



King of Desire

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult, Crime And Mafia

Description: I just agreed to sell my virginity...

I'm a lowly maid for Vegas's most elusive bachelor, Triston Smith.

Beautiful women line up to his next girlfriend, despite his ironclad rule. He never dates a woman for more than one month.

He's so gorgeous.

Strong.

Confident.

I'm tempted to join the queue, but I can't afford that luxury.

I'm the only caregiver for my terminally ill younger brother.

For his sake, I need the kind of guy who'd stick around. Be there for both of us.

When my brother's chance for a transplant comes up, the surgeon refuses to perform the surgery without a down payment. Ten thousand dollars.

I don't have a tenth of that amount.

Until a coworker tells me how she makes money on the side. It makes my skin crawl, but it might be my only choice.

The job? Auction my virginity to the highest bidder.

Before I know it, I'm on the auction block trying to control the panic.

That's when I catch the dark and penetrating gaze of my boss. He stands below me, holding out his hand.

"Did you come to save me?" I gasp.

"No, Honeyeh." His fingers slide into mine a second before he tips me forward and tosses me over his shoulder. "I bought you."

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CHAPTER ONE

Honeyeh

My new bossMr. Stanley stops in front of me, giving me that critical eye like he's trying to figure out what I'm about. Is he worried I'm lazy? Awkward? I swallow down a lump and attempt to give him a reassuring smile.

I don't tell him, but I'd do backflips provided he keeps me on the payroll.

He takes his eyes off me to frown down at his clipboard. "How do you pronounce your name?"

"Ummm... Honey, just like what bees make, and then at the end you add an ahh, like in a-ha," my smile grows bigger, almost manic. One of my college friends Charlotte married some real estate mogul, Mason Kincaid. She convinced her husband to have his company hire me at one of his restaurants as a favor. The pay is great, so much better than my last job, and I will do nearly anything to make certain this position sticks.

"Honeyeh, do you have prior waitressing experience?"

"I was a barista," I clasp my hands leaning forward. "And I was picked for employee of the month multiple times for my hard work and friendliness."

He looks up at the ceiling like he's trying not to roll his eyes. "A barista. Great." Sarcasm drips off the words. Then he adds, in a whisper, "I've been stuck with the

flavor of the month.”

My brows draw together. What does that mean?

But I don’t ask as he checks a box next to my name. “You can do chair set up for the ceremony. Once it’s done, all the guests will make their way outside for cocktails in the garden. We’ll have to very quickly turn the room over for the reception portion.”

“Right. No problem.”

“I’m sure you know already, but the man getting married is a business partner and family friend of the Kincaids, so everything needs to be perfect today.”

I don’t know why I should know that, but I nod enthusiastically. “Hustle. Perfect. Got it.”

He looks me up and down again, frowning, “You won’t be given special treatment here because you’re a friend of the Kincaids,” he says with a sneer. And then he walks away. I don’t need special treatment, but I have a feeling that he might like me less for being Charlotte’s friend.

Two groups are forming among the staff, and I have no idea which one I should be joining. The first is all women, but the second has three guys and one girl.

“Over here,” a blonde calls to me, the only female with the male group. She gives me a friendly wave. “You’re in the set up and take down crew with us.”

I let out a breath of air, glad someone reached out and made my first day a bit easier. “Thank you.”

“I’m Brittany.”

“Hi. I’m Honeyeh.”

“What a cool name,” Brittany’s brown eyes take in all my details. “You’re gorgeous.”

My mouth opens and closes because I’m not quite sure how to respond. Women can be like that, sometimes, really open and friendly. Then again, they can also have an agenda, and the friendliness is a mask for the cut they’re about to deliver. “Thank you. So are you.”

Brittany preens under my compliment, and the truth is obvious. She did have an agenda, it was to illicit a compliment from me in return. But a girl who just needs her ego fed a bit is totally fine with me, especially since she can help me learn the ropes.

I could use a friend right about now.

“Thanks,” she gives me this exaggerated glam-girl smile. “I moved to Vegas to be a showgirl. I’m still working on it, but I think I’ve got my look almost dialed in.”

I nod, because there isn’t really much else to do. I have no idea what she looked like before. But in her uniform, she looks just like the rest of us. White Oxford, black pants, neatly tied-back hair.

One of the guys standing in the group claps his hands to get our attention. “I’m coordinator tonight. The guest list is small, less than twenty. We’ll set up ten chairs on either side of the arch.”

We start out of the small back room and move into the function space.

I nearly gasp out loud at the arch that’s been erected. It’s covered in bright, exotic flowers that infuse the muted room with bright color and beauty. It’s gorgeous.

Along the walls are giant arrangements of the same flowers.

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“I know,” Brittany whispers. “If I don’t make it as a showgirl, I’m marrying the kind of guy who can pay for flowers like these.”

I give Brittany the side eye. Clearly, she’s a woman with a lot of plans. Mine currently aren’t that grand.

My mother, brother, and I moved to the United States ten years ago, after my father disappeared. When she died a few years ago, I became my brother’s caregiver. And when he developed a rare liver disease...

I’m just trying to get him the medical care he needs. “I don’t need flowers. I’d settle for health insurance.”

Brittany laughs. “Girl, with a face and body like yours, you ought to dream big.”

I look down at my fitted Oxford, smoothing the pleats that show off my small waist. I wish she was right. But I mostly I feel like I attract a lot of Mr. Right Now kind of guys.

I date sometimes, but the moment I mention being my brother’s guardian, or heaven forbid, his illness, whatever heat had filled my date’s eyes just disappears.

I get it. I’m a lot.

We set up the chairs, and then ready the tablecloths, plates, and silverware, knowing we’ll only have a few short minutes to change the room over when the ceremony is done.

Waiting discreetly in a small room off the function room, I watch the guests file in. Each man wears a suit that costs more than what I make in a month, all of them handsome.

Some come with a beautiful woman on their arms while others file in alone.

Mason walks in with Charlotte at his side, his arm wrapped around her waist. She catches my eyes and gives me an enthusiastic wave and a thumbs up.

Mr. Stanley tosses me a glare, muttering under his breath.

But his words are drowned out by Brittany as she cranes her neck. “Now see. That’s what I’m talking about. I need a husband like that.”

Behind us, one of the guys working set up scoffs. “Oh please. We all know you’d end up on your back before the appetizers on the first date were even served.”

“Fuck off, Brian,” Brittany snaps back. “We both know you’re a slutty bottom. Besides, what I do for work and how I date are two totally different things. Mostly.” Then she leans closer to me. “Stay away from Brian. He’s a snarky bitch.”

I don’t know if Brian hears her or not as he quips back, “Good luck explaining your career as a prostitute to your super-rich future husband.”

I look at her in confusion. We work at a restaurant...

Brittany lets out a huff. “To make extra money, I work as an escort on the side.”

My eyes go wide, but I press my lips together to keep them shut. Brittany has been a big help, I don’t want to irritate her.

“The pay is really good, and it helps me learn polish,” she says, her nose lifting in the air. “And I don’t always sleep with the guys. Only when they offer me a really big tip.”

“Oh. Right.” I nod like this is a totally normal thing. I don’t mean to judge, but it’s a career I hope never to explore.

The ceremony begins, and I let out a sigh of relief, glad to have an excuse to end this conversation.

The groom steps up to the arch, his perfect suit in complete contrast to his sharp looks and his tattooed hands. He looks bad ass, despite wearing Armani.

That is until his bride appears. Gorgeous in a mermaid wedding dress, her honey hair done up in a simple but beautiful twist, I look back at him to see his eyes light up, a smile making his entire appearance soften.

Brittany must see it too because we both sigh at the same time.

“The estrogen in here has reached an all-time high,” Brian grouses from behind us. “Is this why women put out at weddings?”

“Pig,” Brittany lobs back, leaning out a little further as the ceremony begins. “The groom. That’s Killian Smith. His oldest brother is a real-life duke in England.”

“A duke?” I gasp.

Brittany nods. “Yeah. You’d think the rest of the family wouldn’t work. But they own this major real estate company with some organized-crime ties. The groom is their enforcer. That’s what I hear.”

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Is this common Vegas knowledge? I'm good friends with Charlotte Kincaid and I had no idea.

"And the Smiths are close with the Kincaids?" Charlotte has really moved up in the world. Maybe she could set me up on a date.... I don't need someone rich, but I'd love a guy who was dependable. Stable. And who had medical benefits. Can I put that on a dating app?

"They do real estate business with Mason Kincaid. And one of them, Gris Smith, is marrying Arabella Kincaid."

Royalty marrying royalty. That I understand.

Brittany scans the small gathering. "But the biggest fish in the Smith family is Triston Smith, Vegas's billionaire playboy." And she points at one of the men sitting on the end of one of the aisles.

I can only see the back of him, but his suit is cut to show off his broad shoulders and tapered waist. His hair is perfectly groomed, the back of his neck holding that slightest bit of tan that makes him look even more attractive. "If he's a playboy, how come he doesn't have a date?"

"I don't know, but I know that Veronica Clairmont has been seen on his arm a lot lately. They've been on all the gossip blogs."

Of course he dates a woman with a name like Veronica. It's sophisticated and sexy. She's probably blonde too, tall, model-thin, with the most amazing wardrobe.

I let out a long slow breath, refusing to sigh again. I can't afford to live in a fantasy about scoring a date with a man like that. I'll have to leave that to Brittany.

I've got to keep my head down and my focus on getting my brother healthy. Maybe after that...

"You may kiss the bride," the justice of the peace calls across the assembled guests. I snap my head back up, setting my thoughts aside. The bride and groom kiss and I have to hold back another sigh, it's so romantic.

They make their way down the aisle, the guests following them toward the patio doors.

As soon as the guests step outside, we'll have to turn over the room.

Most say their hellos to the bride and groom stationed by the door and then move outside where bartenders wait to begin serving them. I see Charlotte standing next to Mason, his arm possessively placed around her waist, his hand splayed out on the small of her back. A stab of jealousy makes my chest tight. It's not that I wish Mason was mine, I'd just like that kind of support. To be wrapped in a cocoon of strength like that.

A few guests remain in the room as we stand at the ready.

Finally, when there are only two people left, Triston Smith and an older woman, our coordinator takes a step forward. "We've only got fifteen minutes. I think we should start."

We all rush out, folding up the chairs and setting them to the side. I'm careful not to look at Triston Smith or the older woman he's talking to in quiet tones. I'm not sure if we should have waited, but we can at least give them the illusion of privacy.

But as Brian and I set up one of the tables and I toss the tablecloth over the top, the woman Triston was speaking with flags me by snapping her fingers. They're covered in gaudy rings that click together as she waves her hand. "You," she calls over to me, giving me a glare. "Is there anything to drink besides champagne? I'd prefer a Chardonnay."

Triston looks at me too, our gazes colliding. I feel the color rise in my cheeks. If the back of him is attractive, his face is...just wow. Gorgeous dark brown eyes, strong cheeks and jaw, just enough softness in his lips to make him completely kissable. My whole body responds before I drop my gaze.

"Of course, ma'am. I'll find that for you right away." Brian huffs out a breath and I'm not sure if he's irritated with me or her. Was I not supposed to serve her?

I'm in it now so I turn and practically run to the bar. Which is probably for the best.

I have never responded to a man like that, and I don't welcome the reaction now. All that matters tonight is getting Mr. Stanley to bring me back for another function tomorrow.

I step out to the bar. "A guest inside wants Chardonnay."

The bartender pours it for me. "This better not be for you."

My lips part in surprise. "No. I..."

"Just kidding," he gives me a wink.

First days suck. I rush back inside, looking for the woman who requested it. Instead, Triston Smith stands alone.

I stop dead, my eyes going wide as my tongue swells in my mouth. What do I do now?

“Allow me,” he steps up in front of me. But instead of taking the glass from my hand, he reaches into his pocket, pulling out a card. As he takes the glass, he pushes the card into my hand.

“Sir?” I ask, staring down at the card.

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He leans close and I get a whiff of his cologne, a light musk that has hints of cedarwood and pine. His voice is low and deep as it reverberates over my skin. “Call me.”

My mouth drops open. He is not asking me out. He can’t be. “I’m sorry, sir, but I can’t.... Mr. Kincaid has strict policies.”

From the corner of my eye, I see Mason Kincaid step back into the room. I wince. Am I about to be in trouble? I cannot catch a break. “Triston? What’s taking you so long?” he calls across the room.

Then Mason catches sight of me. My shoulders curl. This is all wrong. I’m supposed to be setting up tables. I don’t know Mason very well, but he’s so intimidating and I can feel Mr. Stanley’s glare burning into my back. “Honeyeh, is my business partner giving you trouble?”

“Honeyeh,” Triston repeats. “Interesting name.”

I put his card in my pocket, taking a step back. I need to get back to work before I get in trouble. “It’s Persian. My mother...” My hand flutters as I see Mr. Stanley’s arms cross. Crap. Crap. Crap. “My apologies for dallying, Mr. Kincaid. I will make certain the tables are set very quickly.”

“It isn’t your fault, Honeyeh, I can see Tris was distracting you.” He comes to stand next to me, and my hands clasp together. I’m caught in a trap. I can’t leave this conversation without irritating my benefactor, but I have to get back to work before my direct boss gets really upset.

“Actually, I was about to offer her a job, because I can see she is an excellent employee,” Triston replies before I am able.

My head snaps up, as our gazes collide again. A job? That’s why he wants me to call him?

“She is wonderful. Which is why I can’t allow you to steal her.”

I swallow. Did I think I was caught before? Now I’m stuck between two titans. “Mr. Kincaid has been most accommodating, giving me off-hour shifts,” I murmur. “And thank you for the offer, but I should get back. Mr. Stanley...” I wave my hand back toward the irritated floor manager.

Mason doesn’t notice my hint. “I wish I could do more. I know how difficult the weekend hours are for childcare.”

Mr. Stanley is forgotten. Because the most gorgeous man I’ve ever met, Triston Smith, is learning all the intimate details of my life. “My brother is old enough...”

Triston Smith looks at me with an unwavering stare that makes me want to dip my eyes to the floor. It’s filled with something I don’t understand, but it makes me want to squirm. “If flexibility is what you need, I have a position within my house that is very flexible.”

I take another step back, wringing my hands. “There are a great many doctor’s appointments. I?—”

I can’t work for Triston Smith. I’d never get any work done. I’d end up making a complete fool of myself. I’d...

“Call me,” he says and then both men are striding off, leaving me standing alone, my

hands still clasped together.

I look up to find Brian and Mr. Stanley wearing matching looks of annoyance. My stomach drops.

Mr. Stanley waves me over, his brows drawn together. “What was that?”

“Mr. Smith asked for a glass of wine.” Not true but close enough.

“So you direct him to one of the servers. You don’t stand there chatting while the rest of the crew fills in for you.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Stanley. It won’t happen again.”

“No. It won’t. I don’t need your help tomorrow night, Honeyeh. And you can take the rest of the night off.”

I feel the tears prick at my eyes. “Are you firing me?”

“No. I can’t fire a Mr. Kincaid hire.” So he’s just not going to give me hours. Inside, frustration kicks at the walls of my stomach.

But there is no point in arguing. With a quick nod, I turn to leave, trying not to cry. His “not firing” me is as bad as just letting me go. I can’t pay medical bills without shifts.

I start for the back room swiping at my eyes. Brittany falls in step next to me, wrapping her arm around my shoulders. “Don’t listen to them. They’re both just pissed you’re too hot for them. And the boss-boss paid attention to you. What’s Mason Kincaid like?”

“He’s fine, I guess,” I say, my voice wavering. “I’m more worried about Mr. Stanley. I really need this job.”

Brittany stops. “Give me your phone.”

“What?”

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“Your phone.”

I hand it to her, and she types in her name and number. “If you need money, you call me. You could make a killing at my other job.”

I seriously doubt I’d ever take her up on the offer. But I guess if I got desperate enough...

I take the phone back, say goodbye, and collect my stuff.

I just got fired-not-fired. And while I got two other job offers tonight, for entirely different reasons, they are both awful. Rock meet hard place. Which one is worse?

The answer is simple. Call Triston Smith.

My stomach clenches. It’s like jumping from the pan into the fire...

CHAPTER TWO

Honeyeh

Darius stares at me as I smooth down the floral sundress I’ve put on for my interview. “You’re wearing that?”

He’s fifteen and he thinks he knows everything. “Yes. I’m wearing this. What should I be wearing to an interview, smarty pants?”

“Not that.” He wrinkles his nose. “You look like you’re dressed for a date.”

That comment actually makes me bite my lip. Shoot. I definitely don’t want to give off that vibe.

I can’t believe I’m even contemplating working for Triston Smith, my reaction to him was just so...

Then again, I don’t I have a choice. I look at the dress again, turning in the mirror.

I’m guessing the women Triston dates would never wear a floral sundress. They’d have on something posh and sophisticated like silk or crepe, paired with designer shoes.

I shake my head. It doesn’t matter. I’m a college student whose last job was as a barista. I’m also an RA in the upper-classmen dorms at the University of Nevada, but I don’t get paid for that. It’s more of an exchange. Free rent for helping drunk people get in their rooms when they lock themselves out.

I wore this dress to that interview too. I really ought to pick up something more professional, but I have no idea where I’d come up with the money. “I don’t have anything else,” I say with a sigh. “It’ll have to do.”

Darius glares at me in the mirror. “You should buy something.” I think his guilt at all the bills I have to pay for us, for him, frequently comes off as anger, so I leave it be.

Instead, I collect up my purse and adjust the strap of my sandal. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“I’m not a baby. I can take care of myself.”

“I know,” I snap back. “But since you’re so grown up, how about helping me calm my pre-interview jitters instead of biting my head off?”

He winces. “Sorry, Honeyeh. I’m just...” He hangs his head, and I get it. He hates that I’m always scrambling for money. But this is what people do for the people they love. They help, even when it’s hard.

Walking over to him, I push up on tiptoe. He’s thin as a rail but taller than me. Gently, I kiss his cheek, my hand on his skin, making his jaundice even more noticeable. “Wish me luck.”

“Good luck,” he says, hesitating. “And Honeyeh, don’t take the job if the guy is a real asshole.”

“All right,” I say, but I already know I’ll take any position Triston Smith offers. It’s not that I want to work for him. I can’t think of a more complicated relationship to have with my boss. But I can’t afford to say no.

Heading outside, I walk the three blocks to Clark County Road and hop on a bus. Once I get off at the stop closest to the address Triston gave me, I think it’s going to be a fifteen-minutewalk to his house. His staff manager gave me his address and I mapped it all in advance just to be sure I’m not late.

I’ve left myself plenty of time, in case the bus is running off schedule, or it has more stops than I think, but my foot still bounces with nerves as the bus moves through the heart of Vegas.

My hands clasp and unclasp in my lap as the bus stops several times, picking up mostly tourists.

I look down at my dress, frowning. Darius is right. I should have worn my white

Oxford and black pants. Even though Triston has already seen me in that outfit and knows it's my waitressing attire, it still looks more professional than this.

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I finally make it to the stop on the west side of the city limits and get off the bus. Pulling out the map I printed out from my bag, I try to get my bearings. I'm no good at following walking GPS directions. Figuring out my direction, I take a quick look at my watch. I've still got a half an hour before my appointment.

I try to keep my steps slow, to keep from sweating in the mid-afternoon sun, but I feel perspiration break out on my back. Lifting my hair off my neck, I duck into the shade which is only a small help.

Summers here are brutal, but at least they're dry.

I do remember the humidity back in Iran, when we lived along the sea. I miss the water. But Vegas has become our home, and with all of Darius's health issues, I'm grateful to live here in the States. We lost our mom to a heart attack two and a half years ago. Darius is all I have left, and I'd do almost anything to keep him healthy.

I reach Triston Smith's house, the large iron gate blocking my entrance but not my view.

The house is massive, a pristine white structure with beautiful sloping roof lines, sitting amidst sweeping grounds. It looks like a fairy tale.

A voice sounds through a speaker. "Can I help you?"

"Honeyeh Karimi here for an appointment with Mr. Smith."

A buzzing sounds and I push at the metal door within the gate. It opens to allow me

to enter, clanging behind me as it closes.

Walking up the driveway, I can't help but ogle the beautiful landscaping that is so lush and green despite the Vegas heat. When I reach the steps, the door swings open, an older woman in a knee-length black dress standing in the opening. "Honeyeh?"

"Yes," I say, wondering if I should shake her hand. "Pleased to meet you."

"And you. The staff calls me Mrs. Raith. Please come in."

I do, the cool air delicious on my skin as I enter the massive entry with marble floors. "This way." She points down a hall at the other end of the grand entrance and then begins walking so that I fall in step behind her.

I press my hands to my sides, keeping my steps light, as we enter the hall and move to the back of the house. She opens a door, revealing a small office, and gestures for me to step inside and take a seat.

I do as she requests, smoothing the back of my skirt as I sit.

Is Mrs. Raith conducting the interview? Will I work for her? Relief makes me wilt in the chair as she circles the desk and takes a seat.

I have no idea how Mrs. Raith will be, but not working directly for Triston will make this so much easier. I feel the tiniest twinge of disappointment, but I shut it down. This arrangement will be much healthier. In fact, if I could not see Triston at all, it would probably be best.

"So, Honeyeh. Mr. Smith has recommended you to join our house staff. Do you have any experience in the service industry?"

“Yes,” I nod my head. Smiling. “I was a barista and a waitress.”

She gives me a warm smile, her eyes crinkling at the corners. “I meant more of the maid variety.”

“Oh.” My cheeks heat. Of course that is what she meant. Trying to swallow down my embarrassment, I keep going. “I did have to clean as a barista, including complicated espresso machines.”

She nods. “Good. That’s good. Perhaps we can place you in the kitchen as support staff.”

My brow furrows. “Is that the open position. On the kitchen staff?”

Mrs. Raith’s eyes widen like my question has caught her off guard. “Not precisely. It’s just a good place to start here at the house and then we can promote someone else into the open position.”

That makes sense and I nod as I let out a long breath. Mrs. Raith seems kind and considerate. “I’m a quick learner, Mrs. Raith, and a hard worker. If you choose to hire me, I won’t let you down.”

Her smile softens. “I’m sure you won’t. Mr. Smith did mention that you might need some flexibility for doctor’s appointments?”

I nibble at the inside of my cheek. “I’m afraid so, I hope that’s all right. My brother is on the list for a liver transplant, but until the surgery happens...” And even after, should he be blessed with the opportunity, our situation is liable to be intense for a while.

She waves her hand. “It’s no problem. We frequently keep a few more staff members

than essential so that we're never lacking."

I sigh with relief. "Thank you, Mrs. Raith. I'm very excited about the possibility of working here."

She stands, holding out her hand, and I stand too, surprise surely making my eyes wide. Is that it? Is the interview done already?

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“Congratulations, Honeyeh, and welcome to the staff.”

“Thank you so much!” I can hardly contain my excitement.

“If it’s all right, I’m going to have you start today.”

“Of course. That’s fantastic.” I draw in a deep breath, trying to calm myself. I was so nervous to come here but starting right away helps me so much.

We shake hands and then she reaches for a folder and hands it to me. “This is all the paperwork I’ll need. If you wouldn’t mind completing it today, I’d be grateful. Please take your time, you’re welcome to use my office for as long as you need.”

“Of course. Mrs. Raith, I’m very excited to join the staff, thank you again.”

With a final tilt of her chin, she walks around the desk and out of the room, leaving the door open.

I watch her go, and then turn back to the desk, a pen sitting neatly on top of the folder. That was the shortest interview I’ve ever had.

What’s more, Mrs. Raith could not have been nicer. My shoulders slump with relief as I take a moment to flop back into the chair, my eyes closing.

But I quickly sit back up, drawing in a deep breath of cleansing air before I slide the folder across the desk, grab the pen, ready to begin.

I'm not even off the first page when I see my perspective salary listed under my name. A small cry falls from my lips. Its nearly triple the hourly rate I made at Starbucks.

My eyes actually mist with tears. With that kind of money, I can catch up on the medical bills and start saving for the surgery.

The debts are deep enough that I can't find a surgeon who'll perform the operation without a hefty down payment.

But with money like this...

I stiffen my spine, moving on in the paperwork. This is my first chance to prove to Mrs. Raith that I can be efficient and hard working.

This job could make all the difference, and I'll do everything in my power to keep it.

CHAPTER THREE

Triston

Mason rumbles into the phone. "Are you listening to me?"

My attention snaps back to the call. The answer is no, I wasn't listening at all. I was thinking of Honeyeh downstairs in my house, under my roof, hoping for me to be her benefactor.

Well...employer. To-may-to, to-mah-to, as my mother would say.

"Of course I'm listening. The Russian Bratva is causing increasing amounts of trouble, and you want to..."

He rumbles out his frustration. “I want to shut down every business they have here in Vegas. I want to run them out of town. I want?—”

“I’m working on it. One step at a time and we’re about to make a major move.” Though quietly, I think Mason is being too aggressive. It’s going to lead to trouble.

“It doesn’t feel like enough,” Mason bites back through gritted teeth. “They bombed one of our clubs. Shot up your brother’s home. They deserve to be punished.”

It’s a valid point. “You’ve already bankrupted one of their casinos and I’m about to complete a hostile takeover of a second.” And most important as far as I’m concerned. “They’re flailing like a wounded animal because they know you’re going to make the kill.”

“I know.” Mason calms and I hear the soft squeak of his chair as he sits back. “You’re right. I’m just done with dangerous enemies. I want my family safe.”

I grimace. I’m not sure that’s possible. Between his legal empire and his deals with the Mafia and Bratva, safety can never be guaranteed.

Then again, Mason is a man made to tame the world. So am I, though I prefer to use compromise more than Mason. A good threat can work wonders as well. But what he’s doing, it’s going to bite us all in the ass if we’re not careful.

I might have thought marriage would have softened him. And it has in some ways. But in others, he’s become sharper. Harder. It’s like he’s got even more reason to fight.

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A soft knock sounds on the door that I ignore.

“Safety is a worthy goal.” I lightly tap the desk. “But...”

“Not you too,” his voice gains back its sharp edge. “My brothers would have me shrink our holdings, make ourselves smaller. But to me, that would only be a weakness.”

“I see your point.” I clear my throat. “But Dimitri Ivanov is a coiled snake and deserves a careful hand. Move too quickly, or too aggressively, and he will bite.”

“He can bite, just as long as after, we make him grovel.”

Dimitri Ivanov doesn’t grovel. He does occasionally bargain, however. I have no doubt Mason will win this fight. But how long it lasts, how many hits Dimitri lands, and who else is ruined is all up for debate.

“If begging is your end game, you’re going to have to be patient.”

“Hmph,” he rumbles, but doesn’t argue, clearly ready to put the conversation to rest. “Now seems like a good time to ask, how is Honeyeh? Has she come in for an interview?”

Honeyeh. My balls tighten just thinking about the little waitress who is about to become a maid. “Interviewing right now.”

“Good. Take care of her, Triston. She’s precious to Charlotte, which means...”

“Understood.” I hang up the phone running a hand down my jaw. It’s an easy task in theory. Hiring Honeyeh. But in other ways, it’s going to make my life difficult.

Another knock sounds at the door. Lifting my head, I call, “Come in.”

Only one of two people would interrupt me in the middle of the day by knocking. My administrative assistant or my staff manager. Both are welcome to do so any time, day or night.

But I can only assume that Mrs. Raith is at the door and the interview is over.

I look at my watch as she steps into the room. Honeyeh was early, I noted the time the gate unlocked but even considering that, it was a short interview.

“Mrs. Raith.”

“Mr. Smith.” She bobs her chin, the American version of the curtsy.

I wait, leaning back in my chair.

“Interview went very well. She’s sweet, well-mannered, and should have the right work ethic for a position on our staff.”

I frown. I know I’ve hired Honeyeh as an employee, but I’m not interested in watching her scrub floors.

Not only is she connected to Mason but there is something so delicate about her. Giving her my card was a momentary lapse in judgment, a reaction that had to be quickly covered.

Mason and I are on delicate ground and messing with his wife’s friend isn’t going to

strengthen my position.

Which perhaps means I shouldn't have hired her to work in my house, but it was the only position for which she was even remotely qualified. "Where are you thinking of placing her?"

"Kitchen."

I frown. "Doing what?"

"Dishes. She has experience there."

The creases on my brow deepen. "Any other possibilities?"

Mrs. Raith's mouth twitches. "Laundry. Housekeeping would also be acceptable if you'd prefer."

"Something light duty." I can't pay her to just hang about the house all day.

But I watched her, with her delicate frame, trying to move tables with a man twice her size and it was completely ridiculous.

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I rumble with frustration at the trap I've made for myself.

If I wanted to fuck her, I should probably just do it, and then send her on her way with a generous parting gift. Then again, Mason is clearly invested in Smith Enterprises, and for my future plans to move forward, I'll need Mason's support.

Which means keeping my hands off Honeyeh. I don't date anyone for longer than a month. It's an iron rule that keeps women from getting too attached. And as my business plans will not develop in such a short time, I need to leave the tempting new maid alone.

"Light duty? Should I have her dust?" Mrs. Raith eyes me with understandable suspicion. She is an excellent manager of my household, discreet, agreeable, but with enough grit that the staff follows her without complaint or incident.

"Dusting works," I nod, rising from my chair. "Where is Honeyeh now?"

The woman's brows lift a fraction on an inch. The change is almost indiscernible, but I catch the judgment. It was unlike her and unwelcome. I stare back until she answers, "My office. Door is open."

Striding out of my office, I head down the back stairs. Adjusting the tie at my neck, I smooth it down as I make my way down the stairs. I stop in the doorway, catching sight of Honeyeh. She nips at her lip, fiddling with the pen as she stares at the papers in front of her.

A pretty little dress drapes down her body, her feet crossed at the ankles with strappy

sandals decorating them.

Her skirt had ridden up a bit, revealing a generous length of her legs and I devour the view, as she reads the papers in front her, oblivious to my watchful gaze.

Her mouth purses, her bottom lip puffing out as her brow furrows. I'd like to stare at her all day but... "Need help?"

She jumps, the pen falling from her hand and landing on the floor as she gives a small yelp. "Mr. Smith."

"Triston," I correct. There is no point in pretending this isn't partially personal. And the entire staff will understand the distinction. Honeyeh might be a maid, but she is here by my grace and that of the Kincaids.

I know I'm dancing with trouble, but I want to hear my name on her lips.

I step into the room and drop down on a knee to retrieve the pen.

But she bends down too, our hands meeting on the pen, my fingers covering hers.

Her skin is as silky as I'd imagined, and I stroke my thumb over the back of her hand.

Her head snaps up, her eyes wide, her lips only a few inches from mine as they softly part in surprise. "Oh. I'm sorry, Mr. Smith—er—Triston."

My cock stiffens. "No need." I don't make any attempt to move, her heady honey-floral scent filling my nostrils. "How's the paperwork coming?"

"Good." She starts to pull back, but I tighten my grip on her hand. This was a bad idea. I should just fuck her. "I was...um...reading the nondisclosure."

“Were you? Most people just sign. I actually have Mrs. Raith review that section with employees on their first day to be sure every employee understands.”

She nips at her lip. “I’m a pre-law major, so I guess, maybe, I read contracts differently from most people.”

“Pre-law? Interesting choice.” I finally let her go, knowing I’ve pushed past the edge of acceptable already.

She straightens up, taking the pen with her. “I think the legal system and the principles of democracy in the United States are wonderful. I’d love to be part of it.”

I should have asked her this question before I hired her as a maid. I could have brought her on as an assistant to an assistant in the real estate office. It would have better experience for her and then she wouldn’t be in my house.

Then again, a whole bunch of the men who work there would be free to ogle her. I stiffen in a bit of irritation at the idea of other men’s eyes on her. Jesus fucking Christ, I cannot afford to become possessive. “What year are you in school?”

Her hands clasp in her lap. “Only a sophomore.”

No wonder she seems so innocent. “Just two years into your degree?”

“I can only afford to take a few classes at a time, and so it’s taking a long time.”

How old does that make her? I stand back up, my eyes glancing to the pile of papers in front of her. “Did you need any help?” This is Mrs. Raith’s job, not mine. But again, Honeyeh is not a normal hire.

Honeyeh shakes her head. “No. Thank you, though.”

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I don't want to leave, which is a big fucking problem.

I could barely concentrate on the call with Mason and I'm about to offer to take her on a tour of my house, just to spend more time with her, when my phone dings that someone is at the gate.

I pull the phone from my pocket, a text message immediately popping up that Veronica has arrived.

I should be relieved. Veronica will be an excellent reminder of why touching Honeyeh is a bad idea.

Then again, Veronica is abrasive on a good day. Spoiled. Entitled. She has a difficult time taking no for an answer, which means she's not taking the break-up well.

It doesn't matter that I was clear. But Veronica isn't used to being held to rules.

"In that case, I'll leave you to your paperwork." I turn to leave, Mrs. Raith passing by the doorway to her office to answer the door.

I'm about to close the door to the office, but the sound of Veronica pounding on the front door before Mrs. Raith has a chance to reach it, stills my hand. I let out a rumble, not appreciating how this meeting is starting.

Veronica knew the terms. I date women for one month. That's it. But every one of the ladies thinks she will be the exception to my rule. That she will be the one who changes my mind and my ways and turns me into husband material.

Like I said, Veronica has always been more of everything. And she definitely thinks she's special. Whatever she's here to say will not be pretty.

Not that I care.

But Honeyeh is about to hear it all. It's part of being on the staff, but it would have been nice...

It's no use playing out what if snow. I wanted to keep Honeyeh at a distance and Veronica is about to help me accomplish that goal. I leave the door open and step into the hall.

Mrs. Raith answers the door, Veronica yelling before she's even through the door. "Where is he? I want to see that rat fucking bastard so he can tell me we're done to my face."

