he's some kind of miracle. He shouldn't be alive, not with his injuries or the amount of blood he lost, but... Well, he's proving them wrong. He's also asking for you, mate. I know you've had your issues with him in the past, but bear in mind the man took a bullet for you, okay?"

My temper flares at his words, which only goes to prove his point. "All right, Dad," I say sarcastically. "I'll be good. Keep an eye on Lauren for me?"

Samantha gazes in at Lauren and Nicky, and I see her eyes widen. She whirls around and points a finger at me. Looks like she immediately homed in on one tiny detail.

Amidst all the drama, she spotted the damn engagement ring before I had a chance to tell her.

“You’d better bloody mean it this time, Dad,” she scolds, but then breaks out into a beautiful smile.

I get yet another hug and grin at her sheepishly. “I do mean it, love. With all my heart.” She plants a noisy kiss on my cheek, and Gabriel shakes my hand.

“Congratulations, mate,” he says. “Now don’t fuck it up, all right?”

I laugh as I make my way down the corridor, thrilled with their reaction. One day, when all this Volkov dust has settled, we’ll have a party and celebrate properly. For now, though, there are still questions to be answered and difficulties to be faced.

A nurse is leaving Taylor’s room as I arrive, and I find Alex and Jacob already in there. They look up at me, then glance at each other. “We’re off to get a coffee, Boss.” Alex stands up and stretches his arms.

“Or a double Scotch,” adds Jacob. “Did you know there’s a bar in this place? It’s not like any fucking hospital I’ve been in before, that’s for sure.”

The two of them leave, and I take a seat next to Taylor. He looks rough, but a lot better than the last time I saw him. Wires and tubes are sticking out from him in every direction, and the green-and-blue swirl pattern of his hospital gown looks a bit psychedelic.

“Bet your arse hangs out of that thing if you stand up,” I say, taking in his ghostly pallor and the way he winces with the slightest movement.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:02 am

“No worries there, Boss. Won’t be standing up for a while. Glad you found the kid.”

Every word seems to take a herculean effort, and I feel like I should leave and let him rest. He asked to see me, though, so I make myself stay.

“Yeah, well, I wouldn’t have been finding anyone if you hadn’t jumped in front of that bullet. Not that I’m ungrateful, but what the fuck were you thinking? And while I’m asking questions, what was that you said about following me? If you’re too knackered and want me to piss off, I will, but if you’re up to it, you’ve got my full attention.”

He rubs his face with one big hand, the leads of his monitors following him, and finally looks me in the eyes.

“I followed you for the same reason I came to London. Because of you.”

I frown, confused. “What the fuck does that mean? I thought you came to London for a fresh start after your mum died.”

“I did. But I also came to London to work for you. To find out more about you.”

“Why the hell did you want to find out more about me?”

“Because you’re my dad, okay?”

I stare at him in disbelief. I shake my head and even poke my fingers in my ears in case I didn’t hear him right. Did he say what I think he said? That I’m his

bloodyfather? That makes no sense at all. Except... Fuck, look at the size of him. Look at the way he handles himself. Look at the awkward way he's always behaved around me.

"Tell me more," I manage to say, the words all I can squeeze out.

"My mum was called Tracy. Tracy Grant. She raised me on her own, and I've no complaints—she was mum and dad to me, and she did a brilliant job. She never told me much about my dad, but she didn't slag you off either. She said she only knew you for a few nights, on holiday in Tenerife when she was young. Said you were a wild one who wouldn't have wanted to be tied down, so even though she knew your name, she didn't try to contact you when she found out she was expecting. She never forgot you though—every time I got into trouble for scrapping, she'd smile and say something about not being able to fight nature. Not in a nasty way, just sort of... deep, I suppose. Like she was thinking about you."

He's looking at me beseechingly, and I know he desperately wants me to remember her. Maybe to say she was special, the one that got away. That I always carried happy memories of my holiday fling around with me. That would make him feel better, but I can't lie to the lad like that.

I scrub my face with my hands and blow out a big breath. "Fuck. Taylor, that's a lot to take in... and she was right. I was a wild one back then. How old are you again? Twenty-three?"

