







# Little Nightmare

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Adult, Crime And Mafia

**Description:** Not all monsters hide under the bed. Some guard your heart while plotting your ruin.

From #1 bestselling author Rachel Van Dyken comes a gripping standalone mafia romance set in the electrifying world of the Eagle Elite series.

Welcome to your final dream.

Don't worry. I'll keep you safe.

I promise. Just close your eyes.

Sleep.

Grief has five stages, they say. But in the mafia, there's only one: survival.

The day I buried my boyfriend, the Families replaced him with the man who rejected me four years ago—Ace “Matchstick” De Lange. Cold. Calculated. Deadly. He has the bedside manner of a serial killer and the looks of a fallen angel. And now, he's my shadow, ensuring I don't end up in the grave beside the man who died for me.

I despise that I'm the one left behind. I loathe how Ace provokes me, pulling me from the abyss of my sorrow. But most of all, I hate that the only piece I have left of my dead boyfriend is something others would kill to possess.

When Ace uncovers my secret, there's only one solution: marriage to the devil himself to protect the legacy of the one who had no choice.

I vow never to love him. He promises he'll never love me.

He's a means to an end—the only one who can stand against my father and live to tell the tale.

He claims his life is mine, but I don't want it.

I tell him I'll never be his.

Ace's response? A chilling, “We'll see.”

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:13 am*

## PROLOGUE

### First Blood

“Do you have the target?”

The voice on the other end of the phone was too familiar. I’d come to hate it—almost as much as I hated myself. I didn’t believe in the cause anymore; there were too many people who would bear the brutal force of the effect.

Throat dry, I tried to keep my voice even, unfeeling, though my heart slammed uncomfortably hard against my ribs. I told myself it wasn’t regret. I lied to myself and even toyed with the idea that it was a pulled muscle or out of place rib—but I knew the reason, even my body was physically repelled by my actions.

They were wrong to do it this way. “Target secure.”

I hesitated. Let my thumb brush the blade—once. Twice. It was cold.

It wouldn’t stay that way for long. She had no idea what I was capable of, what I was supposed to do.

“Make it quick.” The voice already sounded irritated with me.

I rolled my shoulders, trying to loosen the weight in my chest. “It’s my blood to spill. Mine to take.”

Not his.

“Then stop talking and do it already, you’ve been given enough chances, plus, it will earn her trust, something you need if you’re going to pull it off.”

The knife felt heavier now. Too real. I knew it would.

“The killing’s already been done,” I murmured staring at her again, allowing myself to take in her innocent smile, knowing that sharp words always followed past those lips. “Finished,” I whispered, to myself, to him. “In more ways than one.”

A laugh cracked from my throat—cold, bitter, joyless. What the hell had I become? What had I let them do to me?

Why...did it have to be her?

He joined in briefly, his laughter sinister, mine in disbelief, his voice rasped through the speaker with finality. “Make it as pretty and dramatic as her, asshole.”

I walked toward her at the same time the sacrificial lamb came up behind her. The price of his life was a million. Not much by my standards—but it would take care of his wife and two kids.

He’d been useless his entire life and now by giving it, he believed he’d be saving theirs.

He had no clue, that his son probably preferred a dad to a dollar bill, that his wife would probably blame herself and have trouble going to the grocery store or getting in the car without having a panic attack.

All because of his life.

All because he thought money meant more than love.

Money was a liar.

It said it could save.

It said it could change lives.

It said it would make everything better.

Money was a drug, one that always somehow required more of whoever possessed it.

A bead of sweat ran down his neck before he lunged for her. The precision of my knife landed directly in his carotid artery. He'd bleed out in seconds. He collapsed.

I wondered if in those seconds he wished he had said no.

I wondered if he saw his wife's face.

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His two sons.

I wondered a lot as I approached and held out my hand. “No better way to introduce myself, I guess.” I grinned at her stunned expression. “I’m your new bodyguard.”

1

RAVEN

The one where the house is filled with the ghosts and nothing but regret, the one where it burns, toils, and aches, the one where pain smiles and thrives.

I wiped my mouth and braced the sink with my shaking hands. The taste of bile still lingered in the back of my throat. I had no choice in this. Then again, neither had he.

The haunting sound of the church organ crawled through the cracks of the small bathroom walls. If grief had a scent, I was surrounded by it. We’d had peace for so long and now it just felt like peace was the last thing I wanted. War sounded more pleasant, more distracting. I needed the darkness, the kind that made the pain feel earned. The kind that said there was a price and that I’d more than paid it over and over again. But no matter how many times I replayed the memory in my head...

It didn’t make sense. Two plus two did not equal four.

“Raven!” he’d yelled. “Get back now!”

I’d just turned when he shoved himself in front of me then collapsed against my body

like a promise breaking. The back of my head hit the cement, and when I'd looked up, all I saw was the perfect blue sky.

It was a sunny day.

A day made for greatness.

He'd held my hand.

He'd promised ice cream.

Minutes later, I was covered in blood.

"Raven?" Tempest's voice—my twin sister and other half—muffled through the bathroom door. "It's time."

Time.

Something I'd never have enough of.

Something I'd never get back.

Just like him. How could he be so stupid? What was my life worth without him in it? My palm hovered over my still flat stomach. "Be right there, Tempest. Give me a minute." Or an hour. Days. Maybe just give me a grave deep enough to jump into, as long as it's next to his.

I stared at the running water, wishing I could disappear beneath it. Let it drown me, swallow me whole, let it take what I have left. Eventually I turned it off, watching the last few drips hit the porcelain sink. With shaking hands, I tucked my hair behind my ears, and with a calm I didn't feel at all, I calmly, at least from the outside, opened the



bathroom door and walked out, head held high the way I was taught.

Could he see me as I walked into that sanctuary? Was it stupid to even think he could? I hoped he watched, though. I hoped, which was so dangerous in and of itself. I was bred not to think of that word during dark times because it never made the burden lighter.

And yet I gave into temptation.

In that moment, I uttered it out loud again and again while staring into the mirror.

And then I believed it.

Desired it.

I hoped he smiled with tears in his eyes when I kept my chin lifted as I took the four stairs up to the pulpit, like he was proud of me for being brave.

I hoped he knew I didn't break in that moment when every part of me wanted to, craved to actually.

Seven stairs led to the pulpit, each felt like I was climbing a mountain, and each step represented the finality of the moment. Each felt like the briefest of memories.

I'll never forget him. Ever. Things may have started slow between us, almost awkward. He became my friend before everything else. Before it was more.

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The bosses of the five families sat like statues in the front row. My cousins, my friends, my family, each of them too young to see so much death.

Then again, so was I.

I was in college.

But the mafia doesn't care how old you are, how young, how good, how evil. It just...is.

It runs through my veins like the very blood that I know will always be spilled in the name of power, greed, control.

I cleared my throat. "We're here to mourn the tragic passing of my—" I caught myself. "My faithful bodyguard, Louis Santorini."

The man who promised he'd always save me, in more ways than one.

The man who loved me.

The man who was never supposed to touch me.

The church doors creaked open.

Nobody turned.

But I saw him. I locked eyes with him.

I saw him clear as day.

Ace De Lange.

He didn't flinch, didn't as much as look away.

I hated the way my pulse picked up, it was nothing more than rage at his carelessness, because how dare he show up and just stare at me at my worst.

The fact that he was even standing there was an insult to Louis' memory.

He could never be replaced. Never will be.

Focus on the man who truly cared for you—loved you.

The one who kept you alive when you needed it most.

Not the one who walked in like he actually belonged.

Not the one whose family was more likely than anyones to have killed Louis.

Ace had sworn to protect the Alfero family at all costs—mainly my dad.

Well, it cost something, didn't it? It always did.

A long time ago he promised to stay by my side after I was kidnapped only to leave the minute the De Langes needed him in Italy.

And now he was back as if the trauma of him leaving didn't matter. He'd been a pivotal part of my teen years, we'd welcomed him and his trauma with open arms. And then he was just gone as if the blood, sweat, and tears meant absolutely nothing.

As if I had meant nothing.

I hoped he liked the destruction he left in his wake. Louis helped put the pieces Ace trampled all over back together again. It was my fault for having a one sided crush—never again. Maybe he'd still be alive if he wasn't so focused on me that day.

In the end, I didn't blame myself.

No, in the end...

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I blamed my new unfeeling emotionally incapable bodyguard, the only person I'd gladly shove in front of a moving train just to see him react, or at the very least flinch. Ace "the matchstick" De Lange.

2

ACE

The one where dreams go and Lie.

The doors creaked open. I didn't give a shit. Maybe I should, but there were more important things going on than a death.

Everyone looked like they were mourning—but I knew the truth, someone in one of those seats was behind this and I needed to find out who.

Most murderers attended the funerals of their victims.

The average person walked by a serial killer at least thirty-six times in their short life—the number grew if you were in the mafia—the number grew even more exponentially when you were part of the five families—and even more so, when you were a De Lange.

I checked my watch.

I was late on purpose, by ten minutes. I wanted to see the last person walk in. Anxious people tend to pay attention to the other guests more than normal, but

nobody turned around when the doors closed loudly behind me.

Interesting.

I looked up at Raven and held my emotions in check. Let her see me from her little pedestal.

Let them see me from the pews.

Let the memory of what my family did crawl up and down their spines like a ghost they can't get rid of. I was used to it. I'd shut down my emotions to the constant stares a long time ago. It helped that I'd been sent to Italy post college. I'd needed to get away from her, from the stares, from the families. Ivan had been next in line, and according to the whispers, because of who my father was—I would have been next. Then again, I never knew him before the barrel of the Abandonato gun was facing him and my uncle. By then it was too late. He'd already sold my mom to a drug dealer for more drugs and had starved me so much as a child that the first time I was given food I didn't have to fight for, I hid some in my pillowcase.

It made sense in my mind. If I had to run, I'd have food and I could shove clothes in there plus the only blade I'd ever been given by Dante Alfero himself when he took me in and told me he'd make a man out of me.

The only problem was he had twin daughters who drove any sane breathing man to drink—heavily. I'd kept a wide berth not that it mattered. They were everywhere—like the very air I breathed. Tempest was at least semi-quiet where Raven felt the need to talk even in her sleep.

I let out a rough exhale.

I'd only said yes because it was Dante asking.

Any other person I would have laughed in their face. Coming back was already the plan once Ivan, my cousin, continued to rebuild the arm of the De Lange family.

And it was my job to be by his side even if it meant I was his silent weapon.

I did better without words anyway. I used my knife and only used my gun when I had to. While most of the family appreciated what Ivan was trying to do—there were still some people pissed off about being under the Campisi rule. It was normal to have checks and balances, but since the De Lange family was out of the fold for so long, some had gotten bitter and resentful.

And my new job?

Protect the remaining heirs at all cost—Raven Alfero included.

Dante Alfero, boss of the Alfero family, with the twin daughters who were a pain in everyone's ass—Raven was known as the black widow of the Alfero family, she was unpredictable and when her bodyguard was originally hired everyone took bets to see how long he'd last.

It was a joke at the time.

Nobody expected him to get too close to her—he knew the rules and so did she.

Nobody expected him to die that swiftly, that quickly. He was better than that. None of it made sense.

The fucking bastard had to have known something we didn't.

It wasn't a mistake, though. I'd take the information I knew to my grave.

What he did, he did on purpose and it still made no sense. The sort of gunshot, the intel behind their location, and the lack of whispers surrounding the situation. What an asshole.



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I would never forgive him for it—he was too trusting of what he was promised and ended up dying in vain because of it. I could forgive stupidity—I could not however, forgive a death when torture was more deserved.

I clutched my hands at my sides and stared straight ahead.

There are rows and rows of enemies in pressed black suits. Everyone looks so refined, so tame. I know the truth though, blood drips from each and every one of their hands and yet they have the audacity to point those same fingers at my family—at me, as if we're the problem when we've proven in the last two years that they're the ones who need to open their eyes.

The thing about making enemies? The ones who stay alive never forget, they pass down the bitterness, the rage, the inhumanity to their children and their children's children until we're unable to be baptized in anything but blood colored glasses.

Raven stood behind the pulpit like a fallen angel playing at sainthood. Her black dress hugged her curves, her face was like stone, her jaw clenched, her eyes locked on mine briefly before she addressed the room again.

No tears. I wasn't surprised.

She held everything in like a poorly timed grenade.

Raven was beautiful in such a way that you weren't even aware you were getting caught in her web until it was too late, until you had the scars and trauma to prove it.

I saw nothing but hatred in her eyes, for me, for the world, and maybe a bit of vengeance.

Expected, as always, from someone who believed she lost everything when she had no idea what she actually gained from said loss. Emotions were useless, they kept you from seeing the bigger picture, the facts, the numbers.

Her voice cracked with each slow sentence she spoke. "...he was protective of the five families, some might say to a fault, he loved us with his whole heart and—" Her voice wavered just a bit.

He was supposed to just be her bodyguard, an asset to the five families.

What he took to his grave other than cowardice?

His betrayal.

What I'd take to mine?

The truth.

3

RAVEN

The one with the tough love.

I wasn't given an opportunity to hug anyone—not that I wanted it. I just wanted to go back to the house, lie in my childhood bed and hide under the covers and pretend it was all just a horrible nightmare.

When the service was over I held my head high and walked toward the back of the church.

Ace was waiting.

All I knew was that he was the replacement.

Of course my dad would give me the coldest and most calculating De Lange of them all. He came back years ago for college and immediately fell into line with my family all over again, protecting my dad, and now protecting me even though he was only twenty-seven to my twenty-one.

He'd risen in the ranks so fast that he'd become a made man before graduating, and I'd been an immature high school girl used to getting everything I wanted. And I'd always wanted him—I'd told him as much. Apparently he couldn't get over the fact that he practically grew up with me and still saw me as an annoying kid.

I couldn't even think about that day.

I should have remembered that Ace was the epitome of self-control and that I'd been a hot headed idiot thinking I could be the one to break it. I mean how many times had I tried to get him to crack as a child? I'm pretty sure I was the reason he had a nervous tick in his eye for a solid year, but how was I supposed to know the chicken would lay eggs in his bed! The plan was to scare him not have him jump into it and crunch them! I heard rumors that to this day chickens still made him tear up. One time, Ivan called him chicken killer and he pulled out his knife.

I shook the thought away and cringed as my brain strolled down memory lane. I was sad, focusing on anything but Louis was distracting from the severe pain. I'd gotten a bit drunk off the graduation wine my parents had served and approached him, started stripping thinking he'd be all in only to have him turn around and start muttering.

“What? Nervous?” I taunted. Was I slurring my words?

Nah.” He followed the denial with a heavy annoyed sigh and checked his watch.

“How long are you going to be embarrassing yourself like this? I’m hungry.”

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I flinched and reached for him only to have him jerk away. “That depends on you.”

“I’m celibate,” he’d deadpanned. Why did he sound so bored? “And I’m taken so whatever you plan on doing, it won’t work. Maybe you should return to your party and sober up. Might I suggest drinking water next time? Or some chocolate milk?” His green eyes didn’t flash. They were controlled, focused on me like nothing about me tempted him in any way. I may as well have been a houseplant he was inspecting. I shuddered at the memory, and fresh anger returned right after my physical response. He didn’t have to be so cruel about it.

I think that’s what started my hate. I was young and immature obviously drunk and I had a crush; he could have at least turned me down nicely rather than offering chocolate milk.

Something shifted in my brain that day.

He hadn’t as much as blinked, simply grabbed my clothes, handed them back to me, then went straight to my dad and tattled.

I shoved the memory away and stopped in front of him. I lifted my head. May as well get the torture over with. I was too sad to fight him. “Let’s go.”

Long black eyelashes blinked slowly over light hazel eyes. “After you.”

He didn’t touch me—he never touched people, but you felt him regardless, like the heat from his body couldn’t help but pulse from his fingertips even though he was inches from the small of your back.

An involuntary chill ran through my body as I pushed open the doors of the church and made my way to the waiting limo—one of at least ten parked out front the rest were in the back.

I stopped in front of it expecting him to open the door.

When nothing happened I turned around. He put on a pair of aviators and crooked his finger at me, then pointed. “I drove and they’ll expect you to be in a limo.”

"So?"

He didn’t answer, he simply walked to a waiting black Mercedes and hopped in on his side.

Did he open my door? No.

Did he ask if I was okay? Negative.

Did he offer at least a small smile or condolence? Nada.

I jerked open my own door, sat against the cool black leather and buckled my seatbelt, not that it mattered. My life wasn’t worth much—not without him here. I was living for someone else.

Something bigger than me.

The only thing I had left of him.

Unwanted tears filled my eyes; I was so damn tired of crying. Everyone thought I was just devastated over my bodyguards loss, my boyfriend, my everything.

They had no idea I had another secret.

Ace was already in the passenger seat, settled like this was just another boring day and we weren't just leaving a funeral. I don't know what I expected, maybe some sort of condolences, remorse? Something, anything.

Emotion.

I felt weak enough to need some sort of emotion in that moment, even just a long sigh from his general direction would have been mildly helpful.

I clenched my jaw to keep a sob from escaping as he pulled away from the curb. Silence swelled between us like a choking smoke, making it hard for me to take deep breaths.

"Say something," I finally blurted.

The sound of his blinker clicked three times before he finally whispered in a low voice, "Sorry for your loss."

That was it. Like a line from a grief pamphlet or something. What else should I have expected from a killer on my dad's payroll? Flowers?

A teddy bear?

A hug?

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I should be used to the coldness, but my dad had always been warm—my family was a lot of things, but we were family, loving, loyal, tight. It was one of the reasons I wanted to go home. I knew I'd be surrounded with love not chilled by Ace's silence.

Eyes stinging, I stared down at my folded hands. My skin was turning white from clutching them so tight in my lap. "That's it, then?"

Ace cleared his throat as the car rolled to a stop at the light. He swiped across his phone. "We're staying in the East Wing townhomes—two floor, corner master King. Best vantage point. Your morning classes start at 7:30, 9:15, and 11. I arranged for early drop-offs and private entry routes. You'll have the day to spend with family and then we'll need to go back to normal, you never know who's watching."

"Does it matter?" I snorted. "He's dead."

"And you're alive." Ace finally turned to me; his dark hair kissed the nape of his neck, curling at the top of his shoulders. "I intend to keep you that way. We have no idea why someone was after you of all people."

"Because I'm not important?"

"Did I say that?" He said calmly. "We're still looking into it, but the point is, until we know why you're a target. You're stuck with me and with that dorm. Ten death threats have been reported against the families in the past week. Your safety, regardless of how you feel at the moment, is my only focus."

I shrugged. "We get threats all the time."



“One was written in glitter pen; I still flagged it,” he felt the need to say. “You’ll have the day to mourn, and then we’re back at class. I think you’ll find the townhome on campus a lot less crowded than the dorms. Besides, it’s your senior year.”

I didn’t want him reminding me it was my senior year because I’d made plans for after.

Next week I had a doctor’s appointment that I’d be going to alone, and now I had to figure out a way to get Ace to wait outside or keep my secret—at least for now.

It had to have been the longest stoplight known to mankind. Ace reached across the console and opened up the glove compartment and pulled out a black contraption. “Taser, military grade, don’t get cute with it. It’s a weapon as you know. You’ll have a lot of eyes on you on campus and we have a strict no gun policy ever since your sister thought it would be funny to hunt down all of the geese.”

I shrugged and took the heavy taser into my hand. “We had a serious geese problem.” I pointed out. “And the dogs they set loose were exhausted from chasing them away.”

“It’s illegal to hunt within city limits.”

I snorted. “Are you really lecturing me on the legality of things? What’s your kill count at this point?”

“One more than my biological age, then again adding might be difficult for you.”

“So eighty-eight? Interesting.”

“Cute.” He nodded to the taser. “Put it away, use it if only necessary, point it at me and we’ll have even bigger problems than your inability to stop crying and sleeping with your own bodyguard.”

I flinched. “It wasn’t just sex, you asshole.”

"It wasn't just business either, was it?" He pulled into traffic again. "Put the taser away. I won't tell you twice."

"Sure, I'll just shove it in my panties."

"Shove it up your ass for all I care, just put it away and try to focus on the next few hours before we go back to campus. We all have jobs to do, don't make mine any more difficult than it already is."

Tears burned the back of my eyes. "Real nice bedside manner, Ace."

"I'm not your friend." He said it so quickly and with such finality that the last shred of dignity I had in my body simply disintegrated the minute he ended the sentence. It's not like I was expecting more but to have him say it out loud, to hear it did something to me.

I had my sister.

I had my cousins.

My parents adored me—I loved them right back.

But what do you do when you have a secret you can't share? What do you do when you're still mourning and trying to come up with a game plan while also trying to keep it all together?

My birthday was officially tomorrow.

We'd planned on celebrating.

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And I'd planned on telling him I was pregnant.

He would have been overjoyed—I think. I mean it wasn't part of the plan but I'd always wanted a family and while he'd never said the same, why else would he risk his job and actual life to be with me if that wasn't the direction we were headed in?

Now I'd be forced to paste a smile on my face tomorrow when everyone around me walked on eggshells and celebrated my life less than twenty four hours after mourning his death.

Great.

I didn't talk the rest of the way to the road that would eventually lead to our compound. We weren't far outside the city, but you'd think we were hours away. On thirty acres up on a hill surrounded by beautiful fences built beneath the ground along with enough cameras to gain the attention of NASA—the Alfero house was the stuff of legends.

Built completely out of concrete and steel, the only reason it felt like a home was because my mom was a genius at decorating and making us all feel at home. I think it was her gift, while my dad was both equally ruthless and sarcastic—mom was warm and peaceful—she was his anchor when things got stormy and he was the storm when anyone tried attacking.

They made it work.

I could only hope to have something like their love. I thought I did—would.

Now I had remnants of blood still stained on my soul and only one reminder of him inside my body.

Ace pulled the car up to the black iron rod gate. Cameras would digitally search his face, his car, the plates, and decide whether or not to let him in or bomb his ass.

He exhaled and tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. "You're clearly upset." He said it in such a matter-of-fact, no-shit way that I almost laughed. "Would it help if you hit me before we got inside?"

Silence for a beat.

I frowned. Was he serious right now?

Before I could respond he added. "You can yell if you want," he said, checking his phone and glancing at the cameras on either side of the gate. "ETA to the front of the house is around seven minutes. Should we pull over, or do you think you can manage your nervous breakdown while I drive? I'll go the asinine speed limit your dad has in place for the driveway." The gates opened. We were greeted immediately with signs that said children at play, fifteen miles an hour. Dad put one every twenty feet. "Think he has enough reminders?"

I still had no words.

"I don't bruise easily." Ace added.

Something snaps inside me, maybe it's his callous attitude or the extremely calm sound of his voice, but I absolutely lose it and throw a punch to his arm. I hit him over and over again while he drives slowly down the road. When I lost track of how many times I'd hit him, I pulled back. "Are you kidding me right now?" My chest heaves. "Louis is dead! Dead!" Hot tears slid down my cheeks in rapid succession.

“And you’re just sitting there like nothing happened! You’re heartless with zero regard for human life! You’re a monster manifesting as a human being. You have no heart. If you did, you wouldn’t make me walk in there, you’d take me around the back and let me sneak into my room not parade me in front of the bosses, if you had a heart you’d at the very least ask if I was okay, you’d hold my hand, or I don’t know you’d?—”

“But you’re not okay,” he interrupted me. “So why would I ask the absolute obvious and make you tell me how we both already know you feel? That’s just a waste of energy on your part and on mine. Your sadness is turning into anger and anger must be felt, hit me all you want. Besides, you need to eat, and the fastest way to burn calories is exercise.”

My mouth dropped open.

He kept talking as our car inched toward the ginormous building. “Your volume is quite good; you always were good at yelling. At the very least, it helps relieve the stress you’re feeling by thirty percent, lowering your cortisol levels by twenty-five percent if you’re lucky.”

“You’re an asshole!” I shrieked.

“No, an asshole would suggest you crawl into the back an hour after burying your boyfriend and suggest sex since it significantly lowers stress levels, sometimes by forty-two percent, though results vary on your partner in each scenario.”

I had no words.

None.

So I stared at him and imagined wrapping my hands around his throat. This guy? He

was supposed to keep me safe when he was already a danger to my sanity?

Forget sadness. I had murder on my mind.

My dad had clearly lost it.

I'd talk to him after I changed.

This would never work.

It couldn't.

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I could never exist in a world where Ace had control over anything—including the direction of our conversations.

"I hate you," I whispered once he parked in front of the circular water fountain. He rolled up the sleeves to his black shirt revealing a black and blue tattoo on his right forearm.

It was a saint.

He never told anyone which one.

I told myself I didn't care but I'd always been curious why someone who killed with the hands attached to those arms would sully the memory of a Catholic saint by permanently inking its figure onto his skin.

I took a deep breath. "So I guess the back door's out?"

He shot me a glance. It wasn't full of pity or any sort of emotion that I could decipher. "You take the back door once, you'll always be hiding in the shadows. One choice justifies the next choice until you're constantly cloaked in darkness and afraid of the light. Better to feel the burn of the sun than the isolation of the night, don't you think?"

"I'm not thinking. I'm feeling. And I'm devastated," I whispered. "So excuse me for begging the universe for a favor."

He snorted out a laugh and opened his door. "That was your first mistake."

“What?” I snapped.

He poked his head back in. “Assuming the universe would give a favor when it owes you nothing. Get out. You have exactly five seconds before I remove you myself.”

“Aren’t you just a ray of sunshine.”

He shrugged. “Five. Four. Three?—”

“Fine!” I jumped out of the car and slammed my door. “Enjoy it while it lasts, I’m having my dad fire you as soon as I can.”

He smirked and walked right up to me then leaned in until his breath was hot on my neck, speaking in a low voice. “Enjoy your wait.”

4

ACE

Sadness is really just anger banging on the door waiting for a fight.

Raven tiptoed around her sadness and gave in to anger like I knew she would. Ridiculous, as the current situation meant that she was a danger to herself and everyone around her, unable to think clearly or make decisions. Angry and provoked, she had adrenaline coursing through her system and was constantly looking for someone to attack.

I planned on being that person.

It kept her alive and on her toes.



And by proxy, I stayed alive too, and did my job, didn't get yelled at, and wouldn't end up staring at her full mouth or pink lips. She ripped off her heels while walking up the steps, let out a curse, and kicked them off backwards in my general direction.

I calmly picked them up and held them while she jerked open the front door and stomped through a crowd of family and associates.

She stopped in front of her dad, Dante, early forties, looking like he was still somehow in his twenties with his jet black hair and black suit. The guy's eyes were so teal it was unnerving. Almost every human who met him decided then and there that he was one of the most attractive men alive—I could at least attest to him passing it down to his twin daughters.

Poor bastard.

Poor me.

Tempest, Raven's twin approached, then looked down at Raven's feet, back up at her face and backed off, like they were communicating without using words.

Raven crossed her arms in front of her dad's towering frame. "Fire him."

Dante stared into his glass of whiskey. "No."

"Dad—"

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"You're grieving. Go change. Eat some food."

"But—"

His eyebrows rose. "This isn't the time, Raven. I love you too much to watch you make a spectacle of yourself in front of everyone because you hate the person replacing the one you love as if he could ever truly take his place." He kissed her forehead. "I love you more than my own life. He's the best. Let him do his job."

Her lower lip trembled. "We'll talk later."

"Argue, you mean?" he said in a lighter tone.

Her face softened briefly before she hugged him and stomped down the hall. Still holding her heels in my hand I stopped by my cousin Ivan, the new De Lange boss—my boss technically.

"So," He eyed me up and down. "I can't decide if you're dressed like a guy who fucks his way through Wall Street or a rebellious pastors kid with a trust fund."

I shrugged. "I didn't exactly have a lot of time to pack."

He stared down at my hands and smirked, a dimple making itself known on his right cheek. "She throw those at you?"

"And if she did?"

"Did you deserve it?"

I grabbed the glass from his hand and downed all of it. "She's not angry enough to throw them yet, but I have high hopes for future weaponry by way of spikey heels, in fact I eagerly await it."

"You're weird."

"So you've said every day of my life." I sigh, handing the glass back to him. "She won't come out unless forced. I'll take care of it. Oh also, I take it I'm not fired?"

I said it loud enough for Dante to hear.

He shared a look with Ivan. "Do your worst, Ace."

Permission.

Excellent.

I nodded. "And by that you mean my best. I won't let you down."

"Good." Dante clipped. "And Ace, I know this comes as no shock, but touch a hair on her head in any way that doesn't help her through this and I'll slit your throat. She belongs to the Alfero family until I give her away, until I walk down that aisle. I'll cut your hands from your body if I find out they soiled any part of her. Understood?"

Ivan choked on a laugh next to me.

I rolled my eyes. "I'm not into girls. I like women. No offense, Dante, but your precious daughter is safe."

"Is this a bad time to remind you that you're only six years older than her?" Ivan pointed out.

I glared at him.

"What?" He shrugged. "I'm just saying, it's not like?—"

"Stop talking. I'm getting bad thoughts," Dante interrupted glaring at me. "Make it better, Ace, and meet me later. We have more...intel."

I nodded. "I figured as much. Answer one thing..."

Ivan and Dante both froze in place.

"Never mind," I whispered hoarsely. "I think you just answered my question, and I think my job just got a bit more difficult."

Dante placed a hand on my shoulder. "If anyone can do it, it's you."

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Ivan gave me a playful shove toward the hall. “Off you go, little cousin. Let us know if she makes you cry. We’ll be waiting with ice cream and romcoms.”

Very funny,” I called back and made the painful walk down the hall and up the stairs to her room.

I lifted my hand and knocked twice.

No answer.

Not that I was shocked, she wanted to be alone which was the last thing that was good for her. Nothing about Raven shocked me anyway, right down to her not answering the door.

“I’m coming in,” I announced and shoved the door open; at least she wasn’t stupid enough to lock it, knowing that any one of the people here would just break it down in a heartbeat. It was worthless and annoying.

The lights were off.

The room was still and smelled like sadness.

I was used to the smell of her rich and fresh perfume, instead it was almost like I could smell the salt in the air from her tears.

I hated it probably as much as she hated me in that moment for interrupting her darkness.

Clothes were discarded on the floor, her black dress, a pair of black nylons, and then there she was, sitting on the floor next to them, hair a mess in nothing but a black bra and matching panties.

The only light she had was coming from the screen of her phone. I didn't have to guess to know it was probably a picture of him or them together. Unhealthy.

"Staring at him won't bring him back or make him feel better." It was harsh but she needed to face reality and if pissing her off on a constant basis pulled her out of grief, I'd gladly do it.

I wish someone had done it for me years ago.

She didn't put her phone away. "I'm not coming out."

And here we go. "Yes. You are."

"Make me, tall man with too many muscles. You know steroids make your dick shrink, right?"

"My dick thanks you for your concern, it's just fine, though." I checked my watch. "Nine seconds before I toss you over my shoulder. I highly doubt you want everyone to see your naked ass."