Honeyeh emits a soft cry behind me. I know it's a sound of distress, but my cock still twitches. It's the pretty kind of noise that women sometimes make when they...

"Ms. Clairmont. Good to see you."

"Please, Mrs. Raith, don't placate me. Like we don't both know that I was just the next number on his roster of women. I mean, I knew he was a low-life scumbag, with a filthy cock, but I thought he might see reason this time."

Clearing my throat, I step into the entry, just wanting this one over and done.

But the moment that Veronica sees me, her face twists into a rage. "You English bastard!" she cries, her hands clenching into fists.

There are a lot of names I can be called, and some of the ones she first lobbed landed

with some accuracy. But English aristocracy takes the term bastard seriously. As the spare to a dukedom, a bastard is one of the few insults I am not. “Wonderful to see you too, Veronica.”

“Don’t you dare patronize me,” she stomps toward me, her Jimmy Choos clapping on my marble floor. “You ‘terminated our relationship’ via a DocuSign?”

DocuSign is efficient. “You weren’t nearly as irritated when I asked you to sign the initial relationship agreement with the termination date clearly stated.”

She huffs, “That’s because I thought?—”

I know what she thought, I don’t need her to finish.

“I’m sorry to have disappointed you, Veronica, but I was nothing but honest.”

Her lip curls. “Honest? That you were using me for sex? Or was it to further your career?”

I softly snort. The sex was mediocre at best and while she did make good tabloid fodder, it hardly helped me close any deals. The truth is, she was another pretty face to pass the time even if her father was a successful investment banker two decades ago.

She opens her mouth to yell some more, but then stops again, her eyes going over my shoulder, narrowing.

My jaw tightens because I already know that Honeyeh has stepped out of Mrs. Raith’s office.

Veronica’s hands unclench just enough that her nails resemble claws. And they’re

aimed right at Honeyeh.

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“Who is that?” she hisses, her lip curling as her gaze slides down Honeyeh. “Your next conquest? Are you ordering your women brought in from abroad now?”

“Veronica,” my voice takes on the sharp note I was trying to avoid. I want to scare Honeyeh off from thinking we might have a personal relationship, not permanently damage her. “Abusing my staff is expressly forbidden in the contract.”

“Staff? Are you hiring maids to suck your cock now?” She spits, looking back at Honeyeh. “Don’t do it. He’s a soulless animal who will devour you and then leave your carcass to rot.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Honeyeh

Triston reaches Veronica in two strides, his hand decisively grabbing her elbow. He makes a snarling noise as he moves her toward the front door, Veronica struggling to keep up with his long steps.

But Veronica isn’t done, she’s still spitting vitriol over her shoulder, aimed at me. “You aren’t special, so don’t go thinking that you are. You’re just a number, a whore he paid to do his bidding.”

I have never considered myself special. At this point, I’d settle for being average. But despite what Brittany offered, I’ve never considered selling myself. The idea fills me with sick dread.

“There was a line of women before you and there will be a line after you.”

Triston opens the door, his hand still under Veronica’s elbow as he steps outside, pulling her with him.

I’m staring, my mouth open, as Mrs. Raith rushes toward me. “I’m so sorry, Honeyeh. It’s usually not this exciting around here.”

“I...” I swallow down a lump. Veronica’s words were full of vitriol. And while many of them were aimed at me, her assessment of the situation was all wrong. I’m just some girl that Triston Smith felt sorry for. One that is tangentially related to his partner, so he’s doing me a favor, which is really meant for Mason’s benefit.

Triston walks back into the house, his long strides quickly closing the distance between us, his gaze filled with an intensity that makes me hectic inside.

My heart flutters in my chest as blood rushes in my ears. In this moment I have to wonder...

Did Veronica’s words have some measure of truth? Will I be asked to...

“Honeyeh,” Triston’s voice cuts through my thoughts. “Allow me to give you a tour of the house.”

I nod, a bit disoriented and lost for words, as his hand lightly grips my elbow. He’s a man in charge, there is no denying that, and I allow him to lead me away from Mrs. Raith and into the center of the entryway once again.

Part of me wants to ask about Veronica, about what she said, but I hold my tongue. If he wishes to discuss what just happened, he’ll bring it up. If not, I won’t ask.

To the left is a large study, the right looks to be a...

“Let’s start in the ballroom.”

“The ballroom,” I repeat, hesitating for just a moment. Who has a ballroom? His fingers lightly caress the exposed skin of my arm as he leads me into the massive space. It must be forty feet wide, and it runs the length of the house, with a wall of French doors that lead into a formal garden.

“It’s a lot, I know,” he says with a chuckle. “But as the CEO of my family’s company, I end up hosting a fair number of events.”

I can’t believe they didn’t have Killian and Chloe’s wedding here. It’s a much nicer space than the hotel room that his brother used. And the garden... “It’s beautiful.”

“Thank you,” he starts walking again, down the length of the ballroom toward the back of the house. “At the end of the ballroom is a hall that links to the kitchen. From there, we move into the far more personal spaces of the house.”

I nod. I’m sure the staff services both public and private spaces, but I make a note. Be cautious before entering the personal spaces.

We turn down the hall, into the huge industrial kitchen with an entire wall of Viking ranges with double ovens, a twenty-foot-long island filling the center of the room. “Wow.”

Triston chuckles. “You seem more impressed by the kitchen than you did the ballroom.”

“This is a place of purpose,” I say, hearing the awe that colors my voice. I clear my throat. “It’s impressive.”

He nods too as we move into a second, much smaller kitchen. “This is my personal space for making a smoothie or a quiet dinner.”

This kitchen opens into a family room with vaulted ceilings and floor-to-ceiling windows. It’s cozy, yet grand, and I can picture Triston in more casual attire, lounging on the large sectional.

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The idea of him in a more relaxed pose makes my cheeks heat. His hand is still on my arm, the slightly rougher feel of his palm making my skin sensitive and flushed.

“As you can imagine, this is one of the rooms I spend the most time in. It’s tucked in the back for privacy.”

“Of course,” I respond, sure he’s telling me that I should be in here as sparingly as possible. “How many staff members do you have here?”

“Grounds crew, guards, house staff,” he looks up at the ceiling like he’s calculating. “Close to fifty.”

I gasp. That’s a large number.

His response is to chuckle. “The Ducal estate that my oldest brother oversees has at least two hundred employees and the home I was raised in had a hundred. This house and staff are small by comparison.”

My lips part as I shake my head. Triston grew up as royalty. I can’t even imagine...

“I’ll let you in on a secret,” his voice drops, and I find myself leaning in, catching the masculine scent of his cologne which has notes of wood and leather.

“What is it?” I whisper.

“Having a house like this, hosting in a more personal space, it’s part of what makes a difference, makes people trust you more.”

That hardly seems like a secret, but the words have merit. Being here feels so much more personal than a hotel. “I’m surprised your brother didn’t marry here.”

He chuckles. “Family knows the truth. Most of the rooms in this house are an illusion. And as it’s my illusion, this might be one of the last places my brothers would wish to marry.”

I consider those words, not really understanding them. If my family had anything of value, I’d want to rejoice in it.

But I keep this thought to myself as we make our way up to the second floor. “Another set of stairs.”

Triston pushes me slightly ahead of him so that we’re making our way up single file on the narrower steps. “The one in the entry is for public use, the one by Mrs. Raith’s office for daily use of the staff, and this one is for my own private comings and goings. It leads right to the door of the main bedroom.”

I reach the top and step aside as I wait for Triston to show me whichever part of the house he wishes for me to see next.

His hand immediately settles on my elbow again. Not only do I find his touch pleasant, but I enjoy the wordless direction his hand provides. I’m more comfortable following someone else’s lead in nearly every situation, and I’m particularly nervous today.

But when he opens the door and we step into a bedroom, my feet stop as I suck in a breath, Veronica’s words echoing in my head. Why would he bring me here? What job am I really here to do?

He turns his head toward me, chuckling. “Even my bedroom needs to be dusted.”

“Dusted?”

“Yes. That’s the role we’ve decided to place you in.”

“Oh,” I give a small nervous laugh. “How foolish. I...” I can feel my cheeks getting hot. “Of course I would need to dust here. I thought I would be kitchen staff, that’s why...” My words die in my throat.

He draws in a long, slow breath, his eyes on the far wall as he pauses. “I’ve been trying to decide how best to utilize your skills and temperament, and after seeing you here, I have a different role in mind for you. Not only will your cleaning duties be lighter, I’d like you to act as a buffer between myself and the rest of the staff.”

I have no idea what kind of actual duties that might entail, but I nod anyway. As long as I’m gainfully employed, I’d scrub every inch of this house on my hands and knees if I had to.

He leads me toward another door, and we step into a massive bathroom that is so luxurious, it looks like it should be in a magazine. The shower is six feet long with several shower heads and a long narrow window that goes the full length, allowing sweeping views of the backyard.

“There is a cleaning crew that does the deep scrubbing, but besides them, only a very few staff members have access to these spaces. You will be one of them.”

I blink a few times. “Really?”

He smiles. “As I mentioned, you have a pleasing way about you, Honeyeh. Quiet. Conscientious.”

I dip my chin. “Thank you.”

“You’ll be an asset here. Now, let me show you the rest of the second floor. Then we can pass by the formal dining room before Mrs. Raith takes you again to finish your onboarding.”

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“Does she have more paperwork for me?”

“No. But, after she gives you the signing bonus, she’ll have you start working today.”

My eyes nearly fall out of my head, they go so wide. “I beg your pardon. Bonus?”

“Paychecks are given every two weeks, for the previous two. To keep employees from going an entire month without pay, I frequently give a starting bonus.”

“That’s so thoughtful,” I whisper, actually feeling a prick of tears. Whatever amount of money it is, it will help.

“Don’t give me too much credit. Veronica has a few things right. Giving bonuses builds loyalty. I don’t like turnover in my staff because loyalty leads to discretion.”

I nod. With the money he offered me for salary, I’ll stay for as long as he’ll have me.

But this is the second time Triston has mentioned strategy. He goes to great lengths to create ideal reactions in people. It’s a trait I note.

We continue on the tour, as I see his home office, the spare bedrooms, and the formal dining room before I’m returned to Mrs. Raith.

Triston gives me a single dip of his chin before he leaves Mrs. Raith’s office. I’m left watching the door, feeling like I know both more and less about the man who is going to be my boss.

Mrs. Raith clears her throat.

I turn back to her, giving my head a little shake to put my thoughts about Triston Smith aside.

He's no less attractive than he was that first night; if anything, he's more so. But he's also my new boss and this job is the chance to save the money I'll need for Darius.

I cannot afford to be daydreaming about Triston. Even if he were interested back, which he isn't, it's clear he doesn't do commitment and that's my one requirement for dating.

"We have a benefit event coming up on Friday night," Mrs. Raith informs me. "We've already begun preparing, and I'm hoping you don't mind jumping right in to help get the house ready."

"Of course," I reply. "I'd love to begin. Thank you."

"Good," she says as she pushes an envelope toward me. "This is your signing bonus. Tomorrow, I'd like you here by eight."

I nod, slipping the envelope into my bag. Every day I work is another day I get paid. For the first time in a long time, I am filled with real hope. And that's reason enough to keep my head down and my eyes off my boss.

This could be the start of something really wonderful.

CHAPTER FIVE

Triston

My afternoon is no moreproductive than my morning. All day long, I picture Honeyeh in my house, in my private spaces, bent over various pieces of furniture...

I haven't fantasized about a woman this much since I was a teenager with my first girlfriend.

I'm considering tucking myself in a bathroom to squeeze one out just so I can get some work done.

It's almost a relief when my phone dings that someone has approached the gate.

I check the video feed, my brother Killian's Honda Pilot appearing on screen as he comes up the driveway.

I shake my head at his choice of vehicle. Chosen so that he can move around Vegas as anonymously as possible. Here is the thing about Killian. For a long time, I thought he might be certifiably insane.

He's been our family's dirty man, doing all the tasks that are unsavory and often bloody.

Which gives him license to say whatever comes into his head, never using a filter. It gets us all in trouble, and for a while, I thought it made him less. In some ways, though, it makes him more. Better. Honest. Real.

My role in the family would never allow me that kind of freedom. It's all a carefully crafted façade, right down to the dating contract.

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Not that his job didn't come with some serious downsides. We've all had our crosses to bear.

But now that he's married, and he seems more balanced than I've ever seen him, I know his role in the company has to change.

We're working him into security for both us and the Kincaids. Because while Killian uses his ability to walk through shadows to collect all kinds of intel on our enemies, Jake Kincaid has learned the ins and outs of security monitoring. Together, they'd make an unstoppable force.

I hired a company to install all my security at home, but an in-house team would allow us to better hide any activity that was on the gray side of legal.

Killian stops by the door, steps out of the car and comes up the steps.

I stand up, eager to move, looking for an excuse to get up from my desk. I don't normally meet my brother in the hall, but I can't stand another second of sitting. But as I make my way toward the stairs, I don't see or hear him.

I trot down to the ground floor, still not finding my brother as I stride down the hall and into the entry.

Where I stop. Killian leans against the jam of the massive entrance into the ballroom.

His arms are crossed, his chin notched up. "So tell me. How did you meet my brother again?"

Reaching the opening, I glance into the ballroom, my heart nearly stops in my chest. Honeyeh is up on a ten-foot-tall stepladder, dusting one of the three crystal chandeliers that adorn the room.

“Honeyeh.” My voice is sharp and I see her start in surprise. My heart stops, thinking she might fall, but she rights herself, grabbing the top of the ladder as the duster drops to the ground, creating a large clatter.

She lets out a cry, one of her hands coming to her chest. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. Just get down,” I bark back, striding toward her. I don’t want her on ladders like that, it’s dangerous.

I can’t question my visceral reaction, I’m too busy feeling hectic.

She starts down, bending a leg, just as I reach the bottom of the ladder. I only meant to help her but...

I can see straight up her dress to the crisp little pair of white panties that only accentuate the full, round curve of her ass.

My cock is hard as a rock even as I reach my hands up to grasp her hips and help her down.

Which might have been a mistake.

The curve of them fills my hands, her combination of muscle and softness making my brain fritz.

“Ahem,” Killian says behind me. “As I was asking...”

“Not now, Killian,” I grit out. “Mrs. Raith,” I call loudly, my hands lingering on Honeyeh even as she steps onto the floor.

My house manager appears a moment later. “Mr. Smith?”

“Why is Honeyeh up on a ladder?” The words come out like an accusation. I briefly glance at my brother, his eyebrows high up on his forehead.

“She was dusting,” Mrs. Raith answers, her head cocking to the side. “As we agreed would be a suitable role.”

I let out a long breath, slowly removing my hands from Honeyeh’s body as she turns to look back at me, her own eyes filled with questions, the crinkles around them, showing her worry.

Shit. She thinks I’m upset with her. My hand comes to the small of her back, my palm spreading wide into the gorgeous curve of it. “Why don’t you go home for the day, Honeyeh? We’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Go home?” She turns to me then, so that my hand slides to the curve of her small waist. I give the indent a small squeeze. “Did I do something wrong? I can correct whatever it might be. I promise I’ll complete whatever work is required. I...” Panic fills her voice with each passing word.

“You did nothing wrong,” I assure her, giving her waist another squeeze. I can’t seem to stop touching her. “You’re not dressed for ladder work. That’s all. This is about your safety. I’m protecting you.”

She nods. “I know you have a large event on Friday. I can do more work today, just of a different variety. If I can’t finish the chandeliers, perhaps dishes need to be prepped, or silverware needs to be polished.”

Killian loudly clears his throat. “I’m not sure it’s the silverware he wants you to polish.”

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Complete confusion clouds Honeyeh's face, but I look at my brother with a glare meant to kill. He is not helping.

He doesn't look the least bit concerned. In fact, his grin widens. He pushes of the jam and walks toward us, thrusting out his hand. "I'm Killian Smith."

Tentatively, Honeyeh places her hand in his. "Honeyeh Karimi."

"Nice to meet you, Honeyeh."

"And you." She lets go of his hand. "Congratulations on your marriage. It was a beautiful ceremony."

Killian's brow wrinkles in confusion. But I'm showing Honeyeh to the door. "I'm not certain where you parked but there is a lot for staff?—"

"Oh, I don't have a car." Honeyeh shakes her head.

"How did you get here?" I pride myself on details, but this one did not occur to me.

"The bus." She vaguely gestures in the direction of the stop then turns toward the door.

"The bus?" I ask, stopping her. "But, that stop is almost a mile away."

"I'm used to it," she says with a small shrug. "And I enjoy walking. I'd like to thank you again for the opportunity to work here."

Killian has moved back to my side. “My car is parked right by the door. Allow me to drive you.”

I know what he’s doing. He’s going to pump her for information.

But she shakes her head. “Not necessary. I walk most places, even in the heat. I’ll be fine.”

“I insist.” My hand is at her back again, lightly propelling her forward. She starts walking without hesitation, her response to my touch one of instant obedience.

It makes my cock hard all over again, the way she responds to my touch. Would she be like that in bed?

Now I’m like granite as I open the back door of the car for her, helping her in before I shut the door and adjust myself. Killian sees me and starts whistling as he walks around to the driver’s seat of the car.

I’ve never heard my brother whistle before. It’s fucking weird. I open the passenger door and slide onto the black leather seat. It’s still cool from the air conditioning he used on the drive here. I twist my head around to see Honeyeh fiddling with the hem of her skirt.

Which immediately reminds me of her panties.

Fuck.

Killian closes the driver’s side door and starts the engine, even as I hit the button for the gate.

“So Honeyeh,” he starts, smiling in the rearview. “You mentioned my wedding...”

Honeyeh nods. "I'm a friend of Charlotte Kincaid." She looks out the window. "Mason was kind enough to give me a job at the hotel but Mr. Smith?—"

"Triston," I cut in.

"Triston offered me a position here, instead."

Killian looks over at me like I've lost my mind. I think he's probably right. Which one of us is certifiable now? "And you're happy to be working as a maid?"

"Oh yes," she looks back at Killian, a genuine smile on her lips. "Very."

Killian cocks his head. "Student debt?"

"Medical," she answers, her hand fluttering. "My brother is ill."

Killian's eyes go wide as he looks over at me. I think he gets it. I hope he does. Not even I'm heartless enough to use a woman that kind and caring.

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“I’m sorry to hear it, Honeyeh. Is it serious?”

“Thank you,” she says to Killian. “His liver was damaged from the overproduction of bile. He needs a lot of care while we wait for a transplant.”

“Jesus,” Killian quietly responds while my chest grows tight. That’s a big fucking burden for her to carry.

“We’ll be all right,” she smiles again, like she’s trying to convince everyone. I want to pull her into my fucking lap. “This position is a real help, and I have a really good surgeon who’s taken on his case.” She stops, clasping her hands again. “Butenough about me. Your bride was so beautiful. Her dress, her hair, the flowers. It was like a fairytale.”

Killian’s smile turns soft. “Thank you. I have to agree. Chloe is the most beautiful person I know inside and out.”

I look at my brother. I know he loves Chloe. That he’s wildly attracted to her. But what I hear in his voice is respect...

I don’t hear Killian give those kinds of accolades to anyone.

We reach the bus stop and Honeyeh opens her own door, sliding out of the car. “Thank you for the ride,” she says to Killian. “I look forward to tomorrow,” she murmurs to me before she closes the door to the car and walks over to the covered bench, sitting down on the metal seat.

There is no one else there and I feel this prick of annoyance at the thought of leaving her alone here.

“Want me to wait?” Killian asks from the driver’s seat.

I scowl at him, even though he’s said out loud exactly what I was thinking. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about you going all caveman.”

“Caveman?” I repeat at a higher volume.

“Protective, predatorial. I half expected you to throw her over your shoulder and stomp upstairs.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I just got married. I know exactly what I’m talking about.” He puts the car in gear, gives Honeyeh a wave, and reverses direction. “And I like her. “

“You like her?” I am trying to be nicer to Killian. But he says shit that irritates me. Like right now.

“Honest. Sweet. Caring. Gorgeous.” He draws that last one out and gives another whistle. “And the body... A man could do a lot worse,” he wiggles his eyebrows.

I let out a rumble of frustration. “Even if I were the type of man who might settle, Honeyeh is not the sort of woman I’d choose.”

“Is Veronica?” he asks, wrinkling his nose. “Do you want to make some power couple?”

“I don’t want to make any couple. You, of all people, should understand.”

“Why is that?” he asks, approaching the gate.

I pull out the phone and hit the button. In my family, our brother Win is the oldest and the new Duke of Grandmont. Being the heir, he was off at boarding school from a fairly early age.

I’m next, older than my twin, Gris, by four minutes. But apparently four minutes matters. Since I was a kid, I was expected to bear the brunt of our shitty father’s vitriol. And it’s been my job ever since to hold the whole operation together.

But Killian and I don’t need to get into it. “What did you come here for?”

“Did you speak with Mason today?” He asks, parking the car once again.

I turn in my seat to face him. “Yes. Why?”

“He wants me to keep an eye on the Russian’s brothels. It’s the one part of their business I haven’t really gathered intel for. I know their drug trading routes, their casinos.”

I frown. First, I don’t agree with Mason on this topic. While I dislike the Russian Bratva, Dimitri is a man with a fair bit of ethics when it comes to the women in his employ.

While he runs some of Las Vegas’s most well-known brothels, his business is designed to both protect the women and gain their consent. It wouldn’t be Sin City without a sex trade, and Dimitri is the best there is. “I don’t like it.”

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“Why not?”

“He’s the best man for that job, first. And second...there is a lot more room for collateral damage when you add in a building full of women.”

Killian grimaces. “I don’t like it either. If Chloe ever found out I was hanging around a brothel, she’d cut off my balls.”

“That’s your big worry? An entire force of Russian Bratva guard those places and you’re concerned about a petite blonde?”

“Bratva I can take,” he mutters. “If Chloe kicks me out of our bed, I really will go insane.”

There is so much wrong with that sentence, I don’t even know where to begin. Men quake in front of Killian. Does Chloe really hold that much power?

Could the sex really be that good?

I immediately think of Honeyeh and those white panties. What would sinking into her feel like? Jesus, I’m about to be in real trouble, because I want to find out.

CHAPTER SIX

Honeyeh

Mrs. Raith’s eyes slide down me as I model the uniform she’s provided. It’s a simple

black Oxford dress with a collar and buttons down the front, but it's darted in such a way that it hugs my curves.

It's paired with black Keds that are supportive but cute.

"During events, we trade out the sneakers for heeled shoes. They're less comfortable but more appropriate for the events. A few of the black-tie events, like the one this Friday, you'll be provided with a simple knee-length black dress with a square neck."

I saw the cleaning crew, the ones that really scrub the house. They had on white pants and a white shirt with the same Keds in white.

"We ask that you wear other shoes when travelling to the house and bring these to change into, so that they're only worn in the house."

I nod, it makes sense that it keeps the house cleaner.

"If you have any questions, don't hesitate to ask," she finishes, handing me a sheet that looks like a schedule.

"What is this?"

"It's Mr. Smith's comings and goings during the work week. Your job is to dust when he isn't using a room. He's still down in the gym, so if you'd like to start with his room, you should be able to get it done before he's back upstairs for his shower."

"I will," I take a deep breath as Mrs. Raith hands me a cleaning basket with all the supplies I'll need.

"And remember, Honeyeh, we don't miss spots. Everything should be perfect."

“Perfect,” I repeat. Making my way up the back stairs by her office, I crack open the door to Triston’s bedroom and do a quick scan to make certain the room is empty before I get to work.

I start with the bathroom, running the duster over surfaces like the sills, the top of the mirrors, the light fixtures.

I can only assume these surfaces are not touched by the cleaning crew, but I’ll double check with them later.

Finishing the bathroom, I make my way into the bedroom.

The room is done in muted but masculine tones of taupes and greys. The large bed has all white bedding. I can’t even imagine keeping something like that clean.

My mouth twitches down as I dust the greige end tables, moving the few items placed on the top to make sure I’m getting the entire surface.

The bed sits in a wooden frame with modern lines, and I dust the edges, making my way around the entire bed.

The room is so quiet, my mind is free to wander as I work, mostly filled with thoughts of the man who lives here. Is it wrong that I’m picturing being in this bed with him? The way his hands would feel, the way he might bend me over the edge...

I keep dusting, moving around the windows to a streamlined dresser with a cityscape painting over the top.

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Wiping down the dresser with a polish, I pull the duster back out, standing on tiptoe and partially bending over the bureau to reach the duster over the top of the picture frame.

I still can't get one corner so I bend even further, really pushing up on my toes to get the spot.

“Interesting.”

I nearly scream as I jump back.

Triston leans in the doorway, glistening with sweat, a small towel around his neck as he watches me.

“I'm so sorry, Mr. Smith,” I gasp. “I'll get used to the schedule.”

His brows lift, as his eyes run down the length of my uniform. “I've never seen one of those dresses fit like that.”

I look down at myself, trying to keep the heat out of my cheeks. “The next size up was far too large in the waist.”

“Hmmm,” he hums out as he enters the room, crossing the room to come stand in front of me.

His T-shirt stretches across the breadth of his shoulders, and I find myself licking my lips as he comes closer. I have no idea what thoughts my face might be expressing so

I duck my chin to hide the interest I'm sure is shining in my eyes.

He stops a foot away from me as I clutch the duster in front of me like the feathers will somehow protect me.

Instead, they tickle my nose, and I pull my chin up. But that means my gaze meets his.

Unlike me, his expression is completely unreadable.

“As I said, Mr. Smith?—”

“Triston.”

“But...” I swallow, needing to address this name thing. “The rest of the staff...”

“You are not the rest of the staff, Honeyeh. You call me Triston. And as you will be the staff member to enter and exit myroom freely, I can assure you, I don't mind walking in to the sight of you bent over my dresser.”

My brow furrows. Why would I have that kind of trust or freedom in his house? I think back to his brother Killian's comment. The one about polishing something or other...

What did that mean?

I could ask Brittany. She'd likely know.

“I...I have to confess, I'm confused as to why the rules are different for me.”

He lets out a long breath and then he reaches for the duster in my hand, gently taking

it from my fingers. “I need to let a few people have access, a bridge between the staff and a life that feels more...authentic. It’s been lacking in my life, honestly. Mrs. Raith has filled that role, to the best of her ability, but she has a great many management duties, I hate interrupting her to complete the small tasks in my private spaces.”

My eyes light up as I understand. And honestly, I feel a bit of relief, tinged with the tiniest bit of disappointment. He doesn’t want me in that way.

He just needs me to create a buffer between him and the rest of the staff.

Which is great. That is a job I can do. I push aside that twinge that tells me I want more. I know Triston’s reputation. But as I look down at his large, masculine hands, I wonder if I’d be willing to make the trade.

A month in his bed for the inevitable heartbreak.

“If that’s all, I should probably start on the next room...”

He turns the duster in his hand before he finally hands it back to me, our fingers touching as a jolt of energy shoots straight to the apex between my legs.

Grabbing the duster, I scoop up my basket and scurry from the room like the scared little rabbit that I am.

But it means that I nearly crash into one of the members of the cleaning crew.

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“Oh. I’m so sorry,” I gush, dropping my basket, the contents scattering on the floor.

“My fault,” she whispers. “I forgot to put in the new shampoo in Mr. Smith’s shower when I cleaned, and I’ve been hovering here in the hall, trying to figure out how I correct the mistake. Thank goodness you’re still here.”

I blink at her in confusion before I realize, I am one of the few people who has an all-day pass to his bedroom. It’s my job to bring the shampoo to him.

Me. The woman who just scurried from his room. But if I don’t go back in...

She looks at me anxiously and I know I have to go back in. I can’t be making enemies on my first day of work and I need to do my job. “I’ll take it.”

“Thank you,” she gushes, pressing the bottle into my hand. “I’ll pick up the spilled basket while you bring it in. I’ll leave it here in the hall for you.”

I turn back to his door, drawing in a deep, fortifying breath. Triston is surely about to take a shower and then he’ll notice there is no shampoo. Not to mention he’ll be naked.

The idea of him with no clothing makes a flash of heat run down my body even as I knock on the open door.

No one answers.

Shoot.

Is he in the shower already? He said I had access whenever I wanted but this...it feels like I'm intruding. "Triston?"

He doesn't answer.

I step into the room. "Triston?"

"Honeyeh?" he calls from in the bathroom.

"It's me. I have, umm, shampoo for you."

The bathroom door swings open and Triston appears, a crisp white towel draped low on his hips.

My mouth falls open as I take him in. The rippling muscle, the washboard abs, the strong cords of his neck.

I freeze in my spot, halfway to the bathroom.

He's got one hand over the knot of the towel as he opens the door wider.

Behind him, I can hear the shower running, steam already filling the room. It makes my mouth dry as my tongue darts out to lick my lips.

He sees it, his eyes narrowing as he steps out of the bathroom, stalking toward me.

That's when I realize, I'm clutching the shampoo to my chest, just like I did the duster.

I thrust my hand out, like a barrier between us. He stops, muscles flexing, as he reaches for the shampoo. "Thank you."

“You’re welcome,” I breathe, my voice breaking as I try to maintain control. I can’t help myself. My gaze travels down him again.

His fingers dance over mine as he takes the bottle from my hand.

For one second, I revel in the touch before I scurry away, practically running from the room.

Because I am in way, way, way over my head.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Honeyeh

The rest of week passes more quietly than my first two days.

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I meet the staff, learn the rules of the house, balance my schoolwork with the job, and best of all, pay off several debts with the bonus I received.

It's such a relief to zero out and throw away some of the bills that have been hanging around my neck for the past several months.

I have a few larger ones to go. But now that I can focus on just a few debts, I can start saving for the down payment for the surgeon.

By Thursday morning, I've dusted every nook and cranny in the house and I'm beginning to wonder if the staff has ever had a full-time duster, because I have no idea what I'll do with myself for the next two days.

But I spend the morning actually polishing the silverware, or rather, making sure it's free of water marks, and then do the same with the plates.

Finally, Mrs. Raith and I are standing together in the ballroom, staring up at the chandeliers.

The one I dusted before Triston insisted I get down clearly sparkles far brighter than the other two.

"They need to be done," Mrs. Raith grimaces. "It's so obvious one of them was cleaned and the others weren't."

I nod. "I agree."

She looks over at me, giving me a small smile. “You’ve done well this week.”

“Thank you,” I dip my chin, pleased with the compliment. “I really enjoy working here.”

Mrs. Raith shakes her head like there is something she can’t quite figure out. Did she expect me to be different? Why? “I can see that you do, and I appreciate your work ethic and easy demeanor. Both have been a welcome...” She pauses as though she’s rethinking her words. “And while I appreciate your willingness to finish the chandeliers, I’m not certain it’s a good idea.”

“But we just agreed they should be done.” I have little appetite to argue with Mrs. Raith, but I really want her to be happy with my work.

“By someone else,” Mrs. Raith nods along with her own words. “Mr. Smith seemed rather adamant that you not be up the ladder.”

Mr. Smith... Does Mrs. Raith privately call him Triston and only calls him Mr. Smith when speaking to other staff? Or am I the only one who calls him Triston? “Was it because I was in heels and a regular dress?”

She gives me that look again, like she’s attempting to figure something out. “I’m not sure.”

Triston hasn’t been here the past few days. He’s been working in the office. I look up at the chandelier. “It’s not eventhat high if I use the telescoping duster that has the sprayer on the handle.”

Mrs. Raith nods like she’s agreeing, but then stops. “I could have one of the groundskeepers come in and do the job.”

Everyone on the staff has been busy with party preparations. The idea of passing my one job, dusting, onto someone else, makes my insides twist. “I’d hate to pull them from their prep work. I’m going to do it.”

Mrs. Raith shakes her head. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

I look over at Mrs. Raith, my brow furrowing. She doesn’t speak to anyone else on the staff like this, doesn’t make suggestions. She politely gives orders, they politely follow. I’ve not heard her negotiate this entire week.

“It will be fine,” I murmur, going to retrieve the ladder from the wall where we left it as we assessed the chandeliers. “I’ll be done well before Mr. Smith arrives home.”

Mrs. Raith sighs. “I’ll stay with you to hold the ladder.”

I stop, turning back to her. Now I’m disrupting her day, when the very reason I was hired was to free her from interruption. “You don’t have to do that. I can’t even imagine what your to-do list looks like.”

She smiles. “Nonsense. You’ll help me with something else later. Let’s get this done quickly...together.”

Grabbing the ladder, I pull it open, making certain the arms are locked in place. Then I pull out my telescoping duster with a cleaning spray near the top. Climbing up the ladder, I begin carefully spraying the crystal in sections, wiping as I go. The individual crystals sparkle as I work, but I have to move the ladder several times to reach every part of the chandelier.

Mrs. Raith stands silent guard at the bottom of the ladder. She doesn’t need to hold it. It’s a perfectly stable structure. But I can see her look of concern, so I don’t correct her.

Instead, I work as quickly as I can while making certain I'm getting every crystal. "Tell me about the benefit tomorrow night...what will it be like?"

I know I won't be here dusting, my duties do not include attending parties, but I wish I could see it. I've never gotten to attend an event like this, and I bet they are wonderfully beautiful.

I've been watching as the linens and flowers have been delivered. Luxurious fabrics and exotic blooms. Ridiculous amounts of food are filling the industrial refrigerators... shrimp, oysters, massive crudités platters and pastries that look as though they've come from France.

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And the champagne. I'm not much of a drinker, but I'd give anything to taste it. It's another world and it sparkles like this chandelier.

I let out a sigh as I pause in my work.

"What is it?" Mrs. Raith asks from her watch at the bottom of the ladder.

"Will the benefit be as wonderful as I imagine?"