He nods, and I do some maths in my head. That wasn't the most stable time of my life. I'd left the army, drifted in and out of jobs, hadn't really found whatever it was I was looking for. Hadn't found anything that filled the hole left by Samantha's mum leaving and taking my unborn child with her. It was before I met Gabriel and we started working together, before Sam came back into my life. I was wild in every way, and that included with women. I'm not proud of the way I was, but I can't

change the past.

“Fuck. I’m so sorry, kid. Obviously, I didn’t know. I wish... Well, I wish she’d told me. I wish she’d found me and told me. I would have stepped up. I would have been there for both of you, instead of letting you grow up without a dad.”

“I told you, I have no complaints—it made no difference, you not being around, because she was every bit as good, all right?” Even in his messed-up state, Taylor’s temper rouses when it comes to any perceived criticism of his mother.

“All right, mate. Don’t blow a gasket. I didn’t mean it like that. I just... Well, I’m sad, I suppose. Sad I missed out on you as a kid, that I didn’t get to see you when you were little. Hell, I’m sad you just turned up fully grown in my life, like a bad-tempered brick shithouse.”

He croaks out a laugh that turns into a cough, and I pass him a glass of water.

“I never looked for you when she was alive,” he says when he’s recovered, “because I didn’t want to hurt her feelings. She was enough for me. But when she found out about the cancer, she wrote me a letter telling me everything she remembered about you. Your name, where in London you lived, that you worked on the doors at a nightclub called Solitaire.”

“Fuck. That’s a blast from the past. And that was enough for you to find me?”

As I ask the question, I actually start to remember his mum. It’s a vague memory, fuzzy around the edges, but the name of the club sparked something. She was a feisty blond with legs that went on forever, there on a trip with five of her mates. We hooked up, spent a few days together roaming the island on quad bikes, partying and messing around. She was from up north, and I told her if she was ever in London she should call me, come and have a free night out in the club where I worked. Bloody

hell. It was casual, a fling. It meant nothing to either of us, and I haven't given it a second thought since.

But here is Taylor, lying in a hospital bed before me, living proof that it ended up meaning quite a lot.

"It was. I was already working the doors myself, so it felt right when I found out more about you. Maybe I should have told you immediately, but I wanted to see what kind of man you were first. If you were a twat, I would've left. If you were decent, I would've told you."

"Makes sense. Except you did neither."

"That's 'cause I couldn't make my mind up. You seemed like you were both decent and a twat. I needed more time."

I snort with laughter. The kid isn't wrong. He's starting to look wrung out now, and I bet his pain levels are pretty horrendous. Being a macho shit like his dad, though, he won't be letting on while I'm in the room, so I make the decision for him.

I don't think either of us is quite ready for full-on fatherly hugs, especially him with his stitches in, but I give his shoulder a light squeeze. "I'm going to let you get some rest, all right? I'm glad you're okay, and I'm glad you told me. We don't know each other that well yet, but we can fix that. We have all the time in the world. I'm going nowhere, and very fucking clearly, neither are you."

I pause and clear my throat. "I won't be able to make up for everything I missed, but I already know I'm proud to be your dad. Now, stop being a hero and press that bloody morphine button, will you?"

He gives me a sheepish grin, and I recall his mum more clearly now. He looks a little

like her. Poor bastard looks like me too, though.

Chapter

Forty

LAUREN

I shake my head as Seb finishes telling me his story. It really is a WTF kind of tale, and normally I'd have more of a reaction. Today, though, has been a WTF kind of day in general, and this is just one more surprise.

Samantha is sitting with Nicky while Seb and I take a break in the bar in the basement of the hospital. Yeah, weird, but at the moment, it makes perfect sense. I don't think I've ever needed a glass of wine more than I do right now, and Seb is definitely enjoying his pint of beer.

"So, let me get this straight—you have a twenty-three-year-old son you never knew a thing about?"