She shrugged. "They've seen worse. You've seen worse."

For a fleeting moment I looked at her, really looked, and then I proceeded to grit my teeth and think about my vows.

Refusing to touch anyone until a penance was paid in blood.

No matter how pretty.

Broken plus broken doesn't equal whole.

"Nine." I crossed my arms. "Eight."

She wasn't going to budge, and I was already tired of my own voice and tired of her.

"Seven." I leaned down and got in her face.

She met my gaze and narrowed her pretty brown eyes. "Counting backwards while sober still a challenge for your brain cells?"

"Six." I leaned in.

She didn't flinch.

"Fine." I grabbed her body and pulled her to her feet and tossed her over my shoulder. She hit me in the back with her fists.

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I barely felt it.

I barely knew what physical pain was anymore anyway.

I walked her backwards into the shower and turned on the cold water then stood under it with her.

“STOP!” She shrieked.

I held her firm despite her squirming and screaming, and I counted. “Five. Four. Three.”

“ACE, STOP!” She kicked, narrowly missing my dick then tugged at my hair, her nails scratched up and down my back. “I hate you! I hate you!”

Teeth chattering, she kept yelling until her voice was hoarse.

Our countdown was over.

Slowly, I slid her down my wet body and gripped her by the chin. “Get your ass dressed, put a hat on your wet hair, and eat a sandwich, if you make me tell you one more time I’m bringing you back to the cold shower. Don’t for one second think anyone’s going to save you. Only you can save yourself and you do that by eating a fucking sandwich, do you understand?”

Her chest heaved. She shoved against me and stomped off, grabbing a towel. I followed after her and wiped down my face with one of the other dry towels and



watched while she stripped out of her wet clothes, showing me nothing but naked glistening skin.

She looked over her shoulder. “Stare much?”

“Slow much?” I sighed.

She jerked on a pair of black sweats and a matching sweatshirt and shoved an LA hat on her head and walked out the door.

I followed close by.

Ivan and Bella were waiting on the outside.

Bella smiled up at me. “I thought you were water boarding her with all the screaming. Dante asked us to check up on you.”

“I would never hurt her.”

“Oh...” Ivan grinned. “He was more concerned for your safety.”

I snorted. “I can handle her.”

Bella made a face. “Most kids ask for a car for their sixteenth birthday. She asked for a machete.”

I almost cracked a smile. Good girl. “So?”

Ivan pinched the bridge of his nose. “I thought dealing with my family would be hard, you’ve got your work cut out for you. The Alfero’s are actual nightmares.”

Bella nodded in agreement. “At least the Abandonatos are sane.”

We both gave her a look.

She rolled her eyes. “Whatever. So we wiped out like your entire bloodline at one point, water under the bridge.”

I shook my head and walked away. “I’m going to go make sure she eats.”

"Eats!" Ivan called. "Not chokes!"

"No promises!" I yelled back.

5

RAVEN

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:13 am*

The one where passports are handed out before entering into the premises.

It took a deep breath and walked over the threshold or as I liked to call it the war zone of doom also known as the kitchen and was welcomed with loud screaming, cursing, questionable looking food in strange places and what looked like gum in someone's hair.

I normally loved the chaos, but lately it only reminded me of my own loneliness. My dad and the rest of the bosses, cousins, aunts, uncles—they all had their own lives and apparently it was some sort of race to see who could procreate faster. I think Nixon, my uncle, is still pissed that his daughter Serena made him a grandpa in his early fifties, the guy wasn't even a silver fox yet. Every friend in high school had a crush on him—every teacher asked me about him.

And then they met my dad and it was all over.

Gross.

An ear-splitting screech bounced off the walls of the kitchen, not the kind that immediately made you think of bloodshed—though one could never be totally sure in this sort of environment—but the sort of sugar infused scream that warned you a crash was coming soon but you'd deal with the wrath of hell for at least thirty minutes beforehand.

"GRANDPA!" little Beatrice yelled.

Junior looked at Serena, Serena looked at Junior, they played paper rock scissors.

Phoenix, once the scariest mafia bosses of all from the bloodline of the De Langes and the man who took over the Nicolasis glared between them. “You’re supposed to announce the game before you draw your weapon.”

“Forgot.” Serena smiled sweetly.

Junior nodded. “You were too slow old man.”

Phoenix quickly pulled a knife from thin air—or it seemed like he did—and flipped it between his fingers. “I changed the last diaper while you two snuck off and, wipe that look of your face, Junior, before I tell Nixon.”

His smile faded.

It didn’t matter if he was married to Nixon’s daughter and had been for years—what mattered was that she was still Nixon’s princess and Junior would always be the villain masquerading as a prince who stole her away.

It almost made me crack a smile.

I loved everything about my family so why did it always feel like I was on the outside looking in?

Another little one with his pull up over his head and oven mitts covering his hands chucked a ball toward Phoenix. Junior caught it just in time while Serena snuck away from them and eyed me up and down. “It’s war but when we look back we’ll say it was a lovely playtime where we served tea and had biscuits.”

I eyed said tea and biscuits on the kids table. “And that questionable substance?”

Serena shrugged. “It’s brown so it’s either shit or chocolate. Junior says the

consistency is in alignment with peanut butter.”

“Or someone just had peanuts.” I cringed.

"Exactly. So it shall stay on the magical princess tray until someone takes one for the team or loses at paper rock scissors." She grinned over at Phoenix who threw his knife against the wall. It stuck right into a childhood picture of me and Tempest with Santa.

“Think he lost?" I asked.

She just laughed, then as if remembering the occasion, her face fell.

"Nope." I held up my hands. “Not the time, Serena. I love you. Other than Ash you’re literally one of my favorite cousins?—“

She rolled her eyes. “I’m one of the only ones who still lives close by.”

“Also true.” I nodded. “And that’s a point in your favor but right now if you ask me if I’m okay I’m going to cry again and I can’t break, not again. Not. I just, I’m going to go somewhere else.”

Serena reached for me then pulled her hand back. She wasn’t even wearing makeup and had her blonde hair pulled back into a tight ponytail and she looked younger than me. It was all the crying.

SLAP.

We both looked in the general direction of the noise.

Damon had popped a squat on his plate full of pasta. “Look, Aunty Ena!” That would

be Serena. “I go potty now!”

"Son of a bitch." Ash rushed over to him. "I love being a dad, I love being a dad, I love being a—" He froze. "Did we put sausage in the pasta?"

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“Negative.” Serena burst out laughing. “But you’re welcome to double check.”

"Shit!" Grimacing, he used one finger to push the plate away.

“SHIT, SHIT, SHIT!” Damon yelled. “Daddy yell shit, Mommy!”

"DADDY IS NOT YELLING SHIT!" Ash yelled.

Claire walked around the corner narrowed her eyes, handed Serena a glass of wine and slowly backed away with a grin. “Swear jar, sweetie, you’re up.”

Ash swiped Damon from the table and started marching toward the sliding glass doors. “Raven, if your dad asks, it’s not blood in the pool, it’s pasta sauce and it’s sausage. It will always be sausage. He can send me a bill for the cleanup, but if I have to walk up those stairs instead of dipping this one in the pool I might lose my mind.”

“My lips are sealed.” I actually cracked a smile.

He held Damon far away from him then let out a long sigh. “Look, if you need to talk?—”

“Go away,” I snapped, my smile evaporating. “Dip your child in the chlorine already.”

"Might douse him with vodka to kill all the germs afterwards. Where’s a good parenting award when you need it?”

His words were light, his eyes were dark though, like he wanted to say more and knew it wasn't the right time.

I waved him off and quickly went to the adult buffet table and started grabbing food. Tempest was sitting by herself in the corner, staring at her phone, smiling, and sipping some red wine.

I joined her, poured a glass to make it look like I was going to drink it, and stared down at my plate.

Huh. I should have paid better attention.

"New TikTok challenge?" Tempest pointed her wine glass at my plate. "I don't think I've ever seen marshmallows dipped in mustard, though it seems to be all the rage to make these weird plates with mustard and vegetables. Is that a twirler next to your green jello?"

Yeah, utter fail.

I shoved the plate away. "I wasn't really paying attention."

Her phone went off again.

She bit down on her bottom lip and started twisting her golden brown hair around her fingertip.

It was her boyfriend.

The one Dad hated.

The one she loved because Dad hated him and because the guy was too stupid to



believe Dad would, in fact, remove the guy's dick from his body using a dull knife if he ever as much as touched Tempest without his permission.

Tempest reached her hand across the table and placed it on my arm. "I'm here, when you're ready. I know you're overwhelmed right now. He was?—"

I hated talking about him in the past tense but not as much as when others did.

Tempest's phone lit up again. She swallowed slowly and lifted her blue eyes toward mine. She started wearing contacts when she was twelve so people could tell us apart, along with dying her hair and having her own funky sense of fashion. "He's here."

Of course he was. "Go. He's probably waiting and the last thing we need is for him to take a step into the house without Dad's permission."

"He did pull a gun on him last time."

I nodded. "He deserved it. He forgot to bow."

"He thought I was kidding when I told him Dad demanded it."

I found myself smiling. "Wearemafia royalty."

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She grabbed her phone. “Listen, I don’t have to go.”

“I’m not great company.” I lifted one shoulder and let it fall listlessly. “Plus I have marshmallows to dip into my jello and mustard.”

She made a face and stood. “Promise you’ll eat better food than that.”

“I promise,” I lied.

She shook her head like she knew I wouldn’t and walked out of the room. The sounds of laughter and yelling seemed to magnify even more.

Everyone had their own lives.

Everyone had someone.

I’d started feeling that way a year ago like everyone was passing me by, like I didn’t really have a plan outside of being the terrifying one out of the two sisters, the one who had a temper and refused to control it.

I shoved the marshmallow around my plate with my fork then felt a presence behind me.

His cologne floated into the air, wrapping itself around me, choking me with its presence, not because he didn’t smell good, but because he reminded me that I had an unwanted shadow.

One that looked at me like a job, not a person.

I opened my mouth to tell him to go away when a sandwich the size of a freaking brick was dropped onto my plate.

I scoffed. “Good to see you used all the cow to get that lunchmeat.”

“Eat. It’s not a request,” he ordered in a low voice. “Sugar isn’t food, and I don’t know what the hell you were thinking putting the kids’, green jello on your plate but you know that shit has to have been spit in at least three times.”

I would not find him amusing even though he knew my family well.

I touched my stomach. I hadn’t been puking a ton but it was only a matter of time. Already I was feeling queasy and the sandwich could feed an army. I normally loved roast beef and cheddar cheese. But not in that moment, I didn’t. I started to scoot back my chair but was met with a brick wall aka Ace’s body. He picked up my chair—without permission— and turned it around so I was facing him, then proceeded to reach around me, grab the damn sandwich, and hold it in front of my face. “Open.”

I gritted my teeth and tried to speak through them. “No.”

He leaned down his light blue eyes flickered with irritation before he gripped me by the chin then shoved his thumb into my mouth past my row of bottom teeth and jerked my teeth away from each other. “Good girl, now bite.”

I was going to bite his hand if he didn’t remove his fingers.

With a scowl he shoved the sandwich in and pushed my chin closed so I had no choice but to both bite and chew.

He lightly tapped me on the cheek. “Good job, now take a few more and I’ll walk you to bed.”

"I know the way."

"I'm aware."

"Ace." I was seconds away from strangling him. I swallowed then opened my mouth to reason again only to have that same sandwich come barreling in before I could snap my mouth shut again.

"See? It tastes good. Try not to choke." He stood to his full height. "I'll wait until you're done. We have a meeting in twenty, so I'd go fast."

"You're not my boss!" I jumped to my feet.

"Two more bites then," he whispered.

"And then what?" Tears filled my eyes.

He reached for something on the counter behind him and pulled out a syringe. "So I can put you to sleep."

"Ketamine?" I guessed knowing it wasn't necessarily horrible for baby but that I didn't want to take any chances.

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He nodded. “Just enough to sedate you.”

“Just enough to make me forget what I want to remember,” I whispered. “Let me feel it, all of it Ace. I don’t need the drugs.”

He hesitated then said. “Close your eyes and forget for a few hours—you have a lifetime to remember, Raven.”

6

ACE

The one where all you have are secrets, cigars, whiskey, and blood.

She was throwing attitude again, but this time she was doing it in an exhausted way I couldn’t ignore. She needed sleep more than she needed food or anger, and I’d already gotten a few bites down her.

Without asking permission—not that I thought she would at any point do so—she stared at the stairway and then got up and slowly started walking.

I followed silently behind her.

When we stopped at the door, she rested her head against it. “I don’t need help sleeping, and I don’t like drugs.”

She needed to sleep deeply so she wouldn’t get sick and so she could stay on alert.

She didn't know it and she never would, but she just became my greatest fear and I'd stop at nothing to keep her safe even if it meant I'd be keeping her safe from herself and her own lack of self-preservation.

I opened my mouth but before I got any words out, a throat cleared behind me. "Boss wants you."

It was Ivan.

I released a rough exhale. "Which one?"

"Did I say boss? I meant all of them, well most of them, we have too many bosses and underbosses to count. Thank God most of them are in Seattle with the Russians for the next month while we monitor things here."

It really was a true skeleton crew.

The Alfero boss was here.

Serena and Junior were here representing the Abandonatos.

Phoenix was standing watch and communicating with everyone else and keeping a close eye on Ivan while he stepped into his new role, and while we had a lot of men present, that was basically it.

I couldn't even begin to imagine how crazy it was when the entire Cosa Nostra plus half the Russians and some of the families from Sicily got together.

The only sane reason the FBI looked the other way was because half of the family actively worked for them and kept Fentanyl off the streets and put an end to so much sex trafficking they would get awards—then again they fought fire with fire and took

lives in order to do so.

“Yeah,” I rasped. “Coming.”

Raven chose that moment to escape into her room and shut the door in my face.

I turned to Ivan.

He was still in his suit, though his black tie was long gone and the tattoos on his chest were on pure display while he stared at the solid blue door. “She’ll get there, it’s still raw.”

I made a non-committal noise. “She needs to get there faster. Whoever killed Louis is still on the loose, and we both know who did it.”

“We have no proof. Don’t let your past affect your future when you’re finally out of that shit hole.”

Venice wasn’t a shit hole.

It was one of my only good memories of this life.

The five families took me in, they trained me to be the best, then sent me away to help strengthen the De Lange name in Sicily—they were the reason I was in Venice, the reason I finally fell into darkness, mistaking it for light.

Mistaking it for hope.

"Let's go." I breezed past him, my footsteps creating a heavy clicking noise as I got closer and closer to Dante's study.

The wooden doors had the Alfero crest on them. The entrance was intimidating the first time I saw it. With twelve foot doors and two metal daggers sticking out of the front that you twisted and pulled—still stained in De Lange blood to remind everyone who joined the five families what would happen if one branch turned against the rest.

When I was younger I imagined the blood of my family still cried out from those handles. And now? Now, it was just an entrance, a means to an end. Just like this job.

I jerked open both doors and stepped inside. Cigar smoke plumed and twisted in the air, the aromas of expensive whiskey and cologne mixed with it. A few men sat in the corner playing chess and discussing something about a shipment in low voices.

Dante sat at his desk, hands behind his neck, as he stared up at Phoenix, who was leaning against the door and looking in a black folder. "Could be worse."

"Is she still ignoring you?" Dante asked, not looking up from the folder on the desk in front of him.

"Naturally." I imagined he was addressing me. "She hates everyone and everything, but she'll eventually break and things will go back to normal."

Ivan moved behind me. "She's still crying."



A snort escaped before I could stop it. “She’s dangerous no matter what emotion, believe me.”

Dangerously tempting.

Dangerously stupid at times.

Doesn’t allow her feelings to be felt.

Talked too much even during her sadness.

Dangerous.

Terrifyingly so.

Dante leaned forward, pressing his hands against the oak surface of his desk. “This should’ve been simple, and now we have one dead infiltrator. One grieving girl. It’s messier than it needs to be, and now my little girl’s caught up in it. I should have seen the signs, should have—” He shoves the black folder away. “I guess it doesn’t matter now.”

Phoenix reached out and snatched the folder, adding it to the one he was holding. “Stay close.”

Dante’s head jerked up, making me jump back. “Not too close, remember what I said.”

"She’s a job,” I deadpanned reminding myself and him. “And I don’t get close.” Not anymore. “Remember?” I took a long scan around the room. “Besides, you have to actually be in possession of a heart for it to break, right gentleman?” And I’d lost mine long ago, but could you really say it was lost if it was taken from you without

your permission? I turned to leave. "I know what my job entails."

Dante cleared his throat. "Remember what happens should you forget."

He didn't need to say much more. "My ghosts are buried right along with my heart; they fed on what was left of it long ago."

"Good." Phoenix moved up next to me and slapped a hand on my shoulder. "We don't need a repeat of Vienna."

Just hearing the name of the city spoken out loud sent a chill down my spine hard enough to make my stomach drop. "I hardly remember."

Lie.

Phoenix knew it too. "Alright, let us know if anything changes, we'll keep watch on our end, business as usual, act as normal as possible, and let us know if she gives you any information we can use."

Typical. "Yup."

I walked away before I accidentally choked on more memories and headed out of the office and back down the hall toward Raven's room.

I raised my hand to knock on her door when I heard it.

Puking.

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:13 am*

It jarred my memory in the absolute worst way.

The sudden smell of fresh flowers, the feel of the cool breeze on my face, and hearing the vomiting all over again while the smell of dinner wafted past me. “You okay?” I knocked on the bathroom door a second time then let myself in.

Her beautiful black hair was pulled back into a low ponytail and she was sitting next to the toilet looking helpless. “Do you want the good news or bad news?”

“Always lead with the bad.” I joined her on the floor and grabbed her hand.

She laid her head on my shoulder. “I think I pulled a rib.”

I smirked. “I’ll patch you up, what’s the good news?”

“You’re stuck with me.” She grinned down at our joined hands. “My wish came true. We’re pregnant.”

My body gave an involuntary shudder.

We’re pregnant.

We’re pregnant.

We’re pregnant.

Everything about those two words set my world on fire—how could I have possibly

known that she would use those flames to burn our entire existence down?

“Raven?” I knocked harder. “I’m coming in.”

I ignored the whimpering and let myself into the dark room. The covers on the bed were on the floor like she got in a fight with the sheets and decided to add some extra kicks.

The lights were dim, and the sound of puking coming from the bathroom didn’t stop. I stepped through the door. She leaned over the toilet and held her hair back with one hand while tears streamed down her face dropping into the toilet. “Fucking sandwich!”

I said nothing. What could I really say? She needed food even if it didn’t stay in her system that long. I gently shoved her hand away and gathered her hair. She didn’t fight me, but her posture went so stiff I almost checked to see if she was still breathing.

“Please,” she rasped. “Don’t.”

I ignored her.

She leaned back and elbowed me in the ribs. “I’m done for now, but if you keep touching me I really will puke all over you.”

I didn’t doubt it. I just wasn’t sure whether it was from the fact that I was repulsive to her or because her stomach was weak from the food.

The sandwich shouldn’t have done anything to make her stomach upset, but I knew that she was still dealing with all the emotional aftermath of the day.

I stood to my full height and held out my hand. “Let’s get you to bed.”

She swatted my hand away. “I can manage on my own. The last thing I need is a babysitter. I just want to be alone.”

“In the dark with your feelings?” I offered. “You do realize that immediate isolation during grief accounts for at least twenty percent of?—”

“I don’t want stats,” she interrupted and stood. “I know my own body and I know my mind, furthermore, I have a broken heart, so give me a little grace before you continue to chastise me like a child.” She forced a pretty smile. “You can kindly shove your stats up your ass and see yourself out.”

I almost smiled. Almost. “I’ll check on you later. Do you need the ketamine or do you think you can sleep?”

She crossed her arms. “Are you giving me an option now?”

“It was a very convincing lecture.” I leaned in.

Her eyes were so uncertain, so lost, I knew I needed to give her the semblance of control even though it was a complete falsehood. She wanted something to hold onto, let her think that she had a right to that, when the truth was she’d lost every right the minute she was put in harm’s way.

Her life was no longer her own.

It was mine.

And it would be until the threat was gone—she just didn't know it yet.

7

RAVEN

The one where tears solve nothing.

I woke up sobbing thinking—assuming—that Louis was there, only to be holding a pillow and feeling even more nauseated than last night. My head pounded from crying myself to sleep and lack of hydration. I half expected Ace to be leaning against the door when I finally got dressed and made my way downstairs.

Instead, he was nowhere to be seen and someone had cleaned the entire kitchen.

"Hey." Ivan waltzed in wearing jeans and a black peacoat. "I'm taking you to campus. Ace decided to go early to make sure that everything was up to his very anal and annoying specifications. I wouldn't be surprised if NASA had a satellite trained on your ass at this point."

I narrowed my eyes. "I wasn't the target."

"Sure, because we have the technology of heat seeking bullets now." He rolled his eyes. "I already have some tea for your stomach along with a muffin in the car, stopped by your favorite coffee shop on the way here. Oh, and your dad and mom

had to run up to Seattle for the next thirty-six hours so you're stuck with Ace riding your ass, Phoenix checking on you on a daily basis, and me trying to keep you safe without making you feel like you're being suffocated."

I grinned. "Did I mention you're my favorite cousin?"

"Did I mention I heard you say that to Serena last night?" He winked. "Let's go. You have your first class at ten, and you'll want to get settled in the townhome."

The idea of living with Ace made my stomach clench even more. Couldn't they have just let me still live in the dorms? They had some of the best security in the world.

But no, I had to live in a townhome meant for married couples on campus, making me feel even more insecure.

I was alone.

But I had a good-looking guy who'd rejected me in the past just...lurking around every corner reminding me that I was alone—that I had nobody, that I fit in nowhere.

That Louis was gone.

My stomach rumbled. I touched it briefly. "Alright, let's get this over with."

My first class was Operations Management. Hah, if they only knew the I was well versed in how to operate many a business—were they legal? No. Were they lucrative? Yes. Besides, I was convinced that any business that excited always had a dark side.

Humans were still humans.

More and more I was starting to believe that nobody was what they said they were, or who, and that it was just a matter of time before they revealed their true colors. And yet I still held out hope for every single individual I met.

Louis was the only one who never let me down other than my dad, but even some of my cousins had me questioning the sanity of a lot of our family members.

I got it—blood over everything.

The five families protected their own at all costs. I could be ruthless—the point with my own moral compass? I refused to show that side of me unless I was pushed past my limit, and then all I saw was red.

Maybe that meant I had patience?

Or maybe that meant I was more unhinged because there was no holding me back once someone betrayed me.

There was only blood.

And I could guarantee it wouldn't be mine.

I made my way over to Ivan's waiting black Escalade. He'd bought it the minute he found out Bella was pregnant—it was bullet proof; the guy didn't want to take any chances, and yet it was always on the tip of my tongue to remind him he did in fact shoot her last year.

My body felt heavy as I climbed into the front seat, put on my seatbelt, and reached for my tea.



## Page 20

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Ivan didn't say anything when he started the engine. He put on his sunglasses and seemed to pretend like it was a normal Monday, driving toward campus, dropping me off like someone didn't just die.

I swallowed the lump in my throat as we passed familiar streets, trees, one of my favorite parks where I kicked Louis' ass at pickleball.

"Lame!" I yelled. "You have your own paddle and you still can't win!"

"My shoulder's sprained from sparring with Ivan, you ass!" Louis laughed. "One more time, please?"

His blond hair was tousled from running his hands through it in frustration. Beads of sweat streaked down his cheeks. He was beautiful in a boy next door sort of way that within a nanosecond could turn into something else.

Deadly.

Terrifying.

His beauty unarmed a person.

It was his greatest weapon. You were too busy smiling back, thinking wow what a nice guy—only to notice too late the knife sticking out of your stomach.

I liked that people never took him seriously because I knew I was always safe.

Until the very end, at least.

I swiped under my eye with my free hand and took a sip of hot tea. The silence wasn't awkward at all; I liked that Ivan let me have my peace. He knew if I wanted to talk I would.

The black iron rod gates of Eagle Elite didn't look like a prison—they simply felt like one—or maybe just a sign to me and everyone else in the family that this was just the beginning and there would never be freedom once we graduated, we'd just graduate right on into a fortress masquerading as a home, with smiles to distract people from the blood dripping down our fingertips.

"It's time." Ivan put the car into the spot where the admin building rears its ugly head. It was a modern black and white monstrosity that basically looked too expensive to be on a college campus. The designer even added in a mirror bridge that reflected your future—no joke, I wished I was making this shit up—as you walked across it to the building and into the actual campus.

If I didn't have the family I did.

If I wasn't jaded.

Maybe if I still had my heart, I'd find it inspiring that when I looked down into the mirror I saw my own reflection with words of encouragement at each step.

Except now?

I just wanted to break with each and every single step.

I hadn't walked across it since my freshman year—it terrified me, thinking about my future or lack thereof.

Where was my place anyway?

I felt even more insecure now than when I walked through those doors so many years ago, how does a person even step into the shoes of the legacies who walked through this school and made it theirs? Who threatened the world with their power and intimidated the students with their ability to rule with iron fists?

I was part born into something huge.

Everywhere I looked I saw the stamp of my family name.

And every time someone looked in my direction I knew what they were thinking.

I was either someone they wanted to befriend.

Someone to stay away from.

Or someone to hook up with and brag about.

I was never truly me, not the way Louis had always made me feel as if I was special but also not special. It was hard to explain; maybe he just made me feel human.

I cracked my neck.

## Page 21

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“Are you going to be okay?” Ivan was using his soft voice. I hated his soft voice.

I opened my door. “You’re using the voice again. It only annoys me more. Next time just punch me to get my attention.”

He snorted out a laugh. “I’m not going to punch one of my favorite people, and last time you punched back—a tooth cracked—not my favorite moment.”

I smiled. “And yet one of my top five.”

“Shocker.” He smirked and reached for his door. Opened his mouth again.

“Nope.” I waved him away. “Pretend feelings don’t exist just like I am right now. You used to be good at that until your tiny heart grew.”

“Ouch.” He jumped out.

“Oh please, I’m sure Bella made it all better.”

His smirk was back full force. God how did such a player end up married with a baby already? “No comment.”

“Mmm...” I laughed as I settled my white leather Prada bag over my shoulder and kept my black sunglasses firmly in place. “It smells.”

“It’s called nature. Those”—Ivan pointed toward the rest of campus—“are trees.”

"And that"—I pointed at him—"is an ass, out in the wilds of Chicago. Watch how it slowly stalks its prey and?—"

"Shut it." He slid off his aviators. "There he is, right on time." Ivan checked his watch. "Does it piss you off how punctual he is, or is it just me?"

Striding toward us with purpose, Ace was wearing a camel-colored trench coat, tight jeans, and black boots. He had his hair slicked back, and he should look like a tool; instead, he looked like he belonged on the cover of a magazine.

GQ most likely.

"How much do you bet he counts his steps and only stops on even numbers?" I tilted my head. "And yes it pisses me off that he's always on time. I swear the man probably counts every strand of hair on his head instead of sheep then mourns the loss of even one on his pillow when he wakes up."

Ivan choked out a laugh. "He does have nice hair, though."

"Your compliments don't make him more appealing. Let's get this over with. Like you said, I have class."

"Yup."

People walked by us, some stared, others held up their phones. I was used to going viral. The sheer amount of reality shows that our family was pitched was crazy.

Did they really think we'd let cameras film all the gory stuff or were they really under the false impression that we were just descendants of a crime family but kept our noses clean?

People couldn't be that stupid, could they?

Ace eyed me up and down.

“Ten bucks he checks his watch twice.”

Ivan cursed. “Twenty says he goes for a third time.”

“Why a third?” I wondered.

“Because...” Ivan started walking past me. “He's nervous.”

“Why?” I glance around. “It's not like we have any threats.”

Ivan looks over his shoulder. “It's funny.”

“What is?”

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“How you don’t count yourself.” He clapped his hands. “Hurry up.”

I follow after him. “Me? I’m nothing I’m barely?—”

“Late.” Ace shook his head. “Traffic was light, what was the hold up? Anything I should know about?”

“Question.” I held up my hand. “Do you get offended when your body gets sick? Like if you sneeze are you pissed just because your immune system isn’t strong enough to keep the germs at bay? Furthermore, if I sneeze on you is it more intimidating than pulling a knife?”

“Science.” Ivan clapped his hands. “I mean, make your hypothesis and run with it, Raven. You are studying international business. All dealings are about social and economic not to mention?—”

“She’s going to be late to class if she doesn’t eat soon,” Ace interrupted. “And I still have to show her around where she’ll be staying.”

I internally rolled my eyes. “I know what the townhomes look like.”

“I added some needed upgrades.” Ace held out his hand to Ivan. “I’ll be in touch.”

“Dude, you’ve known each other for years, stop with the handshakes.” I shoved past him. “And I’m hungry.” And heartbroken. And already exhausted. Mentally. Physically. “Let’s go.”

To his credit, Ace nodded while Ivan winked at me and walked off. I fell into step toward the married life townhomes, feeling nothing but the pain of regret and crushing sadness.

Would Louis and I eventually have gotten married if my dad approved?

Would we have been living in one of these townhouses on campus?

My stomach sinks.

My phone went off in my pocket. I checked it.

A text from Ace.

“That should be your class schedule along with the passcode for the townhome, it will change every week, and only you and I will have the specific code. We can’t be too careful.” We approached the modern two story townhome. It was gray brick and white paint with some exposed wood on the outside. It was in line with at least a dozen others. Each had a fire pit in the back and outdoor living to encourage a safe and familial feel on campus.

The five families took meal time very seriously—and pushed it on every single human in existence—daily.

“I’ve also already spoken to all of your professors and added more security throughout campus. Until we catch the culprit or find out more of what happened and why, your every move will be followed.”

"Can I at least pee in peace?"

He typed in the code to the door. It made a cheerful chime then opened. “No.



Actually. I'll be waiting outside and listening."

"Hilarious."

"Did you think I was kidding?"

"No. You have zero sense of humor, and If I didn't know you were a little bit of a man whore when you were in college I'd say you were going to die a sad virgin clutching your rosary."

He narrowed his eyes. "You were too young to know anything about me in college. They could have just been rumors. Maybe I've never seen a naked woman."

"Then a naked man. Good for you. Either way you've seen tits, I'd bet my life on it."

"Vulgar," he snapped. "Even for you. Now, all your food was purchased today. You'll eat all your meals here."

"And when we go out..." I waltzed into the kitchen opened the fridge and grabbed a water. "Are you going to taste my food before I eat?"

He blinked. "Good idea, I'll add that to my list."

"I was kidding."

"I'm not. I didn't think they could poison you, but it's easy to pay people off when they only make minimum wage." He pulled out his phone and started furiously typing, his fingers sliding across the screen like another superhuman ability.

“Stop.”

He didn't stop.

I reached for his phone, but he moved out of my way.