Mrs. Raith clears her throat. "They are very beautiful and filled with lots of self-important people."

I laugh a bit, as I come down the ladder, ready to move to the final chandelier. "That makes sense. And thank you for the dose of reality. Every experience is only as good as the people you share it with."

Mrs. Raith steps back to allow me to come down. "Excellent way to phrase it."

"Mrs. Raith." Triston's deep voice calls from the entrance to the ballroom. "Honeyeh. What are the two of you doing?"

I turn as he strides across the large space, a scowl on his face.

Mrs. Raith lets out a long slow breath, her eyes shifting up to the ceiling as though she's preparing herself before she turns to Triston. "We are cleaning before the benefit."

His scowl deepens as I step forward, wishing to protect Mrs. Raith. “It was my idea. The other chandeliers looked so dull...”

“The two of you are the last two people who should be completing this job. Anyone else on staff can be the person on the ladder or the person holding it in place.”

Mrs. Raith winces. “Right. Apologies.”

I open my mouth to protest again. I’m not trying to get myself fired. I just want to explain.

But before I get a word out, he holds up a garment bag he has draped over his arm. “Did you have plans for Honeyeh during the benefit?” he asks Mrs. Raith.

My stomach quivers. Why is he asking that? Fear slides down my spine. Did I just talk myself out of a job?

Mrs. Raith shakes her head. “No. Her attendance is not required within her current position.”

“Good.” Triston turns to look at me, but I sway on my feet. He is firing me. “Honeyeh, I’d like a word.”

“Of course,” I answer, my hands clasping together, over my stomach, as I look at Mrs. Raith with panic surely draining the color from my face. She winces back.

He reaches out his free hand, and for a moment I just stare. Then, unlocking my clenched fingers, I slip my hand into his.

A shock of electricity zips through me as our hands touch. “I...I didn’t mean to directly disobey.”

His eyes meet mine. “Of course you did.”

That makes my stomach bottom out because he’s right. “I didn’t want to push my job on anyone else on the staff. I’m new and...”

“It’s all right, Honeyeh. I’ll assign the last chandelier to someone else personally, so they know you’re not responsible.”

For a moment, my shoulders sag in relief. That doesn’t sound like I’m getting fired. But then a new worry makes me worry my lip. “They’re going to think that I’m your favorite.”

He stares down at me. “They are. Yes.”

My lips part as I search for the right words. “But...I’m new and...”

In answer, he tugs my hand, pulling me out of the ballroom and up the grand stairs I never use. When we reach the top, we turn into his office, where he closes the door.

The room looks over the front of the house, out onto the drive and sweeping lawns. Like every room, it’s well appointed, and beautifully decorated. But I’m starting to realize that the whole house lacks any sort of personal touches.

There are no pictures, mementos, pieces that look like they have meaning instead of just suiting the décor.

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He lets go of my hand as he tosses the bag on the desk, holding it with one hand as he unzips it with the other.

My brow furrows as he pushes back the sides of the bag, revealing a red silk dress. “What is that?”

“It’s for you.”

I blink several times. “I beg your pardon?”

“For the benefit.”

“I...” The dress is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. I reach out my hand and then withdraw it again. “The benefit?”

He clears his throat. “This is a networking event for me. My breakup with Veronica was very public.”

I nod, though I still don’t understand what that means for me.

“I would prefer not to bring a real date, it would be a distraction. But I don’t really wish to go alone either. A woman on my arm softens my image and keeps the female guests from attempting—” He stops. “I’d like you to be my plus one for the evening.”

“I...I’m sorry...” I can’t quite make sense of what he’s saying. Is he asking me out? This flutter in my chest makes me a bit dizzy, and I reach for the desk.

“I need a date who understands it’s not a real date. I will pay your overtime wage. Your job will be to nod and smile so that I can use the night for the business it was intended for.”

“So am I your date or your employee?”

“Employee. But I’d like the other guests to think you’re my date. I know it’s a ruse, but I can’t afford any distractions, and I think we can manage it.”

“But...will people think...the staff...” I don’t want to care. But I also want to keep this job for a while and if the entire staff dislikes me, that will be difficult to do.

He sighs. “I thought I explained. I have a house manager and an executive assistant. What I’m looking for is more of a personal assistant who helps me with all the jobs that are out of bounds for someone in the executive realm.”

I gasp, because, when labeled like that, I think I understand. “A personal assistant?”

“You can continue dusting. It will fill your hours. But I think we can dispense with the uniform. We’ll get you a wardrobe that is more fitting to your title.”

I stare at him like he’s lost his mind. This can’t be real...

“Any after-hours events will command a fee of one hundred fifty an hour.”

I gasp. “That much?” I look down at the dress. I understand what he’s asking. The job he’s suggesting is not just good money, it’s an excellent opportunity for a woman who wishes to attend law school.

With all that said, it’s a foolish idea. I don’t know anything about society and even less about dating.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Triston

I feel a twinge of regret. It's not right to dangle money in front of Honeyeh, knowing how desperate she is for cash.

Then again, how else do I help her?

The very fact I want to help is problematic. Who pays someone eighty thousand dollars a year to dust? It's why I'm creating this new position for her. It helps Mason, helps Honeyeh, and moves me closer to my professional goals.

It also means that I'm spending larger amounts of time with the woman I'm finding increasingly tempting. It's like I'm tying my own noose, but I can't make myself stop.

I know I'm losing control of this situation, but every day I spend in Honeyeh's company, I want a little more of her.

When I watched her dust, bent over my bureau, I did all I could to not hike that dress up and bury myself deep inside of her.

I've spent the last two days in the company office instead of working from home, just to manage my raging hard-on. But that means that I've spent the last two days wishing I was here.

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I'm sleeping like shit, and I can't concentrate at work.

Part of the reason we're having this particular party is to wine and dine Dimitri Ivanov's board of trustees to complete the hostile takeover.

I need a soft-spoken beauty on my arm who will charm the board as I wave the contracts under their nose. For that, Honeyeh is perfect. I adjust my jacket to hide my stiffening cock.

She runs her hand over the silk of the gown, the gentle slide of her fingers making me so tense, I clench my fist against my thigh. I want her hands sliding over me like that.

"I wouldn't know what to do at an event like that."

"I already know you can walk in heels. And wear a dress." I move closer, drawing in her sweet scent, like nectar and summer flowers.

She's studying the dress as she flattens the fabric with her hands. "I mean, how to talk to all those rich people."

"Easy. Just answer any question generically."

"What do you mean by that?" She lifts her head, her gray eyes studying mine as she worries her lip. God, I want to nibble on it too, taste the plump flesh.

"Ask me a question. One a stranger might ask at a party."

She looks to the side like she's thinking, and then she turns back to me. "What do you do for a living?"

I chuckle, because that's an easy one. But I can see why she might think it's difficult. "Some of this and that. I'm still finding myself."

Her eyes light up and she lets out this giggle that sounds like the tinkling of a bell. It makes me warm inside, which should be like a flashing red light of warning to abort. I don't.

"It's that easy, huh?"

"You should follow up with something like, what about you or tell me about yourself."

She nods like this makes sense. "Right. I should always direct the conversation back at them." Her eyes flit down to the dress again, her look growing pensive. "But also..." She pivots to face the desk, her chin dropping as she looks down at the dress.

Is she trying to put distance between us by turning away? Not happening.

I slide a touch closer until I'm almost touching her, and then I bring my hand to her hip. She tenses under my touch but doesn't move. "What is it, Honeyeh?"

"I don't know anything about dating either."

That one stuns me for a second. "How's that?"

"I don't really...I mean, I've tried a few times, but I've never really..." She looks back at me over her shoulder, her cheeks pink.

I tighten my grip on her hip, fighting the urge to bring her ass back against my raging

cock. “That’s fine. This isn’t a date, remember. It’s professional.”

“Right. It’s just, what if I don’t look natural? What if I’m awkward?”

Is that what she’s worried about? I’ve got a solution for that.... Bending down, I brush a light kiss across her temple, then wrap my other arm around her middle. “As long as you let me touch you like this, we’ll be completely convincing.”

“Oh,” she whispers, and I feel the shiver that runs down her body. Glancing over her shoulder, I catch a glimpse of her stiff nipples pushing against the fabric of her uniform. The sight of her nipples makes my whole body taut. No one is going to think we’re faking. The attraction between us sizzles through the air and my hands itch to undress her.

I actually hate seeing her in this dress, as good as it looks on her. I can’t wait to get new clothes for her.

She should be draped in silk and lace and designer labels that hug every curve.

“Why don’t you try on the dress? See how it fits? There are shoes in the bag as well.”

“How would you even know my size?” she asks, sounding the slightest bit breathless. Am I making her flustered? The idea fills me with satisfaction.

“Try it on and then you can ask...” Reluctantly, I take a step back, pointing toward the door to the bathroom I have attached to the office.

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She draws in an unsteady breath. “I don’t have on the proper...” her voice has dropped to a whisper, “bra.”

The idea of Honeyeh in underwear has my brain fritzing. Which makes me curse under my breath.

I’ve never had trouble finding women to share my bed. I’ve seen ladies in every shape and size, in every state of undress.

And yet, simple white cotton underwear on Honeyeh got my engine revving like it hasn’t in years. “There are undergarments in the bag as well.”

“You bought me underwear?” she gasps, but I smell it then. The light scent of her arousal. Fuck me.

“You can’t wear the dress without them.” I’m going to hell. It takes every ounce of my control to step back.

Slowly she picks up the bag and starts for the bathroom. She glances at me over her shoulder. “What if it doesn’t fit?”

“We’ll go dress shopping tomorrow.”

Her gaze is still filled with hesitation. “This is part of being your assistant? I’m not...not...”

Is she asking if I expect a happy ending? I have this vision of her on her knees before

me, mouth open, nibbling at my cock. I nearly cum in my pants. I have to blink several times to speak. “You’re my assistant.”

She nods then turns and scurries toward the bathroom. Run little mouse, run. You’re about to be devoured by the cat.

But I catch myself. Even if she weren’t connected to Mason, the woman is toiling away to save the life of her brother. Underneath her soft and sweet, mild-mannered exterior, is the kind of woman who’s got real grit and loves with her whole heart.

Jesus. Listen to me...I’m like a ping pong ball, bouncing from one extreme to the next.

But I can’t deny that the words are true. The bathroom door softly closes and that’s when my phone rings.

I frown, pulling it from my pocket. I don’t want an interruption now, I just want to picture Honeyeh stripping off her work dress and pulling on the corseted strapless bra I’ve purchased for her.

But as I glance down, my brother Gris’s number flashes across the screen. Gris is my twin and of all my brothers, he’s the one I can least ignore. He has a sixth sense of when I’m out of sorts...

“What?” I bark into the phone. I’ve been surly with everyone this week. Maybe that’s why he’s calling.

“Hello, sunshine,” he rumbles back. “Nice to talk to you too.”

“Sunshine?” I spit into the phone. Since he got engaged to Arabella, he’s been annoyingly chipper. Or maybe I’m just that grumpy.

He laughs again. “How are plans for tomorrow night?”

“Peachy.”

“And Veronica?” he asks, keeping his voice neutral. I know he already knows we broke up. My brothers somehow manage to gossip, despite being the toughest men I know. “Don’t give me that.”

He full out laughs. “Was it ugly? Is that what’s wrong with you? Veronica seems like the type that would not go quietly into the night. She made a big scene, didn’t she?”

I don’t introduce a lot of the women I date to my family. But a few weeks ago, Gris and Arabella had a massive engagement party. A man can’t go to those things single, but I think it made the breakup with Veronica worse. She got ideas... “She did. It was ugly.”

“Have you considered extending the dating window?”

“Longer always makes things worse,” I answer, looking at the bathroom door. I shift my weight, hardly able to wait for Honeyeh to appear. I need to get my brother off the phone.

“Are you going to the benefit without a date? It’ll be like bees swarming to honey if you do.”

I pull the phone from my ear, looking down at the screen. Did he just mentionhoney? “Killian mentioned Honeyeh, didn’t he?”

“Honey what?”

My frown deepens. “Never mind. I’ve got a plan. There won’t be any bees, just

business.”

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“Back up to the honey. I want—” I hang up. Not just because I’m short tempered today, because I don’t want to explain. I don’t even understand myself.

And then Honeyeh walks out of my bathroom and it’s completely clear.

Honeyeh is always beautiful. But like this, draped in red silk, she looks a million times better than any model I have ever seen. She looks like a Hollywood starlet from the 1950s, or a princess, or...

“It fits,” she murmurs, running her hands down her hips. Her hair is still in the low ponytail she wore for work and she’s not even wearing makeup, but holy fucking Christ...

“Honeyeh,” my voice is hoarse.

She points down to the shoes. “They’re a touch big but I’m sure they’ll be fine. If you just tell me how to style my hair, I’m sure I can borrow some makeup from my new friend Brittany.”

Borrow makeup? “There will be a styling team for you tomorrow.”

“Oh,” she cries, her eyes wide. “I’m sure I don’t need?—”

“Honeyeh.” We are not arguing this.

“Right,” she flushes again. “Great. I can just stay after work so that they can make me pretty.”

There is so much wrong with what she just said. Honeyeh is the kind of beautiful that a man fantasizes about. That he dreams... “You’re not reporting for work tomorrow. I don’t need you here until three or four.”

Her brow scrunches. “But if tomorrow night is overtime, then don’t I need to work regular time?”

She’s so stuck on working the actual hours and making the money by the rules. I’d admire her principles along with her heart if they weren’t keeping me from what I really wanted. Her.

“I need you to be your most rested and relaxed self tomorrow night. Besides, if you check the contract, you’ll see that any hours past five mean you get paid overtime.”

Her lips part in surprise before she dips her chin, running a hand over her belly.

Fuck. I want to put my palm over her stomach, spread my fingers wide as I pull her ass back into my constant erection.

“It’s a beautiful dress,” she says and then lifts her chin, those big gray eyes meeting mine. “I never imagined myself in something so lovely.”

I bite my tongue, wanting to tell her she makes the dress beautiful. I’m starting to act like a smitten asshole like Killian or Gris.

I’ve got to get myself under control.

I’ll work out. Maybe if I tire myself out enough, I’ll forget and I won’t even want to masturbate.

If I’m not careful, I’m going to tip over into obsession.

CHAPTER NINE

Honeyeh

I have never, in my entire life, been poked or prodded as much as I have this evening.

I sit in one of the guest rooms in Triston's house, which I am now referring to as ground zero.

The benefit starts in an hour and four different stylists have been waxing, plucking, curling, and applying treatments for the last three and a half hours.

Finally, they bring out the dress. I slip off the satin robe I've been wearing, setting it to the side. The dress is held by two women so that the fabric, which has been carefully steamed, can be lowered over my head. The stylist is up on a step ladder. It's a complete Cinderella moment.

The makeup artist gasps as she looks at me. "Even your undergarments are gorgeous," she gushes. I look down with a nervous laugh. I've got on a strapless corset bra with a lacy pair of thong underwear, a garter and thigh-high stockings.

Triston replaced the shoes that were a little too big with a pair that fit perfectly. The heels are only three inches, I was afraid I wouldn't be able to walk nicely in four.

Which meant the dress needed to be altered...

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My head spins as I consider what sort of cost Triston accrued to have me pose as his date in my new administrative duties. It's crazy.

Then again, I see his point. With me at his side, he needs to be neither attentive, nor even considerate.

The dress is placed over my head, three women making certain the fabric doesn't wrinkle and my hair isn't mussed as the silk glides over my body.

Then, one of them zips me in.

"Oh," Betty, the hair stylist gushes. "You look amazing! You could be in a magazine."

I turn toward the full-length mirror and gasp at the woman who stares back at me. I barely look like me. Smoky makeup makes my eyes look even bigger, while a blush highlights my natural cheekbones, and deep red lipstick compliments the dress and my natural skin tones.

My hair flows down my back in loose, sexy waves, looking effortless and glamorous all at once.

The dress hugs every curve, making my waist look tiny and the draped fabric on the top giving me extra bust. The slit up the side shows off the shapeliness of my thigh and...

"Wow." Triston's masculine rumble pulls my gaze from my own reflection. I turn to

see Triston in the doorway, looking breathtakingly dashing in a fitted tuxedo.

“Wow yourself,” I say and then feel my cheeks heat, the blush that is always under the surface in his company instantly coming out.

He gives me a one-sided grin and then strides into the room. “Is she done, ladies?”

“Done,” Betty chirps.

“Done,” the others repeat.

The makeup artist presses a tube of lipstick into my hand. “Like I showed you, just inside the edges of the liner and blend.”

I nod as the four of them scurry toward the door, leaving me and Triston alone.

I draw in a deep breath, the bra digging a bit as I inhale. Note to self, no deep breathing. But as my gaze turns back to my reflection, I have to confess, the result is totally worth it. I’ve never seen myself like this. “I’m not even certain I recognize myself.”

He chuckles. “I recognize you, Honeyeh.”

I don’t know what to say to that, so I don’t answer. Instead, I watch his approach through the mirror, noting a black box under his arm.

The last time he carried something toward me, it was the garment bag with this dress. “What is that?”

A smile curves his lips. “The dress, shoes, and undergarments are yours to keep. A perk. But before I show you what is in the box, I want to warn you that these are only

a loan.”

But my eyes grow wider. What could he possibly have in a box that size that would be a loan?

I turn around, the question shining in my eyes as he holds the box out and then snaps open the lid.

A gasp falls from my lips as the light catches a set of diamonds and rubies. A necklace, earrings, and a triple-string bracelet. “You cannot mean for me to wear those.”

“I do,” he answers. “Turn back around.”

“Triston. I could not possibly borrow these, not even for a night. Are those real?” My whole body trembles as I lean a bit closer, inspecting them.

He laughs then. “They are. I have excellent credit with a local jeweler who was kind enough to loan these to me for the evening.”

And then he sets the box down on the dressing table, removing the necklace first. Moving the necklace catches even more light, and I tremble as I carefully lift my hair. He steps up behind me, close enough that I can feel his body heat, as he places the necklace on my bare skin, his fingertips brushing my neck as he does the clasp.

My entire body responds to his touch, my skin incredibly sensitive as I break out in goose pimples at the light brush of his fingers.

But even his touch can’t distract me from the glittering image of the rubies and diamonds around my neck. I have no idea what a necklace like this might be worth, but my guess is it would pay for a liver transplant. “My goodness,” I whisper,

brushing the large center ruby with my middle finger.

“It looks stunning.” And then the necklace is forgotten as his lips brush the bare skin of my collarbone.

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I gasp in a breath and he gives me a wolfish smile in the mirror. “Practice.”

“Oh.” That makes sense. I can’t look shocked in front of everyone when he touches me. “We should look natural. Right.”

“We should,” he answers and then he slides his hands down my arms, over my hands. I splay my fingers out, and for a moment, they catch his, our fingers twining together.

And then he releases them, one hand coming to my hip, to pull me back against his body. The moment our bodies touch, an explosion of feeling pulses all through me, making me achy and hot.

But he isn’t done. He cups my jaw and turns my face back toward his, his lips brushing over mine in the kind of light kiss that makes my knees weak. It’s so intimate and so romantic, I feel lightheaded—and I may have forgotten to breathe.

Slowly, he pulls back and my eyes flutter open, meeting his. His look is dark and almost dangerous as his hand splays out on my hip. “We need to get the rest of your jewelry on.”

“Right. Jewelry.” I sound out of breath as I try to shake off the haze that has settled over my brain.

My lipstick has brushed off on his lips and without thinking, I reach up and run my thumb over his lower lip to brush it away.

But before I can finish, he captures my wrist in his hand, kissing the pad of my

thumb. His lips open and his tongue licks at my skin. It's the slightest bit dirty, and the ache between my legs pulses as he drags his teeth along the same path, nibbling at my flesh.

"Triston," I half groan. We've passed practice, I know it. I'd like to drown in this man, let the tide take me away. But I really can't.

I have to remember my brother, my obligations, and my fears too. I won't be like my mother. Abandoned by a man and forced into near poverty.

Which is why I pull my thumb away, at least as far as his grip on my wrist will allow.

He raises my hand up and places another kiss on the inside of my wrist, the sensitive skin responding like a traitor to his touch. And then he lowers my wrist, pulling the bracelet from the box, he places the triple strand over my skin and closes the clasp.

Finally, he pulls the earrings from the box, handing them to me. They are a long chain of diamonds with a ruby dangling on each end.

"Honeyeh," he rumbles close to my ear. "You were made for this life."

I don't know about that. And I don't read anything into the words. I heard Veronica's warning. And even though I would never behave the way she had, it doesn't make her wrong. Everyone knows Triston is a serial dater.

I cannot be caught up in a torrid romance with my boss. It's not the life for me and it would be unfair to Darius if I compromised this job. "I will apply myself to being your doting and considerate date," I answer back. "Tell me what you need."

Our eyes lock in the mirror and I can feel the energy rolling off him in waves. Was it my words? The kiss?

“Just smile. Nod. And when I need to conduct business, join the wives. That’s it.”

I draw in a deep breath. “I’m ready.”

He guides me around, placing my hand in his elbow. His eyes hold mine as he starts toward the door. “Don’t worry. You’ll be perfect.”

My fingers tighten on his arm. I know he’s not a man who offers a future, but for tonight, I’m certain he can guide me through this evening.

Is it wrong that this is what I’ve always wanted? A man to hold me up in those moments I feel weak?

It reminds me to be extra careful. I could lose myself in Triston Smith.

CHAPTER TEN

Triston

Honeyeh is always beautiful. But like this...

She steals my breath every time I look at her and I ache to touch her. This whole charade of her being my choice of date so that I can conduct business is ridiculous. No woman has ever distracted me more.

The taste of her skin lingers on my lips and tongue, and I want to devour her. This past week, I’ve worked out until my limbs ached. Yesterday after a grueling weights session, I took a long, hot shower, picturing the sweet juicy curve of Honeyeh’s ass and the way she looked in this dress.

But in the most infuriating twist, I didn’t masturbate. Cumming would really fucking

help. I'm getting surlier with everyone around me, but as much as I know I should, I don't want to spill my cum anywhere but in or on her.

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Fuck. I don't ever remember wanting a woman this much. I'm consumed by lust and it's going to ruin the takeover if I don't get this under control. I need to wine and dine the board members tonight, not drool over my assistant turned date.

I've racked my brain attempting to figure out how to coerce her into my bed. But the delicateness of her situation, her association with Mason, and her innocence mean I have to tread so carefully.

Blowing out a breath, her fingers tighten instinctually on my arm, some small gesture of comfort.

This is one of the ways men end up fucking married. It's the woman they can't have, the one they'll do anything to get.

And I know I'm officially losing my mental capabilities because, for a moment, I consider it.

Would she marry me for a year? I know it's ridiculous, putting terms on marriage like I do on dating.

But I could take care of her brother, have a prenup where she gets a tidy sum after. We'd both win.

And then I could fuck her in every position in every room of this house until I've worked out whatever lust-induced haze has clouded my mind.

I tuck that idea away, attempting to focus on tonight.

I do not normally greet guests with a woman on my arm. I don't want my date to get ideas...

But as Honeyeh is not a real date and I'd really like to see how she handles tonight, I keep her hand on my arm as I station myself by the front door.

But the first guest through the door is my brother, Gris. I am a man who normally sees the details. How could I miss this one? My family might get the wrong impression when they see me with Honeyeh. They know I don't normally allow my dates to play hostess.

Gris sizes up Honeyeh in a single sweep of his knowing gaze, his eyes meeting mine with a satisfied gleam. He doesn't have the wrong impression, he's got it exactly right.

Next to me, Honeyeh gasps.

"What's wrong?"

"In tuxedos, you look even more like your brother," she whispers back.

Arabella greets Honeyeh with a wide smile. "Why, hello, I'm Arabella. Such a pleasure to meet you."

Honeyeh gives my future sister-in-law a glowing grin back. "Honeyeh Karimi, and the pleasure is all mine."

The two women embrace, leaving Gris and I to stare at each other, surely wearing matching looks of confusion. They've never met. Why would they hug?

"I'm Gris Smith," Gris interrupts, his hand landing on Arabella's back. "After my

fiancée is done commandeering this introduction.”

Honeyeh and Arabella laugh, Arabella backing up. “Sorry. The women at these things aren’t usually friendly. It’s just refreshing.”

“Oh, that’s good to know, actually,” Honeyeh reaches for Arabella’s hands again. “Otherwise, I might have worried the lack of friendliness was directed at me.”

And then the two of them begin babbling to each other in quick bursts of conversation I can hardly keep up with.

“What is happening?” Gris whispers, giving me a bewildered look.

I shake my head. Hell, if I know. He’s the one who’s getting married. “You’d know better than me.”

Rush and Ryker enter together, neither with a date. Fools.

But they stop when they see my hand on Honeyeh’s back as she talks with Arabella. Rush gives a low whistle while Ryker’s brows shoot up.

Honeyeh barely notices as she and Arabella keep talking. I’ve never heard Honeyeh say so much, she’s normally quiet and I feel a twinge of jealousy.

But it leaves Ryker free to come to my other side. “Who is the bombshell?”

“That’s Honey something,” Gris offers.

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“Honeyeh,” I correct, my lips thinning over my teeth as I glare.

“Honeyeh,” Killian booms from the door. Did my entire family arrive in a caravan?

“Look at you.”

“Who’s Honeyeh?” Chloe asks, looking gorgeous in a pale green strapless gown, her hair twisted up in a sleek updo.

Arabella waves Chloe forward.

Killian lets his wife go, and joins us, coming to stand on Ryker’s other side.

“Honeyeh is moving through the ranks quickly, I see.”

“You’ve met her?” Gris asks.

“We all have,” Killian answers with that shit grin he’s so good at.

Gris and Rush share a matching look of confusion, but I cut my hand through the air.

“We’ll discuss this later, other guests are arriving.”

“She was a waitress at my wedding,” Killian goes on like I haven’t spoken. Fucker ignores everything everyone says all the time. “And Triston hired her as a maid earlier this week.”

I hate that he shared that, and I feel this deep, pit-of-the-stomach regret that I made her house staff. I should have made her an assistant right away if I was going to employ her. I don’t want anyone disrespecting her. Fuck.

“A maid?” Ryker asks. “Do you have her dress in a miniskirt and thigh-highs? Does she use her duster on you? Do you?—”

I punch his shoulder. Hard. Difficult in my tuxedo, but I make it work. “Shut the fuck up right now.”

Ryker grabs his arm, scowling. “Jesus.”

“Oh yeah. And he’s really fucking possessive of her.” Killian laughs. “I would have led with that, but then I would have missed out on Triston punching you in evening attire.”

“Shit,” Gris gives a small laugh as he wags his eyebrows. “This is going to be interesting.”

“Honeyeh,” my voice is razor sharp in a way that makes every one of my brothers look at me with intense interest. I’m doing it again. Acting like a surly prick.

“Triston,” she says as she reaches her hand out to me. She’s drifted a few feet away as she’s talked with Arabella and Chloe. But as her fingers lace through mine, she allows me to pull her into my side.

Her body touches mine and I relax, a long breath leaving my lungs as I move her hand to my other so I can wrap my arm around her waist. “I’m sorry to interrupt but the line of guests to greet is growing long.”

“Of course,” she tightens her fingers in mine. “My apologies for keeping them waiting.”

“A maid?” Gris grumbles next to me. “I don’t believe it.”

I ignore him as I wave the mayor of Las Vegas forward.

I let go of Honeyeh's fingers so that I can shake hands, but I keep my other arm around her back, keep her pressed into my side, as I smile and make small talk.

She is everything I hoped she'd be. Polite, charming, beautiful. Dare I use the word polished? She helps me ease the guests into the party with a grace fit for a queen.

I would know.

By the time we're done with the receiving line and moving into the ballroom, I know I need to find a way to get Honeyeh naked and in my bed soon.

I'm the sort of man who always gets what he wants, it's just a matter of developing the right plan.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Honeyeh

The first hour of the benefit passes in a blur. I expected Triston to release me from his side to do whatever it is he needs to do at this party.

Instead, he's had his hand on this spot just above my behind, leading me around the room as we have conversation after conversation with people and I try to remember their names.

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I do as he asked though, and I nod and smile, making small talk wherever I can. And he was right. Most people don't ask me a lot of questions and when they do, soft smiles and return questions deflect nearly all of them.

The few people who persist, Triston commandeers the conversation. I sink deeper into his side, safe as long as he's next to me.

I sip at a delicious glass of champagne, keenly aware that I can't drink too much. I've no tolerance and I need my wits, but it's as delicious as I imagined.

The crowd is mostly assembled in the ballroom now, though people are filtering in and out of the French doors to the garden beyond.

Triston is speaking to some politician whose name I cannot remember when I see Mason and Charlotte approach.

My lips curve into a smile as I give a little wave.

Charlotte's brow furrows for a moment before her eyes go wide. "Honeyeh?"

Mason stops, his gaze taking me in from my styled hair, to my jewel-covered neck, right down to the Manolo Blahniks that cover my feet.

"Hi," I say to Charlotte, my eyes darting from her to Mason. "I'm so glad I get to see you tonight."

"Me too," Charlotte steps forward, giving me a hug. "You look stunning."

I smooth the dress over my hips as she backs up. “It’s amazing what designer labels can do for a girl.”

She laughs at that. “So true.” And then she cocks her head to the side, the question in her eyes. It’s such a long explanation, I’m not even sure where to start.

Mason sticks out his hand to Triston, interrupting the conversation. “Triston. Good to see you looking so fit and happy after your recent breakup.”

The politician gives a nervous laugh, Triston squaring off with Mason as his eyes narrow. “Thank you.”

Charlotte elbows her husband, giving me a nervous smile. “How’s Darius?”

My brother is an excellent topic, considering. “He’s as good as can be expected. That surgeon Mason recommended is wonderful. I’m really hopeful.”

“Good,” Mason looks at me, his glacial gaze warming. “I’m glad to hear it, Honeyeh.”

I fall silent, wondering what to say next. I can’t talk about the job, obviously. “I’m taking my required art class next semester. You’re not going to believe who I got for a professor.”

“Not Burke?” Charlotte gasps.

I wrinkle my nose. He’s a complete pig and some girls have complained that he’s harassed them. “Yes. Burke. You had him. Did he give you trouble?”

“Transfer classes,” Mason cuts in. “I’ll call the school and make certain it happens if you need me to, but do not take his class.”

I blink in surprise. I was attempting small talk, but I seem to have landed myself in more hot water.

Triston's hand comes to my back. "Something I should know?"

"A word, please," Mason returns to Triston in the kind of clipped voice that has my brows drawing together.

Triston gives my waist a light squeeze before he gestures for Mason to follow.

Charlotte sighs. "Burke was awful to me. Mason had to intervene," she whispers. "Honestly, it was my first real indicator that Mason cared about me."

I consider those words, wanting to know more. But she's got questions of her own. "Are you and Triston a thing?"

I shake my head, hiding a sigh. "No. Definitely not."

Her eyes crinkle in confusion. In whispered tones, I explain how Triston has hired me as a personal assistant and my job tonight is to make certain other women don't attempt to distract him.

Charlotte listens, considering the words. When I'm done, she gives me a thoughtful appraisal. "I'm not sure, Honeyeh. About any of this."

“What do you mean?”

“Well...” she sighs, “he doesn’t look at you like an assistant. Which could be fine. I managed to catch Mason, and our friend Kim is now married to Leo Kincaid. And he was wild...” Her mouth twitches. “But Triston, he’s so militantly a bachelor.”

I nod. “Trust me, I know. I don’t care how gorgeous he is...”

“He is that.”

“For Darius’s sake, if nothing else, I’ll keep my head.”

“Good,” she squeezes my hand and then gives my cheek a kiss. “Now tell me all about what you’ve been up to. I’ve been so busy, I feel like we haven’t had a proper catch up in ages.”

“No worries,” I wrap my arm around her, “I can imagine marriage places a lot of demands on your time.”

A blush fills her cheeks as she smiles in this secretive way. “You have no idea.”

I’m so happy for her, but the smallest bit of jealousy moves through me. It’s silly, so I reach for her hand again. “I’m so glad for you. In love and married. It’s so wonderful.”

Charlotte’s eyes slide down me. “Honeyeh, you could have any man in this room.” And then her gaze sweeps the crowd. “Should I introduce you to a few of them?”

I shake my head. I'm here to do a job, not find a husband. "Not tonight. Another time."

She eyes me suspiciously and I know she knows. My new boss is the only man I can handle right now.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Triston

Irritation rolls off Mason in waves as we enter my office. Is he upset that I've brought Honeyeh to this event? I'm not apologizing. That's a move for the weak.

If Killian were in my place, he wouldn't even offer up an explanation. He'd stare back at Mason with a silent but clearly implied, *mind your fucking business*. I debate the strategy, as I pour a glass of whisky for myself and another for him from the sideboard. He takes a seat on the other side of my desk.

I hand him the glass. "Are you fucking her?"

I appreciate directness, but I take a sip of my drink and slide into my own seat. "No. Would it be a problem if I did?"

I see his lips thin over his teeth. I'll take that as a yes. "She is not one of your women to use and toss aside, Triston."

I get his meaning. "Toss aside? Is that what I do?"

He sits back in his chair. "You know what I mean."

"I do. That's the problem."

“Don’t play hurt with me. You’ve dripped her in expensive labels, covered her in jewels. She looks like...”

“Like she belongs,” I say for him.

He pauses, cocking his head to the side as his gaze searches mine. “I mean what I say. I took up your offer to place her in your house because I wanted her out from under the influence of men who might take advantage.”

“Why not employ her in your house?” But the words are bitter on my tongue. I want Honeyeh here.

“She’s Charlotte’s friend. She can’t be staff. And she’s got too much pride to just take my money.”