"Yep. Bit of a headfuck, but it also kind of makes sense. I can see myself in him, the violence and the rage. I'm just glad he had a brilliant mum to keep him on the straight and narrow. Maybe it was for the best that I didn't know."

"Oh, don't give me that crap, Seb. You might have been wild, but you would have done the right thing. You need to let go of this heart-of-a-devil bullshit and accept that you're at least part angel."

"Which part?" He winks suggestively.

I laugh and take his hand across the table. “Not that part. That part is very much in league with Satan.”

He gazes into my eyes. “Is it wrong that I’ve got a hard-on in a hospital?”

“Only if it’s because of all the sexy nurses.”

“No. It’s only for you. Though I wouldn’t object to playing doctors and nurses with you sometime, sweetheart.” His look darkens, and my pulse speeds up in response. I have a sudden image of how that could play out: Seb in a white coat, me on a gurney getting a very thorough exam, those massive hands of his encased in latex gloves while he probes and prods...

“You’re wet just thinking about it, aren’t you?”

“I am, indeed, Dr. Donovan. Definitely one for the future. But for now, how do you feel about all the Taylor stuff?”

“Now it’s starting to settle in, I’m okay with it. Why wouldn’t I be? He’s a good lad. We’ve missed the stage where I can teach him how to ride a bike and play footie in the park, but there’s still plenty to learn about each other. Plenty to catch up on. And your mystery son taking a bullet for you isn’t a bad start, as these things go.”

“No, it’s really not. The only problem is that I’m not sure I’m ready to be a stepmom to two adult kids.”

“Oh, fuck. I hadn’t even thought about that—you’ll be Samantha’s stepmum. That’s fucking hilarious.”

I laugh and then yawn, and he squeezes my fingers. “You’re done in, love. You need to go home and rest. I’ll stay here with the kid; you get some sleep. We can do it in

shifts.”

“No way. We stay together, always. Who knows what kind of trouble you’ll get into without me to look after you?”

He nods and pulls a face that says fair point, then goes off to the bar to get us another round. While he’s gone, I wonder whether I’m crazy to think what I’ve been thinking for the last few hours. And if I am, I wonder if Seb is willing to be crazy with me.

I tell myself I should shelve the whole idea until I’ve had chance to really think it through. I need time to rest and recover, to look more realistically at all the options. Time to regain reason and act logically instead of emotionally.

I’m still lost in thought when Seb returns. He stares at me intensely, like he’s trying to read my mind. “What’s going on in there, sweetheart? You look like you’re a million miles away.”

I sip my wine and notice that I’ve bitten the inside of my lip so hard it’s bleeding.

“What is it?” he says. “You know you can tell me anything, right?” He sounds sincere, and I hate that I doubted him for a second. He has proved over and over again that he loves me, and I shouldn’t feel any hesitation in sharing this with him. It says more about me and the way I hoard my feelings than it does about him.

“I know, Seb, I do. I suppose I was wondering... if you’d like to be a dad to three kids instead of two?”

There’s a beat while he seems to think it through, and then he’s right there with me. “You mean Nicky? You want to, what, adopt him?”

“He has nobody else. He’s all alone in the world, and I can’t bear the thought of him

being foisted off on strangers. There's going to be a lot of damage that he'll need help with, things that normal people won't understand. It's going to take time and patience and probably a ton of therapy. He won't get any of that if he goes into the system, you know that."

"I do, better than most people. And the answer is yes. It was always going to be yes, and I can't believe you looked that worried about asking me. I'd have suggested it myself, but I wasn't sure how you'd react. I know stuff around kids is complicated for you."

A wave of joy floods me, along with gratitude for having this man in my life. Of course he said yes. It's not in his nature to turn down a person in need, especially not a child.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:02 am

“It is complicated, yes, but this feels pretty damn simple, Seb—he needs us. We’ll never replace Caroline, but families come in all shapes and sizes.”

“That they do, my love, that they do. But do you think it’ll be possible? With all the bureaucracy and stuff?”

He looks worried, and I love him even more for it. Now that the seed has taken root, I can’t imagine either of us letting anything get in our way. After all, we are a pretty formidable team.