I kicked at his feet then tripped into his arms. My hands got caught next to his cock trapping me against him and with his arms high overhead and his body pressed against the breakfast bar.

Slowly, he stared down at my hands. “That’s not on my list; I think you have to pay extra for favors.”

Before I could stop it, a nervous chill ran down my spine. “Oh good, a food taster and a eunuch.”

He snorted out a laugh and leaned in. “I’m not a eunuch, you prude. Now kindly remove your hand from my dick before I report you to your dad.”

"And what would you report? Hmmm?"

"Insolent." He shoved me away. "And irritating."

“Then why are you here!” I yelled. “Why are you the one guarding me if you don’t even want to be here?”

“Because.” He lifted his chin. “I’m the only one who was willing to take it on.”

"It?"

"The job. You," he rasped. "The burden of guarding you. I was the only one who said yes." He shoved past me. "Thank me later. It's time for class."

He didn't see the tear that slid down my cheek.

I wiped it too fast.

The human eye can't see or feel a stomach drop the way mine did, it wasn't fast either; it was this slow painful descent like my body was just realizing that nobody wanted me—not even a paid guard.

My head jerked up. "Ace?"

"Five minutes. What?"

"He was paid too." It was a statement, one I needed him to kindly reject.

"All your bodyguards are on payroll." He truly lacked the ability to read the room.

"And if I slept with him?" I asked.

"A finger," Ace said, his reply almost polite.

"What?"

"A pound of flesh, starting with a finger," he said. "For defying your father's rules."

"And those would be?"

"Touch her and die."

I hung my head. "And he did."

"Are you saying your own family killed him?"

"No," I whispered. "I'm saying I probably did."

ACE

Where I call you and you pretend you care.

“It’s time for class, not for you to feel sorry for yourself. Were you the bullet?”

She frowned. “No, but?—”

“Exactly. It’s very black and white, as simple as that, unless you called out the hit, or shot him yourself, and even then, he knew the risks. Let’s go, you don’t want to be late.” I popped a piece of spearmint gum in my mouth and started walking toward the door. When I opened it for her, she was still staring down at the floor.

“Now,” I grated out, all sense of politeness gone. She didn’t need nice, she wouldn’t for a very long time. “The professor waits for no one, and neither do I. So if you want to join your long lost love with a matching bullet wound, by all means stay here unprotected and let down not just your family but your favorite person in the world.”

She frowned. “My favorite person in the world?”

“Louis, of course. Wouldn’t he be disappointed to see you now? All that blood spilled and in vain, all because you’re selfishly trying to take the credit for the perfect shot. It could have grazed his temple, instead he turned at the last minute taking it right through the cheek. He had no choice, you see. He was trying to use his body weight to shove you down. Had he not turned it wouldn’t have been enough; it could have still hit you or gone through him and hit you. Are we done here or do you need more details?”

Tears streamed down her cheeks colliding with her pristine white jacket. “You have no heart.”

I shot her a bored look. “Is this a bad time to let you know I included my soul in a two for one deal with the devil or should we table that for later?”

She stormed past me with a muttered curse.

“So, later. Cool. I’ll pencil you in,” I said under my breath, following her the entire way toward the business building.

Was it really that impossible for her to walk in straight lines or use the sidewalk? The building was only a four-minute walk from the townhouse, and she seemed to skip every single path on the way making sure her short black boots were covered in mud by the time we made it to the double doors.

It had rained last night and she seemed hellbent on making sure the hallway would remember by way of trails of dirt, it didn’t help that her boots squeaked in protest with every step reminding everyone of her certain brand of chaos—as if they actually needed a reminder. Curious stares followed her with every footstep, and I was close behind, always looking to the right, the left—always ready to be whatever she needed me to be. The walls were white on the inside. Institutional. Like the place was trying to bleach itself clean of the dirty bloodlines that walked the halls.

I had to remind myself I wasn’t there because I loved her.

I wasn’t there because I needed her approval or the families’ approval.

I was there to do a job and to protect. Maybe if I did it well enough I’d finally absolve myself of my own guilt. Maybe this time, with Raven, with the girl who most called a nightmare—I’d finally be able to sleep in peace.

Head high, I watched in appreciation as she weaved her way through the crowd and into the classroom, taking the seat in the back far corner, rolling her chair up to the desk and sitting with her hands folded on top of it.

I took the seat next to her and cleared my throat.

“Are we clear of spit wads and sharp pencils, Ace, or should I be on the lookout?” she said under her breath, touching her ear and tugging at her diamond studs.

“Like a sharp pencil could compare to your tongue,” I snapped before thinking.

Her jaw dropped before she shut it again and licked her lower lip. “Okay, short straw, I think you managed to shock me.”

“Short straw?”

“Yeah, the only one who would take me.”

“I offered. I didn’t have to pull a straw.”

Her eyebrow arched. I rebuked it. Sent it to hell. I didn’t find it cute at all. “They paying you more?”

I pulled out my phone. “I don’t need money.”

“Then what did they give you?”

“Nothing.” You. They gave me seconds. Minutes. Hours. They gave me absolute fucking torture—with you. All the things I wouldn’t say, couldn’t even if I wanted to. It didn’t matter.

"Everyone wants something." Her perfume wafted off her as she leaned in, her hair falling gently over her shoulder and nearly touching my fingers as they gripped the side of the table. "What do you gain?"



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I eyed her up and down, and for one second, one brief, solo second in time, I let myself feel. I exhaled against the chains wrapped tightly around my body and wished for a moment where I could let go—maybe it would be safer with my enemy than my friend.

Maybe that's where I went wrong in the beginning...

I trusted someone, I trusted my friend. She turned into more than that: my lover, my fiancé, my everything. She'd slowly emptied my cup and filled it with nothing but the taste of her poison so when she finally left...all I had left to drink was death.

All I had left to breathe was the scent of our regrets.

I had no answers only tattered memories of a love I'd regret for an eternity.

Maybe my love would be safer kept with hatred by its side. I tilted my head at Raven. "Do you want me to say you? Would that make you feel special?" I leaned over and raised my hand tucking her hair behind her ear. "Would your heart skip a small little beat for me? Hmm? Would you curse it for being so desperate?" I pressed my palm to her neck. "It isn't racing but it's doing something, maybe reminding you that you aren't dead and have a pulse or maybe reminding you that somewhere in your grief you can still feel sexual attraction."

She scoffed and batted my hand away. "First off, you're wrong. Second, the only strong feeling I have toward you is one of hatred...and murder."

I smiled; I couldn't help it. "We aren't so different, you know."

“We are completely different,” she pointed out. “I’m grieving and trying to survive all alone and you’re just...” She looked down at the table. “A shell.”

I inwardly flinched.

“A shell sounds safer than a bomb ready to go off at any minute.” I mused and put in my air pods. “The room’s secure, take all the notes you need. I’m hungry so try not to stick around and make friends, they’ll only talk to you because you’re pretty, rich, and powerful—don’t fall for it.”

“Never have, never will,” she said quickly.

But I saw the sadness in her eyes, the reality of loneliness and the want that followed to talk to anyone who wasn’t related to her family or connected. To have a best friend, warm arms to run into and say, this sucks and I’m lost.

Instead.

She had me.

A paid bodyguard.

And a daily reminder of what she lost and won’t ever have again.

The sound of Metallica hit my ears, and while I told her I wasn’t paying attention, I waited for her to look toward the professor before I grabbed my phone and switched off the music and turned on the cameras in the townhouse. Everything was as it should be.

I checked out her bedroom then turned everything completely off and pretended to be still listening to music for the next hour.

I stood before people started leaving and helped pull out her chair when she followed. A guy in a black leather jacket and a matching beanie stayed back and eyed me up and down then shifted his attention to her.

I lifted my eyebrows silently telegraphing my response. Yes, please try, I'm itching to punch someone in the face right now. I gripped my cross necklace and twisted it in my hands then kissed it like I was already asking forgiveness for taking his life...as I had so many times in the past.

The cross around my neck carried not just my sins but the sins of the blood I'd taken over and over again.

Did he want to be added to the list?

God, it would feel nice to wrap my hands around another scrawny neck and squeeze.

I waited.

He looked to my right, then back to me.

I grinned wider.

He shook his head and walked off with a muttered "asshole."

Raven smacked me in the shoulder. "He's my new partner, you ass! He's supposed to get my number, and now thanks to you he's probably shitting his pants in the hallway!"

I rolled my eyes. "I was saying hello with my eyes, it's not my fault he was too intimidated to walk over."

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She shoved me to the side. “No, you were shooting daggers and picking a fight with your face. There’s a huge difference. Trust me, I grew up with cousins ready to rip heads from bodies and use those same heads to play dodgeball. Why do you all have such anger issues?”

"It's not anger, it's pent up rage against the world and the way they see us and want us dead," I said under my breath. "They look up to us, but we're never good enough. They use us because they aren't powerful enough, then wait for us to crack so they can take over. Who wouldn't feel rage?"

“Tamp it.” She looked ready to flick me in the nose. Sighing, she dropped her hand. “Let me grab his number, and then we can eat.”

“Whatever you say.” I followed her out of the room.

Raven marched up to the guy and tapped him on the shoulder. “Sorry about that, he has the personality of drywall and watches crime shows because he thinks they’re comedy.”

The guy stared me down then met her gaze. “Comedy?”

"Because they're so stupid it's funny," she whispered under her breath. "Anyway, give me your number and we'll connect later this week."

"Yeah, yeah." He licked his lips. "It's?—"

I drowned it out, I'd get his entire background in the next five minutes anyway, no

need to memorize it. I was more concerned about his social security number.

I held up my hand. “I’m going to interrupt you right there.” I snatched his phone out of his hand and typed in my number, then my name, Ace, the Matchstick, De Lange. “That’s my number, sunshine, with hers right underneath it in the information section. Think of me as a personal secretary.” I slammed the phone back onto his chest.

He sucked in a sharp breath. I hoped for a small bruise later right where I tapped him.

“This is how it’s going to work, you need her, you’re going to need me. If you need to meet up, you find the quickest and shortest way to say so with your words and meet in a crowded place preferably with cameras and/or a priest nearby.”

His eyes darted from mine to hers then back again. “Alright.”

“Blinking twice to alert the authorities doesn’t get you out of this situation, sweetheart.” I winked. “I am the authority, so get used to it. Now, if you touch her, I remove the part of your body that did the touching—regardless if you need it to survive. Doesn’t matter if it’s a handshake or a very deep breath. Everything counts in my playbook. If you so much as flirt with her without my permission, I’ll find a way to give you a sexually transmitted disease via paper clip, a pencil sharpener, and basic high school chemistry—you’ll be itching your dick before you can ask how.”

He stumbled back, phone in hand. “Got it.”

I stared at his shaking legs. “Huh, you held the piss in, stronger than most, good for you, Casanova.” I smacked him on the shoulder. “And in case none of that landed between your ears where your brain should be, she’s off limits, think of me as the limit. I’m your gateway drug into the holy land—and your only prayer of finishing this assignment alive. I’m your savior, you’re my servant. There will never be a

scenario where you sweep in with your money, good looks, talent, or fast car and impress her—trust me she’s seen better. Any questions? No?”

"No sir," he whispered and looked past me to Raven. "He always a dick?"

"Always." She yawned. "But he’s not wrong. I’m not easily impressed, though I would have liked to see you try, I like being entertained."

I shook my head. "Shit for brains would have led with his last name. You can go now, Stuart."

"Steven," he corrected.

"Sounds good Sven." I saluted him with my middle finger.

He muttered "bastard" under his breath, stumbled away from us and tripped just enough to hit the elevator’s down button on the way.

I tilted my head. "He’s too tall for you anyway."

"Wow, saving me from tall guys and murderers? My hero." Raven tugged at her ear again, then ran her fingers over her earring. Her tell. Her nervous tic. The crack in her façade.

"Ears hurt?" I asked, knowing the tic by now and wondering if she was aware she even did it when she was uncomfortable or thinking.

She dropped her hand. "No, just hungry, tired, and annoyed that you scared him off. Besides, he seemed nice."

I pulled out my phone and tapped the screen then tapped it again and sent her the

background check I'd already run on him. I wondered if she'd still use the word nice in reference to him once she did a quick scan. I looked forward to the trauma, actually. Did that make me evil or just bored? Either way, she needed the reminder about what nice got you sometimes. She read the text and shot me a glare.

I could have gone my entire life without seeing that.”

“It’s good to know who your partner is.”

She turned and started walking away from me. It’s probably AI.”

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“I highly doubt AI allows a pig to legally get taken by a?—“

"Stop trying to ruin lunch!"

"What?" I fell into step beside her. "I'm just doing my job."

“Walk behind me then, not next to me.”

“No.”

"Fine. Walk ahead of me then."

“Again, nice, see what I did there? Using nice? Try. But no.”

“Eat shit and die.”

“Maybe once this job is done.”

She stopped dead in her tracks. “That’s not funny.”

It hit me. That line right there. It bothered her. My death somehow triggered her?

“Why would you care anyway? Let’s go.”

I felt it, though. The slow burn. The ache that the thought brought to my chest.

Like that very shallow grave I was already digging myself the longer I stayed next to her. It made my heart feel something—warm, I think—that she didn’t like the idea of



me being in the cold hard ground.

Too bad she'd soon be disappointed.

My line of work wasn't conducive with life.

She didn't know it yet, but my only reason for living.

From here on out.

Was her.

Raven Alfero.

9

RAVEN

The one with the fruit snacks.

He was a menace to society.

A warning sign wouldn't be enough for him.

And I was coming to almost hate him the more he distracted me from the pain I felt every time I walked by places Louis and I used to visit, the stupid common area included—which is why I chose to sit outside on the picnic bench farthest away from the tree we used to sit under.

We'd been sitting outside the mess hall, and he scared away at least seven people—one of them was a professor. The poor woman started crying, and she was

used to our kind around here.

He was dressed like a fallen angel who decided that rather than jumping he'd just burn his wings and sacrifice his soul. Succubus core energy. At least that was the reaction the girls were giving him, like they were one intense stare away from getting screwed against the tree screaming his name.

What? Did they not see how angry he was all the time? It didn't matter that he looked like a god—he was the devil himself.

I threw my empty diet coke bottle at his head. He caught it midair. “What? Why are you throwing things?”

“Sit.” I pointed at the bench. “Eat. You’re driving me crazy, and it’s not even dinnertime yet. When you’re not glaring, you’re pacing or threatening or spouting insults. Can’t you just put food in your mouth, chew, and swallow like a normal person?”

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He seemed to actually think about it, like weighing if it was actually a possibility before he sat and pulled a protein bar out of his pocket along with a bag of fruit snacks—the one without dye because of course they would be dye-free. They probably lacked sugar aka any sort of joy as well.

He followed it all up with a vitamin shot.

Wow. Wonders never ceased.

"Easy there killer, you might get a cavity." I tapped his protein bar with my Twizzler. He snatched the bar away so fast I nearly fell backwards off the bench. "What the hell!"

"Food shouldn't touch." He scooted the protein bar over to the opposite side of the table and did the same with the rest of the packaged food. "Ever."

"You've gotta be kidding me," I muttered. "It's fucking packaged, Ace. It can touch."

He ignored me and started opening up the vitamin shot.

I made a face when he chugged half of it and wiped his mouth. Part of it spilled onto the table.

It was green.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a napkin, quickly wiped up the mess then folded the napkin six times and put it back in his pocket.

"Why six?" I asked.

"What?" He finished the shot. "Six what?"

"Folds." I pointed to his pocket. "You folded it six times. You have a thing with even numbers and you hate messes and things that touch. Are you OCD or something?"

He reached for his protein bar and tore the wrapper open with his perfectly straight white teeth. Why hadn't I noticed how strong they looked? How his full lips pressed against them. God, if he didn't use his mouth for evil he might actually be more attractive than I'd care to admit. His deep voice interrupted my thoughts. "If I was OCD I'd be counting everything and I'd probably be on medication or it would be more apparent. I just hate odd numbers. They seem unfinished. Even numbers make sense."

He said it like I was the dumb one for not seeing the logic in it. "God forbid something be confusing."

"Confusion leads to mistakes," he pointed out.

Mistakes like murder.

Like the death of someone who was never supposed to die in the first place. The food settles like a rock in my stomach, not that I had high expectations, what with the way I'd been feeling recently.

Happy birthday to me—more puking.

I knew it was only a matter of time before I had to say something to my dad and to Ace, but it was the last part of Louis I had—and something I selfishly wanted to keep to myself—for as long as I could.

Ace reached for his phone. “Yeah, I’m on campus.”

I leaned in to eavesdrop.

“No.” He barked, his eyes immediately started scanning the area. “Alright, I’ll be on the lookout, glad you let me know. I didn’t expect it to be today. Yeah. Bye.”

I pretended not to be interested and started toying with the wrapper on my water bottle. “Anything wrong?”

“Nope.” He shoved the phone back into his pocket and reached for a tasteless fruit snack. “They did a cleansing of Louis’s line this afternoon. They found some incriminating evidence, and the last two family members were working for the Russians. That doesn’t implicate Louis, but it does look bad.”

“Cleansing.” I repeated the word with a harsh whisper. “So had he been alive would he have?—”

Ace slowly rose to his feet. “You know what it entails, he would have either been killed or he would have had to prove his loyalty and worth along with everyone and everything else related to him.”

Me included.

Me.

And his unborn child.

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A cleansing, after all, meant the entire family—the bloodline, the relatives—everyone.

The cleansing that just took place—had he been alive—meant my head would have also been on the chopping block regardless of my last name.

He would have had to protect us all.

And now, I had only one job.

Protect what he left.

What he entrusted me with.

A small part of himself.

10

RAVEN

Coloring outside the lines should always feel more right than wrong.

It was harder at night.

My dad had to have had his reasons.

It wasn't unheard of to cleanse a family line for doing something wrong. I couldn't

imagine a world where Louis would be part of something like that, and he wasn't alive for me to ask.

My stomach had churned the rest of the day wondering what else the family was guilty of and what Louis would have potentially been guilty of other than being with me.

My stomach rumbled for the sixth time that night. I only had two classes in the morning and then a weekend full of birthday celebrations, mine included, to look forward to.

I wouldn't be able to hide it long.

As it was, Tempest kept texting me, asking me to make plans for happy hour later that week. We had a few favorite spots close to campus, and I was counting down the days until she suddenly showed up with a few bottles of wine and demanded I down them.

I'd tell her then—the truth.

And Ace? Well he'd just have to deal with it.

But for now? Now, I was going to sit with my Sprite and watch Ross get a spray tan for the tenth time.

I had three shows that I watched on repeat: Friends, New Girl, and Schitt's Creek

All of them were a huge distraction from the drama of my life, and they made me smile. Louis had introduced me to Friends, and I'd introduced him to the others. He'd been fourteen years older than me—another reason my dad would have lost his shit.

Ace had already been a big no when I was in high school.

Louis may as well have been a walking red flag since he was in his mid-thirties. What did my parents expect anyway? I felt like I was already in my thirties by the time I hit my teens.

I'd seen too much.

Ace moved smoothly around the house checking doors and windows, and every few minutes he'd check his phone, look behind him, text something, put in one ear pod, read a chapter or two from his boring book and then pace.

He was on his third round of pacing when he finally sat down on the couch next to me and set a plate of celery down.

I stared. "Surely you have dip?"

"Surely you have taste." He bit into the celery and chewed loudly. "Why would I need dip? I don't eat for pleasure." Another hard bite. "I eat for nutrition."

I made a face. "I suddenly feel so very sorry for every girl you ever went down on."



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He bit down again. “That’s a different sort of meal, Raven. Then again, maybe no guy ever made you aware.”

He cursed when he realized what he just said.

I didn’t defend Louis.

It wasn’t my place, and part of me was sort of embarrassed to have to lie and say he did when he didn’t. We’d had a few stolen moments months before he died—he swore it would get better once the threats stopped, that we’d have real time alone, meaningful time.

More celery crunching jerked me from my contemplation.

I pointed the remote at the plate. “I’d rather survive off my own spit, thank you.”

“You don’t like vegetables?”

“Is that a romantic deal breaker? Damn it, and I was so close to seducing you, but alas I don’t like celery. I had a very traumatic incident involving peanut butter. We don’t talk about it.”

“Were you allergic to peanut butter?” He took another bite.

“I think it was more the dick that the peanut butter was covering.”

Ace started choking wildly on his celery stick.

I got up and slapped him on the back. “I was kidding, but it was worth it.”

“Who puts”—He coughed again—“peanut butter on their dick anyway?”

I slapped his back a second time. “Maybe someone who doesn’t want the sucking to stop?”

"That would be a lot of throat action."

“Might sprain a tongue.” I added.

He rolled his eyes. “Something’s wrong with you.”

“I know.” I set the remote down. “I’m going to shower,” I mumbled, mostly to escape the weight in my chest.

Ace stood immediately, all hard lines and unreadable expression, wow, right back to square one where tin man forgot he had a heart.

“I’ll go first.” His tone left no room for debate. “I need to check the perimeter anyway.”

“You do that,” I muttered. “Take the celery with you, maybe it’ll cleanse your soul.”

“Souls are for people who sleep.” He was already walking away. “Don’t open any doors.”

I held up my hands. “No promises if it’s pizza.”

"Even if it's pizza." He turned and pointed at me. "Trust no one."

"I changed my mind. You should shower, you smell."

Amazing.

But I'd never tell him that.

He always seemed to smell good no matter what he did, but he was the type of guy that was extremely unaware of how he affected the people around him. Or maybe he was aware, but he just didn't care. People always stared in order to gain his attention or they whispered about him, but he never seemed to care enough to respond.

Maybe he really was like a eunuch.

He could use his equipment but felt no pleasure from it, meaning he was pretty much the safest person to have around me since he'd never take advantage of me. Maybe that was my dad's plan all along.

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He'd trusted Louis because he was good at his job but also because he was older so my dad didn't see him as a threat to his daughter's delicate sensibilities.

When I looked up, Ace had left and I was alone again with the sound of the TV in the background. I tried to find joy in it but as soon as Ace was gone, as soon as I was isolated or felt isolated, my thoughts turned dark.

What was the point?

Was this part of my grief? Constantly battling between severe depression, darkness, and anger? And wondering what the future held? Things were bad before Louis was taken from me, and now it just felt pointless.

Dark.

What if the pizza guy came?

What if he came for me?

I'd be missed.

But did the world really need one more mafia princess?

Did it?

I swallowed the lump in my throat.

Being strong was exhausting, just like forcing a smile when your muscles refused to move.

I leaned back against the couch and stared at the TV. I adjusted the way I was sitting, tucking my feet under me when I saw a movement in the screen.

Was someone behind me in the kitchen?

I waited. Nothing happened.

“Ace?” I called.

The light sound of the shower still filled the air, plus, he wouldn’t sneak around behind me just to scare me.

The alarms were still on weren’t they? I would have heard someone walk in. I think I would have, at least.

I reached under the couch for the knife I knew Ace kept there and brought it under the blanket I was sitting with.

I sent a SOS to Ace’s phone hoping he showered with his watch on. The scent of lavender drifted past.

What?

Body wash? Perfume?

Then—arms wrapped around me.

I was dragged backward over the couch, slammed to the floor.

I kicked. Hard. Mask. Hat. No face.

“Get off me!”

They straddled me. Gun to my forehead.

I rolled us. Kicked again.

Knife. Thigh. Slash.

Blood.

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I threw a chair.

“RAVEN!” Ace’s voice.

I rushed the attacker, too slow.

A kick swept my legs?—

I hit the ground hard.

I wasn’t fighting for my life.

I was fighting for someone else’s.

“Are you hurt?” Ace knelt beside me, water dripping from his hair onto my arm.

“Are you naked?” I blinked up at him. “And afraid?”

“You hit your head.”

“You’re real.”

“You’re delirious.”

I glanced down at his nakedness getting more of a clear view. “Huh, one does wonder

“What? One wonders what?”

God, my head was spinning. “Just wondering how you’d get the peanut butter off that without a serious tongue cramp.”

I laughed at my own joke and promptly faded into the darkness.

11

ACE

Touch the dial and die. Volume is for losers.

I can hear the TV from my room downstairs; it’s loud enough to wake the neighbors, and I need to be listening for more intruders. I’m still confused how they got by my security unless they knew how to get in or had an inside person.

More mysteries.

Couldn’t wait.

I wondered how much caffeine I’d need in order to put up with this for the foreseeable future. People would always be out to hunt the five families—but this felt different, this felt like a threat from the inside, and why her of all people?

They could have attempted to attack anyone. Dante might be a powerful boss, but going after him meant going after the entire Alfero and Abandonato family, not to mention the rest.

We knew we had a few plants within the families—but we allowed it so that those who thought they were smarter only got the intel they thought they needed. Then we used that same information against them. It worked for us, and it was always smarter to keep some of the more intense enemies closer.



I didn't want to complain and ask how long I would be on this assignment, but I guessed it didn't really matter whether I died protecting her or died protecting the families themselves. It was really my only future now, the only thing I truly focused on was doing my job and doing it well.

Putting hope or stock in other things only set people up for failure, and I wasn't sure my soul could handle more of that.

At least not after what I had gone through.

I put on a pair of gray sweats and took the stairs two at a time. There were three stairs left, I took two more and stepped over the last.

I really did hate odd numbers.

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She was propped up like a queen in the middle of the bed, three pillows stacked behind her—purple and silk, of course. The light from the TV flickered across her pretty face.

Her bone structure was something sculpted out of a fairy tale, her jaw was firm yet just feminine enough when she smiled that it was sometimes hard to breathe. Her lips were full and swollen like she'd been chewing them, and her hair was pulled back into a messy bun on her head. As if the TV could get any louder, a tire commercial came on making the walls shake. "By all means, add the surround sound, I think you forgot it."

She looked around expectantly. "Shit, we have surround sound in this room?"

"I was kidding."

"I like noise. I can't sleep without it."

"And here I thought your own snoring would do the trick," I teased, leaning against the doorframe. "I'm serious, you need to rest."

"No." She waved the remote at me. "What I need is to not be attacked in my own house on campus while my bodyguard plays with his yellow ducky in the shower."

I rolled my eyes. "It's purple and it's a soap container."

"Still a duck."

“You done?”

“No.” She yawned. Her eyes darted from the TV to me then back to the TV. “You know you can stay.” I could hear it in her voice, the subtle tremor—she didn’t want to admit it, but things felt real and she was shaken up.

Maybe I was being an asshole, but I wanted her to genuinely ask. “What part of I can’t fall asleep to noise and TV did you not get?”

She swallowed and looked down at her lap.

It wasn’t a suggestion.

I fought hard enough for air just standing next to her let alone having to lay next to her in a bed and share an intimate space with her. I had boundaries, and it seemed like she wanted to jump over every single one of them.

“Fine,” I barked out. “I’ll lay on this side.” I pointed to the right of her. “It’s closest to the door.” I pulled out my gun and placed it on the night stand then started peeling off my shirt.

I didn’t realize what I was doing until it was too late.

I wasn’t the type of guy who made mistakes, but I was currently half naked in front of her, just hesitating. Do I put the shirt back on and apologize, or do I just commit and take it off?

Putting it back on meant I was hiding something, so I roughly peeled the rest of it over my head and tossed it onto the floor only to pick it up, fold it neatly and set it on a chair and crawl into bed. “I sleep naked, so this will have to do. I get hot. No touching. No heavy breathing. And if your foot as much as points itself in my

direction—either one of them—I'll start cutting off toes until you wake up.”

She snorted out a laugh. “Wow, and kids are scared of the boogie man. I think I'd take a monster under my bed any day of the week.”

"You mean you don't like the one in it?"

Her eyes flickered to my chest. “That’s a lot of knife wounds for a living breathing monster. You sure you aren’t a ghost?”

I ran a hand over the rigid scars. “I’m sure the person who gave them to me wishes I were.”

“Who gave them to you?” She asked.

"It's not a bedtime story, Raven."

"It's still a story," she pointed out. Her eyes were so expectant, so large. How the hell was she born into this family? She deserved so much more than the bloody future she had.

Why the hell were they trying to kill her of all people?

She was hard to deal with, but she wasn't a threat.

I mean, she'd been hard to tame and literally nobody wanted to guard her, but it was more or less her tongue that got her into trouble not her ability to take a man down.

It dawned on me in that instant.

Her mouth was dangerous.

Her tongue a sword.

Quick witted, intelligent, and always on the offensive.

Dangerous—but a good ally to have and nobody would argue with whomever she chose to align with because she was solid, trustworthy, brutal.

Even Dante.

She wouldn't enter into an arranged marriage—unless it was over her dead body, but could she be seduced into one?

Fuck, is that what Louis did?

My past came slamming into the present.

Was I looking at a carbon copy?

Similar story, different main character?

"So?" She leaned in. "Who tried to kill you?" She tilted her head. "At least nineteen times. Wow, that's a large number for a large knife."

I slapped her hand away. "I don't like touching, least of all from you."

“Am I that dirty?”

"Tainted," I whispered. "And off limits. Do you really think I want to give up parts of my body in the name of temptation?"

A small smile spread across her face, a small dimple on her right cheek making itself known. "Does that mean I tempt you? Finally?"

She had tempted me then, but she was young and I was stupid, so I left the country and then lost more brain cells, fell in love, was betrayed and nearly killed.

Maybe I should have given in to that dimple then.

Maybe if I had I could have it now.

"I'm not a monk."

"Eunuch." She nodded. "That's how I'm supposed to think of you, right?"

My manhood could only take so many hits, but I nodded. "Exactly."

"Mmmmkay, then you won't mind if I get closer, now tell me my bedtime story, the one with the killing and the knives and you walking away or in your case limping away still breathing."

She wouldn't quit.

I knew her.

So I punched the pillow beneath me and began to talk. "A long time ago, in a land far, far away?—"

“Solid start.”

“I didn’t even practice.” I tried to suppress my smile and almost failed but managed to hold it in when she faced me again.

“Alright, so what happened in this far away land.”

"There was a monster who was taken in by a princess. All his life he was told he would never be anything but a monster, but she let him in on a little secret.”

“What was that?”

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"The monster was born a prince, forced to live in the darkness in order to protect his bloodline."

"Did he?"

"Did he what?"

"End up protecting it?"

My stomach lurched. "He almost lost it, but yes, it's protected."

"Good. I hate sad endings."

"Then you'll hate this story."

She reached for me, and this time I let her run her fingertips over my chest. "Tell me anyway. Maybe it will help me deal with my sadness, maybe it will help you finally deal with yours."

The arrow hit the mark.

How did she know?

How did she see it?

"Unresolved sadness," she whispered, trailing her finger down my chest and up again, "masquerades as anger—it's why you wanted me to yell at you, to react in the



moment. I knew it even though I couldn't compartmentalize anymore, even though I hated you for it—still hate you for it because I know you'll keep doing it—but you have a lot of anger too—it's hard trying to decide what box each emotion fits into."

I ignored her. "The monster believed the lie; he stepped into the sun and embraced his future—with her."

"Which hand?" Raven asked.