The fact he’d give her money has my hackles up. Does he have designs on Honeyeh? Is he planning on stepping out on Charlotte? “You’re awfully invested in her future.”

He lets out a slow breath of air as he stares back. “And you’re awfully invested in my intentions.”

Fair. The intensity of my interest in Honeyeh has clearly been noted. Silence fills the space until he finally looks away. “Honeyeh reminds me of myself.”

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“What?”

“Lost both her parents. In charge of a sibling when she’s far too young for a burden like that.” A raw, unguarded tension pulls at Mason’s features. “She carries the burden with dignity and grace, but not nearly as much strength, and it’s a huge burden.”

I get it. My hand tightens around my glass. “I can make you a promise. I will only leave her better than I found her, Mason. Money. Connections. Doctors and care for her brother. However the relationship goes, I will be her benefactor.”

He gives a single nod, setting down his nearly full glass. “I can accept that. Let’s go rouse up the board, shall we? We’ve got a takeover to conduct and some Russians to drive out of Vegas.”

I set my drink down too, tapping the rim as a sense of dread pulls at my stomach.

Have I changed my mind?

Why should I? This deal will break open our business. But it’s also going to incite the Russians.

And as I think of delicate Honeyeh at my side, in my life... The idea of inviting more trouble that might touch her...

I shut that thought down; she’s a temporary distraction, nothing more. I pull at the lapels of my jacket. “Let’s do this.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Honeyeh

Charlotte gets drawn into another conversation and I do my best to amuse myself while Triston is gone.

I sample a few of the appetizers, chat with random guests, do my best to look as though I belong in this world.

But as I'm between conversations and feeling very awkward, I get a tap on my shoulder.

I turn around to find Brittany from my last waitressing job standing behind me.

"Brittany," I gasp, turning to hug her. "I can't believe you're here. I was thinking of you just yesterday."

She hugs me back. "Me too. I wondered if I'd see you here." She steps back, her eyes moving down me. "You look like you stepped out of the movie, *Pretty Woman*."

I flush. It's a compliment and I appreciate it, but also... "You look great too."

She preens, strutting in a circle, as she strikes several poses. "I came with one of my regulars. He's an amazing tipper, but he likes to see a lot of skin."

I'm not judging. The truth is, what I'm doing tonight is not that far off from being an escort. I'd like to have some moral high ground, but with Darius and his condition, I simply can't.

An older, portly man moves to stand at her side, his beefy hand coming to her back.

He looks completely smitten and Brittany gives him a charming smile in return. “This is my friend, Honeyeh. Honeyeh, this is John Waltham.”

He barely looks at me, which I honestly consider a point in his favor. I wonder if he’d marry her?

Brittany seems like she could use the stability.

John leaves again to fetch drinks for us and we both watch him go. “How serious is it with him?”

Brittany shrugs. “Maybe serious. I have all these dreams, you know, but also, I’m tired of messing around with a bunch of guys who only want one thing, you know?”

“Yeah.” I never wanted to mess with those guys, so I get it.

“I’m getting some money together to take one more modeling class. If that doesn’t work...” She shrugs. “How’s working for Triston Smith?”

“Weird,” I answer with a small shiver. I don’t even know how to tell her that the attraction I feel is making it so difficult for me to make rational decisions.

And then there is the way he treats me, which is not quite like an employee, but not like a girlfriend either. I sigh, with a shake of my head. “Working for a man that good looking is just tough.”

She laughs then. “If I worked for him, I think I’d just throw myself naked in front of him and see if he took me up on the offer.”

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I laugh too, but mine is a nervous laugh because after tonight, it's not sounding like a bad choice.

He's wrapped me in clothes and jewels, his hand at my back in a way that feels like possession, and I only want more.

"Is the pay good?" she asks, her voice dropping.

I nod. "Really good."

She squeezes my hand. "I'm glad. I know you probably don't need it, but I just want you to know that my offer still stands. If you ever needed me to hook you up with my boss..."

"Thanks, Brittany. I appreciate your offer of help." Even though I'm glad I don't have to take it.

John comes back, placing a glass of champagne in my hand, just as Triston moves through the crowd toward us. His gaze cuts across Brittany and John, before he shoulders his way to my side.

His fingers wrap possessively around my hip, pulling my body into his. "Hello," he says, giving Brittany a sweeping gaze before his eyes land on John. "Thanks so much for coming, I'm Triston Smith, I don't think we've met."

John holds out his hand, appearing delighted. "Chairman Waltham, pleased to make your acquaintance."

Chairman? Is Brittany's client a politician? Interesting...

Triston shakes with his free hand, speaking with John for a minute before they agree to talk next week over lunch.

Then Triston is pulling me away. "Everything all right?" I ask, my hand covering his at my hip.

"Fine," he gives me a smile. "Chairman Waltham was on my list of people to make contact with this evening so that was an unexpected bonus."

"That's a relief, I thought you were unhappy."

His lips twitch down. "I am curious how you ended up in conversation with them, considering he brought an escort to the party."

My mouth drops open. Was Brittany that obvious? "He seems really into her."

"Maybe," Triston answers, stopping in the middle of the ballroom and raising his brows as he waits for my answer.

"Brittany works at Mason's hotel as part of the waitstaff. She was at Killian's wedding too, helping with the tables and chairs."

His brows fall now, confusion pulling them together. "Did she? I'm usually better with faces, but I don't remember her at all."

My free hand settles on the side of his ribs. I don't say it, but it actually makes me feel good he didn't notice Brittany that night. Only me.

He dips his face toward mine, his lips kissing that spot just below my ear that makes

me shiver. I turn my head to the side and catch Brittany's stare. I flush, worried she thinks I lied.

When he lifts back up, his face close to mine, he rumbles. "I have some people I'd like you to meet."

"All right."

"They're future partners, most likely, and I'm bringing you with me to help soften the edges."

I wrinkle my nose. "You want me to help you close a deal? Are you sure?"

"Just be yourself, Honeyeh, and you'll be a big help." And then he starts leading me across the ballroom again.

We make our way up his personal stairs and down the hall to his office where Mason and Charlotte wait with three men and another woman.

She's blonde and the kind of beautiful that makes my jaw drop.

Charlotte takes my hand. "Come meet my sister-in-law, Nia Kincaid." Then she waves at the blonde. "Nia, I have to introduce you to my friend, Honeyeh Karimi."

Nia steps forward, a warm smile on her gorgeous mouth. She looks like Marilyn Monroe with long hair. "Hi, Honeyeh. So nice to meet you."

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She leans into kiss my cheek and I give her a kiss back, thinking that Charlotte has managed to find such a wonderful place in life.

“Come meet my cousins,” Nia turns to the men behind her.

Three handsome men with dark hair and piercing gazes stand just behind her. “This is Matteo, Nico, and Lorenzo Andriani.”

I dip my chin, meeting each of their gazes, as I do my best to smile. There is an intensity to these men that I find just a bit frightening.

That’s when Triston steps up next to me again, his fingers sliding down the bare skin of my arm in a light touch that sends a message of clear possession that I really appreciate. They’re dangerous.

I want to sink into Triston and his strength.

His hand leaves my arm, but only to settle on my waist. I sink into his side. “It’s a pleasure to meet you,” I say, dipping my chin. “Do you all live in Vegas?”

“Born and raised,” Matteo returns, his tux and shirt black with a red tie. His looks are so striking that I drop my gaze again. “You?”

I shake my head. “I was born in Iran. My mother brought us here when I was eleven.”

“What made her choose Vegas?” Nico asks. He is less harsh-looking than Matteo, maybe because he’s younger, but he carries the same penetrating gaze.

“At the time, the casinos were expanding and there was a great deal of work.” I always thought my mother wished to hide as well. I don’t know why. Whatever secrets she carried, she took with her.

“So what do you do here in Vegas?” Lorenzo asks, the most mild-mannered of the three.

“I attend UNLV,” I answer. “I met Charlotte Kincaid my freshman year. It’s taking me longer to get my degree, but I’m slowly working my way through the pre-law program.”

Triston’s fingers fan out on my hip. “Honeyeh is her brother’s guardian.”

I feel all three of the Andriani’s soften. Is that what I’m here for? A sympathy move? I stiffen a bit. I am happy to help Triston, but I don’t want to be some dancing monkey.

But Matteo clears his throat. “It’s a blessing and curse, isn’t it?”

My head snaps up as Mason steps up next me. “What is?”

“Being a guardian to your siblings. Changes a person.”

Mason makes a soft noise of agreement. My lips purse. Looking at them, I think they were both made for responsibility. The strength rolls off them. For me, it’s been love that carries me forward. My hands fold over my stomach. “If one of you might be able to give me the secret to running a successful company, I’d be very grateful. I could use the funds for Darius’s care.”

All the men rumble out a laugh. And it was a ridiculous comment. They are successful because they are smart and driven. There is no secret. I don’t need to have

their success either, I just need to get ahead of the curve that I always seem behind.

Matteo eyes me, his head cocking just to the right. “You, Honeyeh, have all the attributes you need to have endless amounts of money at your disposal. How old is your brother?”

Is he talking about my looks? One has to have time to date to utilize those, but I don’t correct him. “Darius is fifteen, nearly sixteen.”

“Nearly a man.”

My shoulder lifts. If I can get him to the age of eighteen, he will be.

Mason clears his throat. “Charlotte and Honeyeh can step out if you have more questions for us that are more of a business nature.”

“Not necessary,” Matteo shakes his head. “We’re ready to sign.”

I feel the air leave Triston’s lungs. Was this important?

The men move to the desk where they lean over the desk, Charlotte stepping up next to me.

“For whatever it’s worth, Triston touches you like you’re precious.”

Maybe I am. But I can’t afford to take a risk. And Triston is the least safe man I know.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Triston

I take Honeyeh to my next meeting as well, at least the first part of it. Here, I'm meeting with the board of trustees for Dimitri's casino, Shimmer.

This meeting, held in the dining room, is far larger, and there is a lot more schmoozing.

She stays by my side, her hip brushing mine as she charms every man she meets.

Even I was shocked by how much Matteo Andriani warmed to her. The man is ice. But I watched him melt, the ice leaving his eyes his gaze drank her in, dancing with fire. I barely controlled the jealousy, especially when he suggested she ought to marry her way out of her financial hardships. It was an offer, I'm sure of it.

I'm glad to do business with Matteo, now head of the Italian Mafia here in Vegas. But if he tries to touch Honeyeh...

A fresh wave of possessive anger pulses through me, and I push it back down.

This meeting is easier though. Charmed as they all are, not one of these blowhards has what it takes to woo Honeyeh out of my house and into theirs.

By the time we get to signing contracts, I send Honeyeh not back to the party, which is winding down, but upstairs to change. "This won't take long and then I can drive

you home.”

Killian is next to me, and he lifts his hand. “We’re driving back into the city if you’d like me?—”

I glare until he shuts the fuck up.

No one else is driving Honeyeh. First, I want a few quiet moments with her and as much time in her company as I can get.

Second, I’m still debating where I’m taking things with Honeyeh next.

She’s been perfect tonight. An asset in every way. Charming, beautiful, always sweet, I have found her company beyond enjoyable this evening in addition to being damn helpful.

For the first time in my adult life, I actually see the appeal of marriage.

I’m sure my father saw it too, though. I’m sure my mother was nothing but an asset in the beginning. Polished, attractive, she gave him six sons. All while he fucked his way through England and beyond.

Not that I’d do that...but still...it doesn’t make a man trust in matrimony to see such a deplorable example.

Honeyeh slips from my side and starts for the door, catching my eye over her shoulder before she disappears.

It takes everything in me not to chase after her.

But this hostile takeover, coupled with the deal that we just made with the Italians,

are the nails in the coffin that are going to close down the Russians in their casino business.

They've neglected their casinos. Mostly, I'd guess they use them to wash money for their other businesses, which is why they don't care.

But that doesn't keep the board happy. And their casino is in the way of me connecting two more of mine to Mason's tunnel.

So as the papers are signed—saying that the board will vote out Dimitri and allow me to assume control—it's a big moment. One I've been waiting for and working toward for the past few years at least.

And yet, all I can think of is Honeyeh upstairs taking off her clothes.

We all sign, and it takes everything in me not to race out of the room. Instead, whisky is poured, and I pretend to drink, far more interested in using my energy for other pursuits.

When I can finally leave, I'm sprinting up the stairs, pulling off my tie and undoing the top button as I shrug off the jacket and knock on the guest room door.

"Come in," Honeyeh calls.

Something inside me unwinds to hear her voice. I push open the door to find her still in her dress, sitting on the end of the bed. "You didn't change."

She looks over her shoulder again and my breath stalls in my lungs, she's so incredible. "I can't reach the zipper." And then she points over her shoulder.

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A laugh rumbles from my lips.

Her shoes are off, sitting next to her on the floor. I cross the room, and she stands, presenting her back.

Without a word, I reach for her, undoing the hook above the zipper, my fingers brushing her skin, before I grasp the zipper and slide it down her back, exposing the clasp of the bra underneath, and then lower, revealing the smooth skin of her back.

The zipper keeps going all the way down to her ass, and so do I, her thong coming into view.

She holds the dress in the front so it doesn't fall off her body, but it opens some. I've got a raging hard on, the one I've been trying to control all night.

But when one of the dimples above her ass comes into view, I start to leak cum.

I want Honeyeh so badly, my balls are on fire. My hand shakes the slightest bit as I reach the bottom of the zipper, and then I trail my fingers back up the exposed skin of her back.

She sucks in her breath, her skin breaking out in little bumps. With a rumble, I trace her waist, moving my hand deeper into the dress until my palm is pressed to her bare stomach.

And then I pull her against my front, settling my cock into the plump curve of her ass.

She gasps and it only makes me hotter as I nip at the curve of her neck, my hand now sliding down, tracing the top of the thong. I want to dive my hand underneath the lacy fabric. The one I picked out in the store, picturing it on Honeyeh's skin.

Her breath is coming out in short little puffs as she reaches a hand back, settling it on my hip.

I look down to see her delicate fingers on my black pants and I know I want to see more of her hands on my skin.

"Honeyeh," I growl out, as I slip past the top of the thong, my hand skimming down the silky skin of her lower belly.

And that's when I realize that her pussy is shaved clean. "Fuck me." I press my fingertips into her mound. "Are you bare for me, sweetheart?"

"She gave me a Brazilian today," Honeyeh whispers even as I sink my fingers lower, running my middle finger along her soaking wet seam.

My breath is ragged now as I part her lips, the wet folds of her pussy drenching my hand. I'm about to completely fucking lose all control when her head falls back on my shoulder. "Triston?"

My answer is to grasp her chin with my other hand and turn her face so that I can devour her mouth, giving her a fierce kiss before I part her lips and dive in with my tongue.

My finger slides up higher and hits her sensitive clit. She cries into my mouth as her entire body shakes and I know she wants me as badly as I want her.

I let go of her jaw, still kissing her like I'm claiming her with my tongue as I tug the

straps of her dress down her shoulders, the dress falling into a heap on the floor.

Now I get to see my hand down her underwear and between her legs. I want her naked.

No. I want her in nothing but the thigh-high stockings, on her hands and knees on the bed as I hold her hips in my hands and watch my cock sink into her pussy that I've messed up so good.

I'm leaking more cum, so ready for release, I step back just enough to get my hand on her back and unhook the bra with a quick jerk, sending the contraption across the room.

Then she's back against my body, my mouth slanting over hers as I circle her clit with one hand and grab one of her perfect fucking tits in my other hand. Apple-sized and pert, with gorgeous nipples already standing at attention for me.

I tweak one and she cries out again, bucking into my hand. "Triston," she gasps into my mouth.

"Yeah, sweetheart?" I'm already moving us toward the bed. I just need to fucking cum, and then I can think again.

Honeyeh's got me crazy and if I could just gain some control back, I wouldn't be thinking wild thoughts of marriage and killing men who even dare to look at her.

"I..." She pauses as I kiss her again, her lips meeting mine with enough hunger that I forget she wanted to talk. Her quads hit the bed, even as I switch my attention to the other breast. I want to lick them, taste every inch of her.

Maybe next time. But then I catch myself. Why am I already thinking of a next time?

There are no promises here.

So instead, I let go of her breast, to place my hand on her back, even as I keep circling her clit. She's drenched now, her juices covering my hand and running down her thighs. She's going to feel so good.

I can't remember a time that I was this amped.

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I push and she goes without question, bending over for me. Honeyeh is so responsive to my every touch it only stokes the fire burning in my balls. I'd love to hold both her wrists above her head, pound into her while she wrapped her legs around my waist and whimpered and begged for me to make her cum.

I nearly lose it, my vision blurring. Fuck. I'm already not sure once is going to be enough. But that's a worry for tomorrow. For after I've cleared my fucking balls of the cum that's been collecting for days.

I start ripping the thong down her thighs, her ass bare to me, her pussy too.

I haven't taken off a single article of my own clothing and with a rumble of frustration I back up, ripping the buttons off my shirt to yank it off and then I'm tugging my T-shirt over my head.

She looks beyond incredible in her thigh-highs and thong halfway down her legs. I'm this close to blowing my load in my pants.

I've only just reached for the clasp on my trousers when Honeyeh looks over her shoulder with large gray eyes filled with, not lust, but worry.

My hand stills. "Triston?"

"Yeah?"

The round curve of her ass is so gorgeous, her pussy and thighs slick from her own juices.

“I’ve never...” She licks her lips and draws in a shuddering breath. “I’ve never done this before.”

My cock is straining against my trousers, demanding to be set free. “Done what?” Fucked her boss? Had a one-night stand? Been paid as a date and then had sex?

“I’m...I’m a virgin and I...”

The word virgin makes me freeze. I’ve got a fucking virgin bent over the bed in thigh-highs with a thong around her knees.

Fuck. Me.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Honeyeh

The room goes cold.Or maybe that’s just Triston. I’m completely exposed, practically naked, and he just stands there, not saying a word.

I shouldn’t have told him.

But he would have found out and then he might have been mad.

Or perhaps he’s angry now.

“You’re a what?”

I risk looking over my shoulder. His hand is on his waistband, his muscles bunched as though he’s about to strike.

His eyes are dark and hooded, and I shiver with dread. But I don't move. I'm not sure why, other than he put me in this position, and he didn't say to leave it.

I draw in a ragged breath. I don't think I understood about myself how much I wanted a strong man to tell me what to do. How obedient I want to be. How it makes me feel safe. "Please don't stop," I whisper. "Please."

"Honeyeh," he growls, and he sounds like he's pissed.

"Don't be mad," I whisper as I feel tears stinging my eyes. "I want to please you. I?—"

"Honeyeh." This time it's sharp. Hard. My lips press together to hold the words in.

And then he's moving toward me, his hands on my legs as he grabs my thong and pulls it up my thighs. I give a little cry, feeling raw and exposed and...rejected.

He scoops his shirt off the floor and then he tugs me up to standing, grabbing one of the arms and jamming my arm through the sleeve and pulling the shirt around my back and yanking it up my other arm. "Pull it closed," he demands, his voice a deep, hard rumble.

I do as he asks.

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“Sit down.”

I turn and do as he’s commanded, feeling the first tear spill down my cheek. How did this go so wrong?

My knees press together, my chin dropping, as I hold the two sides of the shirt tightly in my fist right between my breasts.

“This was a mistake.”

I nod, like I agree. I do agree. I need this job for my brother’s sake and... My head snaps up. “Please tell me you won’t fire me over this.”

He grimaces and fear beats in my stomach, rolling like a thousand ominous drums. “I think we should talk on Monday. Get dressed and I’ll drive you home.”

And then he turns and strides from the room, the door closing behind him.

I make this choked cry I can’t seem to hold back because I’m pretty sure I’ve just ruined everything.

My body shakes as I push up off the bed and walk to the bathroom where my bag is tucked in the closet.

I can barely hold back my tears as I shrug off his shirt and pull my sweatshirt from the bag. My hands are trembling so badly, I don’t even bother with a bra, I just pull the baggy fabric over my torso and then find my leggings, tugging them over the

thigh-high stockings.

Picking up Triston's shirt, I do manage to carefully fold it and lay it on the bed. But not before I give it a sniff, breathing in his rich cologne and the woody scent that is so uniquely his.

It makes me wince, a shudder running through me. I should have never given in like that. I just wanted him so badly...

A sob threatens to break through my throat, but I clamp my lips shut, not letting it out as I pick up his T-shirt and fold that too, laying it on top of the shirt.

"Ready?"

He stands in the doorway in a fitted T-shirt and jeans. I've never seen him look so casual and he looks amazing in a totally different way. Like I guy I could have just met in a coffee shop.

It makes my heart ache as I nod once and sling my bag over my shoulder.

He turns and starts down the stairs and I follow, scrambling to keep up with his long strides.

Moving helps me control the panic rising, but as he stops in his kitchen to grab his keys and I stop behind him, my chest grows so tight I can hardly breathe. "Triston."

He looks back at me, his face completely unreadable. "We'll talk on Monday, Honeyeh."

I jerk my chin, attempting agreement but I think I might look like I'm having a seizure. I want to say thank you for the dress, which I left in a heap on the floor, or

for the beautiful evening, but it's all been ruined now.

I swallow down the raw lump in my throat and step into the garage with him, which holds like six cars.

He hits the button on an SUV, the lights of the car flashing and then he opens the passenger door, his hand on my elbow as he helps me inside.

His touch sears my skin, and I want to sink into him, throw myself at his feet, and beg him to touch me again.

I barely keep my control as I step up into the car and settle in the rich leather seat.

I haven't stopped shaking as he closes the car door and comes around the driver's seat.

The silence is deafening as he climbs in, opening the garage door and backing out of the garage.

I bite my lip to stay quiet. I want to cry. Plead. I'd twist myself into a pretzel if only he'd touch me again.

God, I'm pathetic.

How can I be responsible for another human being? I close my eyes, fighting back tears. "What else are you doing this weekend?"

I look at him then, my jaw falling open. We're going to make stupid small talk. "Nothing. Studying."

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He nods, his eyes remaining on the road.

I stare at his profile for another minute, trying to decide if there is anything I can say, ask, to make this better.

The traffic is much lighter this time of night, and he moves easily into the city, seeming to know the way to my campus apartment.

But I remain silent because I've tried twice to ask questions, and he's shut me down both times.

We reach the edge of campus, and he pulls up to the curb, stopping the car. "Am I close enough to your apartment?"

"Yeah. This is great." I don't look at him, searching for the doorhandle instead. Now that I'm here, I just want to leave the car, go lay in my bed and cry my eyes out. Then I'm going to figure out what the hell I do if he fires me on Monday.

I open the door and start to step down, sliding from the seat. "Honeyeh."

"Yeah?"

"We'll talk on Monday, all right. When we've cooled off and reason prevails."

"Sure," I say, my voice cracking. "Monday. Sounds good. Goodnight."

"Night."

My feet drop to the ground and then I'm stepping around the door, slamming it shut. I practically run from the car, and I don't look back, but I hear Triston pull away.

The sob I've been clamping down breaks from my lips as the tears start to stream down my cheeks.

I make it to my apartment, getting the key in the lock on the third try, my tears making the task ridiculously difficult. It has to be after one in the morning, but Darius is watching TV when I come in. "How was it?" he asks, his eyes on the television.

"Good." Now is not the time to tell him that I may have just ruined the best job I've ever had.

I dart for my tiny bedroom, closing the door behind me before I toss myself on the bed and plant my face in my pillow, letting it swallow all my tears.

I have no idea how long I cry or what time it is before I finally fall asleep, but when my phone rings, jolting me awake, I have no idea what time it is, only that the sun is high in the sky.

I blink, not even sure where my phone is, when it rings again. Swimming out of the fog, I realize that it's in my bag.

Stumbling off the bed, I sway as I cross the floor and then drop to my knees. Pulling open the bag, I finally find the phone just as it stops ringing.

My shoulders sag, wondering who might be calling. Was it Triston? Did he want to talk about last night?

Does he just want to fire me today and get it over with?

The phone starts ringing again and I jump, turning it over in my hand to see who is calling.

But it isn't Triston's name. It's Dr. Lawrence. My breath catches as I accept the call. "Hello?"

"Honeyeh?"

"Yes. Dr. Lawrence. Hi." I stop, not even sure what question to ask. Why are you calling me on a Saturday?

"Hi. Did I wake you?"

Shoot. "No. I mean, it's fine. I had a late-night work event yesterday."

He makes a noise of understanding. "I'm calling because I have some news."

My breath catches in my throat. "What's that?"

"This is always delicate, but a potential donor has been identified for Darius."

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I look down at the phone. “Potential?”

He lets out a heavy sigh. “Car accident last night. He’s on life support and may or may not survive.”

The air rushes from my lungs. I’ve always known that Darius’s luck is built on someone else’s heartbreak, and my stomach twists. “Oh my goodness. I’m so sorry.”

“Thank you, Honeyeh, for understanding that this is a moment for grief and understanding. And I want you to know, that if this is not Darius’s donor, we’ll do our absolute best to find a new liver for him.”

“I know, Dr. Lawrence. Thank you.” I draw in a tremulous breath. I will not hope for another person’s death.

“But that does lead me to a delicate question. If our potential donor dies, we could be performing surgery on Darius within the next twenty-four hours.”

My heart starts to pound. “That soon.”

“That’s right. Which is why I need to know if you’ve procured any funds for a down payment on the procedure. I know we discussed the necessity when you first came to see me.”

My insides tear wide open. I’ve made great strides, but I don’t have more than a thousand dollars in my bank account. Not nearly enough for Dr. Lawrence. But if this is Darius’s chance... “I’ll find the money.”

There is a pause on the other end of the line, like he might be trying to decide how I would do that. “All right. Glad to hear it.”

We finish up the call and I hang up. But I don’t move. My lower legs are tucked under me, pressing into the hard linoleum of the floor as I look down at my phone. I need ten thousand dollars by tomorrow.

How am I getting it?

I look down at my phone. I could try Triston, the man I think might fire me. Then again, I’ve got nothing to lose there if I ask. Except, if he’s on the fence about letting me go, this will definitely make up his mind. I scrub a hand over my face.

I could call Mason. It might end my friendship with Charlotte, but this is my brother’s life.

Or...I could call Brittany. Make the money myself, doing something that fills me with dread and loathing, but I could do it on my own.

There isn’t much time to decide as I close my eyes and run through the options one more time.

Then, opening my eyes back up, I touch the screen of the phone and make the call...

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Triston

I wakeup close to noon, a pounding headache pulsing through my temples.

The drive back to my house after I dropped off Honeyeh was fucking torture. I nearly

turned the Porsche around at least three times. The fact that I don't know which apartment is hers, was the only thing that stopped me.

I could call. And say what...I was an asshole from start to fucking finish?

Yeah. Maybe.

I've always known that Honeyeh was sweet. Innocent. She's hardly dated because she's been taking care of a terminally ill sibling.

The fact that I stripped her and bent her over the side of a bed, and nearly took her virginity with a rough doggy fuck makes me hate myself.

That's how I repaid her support last night.

But then...in an effort to slow myself down, I turned into a cold fucking prick. I know I sucked.

But I wanted her so badly it was the only way to gain control of my body. I had to turn my feelings off.

Honeyeh deserves to be wooed. Loved. Not fucked like a random piece of ass.

But it wasn't until she was out of the car that I realized, and she didn't understand any of it.

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I fucking suck at anything that resembles real intimacy. No wonder I only date women for a month.

This realization prompted me to come home and hit the still-stocked bar, full of half-open bottles of champagne and all manner of hard alcohol.

I barely remember how much or what I drank, but I know it was a lot and very mixed because I can barely pull myself from bed.

I'm sure I need a shower, I can smell the liquor sweating out of my pores. Instead, I pull on athletic pants and head down to my kitchen.

Throwing every protein powder I've got into the blender, I toss in a banana and some almond milk and then hit blend, the sound making my head throb worse.

But when it's blended, I don't even bother putting the mixture into a glass. I chug it straight from the carafe, draining the contents.

Then I turn to the stove to make myself some eggs.

By the time I've eaten and taken some ibuprofen, it's one in the afternoon, and feeling slightly better, I head up to the shower.

I scrub myself down. But as the headache recedes, my cock starts pulsing with a need so deep that my little man can't be ignored.

He wants Honeyeh and so do I.

And last night I fucked it up.

Even in that moment, Honeyeh was so tempting, so perfect as she asked me with the prettiest please to keep going. Begged me to touch her.

Fucking hell, that woman knows just how to hit me where I'm most raw. It's like she was made for me.

Was she? Am I stupid for fighting this attraction between us?

But I don't do commitment, I don't want a woman clogging up my life. I've been the break wall for my family for so long. Taking my father's shit, and now, making the tough decisions for our business.

Why would I take on more responsibility?

Besides, this is not a place a woman belongs, getting bashed against the waves with me. Then again, Honeyeh is like the tide, pulling me out with such force, I can't seem to resist.

I get out of the shower and towel off. Maybe I should have fucked her. Gotten it out of my system.

But then I would have been my fucking father. Selfishly taking without any regard of how much I'd hurt her.

Despite what Victoria said a few days ago, I don't lie, and I don't make promises meant to give false hope. Victoria can handle that even if she's a bitch about it.

But Honeyeh, she's so vulnerable. No matter how I proceed, I could break her.

Fuck.

I pull on slacks and a dress shirt even though it's Saturday. I think I need to call Honeyeh, but I need armor to do it.

In jeans, I might just go over to her apartment and toss her over my shoulder, like I'm not a man on the verge of making billions with everything to lose.

But after I'm dressed, I head to my office, pulling out my phone. Do I call her? Apologize? Invite her to dinner?

I know where that's leading. I'll end up having her for dessert.

How long can I have her in my house, tempting me without tasting the forbidden fruit?

Should I pass her off to one of my brothers to have her work in his house? At the real estate office?

The very idea of her ass on display for any of them has me tensing with irrational barely contained fury.

I go back to my plan I considered yesterday. Marry her.

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Not forever. But long enough to run my cock dry and get her brother the surgery he needs.

I fiddle with the phone. It's a delicate ask. I want to make you my wife...temporarily.

Then again, she gets some major bonuses.

I tap the phone on the desk. Do I call her? Wait until Monday? I fucking hate indecision and in my business life, I work on instinct that never leads me astray, but this is different.

I pick up the phone and tap the screen, searching my contacts I find her name.

Christ, even looking at her name typed in my contacts makes me warm. I'm about to press her name and call her when a call comes through.

I blink a few times, my brother Killian's name popping up on the screen.

I hit the accept button. "What?" I ask, as I place the phone to my ear.

"You're a fucking prick you know that?"

"Same to you," I rumble. But I know he's right. I'm being unnecessarily harsh. And as Killian never calls on a Saturday afternoon, something is up. "It's not two in the morning, so I'm assuming this is a social call?"

He snorts. "I never make social calls. Waste of time."

“So it’s business then?”

“Personal,” he rumbles.

I’m more confused than ever and my head gives another throb, so I rub my temple.
“Get to the point, Killian.”

“It’s Honeyeh.”

My blood runs cold. “What about Honeyeh?”

“You know how Mason asked me to watch Dimitri’s whorehouses?”

I stand, nearly crawling out of my skin. “Killian?” I can hear the question in my voice, the way I’m asking him not to say what I think he’s going to say.

He makes this rumble of regret and my entire body clenches.

“I saw her go in, Triston, makeup running down her face as she cried. She was between two men, each of them holding an arm...”

I jerk open my laptop, slamming the phone on the desk as I hit the button for the speaker.

My fingers fly over the keys as I pull up Dimitri’s website on the dark web.

It doesn’t fucking take much. Honeyeh’s at the top of the page. One night with her, bidding starts at fifty grand. Winner gets her virginity.

“What the actual fucking fuck?!” I roar, my fist coming down on the top of my desk.

“What is it?” Killian asks.

“He’s selling her,” I spit through clenched teeth. Does this have something to do with me? “Was she struggling? Did she look forced?”

“She looked really sad,” Killian answers. “And a bit panicked.”

“Anyone else with her?”

“Some little blonde chick.”

My mouth drops open. Brittany. Did Brittany put her up to this? “Where are you? I’m coming to you.”

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Killian clicks his tongue against his teeth. “This place is locked up tight as a vault. If you’re breaking in, you’d better bring some fire power.”

That makes me pause.

I need a plan. “Give me a second.” I close my eyes and try to think. However Honeyeh ended up at Dimitri’s door, she belongs here. And there is no way I’m letting some other man touch her.

I may be worried about hurting Honeyeh, but I sure as fuck am better than whatever filthy animal buys her tonight.

There is no way that’s happening.

“Did you send me the address?”

“Yeah.”

“All right. In that case, station yourself outside of Dimitri’s home. His daughter. The nanny. Follow them.”

“Triston.”

“I know. And I know I promised no more work like this, but Honeyeh, she’s mine. And he’s going to give her back or...”

Killian drops several curses. “It’s not that I don’t see the wisdom...”

“I’ll try every other way first. But Honeyeh, she needs me to fight for her. She can’t do it on her own.” The truth of those words hit me in the chest. She’ll be whatever I need, whatever I want. A maid. An assistant. My lover. My wife. She’ll beg me, she’ll let me bend her over the bed and fuck her however I wish if she just... She needs my strength like she needs air.

“Fuck yeah, she does.” Killian starts walking. I hear his boots on the pavement. “And I’ll only ever say this to you once. But when you set yourself to protecting a woman like that, brother, she’ll give you every fucking piece of herself back until your whole life is better than you ever imagined.”

I look down at the phone. I can’t accept that. That I could give myself wholly and get a whole person back. But I can do this. I was going to war with Dimitri Ivanov anyway.

Honeyeh will be in no man’s bed but mine.

Grabbing my keys, I’m out the door.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Honeyeh

I stand before one of the scariest men I’ve ever met. I can tell he’s Russian by his accent, and Brittany confirms my assumption when she says, “Honeyeh, this is my boss, Mr. Ivanov.”