“I hope so.” I pause, thinking it through from a family law perspective. “There will be hoops to jump through, sure. But at least one of us is an upstanding member of society,” I joke.

“True. But the other one is a lawyer,” he shoots back.

I slap him playfully on the shoulder, and he grins at me. I’m so excited now, and newfound energy courses through my veins. We can do this thing. We really can.

“Have I ever told you,” he says, smoothing my hair back and kissing me, “that I love you?”

“Yes, but I never get tired of hearing it. I love you too, Sebastian, and I cannot wait to be your wife.”

He pulls me onto his lap and wraps his big arms around me. I nestle into his chest, my face flat against its muscled surface. I’m so happy here, I might never move again.

I am home. I am loved.

Finally, I am safe.

Epilogue I

LAUREN

ONE YEAR LATER

It's been a hell of a day, and as I gaze out at the scene before me, I feel beyond blessed. I am now officially Mrs. Donovan, although I won't be taking the name legally. I already have too many of those.

The ceremony took place in a nearby church, a tiny place in the countryside right outside London that looks as old as time. My parents and the LA contingent were blown away by its pretty tower, ancient stained-glass windows, and the cute gardens that surround it. The weather, which is never a guarantee here, was perfect, the sun shining the whole afternoon.

Seb and I both cried exchanging our vows, and I loved seeing this big man break down with emotion and not try to hide it as he stood before his closest family and friends.

Now, we're back at Samantha and Gabriel's place for a celebration. It reminds me of the first time I was here, when they first moved in. Things are very different now.

The adoption went through, and we found Nicky a terrific therapist who is helping him process his trauma. He says he wants to be a doctor when he grows up so he can help other people, and that makes Seb extraordinarily proud—one kid a lawyer, another a doctor? Proof that he didn't do so badly. Taylor is and probably always will

be exactly like his father, but that's nothing to be ashamed of. Like his dad, he has the potential for great violence—but also like his dad, he has a strong moral compass that keeps him walking in the light.

Things have changed for Samantha too—she's pregnant again, which means Seb will become both a dad and a granddad in the same year. Now that I come to think of it, I'm kind of a grandma now as well. Jesus.

But I don't feel like a grandma today. I feel like a bride. I feel like I've started a new and wonderful chapter of my life, and I'm so glad my family was here to see it happen. I've finally met Alana, Alejandro's wife, and everyone approves of Sebastian.

I've decided that my cousin was right, and at some point soon, I will tell my parents about Carlos and what he did to me. Now that I'm a mom myself, I understand how painful it will be for them to know that I kept such a toxic secret from them for so long, but that's why it's so important for me to tell them.

Today, though, is all about fun and laughter and sharing time with our people—because families do indeed come in all shapes and sizes. Alejandro is dancing with Alana, lifting her off her feet and waltzing her around to the band's rendition of “Marry You” by Bruno Mars. It's a change of pace from earlier, when Beyoncé's “Crazy in Love” resulted in all the Archangel staff, including my new husband, twerking in a long line, shaking their fine asses in time to the music.

Nicky is sitting with my mom and dad, enthralled by some tall tale my pop is telling him. At his feet is Winston, the bulldog mix that goes everywhere with him. I was reluctant at first, residual trauma and fear holding me back, but Nicky was desperate for a dog, and I allowed myself to be talked into a visit to the pound. Winston is old, ugly, and deaf in one ear, but it was love at first sight for those two, and he's been part of our family ever since. I adopted a kid and a dog in the space of a few months, and I

couldn't be happier about it.

Seb sneaks up behind me and whispers in my ear, "Time to go yet?" The warm kiss of his breath against my skin makes me shudder in the nicest possible way.

"What do you mean, husband? I've got hours of partying left to do."

He whisks me up into his arms and spins me around, making me dizzy. When he finally puts me down, I cling to him for balance, which I suspect was his aim all along.

"Nah, I think you're as ready to make an exit as I am. Nicky and Winston are safe here. Everyone is having a great time. All is well in the world, and there's a cottage down the road with a kitchen table that's really missed us. Unless you want to revisit your idea from that first night and fuck in a field?"