"Pardon?" I searched her eyes.

"The knife." Raven whispered. "Which hand did she use, her right or her left?"

Frowning, I answered. "She's right handed, but she used her left, why?"

Raven let out a rough exhale. "The truth might hurt."

"I have no heart left to break."

She smirked. "Okay."

"Tell me."

I was suddenly ravenous for her to keep speaking. Was this part of her charm? Part of her spell? Was I in over my head? Why the hell did I agree to even lie in bed with her when I'd clearly put up boundaries? When I even swore I wouldn't touch another woman for the rest of my life?

Untrusting.

Cruel.

Liars.

Fuck, I wish I liked men.

No, that was just loneliness speaking.

“So?” I grabbed her hand and gently pushed her away from my scars. “What’s the verdict?”

She swallowed and gripped my hand. I let her, only out of curiosity. Her skin was soft. I felt nothing.

I lied to myself when my heart began to thud against my chest.

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I just wanted to hear her version of the story.

"She was right handed, so in using her left, she wanted to hurt you, not kill you. Had she wanted to kill you, she would have used her dominant hand," Raven said cryptically. "She was angry, she wanted to scar you, to humiliate you, she wanted you to feel the warm blood ooze down her fingers and see it spread across your chest. She wanted to maim you—so you'd always look in the mirror and think of her. I imagine, knowing that, you wish she would have used the right hand. I wonder, knowing that, if you wish, you would have died."

I nearly stopped breathing. "I'd cut the scars from my body if I could, then."

"I'd help you if I didn't get queasy," she said in an honest voice while my stomach sank to the ground. Would I never get rid of her? Of the memories. "There's always tattoos, Ace."

I almost laughed. "Yes, I'll just get a giant De Lange crest across my chest like everyone else in my family to cover up the scars from the person who promised me forever."

I'd said too much.

I couldn't take it back.

I tried to turn away but Raven stopped me, not with her hand, or her face, but with her words. "Nobody has the power to promise forever."

Instantly, I felt stupid. “Right.”

"But a moment?" Raven sighed. "That's a promise kept."

“How so?”

She turned onto her back and looked up at the ceiling. A tear ran down her cheek colliding with the pillow. “Try it.”

“Try what?”

"Promising me a moment."

I turned onto my back and stared up at the ceiling with her then reached across the mattress and gripped her hand. “I'll hold your hand for five seconds and try to stay awake so you can sleep.”

"See?" She squeezed my hand. “Was it that hard?”

This moment? Yes.

Because for a brief second, she tempted me...

To promise her more.

12

RAVEN

The one with the annoying noise machine or lack thereof.

Ifell asleep pretty fast, only to wake up around five a.m. with Ace still sleeping, and me wide awake. I went to make coffee and because the bed was so warm, I came back and turned on Friends.

For a person who said they had trouble sleeping with noise he was sleeping pretty damn hard.

I thought back to the night before.

He'd been almost...nice.

Tame.

Maybe seeing me on the ground nearly knocked out did something to him, or maybe he was faking it. Either way, I had a good night's sleep where I didn't spend the time crying over Louis, my birthday, or my upcoming appointment, so things were at least looking kind of up.

I'd been born to deal with death.

I wasn't prepared for it to happen so soon.

Or to someone I loved.

Love.

I chewed on the word. I did love him. I loved his personality, the things he'd shared with me, our stolen heated moments. He'd never opened up a lot about his family. Then again, he'd been a bodyguard, so already he had been overstepping.

Right?

I exhaled and lifted the cup of coffee to my lips.

"Can't. Sleep. With. Noise," Ace's muffled voice said into the pillow. "Why was your first instinct to turn on Friends? I don't share food. I don't like noise?—"

"Aw, it's like Joey but has no personality. Wait, does that mean your blood sugar dropped? Do you need a protein bar to feed all those muscles this early? Should I keep them by the bed?"

"Are we bed partners now?" He groaned. "Say it isn't so."

"Oh, please, I'm a lovely bed partner."

"Noise," he repeated. "And you kick in your sleep."

I smirked into my coffee mug. "Maybe I just wanted to make sure you were still breathing. Think of it as concern for my bodyguard."

“Be concerned elsewhere.” He sat up and looked over at me.

I tried not to gasp but it was impossible to keep it in. His long hair was a mess all over his face, his green eyes penetrated mine in a way that made me feel naked, and his lips were slightly swollen like he’d sucked on them all night, and damn those cheekbones for cutting ice and doing hard work all night.

A knock sounded downstairs followed by the doorbell. I frowned and looked over at my phone.

Ten missed texts.

I’d had my phone on silent.

I quickly opened them.

Ivan

Your mom went on the trip, your dad stayed, he wants to come over and chat.

Ivan

Why aren’t you picking up? Where’s Ace?

Ivan

I know it’s early, I’ll show up first and brief you, I know the code to get in though I’ll give you a warning knock and loudly hit the doorbell so you aren’t naked.

I kept reading the texts, my head spinning, when I looked up and saw Ivan standing in the doorway staring us down, eyes wide. “Well that didn’t take long.”

Ace practically levitated away from the bed. “It’s not what you think. After the attack last night she got scared, I stayed on my side?—”

"He threatened to cut off my toes," I said cheerfully. "As if I'm not already depressed as shit. I found it really conducive for a peaceful sleep."

Ivan looked between us. "I'm honestly surprised you both survived."

"Me too," Ace grumbled.

"Heard that." I threw a pillow toward him. "Put some clothes on. Not all of us have six packs. No need to show off, right Ivan?"

"I have a six pack."



“Sure you do,” I teased.

He glared. “Last year you were so much easier to deal with.”

“Last year you were blissfully unaware of your purpose in life. Now look at you, mob boss to the De Lange family and almost married.” I grinned. “You’re proposing soon right?”

He pointed at me. “You’re distracting me. I don’t like it.” He moved his finger toward Ace. “She’s dangerous.”

“Tell me about it.”

It was almost distracting enough. The normalcy of Ivan standing in front of me giving me shit, Ace being annoyed with me as per usual.

Almost.

But Louis was missing.

Ivan’s phone went off. “Well, if you want to keep all your body parts...” He sighed. “Looking at you, Ace. Put on some clothes. Dante’s almost here, and he’s in a really cheerful mood, threw his coffee cup against the wall and everything this morning.”

“Why?” I asked.

Ivan shook his head. “Too hot? Too cold? I don’t know. He read a text and lost his

shit. I'm pretty sure it has to do with you, though, so congratulations for giving him an ulcer in his early forties."

I gave a small bow. "I do what I can."

Ivan grunted. "Clothes, and try not to misunderstand that when I say clothes I mean ones that completely cover your body. None of this, 'oh, I thought I just had to cover tits' sort of shit. My head also is on the chopping block, and I want to see tomorrow."

"Heard there's an early sunrise." I winked.

His eyes narrowed. "Like I said, dangerous. You have ten minutes."

"How could I possibly?—"

"Nine!" he snapped, slamming the door behind him.

Rude. I jumped out of bed and pulled off my clothes like I normally did, I always jumped out of the left side, walked to the shower and...

I paused as a choking curse erupted from the other side.

I winced and looked over my shoulder. "Old habits."

He clenched his teeth. "Make new ones."

With a smirk, I turned fully toward him. "Okay." I put my hands on my hips. "Look your fill and consider a new habit officially formed. They say it takes seventeen days to break one. How many do you think it takes to make one?"

He stalked toward me, shirt still off, only in grey sweatpants, his muscles bulging

with every step. “Stop being difficult!”

He picked his folded shirt off the back of the chair and shoved it at my breasts.

I didn’t take it. “I’m not being difficult.”

“It’s literally your reason for living.” He seethed. “I did the nice thing, the right thing, which is completely foreign to me, and the way you repay me is to accidentally get naked right before your dad gets here? Do you have any clue what the fuck he’ll do to me if he sees us together?”

"Tell me." A dark voice said from the door. “What the fuck do you think he’ll do? I’m curious.”

I quickly put the shirt over my breasts and stared up at my dad standing in the door and a very pale looking Ivan right behind him holding his phone up as if to say I texted and you’re the idiot for not checking. Again.

My lower lip wobbled. “I can explain. Nothing happened.”

"You’re naked." Dad tilted his head. “He’s half naked. And you’re both pissed. I don’t buy it.”

"Dad—"

"Get dressed, both of you, I want you downstairs in five minutes."

Ace gave me a light shove and walked away from me putting on his shirt in the process. I quickly ran to my closet and grabbed a set of black sweats then stared down at the grocery bag I'd brought upstairs with the pregnancy test.

When I looked inside, it was gone.

I didn't take it though.

No, I had plans to take it when Ace finally went to sleep.

So I left it on.

Oh shit.

Oh shit!

No!

"RAVEN!" Dad yelled.

It wasn't Ace's head that was going to roll—it was all mine.

ACE

The one with the lie.

I've never really believed in the saying your life flashed before your eyes and I've been in multiple near death experiences, but in that moment, I truly felt all the life leave my body as Dante held up a pregnancy test in his left hand and trained his gun on me with his right.

It suddenly clicked into place at the worst possible moment.

Her sadness.

Her mood swings.

The puking.

She was pregnant.

And I was assuming the person responsible for said pregnancy couldn't as much as defend himself. Then again, would he if he were alive? Or was that all part of his plan? Was he just as bad as her?

I shouldn't let my past taint the present.

One thing at a time.

She was possibly pregnant—more than likely.

And I was just seen naked with her in the bedroom, and she was too frail, too fragile emotionally to probably deal with it.

I had two choices.

Throw her under the bus.

Or lie down and let Dante run me over.

I stayed perfectly still while Raven rushed down the stairs. I didn't expect her to run toward me and stand in front of me the way she did, blocking the would-be bullet from her dad's gun.

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Momentarily stunned, I grabbed her by the elbow to pull her to the side, she used that same sharp elbow to jab me in the stomach. “Stop messing around, he’ll kill you.”

I pulled her again. “Well, I won’t let him kill you.”

"Stop!" She threw her left hand back just as I stepped closer. Her fist came into direct contact with my dick.

Collapsing against the counter I yelled out a string of curses and bent over. “Son of a bitch. Are you wearing rings?”

Raven held up her left hand, showing off an impressive display of four rings, including a massive one symbolizing the Alfero family that I’m pretty sure my cock just shook hands with. Perfect. “Sorry, Daddy says they can be weapons, so I always put them on when going to war.”

Dante briefly smiled. “That’s my girl.”

She grinned.

I was still hunched over dying.

And a gun was still pointed at me.

Dante moved the gun up and down, from my cock to my face and back to my cock again. “I’m going to ask you one question, and I’m going to need an honest answer. Your life depends on it.”

"Yes, sir." I stood to my full height and crossed my arms. "What's the question?"

He pointed the gun toward the ceiling. "Did you sleep with my daughter?"

I wasn't an idiot, so I didn't say, by sleep do you mean spooning or lying down and closing our eyes in the same bed or did we sleep together as in did I cuddle her extremely hard only for her to accidentally fall on my dick.

I gulped and took a deep breath. "We slept together."

It wasn't a lie, and to Dante, sleeping with her in the same bed was just as bad as touching her. There was no gray area for him; there never would be. It was always black and white because even if nothing happened, in his mind, it either eventually would or already had before he caught us.

He had no clue.

"You." He seemed satisfied with my answer as he lowered the gun. "Raven."

She licked her full lips then chewed the bottom one. She put her hands behind her and twisted them together in what I could only assume was anxiety, but she kept her chin level, her gaze completely unfazed. A certain talent every mafia kid had to learn in order to at least attempt to win arguments with their parents or when staring down the barrel of a gun.

"Yes?" she finally answered.

Dante held up the unused pregnancy test. "Is this for you? And don't lie. I'll find out no matter what."

She took a deep breath. "Yes. It's for me."



Both Ivan and Dante looked in my direction. Ivan looked confused because he knew as much as I did that I wasn't sleeping with Raven nor was I her biggest fan. If anything, he'd be less surprised if I said I ran her over with my car than that I screwed her.

Dante threw the test onto the floor, stomped on it, and then fucking shot it with his gun twice before pointing it yet again in my direction. Ah, back at square one, couldn't say I was surprised. "YOU!"

Me. Apparently I was at fault. But I knew it wasn't me. I wasn't a part of this. Louis was, however, and he wasn't here to defend himself, he wasn't here to say it was because he loved her that he stripped her naked and tasted what he swore to never touch.

I hated him even more in that minute, not for taking what I wanted—she was beautiful and terrifying in both the best and worst ways—no, it was because part of it felt wrong.

He was there to protect her from evil, not bring more chaos into her already chaotic life.

Plus, she was young, too young to be thinking about kids. Was he just an irresponsible dick or was it more sinister? And how did a person even ask that question to someone already vulnerable and hurting? Someone like Raven looked tough, but that didn't take away her humanness.

I was about to explain that I'd never touched her, that I'd kept my vow not just to her father but to every one of the bosses, when I saw it, a subtle shake of her hand followed by the slight wobble of her lower lip.

Shit.

Don't do it. Don't fucking do it.

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:13 am*

I stared at Ivan. His eyes widened like he knew I was about to fall on my own sword and drown in a pool of my own blood. It felt like I was leaving my body as I whispered, "It's my fault. If she's pregnant it's because of me." I steadied my own breathing. "I won't say it was an accident, and I'll take full responsibility for letting you down, for going back on my word not to touch her, and my code to the five families for daring to think I even had the right to look in her direction." My gut clenched, and while I knew it wasn't true, it felt like it was true right down to my soul as my heart cracked open or maybe just shook dust off itself and roared to life.

Quite possibly—by doing the right thing.

"I'm not sorry, though." I found myself continuing to talk like I couldn't stop even if I tried. "For coveting something so precious. And that's the truth."

Suddenly exhausted, I leaned against the counter. Dante lifted the gun and shot directly between my feet, missing on purpose no doubt. "Then, what do you owe me, Ace?"

I lifted my chin. "A pound of flesh."

"When can I expect it?"

I held out my hand. "Give me your knife and I'll do it now."

"Then I'll be worried you'll short me." He shook his head and shoved the gun back into his pants. "No, both of you, follow me, you were headed our direction anyway for the birthday dinners. You'll give me my pound of flesh then sing me happy

birthday with a damn smile on your face for the family. Speak of this to no one, not until it's done."

"It will be done tonight," I said again.

"Tonight?" He let out a laugh. "I'll get my flesh tonight, and this weekend, this weekend, I'll gain a son-in-law."

"Pardon?" I rasped.

"Welcome to the family. Now get in the fucking car."

14

RAVEN

A pound of flesh, a present, for the birthday boss.

In all my life, I'd never experienced such a tense car ride. Ivan was staring at his phone like any minute it was going to explode, setting him free from the stress of it all, and my dad has yet to stop glaring at Ace.

I couldn't believe he actually claimed me and made it seem like he was responsible, knowing full well the ramifications of his choice. I was so stunned I missed my moment to tell my dad he was wrong, and then it just happened.

Multiple times I could have told my dad no.

I didn't want to get married.

No, the baby wasn't his.

No, he never touched me in that way.

But selfishly I had to wonder, did I need protection even from my own dad, knowing I was carrying Louis' baby? Knowing they were still not only investigating his side of the family but trying to find out why I was targeted in the first place?

Would a baby even be safe right now in this environment? With that blood line? And why the hell was our family so deranged it was something I had to even think about?

Bloodlines.

Honor.

Loyalty.

Revenge.

Louis had always been gentle with me. The last few weeks things had shifted, though, and he'd become a bit more aggressive physically. Not like it was unwelcome; if anything, I'd been the one pressuring him telling him how much I loved him and wanted to take things further. I even offered to go to my dad, which seemed to really freak him out.

"No." He grabbed my hand. "I'd be happy just to stay by your side, maybe hold your purse or something." He winked. "Love doesn't need a label or a schedule. Let's just keep existing the way we are."

"So you don't want me?" I teased.

He cursed and looked down. “I want you on my terms, that’s all.”

“Do mine count?”

He kissed my forehead. “Always.”

A day later he’d ripped my clothes from my body, confessed his love and inability to wait, which had been both romantic and a bit out of character—and we slept together.

It was the first time.

It wouldn’t be our last.

It seemed like every day he couldn’t get enough of me, and when I teased him that I’d unleashed a beast, I’ll never forget the look in his eyes as if to say “you have no idea.”

It was the only time in our interactions that I actually hesitated and wondered if I knew exactly what I was getting into.

The next day he was killed.

The next day I lost my chance to ask him.

I cleared my throat and tried to use my voice to cut through the silence. “Happy early birthday, Dad.”

He grunted, his eyes still trained on Ace. “Told you not to touch her, you swore an

oath in blood.”

Ace leveled him with a matching glare. “And I’ll pay in my own blood, in my skin, prove that I’m loyal to you. But know this.” He leaned forward, his forearms flexing against his knees. “She comes first, she always will, so if I have to take a bullet and it’s between the two of you—sorry, but you’ll see the pearly gates first.”

Dad cracked a smile. “It’s not that easy to get rid of me.”

“I’m sure there are very creative ways. You just haven’t used your imagination enough,” Ace quipped.

Dad didn’t set the gun down but finally gave me his attention, not that I was comfortable with it in his current deliriously pissed state. “Raven, do you know why we call it a pound of flesh or where that saying came from?”

I swallow hard and mutter, “Shakespeare.”

“Yes, from the Merchant of Venice. You see, Shylock, a debt collector, required payment a merchant wasn’t able to give, which tells us one thing. One should never gamble what one is not willing to lose.” He licked his lips, his stare intense. “What if you come up short? After all, asking for a pound of flesh from Ace here is what he owes me for daring to touch you. A simple touch means I weigh it out. Gold for gold. And the rest of his payment? His life. Not only will he marry into the family and protect you until his dying day—he’ll owe us an alliance with the De Lange blood line. It benefits him as much as us, which makes me wonder the last question. Did you...” He turns his attention back to Ace. “Did you gamble with your life in order to enter into the fold?”

Ace didn’t flinch. “No, because in every scenario I can think of, there would never be one where I could seduce your daughter without her knowing exactly what was

happening, without having her consent. If anything, it's impossible not to drown in her, not the other way around. I pity the arrogant fool who thinks otherwise. If anything, I'm trapped, not the other way around."

I smiled down at my hands.

It was nice.

Him defending me.

Not just in front of my father but saving my pride in front of my father at the same time.

I owed him.

And I was calm. I wasn't upset about having to marry him. I already lost the love of my life and told myself it would be impossible to replace him—so why not get married? Why couldn't this be my journey? Everyone in my family had a path—this could be mine.

Marrying the man with the scars.

Marrying the man who hated food touching other food.

Marrying the man who loathed noise.

Marrying the man covered in knife wounds from his ex-lover so that every time he looked in the mirror all he saw were memories of her and a love he'd never have again.

We were the same, in different ways though.



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I slid my hand across the seat and grabbed his. “He’s right.”

Dad snorted. “We’re almost there. I’d be thinking where you want to make the cut of flesh, not an ounce short.”

I squeezed Ace’s hand.

He squeezed back. “My chest and part of my arm. I’ll cut out the family tattoo that links me to Sicily once and for all, and I’ll destroy my scars creating new ones, born out of honor, loyalty—love.”

My eyes flickered to his chest.

“Take the skin from my chest next to my heart as a reminder that every beat belongs to her. My life is hers.”

“And her life?” Dad asked.

“Mine,” Ace snapped.

My heart jolted in my chest. I told myself it was fear.

The shiver that ran through my soul said otherwise.

Why Are You Full of Rage? Why do I like it? The one with no answers.

Someone must have talked because by the time we made it to Dante's house the bosses were already waiting in the basement. I had the lovely job of walking next to Raven into the kitchen, while every mom, aunt, cousin—you name it—gave me a look of trepidation, sorrow, judgment, and at least half of them smiled like this was a joyous occasion.

They knew what would happen.

I was physically giving my body to her—it meant my soul would follow.

Words, after all, were so easy to toss out.

I like you.

I love you.

My heart is yours.

Words were bullshit, though, especially when it came to the time of proof. Could you actually really own a person's heart if they weren't willing to physically cut it out of their chest? Gory as it was, I wondered about things like that.

After all, didn't Saint Valentine oppose the emperor when he married couples in secret?

"What?" Raven said under her breath. "Is this really a time to tell stories?"

I frowned. "I said that out loud?"

Dante and Ivan were a few steps behind us while we made our way past the kitchen.

“Yeah.” She shivered.

I shrugged. “I like history and weird facts. Valentine defied the emperor himself for love, figuratively giving his heart, his very life in order to prove that love conquered all.”

She snorted out a laugh as we made it down the hall. “You don’t love me, Ace.”

I hated that she said that.

Maybe at one point in my life, I could have been that person, the one to give his whole heart. Maybe it really was easier then, for me to give my body? Did that make me a hypocrite?

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:13 am*

"Is my blood not enough to prove my loyalty at least?" I whispered. "You know, in Aztec tradition, they would offer their still beating hearts to the god, it was the ultimate sacrifice the most powerful way to honor was to give over the one thing keeping you alive." I took a deep breath as we made another turn. The black basement door stared back at us. "Should I then? Hand you the only thing keeping me alive? Would you believe me then? That my life is yours? That despite all the sadness in your soul and all the damage in mine—I'll live for you. Bleed for you. Die for you..."

Raven reached for my hand. One of the guards opened the ironclad door. The stairwell lights snapped on—Dante's flair for the dramatic meant fire-lit sconces lined both sides. Bastard thought it was hilarious bringing guys down here for training. At least he squelched the idea of putting bloody hand prints down it as if to show that some escaped, some didn't and got terrified enough of the souls of the dead that they decided to leave a mark for good.

"This is crazy." Raven muttered under her breath. "Maybe if I talk to him?—"

"Don't insult me by speaking to your dad and allowing me a free pass. I agreed to a pound. I'm honor bound by it and I'd never forgive you for using your tongue to speak against my honor."

"My tongue?"

"Use it for other things."

"Like what?"

"Praying," I deadpanned. "Just like the Rabbi who was martyred for teaching under Roman rule. As he died he recited the Shema by saying all my life I longed to love God with all my soul—now I finally can."

"That's beautiful," Raven murmured.

"Devotion," I said as I squeezed her hand, "is easy when painted with pretty words—devotion is hard, when it's proven with pain."

Her eyes met mine. I couldn't read her and for once she didn't respond. Her face was pale, her lips parted like she wanted to find words but was at a loss.

I inclined my head toward her right before we reached the end of the hall. The door was older than the others, wood instead of iron.

After all, it wasn't meant for torture.

It was meant for sacrifice.

And in the mafia, sacrifice must be heard by all, no matter how painful the cries might be.

The other doors were designed to keep the screams inside the room.

The one I was standing in front of was created to let the screams out like sacred bloody worship.

We stopped in front of the door.

The man guarding it changed depending on the family, but they always wore a white blindfold, from here on out. I would come back a new man; he would only see

me as the new me.

Tradition.

He was at least six foot two and appeared young from what I could see. “Name?”

“Ace De Lange.”

"Patron Saint?"

I swallowed the tightness in my throat. “The Penitent Thief, Saint Dismas.”

He went very still—too still.

The basement was quiet except for the hum of the air conditioning and the refrigeration units they kept for—things.

"The saint crucified next to Jesus. A saint who begged to be saved, who defended Jesus, who used his last few breaths as a sinner—to beg on behalf of another, and hope for forgiveness.”

"Correct.”

He held out his hand.

Slowly, I reached into my pocket and pulled out the Patron Saint Card. It wasn't stained with blood—typically it would only be stained once I was killed or left the mafia which meant I would be killed and the card would be burned again.

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The first time you burned your patron saint, you entered in.

The last time it burned, you left with it.

Dead.

"For safekeeping."

He nodded. "Proceed."

"Thank you."

The door creaked when I opened it wide. The walls were covered with pictures from generation after generation of the Alfero family. Several sculptures of patron saints were scattered around the room on different tables with candles lit.

And in the very front, a row of candles and a cross.

Dante, in my opinion, had been the most religious of all of the bosses. I never asked him why, figuring even if I did he wouldn't offer me the truth.

I just knew that there wasn't a day when a candle was not lit in this room—I would know, because for two years it was my job to make sure of it.

I took a shift a day.

I was very good at lighting a match.

The room carried a slight chill and was too quiet for comfort. Raven stood next to me as Ivan and Dante filtered in.

Behind them, Phoenix, Junior, and Serena.

Oh, shit.

I heard the footsteps.

Braced myself as King made his entrance.

The Cappa del Cappa.

The boss of bosses.

King Campisi.

He was young, like so young it was crazy—around the same age as Junior, mid-to-late twenties, and these guys were ruling the non-free world as the new bosses of the Five Families and doing a damn good job at it.

He'd been part of my training when I was in college.

He had a sense of humor that could shift into rage in any given moment. My jaw was proof of that.

"Ace." King uttered my name like a curse. "It's been a few months and already you're back in the fold cutting off your skin, seducing the daughter of the guy who raised you after swearing to protect her and—my favorite—not to touch her and here we are in Dante's creepy sacrificial room, all waiting for your blood to spill. I'd ask how it feels, but I'm pretty sure you'd say fine like the honorable guy you are when



we all know this is shitty. All of it.”

"You're wrong." I smirked at him. "Is every boss cursed with a mouth like that or just you?"

His lips twitched. "I miss our fights."

"My body doesn't."

"Don't be a stranger in the ring. You're the only one who holds in his tears, it's such a challenge trying to set them free."

"How romantic." I actually smiled.

I respected him. Liked him. Would die for him too.

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His blue eyes locked on Raven. “You can leave.”

“I stay.” She gripped my hand harder. “If I can carry his name, I can carry the sound of his screams too, right King?”

His eyebrows rose in surprise. “Well said.”

A line of weapons rested on a white table cloth behind him. A giant black candle had been lit in the middle next to the ancient silver scale.

Dante stepped forward. “One pound of flesh, nothing more, nothing less.”

With my free hand I touched my Saint Dismas necklace and kissed it. Warmth from it sent what comfort it could.

Dante’s eyes asked if I was sure, if I was really going to do this.

I hoped mine screamed yes right back.

I released Raven’s hand and peeled off my shirt, tossing it onto the table with all the sharp objects.

I turned and braced my hands on the metal table noticing the scratch marks etched in it from people who’d needed to be tied down. Not me.

Raven touched my warm back with her hand. “You don’t?—”

“Your life is mine. Your air is mine. Your body is mine,” I snapped. “My flesh is yours, my blood is yours. If I had a soul to take, I’d hand it over too.” I nodded to Dante. “Begin.”

He reached for a sharp blade and thumbed it, nodded to King. Immediately he was at my side holding my right arm while Ivan held my left.

Dante pointed the knife at my chest. “Here, I take your scars and create new ones, new memories, replacements for what was done to you, now given by what is being taken.” He dove the knife across my chest and cut. The pain was unbearable, stinging, tearing, the sound of flesh getting sliced like scissors across my chest was worse than the pain. My teeth clenched as he took some of the flesh and tossed it onto the scale then wiped the knife on the white table cloth and held it over the flame. “Weight.”

Ivan answered. “Thirteen ounces.”

Shit, that was it? It felt like they filleted my entire chest and left nothing but ribbons of skin and muscle. My legs shook beneath the weight and pain of my own body.

“Legs.” I blurted. “Take some flesh from my leg to finish it off, so that every time I walk I remember her, I think of her, of the pain, of the fact that it burns for her.” Dante didn’t hesitate, he nodded to Ivan who lifted my pant leg and quickly this time, Dante sliced.

Ivan let go of me and said a number.

I was already headed toward the ground in a heap when King grabbed the bowl beneath the scale filled with drops of blood and lifted it toward Dante. “The sacrifice is received by the five families, his pound of flesh is finished, he’s yours and she is his. What was owed has been paid in full.”

He set it down and tore a piece of the table cloth and dipped it in my blood then held it out to Raven.

Did she know the tradition?

My eyes blurred.

I bled for her.

So to honor my sacrifice she would touch it to her skin to accept it as well since it was done on her behalf.

“Don’t.” I shook my head. “Have to.”

Black spots appeared in my line of vision as a bottle of red wine was handed to me and basically poured down my throat.

"I know." She took the cloth and brushed it across her lips. "A kiss to the man who bled for me. A kiss," She leaned over and pressed a kiss to the corner of my mouth. "To the man who gave his blood—not his empty words. Your life is mine, Ace De Lange."

"Always," I whispered and collapsed against her as blessed darkness took over.

16

RAVEN

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:13 am*

The one where the scars are all the words spoken in the flesh, acted out on, bonded.

I couldn't stand the sight of him lying in bed—I couldn't stand the sight of him period. Did that make me heartless?

I honestly wasn't sure.

One thing I did know. I was part of him, and he was a part of me now. I pressed a hand to his chest. Already the wounds were soaking through his bandages. He was given morphine and told to rest.

I hadn't left his side.

He was a bloody mess. Covered in sweat, his hair stuck to his forehead while he slept.

"Idiot," I whispered. "Taking the downfall for something that you didn't even do."

"Idiot," he rasped back, his voice startling me. "For staying in the room while I did it."

I nudged his side. "You're awake."

"Kind of... wish I wasn't, but the pain meds wore off an hour ago so I've just been laying here listening to you sigh."

"And you creepily said nothing?"

"Five minutes in, and I talked myself out of it. The more time that passed, the more awkward it got, and then it was kind of nice, the silence. I mean, the minute I extend the olive branch of communication you light it on fire then search for more words you haven't used yet in the last twenty-four hours."

I narrowed my eyes. "And yet you use words to fill time and space with insults when you could just say thank you."

"It's hard to pronounce." He finally opened his blue eyes and stared at me, leaning up onto his elbows. I tried to help him, but the way he clenched his jaw like the last thing he wanted was someone touching him had me dropping my hands back to my sides.

After a minute of squirming and writhing, he was sitting back against the headboard. "So, tell me about yourself."

I gaped.

"What?" He tried to fold his arms then must have remembered he was bandaged up and, you know, missing freaking skin, and folded them in his lap. "I was serious."

I nodded. "Leave it to you to cover my ass, pass out from pain after offering my dad your skin and hand in marriage all before asking that question. Besides, you read the black folder."

The folder that carried both your triumphs and your sins on top of everything else I could have sworn that was attached to you like some sort of demon that the families couldn't get rid of no matter how many times they tried to cleanse the bloodlines.

"Ah, the black folder." He rolled his eyes. "And don't you feel like I should at least be owed a cow or something?"

"Are you high?"

He peered to his right, his eyes unfocused. "Fuck, that's a lot of morphine."

I let out snort. "Need I remind you that you gave up parts of your flesh all in order to protect my honor?"

"Life," he corrected. "To protect your life. Besides, too much is at stake and—" He eyed my stomach and shook his head. "It doesn't matter now. What matters is protecting you and the secret growing inside of you."

I touched the flatness and dropped my hand. "It's soon."

"We should make an appointment."