“Dimitri,” he rumbles, looking me over. I have on the same sundress that I wore to my interview at Triston’s. I didn’t know what else to wear.

My hair is still mostly in the loose curls that the stylist placed them in last night, but I

had to wash off the smudged makeup.

When I called Brittany, she was at my house within thirty minutes. “This is so exciting,” she gushed as she pulled me out of my place, Darius giving me a curious stare as we passed.

“Who is she?” he asked, looking suspicious.

“My friend,” I said with a weak smile. “We’re going shopping.”

“In your interview dress?”

Crap. I suck at lying. “I need clothes for work.” I lied again and then dashed for the door.

Now I wish I hadn’t. Nothing about this feels right.

I don’t want to call him Dimitri. I don’t want to call him anything. I want to go home. “I don’t think I should?—”

He gives me a smile which only makes him look more frightening. “Sit.” It’s not a request and I find myself sliding into the chair.

Crap. Why do I always just follow commands? My hands twist together. But Brittany touches my shoulder. “Honeyeh needs ten thousand by tomorrow to pay for her brother’s surgery.”

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“Ten thousand is a lot for any woman to make, even one as beautiful as you.” He’s looking me over again, like I’m steak at the meat counter.

“Well, she does have something special,” Brittany says in this excited voice that makes me look up at her with a question in my eyes. Is she enjoying this?

“Really?” Dimitri leans over the desk, his eyes narrowing.

“She’s a virgin,” Brittany grins. “I know that’s big money.”

A squeak comes out of my mouth. I’m not sure I even want to be here, let alone share such personal information.

Dimitri’s brows cock. “Can that be confirmed?”

“What?” I cry, standing. “No. I’ve changed my mind. Thank you for your time, but I need to get home.”

“I’ll give you your price.” And then he opens the drawer on the right side of the desk, pulling out a wad of cash that he slaps on the desk. “What’s more, it will be a requirement that the man who buys you?—”

“Buys me,” I repeat in a strangled cry.

“A night with you,” he corrects. “Must stay here and use one of our rooms where you’ll have the protection of our guards.”

“Tonight? That soon?” I don’t know what I expected, but I need more time. Time to think. This is nothing like I thought and I’m sure I’ve made a mistake. I should have called Mason. No. I should have asked Triston.

But last night was just so...

My eyes are filling with tears again, but I swallow them down, looking at the money. I can’t follow my heart. That was never an option, even if I wanted it to be.

Do I want my brother to have that transplant? “Okay. I’ll do it.”

“Good,” Dimitri gives me another creepy smile before he pulls a contract from the center drawer and slaps it, along with a pen, in front of me. “Just sign, agreeing to the terms.”

Contract. I’ve never hated the word more. I skim the document. Once I sign, there is no changing my mind.

Brittany stands over me, tapping the back of my arm. “Go on. Do it. There’s no other way you can make the money.”

Why does she care so much? Would she feel better if I worked like she did? But drawing in a breath, I slash my name on the line.

“For Darius,” I mumble as I push the paper back.

Brittany claps as Dimitri takes the contract and tucks it away again. Then, he pulls another, smaller bundle of money out of his other drawer and hands it to Brittany. She scoops it up, shoves it in her purse and heads out the door without a backward glance.

I stare after her, my mouth slightly ajar.

When I first met her, I thought she might want something. Now I know she did. She just sold me.

But I don't have time to think on it as Dimitri comes around the desk, his hand sliding under my elbow.

Unlike when Triston touches me, I shrink away, but his grip is firm. "Time to get ready."

"So soon," I gasp.

"We'll have the auction at six o'clock. You should eat. Relax. Then you'll be dressed and made ready. Some of the bids will be done online, but others will be in person."

"But is that even enough time to find the right..." I stop, knowing I don't need to tell him his business. I'm just stalling.

He moves me toward the door and down the hall. "Trust me, you'll be posted on our website in the next five minutes. Buyers will be flocking here."

My breath catches in my chest. I don't want to do this. Any of it. "Please. I don't think..."

"Too late, Honeyeh. You've signed the papers."

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“The money...” I ask, attempting to control the panic.

“Will be yours as soon as it’s done.”

“But how do I know you’ll pay me?” I ask, trying to tug out of his grasp.

He stops, his hand tightening. “I am a man of my word. I want you to be a woman of yours.”

That cuts me deep and silences me.

He turns us into a room on the left, small and old, with a worn couch that makes me wince.

He lets go of my elbow to grab my purse. “Hey,” I start as he unzips it, pulling out my phone. “It was in the contract. This will be returned to you tomorrow morning.” And then he’s gone.

I don’t even want to sit on the couch. Instead, I stand in the middle of the room hugging myself.

But I don’t have long to dwell.

Not five minutes later, three women walk into the room.

One of them carries a plate with a greasy sandwich. The other a basket with a curling iron and makeup.

I almost laugh hysterically.

The similarities and difference to last night punch me in the gut. I'm not Cinderella tonight. It won't be beautiful dresses and a luxury house. Tonight, I'm just a whore.

And just like last night, this will end with a man undressing me, but he won't stop when he learns I'm a virgin.

He likely won't be kind.

I cover my mouth as one of the women slaps the plate on a table in the corner. "When's the last time you shaved?" Her accent is even thicker than Dimitri's.

"I was waxed yesterday."

"Good. Less for me to do." And then she sits on the couch, pulling out some see-through white lingerie. "Eat first."

"I'm not hungry," I whisper.

"Orders. Eat." She points at the plate.

I think I might throw up, but I cross to the plate and take a bite.

It's some heavy, greasy meat slapped between two pieces of bread. I can barely swallow as I grab the bottle of water, washing it down my throat.

Apparently, the single bite is enough to satisfy them, and they get to work.

My hair is curled again, my legs inspected, the makeup applied to my face.

That's when a fourth woman enters. "Time for your check-up."

I turn to her, my brow furrowed. Check-up? I don't know what she could possibly mean when all the other women crowd around me. Two grab my arms and the other two my knees and then I realize.

I gasp, trying to twist out of the chair but their nails dig into me, holding me in place. "Stop," I cry, knowing that I am in so far over my head.

"You claim you are virgin." She narrows her gaze at me. "I need to check."

I freeze. "No one told me about this."

"You lying?" she asks as she pulls a white device out of her bag, that's the shape of an egg.

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I gag. “No. I’ve just never been touched there...” It’s not true. Triston touched me just last night and I don’t have to ask to know that nothing that happens today will be anything like that.

She kneels down, turning her head this way and that as she studies me. “What brought you here?”

I don’t know why she cares. I’m not even sure I should tell her. “My brother needs surgery, and I don’t have the money to pay for it.”

I see her frown, the other women’s hands lessening, easing back. “Ah. I see.” She puts the device in the bag. “I’ll spare you this, but whatever man buys your virginity will spare you nothing, and if you’re lying, it will be both our necks.”

“Your neck is safe,” I whisper, but my eyes are filling with tears again. Hers might be, but mine is not.

She gives a nod.

“My phone? Can I see it?”

“No. No phone until tomorrow.”

“But,” I cry. “The doctor might call. If he does, my brother needs to go to the hospital right away.”

I didn’t tell Darius there might be a donor because I didn’t want to get his hopes up.

But now, I'm seeing all the ways in which I've erred. This will all be for not if Darius doesn't make it to the hospital in time.

"Irina," the woman says. "Go find her phone."

The one I'm assuming is Irina says something sharp back in Russian, but the woman I'm speaking to stands, hands on her hips and says, "Go."

Irina huffs off and I hold my breath as one of the other women starts curling my hair again, while a second pulls out a makeup bag, applying some very natural looking and perfectly matched makeup to my skin.

Irina walks back in, handing me the phone. I tap the screen, the device lighting up, showing that I have seven missed calls.

I gasp in a breath, sure that Dr. Lawrence has been trying to reach me, but it's not his name that appears.

It's Triston's.

My eyes grow huge as I realize he called all seven times. I start to shake. Why would he be so insistent?

I see his first voicemail and tap the message, bringing it to my ear. But before I can listen, the phone is snatched from my grasp. "You check for the doctor but now is not the time to talk to your boyfriend."

"I don't have a boyfriend."

"Who is he then?"

“My boss.”

She clicks her tongue. “Your boss calls you seven times on a Saturday? Maybe he wants to be your boyfriend.”

I don’t answer as my curls are finished and brushed out.

White gauzy lingerie is pulled out of the closet, the kind that I’ve never worn and embarrasses me to even look at. “Aren’t there going to be a room full of people?”

“Not people. Men. Who are deciding if they want to fuck you.”

And the ladies start pulling off my sundress and tucking me into a white lacy bra and panties that have a sheer overlay in the shape of a short nightgown.

At least a silky robe is placed over my top as too-big heels are put on my feet.

Then Irina holds out a gummy of some kind. “You want?”

“What is it?”

“Drug. It will make you sleepy, which will help.”

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I nip at my lip. I've never taken any kind of drug before, I barely drink. It's tempting, but I shake my head. For better or worse, I'll know what's happening.

I get pulled out of the room and down a hall where I can already hear the rumble of many male voices.

My knees begin to quake as I try to walk in my heels. "No backing out now," Irina says from one side as she pulls me forward.

Up ahead, I see a red curtain, the voices growing louder. My heart is pounding in my chest and my whole body starts to shake.

Darius. I'm doing this for Darius.

But before my eyes, lights begin to swim. And I know I'm going to faint.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Triston

Ryker and Rush flank me as I stand outside the address that Killian gave me. He's gone, stationed outside Dimitri's home.

Women are off-limits in this game of real estate and crime. It's one of the unwritten rules, but if Dimitri is going to play dirty, then so am I.

My gut churns that I made Honeyeh a target by bringing her to the benefit last night.

But I put those thoughts aside. Right now, all I need to be is powerful. Decisive.

I bang on the brothel door, the sound echoing through the establishment. But no one answers.

Behind me, I see a few men appear in the alley. But they don't look like Bratva.

Glancing at my watch, I note the time. It's just after five. The auction is supposed to happen in less than an hour.

I raise my fist and bang again.

Again, no one answers.

Pulling out my phone, I do a quick search of my contacts. Finding Dimitri's name, I place the call, waiting as it rings several times.

My teeth gnash together as I bang on the door a third time.

Finally, the phone picks up. "Triston Smith."

"Dimitri," I growl back.

"Why are you banging on my door?"

I look up at the camera positioned just above the door, glaring. "Because," I push out, my jaw still locked. "You've got something that belongs to me."

"I do?" he asks, and I can't tell if he's sincerely asking or taunting. "What would that be?"

My fist clenches at my side. “Open the fucking door, Dimitri. Or?—”

“Or you’ll what? Takeover another one of my casinos?” I hear the vitriol in his voice. “You’re not stepping foot in my establishment.”

I let out a growl. “That’s a mistake. Whatever is happening with us business-wise, you’ve made it personal, so you’d better?—”

“Personal? What the fuck are you talking about?”

This time, he sounds genuinely surprised. I blow a slow breath out through my nose, trying to decide how to proceed. Finally, I just go for direct. “Honeyeh. I want her back and I want her now.”

“Honeyeh? The virgin?”

I let out a snarl. How did he learn that the woman I passed off as my girlfriend is a virgin, I’m going to find out, but first... “Now.”

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The door buzzes, unlocking. I push it open, Rush and Ryker following just behind me. But we've barely made it through the door when we're being patted down.

Both Ryker and Rush have a pistol, both of which are removed.

I feel like I could tear Dimitri apart with my bare hands, but I draw in several deep breaths, attempting to keep calm.

Dimitri is surely armed, and I am not.

We're led down a narrow hall, the guard stopping by an open door. "Those two wait outside," he says in a thick accent.

Ryker steps up next to me. "No. This is a family matter, he'll see the family."

Ryker's words help me focus, knowing I have my brother's support.

"It's all right, Ivan. See them in."

Ivan steps to the side of the door, allowing us to pass.

Rush moves between me and him, clearly acting as temporary guard.

I am the man in my family who keeps our business moving forward. Makes the deals, plans for the future.

But in this moment, I understand how important family is to my success. They prop

me up in those moments I need them.

I never think of it this way. I've always seen myself as the man who breaks the water, how I take the full force of the wind.

And I am. But I do so with their strength at my back. It's something I've forgotten and in losing it, I've lost part of myself. The part that finds joy.

My father may have been a complete piece of shit, but my mother managed to raise men who are strong and committed.

Thinking of her makes my chest tighten. A good woman can't be underestimated.

I stop in front of Dimitri's desk. He's a roughly handsome man with a crooked nose and a sharp jaw. We're equal in height, but he outmuscles me.

And these Russians can never be underestimated.

I straighten my spine, expanding my shoulders. "Why do you have Honeyeh?"

"She came to me." He holds my gaze, his own steady.

But my knuckles rap on the desk. "Lie."

His hands come up. "Something about a surgery she needs to pay for."

I want to tell him to fuck off. That she would come to me if she needed money, but my gut twists.

Because last night I nearly fucked her, then packed her in my car and dropped her home with barely a word. Fuck.

But what are the odds that Honeyeh would end up here? In the den of the man I'm moving against. "You're telling me that she just ended up here? With you? On accident?"

"I have a regular girl who brought her."

Brittany. The tramp in the short skirt last night. She had all the markers of a whore. Why had it not occurred to me that she worked for Dimitri?

I take in a deep breath. "It's a mistake. Honeyeh belongs to me."

Dimitri tsks, his finger waving. "This is America, my friend. She is free to sell herself if she wishes, just like you are free to just take my best casino."

Ah. So this is about me.

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Glad we've got that out in the open. "What is it you want?"

"I want to make money tonight since I've no longer got my highest earning business."

"There is no fucking way that casino is your highest earner. If it was, your board would have never ruled in my favor."

"You're taking what doesn't belong to you," he snarls.

I can see we're about to hit an impasse. From out in the hall I hear men filing in, getting ready for the auction.

I cannot give Dimitri his casino back. That deal has been months in the making and is the key to us doubling our profits here in Vegas.

But that all feels hollow if I have to watch Honeyeh be sold to another man. Fuck. This is why I don't get involved with women. She's clouding my judgment and making me want to compromise in places I shouldn't.

My hands come to the top of his desk, and I lean forward, my eyes holding all my vitriol as I stare up at him. "You want to hit me back, you take on my businesses. Not my woman."

"Opportunity," he rumbles. "Russians never pass one up."

I stand straight again, rolling my shoulders. I pull out my phone and dial Killian all

while I stare at Dimitri.

“T?” Killian rumbles.

“You’re on speaker,” I tell him. “Where are you?”

“The sweetest little park on Tremont.”

It’s Dimitri’s turn to snarl as I hang up the phone. He’s gotten the message. Killian has his nanny and daughter in his sights. Did he not expect this move? Killian warned him the last time we tangled. “We can involve the women or not. Your call, Dimitri.” I’m poking a big fucking bear.

Major deals are on the line. When Mason pulled Dimitri’s access to the tunnel, this is the man who blew up a club.

There will be a price to pay, I know it. Then again, Dimitri was always hitting back, I’ve likely just moved up the timeline.

Perhaps I should have talked to Mason today. This is the very operation he wanted to shut down. I’m starting to see his point.

But I’m here now, watching Dimitri gnash his teeth. “It will destroy my reputation if I cancel the auction now.”

“I’m sure you’ll recover. You’re savvy like that.”

“I’m savvy in a lot of ways,” he spits back. “Are you certain you want to do this?”

Dimitri is descended from hard men who commit unspeakable acts. But me? I’m descended from royalty. “Give me Honeyeh.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Honeyeh

I wakeup to a slap in the face.

My eyes burst open as I attempt to remember where I am and where the strange women around me have come from.

“Wake up, girl. It’s your big moment.” The thick accent of the woman to my right has my brow furrowing.

“Where am I?”

“You think you’re the first to feign amnesia? It won’t change the contract you signed.”

“Contract?” My brain swims through the fog as I attempt to piece together what’s happening.

I look down at myself, wearing nothing but glorified underwear and the situation comes rushing back, a cry falling from my lips.

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“She’s good,” another says, grabbing my arm to haul me up.

I stumble, trying to get my feet under me, and another grabs my other arm.

My head swims and my knees threaten to give out again as they tighten their grip on my arms.

On the other side of the curtain, I can hear the jostling of the crowd, male voices that sound rough and angry.

“Gentlemen,” a male voice calls over the noise. “There is room for all.”

“Bring her out,” one calls.

“I want to see her!” another yells.

More yells fill the space as panic rises in my chest.

Whatever man takes me will have fought to be in this moment. He’ll be heated and...

“I can’t do this,” I whisper, a cry breaking from my lips. “I can’t...”

“You can.” A third woman is at my back, her hands on my shoulder blades as the other two hold tight.

“Take yourself elsewhere when he’s on top of you,” another advises. “Focusing on the pain won’t help.”

What have I done? Another cry falls from my lips, but it's cut off as I'm thrust through the curtain and onto the stage.

My eyes struggle to adjust to the bright light as I throw a hand up to block it.

But that only seems to make the crowd more riled, the noise growing deafening as I stand on a narrow stage that's only a few feet above the regular floor.

A man wraps a beefy hand around my upper arm, to hold me in place. He's got a microphone in the other, but I can't attend what he's saying because several men have reached out and are running their hands over my legs. I cry out, trying to back up but the man holding me barely allows me to move an inch.

"Certified pure, auction floor price for this lovely young thing begins at fifty thousand. This auction will be done via our app, silent only."

The room goes dead quiet. It's the only sound that frightens me more than all the frantic noise.

I sweep my gaze across them, wondering which man will be the one who....

But my gaze stops as a door in the back of the room bangs open.

I jump, all heads turning as a man steps into the room. His dark penetrating eyes meet mine and a sob breaks from my lips.

"Triston," I whisper, broken, as I go limp next to my jailer.

Two more men move into position next to him, I know they are his brothers, but their names escape me as his eyes hold mine.

I feel myself leaning toward him, my entire body begging him to come closer.

He storms toward the front and that's when I realize even more men are filing in behind him, including the man who made me sign the contract.

I gasp, my knees buckling as I start to fall again.

The guy holding the mic lets out a string of words I don't understand, but I can only assume are curses as he drops the mic, the sound deafening, to grab me with a second hand. Triston pushes his way to the front of the crowd, a snarl pulling at his lips as he vaults up onto the stage. "Take your hands off of her."

"You're here," I stutter out, my breath erratic as I reach out my free hand to clutch his jacket.

"Who are you?—"

"Do as he says," Dimitri barks out from the center aisle.

There is a pause that lasts for a second before the auctioneer lets me go and Triston bends down, lifting me on my feet before his shoulder lands in my stomach. Suddenly I'm up in the air, my head down his back as my legs dangle over his front. He's got one arm wrapped around my legs.

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“Are you saving me?” I gasp, lifting my head to see what’s happening.

“No, Honeyeh,” he grits out even as the crowd rises to its feet, the noise going from silent to deafening. “I bought you.”

And then his free hand comes down in a hard smack on my upturned behind.

I gasp, going rigid, but I don’t struggle. Not even when he steps down off the stage, his shoulder biting into my soft middle.

Men surround us, some of them grabbing me and pulling. But Triston spins with a snarl. “Touch her again and I’ll rip your fucking head off. The girl is mine.”

I look around his side just in time to see him jab his fingers into the throat of a man, who gags and then falls into the crowd.

I clutch at his waist, as the crowd surges.

“The auction has been closed. This man is the winner,” Dimitri’s voice booms over the assembled crowd. “The whorehouse is opening in ten minutes for any man who might need to partake.”

There is a pause in the chaos and Triston doesn’t hesitate. With me still over his shoulder, he strides for the door.

I have no idea what happens next, but whatever it is, I’ll take whatever Triston hands out. I wilt against his back even as his hand comes down hard on my backside again.

It stings but I don't even jump.

Instead, I sink deeper into him, my eyes closing as I reach my arms around his waist.

“What the fuck were you thinking?”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Triston

Seeing Honeyeh up on that stage, every gorgeous curve on full display as every man in that room pictured sinking inside her has uncorked some feral male drive inside me.

I'm going to kill every man here, and when I'm done...

My hand comes down on Honeyeh's ass again. I'm going to spank her raw for putting herself in danger and then?—

I make myself stop. Because I'm right back where I was yesterday. I was a fool to think I could have Honeyeh under my roof, in front of my eyes, without touching her.

Ryker's luxury SUV sits idling at the curb.

He climbs into the driver's seat, Rush moving to the passenger's chair. I open the back door, tumbling Honeyeh inside, before I climb in too, closing the door.

Ryker's peeling out before I've even sat down, Honeyeh's legs in the way. I don't move them. Instead, I roll her on her stomach and smack her ass three more times with hard decisive strikes.

She doesn't make a sound. "You haven't answered me yet," I snarl.

She's got her face turned into the seat, her hair blocking her face. "What was the question?"

Anger and fear are beating through me in equal measures, and I smack her sweet ass one more time. It's bright red and clearly visible through the see-through fabric. "Why the fuck would you go there instead of coming to me?"

She barely moves, doesn't lift her face. "After last night..."

Her words taper off, but I know what she means. We left things very tense and rather ambiguous. I hang my head, sitting next to her legs on a sliver of the seat, as I rest my hand on her ass. "You still should have asked me."

She shakes her hair, her glossy curls moving with her. "I need my job. I couldn't jeopardize that by asking you for ten thousand dollars."

"Ten? You were going to sell yourself for ten thousand dollars?" I ask, so pissed I nearly spank her again. I just wired Dimitri a hundred thousand. If Mason knew I pumped that kind of money into one of Dimitri's businesses...

Not to mention that Dimitri and I are far from done. If anything, this made relations between us much worse.

But those are both problems for another time because Honeyeh's head jerks up. "My phone!"

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Rush passes her bag back, which he'd collected on her behalf, and I take it from him, giving it to her. She scurries up, her legs draped across the seat still, as she digs through the bag. Does she have any idea how stunning she looks like this?

I see Ryker's gaze linger on her in the rearview mirror as she pulls out her phone, and I give him a quick jab in the soft part of his neck with a single knuckle.

He sucks in a breath as his gaze returns to the road.

She taps the phone and then lets out a rush of air. "Thank goodness."

"What?" I ask, my gaze narrowing.

"Dr. Lawrence. They might have a liver for Darius. If it comes, I need to get him to the hospital within the hour."

"How were you going to do that from a whorehouse?" I bite back, irritated all over again.

"He's nearly sixteen. He can take the bus," she looks up at me then, tears staining her cheeks.

"Still, Honeyeh, it was fucking stupid. Do you know what kind of man you might have had rutting on top of you?"

She makes a choking noise. "I don't have health insurance. He wouldn't perform the surgery without a down payment and if Darius doesn't get the surgery soon, he'll

die.”

My jaw locks. She’d sell herself to save her brother. I have long taken the heat in my family, been the person who bears the full weight of burden.

In some many ways, Honeyeh and I are opposites. But in this regard, she is a kindred spirit. She’d fight with every weapon in her possession for her family.

Rush makes a gurgling noise in his throat, clearly understanding her predicament, as I pull Honeyeh close, wrapping my arms around her. She melts into me. “I’m sorry,” she whispers.

I pull her even closer, my cheek dropping to the top of her head even as one of my hands threads into her hair, cradling her skull while the other wraps around her body. “I’m sorry,” I whisper into her hair. Because a bunch of this is my fucking fault.

She tips her head back, her brow furrowing. “For what?”

“For last night. For not being clear that you can always come to me.” And then I drop my mouth to hers, giving her a soft, slow kiss.

My brothers have remained silent, despite likely having a thousand questions. I expect one of them to interrupt at anymoment, but the sound that breaks the kiss is the shrill ringing of Honeyeh’s phone.

She jerks away, grabbing the device. “Hello?” she says in a breathy voice, her gray eyes wide.

“Honeyeh? It’s Dr. Lawrence.” I can hear his voice clear as a bell and I make no move to pull away.

“Dr. Lawrence. I’m glad to hear from you.”

“I have news.” I can tell by his tone, it isn’t good.

“Yes?”

“The potential donor has recovered from the coma. It doesn’t seem as though…”

Honeyeh’s face crumples. “That’s wonderful news for him.”

Dr. Lawrence clears his throat. “Try not to lose hope. We’ll keep fighting.”

“I will. I mean I won’t.” More tears roll down her cheeks, and she swipes them away as she attempts to collect herself. “Thank you, doctor.”

“I’d like to see Darius on Monday to assess his progression and see what further steps can be done.”

“Of course,” Honeyeh answers even as she slumps back on the seat. I follow her, wrapping my arms around her body, pressing my chest to hers. Her arm comes around my neck. “I’ll see you Monday,” she murmurs into the phone before she hangs up. “There’s no liver after all,” she says into my collar before a giant sob racks her body. I gather her closer, hugging her for a moment, before I ease back, but only to lift her and settle her in my lap.

She curls into me, making herself as small as possible as she cries into my collar.

I stroke my fingers down Honeyeh’s arm, fitting her tighter against my chest. I don’t even realize I’m murmuring words of comfort until Rush clears his throat.

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My jaw locks as I go silent again.

We arrive at my house, the gate swinging open. When it clangs behind us, I breathe out. “How soon do we need to discuss next steps?” I ask Ryker as he pulls up by the front door.

His mouth forms a grim line. “I’m going to need ten minutes of your time, and then the rest of us will start forming a plan.”

I nod, pushing open the car door. Stepping out with Honeyeh in my arms, I set her on her feet long enough to take off my sports coat and wrap it around her body. She hugs it tight around her middle as I wrap my arm around her, leading her toward the house.

Mrs. Raith appears in the doorway, but I wave her away. “Clear the house,” I order as I walk Honeyeh up the stairs.

Mrs. Raith jerks her chin and then disappears.

“I’m mortified,” Honeyeh whispers next to me even as Ryker and Rush fan out on either side of us.

“Never be embarrassed for giving all of yourself for the people you love,” Ryker says from next to her.

Her chin notches up and her spine stiffens. “Thank you for that.”

He meets my eye again as he stops to let Honeyeh and myself in the house.

By the time we reach the stairs to the second floor, I lift her into my arms once again and carry her up. I don't set her down until we've made it to my bedroom.

As I gently set her on her feet, I whisper, "I'll be right back. Go lay down and close your eyes."

She nods and I kiss her one more time before I force myself to turn and head back down the stairs.

Much as I'd like to stay with her, I'm also a man who sacrifices for his family.

My brothers are coming up the stairs as I exit the bedroom, and I lead them silently into my office.

We've barely made it through the door when Rush asks, "What happened last night?"

"That's your question, of all the questions?" I cross to the window, staring out at the front yard.

"Mine too," Ryker adds, taking one of the chairs by the desk.

I let out a long breath. "I got carried away before she told me that she hadn't ever..." They already know she's a virgin. It was part of her auction.

"And?" Rush prompts.

"I stopped," I bite back.

"But you were really pissy about it," Ryker finishes, not asking a question but stating a fact.

“Wouldn’t you be?”

“For sure,” he chuckles. “Honeyeh is other-level hot.”

I turn to glare, my lips thinning enough to expose my teeth. “Touch her and I will?—”

His hands go up. “Off limits. Got it.” He puts his hands down to lean forward, his elbows resting on his knees. “But when I said you were really pissy, I meant it more as like a general state of being.”

“I thought we came up here to talk about Dimitri and the threat he poses. Not stage an intervention about my mood.”

Rush sits on the top of my desk. “Ryker is right. You have been getting increasingly agitated, Triston. Over the last year. Two. Until last night...”

I open my mouth to speak, but then close it again. When I think of last night, right up until I drove Honeyeh home, that was the happiest I’ve been for a long time. “Fuck.”

“Now you’re a guy who saves other people’s asses,” Ryker continues. “But if you’re not serious about Honeyeh, we should not have rushed in there like that. If you are, though, serious about her, then I’ll be happy for you, and I’ll be by your side to tear Dimitri to the ground.”

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My stomach fills with lead. My brother is willing to fight battles with me, ready to go to war to preserve my happiness. I've seen all the ways in which my dad fucked us, the way I've taken the brunt for this family. But I might have missed just how tightly my brothers have my back.

"I've known Honeyeh for a week, I have no fucking idea how I feel. But I know I can't let her struggle alone under the weight of her brother's illness. She's doing an amazing job, but she's soft. He needs?—"

"She took your spanks with a lot of grit," Rush says with a half-smile. "I gotta be honest, I'm giving spanking a try. That shit was hot?—"

"Shut up," I bite back. That was a private moment, because she scared me so fucking much.

He laughs me off, not the least bit concerned. "Fine. I agree. She needs help. And any woman that strong can only be an asset."

"So what are we doing about Dimitri?" Ryker asks. "Because we poked the fucking bear, today."

"We already poked the bear, Ryker, when we made a move against his best casino."

"Right," he nods. "True."

"What just happened with Honeyeh is only moving up the timeline of his counterattack." Which is true. But honestly, it likely made things worse. I'm not

telling my brothers that, though. In this way, I can protect Honeyeh. I don't need them thinking she's a problem. And as much as I wasn't looking for the responsibility of a woman in my life, I think I'm taking on Honeyeh's problems as my own. "And honestly, I'm not convinced that it was an accident. Killian threatened his family a few months ago. And Brittany, one of Dimitri's women, the girl who led Honeyeh to Dimitri's door, just happened to befriend Honeyeh at Killian's wedding?"

"Fuck," Rush rumbles. "You think he contracted Honeyeh on purpose?"

"It's a possibility." Which means, Honeyeh needs my protection. I'm strong enough. Always have been. And what's more, it matters to me that Honeyeh, if I really needed her, would go to any length to protect someone she cared about.

Fuck. It hits me in the chest, the lengths she'd go, the danger she'd put herself in for the people she loves.

I've always known Honeyeh was different. But the specifics are becoming clearer. Heart and grit right along with beauty. There isn't a spoiled bone in her body.

I file that away. "I can't prove it. And I won't lose my head. I'm going to have to offer Dimitri a bone to try and move forward, but Mason isn't going to like it."

Ryker rumbles. "Right. Rock, meet hard place."

Too true. I've got to find an offer tempting enough to pacify Dimitri while not completely pissing off Mason.

If I don't make a deal the Russian can live with... I've always known that Dimitri will not sit idle. He will attack and attack, again and again.

Any number of us could be targeted.

Killian and myself most of all.

It's that or Dimitri needs to be eliminated permanently. Like Ryker said. Rock, meet hard place.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Honeyeh

The sound of the door opening wakes me from the light sleep I've slipped into.

I lift my head, my eyes blinking into the last rays of light filtering in through the windows.

Triston stands in the door, holding a tray of food. "When's the last time you ate?"

I push myself up, lifting my shoulders and chest off the bed. "I'm the maid. I'm supposed to bring trays of food to you."

He doesn't say anything at first, setting the tray on a console, before he crosses the room to close the door behind him.

I push the covers back, determined to get up. I discarded all the lingerie, stealing one of Triston's T-shirts from his closet. It smells like him, and I fell asleep with his scent all around me.

"Stay," he rumbles, moving toward me. His hand threads into my hair as he cradles my skull, titling my face up to bend down and give me a quick, fierce kiss.

"I borrowed a shirt," I whisper as he looks down at me.

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“Good.” Then he moves back to the food, bringing the tray over to the bed. He unfolds legs on the bottom and rests it across my lap.

There’s yogurt, fruit, nuts, some sort of shrimp bowl with quinoa, and a few other assorted goodies. It’s tons of food and I stare down at it as Triston sits on the other side of the tray. “I haven’t had anything to eat either. Thought we’d share.”

I nod, swallowing down a lump. This was not the evening I pictured at all. I thought that right about now, I’d be having the worst night of my life. And that thought keeps me from eating as he scoops out some shrimp and quinoa.

As he chews, his brows lift. When he swallows, he points his fork at the food. “Eat.”

I lift the fork but then set it down. “When I asked you if you were saving me, you said, I bought you. What did you mean by that?”

He’s just put another bite in his mouth, but he pauses, not even chewing, before he starts again and then swallows. “You signed a contract.”

“All right,” I feel my stomach drop, because I know what he’s not saying. “Does that mean you had to pay for me?”

He doesn’t look up at me as he takes another bite. “Something like that.”

I shake my head, biting at my lips. “I’m so sorry, Triston.”

He looks up at me then. “Don’t be sorry, luv. Money is the one thing I’ve got plenty

of. But I do want you to promise me something.”

I nod as he reaches out to cup my jaw in his palm, “Whether you work here or not, the next time you’re really in trouble, who are you going to ask for help?”

“You.”

“Good girl.” And then he leans over the tray and kisses me again. I sink into the feel of his mouth, the warmth of his hand. I could wrap myself around him if I thought he’d let me. “Now eat.”

He sits back down on the other side of the tray, and I pick up my fork. “Are you going to spank me if I don’t?” My backside is still sore.

His eyes burn into mine. “Don’t tempt me.”

Heat fills my cheeks. Because there was something about being over his shoulder, of having him claim me like that in front of all those men, it wasn’t exactly pleasant, but it also made me feel really feminine or something.

I pick up the yogurt and take a bite, the flavor delicious without being too sweet, the texture of the yogurt velvety and perfect.

“If you paid for this night, does that mean that we’re...” I taper off, but his gaze intensifies as he makes this noise in his throat.

“You’re mine, Honeyeh. Tonight. Yes. Beyond that is a discussion for the morning.”

My stomach jumps, a million butterflies fluttering in my chest.

He’s not sending me home tonight. I set the yogurt down again, but his glare

intensifies. “We’ve got all night, there is no need to rush and no need to be nervous. Now eat.”

All day long, people have been force-feeding me. But as he hands me the bowl of shrimp, the one he was just eating from, I’m struck by the domesticity of the action.