I pretend to be horrified, even though we have fucked in a few fields since then. "What, in this gown? In these shoes? With this hair?"

He growls and slaps a big hand on my ass. "I've been a gentleman all day, baby, but now the real me is desperate to come out and play. The shoes you can keep. I can imagine those wrapped around my back as I nail you. The hair... Well, you look beautiful, but that's coming down. I want my wild curls back. And that dress, Lauren? That fucking dress? All I can say is, I hope you didn't spend too much money on it, because I'm going to shred that thing off your body with my teeth. Or maybe my knife... I haven't decided yet."

Page 72

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:02 am

My insides turn to liquid, and I feel a rush of wet heat between my thighs. “I’m wearing stockings as well, you know.”

“I have plans for those also, don’t worry. Now say your goodbyes and get in the goddamn car.”

I place my hands on his chest like I’m going to shove him away. “You can’t speak to me that way, big guy. Since when do you think you get to boss me around like that?”

“Since I made you my lover. My best friend. My partner in everything I do. Since I made you my wife. Is that good enough for you, Hot Sauce?”

I lean forward to kiss him and tangle my tongue with his in a way that leaves us both breathless.

Yeah, that’s good enough for me.

Epilogue II

SEBASTIAN

SIX MONTHS LATER

Lauren slides the file to me across the pub table, her lips set in a grim line and her fingers trembling. They’re trembling because she’s angry, not because she’s scared.

I lay my palm on the manila folder but don’t pull it toward me. “You’re sure?” I ask.

“We could just forget we ever discussed this.”

“I’d never forgive myself. Take it. Show it to Sasha. You two... Do what you do best. Clean up.”

I take a quick look at the contents. Photos, witness testimonies, a mug shot of the scumbag grinning smugly at the camera as though he thinks he’s untouchable. He’s wearing a dickie bow, for fuck’s sake, looking like some overweight prick from a fancy boarding school.

Turns out he was right, he was untouchable—at least legally. Now, though? He’s going to get touched, and not in a way he will like. In a way he won’t survive.

“And there’s no link to you or the law firm?”

“Seb, you ask me that every time—no. I know what I’m doing here, okay? Remember who you’re married to.”

I have to laugh. As if I could forget—her fiery Montoya blood comes out to play every few days. We fight all the time, but wow, the make-up sex is so worth it.

She gulps down her wine. “He’s a grade-A sicko, Seb. He got away with molesting children for years—good lawyers, money, sympathetic judges. It’s all played out in his favor. And he doesn’t just molest them. He films it. Films it, photographs it, and sells it. He kept one girl under his thumb from the age of four until she was twelve, when he told her she was too old and ugly to interest him anymore. She killed herself, Seb—at twelve years old. But still, all the proof was circumstantial. He covered his tracks. He’s done it for so long, and you know as well as I do that he won’t stop unless someone makes him.”

I nod and close the file. The fewer people get the chance to see it, the better.

“Okay, sweetheart, I trust you. Sasha and I will take it from here. Sure you don’t want to join us?”

She smiles, a glint of something like lust in her warm brown eyes. There she is, my warrior queen.

“Believe me, Seb, part of me wants nothing more. But I’d lose a piece of my soul, part of who I am, and I need to stay in one solid piece until Nicky is older. But after that...”

She doesn’t need to finish the sentence. Sicks fucks of the world had better watch out when my girl starts coming after them. Fuck, I couldn’t love her more if I tried.

“Until then, Seb, I have you, and you have Sasha. And bit by bit, we’re making the world a better place.”

I pick up her hand and plant a kiss on the sensitive skin of her palm. “Damn right we are, sweetheart.”

I can hardly believe that I have so much joy and love in my life now. Three incredible kids who make me grateful every single day, not to mention our dopey, lovable mutt, Winston. But most of all, I can’t believe I get to call this incredible woman mine.

And she is mine. Every single inch of her. Just as I am hers.

I may have the heart of a devil, but it won me a life with an angel by my side.