I forced a smile I didn't feel. "It's next week, actually."

"I'll take you."

"You don't have to?—"

"I'm your bodyguard."

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It happened too fast. The onslaught of emotions that attacked from all sides, all angles. I sat there as pain ran through my chest only to come back around and slice through again, moving up toward my brain to remind me yet again.

He's gone.

"I'm your bodyguard." He used to say that whenever he knew I felt guilty about being needy.

Except the last two weeks when things got really physical between us, then it was just this...crazy passion that seemed to never go away. It was like he'd somehow silenced his pretty words with his body, with our bodies. I had to admit that I missed those words before he died. It would have been easier, I think, had I had more memories of him those last few days, of his gentle kisses rather than his passionate ones.

Of holding his hand not hiding from my dad or drugging two made men so I could sneak him into my room.

It had been fun and out of character for him.

In the end, I trusted him.

In the end, he failed to keep his promise to stay alive.

"Right." I finally squeezed the word I needed out of my mouth and into the tense air. "You're my bodyguard, so you'll need to be there anyway. Just try not to freak out over all the pregnant women and screaming children."



He shrugged. "We're Italian. I'm used to women yelling. In fact, there is nothing more terrifying than a quiet kitchen."

I laughed, some of the sorrow dissipating. "I feel that."

"Thought so." He winced, not quite masking it with another shrug. "And maybe it's the drugs speaking, but I'll let you in on a little secret."

"Oh? Careful, you're going to use your allotted word count for the day."

"Shhhhh..." His grin was dopey, sexy, and cute. I shoved the thought away. Anyone could be cute with happy drugs. "I think I'll be okay, I put some words in a savings account for special moments like this." He held up his hand. "Shhhh, I'll make a quick withdrawal."

"I didn't say anything," I whispered.

He held a hand to his mouth again. "Shhh, ah yes, please, I just need to take out a stack of apologies followed by a few compliments and..." His eyes narrowed at me. "Double the compliments, they carry more truth than apologies, and I'd like to add in something really special."

"What's that?"

He gave me a stern look. "Can't you see I'm on the phone with the bank?"

He actually made a phone motion with his hand. Did he even realize he was doing it? No clue. The drugs must have really, really kicked in. "Sorry, go ahead, I'll wait my turn."

He cleared his throat. "Thank you." After another not needed deep breath he added.

“Yeah, she’s really pretty.”

I smiled and wagged my finger at him. “Isn’t that pre-spending compliments?”

"I won't tell if you won't."

I pretend-zipped my lips.

He “hung” up the phone and shrugged. “Alright, I have more words which means I can talk all I want and they’re really burning a hole in my pocket, so the second thing? I love big families. I always wanted kids, on account of I was raised without any siblings and had a father who’d rather sell drugs and prostitutes than spend time with me. The one and only memory I really truly have of him is when I woke up on a Saturday morning to the smell of waffles.”

"That's a nice memory." I patted his leg.

His eyes focused in on my hand and the way it was touching his thigh through the blanket. “I didn’t tell you the rest.” He licked his bottom lip then held it captive with his white teeth biting down until his skin matched. “I was a play, like a sitting duck. A cute kid that disarmed the woman waiting for a meeting. She took one look at me and figured it was safe. I mean there was a kid, a waffle, he even lied and said it was my birthday. He told her to invite her friends. Six arrived that day. Seven left to be sold on the black market for top price, all because of my blue eyes and a waffle. I still can’t eat them.”

The lump in my throat grew until it was nearly impossible to swallow the grief. “When I’m sad you tell me to get angry. Should we go burn down a Waffle House? I mean, we’ll of course make sure insurance takes care of things and get all the innocent people out.”

He smirked. “No. I just have a very strict waffle rule.”

"You don't eat them?"

"I never have, and I promised myself that the only time I ever would—would be with someone I trusted with my life, someone who saw every ugly part of me, lied, and told me my scars were my best feature. To me, a waffle represents everything I want to forget—and every burden I have to share—and all I have to give.”

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*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:13 am*

What was this feeling? Was I jealous of whoever would get to eat his first waffle with him? Why did I even care? He was a bodyguard, not my boyfriend, or my fiancé. He was the person I had to marry.

The person protecting me and Louis' baby because of the bloodline.

I slid my hand up his leg and very slowly leaned in toward his chest. "The girl who shares a future waffle with you? I kind of hate her."

"You're about to be my wife, you're allowed to hate any woman who shares food with me." He shrugged slightly then winced again. "Besides, you'll always be prettier."

"Ah, cashing out more compliments I see."

"It's true. You're beautiful."

"I'm loud, annoying, and stripped in front of you in order to drunkenly seduce you and take you into my lair."

"It could have been worse. You could have had bunk beds or one of those things, over the beds, with the pink or white." A shudder rippled through him.

I burst out laughing. "A canopy bed?"

"Oh God, imagine fucking beneath unicorns. You know something's wrong with you if My Little Pony gives you an erection."

My face hurt from smiling. "I'm going to be kind of sad when you're all healed up."

"Why's that?"

"You won't talk as much."

He swallowed and looked down. "I don't have a lot to say, Raven."

"I'll take anything as long as they're words, conversation, as long as you try."

"Will you?"

"Talk? Yes."

"Try." He licked his lips. "Will you try with me? I deserve misery, but that doesn't mean I wake up every morning cheering when it chooses me."

He means will I try despite the fact we don't get along.

Despite the fact that I hated him for years after he rejected me and vice versa.

Despite our past and uncertain future.

Will I try?

I nodded. "It was enough, your pound of flesh, for me to at the very least try, Ace."

"Swear it." His eyes started to blink slower. "Swear it and seal it."

"I swear it," I whispered and leaned forward, pressing a kiss to his forehead. "And I'll seal?—"

He pulled my head down and kissed me deep.

He tasted warm.

Safe.

Intoxicating.

For one brief moment, grief left.

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:13 am*

For one tiny flicker, I really was his.

And then the nausea came again.

Not from the kiss, but from the betrayal.

I was carrying another man's baby, and my heart was buried right along with his body.

I had nothing to give this man.

He'd given me his flesh.

All I had were my words.

We each only had half of what we needed.

We would make it work.

I pulled back as his head lolled to the side. The last words he whispered were, "I haven't had one of those in a while."

"A kiss?" I whispered leaning forward.

He shook his head and frowned, his eyes not opening. "No...a really good dream."

"Dream?" I repeated. "What dream?"

“The one where I finally told someone about the waffles—and she kissed me anyway.”

And to think...just a few days ago, he was still calling me Little Nightmare. I spent the rest of the night awake.

And when midnight hit—my birthday.

I cried.

I just wasn't sure if it was for him.

Or me.

17

ACE

The one with the sad beginnings don't always mean happy endings.

"They're staring at me," said Ivan on my left. "Look." He was pointing at a few dozen of the saints that were etched out of pure marble just watching us from the ceiling waiting for us to burn in hell. At least that's what it felt like.

I hadn't seen Raven since her birthday.

I'd been in and out from the pain meds and finally told Sergio, our resident doctor, that if he gave me any more morphine I was going to ketamine his ass and make him watch me, paralyzed, while I carved my initials in his thigh powerless to stop me.

It got a bit more graphic but it worked. He said I was the worst patient he'd ever



had—and he'd treated Phoenix—and let me heal back on campus, which meant no Raven.

She'd deserved one last day with her family.

Both she and her dad shared the same birthday weekend.

When she came home later that night, I heard her stumble into bed and then Ivan's footsteps.

He'd taken over as bodyguard for the night.

## Page 51

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:13 am*

And now it was time to get married.

Anxiety was a crushing evil bitch, weighing down my head in so many unnecessary ways as I stared at myself in the gaudy gold mirror they had in the groom's room—the temporary groom's room that doubled as a prayer room during the day.

I bet they'd have to sanctify the damn place once I left.

In fact I'd strongly suggest it.

Did Raven remember our conversation?

I briefly recalled the waffle story—hating myself for being so vulnerable and weak with her. I knew it made it that much easier to get hurt. I would protect her, but who the hell was going to protect me?

I was extremely good at lying to myself about the whole situation. How could a person you don't even love possibly hurt you?

But every time I asked that question and got more worried about getting hurt the more I realized I'd never lost the feelings I had for her—if anything, they'd just shifted into something more terrifying that I'd ignored for so long that now it was impossible to hide the monster in the closet or under the bed anymore.

Fuck, I'd spent years feeding it and now it needed more.

The kiss hadn't helped anyone but the monster.

And her lips tasted like sugar.

“Hey!” Ivan nudged me. “Did the mirror personally offend you? Any longer and I’d think you were going to try to carve an Ace sized outline in the glass with laser beams.”

I shook my head. The church still smelled like loss somehow, that and the fresh flowers we’d purchased in order to somehow cover up what had already taken place a week ago—Louis’ funeral. “Sorry, lost in my thoughts.”

There was no way Raven was handling this well. Six days ago she was walking down the aisle to give a eulogy. Today, she’d be walking down the aisle to say yes to a man she didn’t love while being tortured by the dead soul of the one she couldn’t be with.

I refused to fight a ghost.

Just like I refused to be jealous of one. A soft knock sounded at the door.

Ivan swiftly moved toward it. I smelled her before I saw her. “She can come in.”

Ivan moved away and clicked the door softly behind him. I gave myself a few seconds before lifting my head—knowing full well that just seeing her in her wedding dress would steal the breath from my body. I thought I was prepared.

I wasn’t.

Her off-white dress was form fitting all the way down to the ground. It was strapless with an overlay of black lace that reached just below her breasts before wrapping around her back and joining down the train toward a pool in the floor.

She held a blood red bouquet.

I wondered if it was symbolic or if she really did just love roses.

It felt like blood was staring back at me, blood I'd spilled, blood I'd given to her, and more blood I would be taking.

Hers, his.

I hated him in that moment, hated him for leaving her.

For being selfless enough to save her.

For being someone I couldn't fight with even if I wanted to steal her.

It would be an impossible war for the rest of my life—one I would never win—and I allowed myself the resentment in that moment, even though I deserved less than what I was actually getting.

Raven Alfero had always been my nightmare.

Right now she looked better than my dreams.

## Page 52

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:13 am*

Her long hair was swept away from her face in large curls, her makeup was light, her lips a pale pink.

“Hi.”

I almost laughed. “That’s not a lot of words for someone who normally stores them to use as weapons later.”

Her smile was slow, deliberate. “Maybe it was a test.”

"Did I pass?"

She gently set her flowers down on the nearby black leather chair. “I bet it’s killing you not to know.”

She wasn’t wrong. “What can I help you with?”

"Is there another way?" she asked. “Out of this? And if there was, would you take it?”

I leaned against the table and crossed my arms. “His family went into deep hiding, if they showed their faces they’d be killed on the spot—and you’re carrying his child. What do you think would happen if his family knew or if yours did? They’d want an immediate alliance and your dad would be honor bound to keep it depending on whatever terms they had with us?—“

“Terms,” She stated flatly. “What do you mean terms?”

Shit. “The same as mine I’d expect. As a body guard if we touch you or go back on our word then we owe you a pound of flesh, a body, a soul, you name it. I don’t know what his contract said, but I’m assuming it took into account pregnancy.”

"Would I get sent away?"

“I highly doubt your dad would allow it.”

“So it would start a conflict?”

“Most likely.”

“So there isn’t a way out?”

"Am I so bad?"

"You’re beautiful to look at and terrifying to talk to on even your best day when you cash out all your words, Ace." Her eyelashes fluttered closed for a moment, then she lifted them and gazed at me, a half-hearted smile teasing her lips. “You’re a killer, impossible to read half the time, and you look like you’d rather be tortured than seduced.”

I flinched.

“Sorry.” She crossed her arms. “That was harsh.”

“Truth is rarely pretty.” It stung, though. It stung because I’d told her about the waffles when my guard was down with my physical pain.

She’d sat next to me.

She'd touched me.

I'd allowed it for one brief second.

To put down the shield, the pain, to wonder about the road that led to her and if it could be more than a signature on a piece of paper.

I wondered about a soul exchange.

And now I was struggling to put the shield back, to build the castle I'd allowed to get slightly destroyed by her easy smiles and weaponized words.

"I'm sorry," I finally said. "That I'm not what you wanted."

It was all I could say.

"It's not your fault."

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I wasn't sure I could actually feel worse, and I was trying like hell to find the hatred and annoyance again but when you're both in physical and emotional pain it's fucking harder than attempting to collect water with your hands.

"Ace?"

"Yeah?"

Tears filled her eyes. "I'm sorry I can't have breakfast with you."

I knew what she meant.

The knife inched into my chest just a bit further and twisted to the right, the left. "I'm fasting anyway."

"Good." A tear slid down her cheek. She wiped it away. "That's good."

No. It was lonely.

It was terrible.

It was my future. "Right," I nodded toward the door. "You should go but before you do I want you to do me a favor."

"What?"

"Don't look so worried." I forced a smile that felt brittle and full of a choking loss I



hadn't even begun to realize yet. "When you walk down your aisle, my gift to you is this. Close your eyes. When you take those steps imagine him at the end of the aisle, not me. When you're told to say your vows think of his voice, when you're angry you can say you wish it was him, and in the end, when I kiss you, believe the lie that it is. Don't believe in the sweet nightmare that we have—cling to the beloved dream." I choked the last part out. "It's okay—to cling to him instead of me."

The final words burned when they fell from my lips.

And I felt it—in the moment.

The shield creaked back into place.

The walls were once again erected.

The pain she'd caused was nothing more than a few scars against the brick.

Feelings were for the weak.

My only job was to stand by her side.

And live the nightmare so she could live her dream.

18

RAVEN

The One where you kiss the wrong groom while waiting for the right one.

"It should have been him." I didn't say the words out loud, but I knew Ace heard them anyway. With him, I realized, I didn't need all the words. As much as he made

fun of me for it, he knew just as much with the unbearable heaviness of silence.

I could see the shift in Ace's stance like whatever we'd shared over the last two days was gone, completely drained from his soul and in its place the devil I always knew.

The one I needed when I was in pain.

The one I probably needed now in order to get through this.

If he said one more thing that was sweet, one more thing that made me feel undone, I would crack.

It was something I couldn't afford to do.

"I'll pretend it's someone else if you do," he whispered with a smirk. "Believe me when I say I could be getting laid right now instead of..." He shrugged. "Saying I do."

"And I couldn't?" I fired back.

Ace leaned in, his lips twisted into a wry smile. "Clearly, you already did."

"Low blow."

"Was there blowing involved, though?" he snapped.

"God, why was I even feeling?—"

"What?" His blue eyes lit up. "Feeling what?"

"Nothing," I lied. "Nothing but hatred, disgust, but for a second I did feel guilty about the scars."

"I'm used to them. Old and new, they all mean the same thing, a part of me I never deserved in the first place, gone forever," he rasped. "We should go, it's time. I'll be the one waiting at the end of the aisle with a scowl in my face."

I rolled my eyes. "I'll try not to sprint."

As I turned, his hand landed on my shoulder. He squeezed and pulled me back against him. "Remember to close your eyes, remember to imagine him, it will make saying yes to the monster a lot easier."

I swallowed the lump in my throat. "Says the monster."

“I would know best. After all, he has to wrestle with his own reflection in the mirror on a daily basis.”

I took a deep breath. “I can do that.”

“Good.” He cursed under his breath and dropped his hand. “That’s good.”

I didn’t remember walking to the church doors, only that my dad was standing there in his black tux with his arm out like I had to take it, like I had no choice.

A week ago I took this long walk and thought my life was over.

I thought it couldn’t get worse.

Today I wasn’t saying goodbye.

Today I was saying hello to a brand new life I’d never asked for, one I didn’t want—with Ace, in order to protect the one that was taken from me with Louis.

Before Louis I would have maybe been excited. Ace and I didn’t get along for obvious reasons, but at one time, he was all I saw when all he did was look through me.

"You look beautiful," Dad said.

I took his arm. “Thank you.”

“Deep breaths,” he whispered. “It will all be over soon.”

How wrong he was.

How very wrong.

"Yeah." I was so good at lying to my dad's face now. "It's for the best."

His eyes narrowed. "You look anxious."

"I'm happy." Another lie as the music started.

The doors opened, the choking sound of the organ echoed off the large walls of the sanctuary. Everything was dripping in beautiful lilacs and at the front dozens of red roses like the ones I was carrying.

It smelled like perfume.

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It felt like death.

Each step that brought me closer to Ace was like betrayal, a knife getting shoved deeper and deeper into my chest or maybe deeper into Louis.

I stumbled around ten feet from the front.

Ace locked eyes with me and pointed to the corner of his right eye then closed it. Right, close my eyes. Imagine Louis.

So I did.

I imagined his brown eyes and blond hair. I imagined his infectious smile and the way he always talked into his wrist like he was part of the secret service. He'd gotten more serious toward the end; then again, we'd gotten serious.

Imagine you're walking toward him.

Imagine it's Louis, not Ace.

We stopped walking. Dad turned me toward him and leaned in kissing my left, then my right cheek.

"Who gives this woman?" the priest asked.

"Her mother and I," Dad answered in a bold voice.

Ace stepped down and held out his hand.

Dad placed mine in his and it was over.

I was already Ace's by that one small movement, and another De Lange had joined the Five Families by way of marriage.

Just like that.

I smiled at Ace, and the smile he gave back to me almost seemed real except for the tears of anger in his eyes.

His hands even shook when it was time to exchange the rings, right along with this voice. Anyone watching would have thought he was obsessed with me, in love even.

If only this marriage wasn't a farce.

"You may now kiss your bride," the priest announced.

Ace cupped me by the chin with both hands and very gently pressed a soft kiss to my mouth, his lips moving smoothly over mine. I was thrown off by how gentle the kiss was, how he had the perfect amount of pressure to make it look believable but not so much that I felt like he was about to invade my mouth.

People clapped all around us.

I continued to imagine it was Louis and clung to Ace.

When his tongue met mine. I let out a gasp and kissed him back, my arms wrapping around his neck while he lifted me off the ground.

Cheers and whistles erupted as he ended the kiss and pressed a final one on my nose, my body slid down the front of his.

What a mess.

Because for a second—I forgot about Louis completely.

For a second. It was only Ace.

19

ACE

The one with the smart quotes, if it's not love it's just a mess and if it's a mess someone's bound to get hurt, and if you're the someone thinking about the mess, it's one hundred percent you.



The reception was loud.

Everyone was drunk.

And I was tired of pretending to be happy. I wasn't a good actor anyway, and the more times I had to take pictures with family, with Raven specifically, the more I felt my soul get stolen from me. It was torture, seeing her in her gorgeous dress, tasting her lips, knowing that they weren't even mine to taste to begin with.

I decided the only way to absolutely cut my feelings off was to be a complete asshole once we were alone, if that meant I stayed in the bathtub of our hotel room or slept on the floor—so be it.

I couldn't sleep next to her, not in the same bed, not in my current state. I'd say something stupid or I'd be tempted to ask if I could hold her.

The last time I held someone they let me only to push me away and stab me days later, so maybe I'd put that one on the shelf permanently.

“Hey!” Ivan slapped me on the back and leaned against me. “I’m a bit drunk, but it seems like you’re watching Raven like you want to either hunt her and take her down the street to the hotel or you want to see if she’ll stand in front of your car while you put it in drive.”

I snorted out a laugh and shoved away his offer of wine. “Nah, I want to be sober for tonight.”

His eyes narrowed. “You mean?—”

“Don’t worry about it. Her body is mine, right? Her life is mine now?” I smirked and walked off then did just like he said. I grabbed her, put her over my shoulder, and walked toward the doors.

She’d see everyone tomorrow anyway.

Tonight I had to prove to everyone she was mine.

Dante gave me an interesting look once I stopped at the door. I couldn’t decipher it but he seemed to be projecting a mixture of amusement and respect. “Beautiful wedding.”

“Yeah.” I looked between him and Phoenix. “It really was.”

"Put me down!" Raven smacked me in the ass.

I heaved her higher. “Save that for later.”

“You disgusting piece of?—”

“Shhhh, your dad’s right here, plus he knows why we got married, just can’t seem to keep our clothes on when we’re around each other.”

She grumbled something as I nodded my head and walked us to the waiting limo out front. I set her down and let her crawl in on her own then followed suit.

The car immediately started to pull out of the church and onto the road toward the hotel.

We were quiet.

I could still smell her. Taste her. My body wanted her.

She shifted in the leather seat.

I swallowed for the tenth time.

We finally pulled up to the hotel.

“Your bags are already in your room, sir,” our driver said.

I turned and regarded him. He was familiar...but not one of our guys. “Thank you.” Normally I’d ask if he was new. Instead, I grabbed Raven’s hand and walked through the double doors of the boutique hotel, Cellar. It was owned by one of our families and had one of the best rooftop bars in the city. Every room was a suite and had a fireplace along with an extensive private cigar selection.

"Stay close," I said under my breath when we went to check in.

Already, they had our key cards out for us.

I took the cards and didn’t say a word to the receptionist. They knew not to speak to me unless spoken to first. It was one of the rules if you worked for any of our businesses.

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Our business was ours.

Theirs was theirs.

We walked to the elevators. I looked over my shoulder. Our driver was currently in the lobby on his phone.

Weird and he wasn't acting according to typical protocol.

Raven started to get onto the elevator. I pulled her back and around the corner and put my hand over her mouth.

Footsteps sounded. "Yup, I understand, I'll make it clean, they'll probably be too busy to notice. Hah, right? Boss mad? Shocker. Yeah, yeah, heads will roll, the favorite phrase this week. I'll call when it's done."

He was an idiot.

Nobody went after us without signing their own death sentence. He must be that green or that much in debt, my guess was the latter. People tended to become extremely blind to things when money was brought to the table.

He got in the elevator.

I pulled Raven with me and walked into the same one and pressed her up against the elevator wall and ran my hand up her thigh. "Fuck you're so ready for me, aren't you?" I leaned into her neck. "Go with it."

"Ace!" She let out a moan. "We're in the elevator. Aren't their cameras?"

"Nope, not in this one." I grinned, reached for my gun, quickly turning around and pointing it at his head before he knew what was happening. He'd been watching, distracted. "Hi sunshine, anything you'd like to tell us?"

He gaped.

"They must have offered you a lot knowing you'd probably get killed tonight, so that means they're testing security. Well, they'll have to get through me to get to her and I don't fuck around." I pointed the gun at his left knee cap and pulled the trigger. "Ouch, must hurt."

He stumbled, grabbing for the side of the elevator car, screaming, "You lunatic! You broke my knees!"

I shot the other kneecap. With another scream, he collapsed against the floor as blood spewed down his pant legs.

"No, now I broke both of your knees. Who do you work for?"

He went quiet. Then, through gritted teeth, he said, "Kill me."

I shrugged. "Too easy. I'm more curious than anything. Why don't you crawl back to where you came from and let them know I'd be open to talking so we can put all this violence behind us, hmmm?"

He frowned. "What?"

"You heard me." I hit the penthouse button. "This is us. If you follow, breathe, or sneeze in our direction I'm putting a bullet between your eyes, got it?"

"Yes."

"Good." I pulled Raven with me off the elevator. "Have a lovely evening. What was your name again?"

He stared me down. "Chuck."

"Night, Chuck." I hit the down button and walked over to the penthouse door, scanned our key card and started shrugging out of my jacket.

"Brutal." She sighed. "Even for you. He's going to have to crawl to get anywhere. He'll be wishing for death."

"The human body can handle a lot, Raven. Besides, he was staring at your ass, and that's my ass."

"Your ass?"

"Yes, I hissed. "Because your life is now mine, and your body as well, so staring at your ass is uncalled for. He's lucky I didn't kill him."

She sat down on the white comforter and leaned back on her elbows. "Didn't take you for the jealous type."

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She was so stunning, sitting the way she was. I wanted to look anywhere but into her hypnotic eyes. I had no choice, though. I had a lifetime of this ahead of me. I might as well accept it and say thank you even though I'd be living a life of deserved torture. I wondered in that moment if her child would think of me as their dad? Would he or she call me that? Would she let them? Why did I care? This was a business arrangement, nothing more, nothing less. I had to think of it that way so my heart didn't rip to shreds inside my chest and leave nothing left but lungs without the ability to breathe in oxygen. "I don't like sharing, remember?"

"I do." Her eyes flickered to my chest. "I should probably go shower or something and get ready for?—"

"No need." I pulled her to her feet and started to help her take off her dress. "I'll get you completely undone first and then I'll draw you a bath, not too warm, but warm enough to help soothe your muscles."

"That's actually nice of you."

"I thought of drowning you in it later but?—"

"Very funny." Her hands shook as I slowly unzipped the back. She had gone for a modern dress thing, very modern, something that screamed Raven Alfero. I loved the easy access. I had no buttons to fight with and yet it didn't matter did it? How fast or how slow I took off that dress and let it pool on the floor by her blood red heels.

I could look but not touch.

Remember her taste and never have it again.

I slowly tugged the dress down once it was loose enough and let it fall to the ground in a heap. Inwardly, I cursed as my eyes roamed over her shoulder blades and curved back. Her plump ass was barely covered with a scrap of lace that rose up around her ass cheeks and cut into her hips. My hands would fit perfectly there. My thumbs would rub down her skin while my fingers pulsed with the need to dig into her flesh and my mouth watered to nibble down her neck.

It was stupid but it was an excuse, wasn't it? To touch her just once. I ran my fingertips down her spine. "You're cold."

"I'm half naked," she answered crossing her arms in front of her.

She wasn't wearing a bra.

One.

Two.

Three.

I had three seconds with her skin before my hands dropped to my sides. "I'll go draw you that bath now."

"Wait." She turned, her arms covering her breasts. "Can we maybe just sit in bed for a while? I'm still a bit freaked out over what happened in the elevator, it's been a long week and—" She made a face.

"Are you going to be sick?" I asked.



She shook her head, her eyes narrowed. “No, I thought I was, I just need to sit, I think.”

I didn’t realize how pale she’d gotten just standing there. “Come on.” I pulled her into my arms and gently carried her to the front of the bed and pulled the covers down. “I’m not a total monster; I can at least keep my wife warm.”

The minute the words left my mouth, I regretted them.

Not because I was embarrassed, but because she flinched.

The word wasn’t a comfort; it was almost an insult, a dirty reminder to her of who she belonged to and why.

Every time my walls started to crumble, she was right there to remind me why it was smarter not to care, why I needed to keep them fully erect to survive.

I never ended up drawing her bath. Instead, she was asleep in minutes. I went to the mini bar, poured some whiskey, then went outside and sat.

Maybe the sins of my past brought me to this place.

“Did you ever love me?” I begged, blood soaking my shirt as her face filled with rage, she held the knife over my chest. She’d drugged me so it was hard to move, yet I felt every single stab of the knife.

“You?” She laughed. “I loved you for what you could give me and what did you do? You got all noble. I want something you can give me, power. Quit? Quit the family business? You want to leave all of this? I would never go with you. It was either pull you into the family or kill you—we’ll keep this our little secret, though, because I did at one point have a flicker of attraction toward you.” She knelt down and pressed the

tip of her knifewhere my heart slowed. It sliced into my skin. “Besides, did you really think you had anything to offer me other than your name and the muscle behind it, Ace?”

Yes. Because she’d been the only one other than Dante to show me affection. The only one to tell me I wasn’t broken, that I was loved.

And when I really thought about it in that moment, it included Raven, even Tempest, my family.

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What I'd had with her wasn't real, I'd just wanted it to be. I wanted something I achieved on my own, not a family or girlfriend given to me out of pity.

Once a forgotten De Lange, always a forgotten De Lange.

I slammed back the whiskey.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. I didn't even check the screen before answering.  
"What?"

The line was quiet for a brief minute. "Wow, you clearly didn't get laid tonight."

"No shit." I gripped the phone harder in my hand. "Did you need something, Ivan?"

"Found your guy crawling down the street, thankfully one of our inside guys was on patrol, picked him up and dropped him off on our doorstep."

"What a gift."

"And it's not even my birthday." He laughed. "Anyway, through much blood loss and screaming we think we have a lead."

"Oh?" Finally something. "Do you know why they were after her?"

"Not her," Ivan whispered. "Him."

"Louis? Why?"

“He said that Louis stole something from his boss and that he was getting revenge, it apparently has nothing to do with the Alfero’s.”

“That doesn’t explain the break in.”

“Unless...” Ivan sighed. “The person was after Louis in order to get to Raven. It’s possible it’s someone we know and it’s possible they were trying to intimidate you to get close to her, to maybe take her. Has she had any boyfriends in the past before you two er, hooked up, because let’s be fully honest, there is no way it was more than a one night stand. I don’t care what shit you try to spin.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. “It wasn’t a one night stand. It wasn’t even one night.”

“What?”

“Louis. It was Louis.”

“And we’re back at square one then, aren’t we?” He cursed. “Keep close to her, someone wants everyone out of the picture, including you. And someone desperately wants her.”

“Over my dead body.”

“That’s the spirit. Well, enjoy your blue balls and whiskey. My wife’s waiting for me.”

“Screw you?—”

He hung up.

I almost threw my phone over the balcony when I made eye contact with someone

several floors below and froze. He was wearing a dark baseball cap and staring up at me. He briefly nodded his head like he knew me and then crossed the street.

Strange.

Maybe he was just being polite or noticing my semi-nervous breakdown. Either way, I ignored it and went back inside the hotel room and watched her sleep.

The sheet dropped below her breasts.

I walked over and looked away when I tugged the sheet back up. She grabbed my hand. "Lay with me."

Did she understand what she was doing to me? What she would be doing to me over and over again until the day I died?

I didn't think it through.

Or maybe I did.

Maybe I wanted the torture.

Or maybe the idea of being anywhere but by her side was more painful than being by her side knowing she wished it were someone else.

“Okay.”

I lay down on the bed next to her. “Promise me.”

“What?”

“You’ll protect me and the baby. My life is yours, so is this baby’s.”

“As mine is yours.”

“Will I be a good mom, you think?”

I smiled up at the ceiling. “The baby will probably know how to talk before it can walk, so yeah?—”

She rolled toward me. “Mean.” She flicked my nose. “Sorry I fell asleep on our wedding night.”

“You’re tired, sad, and pregnant. What else would you do?” I shot her a quick glance and looked back up at the ceiling.

Her hand slid around my neck, slowly tilting my head toward hers. “I’ll be loyal. I swear it.”

“I know.” That was the problem. She was too damn loyal, to his memory, to my choice to take the brunt of everything.

Loyalty be damned, I just wanted to kiss the word out of her body and purge it from her soul.

Her eyes locked in on my mouth. “Remember when you rejected me?”

“Vividly. Why?”

“Do you have the will power now?”

“Absolutely,” I lied. “Why?”

“Because you’ve been trying really hard not to look down,” she teased.

I cracked a smile. “I’m not perfect, and your body is mine. It’s not wrong to stare at what belongs to me, right?”

“Then can I stare at what belongs to me?”