“Do you...do you do this often?”

“What?”

“Feed the women you sleep with?” I don’t know why I ask. I shouldn’t care, and it’s none of my business. But I remember Victoria’s words. I’m one in a long line.

“Never.” Then he pushes a fork toward me.

My brow furrows. I know that at some point, I’m going to run into Triston’s rules. But he keeps saying things that make me feel...special. Which is so dangerous. It’s just going to hurt more when our time together ends because I believed I might be different.

But I can barely keep that little seed of hope from sprouting.

I take a bite of the shrimp, the flavors dancing on my tongue. “Wow. This is amazing.”

He smiles. “One of the many benefits of money. It might not buy happiness, but it does provide delicious food.”

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I take another bite, starting to feel better for eating. Like everything isn't quite so dire. "You don't think financial stability provides a certain measure of..." I search for the word.

He sighs. "Financial stability provides stability period. Something I went without as I moved through young adulthood. My family was the picture of wealth then, but it was mostly an illusion. With my brothers' help, I have built Smith Brothers to provide for both the dukedom, and our individual futures."

"It's a lot of responsibility."

His brows lift. "Something you understand better than most."

I shake my head. "Not like you, I fight for Darius's life, but I haven't figured out how to provide us with stability, except for maybe the apartment." I set down the shrimp again.

"You know how to love him, at least. That is something I've struggled with." My head snaps up as I stare at him.

"What do you mean?"

"I like working, I can't imagine my life any other way, but..." He looks out at the sun, the last rays filling the sky. "But I've been struggling to connect with my brothers. I've been resentful as they..."

"What?" I ask as I reach my hand across the tray.

He takes my fingers in his and then brings my palm to his lips. “They seem to be happier. Better adjusted.”

I understand what he’s saying. “You’re the second oldest?”

“I am, but my oldest brother was gone most of the time, off at boarding schools which left me with the burden of—” He stops, grimacing. “I’ve talked enough.”

I shake my head. “The responsibility feels like a weight that is too heavy to bear sometimes. I get it.”

I pull my palm from his hand and eat another bite of the shrimp and then hand it back to him, eating more of the yogurt and the fruit. By the time I’m done, the trauma of the auction feels further away.

Nothing happened to me. Triston took on the responsibility of saving me...

My chest tightens.

He’s like that. The question is, how do I even begin to repay him?

I’ve got a few ideas.

I grab the tray and then shimmy out of the bed, carrying it back to the table he rested it on before. Then I reach for my bag, digging out my toothbrush.

Triston watches me, as I start for the bathroom. I’m in nothing but his T-shirt, most of my legs on display. As I reach the door, I turn back to him. “I’ll be right back.”

But I hear him get up and walk across the floor. I pause, intending to go to the bathroom and brush my teeth.

Triston has seen me all kinds of naked, but there is something about peeing...
“Triston,” I gasp as he steps into the bathroom, “I need to?—”

His stance widens as his arms cross. “Tonight, you’re mine, Honeyeh. If I want to watch you use the head, I will.”

My mouth opens to protest, but then I close it again. Swallowing down a lump, I set my toothbrush on the sink and then I move to the toilet.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Triston

Watching Honeyeh go to the bathroom has my cock hard in a second.

To be fair, it was half hard already just watching her cross the room.

And no, I’m not one of those fetish guys. First, I like that Honeyeh does what I ask of her, without a word of complaint. That’s part of the appeal.

I don’t want a weak woman, and Honeyeh isn’t. But she’s so responsive to me, to my every touch or request.

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Then there is the visual of her panties around her calves, her heels off the floor. She looks so fucking hot, that I unbutton my shirt, tossing it aside, as I pull my T-shirt over my head.

I kick off my shoes just as she reaches for the toilet paper. Fuck. She might be turning me into some weirdly obsessed freak because I freeze, wanting to watch her hand dip between her legs.

Like everything else about her, Honeyeh has gorgeous hands with long, tapered fingers and beautiful nail beds. I wonder if she could be a hand model.

Or a regular model...

I watch as she parts her knees, and I swear I leak cum as she dips her hand between her legs. I'm craning my neck to catch a peek of her waxed pussy. Fuck. I cannot wait to have my mouth all over her.

But first...

I shrug down my pants and cross to the shower, turning on all the sprayers. She spent the day in an actual whorehouse and my first thought is to wash it clean off her. It's more symbolic than anything else.

Well that, and I can't wait to have soapy hands all over her.

I hear her little intake of breath, even as I push my boxer briefs down my thighs and kick them off.

The shower starts to fill up with steam and I look back at her. “Come.”

She swallows down a lump and then slides her panties down to her ankles, stepping out of them, before my T-shirt goes up over her head.

She stands before me naked, and I turn to take her in. The high pert breasts, the tiny waist and flat stomach, the flair of her hips. Her long, shapely legs with the exact right amount of muscle.

She’s more beautiful than any woman I’ve ever seen and I just stare. And I have this moment where I know I could look at Honeyeh for a long, long time.

That any other woman would only disappoint. And I’m not just talking about her looks. It’s everything.

I reach out my hand, and she takes a tentative step forward, sliding her fingers into mine.

Opening the shower door, I pull her forward until she steps inside. I’m right behind her, closing the door to keep in the heat.

She steps under the rain head, water pouring down her body as I come up behind her, grasping her waist and pulling her back to my front. Her skin glides along mine and I rumble out my approval.

She settles against me as I squeeze her waist, and then slide my hands over her wet belly. I take a moment to admire the smooth expanse of skin before one of my hands starts moving up her torso, while the other ventures down.

Cupping her breast, I tweak one of her nipples as my other hand grasps her mound, my middle finger settling over her slit.

She cries out, arching into my touch. My cock is so hard, every muscle tense as I press deeper into her flesh.

I told myself that I was going slower this time. I know she's innocent, but her body, her response, they make me frantic as the pad of my finger settles over her clit, swirling around her nub as she cries out.

I'm nestled between her ass cheeks as I work her clit, looking for more friction.

Part of me wants to wait to cum inside her. But it's been days and if I'm going to be gentle later, getting rid of some of this pent-up energy would really fucking help.

My second hand leaves her breast joins the first. As I keep circling her clit, I slide a finger inside her slick folds, entering her pussy, which is tighter than any I've ever felt before.

She moans, her knees going weak, all her weight settling against my chest and in my hands.

She reaches back, wrapping her hands around my neck, her fingers threading into my hair.

I've never been so amped to hear a woman orgasm as I work her relentlessly, bending down to suck her earlobe between my teeth.

She comes undone, crying out as her pussy locks around my single finger.

I'm going to have to stretch her before I'm fitting my cock inside her.

She slumps into my hands, and I turn her so she's not directly under the rain head. "On your knees, baby," I grunt into her ear.

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She slides down without protest or hesitation. I catch her under her armpits to make sure her knees land softly on the tile.

And then I let go to step around her. One of my hands wraps around my cock while the other slides back in her hair. “Look at me.”

She tips her chin up, her gray eyes meeting mine, open and so clear.

“Open your mouth, luv. Stick out your tongue.” She does as I command, those gorgeous lips going wide as her pretty pink tongue darts out.

It’s the last straw and with a final tug, I explode, coating her tongue with ropes of my cum.

I squeeze my eyes shut, opening them wide as I try to process what’s just occurred.

I’ve cum for the first time since meeting Honeyeh, and it clears my head, making my thoughts equally so for the first time in days.

Jerking off on Honeyeh’s tongue was better than any sex I’ve had in years. I don’t feel bored, or distant, or revolted.

I feel...connected. I reach down and haul her up, my arms wrapping around her as I kiss her mouth.

She swallows my cum down before she kisses me back and it just makes my cock roar to life again.

One of my hands slides around her ass, and I fill my hand with the softness as our hips grind together.

Honeyeh's mine.

I meant what I said about not being the marrying kind, but I know it's going to take me longer than one night or even one month to clear her out of my system.

Hell. The very idea of having another woman in my arms feels fucking wrong.

I don't think too much as her leg wraps around my waist, opening her up to my already-needy cock.

Maybe I need to be inside her and then I'll stop feeling so fucking needy.

I kiss her, my tongue filling her mouth as I knead her ass, my cock nudging at her folds. I can't take her virginity in the shower, can I?

Her arms wind around my neck, the water pouring over both of us, as I slide my hand deeper between her legs. This time, I don't put one finger inside her, but two, opening her up. She's wet and relaxed, she's not so tight, as I work in and out of her, adding a third finger, stretching her to get her ready for me.

Her hips are moving with the thrust of my hand, my cock trapped between us. I pull my fingers out of her, to grab her ass and lift her up.

The head of my cock settles into the slick folds, and I push inside her, just the head, but I feel the resistance at the same time that she stiffens in my arms.

I'm barely inside her. "Are you all right, luv?"

She lets out a couple of shallow breaths. “I’m...” She puffs out another breath. “Your fingers felt good. I don’t understand...”

But the tension in her voice slows me down. I know there will be pain, but deep down, I want it to be as pleasant as possible. I want to make Honeyeh feel good.

Pulling out, I grab the soap and begin working a lather over her skin.

“Triston,” she cries as I turn her. “You don’t need to stop. I...”

I bend down, washing over her legs, blood already on her thighs. I lean forward and place a soft kiss on her mound. “I want it to be good for you, baby.”

Her head tilts down to look at me, water running off her nose. “It is good. It’s so good, so much better than...” Her voice breaks as her hands comb through my hair.

I stand again, lifting her into my arms as her legs wrap around my waist.

I begin sliding into her again, deeper, feeling her stretch as she stiffens again. Part of me thinks I should wait longer, but she feels so good. And I can’t bring myself to resist when even she doesn’t want me to.

I still, carefully carrying her to the shower wall. Leaning her against the tile, I’m hoping the angle will make it easier to press inside her.

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I slide a bit deeper, her breath blowing in my ear.

“All right?” I ask her, stilling again, my head dropping into the cradle of her neck. I’m fighting every urge to bury myself inside her.

I just came, but my body is strung so taut, I feel like I could break.

“I’m good, Triston,” she whispers in my ear. “Finish it.”

With one quick thrust, I bury myself to the hilt. Holy fuck, she feels so good I never want this to end.

“Honeyeh,” I groan. “Sweetheart.” I drag in a ragged breath. One of her hands skates down my back, her fingertips light.

Is she comforting me? She places a light kiss just behind my ear, her nose brushing my lobe. “I know.”

Does she? Does she have any idea what’s she’s doing to me?

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Honeyeh

My insides burn as Triston stretches me, and I bury my face into the crook of his shoulder.

Because as much as it hurts, I don't want him to stop.

This moment was meant to be his. I've never felt more certain, more joined to a person than I am with him, and when I think about how this night could have gone...

I hold him tighter, wrapped around him, I start to worry that I'm hurting him.

But he seems fine as he pulls out of me and then slowly pushes back in.

We're out of the water, but the shower is so warm with the steam, my head swims a bit.

As he sinks back in, the pain lessens and my muscles relax, which makes it hurt even less. Noted. The key is less tension.

I ease back, leaning into the wall. From here, we're face to face, the cords of his neck so taut, they look as though they might snap.

Without thinking, I run my hands over them to ease them.

"Honeyeh," he grits out. "Are you comforting me?"

My hooded eyes assess him, and I smile. "You look tense."

His answer is to lean over and kiss me, his tongue sliding between my lips as he pulls out again and sinks back in, no pain at all this time.

I thread my fingers into his hair, holding him closer as I kiss him back.

"Jesus Christ," he grits out between two kisses.

But my eyes snap open. “Everything all right?” I whisper against his lips. I want him to feel the way I feel about this. Which is likely a ridiculous ask. He’s my first and only. I know this is different for me. Triston, in this moment, is my everything.

For him I am just...

“Honeyeh,” he groans into my mouth. “You feel so good, luv.”

My eyes close as I arch to take more of him in. He feels good too. And not just inside me. It’s his mouth, the feel of his muscular shoulders under my hand, the way his body supports mine.

He’s got his hands under my ass as he lifts me again and then slides me back down his shaft, filling me once again.

This time it feels good, the slide sparking pleasure all through me. I let out a small moan, my head tipping back, exposing my neck to his lips.

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He sucks at my skin, thrusting into me again.

I never imagined sex would feel like this and my fingertips dig into his scalp as I try to hang on.

I want to imprint this moment in my memory, remember how it felt to be with a man like this.

It's become clear to me that I've always needed a man who would take me in his arms and lead the way. Triston's confidence, his self-assurance, has made this so erotic...

I'm not trying to put pressure on Triston. It's only that a map of what I want and need has formed in my head.

He kisses me again, his thrusts light as holds me close. I know he's being gentle because it's my first time and it only makes me want to give him more, so I tilt my hips closer, taking more of him in.

I feel the shudder that runs through him as he hits me deep.

He makes this feral sound in his throat and then his whole body convulses. One of his hands leaves my ass to brace against the wall, his large hand right by my head on the tile.

I turn and kiss his thumb, feeling the pulsing of his cock inside me.

His forehead comes to mine, his eyes closed as we hold for a moment, him still inside me, my body wrapped around his.

“Cold?”

“Hot.” I say, my eyes closing.

Gently, he eases out of me. I unwrap my legs from his waist, first one set of toes and then the other settling on the tile. It’s this slow uncoupling that I know has to happen, but I don’t want to lose the connection.

He pushes away and I feel colder already, my shoulders curling as I realize the intimacy of the last moments are over.

I don’t want them to be. I’d happily remain in his arms, and I wrap my own around myself to deal with the loss.

He slides the glass door to the side, letting out a plume of steam, cool air hitting my skin.

And then he’s back at my side, pulling me into his embrace.

I curl around him again, burying my nose into his neck as he steps out of the shower with me, wrapping us in a fluffy white towel.

I go rigid. “The blood.”

His response is to dip the edge between my legs and gently massage. “I can get a new towel, Honeyeh.”

I flush. “Right.” For me, every item has value and is not easily replaced. For him...all

things are replaceable. Even me.

Especially me.

It's that thought that completely severs the moment and I wiggle free from his arms. He lets me go as I grab another towel and wrap it around my body.

Taking the corner, I wipe a section of the mirror and run my fingers through my hair. I, need to at least run a brush through it or it will be a tangled mess.

He comes up behind me, his eyes meeting mine in the mirror, but my gaze skitters away. I'm suddenly reminded that I am more vulnerable than him in every way.

"Honeyeh."

I grab my toothbrush, putting some paste on it and stick it in my mouth. "Yeah?"

"Where did you just go?"

"I'm right here."

"I know all about withdrawing, so trust me when I say, I know that you just put up some wall between us."

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I stop brushing, meeting his gaze in the mirror. “What happens next?”

“We go to bed.”

“Here?” I start brushing again, looking for something to do.

“That’s right.”

“And then I just get up and go home in the morning?” I spit into the sink, turning on some cold water.

“No.”

I gasp, straightening up. “What? But my brother?—”

“Will also be coming here.”

I spin then, turning to face him as his hands come to my hips. “I don’t understand.”

He lets out a long breath. “We said we were going to discuss things in the morning. You need some sleep.”

“But...” My hand comes to my throat. “I have a job at the dorm, and it pays our rent and...”

He slides his hands up to my waist and pulls me into his arms. “Honeyeh, trust me to make your life better than I found it. Whatever happens, you will be safer, better

provided for than when we met. Do you understand?”

I blink, confusion making my brain muddled. I heard what he just said. But what I witnessed with Veronica, and what I know about Triston, this does not end well for me. I could accept that when I was his maid. Whatever money I made, it would leave me in a better position. But this... “For how long?”

“Until the danger passes.”

“Danger?” Now I’m starting to worry. “What danger?”

He lets out a long breath. “Do you know who the man was who gave you that contract to sell your virginity?”

My insides swoop as I think about where I was, what I almost did. I shake my head.

“That was the head of the Las Vegas Bratva.” His hands are still tight around my waist.

“Bratva?” My knees start to sink, Triston supporting my weight. “Like...like the Mafia?”

“Russian Mafia, yes.” The room is clearing of the steam, but I feel my head swim again. “And the man that owns the casino I just forcefully bought out.”

I stare at him, my eyes so wide I blink them several times, the weight of his words making the room tilt. “That can’t be.”

Triston leans closer. “And now he knows for certain that you are important to me.”

I know I should be focused on the danger but my thoughts scatter with his last

sentence. “I’m important to you?” I try to push down the silly hope that rises up inside.

“I’d never let him try to hurt you to get to me, Honeyeh. You and Darius will stay here until I’ve figured out how to neutralize the danger.”

That one brings me back to reality. “You think he’d hurt us?”

But he doesn’t respond as he pushes back, disappearing into the bedroom. He’s back a moment later, my phone in hand.

“I’m going to send Ryker and Rush to pick your brother up, can you call him and tell him who they are so he doesn’t worry.”

I nod, trying to reconcile all that Triston’s just said. How bad is this? How much danger am I in? How much does he care?

I stand there with my phone in my hand, beginning to tremble. His arms come around me then, his warm skin sliding against mine as his lips brush my temple. “Honeyeh, sweetheart, I need you to make the call.”

I nod, trying to make my fingers work. “I didn’t know. I…”

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One of his hands reaches for my jaw, my face cupped in his large hand. “I know you didn’t.”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

“No need to apologize, but I do need you to trust that I will keep you safe.”

“I do,” I hit the Darius contact button to make the call.

“I’ll have Ryker get Darius a gaming system so he has something to do while he stays,” Triston says as he starts for the bedroom again.

“Oh, you don’t have to do that,” I call after him. “I don’t expect?—”

He turns in the doorway, his broad shoulders filling the entrance as he looks over his shoulder at me, a stern look making his features sharper. “When you’re here, you’re mine to take care of, Honeyeh. Your brother too.”

“But Triston,” I take a step toward him. “It’s too much. I would never ask?—”

“No, you wouldn’t ask, which is why I’m telling.”

I’d argue more, but Darius answers the phone. “Hey, Honeyeh.”

“Hey, Dar,” I answer weakly. Triston makes it too easy to sink into his strength.

“Are you ever coming home? I’m bored.”

“Actually,” I clear my throat. “My boss has invited you to his house.”

“What?”

“I’m going to be working a lot of overtime, so he thinks its best that you just come here.”

Triston pipes in from the other room. “Tell him he’s got his own room with an en suite bathroom, TV, and gaming system. And tell him not to forget to bring a bathing suit in case he’d like to swim.”

“Sick! Does he have a pool?” Darius asks, sounding excited for the first time in forever.

“He does. We’ve got an appointment on Monday with Dr. Lawrence, so bring your dress slacks too.”

“Dress slacks?” Darius groans. “We’re American now. We don’t have to dress up for the doctor.”

“Bring them. We do it mom’s way,” I huff.

One corner of Triston’s mouth quirks up before he disappears. I hang up with Darius, and then follow Triston, who is in the bedroom. “Pack her clothes too and use the corporate card at Best Buy.” There is a pause as I lean in the doorway. “Yeah. Bring Rush. And keep an eye out. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

He hangs up and crosses to the bureau, pulling out a shirt from his drawer before he crosses to me. “Tired?”

I let him pull the shirt over my head as I nod. “A little.”

“Me too. Want to go to bed?”

I let him pull the shirt over my head as I drop the towel from my body, only to tip my head upside down to wrap my hair. “I’m just going to wait for Darius. Which room did you want me to sleep in?”

One of his brows quirks up. “This one.”

My mouth opens and closes. We talked. Decisions have been made. And I am still so confused. Triston wants me in his house? In his bed?

With a sigh, I nod. I’d ask or argue, but I lied about being a little tired. I’m exhausted, and sleeping next to Triston sounds perfect. I’ll take whatever I can get right now and worry about the future another time.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Triston

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It takes a couple of hours before Darius arrives and we get him settled in, but as we climb into bed, Honeyeh stretched out against me, my arm wrapped tight around her, I'm not the least bit tired.

She feels amazing, all soft and warm as she settles into my side. My cock is stiff in a second.

I cannot fuck her again, her body needs to recover. But it's like I'm sixteen and I can't get enough.

I settle my hand under her shirt, into the curve of her back, her skin so silky smooth under my palm and fingertips.

If I'd been thinking clearly, my first move would have been to bring Darius here. But despite the need still pulsing through me, a few things have become clear. Honeyeh is mine to protect.

It should have been obvious before now. I've never rushed in to save a woman before, jeopardizing my business. Even the very first move, hiring her, was out of character.

But I honestly thought once I'd had Honeyeh, these feelings of possession and protection would fade.

But it's been exactly the opposite. It's like she tied me even tighter to her side. I squeeze her as she sleeps, brushing my lips against her temple.

“Triston,” she sighs, nuzzling deeper.

Saying my name while she sleeps makes me diamond-hard as I slide my hand down to cup her ass, a little pair of panties the only thing between my hand and her skin.

I’ve got to get some sleep. Tomorrow I’m going to have to speak with Mason. He’s part of this plan and I need his blessing for whatever I do. I’m also going to have to meet with all my brothers at once and get all of us Kincaids and Smiths on the same page. I’ve likely compromised our family goals, and even my eldest brother, Win, is going to have to hear about this one.

Which is unfortunate. Win mostly stays out of daily operations, which I appreciate. We don’t always work well together. As a duke, he assumes he is in command of...everything. And while that is true of the family holdings in England, this company, our success, it’s mine.

I close my eyes, letting out a long, slow breath. But my body doesn’t want to sleep. I’m all kinds of amped up with Honeyeh in my arms and I’m in hyper-protective mode. Like I need to stay awake to make sure no danger comes anywhere near her.

Her hand splays out on my bare chest, her curtain of dark hair spread out on my pillow.

I take several deep breaths and slowly relax, finally falling asleep. But it feels like barely any time has passed when the loud jangling of my phone wakes me.

I open my eyes, blinking twice before it rings again. I pick it up, Mason’s name flashing across the screen.

And so the day begins.

Honeyeh picks up her head too, her brow furrowing.

“Hello,” I say as I pick up the phone, my eyes closing again.

“What the fuck were you doing in Dimitri’s brothel?” Mason shouts into the phone, Honeyeh crying out at the words.

I’m up in a second, not at all happy at the jarring interruption to what could have been a pleasant morning. I owe Mason an accounting of events, but I don’t answer to him.

“Hang on,” I rumble into the phone as Mason starts yelling again. Pulling it from my ear, I hang up. “Go back to sleep, sweetheart,” I lean over, kissing Honeyeh, before I straighten again.

She pushes up, her loose waves tumbling down her back. “But he’s upset with you because of me.”

I kiss her again. “I can handle Mason. You need some more sleep, it’s too early for you to be up.”

The phone starts ringing again, but I ignore it as I pull on athletic pants, not answering until I’m in the hall. “Mason.”

“Who did I just hear?”

I pause, deciding what I might say. “You asked why I was at Dimitri’s brothel.”

“It was Honeyeh, wasn’t it?”

I blow out a breath. “Why are you calling me before six if you’re not going to listen?”

“I’m listening,” he rumbles. “I knew you were interested when you brought her as your date to the benefit. If you hurt her, Triston, you will answer to me.”

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I'm glad that Honeyeh's health and safety trumps my trip to the whorehouse. Mason doesn't realize they're of the same piece, but knowing his priorities helps me to have this conversation from the right angle. "I have no intention of hurting her, as I've stated several times."

"Making her your flavor of the month is the definition of hurting her."

I had that coming. But the idea of Honeyeh being like the rest of those women makes me bristle. "Flavors of the month do not sleep in my bed, nor do I rush off to whorehouses to rescue them when they've stepped in over their heads."

"What the fuck are you talking about." He spits into the phone.

"Look on Dimitri's website." I jog down the stairs, firing up my espresso maker, listening to Mason click several buttons.

"What the fuck?"

I sigh. "Dr. Lawrence had a possible liver, but he needed a substantial down payment before he'd perform the surgery."

"Keep explaining."

In clipped tones I tell him about Brittany and her offer. "The funny thing is, she's an average blonde at best, and not at all the type Dimitri usually hires."

"You said she met Honeyeh at Killian's wedding? She could be a plant."

My thought too. I tell him about how she came to the party with Chairman Waltham. He rumbles, “Waltham is in Dimitri’s pocket. It’s those kinds of connections that make him so fucking hard to remove from Vegas.”

I take a sip of my espresso shot. “Listen, Mason. I think it’s time we face the facts. Things are going to escalate with Dimitri. We’re likely to end up with a lot of blood on our hands like we did with the Vendettis.” The last year was a bloody war with the Italian Mafia. It’s why the meeting at the benefit with the Andrianis was so important.

But we just put that conflict to rest, I’m not entering another one with him.

“I’m trying to remove Dimitri legally,” Mason fires back.

“I know, but he’s Bratva. And Killian has threatened his family. He’s going to strike back and it’s not going to be legal and then what’s our move?”

He lets out another breath. “Charlotte’s pregnant.”

“What?”

“Early.” I hear the worry in Mason’s voice. “But I’d like to avoid violence.”

“Then you might have to cut a deal with Dimitri.”

“No,” Mason says, his voice hard enough to cut glass. “He attacked me once. Letting him stay in Vegas gives him the chance to hurt us again.”

“Then you have to cut the head off the snake,” I say, but I don’t like it.

“Killian can...”

“No.” I straighten. “He’s out of that game. My brother is not the man who does this deed.”

“It’s his job.”

“His job is intel. Which he has provided in abundance.” If Mason wants to start a war, I won’t compromise, but that is on him and his family. I will be his partner in real estate, but not in blood feuds. I’m drawing a line and money can be damned.

Mason rumbles. “You started this when you walked into that brothel yesterday.”

“That’s bullshit. This day was coming after you pulled his tunnel access and he?—”

“He made a deal with the Italians, bombed Temptation.” Mason is practically yelling again.

“Make your choice, Mason. But my job is to keep my family safe first, and I won’t cross to the other side with you.”

“You’re the one who said we need to cut the head off the snake.”

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“Because you refuse to cut a deal,” I fire back. I respect Mason. But I’m not afraid of him. And I won’t be cowed into a move I don’t want to make.

He lets out a frustrated growl. “What’s gotten into you?”

I think the issue might be what I got into. Honeyeh. My moves are shifting from growth to protection. “I want to get back to work.”

“You just completed a takeover,” he says.

“And there is more to be done. But it can’t be accomplished with Dimitri hanging a sword over our heads.” I finish my espresso and start another as I hear the soft pad of feet across the floor.

Honeyeh appears, still in my T-shirt, her hair mussed and her eyes sleepy. Her skin glows in the morning light, and I reach out a hand.

“Fair. I’ll make a decision today and let you know tomorrow.”

“Darius has an appointment tomorrow morning with Dr. Lawrence. I’ll be accompanying Honeyeh to discuss any financial needs and all treatment options that have yet to be explored.”

“Triston.” Mason sounds curious now.

But Honeyeh has slipped her hand into mine and I pull her close. My espresso finishes and I tuck the phone between my shoulder and ear as I pull the cup out of the

machine and hand it to Honeyeh.

She takes the cup, takes a sip and wrinkles her nose.

I can't help it. I chuckle.

"Triston?" Mason asks again. But I let go of Honeyeh to get some milk to froth.

"Early morning or after lunch, Mason. I look forward to your decision." And then I hang up. Tossing my phone on the counter, I grab some milk and pour it into the milk frother.

Turning it on, I pull her close again. "Why aren't you asleep?"

"I couldn't fall back to sleep," she murmurs as her arms wind around my neck. She's so soft and she smells amazing as I bury my nose into her hair.

I slide my hands down her back as I wrap my hands around her ass. "Sore today, sweetheart?"

"Only a little," she murmurs close to my ear.

Satisfaction has me rubbing my stubbled chin over the silk of her hair. That means I'm going to be inside her again very soon.

The frother finishes and I pour the milk and then the shot of espresso into a mug. "Sugar?"

She shakes her head. "This is perfect. After I'm done, I'll unpack my stuff?"

"Good idea. Use the other half of my closet."

She takes a sip of her coffee, half turning away. “You’re sure you don’t want me to unpack my things in one of the guestrooms?”

I’m fucking sure. I fire up the espresso maker again. “Are you worried about your brother?”

She shakes her head. “No. I’m concerned about wearing out my welcome.”

It hits me square in the chest. I don’t think that’s happening. If I have my way, Honeyeh is staying for a while. I pull her close. “Put your things in my closet and your toothbrush in the holder. You sleep on the right. Away from the door.”

Her brows lift, but I see her smile into her next sip of cappuccino.

My girl likes it when I tell her what to do. I love that about Honeyeh. And I’ve got a few more situations in mind where I’m going to get bossy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Honeyeh

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I load my clothes into the closet, aware of how my cutoff jean shorts look ridiculous next to Triston's designer suits.

He lounges in the doorway watching me.

I feel my cheeks heat. Does he notice the difference in our clothing? Does he care?

Duffel empty, I stuff it into a bin and straighten. The closet is larger than my bedroom in my and Darius's apartment.

It's so big, there is an island in the center with more cabinetry and a countertop. I run my hand over the smooth stone. "What do you use this for?"

"Folding," he answers.

My brows lift. His laundry is sent out and comes back folded every week. I stop, my fingers dancing over the surface.

This counter is like so many parts of this house. It looks beautiful and it's meant to be functional but it's for show. "Has it ever actually been used?"

"Are you judging me?" he asks, his voice growing even deeper.

I blush. Here I am worried about my clothes and how inferior I look. The idea of me judging him... "Trust me, I'm not. I'm just marveling..."

"At how much I have that I don't use?" Triston pushes off the doorframe, still

shirtless. I watch him stalk toward me, a flush climbing up my chest.

“Everything in your house is perfect. I’m surprised you’d want me here messing it up.”

He stops just in front of me, and dips down, wrapping his arms under my backside and lifting me up. My hands automatically wrap around his neck, my legs around his waist.

His lips find mine, his kiss slow but intense, before he whispers against my lips, “I want you to mess it up so good, baby.”

I smile, even as he kisses me again.

He turns us both and sets me down on top of the counter, the cool stone touching my bare skin.

I shiver, his hands climbing up under the T-shirt I’m still wearing. He spreads his palms over the small of my back, bending me back as his hips settle in the cradle of mine.

The kiss gets deeper, more erotic as his tongue tangles with mine. I trace my hands down the muscles of his back learning every angle, delighting in each ripple.

His strength fills me with some security that I’ve been struggling to find on my own. He leans forward and I naturally flow back until I’m lying on the counter.

He pushes back up, pulling the shirt I’m wearing up and over my head. Stepping back, he takes my underwear off next. I push up on my elbows, my hair flowing over the counter as I meet his gaze.

“Spread your legs.”

I do, feeling the intensity of his gaze as it travels down my body, zeroing in between my thighs. “We’re keeping you waxed,” he rumbles as he brings both his hands to my knees, spreading me even wider. “Fucking hell, Honeyeh.”

I’m not sure what that means, but I assume it’s good as his thumb brushes over my already throbbing clit.

My head falls back, my chest pushing up as I cry out.

“You’re so beautiful.” But he stops massaging me with his thumb. I lift my head to protest, just in time to see him drop down on his knees and then lean forward, lapping exactly where his thumb had just been.

Pleasure surges inside me, a keening moan falling from my lips. He keeps working me until I’m panting, my legs so open to him that my thighs ache.

But I’m mindless now, threading my fingers into his hair as I pull him closer.

I’m so close I can feel the orgasm when he stops, surging up on his feet.

“Triston,” I protest, reaching for him. “Please.”

He smiles, his eyes hooded and dangerous as he lines his hips up, sinking slowly inside me. “Don’t worry, baby, I’ll give you what you need.”

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This time, there is no pain, only pleasure as fills my insides, pleasure sparking hot and deep. He doesn't stop until he bottoms out.

My back arches to take even more of him in, my hands rising over my head to grab the lip of the counter.

His hands wrap around my waist as he pulls me even tighter against him, rubbing my clit in a way that sends tendrils of pleasure radiating out.

A mewling cry falls from my lips as he pulls out and then surges back in, repeating all the feels.

I'm mindless now as my body climbs higher and higher, the pleasure so intense a half sob falls from my lips.

He pounds into me, his jaw hard enough to cut glass until with one final surge, I break, falling over the edge as an orgasm rips through me.

He pumps into me a couple more times, but I've hardly come down from the pleasure when he pulls out of me and flips me over, my feet landing on the floor, my breasts crushing into the cool counter.

But I've hardly got my weight recentered when he pushes inside me again, this time going so deep, I gasp.

"Fuck," he spits out the word, just holding inside me for a moment. Two. Then he grabs my hips and pulls out only to pound in again.

It's rough and fast and animalistic. But my insides light with fire at all the friction and soon, I'm barely hanging on as I start to climb again.

My body can hardly take it, it's so good. My toes curl into the thick carpet, pushing up to take more of him. "God, Triston. Oh God, you feel..." I can barely get out the words, the thrusts making my voice come out in halting gasps.

And then he lets go of one side of my hip to reach around and press his finger to my clit.

It's the final straw that breaks me and I scream out again, another orgasm stealing my breath.

He roars behind me, his thrusts losing all their art, as he breaks too, cumming inside me.

I go limp on the hard counter, my body so spent, two espressos can't keep my eyes open.

Triston collapses on my back, kissing my neck and shoulder. "Sweetheart," he murmurs against my skin. "Do you have any idea how good you feel?"

"None," I sigh out. "But I know how good you feel."

He lets out a small chuckle as he lifts off me again, pulling me off the counter and into his arms.

Carrying me into the bedroom, he settles me back on the bed, his body wrapping around mine.

But he's hardly settled me on the bed when I close my eyes, falling sound asleep.

I have no idea how long I'm out, but I wake to the feel of Triston's fingers dancing down my arm.