Yeah, because that was a good idea, to show her a fully erect man in bed with her just waiting to pounce. “If you want, but I highly doubt it’s a good idea.”

“Why?”

“You scare easily.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Do not.”

“You slept with the lights on for five years after watching the entire *Scream* series and then blamed me for turning it on in the first place—which I didn’t.”

“You were older. It was more believable,” she pointed out.

I rolled my eyes. “You scream when you see horseflies.”

“They bite.”



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“So do I. My point is made.” I started to move when she grabbed me by the arm and then crawled on top of me, straddling me completely. “What are you doing?”

“I’ll regret this.”

My heart sank. “Me? You’ll regret me?”

“No, I worded that wrong. What I’m saying is that I know you aren’t getting anything out of this, and while I can’t move on because it feels like betrayal, I can at least give you a wedding night, right? I can do this for us. And then we just live as really good roommates.”

“I take it back, you’re scarier than me, I don’t like this story at all.” I started to move away from her, lifting her body off me. “I’m not a pity fuck, Raven.”

Her face fell. “I didn’t mean?—”

“Come to me.” I sat up and rubbed my hands down my face. “Come to me when the ghost of him is gone, when nothing stands between us but skin, when we’re emotionally bankrupt and completely stripped of everything that makes us human, when it’s just us against the world. Come to me then. Not now, when it’s convenient, when I’m convenient. I may be a monster, I may be a De Lange, but one thing I have left is a tiny ounce of pride. Let me keep it, Raven. God, let me keep it.”

I left.

I grabbed a pillow and the bottle of whiskey and went to the balcony to cool off.

She didn't see how weak I was.

Or that my hands shook.

Or that she'd hurt me in unimaginable ways. How could she know that my ex's very last action was to tie me up and take advantage of me only to say I would have been no different than the same De Lange whores we used to sell on the market.

Just as tarnished.

A means to an end.

A body to use.

A soul that was lost long ago.

If Raven was lost in her grief, then I was lost in my inability to gain back what had been taken from me and the shame that went with it.

I squeezed my eyes shut.

Choose not to feel.

And if you must, pick rage, it hurts so much less than love.

20

“The One where you hate who you've become and you choose it anyway.”

Raven

“He’s good with kids.”Serena was sitting next to me at my dad’s house. We were supposed to be opening wedding gifts then heading back to campus, but my dad decided it would be more fun to not just open gifts but also throw a random cornhole tournament.

Any excuse to play games without violence, though most of their tame games ended up with bets, bullets, and bruises.

I watched Ace grab Spiderman and spin him around, at this point since they were all in super hero costumes it was just easier to call them by their hero names.

“Oh shit, Thor’s throwing a fit.” Serena stood. “Thor, sit your ass down and give the hammer back to Batman. you know how pissed he gets when you take shit out of his hands!”

“Shit, shit, shit!” Boss Baby started screaming.

I frowned. “Since when is Boss Baby a hero?”

Serena slowly craned her neck in my direction. “I swear if you ask that around any of my children I will set you on fire and make S’mores.”

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Children's laughter sounded in front of us as Ace put on a Sully costume from Monsters Inc. "I take it he too is a hero."

"EVERYONE IS A HERO!" Godzilla walked up to us and tucked her hands behind her back. "Right, Mama? They just need a chance!"

I grinned. "Does that mean monsters don't exist?"

She shrugged her scaly shoulders. "Monsters are just scared heroes who don't get enough hugs because they're afraid that they'll like them too much and won't get them anymore."

Girl had a point.

"Honey..." Serena let out a patient sigh. "You're right, but that doesn't mean we just go and hug perfect strangers."

"BUT ACE LOOKED SAD!"

Ace? My Ace? My next breath stalled in my lungs. When did I start thinking of him as my Ace? What? "He's, um just tired from protecting me."

"Oh." She folded her hands in front of her costume and whispered. "Is it because you snore when he cuddles you too hard?"

"OKAY, THEN!" Serena jumped to her feet. "How about a snack to fill that mouth of yours, Godzilla?"

“Good luck with that!” I laughed and watched Serena scold her as they walked off back toward the house. It was a beautiful spring day, I could almost tuck my sadness away, or at least pretend it didn’t hurt to breathe as much.

The sound of laughter around me seemed to reach the skies in that moment. I touched my stomach. My appointment was tomorrow, right after class; Ace was obviously going with me. Why was I even finishing my senior year? I only had a few classes left anyway; couldn’t I just test out of them? Or wait a year?

I chewed my lower lip and reached for my water and took a sip.

Batman started walking up to me then took Serena’s empty seat. It had to be Ace, the costume was clearly meant for a small adult, his muscles protruded and the mask did nothing to hide his perfect jawline.

“I like the cape,” I finally said.

“Capes get caught in things. What super hero actually wears a cape? It’s stupid, it’s just one more thing the bad guys can grab.”

Ivan walked by us and stopped. “He still complaining about the cape?”

“SIT DOWN, AQUAMAN!” Ace yelled.

I frowned. “He’s wearing a Finding Nemo costume.”

“Cinderella got confused.” Ivan pointed.

I nodded. “I think I missed the part where she carried a bow and arrow.”

“It’s there, trust us, do not engage.” Ivan kept walking, his fish tail moving behind

him.

I burst out laughing. “How did you guys get roped into playing with the kids?”

“I offered,” Ace said, surprising me. “But the others lost at cornhole so this was their punishment. I think Ivan has it the worst; guy hates eating fish let alone wearing a bright orange costume.”

Yelling ensued on the other side of the grass where Ivan was trying to pour beer through his mask while a small cowboy kicked at his feet.

I turned to him, raising an eyebrow. “I take it Woody has a strict no drinking policy when in costume.”

“Mmm, on account of it ruins the magic for the kids.”

“Isn’t that Bam Bam’s friend? Who’s like four?”

“Three, actually.”

“That’s terrifying.”

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“Tell me about it. I almost asked if he wanted to do my taxes, I’m surprised Walt hasn’t jumped in and offered a calculator to the kid.” Ace pulled off the mask and dropped it onto his knee. “We should get back; you have an early day tomorrow.”

“You sure about going with me?”

He frowned. “Where else would I be?”

“Anywhere but a doctor’s office surrounded by screaming kids?” I offered.

“Again, I’m used to the loudness. It’s the quiet I can’t stand.” He stood. “I’ll go get the car.”

“Don’t forget to take off your costume!” I yelled.

He started peeling it off while he walked. I almost joked that he should take it home with him and then stopped myself. I mean what would we do with it? Stare at it? I wasn’t thinking those sorts of thoughts, right? I loved or had loved Louis; it was wrong to even think of Ace like that, and yet as his body flexed with each step, I couldn’t deny he looked damn good in black.

“Damn.” Ace swung his gaze around the doctor’s office. “That’s a shit ton of brochures that woman’s stuffing into her bag.”

Panic hit me instantly, and I grabbed his biceps. “Do we need that many? Should I have bought a book? Do you think there’s going to be a test?”

His blue eyes narrowed. “You’re an aunt and cousin to so many kids we could have our own school—legally—if there’s a test you’d pass it by simply existing. Why are you so stressed?”

I shrugged, trying to appear nonchalant even as tsunami waves of fear rolled through me. “I don’t know. I guess I just, I don’t know, I mean the test was inconclusive today, and I have been feeling better, so maybe I’m not pregnant after all or I lost the baby. What if I did something wrong?”

He reached for my hands. “Worrying about it isn’t going to change anything. No matter what, you walk in there with your head held high and me by your side. It’s why we have doctors. And you’ve been doing all the right things, Raven.”

“Thanks to you,” I grumbled. “I wasn’t even taking prenatal vitamins.”

“Easy mistake, and I live to make you feel inferior,” he teased. “Stop overthinking it.”

“Fine.”

“Good.” He leaned in then stopped himself.

Wait, was he going to kiss me? On the head? “Hey, Ace were you?—”

“Raven Alfero?” The nurse called me back.

“That’s us,” Ace announced standing.

I swore I could feel every single person in that small waiting room crane their necks in our direction to get a good look at him, then me, then back at him. Yes, I was aware, he was a god walking among men, gorgeous, tall, muscular, a stunning smile,



perfect hair.

Which was why I almost tripped him when we followed the nurse.

He elbowed me. “Seriously?”

“They’re staring!”

“They always stare!” he snapped back. “They’re scared. I’m tall, and I look like a killer.”

I nearly ran into the nurse’s back as she cleared her throat. “Now we’ll just take your height and weight.”

I kicked off my shoes. “You do not look like a killer.” I faced the wall. “Right? He doesn’t look like a killer!”

The nurse forced a brittle smile. “No you look like a very nice young man.”

“See?” I threw my hands up while she wrote down my height and weight. “You just give off hot dad vibes along with a phobia of complex carbs.”

Ace scowled. “Hot dad vibes? Please, I know I’m terrifying.”

“Meh, more like terrifying to think about how you’d just take them against the wall instead of the bed.” I winked at the nurse. “Right?”

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She looked between us. “Um, I’ll just take you into the room now.” She cleared her throat a few times while I sat on the table. “I need your blood pressure.”

“Ouch.” I lifted my arm. “Sorry, my neck’s been hurting.”

Ace was immediately at my side. “Why didn’t you say anything?” His hands moved to my neck and then his fingers were digging in and I was lost in ecstasy. “Does that feel good?”

“Oh, God.” I gripped the edge of the exam table. “So good. Don’t stop.” I leaned against his body.

He moved his hand. “How about here?”

“Mmm, yeah that spot, right there.”

The nurse cleared her throat. “Oh, um, I need to take your blood pressure again it seems to be all over the place, ha ha.”

“Sorry?”

“Just one more?—”

“Ahhh Ace, you have magic fingers.”

The nurse dropped the blood pressure cuff onto the table. “Sorry, um one more time, try to relax and stay very still.”

I ignored her and continued to focus on Ace's hands. "Yes, you're such a monster Ace, one who knows how to use all of his parts effectively."

Did I just say parts?

Out loud?

"Well, I guess I don't need to ask if this is a surprise pregnancy or not," the nurse said under her breath. "The ultra sound tech will be in soon."

She eyed Ace, then me. "I mean at least ten minutes, if you..." She held up her hands. "No judgment at all, women tend to get very horny during the first few stages. I've heard it gets worse in the end but, just, there's space, this is a safe space." She turned and tried the door handle twice before leaving.

I sat up. "That was weird."

"Must be her first day," Ace agreed. "Do you feel better?"

"Much." I yawned. "Seriously, though." I grabbed his hands without thinking. "I want these everywhere."

He froze.

I froze.

I said it out loud.

It was the truth, and I couldn't unsay it.

My body was quite literally humming with awareness. Was I sweating? Chest

heaving, I leaned forward. “I’m going to do a really bitchy thing that has nothing to do with how I feel about you.”

“Okay...” He drew the word out and kept his hands next to his sides. It wasn’t fair. It was wrong, but I suddenly needed him. “What are you?—”

I fused my mouth with his and put his hands on my chest only to break away from his mouth. “I need you to—to touch—I sound crazy I just?—”

“Shit.” He ran his hands up my shirt, his tongue slid aggressively across mine deepening the kiss. I moaned into his mouth only for a knock to sound at the door. We broke apart, me still horny, his eyes wild like he was seconds away from ripping my clothes completely off. I lost my balance and accidentally grazed his dick. He let out a low noise in the back of his throat. My fingers grazed the front of his jeans again. He leaned into me, mouth parted, eyes wild.

The nurse swept right in, as if I didn’t look like I was ready to jump my husband’s bones, and yawned. I couldn’t tell how old she was but she seemed nice enough, salt and pepper black hair pulled into a tight braid and she was wearing pink scrubs. “Alright let’s take a look at this baby.” She grabbed the ultra sound machine next to me and pulled it around then grabbed some gel and a warm towel. “I’m going to have you just slide your jeans down while we try to find this baby.”

My eyes filled with tears. “What if it’s not there?”

Ace squeezed my hand.

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She smiled over at me. “Well, we’re here to find out what we’re working with so just lean back, there you go. Are you the father?”

She asked Ace.

Was he shaking? I hoped to God he said he was because we couldn’t let it get out that he wasn’t, that would defeat the whole point. “Yes. I am.”

The room probably felt my giant exhale. I clutched his hand like it was my lifeline and I told myself it was because I was thankful not because I needed him.

“Mmmm, let’s hope this one has daddy’s good looks then, hmm?” She released an amused laugh. “I haven’t seen a man so tall in a while.”

Because I’m sure that’s what everyone thought when they saw him, how tall he was. I’m sure it was easy to look past that perfect jaw, the piercing eyes, wide open smile when he was really happy and sexy scowl when he wanted to chase. His height might as well be the least shocking thing about him.

“Alright, it’s going to be a bit warm, tell me if it’s too much.” Too soon she was rubbing oil on my belly with the wand.

Tears slid down my cheeks. Please let there be a baby. What if my body just conjured up something? What if this was all for nothing?

What if I had nothing left?

The silence was painful as she ran it around and flicked something on. Immediately I heard it, like a thousand little wings taking flight. “Do you hear that?”

“Yeah.” I sniffled.

“Strong heartbeat, this baby, he or she seems to be hiding a bit oh, there we go.” She stopped the wand and kept tapping on her keyboard. “Right now I’m just getting a few angles look at that.” She circled a dot. “That’s your baby, congrats Mom and Dad.”

Ace let go of my hand and leaned over my body to stare at the screen. “That’s him or her? Right there?”

“Right there.” She pointed again.

Ace’s smile could not be more gorgeous as he stared at another man’s baby knowing it would call him Dad and whispered, “I see you.”

I didn’t know why it was the most romantic thing I’d ever witnessed.

But it was.

Ace wasn’t watching me.

He was watching what was growing inside of me.

And he was claiming it as his own.

The joy of the moment lasted the entire hour-long appointment—and then we got to the car.

He turned on the ignition and looked behind us even though he had back up cameras, then ahead, then behind, then took a deep breath. “I know this is going to sound crazy, but I think I forgot how to drive.”

“A car?” Perplexed, I leaned over the console to get closer.

He turned. “I think anything at this point? A car. A truck. Give me a bike, and I’ll probably stare at it too. I think I just need a minute.”

“Is the baby freaking you out?” My stomach sank. “Because I could understand, this is a lot in the last few days?—”

He held up his hand. “Do you know what it feels like?”

“Whatwhatfeels like?” I asked gently.

“To be given a chance to give something so innocent the absolute world you were never given? Do you know what an honor this is?”

Tears welled in my eyes. “You’re going to be a great dad.”

“You’re going to be a great mom,” he whispered.

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A horn honked behind us, killing our moment, but we had it, a moment of solidarity, determination, a moment of shared love.

Me and Ace, in that hospital parking lot, for the second time since agreeing to all of this, had another moment.

And just like that another crack in my heart knit back together, not on its own, not through my own strength, but through Ace's.

21

ACE

The one with the Stalker.

Isnapped out of it enough to get us on the road and driving toward campus. We ere a few miles out when my phone went off. I immediately tensed when I saw Ivan's name on the screen. I tapped it. "Yeah, what's up?"

"More intel, looks like you're headed close to campus, so stop off at Dante's on the way. Bella wants to see Raven anyway and said if you don't have ultrasound pictures she's going to kill you because we need Raven for the baby but your dispensable."

I rolled my eyes. "Tell her I love her too."

"See you soon."



Raven grinned over at me. “You’re not dispensable. What would I do without your hands?”

I swallowed and looked out the windshield. “I’m surprised they let us book another appointment.”

She let out a snort. “I’m not, it’s like free entertainment watching you walk in there I’m sure everyone wanted to bone you, not just me.” She followed the statement with a sharp gasp.

I slowly tilted my head in her direction. “Did you just say bone?”

“Nope.”

“Yeah, you did.”

“I would never.”

“You wanted to bone me?”

“Ummmm, guys.” Ivan’s voice cracked over the Bluetooth in the SUV. “You never hung up. But good luck with the boning, I’ll be rooting for you. Shit, pregnant women are horny—Bella, babe, hear me out—” The phone went dead right along with my soul.

Raven whistled. “He’s not going to let us live down the boning conversation.”

“Nope.”

“Sorry.”

“Feel what you have to feel, Raven.” I smirked. “Bone, I can’t believe such an uncouth word would fall from those lips.”

“Did you just say uncouth?”

“I said what I said. I do have a degree you know.”

“Please, I thought the degree was in sex until I found out you were a eunuch.”

I gripped the steering wheel and pulled a hard right down Dante’s street. “For the last time, I’m not a Eunuch!”

“Okay.”

“Don’t taunt me.”

“Then don’t lie.”

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I pulled over to the side of the road right before the gate, grabbed her hand pressed it on my very hard dick and was just about to pull her into my lap when the gates opened.

She jerked her hand away; we both knew there were cameras, not that we were doing anything wrong.

Wait, why did she pull away?

An hour ago she was ready to strip me in the doctor's office.

I cleared my throat and drove into the circular driveway. Raven didn't wait for me to cut the engine before grabbing the ultrasound pictures and hopping out of the car toward the two blue double doors. Bella came flying out and then they both disappeared.

Typical.

I shoved my keys and phone into my back pocket and made my way up the cement stairs only to see Phoenix standing up there waiting, arms crossed, hair buzzed close to his head, black aviators on. "Bone?"

"Not you too."

"Oh, I boned last night, I'm just curious as to how this took place in a doctor's office of all places. You know Ivan won't let you live this down, right?"

“So I’ve been told. I want to get home, what’s the update?”

He jerked his head toward the hall. “It’s better in the office.”

“Oh yeah? Lots of secrets.”

He made a face. “No, and sorry to throw this on your pretty little face, but they’re all here.”

“Who are?”

“The bosses.”

“All five of them?”

He smirked. “Both generations.”

“Fuck.”

“Yup.” He slapped me on the back. “Try not to get eaten alive. Senator Chase is pissed about some bill that just got passed. Nixon, Tex, and Sergio just got into a fight about last years NBA finals. Andrei flew in with Maksim from Seattle, Junior and Ash are still upset over the Christmas incident that nobody will talk about, and I think the list just goes on and on. Main point: King is taking care of everything, but only half of them were at the wedding and this is some intense news, so enjoy your peace and quiet mind right now because in three, two, one...” He shoved open the double doors.

I walked in behind him.

It felt exactly like a cheesy movie. Everyone stopped talking at once. Dante glared

from his spot next to his cousins Nixon and Chase while I looked over at Ivan. “They could at least pretend to like me.”

“They love you.” Dante stood. “They’re just curious who was stupid enough to cut out his own skin for my daughter. Behold, this dumb ass.”

I had the audacity to wave. “Present.”

Chase snorted out a laugh behind his hand. “I’m suddenly so disappointed I wasn’t here for his torture.”

“Ditto.” Nixon grinned while Tex, the old Cappello, stood next to his son King and whispered something.

King grinned. “Nah, sadly enough I did not win the pool where I said he’d vomit twice and shit his pants once.”

“Damn.” Tex shook his head. “Balls of steel.”

“Better to bone with,” Ivan piped up. I jabbed him with my elbow. “Or so I’ve been told.” He wheezed. “Dante, since it’s your men who made the discovery and since it affects Ace more than he’d care to know, I’ll let you lead.”

I walked further into the room and leaned against the wall closest to Dante and waited.

His black shirt was still tucked in but unbuttoned down to the middle. His hair was tousled, and he looked exhausted. “Lucky for us, now that we’ve officially given the De Lange family a chance to join the ranks and re-establish themselves within the Cosa Nostra—a new offshoot sort of Syndicate has made its presence known, first in Italy and now apparently here.”

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“A syndicate?” I asked. “Comprising of what? Assassins, would be made men, disloyal captains, what?”

“They come from several families, overseas and here, ones who were maybe overlooked, forgotten, or mistreated. They call themselves the La Nebbia.”

I knew that name. I knew it because of her. “You only see what you want to see.”

“Yes,” Dante rasped. “They don’t use force, they use smarts and seduction as their weapons to infiltrate elite families and tie themselves to them, gaining protection, bloodlines, influence, and power.”

My stomach sank. Numb, I kept listening. “Ace here should be familiar with them or with one of them at least.”

“How?” Ivan asked. “You never got to that part.”

My throat burned like I’d poured sand down it as I answered. “Because I was their first target.”

People started whispering around the room. I held up my hand.

“Let him speak,” King demanded.

I dropped my hand to my side in defeat. “There really isn’t a lot to say. I thought I was in love. She betrayed me as a few of you already know. I’m assuming it’s the same girl who made me think I could leave all of this behind only to scar the memory

of her all over my chest, all because I was going to walk away from the De Lange family—the very family she wanted to be a part of.” I shook my head. “It was a lie. All if it. That’s all you need to know.”

“No,” Dante said, shaking his head. “It’s not. Because you’re directly tied to the next target, or should I say the failed target.”

My blood ran cold. “Who?”

“Raven,” Dante whispered. “Louis worked for them—his mission was to get close and marry her by any means possible.”

“Shit.” I ran my hands through my hair. “She lo—” I stopped myself. “She loved him for what he did. She respected him. He was her friend!”

“I know,” Dante agreed. “And now it seems like they’re still trying to access her by any means possible. At least we can put a face to the enemy. You’re all on high alert.”

King pushed away from the wall. “Junior, Ash, spread the word to the rest of the bosses. Maksim, when you go back to Seattle you know what to do, make sure the Petrov family is ready to fight and no new hires for the next six months.”

Maksim gave him a calculated look. “Shall I go through the list of new hires in the past week and kill them all?”

“Not necessary.” Chase spoke up. “I’ll access some files for Phoenix later; we should be able to hack the system with Sergio’s help.”

“Already on it.” Sergio held up his phone. “I’ll go through all the new hires for the family and get back to you guys just to be on the safe side.”

Nixon shared a look with Phoenix. “No dating.”

Everyone jerked up their heads.

Nixon rolled his eyes and looked heavenward. “I’m not talking about anyone in here you’re all married, you dipshits. I mean none of the kids, the cousins, nobody can date, the easiest way to get in would be through marriage or a contract, nobody dates. Period.”

Ash nodded. “Makes sense.”

It did.

I almost cracked a smile. “Who gets to tell Tempest?”

“Not it.” Ash and Junior said in unison while both pointing at Maksim.

He shrugged. “I’ll spar. I’ve been on the plane for too many hours.”

King sighed. “Now that it’s settled, you all know what to do. They’ll act quietly. Be on alert, let everyone know, trust nobody. I don’t care if it’s an ancient nona who wants her cat rescued from the scary tall tree in her own backyard and offers chocolate chip cookies. Don’t fall for it.”

Ivan laughed. “Did we just become the mafia version of telling all our men not to take candy from strangers? Because I think we did.”

Nobody seemed amused.



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“Read the room,” I muttered under my breath.

He winked at me then gave me a solid elbow. “I’ll get this guy back on Raven duty,”

“How was it?” Dante broke his silence again. “The appointment with the doctor? Strong heart beat? Is the baby okay?”

A smile spread across my face. “The baby’s perfectly healthy, strong heartbeat, and I almost cried.”

“And yet not a tear when I cut a pound of flesh from your body.” Dante winked. “Keep them safe, Ace.”

“Always will,” I answered. “You have my word.”

He snorted at that.

I walked out with a pounding headache and in need of a long shower and some water. I found Bella in the kitchen. She was drinking a glass of water and looking at her phone. “Oh hey, I heard the meeting end because I wasn’t eavesdropping on my very terrifying senator dad and put Raven in the car. She was exhausted.”

“Thank you.” I yawned behind my hand and started to turn when her eyes widened. “What?”

“Speak of the devil.” She grinned. “And he appears.”

“Heard that.” Chase winked. “I’ll be back Bella. Ace, a word?”

“Dun, dun.” Bella sing-songed.

I flipped her off behind her dad’s back and followed him down the hall and out of the house.

“I’m telling you this in confidence.” He stared straight ahead, a normal smile spread across his face like he was talking about the weather.

I mimicked his movements and pointed to the fountain. “I’m listening.”

“You’ve had a tail for the last week, six foot two, always wears a hat and face mask, hasn’t engaged but even has access to the campus and tried to access records. If he engages, you know what to do. For right now it seems like he’s gathering intel. I’m not putting a tail on him because it’s too suspicious. Just be aware like you always are and make sure she doesn’t leave your side.”

“Why are they still following her if Louis is dead?” I asked. “That’s the question I have. Unless they plan on inserting someone else, a classmate, a professor?”

“A bodyguard,” he deadpanned. “I’m only going to say this once, but lie to us, double cross us, do as much as sneeze incorrectly, and your throat will be slit so fast you’ll look up and see a headless body from the gravel. Do we have an understanding?”

“I’m not like them, Chase. I’m a De Lange in name and blood; my honor is something else entirely. You gave Ivan a chance. Give one to me too.”

“Convenient,” he whispered. “That she got pregnant so fast, when you just got back into the country a few months ago and weren’t seen with her. Louis worked hard and fast, clearly he was the plant. It’s clear as day, right? All eyes point to Louis, but what

if that's the plan? You only see what you want to see. How do we know you haven't been hiding in plain sight all along?"

"I bled for her."

Chase pulled out a knife and sliced it across his hand and squeezed drops onto the ground. "Two can play that game, your blood, your life means nothing in this moment, it only means something when it counts. Prove your loyalty. Keep her safe. Prove us right, Ace, I really hate getting blood on my suits, it looks bad on the news."

"Right."

"Goodnight."

He walked off leaving me pissed that he would doubt me and then pissed I never thought of the same thing. Yes, all fingers pointed to Louis.

Mine too. Which meant I never once thought anyone could possibly point them to me.

If they knew I married her to protect his child. If they knew the child wasn't mine, would it change things?

Would her life be in danger too?

It was too much to think about.

I hopped into the car and put it in drive. Raven was sound asleep in the front seat, her hands tucked under her chin. I stared longingly at her flat stomach.

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All that mattered was keeping them safe.

They could doubt me all they wanted, but my whole life was in that car. I wasn't a plant.

I never could be.

I knew my own mind.

My actions were my own.

And what was left of my heart wasn't bought or manipulated—it was my own.

I was glad she was sleeping by the time we pulled up into campus and to the townhome. The lights were on outside the house and the cameras were blinking. I checked behind us and made sure the safety was off my gun when I got out of the car and walked over to her side to let her out.

The sound of gravel crunching had me whipping around only to see a bird fly away. We needed to get inside. "Come on." I lifted her out of her seat and carried her to the house. I typed in the code and let us in and paused when I looked down.

A set of muddy footprints were right in front of the door on the concrete. Fresh. He was there. Watching. Waiting.

Good.

I kissed her on the forehead. “Wake up.”

She wrapped her arms around me. “Everything okay?”

I looked out into the grassy campus. “Perfect.”

“Sorry I fell asleep.”

I shut the door behind us. “You didn’t miss much. Trust me.”

“I do.”

At least that was one person in the family who did. At least I had her. The sad part, I was caught in the middle, between duty and death, want and rejection. I didn’t belong, did I? I was a husband in name only, a father in name only, a bodyguard replacing a fallen one, and everyone suspected me.

Maybe she should too.

The thought haunted me, keeping me from sleeping. I walked into her room and watched her sleep. She’d kicked off the comforter and was hugging her pillow. With a sigh I padded over to the bed and tucked her back in.

Her eyes snapped open.

“Shit!” I stumbled away.

Slowly, she sat up. “Sorry, I must look terrifying to make the great Ace nearly stub a toe in an effort to flee by falling out the window.”

She was beautiful; her hair was a mess around her face, her eyes were swollen from

sleeping so hard. I swallowed the dryness in my throat. “Yes, that was my next sentence, you look like shit.”

Her eyes narrowed, she weakly reached for a pillow. “Too much effort.”

I found myself smiling. “Go back to sleep.”

I turned around then felt small arms wrap around me from behind. I looked down at her clasped hands against my stomach. What was this feeling? Belonging? Want? Blood roared in my ears; I could count my heartbeat as it picked up slamming against my chest.

“Stay.” Her body was warm against my back. “Please.”

My exhale was anything but calm and collected. “Just don’t.” I licked my lips. “Don’t make it harder than it already is, Raven, please?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Me too,” I whispered. “I’m sorry I’m not him. Maybe when you close your eyes you’ll dream of his face while sleeping next to the waking nightmare.”

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I pried her hands free and went to my side of the bed. I lay down facing away from her and stared at the wall, and for the first time in a very long time, rather than get angry—I let myself feel the sadness wrap around me like a choking blanket and tortured myself to sleep.

Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the lord my soul to keep.

If I should die before I wake, I pray the lord, my soul to take.

Though it deserves less.

Take it anyway.

And give her more than I can.

22

RAVEN

The one with the homework.

Things went from spinning out of control to almost feeling like normal. It had been two months since the appointment, and Ace had been incredible. I stared at the professor as he droned on and on about international business and stole a glance at Ace standing in the corner of the room, AirPods in. He never overstepped, he never engaged, though it was as if that night when I asked him to stay he'd finally made his choice and it wasn't me.

He'd drawn a very blatant line in the sand.

I would reach for him, and he would gently pull away.

I would playfully shove him, and he'd give me a polite smile and keep his distance. He was suddenly the opposite of Louis. He was doing his duty perfectly as both my husband and my bodyguard, and part of me knew it was right, he was doing the right thing, the mature thing.

But most days, I wanted him to throw caution to the wind and just do something, anything.

I mean he never even got angry anymore.

I used to be terrified of him and also want to set him on fire.

Now I found myself saying thank you more than I'd like and getting annoyed when he didn't give me shit about how much I talked.

Every morning, my vitamins were on my nightstand with a glass of water. The fresh smell of decaf always filled the house, and the guy even grocery shopped. I started feeling weird drinking milk, so he bought not just oat milk, but hemp, coconut, and almond and told me to let him know which one I liked the best.

I said all of them just to be extra.

He continued to buy all of them.

The only time he left my side was when he sparred with Ivan and went grocery shopping as an excuse to listen to his new podcast obsession.



Oh yeah, he was into podcasts now.

True Crime.

He said the only reason he listened to them was to correct where the murderers went wrong, almost like he was a teacher with a chip on his shoulder and an aggressively large red pen.

It was alarming how eager he was to use that pen. In fact, it was becoming an obsession or at least it felt like it. He always had his AirPods on and said it was True Crime he was listening to, and I always gave him a stare like you do realize who you are and what you do for a living, yeah?

I didn't want to be that person, but he was making me that person—in fact, making me crazy because other than his duties—he was ignoring me.

I never thought I'd actually think it, but Ace was a great roommate except I craved more. And I knew I shouldn't, given the fact that I was carrying another man's child and that on more than one occasion Ace had caught me crying.

I was convinced if it was Louis, not Ace, things would be easier, but I was starting to question my memory of him. He was great, but things had been so new, and he'd given me attention and distracted me from the very real threat of being Dante Alfero's daughter, but the more I tried to remember why I'd loved Louis so much, the more my brain and heart reminded me why I was so thankful I had Ace.

It made me almost resent Ace in moments, though, for making everything so easy, for making liking him suddenly like breathing, for being cute with his stupid podcasts even though it made me jealous every time I saw those stupid AirPods.

“That's it for today, please have your papers turned in to the portal by midnight

tonight if you haven't already." Professor Alino checked his watch. "Dismissed."

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:14 am*

Everyone scurried out like they always did, far, far away from me.

I hadn't made a lot of friends to begin with because I'd been an idiot and attempted to triple major so it was my fault in the beginning. I'd done a deep dive into my studies and had already finished two of my majors before this year. Why did I need to finish out junior and senior year, again? Even then, I'd only ever really hung out with people because Tempest was a social butterfly and wanted me to get out more on account I was too intimidating with my loud clothing and loud mouth.

That all seemed like a lifetime ago, though.

When I was a freshman, when the world was my oyster at eighteen, when I was just trying to find my place in it—and when I dumbly thought it would be easy to become an adult.

And now I was pregnant at twenty.

My bodyguard was dead.

And I was married.

Not how I planned on things going.

A shadow cast over my desk. I looked up. Ace still had his AirPods in. "You ready?"

"I should quit."

“What?”

“School.” I stood and grabbed my bag. “Seriously, this is a waste, I mean I have three majors for what? I have more money than I need, I can work for the family doing whatever I want, I’m pregnant. Like, why am I even here?”

He fell into step beside me as we walked through the halls on campus and out the door to the grassy area between the student union building and the business building.

“To get an education,” he said in a clipped voice. “It’s kind of a requirement for every family to go to Eagle Elite, get your piece of paper and move on like the rest of us, plus you were so busy studying your ass off the first two years the only time you ever really socialized was when Ivan made you.”

I made a face. “He was always a pain in our asses, still is, and even though you’re older than him he still bossed you around until you left for Italy.”

Until he left us.

Left home without as much as a word other than he needed to get away.

“Why did you leave, anyway?” I asked. “Really?”

“I got an assignment.” He said it slowly, carefully. “And you don’t say no to Phoenix Nicolasi.”

“Why did he out of all people give you an assignment?” I asked. “I mean why not Dad?”

He swallowed and looked down. “Because telling him the real reason I wanted to leave wasn’t really a topic I wanted to discuss with him.”

I rolled my eyes. “So Phoenix, the death bringer, was your next logical choice?” I shook my head. “I don’t buy it.”

He touched my elbow and gently led me to the cafeteria. “That’s the best part, Raven, you don’t have to. All you need to know is it was a decision that needed to be made.” He started walking through the little store before we actually made it into the cafeteria and grabbed two of my favorite protein bars, some yogurt, a can of Sprite, and licorice, paid for it with his phone app, then escorted me back outside like I didn’t have an opinion on snack time—which I didn’t because it was like he could read my mind these days.

We went back to the townhouse where he would somehow convince me I needed a nap, I’d complain and then sleep for two hours and find myself covered with my favorite blanket and then we’d make dinner.

I hated it.

I loved it.

He confused me.

So much.

I kicked off my shoes and put them next to the door then walked over to the breakfast bar. He tapped on his phone and checked the cameras like he always did, then he went and locked the door and did a check of all the windows.

Again, like he always did.

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When walking by me he put his podcast on again or I'm assuming he did because he said that's what he did and he was a creature of stupid habit.

He pulled out a chair. "You should sit, eat something then take a nap."

I could quote him back to himself.

Normally, I'd argue for a bit then listen.

But today...today it was raining. Today felt wrong, different. Today for the first time in a long time I really missed Louis, his distractions, his jokes, his way of making me feel important.

I missed him so badly.

At least he'd know I was upset, he'd read the room, not completely ignore me or pretend I didn't exist.

I stared down at the yogurt, tears in my eyes, and chucked it at his head.

It hit him and dropped to the floor.

Chest heaving, I reached for the protein bar and held it high.

Ace pulled out his stupid AirPods. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Me?" I yelled. "ME?"

He narrowed his eyes. “Yes. You, the only other person in this room!”

“You’re not even real! You’re just going through the motions!”

Ace looked around the room. “I’m not real? Like I’m not human? Have you lost your mind? I’m being dead serious, is there something wrong?”

“Yeah!” I waved the protein bar. “I’m like one of those girls who snapped, where she just loses it and buries her husband in the backyard!”

“Technically, you’d have to bury me in your dad’s yard on account of ours couldn’t handle the amount of cement you’d need to seal the grave,” he pointed out. Annoyingly.

“I know that!” I didn’t. “And what if I want to use pigs?”

“We have those now.” He nodded. “But the guys would know.”

“They’d be on my side!” I screamed. “Because you’re the crazy one!”

“Me?” He burst out laughing. “I’ve done everything right! I’m more real than you are living in your little fantasy world of romantic comedies and refusing to deal with Louis’ death by just pretending it never fucking happened!”

“Take it back!” I threw the protein bar.

“No,” he spat. “Because you’re the delusional one. I’m trying the fucking best I can, Raven! What more do you want from me!”

“Everything!”

“You have it!” He reached for the last protein bar then tossed it on the floor. “I’m here, constantly. I’m here. I’m the one that’s here!”

“You’re not even a real husband!”

“It sure as hell feels like it when I’m doing your laundry, Raven!” He shoved all the food off the table. “And you know I’m going to clean that shit up later, and then I’m going to make sure you’re safe, make sure the baby is safe, I’m going to take care of everything. What more could you possibly want from me?” His chest was heaving, his eyes searching for me to say something that would make this better.

Instead, I said the worst thing I could have possibly said. “Louis. I want Louis.”

He stumbled back like I’d shot him.

His phone dropped to the ground.



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And Ace De Lange just stared, the protective shield shattered in front of my eyes as he opened his mouth and closed it.

I'd seen men cry—my family was very open to expressing themselves.

But I'd never seen someone actually break. I never thought I would be the one to break them.

In one second, I wasn't just a nickname, I was his nightmare.

A tear slid down Ace's cheek before he could stop it. He didn't say anything. He just left.

The door shut quietly behind him.

When I looked down, his phone was still on, but the podcast wasn't True Crime—it was an audio book on how to be a good father.

23

RAVEN

The one where words mean nothing and actions are long gone...

8 Months Later

I was dying.

I always imagined it differently, that I would be taken too soon from this world by way of violence—not by way of life and beauty.

She hadn't cried yet, why wasn't she crying? "Ace?"

"One more push," he whispered against my sweaty neck. I was in too much pain and yet not even a part of my own body as I weakly nodded my head. "She wants to meet you, desperately."

I wronged him.

In so many ways.

Maybe this would be the one right thing I did, the last gift.

"She's losing too much blood." It was Sergio's voice I think. After two days of labor they'd finally let him in, and he was pissed they'd let it go on this long.

"Options?" someone said.

"Emergency C-section," someone else said.

Ace never left my side.

Everything happened too fast; I wasn't in my body or was I? Suddenly a cry erupted through the room. It was loud, just like me.

"Good job, Raven. Good job." Ace was either sweating as much as I was or he was crying, his face was wet against my cheek. "She's perfect."

"I'm sorry." I choked out a cry. "I'm sorry for everything I know I keep saying." My

vision blurred. “You know I-I?—”

“Do something!” Ace yelled. Was that Ace?

Alarms went off or was it a clock beeping?

The pain was gone.

I was dying, wasn't I?

The pain left.

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*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:14 am*

My only regrets were not seeing my little girl grow up—and not telling Ace De Lange I'd bought him waffle mix.

24

ACE

The one where regrets are like wildflowers unable to stop appearing over and over again, showing off their resilience in never going away.

Present Day - Two Months Post Delivery

“So how many moms hit on you at the park when you go for walks?” In Dante's kitchen, Ivan was bouncing his infant son Zach on his lap while I was attempting to feed Lily some cereal. His and Bella's first child, a daughter named Jessica, Jessi for short, was napping upstairs under Dante's watchful eye.

I snorted. “It doesn't matter. There's only one girl in my life, huh Lily?” I held out the little spoon of oatmeal and made a face.

She had the most intense mean mug I had ever seen, intimidating and adorable at the same time. I tried to focus on it during the hard times which were basically every day. She hated sleep, was constantly crying and even though I hired a nanny we were still missing something very important in our lives.

“Don't let Raven hear you say that,” he said under his breath. “I've never seen a person jealous of how much attention you give the baby while also so attracted she

looks minutes away from just devouring her own husband whole.”

“That won’t happen,” I said quickly despite the fact that my heart did a little flip in my chest. “Especially after she nearly died and had to be put into a medically induced coma. Not my favorite moment for Lily or for Raven—she deserves to live her life you know?”

I deserved to live mine too.

I was done trying to prove myself. I had two people to protect and the only way I knew how to do that was to take it a day at a time and completely purge Raven from my life.

I really was her husband in name only.

It was just a really weird road to navigate, and we’d both been tiptoeing around each other since she woke up. Every time she tried to reach out, it felt like I had no choice but to close the door because what if the words that came next were the ones I’d been wanting to hear? Then what if she took them back? Words only existed in two places once spoken, through reading them or through hearing them and neither can be unread or unheard. Like manifesting something into existence, there would be no way I could go back to before they were spoken, no way I could go back to the moment in time before I read them.

I thought I’d experienced terror, and then I saw her code in front of me.

I thought I knew actual fear until I was in charge of an hour-old infant while her mom fought for her life.

I knew nothing.

“Yeah, well...” I held Lily close. Raven and Bella were walking outside. Both of them had their ever present ginormous water’s with them. Bella’s said “This is probably Vodka,” while Raven’s said “Blood of my enemies.” Both fit, and we all knew that theywere drinking straight electrolytes. Bella had found out she was pregnant for the second time shortly after our first appointment; they could only keep it from everyone for a day before the happy news exploded. I was glad Raven had someone she could share it with and at the same time a bit jealous that it wasn’t me she complained to.

In fact, she never complained.

Everything was always fine.

She was never tired.

She always smiled. If anything she was too perfect, and too much; it made it hard to believe anything that came out of her mouth most days, because every day was, and I quote, “a miracle.”

Did I think she was full of shit?

Half the time, yes, because I don’t care how many miracles get thrown your way, eventually when you get shit on—literally, are starving, constantly thirsty, and don’t remember the last time you had a solid night’s sleep, eventually the miracle feels more like a permanent twitch in your eye and a locked jaw from clenching your teeth so much.

“Things good?” Ivan asked.

He always asked, just like I always lied. “They’re great.”

“You both should stop using the baby as a buffer between you; it might force you to face your feelings. You’re in love with her, she’s in love with you, you have shit tons of money, nobody wants to kill you, and a beautiful baby girl, I’m surprised nobody has put a price on your head, it’s disgusting.”

“Yeah, okay boss.”

“Seriously.” He shot me a dark look. “It’s looking too good for the De Langes. Are you just waiting for the other shoe to drop?”

My entire body went rigid. “Yeah, you?”

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“Every day, every night,” he said through a forced smile in Bella’s direction. “What if we didn’t get all the informants? What if the syndicate is just waiting to infiltrate again? What if—I guess that’s life but, I’m almost more worried now that nothing horrible happened. We lost Louis, but he was working for them anyway. Everyone’s safe.”

“Safety and peace, both terrifying words.” I sighed and gently patted Lily’s back. She burped a bit and blinked up at me.

How could a tiny baby be so beautiful?

Fuck, I already wanted to kill every human who looked her way. I didn’t care who asked her to prom, I just cared that they thought I would let her leave the house without scaring them so shitless they apologized for even asking her without talking to me first, you know?

Raven looked sad. I mean she had a smile on her face. Her hair was pulled into a low ponytail. She was wearing a white tank top and matching yoga pants I bought her so she’d feel comfortable and cute, my actual words when I handed them over to her. She said she wanted more.

So I bought them in every color.

She thanked me.

I told her she was welcome, and we lay in bed, next to each other, and stared up at the same ceiling, and took turns with Lily only to repeat it all over again.



It was all so very civilized, our arranged marriage.

Sometimes it was so civilized I wanted to build a bomb and set it off so when Lily wasn't crying something would break the tense silence.

Did I really used to hate noise when I tried to slept?

Last week, I finally broke and told Raven she could turn on Friends, "You know, if you feel like it."

Pigs didn't fly but you'd think she just saw one float between us and explode. "Yeah, um sure, I'll turn it on."

"Hey," she said as she and Bella entered the kitchen. She smiled at a sleeping Lily and said without looking at me, "You guys ready?"

"Yeah." I stood. "We should get her home."

"Stay!" Bella pouted. "For dinner?"

"Actually..." Raven beamed with pride. "I cooked."

Ivan's eyes narrowed. "Food?"

"What else would she cook, dumbass!" Bella hissed.

Ivan smirked at Raven. He loved giving her shit. "Oh, I genuinely thought you meant you cooked as in slang and was about to ask what hobby you took up."

"Hilarious." Raven glared. "And all good Italian wives should know how to cook."

“Yeah, but you’re not one of those.” Ivan pointed out. “I mean a good Italian, I’m sure you’re a wonderful wife.” He winked.

She lifted her hand.

He held up his finger. “Shhh, you’ll wake up Dante Junior and I just put him to sleep in his stroller.”

“His names Zach,” Bella deadpanned.

“That’s what I said.” Dante grinned. “Anyway, enjoy your more than likely not edible meal.”

Raven lunged for him, but he already knew so he started running off leaving Zach with Bella. “You really cooked?”

“Well, I mean...” Raven’s cheeks burned red. “I put the meat in a crock pot with potatoes and followed instructions.”

“I’m sure it’s going to be great,” I said quickly.

Bella shot me a look as if to say good save. “Alright, well, I’ll call at my usual two a.m. when we’re both up for our feedings.”

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Best idea we've ever had as friends. We realized we were all doing feedings at relatively the same time like the kids knew or something or were telepathically putting both families through hell—so we FaceTimed, me and Ivan and Bella and Raven. It was nice.

Really nice.

I finally had a family, just not in the way I thought.

We said our goodbyes, and by the time I had Lily in her carrier and then in the car, Raven had already gone to the driver's side. "What are you doing?"

"Driving." She shrugged. "You were up early. I know you're tired, you run your hands through your hair when you're tired then tug on it like you're trying to wake yourself up."

"True and yet it never works, the waking up part."

"Next time I'll pull." She offered a serene smile.

We both froze.

The entire world could have burned around us.

That's all it took, one off-the-cuff comment that could turn sexual and the tension was back.

It was the longest I'd gone not touching a woman—the day I said I do I'd meant it. I just didn't know it also meant I wouldn't ever have sex again—ever.Ever!

She cleared her throat and started the car, pulling us out into traffic. We both ignored the silence until we got to our house. By the time I had Lily changed and into her crib I was ready to face plant into dinner or the next day. Some bodyguard I was at that moment.

I checked the cameras again, the front door, looked for a shadowy figure and found none, then went into the kitchen. “Need any help?”

Raven stared at the pot roast. “I think I left it in too long.”

“It looks...great.” It was a lie. It was burnt, all of it. I'd chew it until my teeth broke in half. She'd been too proud. “Look, we can just cut off some of the top and eat the inside.”

“I tried that over in this general area.” She pointed with the knife. “Seriously it said to put it on high for six hours!”

“Show me.” I suggested.

She handed me the saved recipe on her phone. I smiled and handed it back. “Was it frozen?”

“No, why would?—”

I nodded.

She cursed. “Stupid exhaustion! I missed the frozen part!”

“Which,” I said gently as I picked up the roast and tossed it in the trash, “should tell you that had it been frozen, this meat would be perfect.”

“I can’t tell if you’re trying to make me feel better or just lying your ass off.”

“I’m serious.” I washed my hands and reached for her shoulders, something I rarely did—touch her. “I’m too tired to make a sandwich, and you shouldn’t be on your feet. So we lie to Ivan, we steal pictures off Pinterest if we have to—and we order pizza instead, deal?”

“We take it to our graves.” Tears filled her eyes.

I frowned. “What? Is something—” I dropped my hands.

She quickly reached for them and held them.

I didn’t know what to do other than hold hers back.

“I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

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“For everything, for what I said all those months ago before Lily was born. I’ve told you a million times but it’s like it never gets through and I—I’m just, I miss you. I’d rather you hate me and show me every day than get this version of you. I’d rather you throw things and get angry than just exist next to me.”

I leaned in. “What about you, miss perfect? I’m fine, the world is beautiful, I’m a miracle.” I smirked.

She glared. Hard. “Iama fucking miracle, you ass.”

“Did I say you weren’t?”

“Fine! I’m exhausted, but I just I want you to be happy, so I keep thinking if I just do a little more then you’ll be happy.”

“Did I ever once say that or did your guilt say that? Just asking.”

“You don’t act normal!”

“Because...” I licked my lips and tried to think of what I could say that wouldn’t hurt me—or her—again. Then I just said it. “I’ll be an adult. I’ll communicate. Words hurt, no matter how pretty the face is that delivers them. You can’t blame me for being careful just like I can’t blame you for overcompensating and saying things are fine when you put salt in your coffee mug yesterday.”

“Saw that?”

“Yup.”

She lowered her head. “I’ll try not to overcompensate and stop using the word miracle and be more bitchy, happy?”

“Thrilled.”

“And?”

“I’ll try to hate you just a little bit more.” I nodded. “And I’ll start yelling at you for leaving your makeup out all the time on the counter and staining the porcelain sink.”

“For the last time...” She clenched her teeth. “I’d put my makeup away if I could see in the damn bathroom and not run into the open drawers you refuse to close because you’re afraid to wake up the baby.”

“Are we fighting?” I asked.

“No.” She pulled me close to her. “Can we order pizza now and watch more documentaries about all the food we shouldn’t be eating?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I’ll order the pizza.” I turned to grab my phone but she pulled me back and hugged me.

My entire body tensed and then relaxed as I wrapped my arms around her.

My soul told me it meant nothing, that a hug was a hug.

My heart, however, screamed. “Starving.”

For more.

## RAVEN

The end of the road, or maybe, just the beginning.

Iloved him.

I fell in love with him before the day I saw his phone, I just didn't want to admit it; it felt like betrayal. His love crept up on me in a way I wasn't prepared for. I hadn't healed yet. It was no excuse, though. Not at all.

I expected things to be better when I woke up from the coma, when I had my family, when he saw the apology I asked Ivan to set out for him, only to find out that in the chaos Ivan never did.

So I just resorted to my default settings, to doing everything I could to show him that I cared, and all he did was keep me at arm's length. If he gave me one more polite smile I was going to scream.

Then again, I wasn't any better. Ihatedthe word miracle at this point. Detested it.



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But it still felt like we had this chasm between us. I wanted to make a move, but the timing always felt off. I didn't want to come across as insincere, so I tried to spend time with him, but he gave me space.

Too much freaking space.

And when he didn't give me space, he was sending me out to get my nails done or to get a massage.

It was like he was trying to get rid of me by way of overflowing gifts. I wasn't complaining, I really wasn't. I loved it, but I would take pizza on the couch any night, because it was with him.

The doorbell rang. "Shit!"

"We told them to knock!" Ace hissed.

I scrambled toward the door and nearly tripped on my own feet and jerked open the door just as the doorbell went off again, followed by crying.

The delivery guy took a picture of the pizza. "Oh hey, here's your pizza. Have a good night."

I almost chased him to his car.

Instead, hunger won out. I grabbed the pizza off the chair next to the door and went back inside the house while Ace came out with Lily on his chest. "She already went

back to sleep but I'm going to hold her a bit."

"Right." I put the pizza on the counter, grabbed us each a slice, and went over to the couch.

His hands were busy holding our daughter.

Mine were busy holding pizza, so I didn't reach for him. The frustration lingered, the words left unsaid, the mistrust, the stress and the lack of sleep helped nothing.

I lifted my slice of pizza up and held it to his mouth. He stared down at it then back up at me. "You eat."

"Take a bite before I change my mind, my stomach already ate itself and is working on the intestinal wall lining."

"That's physically impossible, if your body was eating itself it would most likely break down major organs first, but normally the brain shuts down, making it impossible to send signals to—" He grinned and opened his mouth.

I pulled the pizza away. "You were saying?"

"I was saying, normally the brain breaks down first making it impossible to send signals to your organs, but not your brain, never, yours is too massive."

"Good answer."

"Can I have a bite now?"

Throat dry, I tried not to shake as I lifted the slice of pepperoni pizza to his lips. He took a huge bite and closed his mouth to chew. A soft moan escaped. "So good. I'm

starving.”

I licked my lips. “Y-yeah, me too.”

I fed him the rest of his slice then ate mine. I was asleep in minutes and woke up to a blanket laying over me and Lily fast asleep in her crib.

When I went to bed he was there, shirtless, sleeping, his hair a wreck and his body half on the bed.

It wasn’t fair.

I needed to talk with him, even if it meant I ended up with a broken heart in the process. I would deserve it anyway. In a few hours, after class, I’d tell him everything.

And just pray he responded.

26

ACE

“Thank God for the nanny.” I ran a hand through my hair and yawned into the phone.

“Seriously, Ivan, sometimes, I want to hug her and let it out all out.”

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“You that tired?” he asked. “I thought Lily did pretty good at night.”

It was me. I was the problem. I was sleeping next to Raven. I told myself it was easier and made more sense in the beginning because Lily was in the same room as us, but lately we’d been slowly introducing herself to her room and her crib. Two nights ago, she slept three full hours by herself with the cameras surrounding her.

I could only use her as an excuse to stay close for so long.

It was a good thing though, the sooner I moved into my own room or slept there, the better for my sanity and sleep.

“You there?” Ivan asked.

“Yeah, sorry, just thinking. Anyway, thanks for the update. I haven’t seen any movement but it’s good to know they’ve gone completely underground.”

“They aren’t as brazen as before. Be careful.”

“I will.” I hadn’t introduced anyone new into our lives anyway, and we were cautious of who we even interacted with right down to the grocery store clerk. And even then I was always packing. “I’ll see you later.”

“Get some sleep, man.”

“I will.” I wouldn’t.

I slid my phone into my back pocket and checked my watch. Raven was with that stupid project partner again. Halfway through her pregnancy she'd decided to take the rest of the semester off and finish things the following semester. She had two classes left and that little shit for brains partner she was with last year was thrilled to help her.

I hated him.

And I hated another guy even more, the other partner. New student, which meant I was suspicious until I did a background check that so extensively detailed I could name which molar had a filling.

I groaned and leaned against the tree while they chatted. She was smiling more now. Was he making her smile or was it just that she got a good night's sleep and the nanny had Lily for the next two hours?

My eyes narrowed when he reached for her.

He knew she was married, right?

She'd told him.

I mean she'd had to have told him.

She had a ring on.

Wait.

My stomach dropped.

She wasn't wearing it.

She always wore it.

Her left hand went up and touched his elbow.

My stomach sank to the ground. I was too tired to be angry. Was this what giving up felt like? I was torn between ripping his head off and scattering his body around campus and torturing myself by watching.

I chose torture, obviously.

He held out his hand.

She gave him her phone.

He typed something in and smiled while handing it back. He was good looking enough: tall, muscular, he had dark hair shaved close to his head, and he wasn't a psychopath—I would know—nor did he have blood on his hands or choose to cut off parts of his body to prove his loyalty.

To any sane person he was a total win. He even had a part time job at Taco Bell of all places.

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How fucking normal.

He rescued dogs.

His parents were both surgeons.

But the worst part—he was safe.

There was a difference between being safe and keeping someone safe. Where I was a shield—he was a space.

I felt numb when she walked back to me, all smiles. “Ready?”

“Yeah.” I couldn’t look at her; instead, I listened as she explained her project for Business Finance and all the ideas she had. She talked the entire way, she sounded happy, she sounded as normal as douche face appeared on paper.

Maybe that was what I’d been missing in this entire scenario. “Can I ask you a question?”

I hadn’t meant to interrupt.

“What? Sure.” She followed me into the house and put her bag on the couch. “What’s up?”

“Was he normal? Or as normal as possible given the circumstances? Louis?” I hated saying his name.

Her face didn't fall though; she simply tilted her head. "Yeah, I think at first I even called him boring. He was the sort of guy that never snuck out of the house, followed all the rules, and then when you least expected it, he'd do something sweet or out of the blue. But I realized it was always a way to distract me from it all."

"Life?"

She nodded. "The pressure but mainly the loneliness...everyone has their part to play and other than getting my degrees I've never really found where I fit in, you know? I'm rebellious but not insane like Serena. I can be sweet when I want to like Bella, but I'm not a mafia princess."

She was right about that. She was a queen.

"I just, I don't know, I think in such a large family it's easy to get overlooked, it's easy for people to see you but not really see you. They assume your smile means you're okay or your presence means your present when it can be the exact opposite. Imposter syndrome, even next to blood relatives, is a very real thing, and not fitting in if you're not careful—is heavy—like shame, like you were born with a task that you can't accomplish because it isn't clear yet."

That was probably the most open she'd been with me in a really long time. "And now, now do you feel like you can be yourself or be normal?"

She smiled. "Nothing about this is normal, Ace. We take it a day at a time, right?"

"Right," I whispered.

Something flickered in her eyes. "Let me go change real quick, then maybe we can take a walk." She pulled out her phone and set it down on the coffee table. "I have something to talk to you about."



Was it about him?

About the normal?

About finally being happy—outside of us?

I hadn't just lost control, I'd lost complete navigation of the ship. She ran up the stairs while I stood completely frozen in place.

Was this where you did the hard thing? Was this where you didn't just walk away but you gave yourself and them permission to let go? I thought about Lily. She'd always have me. I'd always be her dad no matter what.

Raven deserved love.

She deserved to be seen.

I'd just take it to my grave that all I'd ever truly seen—was her.

I wasn't sure how much time went by, but she was suddenly back downstairs, hair pulled back into a ponytail, a black sweatshirt on and a pair of white athletic shorts; she was in her normal walking attire.

Keyword,normal.

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“Hey.” I leaned back on the counter. “I just, I want you to know something.”

She had reached for her phone but pulled her hand back and faced me. “Okay.”

“It’s fine.” I licked my lips and struggled to get the words out. “I know this isn’t what you wanted and things are—comfortable.” Hell, I hated words today. “But I just want you to know. I can be okay. I will be okay, what I mean is it’s fine, if you look the other way.”

The buzz from the TV playing in the background had never been so loud.

“What do you mean look the other way?” she rasped, her eyes narrowed in on me like daggers. “Like down the street?”

“No.” My voice was cold, unfeeling. I forced it. “If you have an affair. Don’t even think twice about me. We have Lily to take care of and the threat seems to be magically gone ever since King ordered a new commission and killed off most of the syndicate that infiltrated. You were in a coma. We got shit done. You woke up to a new life—one where you’re a bit safer than when you went to sleep. My job is to take care of you and Lily, but any other need you have—like I said, I’ll look away.”

I hated her in that moment for not reacting right away. I hated her for proving my theory right and I could only blame myself for getting so invested that the pain spreading down my arms was self-inflicted in the worst possible way.

It was like I just said, look I really think sweet potatoes are superior to normal potatoes, and she responded with, well if that’s how you feel.

Wait, did she really just say that out loud.

Her eyes flashed as she repeated the words. “If that’s how you feel, Ace.”

I yelled after that, no I snapped and I lost my shit. How the hell is she turning this one me? “If that’s how I FEEL?”

“Yeah.” She backed away from me, hands on hips.

“HOW I FEEL?” I roared. “Do you even know how I feel right now? How fucking terrified I was when you were on that table dying? When we couldn’t get Lily out? Don’t just toss out how I feel as if it’s not important. Maybe you’d know how I feel if you actually asked. But yes, Raven, this is how I feel. Do whatever you want with your life as long as you stay safe and Lily stays safe. I’m fine.” I felt like dying and couldn’t remember how to breathe, but I was totally completely fine.

“Then what about you?” Her eyes snapped to mine with fury. “What about?—”

“I’ll fucking die a eunuch. I don’t know Raven!”

“You’re an idiot and guys have needs?—”

“Shit, if you keep talking right now I’m going to break something. I’m aware of what needs I have but I’m a little too focused on keeping the two of you alive and happy. That’s what I live for right now, not my fucking cock, so if you could please either react and punch me or prepare me for when you do start seeing other guys I’d really appreciate it, and I’d appreciate if you just kept it quiet since I’m not so sure my pride could take another blow right?—”

Her fist came flying so hard and fast, shocking the hell out of me that I didn’t even realize she’d punched me until the numbness in my cheek wore off and replaced itself

with searing pain and tingling that radiated all the way down my neck and had my jaw in a chokehold. “You jack ass!”

“I was just?—”

“You were just being a complete dick! Do you even hear yourself? I was being sarcastic! Do you really want someone else stripping me naked? Do you want to share any part of me? What about that vow that my life is yours and yours is mine? Was that complete bullshit?”

“No.” I braced her by the shoulders. “But this is fucking worse than cutting off parts of my body—I can’t keep cutting from a heart I’ve already given away, Raven. It seeps into my bones, my blood, it keeps me awake at night. It’s a slow torture that never goes away. I can’t do it anymore. I can’t watch you suffer and take care of you and my own fucking feelings.”

“And how”—she glared—“do you feel?”

“Like I’m one confession away from disappearing—because I don’t know who I am without you by my side.”

Tears slid down her cheeks. She shoved past me and went into the kitchen. I hung my head.

What was done was done.

I should leave.

Get some fresh air.

Maybe get drunk.

No, that would be irresponsible.

Something hit me in the back of the head, it wasn't a fist. I turned around and stared at the floor.

It was a box.

There was writing on the outside. It simply said. "Bring your fork."

"I was going to give it to you after Lily was born, it was supposed to be waiting here when we got home. Then the coma happened, then life happened, and the longer I waited the more I doubted you'd accept it. I was going to give it to you today and tell you everything, but instead you turned into a bigger ass than a few years ago, a feat, even for you."

I stared at the handwriting and very slowly opened the box and pulled out another.

It was waffle mix.

She'd gotten me waffle mix.

And on that box she'd written. "Make that two forks."

I dropped it onto the ground.

I couldn't see my hands.

I couldn't feel my body.

I moved.

And then I had her in my arms and I was kissing her, mouth fusing to hers in pressure

so filled with pain that I was sick with it.

She jumped up.

I caught her in my arms again still kissing her and shoving her against the wall. Her hands reached for my shirt, pulling it over my head.

“I love you,” she panted between kisses. “I loved you since before I hurt you. I hurt you because your love was scary, Ace. I hurt us because once you say the word out loud?—”

“You can’t take it back,” I whispered against her mouth. “Please, please,” I begged. “Don’t fucking take it back.”

“Never.” She jerked my head back by the hair. “I really, really hope you’re done with that stupid fast or I’m going to kill you.”

“Can I start with you?” I was already tugging off her shorts.

“Yes, yes, please.” She helped kick them off.

We were a flurry of anger, pain, tears, and clothes flying all over the kitchen. Waffles forgotten, windows, cameras, past, present.

It wasn’t normal.

It was spectacular.

Uniquely us.