I jerk awake. "Ho lo?"

He laughs. "Hello to you too."

I shake my head, trying to clear the cobwebs and make my tongue work. "How long was I asleep?"

"Four hours."

"Four hours!" I cry, bolting up, which makes me dizzy. I tilt to the side and Triston catches me.

"Slow down. Everything's all right."

I lean back again, closing my eyes, trying to give my body and brain time to adjust. "I should check on Darius."

"He's fine and..." He kisses my temple. "Your clothes arrived."

"My clothes?" Is it just the grogginess? He's lost me again.

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“Remember I mentioned I wanted you to dress as my personal assistant rather than a maid? I ordered clothes. They arrived.”

His assistant. That feels like a lifetime ago and I wince as I push away. I’m his assistant. His employee.

Rising from the bed, I head for the bathroom, hoping to hide as I collect myself. I can’t forget my role in this house.

He even paid for the sex. That makes me cringe.

Because somewhere after orgasm number three, and falling asleep in his arms, it has felt way more personal.

But if I wanted a moment, I don’t get it. He gets up and follows. “I’ll get you another cup of espresso.”

“Just show me how to use the machine and then I can make the coffee for you.” I don’t look at him as I stop in middle of the bathroom. “Is it all right if I use the shower?”

“Of course,” he answers, and I catch the slight furrow of his brow. But I turn away, opening the glass door and reach for the knob.

The water is instantly hot, and I step in, going to close the door behind me but Triston is there, hand on the door.

“My brothers are all arriving in the next hour,” he says as he steps in. “Including my eldest brother.”

“The duke?”

“That’s right. His flight should be landing shortly.”

I dip my head under water, trying to puzzle this out. “Did he already have a flight booked?”

“No. He was able to find a friend with a private jet who’s bringing him over.”

“Private jet?” I reach for the shampoo, feeling as though I am in deep over my head.

“We’re working on buying our own. Next on the list,” Triston says, turning on a separate sprayer as he wets himself down. “I want you to meet him.”

“Why?” I ask, a weight settling in my belly.

“Because,” he turns back to me then. “You are part of this too.”

Right. I’m the reason that a major deal is about to fall through. His family surely hates me.

I’m the maid who managed to detonate a major real estate company. I scrub out my hair, applying the expensive conditioner. I might as well look good as I face the jury.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Triston

Honeyeh has been quiet since we woke up for the second time. And not a good quiet. She doesn't purr with contentment. If anything, tension simmers under the surface.

Is she worried about my brothers? Hers? Dimitri? All of the above? We're due for a good long chat about the future, but I need to handle my family first.

Ryker, Rush, and Killian will follow my lead. Gris, my twin, does a lot more questioning, but if my choices mitigate danger, he'll be on board. He's about to get married and is all about quality of life and more time for his soon-to-be bride.

But Win. He's got my father's uncompromising nature, my mother's head for business, and the kind of alpha energy that makes most other men tremble.

It's not a false bravado. Win is deeply confident, and it makes changing course nearly impossible once he's decided upon a path.

Honestly, he's a prick.

Not that I don't love him. But he thinks he answers to none of us. He's a giant pain in the ass.

My responsibility is to support him and the rest of this family, and that has made me feel heavy. Until Honeyeh.

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What I failed to understand is that the right woman would take my burden and make it...lighter. She makes my life more beautiful and I'm not sure I could go back to the way it was before.

I will not lie to my brother. I gave up ground when I saved Honeyeh. I had a lot more room to spin or hit before I showed my cards to Dimitri, and I might have painted us into a corner.

But I don't regret what I did yesterday. In fact, I think it might have been one of the most important moves of my life.

And now that I've got her here, it's become clear that I'm not just letting her go.

I've moved her in. Moved her brother in, for fuck's sake. Honeyeh is my future. And I'll tell her all of this, after I deal with my brothers.

She's next to me in the shower, showing me her back, her shoulders curled. I finish scrubbing and turn off my showerhead, stepping toward her as I grab her hip, my front coming up against her back. "Need any help?"

That relaxes her and her body melts into mine. "Have a moisturizer I could use?"

"Yes. In a few days we'll have you all sorted."

She looks back over her shoulder, her eyes filled with questions she doesn't ask. I slide my hand over the curve of her hip, kissing her shoulder. I'm glad she doesn't ask now. It's a big help. Honeyeh has always been more than willing to follow my

lead, which I appreciate.

I wrap my arm around her waist, squeezing her before I ease back. “You get ready. I’ll see if Darius has had anything to eat.”

“You don’t need to take care of my brother. You’ve got enough?—”

“I’ve got plenty of time and energy to check on your brother.” I skim my fingers down the curve of her spine, wanting to taste her.

“Thank you,” she looks at me over her shoulder, a small smile playing at her lips even if her eyes hold some hesitation.

I push her hair to the side, kissing the spot between her shoulder blades.

“I’ve got to finish if I’m going to be ready to greet them,” she murmurs.

I let out a long, rumbling protest. After what I just did to her in the closet, I know her body will need a rest. She’s new at this. But I can’t keep my hands off her. “They can wait.”

She shakes her head. “We don’t need to give them more reasons to dislike me.”

Shit. I can see how she’d be worried about that. “They’ll like you just fine, sweetheart. Don’t you worry about that.”

I feel the little twitch that moves through her. “What’s my role today?”

For a second my brow furrows.

“Am I your assistant? What will you tell them about Darius? Or should he stay in his

room?”

My lips press together as I begin to understand her tension. “You are here as my guest.” I almost say more. Maybe I should. But she’s right, we don’t have a lot of time to really get into it.

She nods, appearing less pensive. I kiss her neck and then get out to find a moisturizer for her.

Once done, I shave, dress, and bring in her clothes, laying out an outfit for her. It’s a pale pink shirt dress in silk that belts at the waist. It’s classy, understated, flattering, and perfect for a Sunday.

I pair it with a pair of strappy sandals and then pull out a polo shirt and slacks for myself.

Heading out in the hall, I call to Darius. “You up?”

He pokes his head out of his room. “I’m up.”

“Eat anything?”

“No. Not yet.”

I wave him forward, and then start for the kitchen. I can see the yellowing of his skin, how thin he is, even for a teenage boy. “Let’s find something for you.”

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“It’s all right. I don’t have much of an appetite.”

I keep walking and he follows. The family resemblance to Honeyeh is undeniable, as is the pleasant demeanor.

So different from my family.

“What other symptoms do you have?”

“Not much energy.” We reach the kitchen, and I take out some eggs and bread. I know that his problem stems from an overproduction of bile that has scarred the liver, but I’ll get more of the particulars from the doctor tomorrow.

“How’s the gaming system?”

“Awesome,” he answers, a big smile tugging at his lips.

“That’s good. Feel free to use the pool whenever you like.”

My phone chimes letting me know someone is at the gate. I look at my phone, a limo sitting just outside.

The phone rings in my hand. I pick up on the first ring. “Hello?”

“It’s me,” Win says in his deep baritone. “Open up.”

I hit the button, swinging the gate open.

“I don’t like to be kept waiting.”

I scowl at my phone. “I have real time updates, Win. It wasn’t longer than ten seconds.”

“It’s harder to get in here than it is to access Windsor,” he fires back.

I hang up, not wanting to listen to his grouching. He’s completely out of the fray in England, where the gates are purely for show. If he wants to change jobs, I’m game. I’ll take Honeyeh and Darius to England. Sit and watch it rain while I bark at Win to make more money.

I hit another button on my phone to unlock the front door. Mrs. Raith doesn’t work on Sundays and I’m not answering, especially not for him.

I could have the house staffed all the time, but I like the break. Perhaps I’ve been craving some normalcy for a while now.

I hear the front door close. “Darius, can you go meet my brother?”

“Sure,” he gets up from the stool at the island and starts for the entry. The two of them enter the kitchen a minute later.

Win looks even sterner than I remember, his face more deeply lined. “Eggs?”

“It’s dinner time in England,” he answers.

“Check the fridge,” I wave behind me. “I had a benefit on Friday. If there is nothing in this fridge, my guess is the staff kitchen is still loaded to the gills.”

He grunts his thanks. “You want something too?” he asks Darius.

“Is that okay?” Darius looks at me.

“Of course. Help yourself.” The coffee pot beeps.

“Tell me again how you know my brother?” Win asks Darius as they reach the connecting doorway.

“My sister works for him.”

“Worked,” I call out. “She’s my girlfriend now.”

Both of them stop, turning back to me. Darius wears an excited grin while Win gives me a fierce glare.

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I glare back. I've done my duty to this family and then some. And I'm fine with continuing. But only if Honeyeh is welcome. Without her...

He turns away again, leading Darius into the other kitchen. They come back five minutes later with plates heaping full of food.

The coffee finishes and I pour myself a cup, my eggs done, so I dump them on a plate.

The three of us eat until my phone chimes again. One by one my brothers arrive, joining us around the island.

They grab plates of food, coffee, filling the kitchen with low chatter. It's a quiet moment in my home that we almost never have.

Most of the house is a showpiece. I can't ever remember having a quiet family meal like this.

They pull up stools, eating and talking. Gris pops a shrimp in his mouth. "Win, can you remind Mother that we'll be in England in a month to help with wedding prep? She's texting me constantly."

"She's excited," Win chuckles, more relaxed after some food. "One son married," he nods at Killian, "another planning the wedding of the century."

My phone dings again, a text message from Mason appearing.

I'm here.

"Who invited Mason?" I ask, allowing our partner in through the gate.

"I did," Win answers.

Of course. The father I never wanted or needed. It's my turn to glare. Because Win doesn't have to answer to anyone. I've always shouldered that burden, and I don't appreciate him making it harder today. It's my call when Mason is included, not his. I wanted us to make some decisions as a family first. Something he would have known if he'd asked.

That's when Honeyeh enters the kitchen. She's got on the dress I laid out for her. The shoes.

Her hair is styled in loose waves down her back, her light makeup perfect for the occasion.

I reach out my hand and she moves closer, slipping her slender fingers into mine. "Honeyeh, I'd like you to meet my brother, Winston. Publicly, you refer to him as Your Grace, or Lord Grandmont. Privately, we call him Win."

She dips into a curtsy, though I never mentioned that it was appropriate.

Win gives her a curt nod in return. I'd hoped for warmer. "Win, this is Honeyeh Karimi."

Before either can say a word, Mason enters the kitchen. "I see I'm just in time for introductions. Lord Grandmont, a pleasure to meet in person."

Win turns to Mason. "And you, Mr. Kincaid," he says as he pushes his plate aside.

“Now that we’re all here, are we ready to begin?” He hasn’t verbally acknowledged Honeyeh at all.

“Win,” I rumble. “I don’t have staff on Sunday. We’ll load the dishwasher first.” Because this is my house, my business, and my life. Win doesn’t call the shots and we’re going to tangle if he tries.

Honeyeh squeezes my hand, her eyes filled with a question. “I can take care of it,” she whispers close to my ear so that only I can hear. Though I know Gris hears it too when his brows lift.

“You get coffee, sweetheart. And then eat.” I kiss her forehead and then let go of her hand to pour her a cup.

Win has played his one move. The rest of the meeting is going my way. And while I don’t need another person to fight with, Win will understand. He might be the duke, but when it comes to our American company, he bows to me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Triston

Kitchen cleaned, we all head upstairs to my office. It’s more than large enough to accommodate us all, though I do send Ryker and Rush for a few more chairs that are packed in a storage closet.

I opt to sit on my desktop, not a move I normally make, but between Mason and Win, I need any advantage I can get.

Win and Mason take the executive chairs that sit in front of my desk. I expect my other brothers to fan out around them in the chairs that have been brought in, but they

don't.

All four of them stand behind my desk, like centaurs. I take a quick look back to find them in a line by birth order, their arms crossed.

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Win notices too, and his eyes narrow.

Mason clears his throat. “To begin, Tris, would you mind repeating our conversation from yesterday?”

I do, explaining how I ended up at Dimitri’s establishment and how this has compressed the timeline in terms of the Dimitri problem, but it has not created the situation. “We were always coming to this.”

Mason nods. “I agree. I’ve been the aggressor in terms of shutting down his involvement in Las Vegas.”

“You’re not alone,” Killian grunts behind me. “Let’s not forget, he riddled my loft with about a thousand bullet holes while Chloe was there. He’s not forgiven.”

Mason jerks his chin in agreement, before he looks at me. “I’m aware that in asking you to complete the hostile takeover, I’ve placed you in a tenuous position.”

I wave my hand. “I was a willing participant. It was the right business move for the future of Smith Brothers.”

“And was nearly tossing it all away on a maid the right choice?” Win rumbles, entering the conversation.

“Win,” I warn. “You will respect Honeyeh, and what’s more, you will give me the grace that I’ve earned.”

Win stares back with hard eyes.

Mason frowns at my brother. “If I may share my experiences.... With two of my brothers, I asked them to prioritize the business over their budding romances. It didn’t work out either time.”

Win snorts. “My brother does not have a budding relationship. He has rules. One of them is no emotional entanglements.”

“I can speak for myself. I do not need you to explain my choices,” I fire back.

“Fine. Then I’ll speak for myself. You should have acted with more care yesterday. You might not have created a situation, but you certainly made it worse.” Win’s jaw is hard enough to cut glass as he glares with hard eyes.

I glare back. He’s not wrong.

But it’s Gris who speaks next. “He was supposed to allow Honeyeh to be auctioned?”

“He was supposed to allow her to suffer the consequences of her own actions. Yes.” Win stands, staring down Gris.

Mason pushes up too. He starts to speak but I hold out my hand. This is between me and Win. “When was the last time you sacrificed anything for this family? Answered to anyone?”

Silence fills the room. “I am the leader of this family. I don’t answer to you.”

“Bullshit.” I’m off the desk. “If you were, you’d understand a leader sacrifices most of all.” I step up, my finger in his face. “What do you give up, playing polo all day? Sitting in the house of Lords?”

I see his face spasm. But I don't let up.

"The man at the helm, he makes the hard choices, they belong to him. And he takes the consequences too." What I don't say, but I'm beginning to understand, is the weight of my burden was killing me, until Honeyeh. That her being in my life has made it all worthwhile.

Without her, I was about to not be me. And if they make me choose, it will be her.

"What the fuck does that mean?" He leans down an inch from my face.

"You can come here and add your opinion," I say slowly, like I'm not spitting mad, "but we both know the man who is going to do anything, who will be mired in the action, who will suffer the consequences of the choices, will be me. Bitch about my choice if you want, but don't pretend you understand the weight of the tough calls. You fucking don't."

"With me, none of this would have happened."

I'm done with that argument. "Take it over, then. Have at it. I'll build my own?—"

"Don't you fucking dare," Gris growls behind me. I turn to my brother, preparing to fight. But his glare is focused on Win. "If Triston walks, I go with him."

Win's lip curls. "Fucking twins."

"No," Ryker points at Win. "It's not that. It's that Triston has always been the bow of this ship. And his decisions navigate our ship."

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Killian steps around the desk to stand next to me. “He breaks the water for the rest of us. Including you, Win. You’re not here enough to see it, but that doesn’t make it less true.”

My younger brothers supporting me fills me with gratitude. Killian in particular, because we’ve had our differences. But the fact he’s standing next to me now when I need him most, it fills me with a fraternal affection I haven’t felt for a very long time. I clap my hand on his shoulder.

“Is that how you all see it?” Color rises in Win’s face. “That I am some freeloader and not the man who has had to sacrifice for this family?”

I drop my hand. “Sacrifice?”

“You’ve always had each other.” He waves his hand. “I’ve been forced apart from the rest of you my entire life.”

I’ve never considered it from that angle, but he’s right. I give a nod. “You have, Win. It’s true.”

I see his shoulders drop a fraction of an inch as he blows out a breath. “So what you’re telling me is that rushing into the enemy’s den is going to work out for us?”

Mason clears his throat. “I suggested that Killian enact a more permanent solution but?—”

“I said no,” I bite back. Killian’s got my back, and I’ve got his.

It's Killian's turn to clamp his hand on my shoulder. "If it comes to that, the safety of this family, and of Chloe, are my first priority."

"Fuck this," Win rumbles and then turns toward the door. I don't stop him. I'm smart enough to understand I can't.

Much as my brothers backed me as the head of this operation, I will never be Win's boss.

He slams the office door as he goes. Rush, who's remained silent, heads toward the door. "I'm going to talk to him."

Rush has always been the most accommodating, the compromiser. But I don't care about compromise.

Win can do whatever he wants.

"Now that the pissing contest is over," Gris rumbles. "What are we doing about Dimitri before we resort to offing him?"

"We make him an offer to buy him out," I answer. "Give him the sort of money that allows him to go wherever he wants, do what he wants."

Mason rumbles. "I hate it. He should suffer."

"Vengeance is a different agenda from stability or financial gain." If Mason doesn't want to do it my way, that's his right. "I think you ought to be clear with me about which is most important to you. It's time for all us to show our cards, blackjack style."

Mason's mouth twitches. "You're in the mood to hand out beatings today, I see."

“My priorities are realigning.” I shake my head. “I’ve stopped caring about more money and started caring about?—”

“Honeyeh,” Gris cuts me off.

He’s not wrong.

“If that’s the case, then you ought to understand the importance of creating the most stable environment we can.”

“I agree,” I nod. “Which is why I think buying him out is the best option. No laws broken, no worry about retaliation from one of his family members...”

Mason lets out a long breath of frustration. “Fine. I agree. But whatever amount you agree on, it will be less the amount of money it takes to repair Temptation and Killian’s loft.”

It’s a big ask, but fair. “Fine. I’ll set up the meeting as soon as possible.”

But just as I’m about to call this meeting done, Win walks back into my office, his scowl still firmly in place.

I’m preparing for another round, when he pulls a small velvet box from his jacket and slaps it on my desk.

“What is that?” I ask, looking from the box to him.

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“Mother sent it with me. I thought she was being ridiculous, and I still do, but it was her request that I deliver this, and I won’t go back without having fulfilled it.”

I pick it up, my brows lifting at the sight of a clear blue sapphire winking up at me. “What’s this for?”

“You tell me.” Win cuts his hand through the air before he turns and disappears again.

Killian slaps my back. “She gave me Chloe’s ring too.”

I snap the box shut. “I didn’t ask for a ring.” But it begs the question. How deep am I going here?

“But now that you’ve got it,” Killian starts. “What are you doing with it?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Honeyeh

I sit in Darius’s room as he shows me the third game from his new game console.

I’ve never been interested in video games, but I nod and smile for his sake. I love that Triston has given him this chance to do something that excites him. There’s been so little of that in Darius’s life lately.

He finally puts the controller down and turns to me. “So, when did your boss become

your boyfriend?”

“What?” My heart jumps into my throat. Darius must have realized I slept in Triston’s room last night.

“That’s what he told his brothers. That you were his girlfriend.”

My mouth opens and closes, my heart beginning to pound in my chest. I never asked Triston to put a label on what we’re doing. In fact, I really dislike that he did.

It’s not that I wanted to be his paid bedmate. It’s just...

As much as I like Triston’s assertiveness, enjoy how he eases the burdens of my life, and I find him wildly attractive, I cannot afford to have feelings for him.

Because what I need even more than I need help with Darius, is a person who wants to stick around in my life.

My father just up and left...and when he did, our lives fell apart. I’m still picking up the pieces.

I think about Triston’s promise to make my life better no matter how long he’s in it. But leaving, that always destroys. It doesn’t cure.

And everyone knows that Triston doesn’t keep a woman around for long once he’s romantically involved. I cringe, trying to decide what to say to Darius. “Listen. I know how that sounds but he’s the kind of guy who has a lot of girlfriends. We probably shouldn’t get too comfortable.”

Darius gives me a skeptical look. “He packed up all our clothes. Seems like he plans to have us stay for a while anyway.”

My heart twists. Because I'm just realizing that Darius will have to break up with Triston too. It isn't just me.

I should have thought about that before. It's just been so crazy the past few days and I wanted to hide in Triston, take a break from the burdens. Not that I'm making excuses. I got caught up in Triston's magnetism. And I can add this whole thing to my list of failures.

But right now, I have to think about what's best for Darius.

Triston appears in the doorway. "What are you two up to?"

"I'm showing her some of the games I've been learning," Darius calls over his shoulder as he fires the console back up.

My hands press together, my eyes casting down. What do I say?

"I've got a call to make and then how about the three of us head out to the pool?"

"Awesome!" Darius answers before I can.

I stand, smoothing the skirt over my hips. "You don't have to come out with us if you've got other things you need to do."

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Triston stares at me a moment before he reaches out a hand to me. Drawing in a deep breath to steady my nerves, I start toward him. Reaching him, I slip my fingers into his as he pulls me close. “With you is exactly where I want to be.”

My insides melt. Which I know is part of the problem. When Triston’s not around, I tell myself all sorts of things. But once he’s near, I turn into clay for him to mold. “Did it go all right with your family?”

I feel his moment of hesitation. “Most of us are on the same page, so that’s good.”

“Win?”

I could tell that Triston’s older brother did not like me. After yesterday, I’m not sure I blame him.

“He’s not happy with me, but then again, it’s pretty much his full-time job to be dissatisfied.”

“Because of me.” I shake my head, wincing.

Triston’s arms come around me as he pulls me close. “All of my other brothers understand. Trust me when I say, this is a Win problem, not a Honeyeh problem.”

“I’m not so sure,” I whisper, breathing in his scent. “If Darius and I are causing trouble...”

“You’re not.” He squeezes me tighter. I was trying to give him an out. Instead, his

lips brush over my temple. “Give me ten minutes and then we can head outside.”

I let him go then, but follow him out into the hall to cross to the bedroom to change. That’s when I see his brothers and Mason filing out of his office.

Mason waves and winks. I give a small wave back, but my bottom lip is still between my teeth.

Win’s clear dislike of me has made me question how the rest of these men might view me. Do they think I’m a shameless social climber? Or do they just see me as Triston’s latest conquest? I wince at the thought.

The group heads down the stairs to the foyer while Triston goes back in his office. I only have a minute to decide, but drawing in a deep breath, I start down the hall to the stairs.

Triston’s brothers, along with Mason have reached the front door when I’m halfway down the stairs. “Mason?” I call out before he can leave.

They all turn to look at me.

“Hey, Honeyeh.”

“May I have a word?” I ask before I can lose my courage.

They all stand there waiting and I hesitate. Triston’s brothers have been nothing but nice, but I was still hoping to have this conversation a bit more privately.

“Of course,” Mason answers, but his eyes crinkle at the corners as he stares back at me in question. No one moves. I guess I’m doing this...

“I...I wanted to thank you for hiring me for that waitressing job.”

Mason smiles. “It was my pleasure. I’m sorry you weren’t in my employ longer.”

That makes me relax the slightest bit, but my hand still flutters. “Thank you for that. I really appreciate it because I was hoping to ask...”

His brow furrows.

“If...when...things...” I wave my hand around Triston’s house. “Should I find myself in need of a job again...”

His brows lift. “You’re always welcome to call me, Honeyeh.”

“Thank you,” I whisper, relief making me limp.

“Worried about Triston?” Gris asks, making me stiffen back up.

The answer is definitely yes. But I’m not saying that. “I try to have a plan and a backup plan because I can’t afford to be without work.” I hope that sounds reasonable and not at all accusatory toward Triston. My goal is not to create more trouble. I just need to make certain I can pay our bills.

Mason lightly touches my elbow. “Triston is not going to let your bills go unpaid. But you are always welcome to come to me should you need anything.”

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“Thank you,” I answer, feeling slightly better. I wave goodbye, but as I make my way up the stairs, I hear footsteps behind me. I turn to see Killian and Gris at the bottom of the stairs.

It’s my turn to be confused. What does Killian wish to say and why is Gris with him? Did I just err?

“I hope I didn’t offend,” I lift my hands up. “I don’t mean to question Triston, I just... My brother Darius. I have to think of him too.”

Killian quirks one brow. “I can’t believe more women don’t proceed with caution when it comes to dating Triston. He’s got a terrible record. If I had a sister, I wouldn’t let her anywhere near a man like him.”

I relax, a smile playing about my lips at having the subject stated so openly. “Thanks for being direct.”

Killian laughs. “Most people hate it.” He points down at Gris. “I asked him to stay in case I made you nervous.”

That completely perplexes me. From the first time I met Killian, he’s been so open and honest. I really like him. “Why would you make me nervous?”

Gris grunts, but Killian only shrugs. “Listen, Honeyeh. We all got to watch you and Tris together at the benefit. Which is why we know, that despite yesterday, you and Triston work very well together.”

My mouth falls open. “Really?”

“But if things don’t work out, we all wanted you to know, Mason isn’t the only person you can come to for help.”

Gris raises his hand. “We weren’t sure if you’d prefer this information from Ryker and Rush, as they are single, or if the taken men would be easier to trust, but either way, just know you’re not alone. You can call on any of us.”

My heart melts and crazy emotion pricks at my eyes. “Thank you so much.”

Killian scratches at his jaw. “I also wanted to ask you about your past. Tris mentioned that your father disappeared.”

My eyes instantly drop. “I don’t like to talk about it. But yeah.”

“Do you know his name?”

“Darius Karimi Senior. Darius is named after him.”

Killian asks me several more questions, his interest making me nervous. “That’s all in the past,” I wave my hand.

“Of course,” Killian gives me a smile. “I’m sorry to pry.” And then he starts down the stairs again.

I turn back up, heading to the bedroom to put on my bathing suit.

But honestly, more questions than ever are swirling in my head. I’m in so deep with Triston, there is no avoiding heartbreak.

The promises Mason, Gris, and Killiam made are a big help. Because I have to think about how I proceed with Triston in a way that doesn't hurt my brother.

I have to make the best decision for him, no matter what my heart wants.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Triston

I watch everyone leave, picking up my phone. I dial Dimitri, listening to the phone ring.

On the third ring, he picks up. "Triston."

"Dimitri."

"How was your evening?" he asks, the edge to his voice undeniable. "Satisfactory?"

What happens between me and Honeyeh is none of his fucking business. I'd like to tell him so, but I've got a job to do. "I've met with my partners this morning and we have an offer for you."

"An offer?" He rumbles. "What kind of offer?"

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“You own two more casinos. There is the establishment I was at last night...”

“Fuck you, Smith. Fuck you all.”

“Don’t you want to hear what we’re offering first?” I pause, giving him time to calm himself. It’s not a bad offer. Granted, the majority of his money comes through his drug trade, and to start over in a new city is...messy.

But then again, he has a young daughter. Perhaps he’s ready for a quieter life.

“I already know what you’re offering. A buy out.”

He’s right, I’ll give him that. “You shot up my brother’s place with his fiancée inside. Bombed a club of Mason’s. Did you think this ended with all of us living harmoniously in Vegas?”

He spits some Russian words into the line. “I expect Mason to honor his original agreement.”

“You think we don’t know the deal you were trying to cut behind our backs with the Italians? The original agreement is off the table. It has been for a while.”

He rumbles more words in his native language, none of them sounding happy. “I cut that deal for the girl so that we could move forward. Not go backward.”

I don’t give a fuck about his intentions. Honeyeh was never his, and honestly, I ought to make him pay for what he almost did. “It’s a good deal, Dimitri. The kind of

money that would allow you to build a whole new life somewhere else.”

“You underestimate me as a Russian and as a man if you think I’m going to let you push me into retirement.”

“Build a new business, a legitimate one. Or stay underground. It’s up to you. But Mason and I will buy out your casinos and your clubs that mask your brothels for a fair market value. You won’t get a better deal.”

“You know neither of those are where the real money comes from.” He’s spitting mad now. “I’m not leaving Vegas.”

“Sell that business too. Take your product elsewhere. Your call.”

“I refuse.”

I let out a long breath. “Don’t make me repeat what I did with the last casino, Dimitri. It will be a lot fucking slower for us, and significantly less lucrative for you. Think about your options and call me when you’ve seen reason.” And then I hang up.

Painting Dimitri into a corner is a gamble, and I hope it’s worth the risk. He’s a dangerous man. But this has gone on too long and it’s time to end it.

I push up from my chair, and head to my bedroom. It’s quiet in the house, which is the norm for Sundays, but I find it unsettling. Outside, I see Honeyeh and Darius by the pool.

Darius is laying in a chair, Honeyeh, in a tiny bikini, is adjusting an umbrella over her brother.

She looks gorgeous and the sight of her caring for her family has my insides going

soft and my cock growing hard.

Am I ever going to get enough of her?

Everything she does only makes me want her more. Stepping into the closet, I shrug off my clothes and pull out a bathing suit. I can't remember the last time I used the pool, and I shake my head, laughing a bit.

Honeyeh has brought this house to life. I'm still not sure how, but I know she has.

Tying the suit, I grab some towels and head outside. By the time I reach the pool, she's lounging in one of the chairs, her body on full display.

I stop, just staring.

Darius is sound asleep, snoring softly in his chair next to her.

Honeyeh looks at me with a smile. "He's tired. I think he was up late last night with that gaming system."

I wince. Not because I bought him the games, but because a boy his age should have almost limitless energy for staying up and playing games.

I join Honeyeh, sitting on her chair next to her hip, my hand splaying out on her belly. "We'll get him right, Honeyeh."

She looks away, nipping at her lip.

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I know that look and I know it means something is wrong. I lean down, kissing along her jaw. “What are you thinking?” I whisper close to her ear.

“You’ve done too much already.”

I slide my hand from her belly to grasp her waist. “I haven’t done nearly enough.”

She turns to me then, her face so close to mine, her breath fans over my cheeks. “Triston.”

There is a warning to her tone I don’t understand. I brush her hair back, sliding my fingers along her neck and into the back of her hair. “Why do I sense a lecture coming?”

She winces, pain stretching her features, and I tense. “Try to understand, if it were just me, I’d let you in as far as you wanted to go.”

What the fuck is she saying? Irritation, and if I’m honest, hurt, slithers through my limbs. I’ve broken up with a hundred women. I know every variation. My hand tightens in her hair. “Are you breaking up with me?”

She shakes her head. “No. Not that. But I think...” She lets out a slow breath. “I think Darius and I should go back to our apartment.”

My jaw clenches as I try to land on the problem. “You think I’m bad for your brother?”

Her lip trembles as she draws in a tremulous breath. “Our dad left. Our mom died.”

“So?”

“If Darius gets too attached to you and then I end up like Veronica...”

Suddenly I get it. I’m the thirty-day guy. For fuck’s sake, I bought her virginity. Though to be fair, I was protecting her. “You are not like the rest of them, Honeyeh.”

Her mouth twitches into a frown. “Maybe. But also, the man I let into my life, give access to Darius, I have to trust to stay. If not for me, then for him.”

Fuck. Me. I’ve always known that Honeyeh was a woman who would do anything to protect the people she loved. Apparently, that also includes breaking it off with me. “So you don’t want to what?”

I pull my hand from her hair, sitting up straighter. She follows, moving with me as usual.

“Darius can’t depend on you, only to have us break up?—”

“We’ve known each other a week. I’m not promising forever.” The truth is, before this conversation I was close. But my pride won’t admit that. Not now.

I see her wince as she draws her knees up. Christ, she’s so fragile even now, my irritation deflates, and I want to wrap her in my arms.

And that’s when it hits me. Just like always, she needs protection. But the person she’s afraid of most...is me. How I might break her or her brother.

Making my decision, I reach my arms around her, plucking her into my lap. She

comes easily, wrapping her arms around my neck and sinking into my body.

She needs me so much, she's just afraid to trust in that feeling.

I get it. She was hurt by the one man who was supposed to keep her safe, her father. It's something I deeply understand, and I know, I can't play with her feelings. Not with her. It's all or nothing and I already know which way I'm going with this. With us.

"Honeyeh," I kiss her then, slow and soft. "You can trust me, sweetheart."

"I want to," she breathes into my mouth. "So much."

Those words make me relax. "You've turned this house into a home for me. I need you to understand that."

"Really?" she cries, her arms tightening around my neck.

It hasn't been long enough to make the big promises like forever and marriage, and she has every right to pump the brakes until I prove that I'm for real despite my dating history.

But I can remind her that there are promises I've already made. "What did I tell you? No matter what happens between us, I will leave you better. Remember?"

"I know. And I'm so grateful for that. But our hearts, me and Darius's, they're fragile. It's why I haven't dated, even though I'm not that strong on my own. I have to put his needs first. Not mine."

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I get it. With deep clarity I also know that I want to be on the list of people she loves like this. “Can you trust me to help with that? His needs?”

She leans back, her gray eyes searching mine a moment before she nods her affirmation. I kiss her then, slow but deep, my tongue brushing against hers over and over as my fingertips trail up her spine.

“Gross,” Darius gags from the chair next to us.

I can’t help it, I laugh against Honeyeh’s lips. “You’ll understand very soon, young man,” I say as Honeyeh giggles too.

“I’m going inside to take a nap,” he grouses as he pushes up from his chair and starts for the house.

“He liked me just fine before he saw us kissing,” I say as I watch him enter the house.

Honeyeh’s fingers thread into my hair. “He likes you. He’s just not used to seeing me with anyone. I’m not even sure how much he remembers about my parents. This might be a first for him.”

That’s a topic that we’re definitely discussing at some point. But right now, I kiss her again, holding her tightly against my chest.

The Vegas sun beats down on us, so wrapping my arms around her, I stand, walking into the pool with her in my arms.

The water is cooler than the air, but not much and we sink in, her legs coming around my waist.

The gentle lapping of the water makes me want to fuck her slow. Which is good because my girl has got to be sore.

But her body is pressed to mine, my hand sliding down to her ass to pull us even tighter together.

We both groan as I tug at the ties of her bikini to release the bottoms.

“What if someone sees,” she whispers between kisses.

I don’t give a shit, but I ease back. “No one else is here but sleeping beauty.” She laughs a little even as I work the fabric off her body.