When she was finally bare to me, I lifted her by the ass and thrust into her. I couldn’t

wait. I was desperate. “Your body is mine.”

“Yes.” A tear slid down her cheek. “Yours. Only yours.”

With each movement of my hips her nails dug deeper into my back scarring it the way my pledge to her had scarred my front. “I love you, Raven Alfero.”

Her eyes flew open. “Say it again.”

I was so close, it had been so long. Our bodies slid together again, every muscle strained to make the moment last longer. “I love you. So much.”

She clenched around me, her heels digging into my ass.

I let go.



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I was home.

27

RAVEN

The one where love slams into you and all you see is that the darkness was your light the entire time, the nightmare, your dream.

“I’m still mad.” I trailed my fingers down his naked torso. “And then I see the scars you made when you hated me, and I feel like shit.”

“I felt nothing.” He said grabbing my hands. We’d barely made it out of the kitchen and then to the couch before he was all over me again. His hands spread across my chest, his mouth followed kissing small trails between my breasts.

“Liar.”

He laughed and flipped me onto my stomach and took me lazily from behind. I leaned back into him, he pulled me up onto his knees. His mouth found my ear. It was so easy being with him, loving him.

“We’re both a mess.” He thrust into me harder and held himself there.

My legs pulsed around him. “I like the mess.”

“I’m staying inside you forever.”

“I’ll need just short breaks.”

“Deal.”

We both heard a commotion downstairs. I groaned. “Sandra’s back with Lily.”

“I want five more minutes, even three.” Ace pressed a kiss to my shoulder then cupped my breasts. “I want it all.”

“Honeymoon?” I suggested. “Why don’t we see if we can get away?”

“Deal.” He kissed my neck. “Deal.” He nibbled on my ear. “Deal.”

The door jerked open. Ivan looked between us and cursed. “Well that changes things.”

I rushed to cover myself. “What does?”

“This.” He pointed between us. “The fact that you actually are sleeping together and now have to tell people the truth. Wait I’m confused, because according to the guy at your dad’s house, Lily’s his or something like that, and Ace covered for him, which means you’re both in deep shit and that you maybe just gave your husband a death sentence for fucking lying to Dante. I never asked for details about why you’d cover for her because I knew the truth but now people have questions and I have questions because you actually are together it seems and, this isn’t going to end well.”

“You’re my boss.”

“Yes,” Ivan snapped. “You lied to me too, at first, but the minute you married an Alfero you skipped over to their control. If Dante wants to chop off your balls and make you watch while pigs eat them, I can’t do shit.”

I was too busy processing what he just said to think death. “What do you mean Lily’s his? Lily’s ours!”

Ace pulled me into his arms and kissed my head. “We’ll figure it out.” His voice was gentle and then he started yelling. “The fuck do you think you are coming in here seeing my wifemaker and threatening us then saying Lily belongs to someone else! She may not be my blood, but she’s mine!”

Ivan lowered his head and winced. “I think you need to see what’s going on, it’s better that way. If I tell you...” He shook his head. “Trust me when I say everyone was very confused at first.”

It didn’t take long for us to get ready.

Ace yelled.

When the nanny, Sandra, came she helped get Lily ready to go out again and agreed to come with just in case we needed her for whatever the hell was going on.

Ivan was quiet.

Too quiet.

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And Ace wouldn't let go of my hand.

One hand had mine, one hand was touching Lily's while she slept in her car seat.

Once we pulled up to my dad's house it seemed like the entirety of the five families were gathered as if we were having a commission which was rare during peace.

Ace grabbed Lily and held her close then wrapped his free arm around us while we walked up the marble stairs and inside.

Suits were leaning against walls, talking, discussing in low voices. Junior and Ash were near the kitchen, both of them looked pissed.

Like very, very pissed.

And then they saw us and the anger was gone.

Replaced with—pity.

It was pity.

But not for me, their eyes all went to Ace.

Maybe because he lied?

I wouldn't let anything happen to him, though. Never. Over my dead body. The whispering grew louder when suddenly I heard a voice.

His voice.

“Hi, Raven.”

A chill ran down my spine as I slowly turned around and gasped. “Louis.”

28

ACE

The one where the universe laughs and strips you bare leaving nothing left but dry bone.

My line of vision went from clear to a complete tunnel, focused only on him, the man who was supposed to be dead. I saw him die. I was at his funeral. We had a thing now, we always checked because people just tended to pop back to life in the five families and often at the very worst moments.

Everyone had trust issues and for good reason.

Suddenly someone was at my back, Raven was ripped away from me. “You lied.”

It was Dante’s voice.

And I was staring at Louis’ face.

I never thought my death would come with the guy who raised me and became my father-in-law at my back and the one who supposedly already beat me to it smiling at me.

Would he get everything?

Was this all part of the plan?

And wasn't he the bad guy?

"You're dead."

"Lucian's dead," he snapped. "My twin brother."

"Twin," I repeated while Dante held me firm against him. "Your twin?"

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“Yes,” snapped Louis. “And I would know he was dead since I’m the one who pulled the trigger.”

I snorted. “So you’re the good guy, now? You killed him for what? Working for the enemy? I don’t buy it.”

“No.” His glare said everything and nothing all at once. “I put a bullet in his head because he touched what was mine.”

All the blood felt like it just left my body at once. “What?”

He looked around the room. Raven was silent behind me. I needed to see her, to touch her, to gauge her reaction to the news. Was she softly crying? Was she regretting this afternoon?

We didn’t use protection.

We were lost in each other.

I told her I loved her.

I had everything in those moments.

And now it felt like everything the universe promised me I could keep—was getting ripped away.

Louis bit down on his lower lip and put his hands on his hips. He was wearing a black

cap, similar to the one I saw on the guy who was tailing us last year. He had a black T-shirt on and fitted jeans, his blond hair poked out from under his hat. He looked identical to the guy who'd died. "La Nebbia instructed us to infiltrate the family. We'd been instructed, picked up off the streets at ten and trained for a special mission. Early on we thought we were working for the government to get rid of the hold the crime families had in Sicily and in the States. It seemed legit at first, obviously, until we realized that the goal wasn't to take you down, it was to take control." He locked eyes with me. "I wasn't willing to do what it took to get close, they wanted a hold in the Alfero family by any means possible."

My stomach recoiled. "Get her pregnant."

"Get her pregnant," he repeated as Dante's grip on my arms tightened. "But I was falling in love with her and it felt wrong, sleeping with her should be because of our feelings not because I was betraying her with each kiss—since I refused to do it, I was taken out and Lucian took my place. I escaped and killed him, and I've had a price on my head ever since."

I cursed. "So now you're trustworthy?"

"I'm trying to make things right. An old contact is making a move. I came here to warn you and to," His eyes flickered past my body. "To apologize to the only girl who ever made me laugh."

I'll make him laugh or at least myself smile by punching him repeatedly in the face. I can suddenly feel the eyes of the room on me, every single individual like they're waiting for me to fight, waiting for me to rage and lose my shit. I can't decide if the feeling I have in my chest is absolute hatred or terror, maybe it's a mixture of both.

I took a deep breath and exhaled roughly. "She's mine."



“She should be able to choose who she loves—don’t you agree?” His eyes narrowed. “After all, you covered for her—claimed the baby was yours when you hadn’t even touched her, what an easy way to infiltrate.” He took a few steps toward me and held up his phone. “After all, you learned from the best.”

“What the fuc?—”

I stopped short.

It was her.

My ex.

Sienna.

The woman who told me she loved me only to want my name and power. I was trained long before her.

“So?” I sneered. “A picture of the woman who betrayed me and stabbed me repeatedly in the chest—who cares!”

Louis tugged his shirt down.

He had similar knife marks. “It’s what she does—to her favorites.”

“No.” I shook my head. “No—we were in a relationship. Together. I was going to leave this life, and she got pissed and nearly killed me.”

Louis rolled his eyes. “Likely story—she always gives us different ones since she’s the boss of La Nebbia Syndicate. Then again, you knew that, right?”

My memories came slamming back into the present.

I remembered moments with her.

The pregnancy that never happened.

Wanting to get married.

Being willing to do anything to keep the baby, to help her to.

My blood ran cold. “She trains...everyone?”

Louis leaned down and patted me on the shoulder. “She’s very skilled at psychological manipulation. You don’t even realize that every day she adds another layer until she places certain scenarios and triggers—all possible—that could make you do anything and I do mean anything—to not only belong—but in your mind—be redeemed. It’s part of the sickness she spreads—she leaves just enough of a starving heart, layered and peppered with pieces of longing and betrayal that when you see a tiny flicker of light you go—this will fix it—and you believe it will until it doesn’t.”

I slumped to my knees. “I would never hurt Raven or Lily.”

He shrugged. “Does it really matter?” He pulled out a UV light stick and turned it out then held it up to my face.

I couldn’t see what everyone else saw but I imagined it was bad.

“The N tattoo is only visible under black light.” He shrugged. “It spreads across your neck and crawls down your back. Whatever has control of the head can turn it,

whatever control the spine can move it—your tattoo represents exactly where your loyalty lies.”

I opened my mouth to yell when something hit me on the back of the head. Dark spots appeared as I fell to the ground and looked up. Raven stared at me, then over at Louis.

He took two steps toward her.

I fought to keep my eyes open.

Tried to will my body to remember we had a family to protect, to love.

But it gave out on me.

The last thing I saw was Louis reach for my wife’s hand.

29

RAVEN

“The one where there’s nothing left to lose.

I jerked away from Louis. “You left me.”

“I had no choice.” He shook his head. “They kidnapped me and sent me back. I came as soon as I broke free.”

“How do we know you’re good?”

“Because I’m marked,” he said. “A walking target.” He lifted the UV light to his

face. A giant X was tattooed across his right cheek in UV ink. “I’m an outcast, because I fell in love with you.”

“Why come back now?” I asked.

Dad dropped Ace to the floor with a dull thud. He’d been hit so hard he got knocked out—by my own father. I knew everyone was mad and confused, but as far as I was concerned that was the father of my baby—despite his blood saying otherwise and my husband. I refused to believe anything else.

“Take him downstairs,” Dad snapped. “And that’s what we asked as well. It seems he has some unfinished business, with you.”

Louis reached for me again.

I took a step back.

“I tried to stay away.” Tears filled his eyes. “I watched you, tailed you often, and then Lily was born.”

He dared say her name? Out loud?

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“And you looked so happy. I walked away until a friend inside told me that Ace was succeeding in doing exactly what Lucian was supposed to do.” He drew a ragged breath. “I’m saving you.”

I snorted out a laugh. “Do I look like I need saving?”

My heart hurt, but this man, this man I didn’t know him, maybe I never had. He wasn’t the man I had fallen for, and Lucian was dead. The guy I’d barely known and thought was Louis wasn’t even here.

Lily’s real father, however, was probably getting either beat in the basement or tied up. I needed to find a way to convince my dad to let him go.

“Dad...” I reached for his hand. “Something feels wrong—I’m not saying Louis would betray us but...” I looked around. “I also don’t think Ace even knew what he was doing, plus he grew up with us. He would never willingly go against us. He’d die for me?—”

“He lied to me without thinking of the consequences,” Dad snapped. “He bled for me.”

“He bled forme!” I yelled back. “And for Lily!”

“Sweetheart...” Dad’s face softened. “We have no idea what he’s capable of or how long he was even under her spell. When we called him back from Italy he’d already been there three years.”

Three years of psychological torment.

Three years of being in love with someone only for them to leave you.

I didn't have the whole story but it suddenly made so much more sense.

"I choose him," I whispered. "Even if you don't. I do. And Lily does too." I shook my head at Louis. "I never knew you then, apparently, and I don't know you now. Please leave me and my family alone."

Louis' eyes darkened. "I'm here saying I'll fight for you. I'll save you, I'll do whatever you need me to do."

"That's the thing about love," I interrupted him. "It's more. You don't even have to ask, you just do, seamlessly day after day. Ace doesn't offer to save me—he's too busy giving me and our daughter the tools so we can save ourselves."

I walked past my dad. Two men blocked the hallway. "Move. I'm going to go see my husband."

"Raven," Dad warned, "he can't stay."

"Where he goes I go."

"I can't let you do that." I could feel his nod at the guys in front of me.

"Move," I said again to the men in front of me. "At least let me say goodbye to my husband."

The guys moved to the side while I stomped through.

“Ten minutes,” Dad snapped.

I knew what he meant.

“Can’t stay with us.” That was basically like saying he’d kill him, whether that was physically or just by sending him away and giving him a new life and name, I wasn’t sure; it depended on each case.

Lily would never know Ace.

I would never have him.

It was too dangerous.

The doorbell went off above me as I took the stairs down to the bottom and went to the first room.

It was a holding cell before dad decided what to do—it was a way for people to pay for their sins.

I shoved open the door.

Ace was shirtless, his scars on full display. He hung from the ceiling with both arms spread wide to the sides at a V angle. His head hung in front, his pants were tugged down low on his hips like they didn’t bother to pick them up when they also tied his ankles together, his jeans getting caught in the process. His body was gorgeous even like that, all sculpted muscle and scars.



I refused to believe it.

“Ace?” I called. “Wake up.”

I tapped his face.

He stirred and looked up from beneath a curtain of messy brown hair. “I love you.”

Tears spilled over my cheeks. “I love you too.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck and hung on. “I’ll talk to my dad again, we’ll figure this out. I’ll grab Lily and we can run away with you.”

“From your family? You’d always be in danger with me, Raven, even I know that. Your dad’s trying to protect you, protect Lily.”

I hated that he was right. If it was just me I’d run—but we had a daughter.

“But she needs you. I need you. You just started learning how to braid hair.”

His smile was sad. “I still think the doll I’m practicing on is possessed, how does it move around so much?”

I smirked. “I do that to mess with you.”

“Even knowing my only stupid fear is dolls?”

“Absolutely.”

His smile dropped. “I’ll miss you, but it’s okay.”

“None of this is okay.”

“I had you.” He licked his lips. “For a few brief moments I had what people fight wars over, what they live for and die for. I had it and guess what! I’ll still have it; nobody can take the memory of us away—nobody can take what I’ve stored in my soul of you and Lily. It’s mine to keep.”

“I can’t lose you.” Chest aching I leaned on his shoulder and sobbed. “I love you. I spent too long not touching you, not kissing you, not telling you every day how much!” I kissed his warm neck and found his mouth and broke away. “She needs someone to give her away at her wedding, she needs someone to scare off anyone who wants to date her, she needs someone to teach her how to shoot a bow and arrow?—”

“Because that’s normal.”

“It is. For us that’s normal,” I cried. “Please just—fight with me, fight alongside me for us, please.”

A tear slid down his cheek and onto my hand. “Don’t you see? That’s exactly what I’m doing.”

I kissed him again. “No.” We parted. “No.” I kissed him so hard that his body moved against the bindings holding him there.

Footsteps sounded.

They'd said ten minutes!

They'd lied.

A few men rushed in and started pulling him free from the bindings.

“Wait? He's going free?” My heart soared. Maybe my dad found a way too?—

“Not enough time,” Mark one of my dad's higher ups worked on Ace's feet. “They killed your nanny and left a note with her body on the doorstep. Lily for Ace.”

Two of the most important people in my life. Dizzy, I bent over and had to put my hands on my legs. “What do you mean?”

“They'll hand over Lily to the family but they want Ace. A life for a life or maybe they just want their soldier back.”

“He was never one of their soldiers!” I screamed. “Do you hear yourself?”

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They jerked Ace to his feet. Mark didn't so much as look at me. "Doesn't matter. The car's right outside the gate. We'll take no chances on this one. I'm sorry, Raven, I really am."

It was a blur walking up the stairs behind them. Needing to touch Ace but ready to collapse at any minute over the idea of losing Lily.

Losing them both.

I couldn't focus, couldn't think.

"This is the best way." Ace stopped in front of me. Mark let him. "Trust me."

"Don't leave me," I begged. "Please. Please don't leave us."

"Your life will always be mine—now let mine...be yours." He leaned in and pressed a kiss to my cheek. "It was beautiful, a little nightmare that turned into a dream I never thought I'd be given. Thank you for making the darkness warm."

I rushed out after them to the front. Every man in attendance was lined up and armed standing up front. The gate was open on the other side a black limo and a tall woman leaning against the hood of it.

She was stunning, with long black hair a svelte shape and red lipstick that you could almost taste by just staring at it.

That's who he'd dated?

That's who he had been in love with?

I would hate her even if she was a saint sent from heaven.

The man next to her was holding Lily in her car seat.

I jumped forward.

"No." Ace shook free from Mark and started to walk toward her. It felt like an eternity as the other man began his walk toward us.

Ace stood in front of her. They talked.

He nodded and then he leaned in and hugged her like they were best friends.

What the hell was going on?

Did he really betray us?

Was he lying?

I rushed toward the man holding the car seat and pulled her free from him. My hands wouldn't stop shaking as they undid the restraint and pulled Lily against my chest.

She'd been sleeping. Thank God.

Ace was still standing there. He nodded. And hung his head. He nodded again and then she handed him a gun.

He took it, aimed for her head and pulled the trigger. When it was all over with, he took one look over his shoulder at me and smiled.

## ACE

The one where the enemy surprises you.

“It was deep cover.” Sienna sighed. “There’s always a boss. I thought I could fight it. I didn’t want to kill you, I wanted you to have a life without this.”

“And yet you stole my child. Tell me why I shouldn’t rip your spleen through your mouth?”

“You can kill me how ever you want.” Her bright blue eyes filled with tears. “I was given a few months, apparently miracles are only in stories and brain tumors like to kill. I’d rather go out this way—besides, it’s all part of my plan. La Nebbia will need a new boss who’s already got an in—talk about deep.”

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I looked up toward the sky. “You don’t get a miracle, and yet I do?”

“You deserve it for what I put you through, for the way you grew up, for all of it—take care of that baby, at least now your father-in-law doesn’t have to kill you, he just has to get along with his enemy.”

“You made me their enemy and got me inside the family all at once. They can’t kill me, they have no choice but to keep me, and whoever runs La Nebbia will be watching.”

“Well...” She handed me the gun. “Don’t let them down, you’ve got a syndicate to run and a family to join, she’ll need to make it believable.” She looked beyond me. “And she’ll have to take on the mark of La Nebbia to swear her allegiance.”

“She gave birth. She can handle a tattoo and a fake betrayal.”

“Thought so.” Sienna gave me one last watery smile. “Thank you for allowing me to go out this way.”

“Maybe there are?—”

“No options.” She smiled as more tears slid down. “Let me end on a good note, Ace.”

“Go in peace, Sienna. You enter alive.” I took a breath. “And you will have to get out dead.”

“I accept.” Her smile was wide. “And now I must leave.”

“May God have mercy on your soul,” I rasped. “For I will not.”

I closed my eyes and pulled the trigger. Dropped the gun, stole a mocking glance at the family, got into the running limo and ran away.

Lily was safe.

Raven was safe.

And I’d just been given complete control of the one thing the five families wanted to destroy but now needed to keep.

Me.

“Sir,” the voice said from the front. “The boss is calling, phone’s on the seat.”

I picked up the phone and hit accept. “Yes?”

“This wasn’t a part of the plan.” The male voice cracked; it sounded far away. “I’ll be in touch with the next target—until then, make them accept you by any means necessary. You’ll be given instructions on your wife’s tattoo. She betrays us, she dies. You betray us, you die. You both betray us, your family dies. We already have people in place.”

That’s what I hoped he’d say. “I understand.”

“We honor the fallen by striking those who caused it in the first place. You will always be one of them—a De Lange.”

“True. I will always be a De Lange.”



He hung up the phone.

I didn't.

Instead I kept talking. "But I didn't fall, you jack ass—I just fucking rose."

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RAVEN

The one where you pick sides and realize you belong with the enemy more than you ever belonged with the allies.

It had been a week.

A week of staying with my dad, wanting to murder anyone who looked at me or asked how I was holding up, as if I was standing in front of a wall making sure it didn't fall.

My sister was the worst.

“I wasn’t there for you.”

“I’m so sorry. I suck, here let me bake you bread.”

“I’ll watch the baby!”

“All men suck.”

I genuinely think she thought she was helping when she really wasn’t. I missed Ace. He’d freaking killed that woman in cold blood and within a day we had a hand written note announcing he was the new boss of La Nebbia.

Just like that, another De Lange had chosen sides.

Dad actually smiled when he read the note like the news made him happy. Ivan did the same thing. Clearly, they had all lost their minds. When I asked them anything about Ace they refused to answer me.

A knock sounded at my door. Bella waltzed in, radiant in her white sun dress. “Hey, I’m going to take Lily with me for a picnic under the tree—it’s like five feet from the house, but it’s good to be outside.”

She was already reaching for her before I could answer.

“Oh,” She made a face. “Maybe put on some lip gloss and...pants.”

I wasn't wearing pants?

I looked down.

I was in nothing but Ace's long T-shirt. "Right."

"Go out front, I heard you had a package." She shrugged like it was normal for me to get packages at my dad's house, which it wasn't. In fact, most packages weren't even delivered to the house on account of they could go boom and kill us all.

Intrigued, I put on a pair of jeans and added a fresh new T-shirt. I slammed a black hat on and power walked down the hall. Where were all the men? Weird.

I made it to the front door and frowned. Why was it already open?

I took a step outside and stared.

Ace stood on the front porch.

He was wearing a fitted black suit that looked too good on him. Messy hair still present, he shoved his hands into his pocket. "You like words, right?"

I smiled through my tears. "I've been told I talk too much."

"I believe it." He took another step toward me. "And poems, do you like those?"

"Yes."

"I have one for you, some might call it a famous poem, I call it a riddle, would you like to hear it? Since your life is mine?"

Hot tears burned the backs of my eyes. “Since our lives are yours—I’ll listen.”

“I’ll only ask one question after and then I’ll leave.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to say don’t. Instead I just stood there. “Alright.”

He reached for me and grabbed both hands in his.

“The Road Not Taken.”

My tears spilled over onto my cheeks. “By Robert Frost.”

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Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
  
And sorry I could not travel both  
  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
  
And looked down one as far as I could  
  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;  
  
Then took the other, as just as fair,  
  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
  
Though as for that the passing there  
  
Had worn them really about the same,  
  
And both that morning equally lay  
  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,

I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh

Somewhere ages and ages hence:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I?—

I took the one less traveled by,

And that has made all the difference.

“I choose you and Lily, but the road...” I shook my head. “It’s not one I’ve traveled or would wish for you.” He pulled me close until his forehead touched mine. “It’s your choice.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck. “Are you on this road with me?”

“I’m the one trying to read the map,” he rasped. “I’m just not very good with words or direction.”

“Ah, so the enemy needs me?”

He tucked my hair behind my ears. “More than you will ever know.”

I stood on my tiptoes and pressed a kiss to his mouth and said. “We accept.”

“Thought you would say that.” My dad’s voice came from behind me. I turned around. His blue eyes landed on Ace behind me then back on me. “This isn’t the path I would have chosen.”

I walked up to him, all my life he'd been the protector, the savior, everything to me and I'd always wondered what parts of him I got since it felt like they all went to Tempest. I almost laughed when it suddenly dawned on me. I got bits and pieces of his darkness, his determination, and his need to forge his own path, something new, something he was told not to do.

At a young age he was pulled into the mafia after being told not to do it and he did it anyway, he took over the family anyway, he made the hard choices. My mom was standing behind him with Bella. Both of them were paying too close of attention to Lily to even care what conversation was going on with us.

It was always life or death.

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It was always like this. It would always be like this.

“I want my own path.” I crossed my arms. “The way you did when the uncles told you not to leave New York. They hid you away to protect you.” His dad was the infamous Luca Nicolasi, Grandma Joyce had been an Alfero through marriage. Long story short she had an affair with Luca Nicolasi.

They had two children, my dad and my Aunt Val.

“You’ve always searched for home even though we told you, you were in it.” He shared a look with Ace. “I think you found it.”

“I have.”

Bella walked over to me. “The car seat’s already in there. I told them not to be idiots and that you’d make your choice, see aren’t you glad I told you to wear pants?”

“You should have hinted at makeup and brushing my hair too.” I glared. “But yes, thank you.”

“I could have done without pants.” Ace just had to say earning a glare from my dad. “Nothing wrong with a beautiful naked woman.”

Dad reached for his gun.

Ace gave him a knowing look. “Can’t kill me, remember?”



I took Lily in my arms. “Let’s go.”

I knew if I waited any longer I’d think more, and I wanted to leave with my husband, with my family.

It would be tedious this new relationship.

I quickly put Lily in the car seat and closed the door just to turn around and see Ace fire off two shots, one in my dad’s shoulder and one in Ivan’s. “A guest should never walk away without leaving a gift.” He blew them a kiss and got into the car.

I didn’t scream.

I stared straight ahead and kept my hands in my lap.

Once we were through the gate and on the road, I smacked him in the shoulder “You shot them!”

He turned down the road. “They were expecting nothing less. We’re La Nebbia, they know it, we know it, now it’s a game of cat and mouse and trying to stay alive.”

“Dangerous.”

“You chose the path.”

“Because you were on it,” I reminded him. Lily was already fast asleep in her car seat as he took another turn and went down a winding road a few miles from my parents’ house.

At the very end of the driveway was a huge brick two story home. There was a barn, horses in the nearby field, an extensive garden.

“I think I like this better than campus.”

“Thought so.” He reached for my hand. “Lily’s room is ready—I just?—”

A knock sounded on the window.

Just in time.

“Hi, Sara, can you take Lily to her room? I need to talk with Raven.”

Sara was in her mid-sixties and was the only nanny we were allowed to have, meaning we had another pair of eyes on us in the house.

When she left, I kissed Raven’s hand and whispered low against it. “We live with the enemies, we must become closer than family—in order to protect ours and yours, in order to peel away the layers and find who’s at the root. Are you with me?”

“Yes.”

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“Good.” He jumped from behind the wheel and walked over to my side of the car, jerked open the door, pulled me out, tossed me onto his shoulder and carried me into the house. I didn’t have time to appreciate the kitchen or the halls or the stairway until he carried me into a giant room that had windows overlooking a pond. “It’s so pre?—”

“Strip.” He dumped me on the bed. “I want to watch.”

Oh yes, I definitely chose the right path. I fumbled with my jeans and tossed my T-shirt into the corner, nothing about how I was stripping was sexy but I needed him, wanted him.

“I need to taste you.” He shrugged out of his suit. “And then we’ll have a normal family dinner. I’ll love on Lily we’ll make this a home but right now—” His jaw flexed. “I need you.”

“Yes.” I reached for him, grabbing the back of his neck and pulling him down on top of me.

He kicked off the last of his clothes and thrust into me in one fell swoop. Pinning me to the new bed, making me his.

Ace crushed his mouth to mine. “Missed you.”

I wrapped a possessive leg around him. “Keep me.”

With a moan his hips moved, the kiss deepened. “Done.”

## EPILOGUE

### TEMPEST

“This is weird.” I looked around the dinner table. “We have Russians over in that corner pounding vodka like water, we have Italians in the middle, the De Lange family is actually sitting with us, and now we have an underground syndicate boss feeding a small baby yogurt. What’s next? Aliens?”

Raven choked on her dinner roll. She looked happy, alive. Never did I think she’d be married to Ace of all people with one little girl and another one on the way or that she’d technically be an enemy to the five families for life while also playing both sides. “It’s not weird, it’s just...family.”

I pointed at Ace with my fork. “He’s scarier now.”

“He has a role to play.” She cleared her throat. “Just like us, plus it does make any time we’re alone explode into this tension like?—”

“Hellooooo, um, Louis, Lucian, L... what did we decide on again?” I joked trying to make things better even though the guy still loved Raven, loathed Ace and was basically abandoned by La Nebbia only to be forced back in to help protect the very family he wished he had.

Basically his life was now torture.

“None of the above.” He looked between us and then exchanged a frown with Ace. “Hey, um Tempest can I talk to you for a minute?”

“I gotta pee.” Raven jumped to her feet.

Louis took her chair and sat. His blond hair was a hot wavy mess. “So, there’s no way to sugar coat this.”

“Then don’t.”

“I’m going to be your new bodyguard.”

“Ah, maybe a bit of stevia would have helped.”

“You said not to. And I’m good at my job.”

“Does being good at your job mean not sleeping with me if the boss forbids it or sleeping with me if he asks you to? At what point do we have a meet cute and fall in love and do you or don’t you prefer the side closest to the door?”

“Look...” He ran a hand through his hair. “It’s not ideal for me either!”

“You don’t need to raise your voice.”

“It gets me out of the house,” he admitted. “Please, Tempest, I can’t?—”

“Fine.” My smile was fake. I didn’t want the guy that ignored me anywhere near me, he would see too much and I’d have to kill him if he figured out all my secrets. “On one condition.”

Maybe this would work out best for everyone?

Maybe.

I held out my hands. “Deal?”

“You haven’t said yet.”

“I’m aware of that. Deal?”

He looked at Ace then watched Raven walk back toward us. Without glancing in my direction he held out his hand and shook mine. “Deal.”

I jerked him against me and pressed a kiss against his mouth. “Excellent.”

“What is?”

I jumped to my feet and clapped my hands. “Listen up, everyone. I’m not in love. I hate it when accidentally arranged marriages happen, too many feelings, don’t want to catch those. This guy’s going to be my new bodyguard, oh and husband, they say twins do everything together, am I right?” I laughed.

The tables fell silent.

“Anyway.” I grinned. “Carry on.”

I took my seat.

In three, two, one.

The room exploded with yelling.

I grabbed my champagne and winked at Louis. “Don’t worry I’m the last person you’d ever fall for. Many have tried, all have failed.”

“Why’s that?” he yelled above the noise.

I leaned in and tugged his ear with my teeth. “My kiss is poison, and I love to bite.”

Sweet Poison

Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies. —  
Nelson Mandela

Tempest

"NO!" My voice cracked. “Tempest, no, back away, drop the gun, no.”

How many times could a person say no?

How many times would she point it at me and my brother?

How many times would I betray her?

How many times would I regret the moments I stole from her?

"Tempest," I held up my hands. “It’s not what you think.”

Her blood-soaked Nike sweatshirt was plastered against her tall frame, just like her jet black hair with tips of blue kissed her cheeks. Mascara streaked down her skin.

Mourning. She was mourning what was lost while I was desperate to keep what I had

found.

She choked on a sob. “Did you break me?”

The hardest words I would ever say. The hardest truth I would ever tell when I’d only ever been a liar. “Yes.”

“To what!” she screamed. “Say it!”

"I'm broken, and broken people break things." My breath was heavy in my chest, my throat burned with choking flame after flame. “You were pretty so I touched you, you were easy so I took you, you were lost so I found you, you were nice so I ruined you.”

The truth hurt.

She was nothing but a target, right?

She was nothing.

Love me. I'm not done. Marry me. Cling to me. Stand by my side. Carry me. Kill me.

The final blow, I felt it, I orchestrated it. “In what world would someone like me, ever truly love, someone, like you?”