Then I’m tugging down my shorts.

I slip into her, even as she gives a little hiss. “Does it hurt, baby?”

“A little,” she murmurs against my lips. “But I like being this connected to you.”

“Me too, sweetheart.” God, she feels so good. I want to take her top off, but I leave it on just in case, as I walk into deeper water, pressing her against the wall where our bottom halves are hidden from view from the house.

Then I lift her by the hips, her body bobbing on my cock.

It feels so fucking good, I grind my teeth, my eyes closing. “You’re going to let me take care of you, aren’t you, baby?”

“Yes,” she answers, kissing down my neck.

I don’t just mean right now. And even though I didn’t tell her, didn’t want to over promise, I know this is a forever offer.

I slide into her, my balls on fire. How can I want her this much? I keep the pace slow, though, relaxing into it as I lean back, looking down to watch my cock sinking into her. It’s exactly where I belong.

“Don’t worry, Honeyeh. I won’t let anyone hurt you or Darius.” I’m mindless now, words just falling from my lips without forethought or pretense. “Not even my family can stand between us.”

She stills, tightening her legs around my waist so I can’t pump into her. “Triston.”

I squeeze her ass cheeks together, increasing the friction and I’m rewarded when her head falls back. But she draws in an uneven breath. “Don’t hurt your family for me. They’re too important.”

“You don’t know what they ask of me. What they always fucking ask.” I didn’t mean to say the words, but they’re out now.

She stops, looking at me then. “I know. But what would you do if one of them was hurt or sick? Would it matter then? What they ask of you?”

I get what she’s saying. I do. She’s given almost all of herself for Darius. “They have to make room for the things that make me happy too.”

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“Do I make you happy?” she asks as she leans toward me again, her lips pressing to mine.

“You do.” I’m holding her ass with both hands, pressing us so close together that she moans at the same time I groan.

Her back arches, taking me even deeper inside her. “You make me happy too,” she cries.

I pick up speed, forgetting to be gentle as I pump into her. She’s tightening around me, her mouth open in a cry as her eyes squeeze shut. I love seeing her like this and I hold off my own orgasm, just wanting to watch her.

Two more thrusts and she breaks apart, crying out my name. She looks so gorgeous, feels so good, I break too, roaring as I fill her with my cum.

Her head falls back on the stone surround, her neck totally exposed as her arms float out to the side. “Triston?”

“Yeah, luv?”

“I want to help you however I can. Your business, your family. I want to help you.”

I gather her close. This is what I’ve always needed. Someone who wants to love me, and give to me, when the other parts of my life are trying to break me down. “You already do, Honeyeh.” I kiss her shoulder. “I love you, sweetheart.”

“I love you, too,” she chokes out, the emotion of the words making her voice tight.

“I think maybe we’re due for a nap too,” I whisper into her skin. I just want to hold her close.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Honeyeh

I wake in Triston’s arms, the Monday morning sun streaming in through the windows.

We spent most of the day yesterday wrapped up together, when we weren’t with Darius. This morning, Triston insists on going to Darius’s appointment with me.

Truthfully, I’ll be glad to have him there.

There is a weight that I’ve carried with my brother’s care, and I’m happy to share even a small piece of it. But I’m also aware that Triston feels the weight of his family too. I’m going to have to figure out how I help him in return, despite what he said yesterday.

I won’t just be an added burden for him to bear.

Maybe that’s why his brother Win doesn’t like me. He sees me as a distraction or a syphon of Triston’s time and energy. I’m not sure how, but I’ll have to prove Win wrong.

Triston is still asleep, looking more relaxed than I’ve ever seen him. In fact, he usually wakes before I do so I’m not sure I’ve seen him sleeping. I push up on one elbow, staring down at his face.

I love him so much my chest is tight with the emotion.

I'm still worried that I won't be enough or that he's just not the guy who loves a woman like me.

But, whatever fears I'm facing, I can't just let him go. I must try and trust that he meant his promises. Trust has been in short supply for me, but I'm never going to find love without it.

Triston should not have been the guy for me. Between his playboy status and position as my boss, he's the last man I should have given myself to. But then again, he's exactly what I need.

I lean down, rubbing my nose over his cheek, giving him a light kiss on the jaw before I roll over to sneak off to the shower.

"Where do you think you're going?" he rumbles, rolling with me and catching me in the cage of his arms.

I giggle as he pulls me into the cradle of his larger body. "The shower."

"Without me? How dare you." He holds me tighter as he nips at my neck.

I laugh harder as I bat at his hands, trying to free myself. "I don't want to be late today, and we know what happens when you get in the shower with me."

He holds me for a few more seconds before he finally lets me go. "Should I pick something for you to wear?"

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Triston has amazing taste, and I love it when he chooses outfits for me. They're always perfect. "Only if you don't mind."

"Why would I mind?"

I nip at my lip. A new day, a new insecurity... "I don't want to be another person that you have to pour work into all the time."

He stops, turning back to me and suddenly I'm under him, his body pressed on top of mine. "Banish the thought, Honeyeh. Now."

"But..."

He kisses me, his tongue tangling in my mouth, before he lifts up his head. "Everything shines brighter since you arrived in my life. No more needs be said." And then he's up and off the bed.

I get up too, starting for the bathroom, but I stop just as he's about to step into the closet. "My life shines brighter too," I say, drawing in a deep breath. "I want to be the best I can be for you." Our eyes meet and hold, his dark gaze holding the power that both captivates and excites me. "Promise you'll tell me if you need more from me, all right?"

He doesn't answer, and I worry that I've upset him as I slip into the bathroom. But before I've gotten the water on, Triston is walking into the bathroom.

I stop, turning toward him. "Chosen already?"

“I did.” He smiles then as he holds out a small velvet box. I gasp, a jolt running through me.

“Triston.”

“Open it.” And then he grabs my wrist, turning my palm up as he places the box in my open hand.

I open the lid, a very large sapphire winks up at me encrusted with layer upon layer of diamonds. “What is this?”

“It’s a family heirloom. My mother sent it.”

That only confuses me more. “How kind. Why...why would she do that?”

“In case I wanted to propose.”

My eyes snap up to his. Is he...

“Honeyeh. Will you marry me?”

I stare down at the ring. “But...”

“But what?” He frowns. Am I irritating him? I don’t mean to.

“It’s just...” I shake my head. I could ask, why me. All those women, I can’t believe I’m the one he wants. “You have all the choices in the world.”

He takes the box from my hand and slips the ring from the folds of velvet. “But I never fell in love with any of them the way I have with you.”

I smile, joy bubbling up from inside me as I hold out my hand, fingers wide as he slips the ring on my finger. “I love you too.”

“Being a man of business, I’d like an official yes.”

“Yes,” I half yell as I toss my arms around him. “Yes.”

Triston kisses me, before he lifts me up and moves to the shower to turn on the knobs and start the water. “No distracting me in the shower, future Mrs. Smith. We’ve got an appointment to make.”

I snort as he carries me into the warm water.

By some miracle we make it out of the shower and dress within forty-five minutes. He starts for the bedroom door, as I turn back to the bathroom. He stops, eyeing me curiously. “I just want to blow out my hair.”

“Breakfast?”

“I’ll eat after,” I wave for him to head down without me.

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“I’ll make you a coffee to go.”

That sounds amazing and I hum to myself as I dry my hair. I’d love to curl it too. First, I can honestly admit that I want to be pretty for Triston. But also, going to Dr. Lawrence always makes me nervous and looking good is somehow my armor.

Triston hands me a coffee when I make it down to the kitchen, Darius munching on a piece of toast. I sigh with relief as we sail out the door and into Triston’s car.

We make it to Dr. Lawrence’s office in plenty of time. Darius doesn’t ask about the ring, and I don’t tell him right away about the engagement.

I want to focus on him first.

As the three of us shuffle into the exam room, Darius sits on the exam table, Triston and I move into the chairs for attending family.

I’ve been in this room a hundred times, but it feels much smaller with Triston here. And way less scary.

Dr. Lawrence comes in a minute later, his eyes widening as they land on Triston with his fitted dress shirt and slacks.

“Dr. Lawrence?” Triston rises, holding out his hand. “Triston Smith.”

“I know who you are,” Dr. Lawrence clears his throat. “I’m a property investor myself and you and the Kincaids...” he shakes his head. “Pleased to meet you.”

“Hi Dr. Lawrence,” I wave my hand, the sapphire winking on my finger, his gaze following the sparkling stone.

He sits down on the stool. “The necessary documentation was completed for me to speak in front of Mr. Smith?”

“Yes,” I nod, leaning forward. “He asked me about other medications or treatments available and I’d mentioned we hadn’t pursued them for financial reasons. He’s here to discuss them today.”

Dr. Lawrence waves his hand. “I can certainly go over them with you, but...” He shifts, his eyes sweeping over us. “The potential donor, that I thought had recovered, is having certain setbacks?—”

“Donor?” Darius asks, scowling at me. I know that look. I’m about to get a lecture on how he’s too old to protect like that.

I frown. “It wasn’t a for sure thing.”

“But—”

“Let’s let Dr. Lawrence finish,” Triston interrupts. Darius nods, quieting right down. I give my brother a quick sideways glance. I might not be the only one who’s been missing a strong man in our lives.

Dr. Lawrence nods to Triston. “It’s a distinct possibility that we’ll have a liver for Darius in the next few days.”

I blink my eyes, tears misting them. Because this time, there is no worry of the money, just the hope of a long life with my brother.

My hand raises to my mouth as Triston's fingers slide into my other hand. He gives my hand a comforting squeeze. "How possible?"

Dr. Lawrence grimaces. "Seventy to eighty percent."

Emotion clogs my throat as I look at Triston. This might be the best day ever. Dr. Lawrence keeps talking, Triston asks several questions, Darius asks a few. But all I can do is sit and breathe.

Because I finally got here...

To the place where my life is getting better.

And I know that letting Triston into my heart has made it all possible.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Triston

When we get back to the house, I do something I haven't done in actual years. I take the rest of the day off.

I send out a blanket email that I'm not available. Then, after we eat a big lunch—even Darius has found his appetite—we head out to the pool.

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I leave my phone in the house. I don't want to hear from my brothers or the office, or anyone else for that matter.

I just want a quiet moment with Darius and Honeyeh. We stacked a lot of good into this day and I'm going to relax and enjoy it for once in my life.

Honeyeh explains the surgery and recovery for Darius if he does have a donor. It means a lot of work in our near future, which makes me even more determined to enjoy this day.

We relax. Eat. Swim. I can't remember the last time I experienced this kind of simple joy. My insides are uncoiling, relaxing for the first time in years, I feel at peace.

As the sun sets, we go inside, have dinner and then we all start upstairs. I pick my phone up from the counter, noting that I have seventeen missed calls and a dozen voicemails.

Tomorrow is soon enough. I pocket the phone and follow Honeyeh and Darius up the stairs.

I'm a half flight behind them when Darius turns back to Honeyeh. "Want to see the game I'm learning, Need for Speed?"

"What's that about?"

"It's a racecar simulator. I'm learning to drive."

Honeyeh snorts. “You can’t learn to drive with a video game.”

I laugh. “Did you know that a man became a racecar driver after mastering driving with a video game?”

“Do not encourage him,” Honeyeh fires back.

“Fine,” Darius scoffs. “But when I’m better, can I learn to drive for real?”

Honeyeh looks back at me, her eyes wide. My brows go up. “Honeyeh, do you drive?”

She shakes her head. “We’ve never had a car...”

“I guess I’ll be teaching you both.”

Darius gives a whoop, but Honeyeh’s back down the stairs, her arms threading around my neck, her mouth pressing to mine.

I already know she’s going to worry that it’s another thing I’m giving her, but I don’t see it like that. It’s my job to provide. It’s a role I’ve embraced my whole life. Only this time what I get in return is comfort, warmth, love, and Honeyeh in my bed.

She’s still in a bikini, a little pair of shorts hanging onto her hips and I run my hands over her back even as Darius snorts and then disappears into his room.

I chuckle against Honeyeh’s lips even as I hook her leg around my waist. She’s on the step above me which gives me even better access, my cock pressing to the softness between her legs.

“Shower or fuck first?” I rumble. “Or both at the same time.”

“How about a little business before that,” a voice says from the bottom of the stairs. I freeze, my hands going rigid on Honeyeh’s body, because I recognize that deep Russian voice anywhere. Dimitri Ivanov.

Slowly, I let Honeyeh go, turning on the step to find Dimitri at the bottom of the stairs, pistol pointed at my chest.

Inside the pocket of my shorts, my phone buzzes.

Fuck. “Business? Now?” I take a step toward him, down one step and he cocks back the hammer of his gun so that I freeze again. “Sure. In my office?”

But his eyes are sliding back over my shoulder. “Printsessa, you’re even more beautiful than I remember from our first meeting.”

My lip curls. “Honeyeh is not part of this conversation.”

“Wrong,” he snarls back. “Consider this my thank you for sending your brother to threaten my family.”

“No one held a gun on your family. They didn’t even know Killian was there.”

“I knew.”

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I hear Honeyeh gasp behind me, and I realize my mistake. She has no idea what kind of men we are or the lengths I'd go, have gone, to keep her safe.

I reach back for her, but she doesn't take my hand. If I live through this, what will be waiting for me? Will Honeyeh still want me?

I'll worry about that after. Right now, I need to get Honeyeh to safety and then kill this fucking prick who's been a thorn in my side for too long.

"You went after my girl first."

"Wrong. I'd have to know she was your girl in order for that to be true."

"Please," Honeyeh cries from behind me. "I'm so sorry that I started all of this. I had no idea that?—"

"It's not your fault, sweetheart. You didn't know." I reach back for her again but that's when she steps next to me, trying to slide in front of me.

My hand shoots out to stop her, holding her back as I try to push her behind me again.

The stairs make it almost impossible. I'd have to pick her up, which would mean turning my back on Dimitri. And Honeyeh resists my push. She's trying to push to the front, to cover my body with hers.

Which is completely ridiculous. "Triston," she whispers. "Promise me you'll take care of Darius."

I let out a rumble. “You will take care of Darius. Dimitri and I are going to work this out like men, away from women and children.”

But Dimitri steps closer. “Not this time. If you want my businesses, wish to threaten my family, we’re including yours. Call your brother, Honeyeh. Let’s bring him down here too.”

Honeyeh pulls her shoulders straighter, her fingers lacing through mine. And then she steps around my hand, moving down to the next step and placing herself between me and Dimitri. “I never thanked you, Mr. Ivanov,” she whispers.

“Thanked me?”

“Leaving with Triston the other night has saved both my and my brother’s lives.”

“You’re welcome. But understand, that the time for grace is over.”

“Please,” she starts, holding up her hands. “I’m sure?—”

I’ve had enough of this. I reach down and pluck her in my arms. Honeyeh will not be my human shield. It’s not that I didn’t know she would do it, it’s one of the many things I love about her, the way she gives herself. But this isn’t happening.

“Stop,” Dimitri snarls and then raises the pistol, shooting up, the bullet hitting the ceiling above.

Honeyeh screams, but I toss her to the side, vaulting down the stairs in a single leap, and tossing myself at Dimitri, my body slamming into his, a fraction of a second before he can aim his pistol again.

We both go careening toward the floor, my body landing hard on top of his. I hear the

air rush from his lungs, the gun knocking from his hand and sliding across the floor.

But I don't have time to get it as Dimitri recovers, landing his fist with punishing force into my side.

Fucking Russians. Scrappy as hell.

But even as I fold from the blow, I manage to jam my fingers into his throat. He starts gagging as I land another blow in his stomach. "I know you're lying. Brittany was a fucking plant, and you knew exactly what you were doing when you had her bring Honeyeh to you."

His eyes widen and I know I've landed on the truth. I get my knee into his stomach even as I hear the gun cock again.

Both Dimitri and I turn to see Honeyeh holding his pistol. "Brittany was a plant? What does that mean?"

I'm up and backing away from Dimitri, keeping him in my sights as I move toward Honeyeh. When I reach her, I gently take the gun from her hand. "Dimitri paid her to spy. At first the wedding and then the benefit. He knew exactly who you were when Brittany convinced you to come sell yourself at his brothel. And he was figuring out how to use you to get to me."

He slowly pushes off the floor. "Triston."

"So we're going to discuss the sale again, and we're going to dispense the bullshit of how I brought his family into this first. Or how giving you to me the other night was an act of grace. It was a tactic, nothing more."

"Killian stalked my fucking family."

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The nanny is his family? Noted. “You shot up his place with his fiancée in the bathroom. You don’t make a move like that and not expect it to come back at you.”

“Triston?” Honeyeh says behind me, her voice shaking.

“Go upstairs, sweetheart. I’ll be up soon.”

Dimitri holds up both his hands. “We’ve lost a certain measure of trust. I understand that.”

“I’m glad you understand.” Honeyeh is frozen behind me. “Go Honeyeh. Now.”

“Not yet,” another man says behind me. What the fuck is he doing here?

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Honeyeh

I spin at the voice, Triston’s brother Win is just behind me. I gasp, taking a step back so that my back presses to Triston’s.

His free hand comes to my hip.

Win’s eyes take in every detail, his gaze stopping on the ring on my finger. His lips press together, before he looks over Triston’s shoulder to Dimitri. “He set Honeyeh up to get to you?”

“That’s right, big brother.” Triston says, his fingers tightening on my hip. “How long have you been listening?”

“Long enough to see your woman put herself between you and a loaded gun.”

“And you didn’t help me sooner?”

“You’ve got it under control,” Win crosses his arms. “As usual.”

Triston gives a single jerk of his chin. “Dimitri and I were just discussing closing the deal.”

“I’ll sell you the casinos. But I’m not leaving Vegas.”

“I’m the one holding the gun,” Triston bites back.

“I know Mason is the one who wants me gone. Complete dominance, that’s his game. Which means, at some point, he’ll come for you too.”

Mason? I feel Triston stiffen. Does he believe these words? “What are you proposing?”

“I sell you the casinos for a song, and you...” he points back at Triston, “create a connection with my family like you have with the Kincaids.”

I look at Win in confusion. What does he mean? But Win doesn’t look back at me, his eyes going wide. “It’s a good idea,” Win answers, “the British have always used marriage to make our ties stronger.”

I gasp as I understand. Dimitri is proposing that Triston marry someone from his family?

Tears mist my eyes as I look down at the ring on my finger. This is the moment that Triston has been fighting for, for the sake of his family.

“Shut up, Win, and call Mason. Now.”

I blink in surprise. Triston doesn't sound happy or victorious. The only emotion coloring his words are anger. “Triston,” I whisper, a tear falling down my cheek as my voice breaks. I somehow knew he was never going to be mine.

He squeezes my hip. “Upstairs, Honeyeh. Check on Darius.”

“I'm fine,” Darius calls from the top of the stairs. “Was that a gunshot?”

My brother's voice pulls me from my pity party. “Get in your room!” I yell and then I push off Triston, passing Win to use the other stairs. I'm not going by Dimitri.

But I've only made it halfway up the stairs, before more tears start to fall. Triston told me he'd leave my life better than he found it. I know he will.

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Darius will have his surgery. I feel it in my bones.

But I'm not sure I'm getting my happily ever after. No matter how much I wanted Triston to be mine, he'd be a fool not to take the deal. It's what he's always wanted and what do I have to give him?

Nothing but my heart and a whole parcel of problems.

I reach the top of the stairs and Darius is standing in the hall, his hands stuffed into the pockets of his shorts, his shoulders hunched.

I don't say a word as I cross to him, wrapping my arms around his thin body. He hugs me back. "Don't worry, Honeyeh. It's going to be fine."

I shake my head. "Come on." I pull him toward Triston's room. My fiancé is downstairs planning his wedding to another woman. I'm not sure it's ever going to be fine again.

For the next two hours, the house is silent. I know Win, Dimitri, and Triston are all still here. I'd hear the front door if one of them left.

My brother falls asleep at some point, and I marvel at his ability to sleep anytime, anywhere.

I try to tell myself that as long as he's all right, I've won. And I do feel that way. But my heart is about to break, I just know it. I'm a barista. A maid.

I cover my mouth with my hand, determined not to cry, not to make noise.

I slide down onto the floor, my back against the side of the bed. I wrap my arms around myself, the tension so tight inside my chest, I think I might snap.

That's when the door opens and Triston appears.

I shoot to my feet, the blood rushing from my head, as I swallow down a lump of fear.

Triston is by my side in a second, his arms around me, "Sweetheart."

The sob I've been holding in threatens to break from my lips, as I wrap my arms around his neck. I know I'm only making it worse, holding onto him for comfort, but I just need to borrow a bit of strength before I learn the truth.

I press my cheek to his bare chest and close my eyes. I can't even bring myself to ask the question.

"Just a warning, the house is about to get very busy."

"What's that mean?" I tip my head back, confusion trumping every other emotion.

"Ryker, Rush, and Win are all staying. Killian and Gris will disappear with their brides to keep our family diversified and their women safe."

My brow furrows. "Safe?"

"We made a deal with Dimitri, but who knows if he can be trusted. And Mason is furious..."

My knees grow weak and my throat burns. “You made the deal.”

He’s looking down at me, but I can’t see his expression through the mist clouding my eyes.

“I think Win’s a fool, but yes. We made it.”

I don’t understand what he means as I step back, my stomach churning with nausea.

I reach for my finger, pulling the ring from my finger.

“What are you doing?” he asks, his hands covering mine.

My eyes clear as I snap my chin up to look at him. “Giving you the ring back.”

“Why?”

“Because...” I shake my head. “You made the deal. You’re marrying?—”

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He squeezes my hand before he opens my fingers back up, takes the ring, and puts it back on my finger. "I'm marrying you, Honeyeh."

I stare, my mouth agape. "But..."

"You are the exception to my rule. You really think I'd marry some random woman after I waited so long to find you?" he snorts. "I'm only marrying you because you're exceptional. The deal could fuck off, for all I care. This was my brother's choice."

"The deal could fuck off...I thought it was what you wanted. What you've been working for."

"I want to work. To be productive. To work with and for my family. But I'm doing so with joy from here on out, and honestly, not at the expense of my happiness. And not yours either."

Bubbles of hope start to rise in my chest. "But the casinos. You've spent years..."

He shrugs. "Turns out, I want you far more than I want them." And then he pulls me into his arms and kisses me, lifting me off the floor.

I'm crying again, but these are happy tears. A million questions fill my thoughts, but I hold them off, the feel of his mouth like a balm to my bruised heart.

"Oh God, are you two kissing again?" Darius snorts, pushing up from the bed.

"My brothers are staying," Triston says as he lifts his head. "Rush, in particular, loves

racing games. You should ask him to teach you some moves.”

Darius pumps his fist in the air as he moves from the bed. “Is it cool to go to my room now?”

“It’s cool,” Triston says with a nod. “Though, tomorrow, a new security system is getting installed, one we’ll all have to learn.”

Darius grins. “Does that mean we’re staying for a while?”

“You’re staying,” Triston answers. I hug him tightly, my forehead falling to his chest. Because here is exactly where I want to be.

Win pokes his head into the room. “I’ll keep an eye out and let Rush and Ryker in the house when they arrive.”

“Thanks,” Triston replies but I lift my head, my brow furrowing.

“Wait.”

Win stops, turning toward me as I look from him to Triston. “If we’re still getting married...who is marrying...” I don’t even know who the woman is to Dimitri.

“That is a conversation for another day,” Triston says, pulling me toward the bathroom.

“Welcome to the family,” Win calls as he leaves the doorway.

“Why does your brother like me now? He didn’t before.”

Triston pulls me into the bathroom. “I think he might have thought you were in

league with Dimitri or that you were using me to help your brother.”

I scoff, but I hardly have time to be offended as he spins me around, his hands on my stomach as he kisses the back of my neck. Our bodies come together, his stiff cock pressing in between my butt cheeks as he sucks at my skin. “I would never,” I gasp as his teeth graze the muscle that connects my shoulder to my neck.

His hand slides down in my shorts, brushing over my already-slick folds. “I know that, my love. He pulls his hand out, just to unbutton the shorts, shucking them off my body right along with the bathing suit bottoms.

With a few quick tugs, he’s got my top off as well. I turn to see myself naked, Triston’s large hands roving over my body before he settles one of his hands between my legs. It’s so hot to watch him touch me and even more amazing when the pad of his thumb presses on my clit.

I arch into the touch, my head falling back as my eyes close. He rubs me just where I need it, but only for a moment and then his hand disappears again. I cry out, wanting his touch.

“Honeyeh.”

My eyes snap open and I meet his gaze in the mirror, it’s filled with the sort of intensity that steals my breath.

Wrapping an arm around my waist, he moves me toward the mirror. When he sets me down, I instinctively reach for the frame, catching myself as he tips me forward. His shorts only make it to his thighs, before he lifts one of my legs, the head of his cock parting my folds before it slides inside me.

I see it all in the mirror and I gasp to watch the way he disappears inside me. “You

are never to put yourself in front of me like that again, do you understand me?” He growls as he wraps a fist in my hair, pulling my head back to expose more of my neck in the mirror.

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“What’s my job, then,” I moan as he bottoms out inside me.

He holds us like this, me filled with his cock. “This is your job,” and then he swirls his hips. “Making this place a home, that’s your job. Taking care of Darius. Going to school, that can be your job too, if that’s what you want.”

He pulls out again, only to slam into me and I cry out it feels so good. “But the dangers this life brings, Honeyeh, those are mine alone.”

His other hand circles my waist, keeping my body in his control as he pulls out and thrusts back in.

“But I love you,” I cry. His answers by folding over my back, kissing just below my ear.

“I know, baby. And that matters. But I never want to see you at the business end of a pistol again. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

I’m rewarded when his hand leaves my hair, and slides down my front, tweaking one of my nipples before he runs his hand over my belly and then settles it between my lips again.

When he tweaks my clit, I scream, the feeling so strong, I nearly cum.

And then he sets a punishing pace, setting my body on fire, until I’m sure I’m going

to shatter into a thousand pieces.

We climb higher and higher, the sight of Triston's rippling muscles in the mirror only making me that much hotter as I clamp down on him, crying out his name.

And I then I break.

He pumps into me a couple more times and he cums too, letting out a roar that shakes the house as he does.

I collapse against the mirror, instantly fogging the glass.

He presses to my back, kissing a trail along my shoulder. "Jesus, Honeyeh."

"I know," I close my eyes and enjoy the cool feeling of the mirror and his warmth at my back.

It takes a minute for both of us to recover, but Triston finally pulls me into his arms and carries me into the shower.

I'm going to sleep like a baby tonight.

"Is Dimitri a problem that's been solved?" I ask.

He turns on the water. "Yes. We won't have that kind of disruption again, I promise."

I wave my hand. Honestly, I'll take Triston's problems over the ones I was facing before. "I trust you."

He kisses my forehead. "I love you, sweetheart."

“I love you too.” I tip my head back and he leans down to kiss my lips as the warm water hits my skin.

I am definitely right where I am meant to be.

EPILOGUE

Triston

The sound of my phone ringing wakes me from a dead sleep. It's been two days since Dimitri broke into my house.

I will mete out his retribution, I'm just waiting until he gets comfortable, and I've retained ownership of his casinos.

I press the answer button. “Hello?”

“Triston?” An unfamiliar male voice asks.

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I sit up, coming alert in a second. “Yes?”

“This is Dr. Lawrence, Darius’s doctor.”

Next to me, Honeyeh has yet to stir. I place my hand on her hip, preparing to wake her. “What time is it?”

“Three in the morning,” Dr. Lawrence clears his throat. “Sorry to wake you but I tried to call Honeyeh’s phone, and she didn’t pick up. I’d like to have Darius here no later than six.”

I shake Honeyeh. It’s the moment we’ve been waiting for. “You have a donor.”

“We have a donor,” he says, his smile evident through the phone.

“No problem, we’ll make it happen.”

“Good,” the doctor says, rattling off a few more details as Honeyeh rolls over, blinking up at me with sleepy eyes.

I run an absent hand up her arm to cup her cheek. “What is it?” she asks, slowly blinking.

“It’s happened. Darius is having surgery today.”

She bolts up, her hair cascading around her torso. She doesn’t know it, but I’ve spent the last two days preparing for this.

I've already hired round-the-clock nurses and have ordered a hospital bed for the early days of recovery.

I know that Honeyeh will do a great deal of Darius's care herself, but I want her to have any help she needs.

She tosses the covers back and jumps from the bed, swaying on her feet. I've already learned that Honeyeh is slow to wake up, so I've got my hand at the ready, steadying her hip.

"Thank you, Dr. Lawrence, we'll see you in a few hours." I hang up the phone as Honeyeh stares down at me.

"What should we do?" she asks.

I give her a little tug. "You should lay back down. Give yourself a minute to wake up."

She does as I suggest, sliding back into the bed. My body covers hers as I gather her close.

"This is amazing," she whispers into my neck. "And terrifying."

"We'll take it one step at a time. Together."

Her legs circle my waist, her arms my neck, placing me exactly where I want to be, wrapped in Honeyeh.

I lean down, kissing her with a slow sensual passion that has both of us panting.

God, I fucking love her, and I can't get enough.

That's when a knock sounds on the door.

I grimace, lifting my head. Who is knocking on my door at three in the morning.
“What?” I bark.

“I heard you on the phone,” Ryker calls back. “Did you get the same call I did?”

I sigh, because having my brothers here has made this house feel small.

We haven't lived together for a very long time, and I've forgotten what it's like to have them in my business like this.

Whenever Honeyeh leaves the room, they instantly start teasing me about how loud the sex is with me and her. I get it. We're shaking the rafters.

But it's my fucking house and Honeyeh is the love of my life. I'm not going to stop making her scream.

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“My call was from Dr. Lawrence,” I kiss Honeyeh again, then climb from the bed, pulling the covers up around her as I slip on a pair of athletic pants. Then I open the door a crack, just enough so that my brother can see me and nothing else. “Who called you?”

“The night manager at Dimitri’s casino, The Star.”

“Why is he calling you?” I open the door a bit wider.

Ryker winces. “There’s been an incident with one of Dimitri’s sisters, and apparently, the guy didn’t want to call Dimitri.”

I grimace. “Which sister?”

“The other one.”

I nod. We’ve kept it kind of hush, but Ryker has agreed to marry Dimitri’s eldest sister in an arranged marriage. In exchange, he’s taking over leadership of the new casinos. It’s a promotion for him, and a chance for me to focus on my new family.

“Need help?”

He shakes his head. “No. I’ve got it. I’m heading over there now, tell Darius I say good luck.”

“Will do.”

“Call me when he’s out of surgery?” Ryker says as he takes a step back.

I nod. “Gentle with the sister, whatever’s happened. The deal is not closed.”

He salutes me and then turns, heading down the stairs.

I turn back to Honeyeh. We don’t have to wake Darius for a bit so I’m going to take advantage this little reprieve and shake the rafters. My girl sees me coming and peels the covers back, her body on full display as I stalk toward her.

Oh man!!!Ryker is getting ready to rock the next Smith book! Check out his story,King of Dishonor. But first...Dimitri has been knocking at the door of the muse. Want to know what happens with him and his nanny?King of Maliceis next in the “Kings of Las Vegas” series!

Bonus Epilogue:

Honeyeh

One year later...

I smoothmy shorts over my hips, my hand settling on my small baby bump. Hopefully no one notices when I put on my wedding dress this weekend.

It’s finally happening. We’re getting married.

Triston and I have been meaning to make this happen.

But there was Darius’s recovery, and then there was school for me, the sale for him, and all the craziness of multiple weddings in his family.

Plus, dating was so fast, I think we were both content to take engagement a little slower.

But when we found out I was pregnant last month...

Triston planned this wedding in a week. I say Triston because I mostly nodded as he fired off details.

Not that I didn't get a say. My first request was to have the wedding at home. The ballroom is perfect for the event, and I can't imagine getting married anywhere else.

I smile as I set the ladder under one of the chandeliers. They need dusting again. The staff hasn't gotten to it, and I'm antsy anyway.

Pulling out the duster, I start up the ladder.

"What are you doing?" Mrs. Raith gasps from the doorway. "You know what Mr. Smith will do if he?—"

"I'm way ahead of you," Triston rumbles from the other end of the room.

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I wrinkle my nose, making a face at him. “Don’t be ridiculous. They need to be cleaned.”

“Someone else—” He’s striding across the room, looking so handsome, he steals my breath. Still.

“Everyone is busy,” I huff from the top of the ladder. We’ve been together long enough that I don’t let his gorgeousness distract me from being right. “I’ve got the day and energy to spare.”

He stops at the bottom of the ladder. “Come down, sweetheart.” I glare and he lets out a sigh. “Please.”

I only hesitate for another moment before I start down the rungs. While I’m more than capable of being on a ladder, being pregnant has made both of us more cautious.

When I get halfway down, his hands grab my waist, lifting me off the ladder and into the cradle of his body, where his large hand settles over my stomach. “You shouldn’t be on a ladder.”

“The crystals need to be cleaned.”

“I knew you’d say that which is why I hired a service to take care of it tomorrow.” His arm wraps tighter around me as he nuzzles my ear.

Mrs. Raith has discreetly disappeared, so I wrap my arms around his neck. “I’m excited and trying to keep myself busy.”

“Come help me supervise the placement of the archway. You can help the florist choose the flowers to string up the sides.”

I remember Brittany’s comment about wanting to marry a guy who could buy expensive flowers, but I still don’t care about them.

He bends down to kiss me then, and I sink into him. I still haven’t gotten enough of him, the passion between us, bright as ever.

“We could do that,” I whisper against his lips. “Or...”

He chuckles. “The florist will do an excellent job without our help.” And then he’s lifting me, sprinting toward the stairs with me in his arms. In two days, I’ll officially be Mrs. Smith.

Triston is my dream come true.