



Mad Love

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Description: Innocent Blaise Lexington knows better than to cross paths with the dangerous and sexy billionaire “Mad” Maddox Stassi.

He is known for his dark temper and ruthlessness, as well as his link to a horrendous vigilante act. Blaise is willing to overlook all of that for the protection his name and wealth can offer her.

When she presents him with a far-fetched arrangement—marriage to her for the limited-edition sports car that will complete his collection—Blaise expects him to turn her down. Much to her surprise, he accepts.

He doesn't believe in love. She isn't looking for forever-after. As their business arrangement flares into a blazing hot attraction, can two non-believers take a chance on each other? Or will a man from Blaise's past destroy their unexpected marriage?

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1

Blaise

There's a line my grandfather is fond of saying when we're surrounded by people more interested in his wealth and our family's name than in us as people with dreams and fears.

"The world doesn't give a crap what you are on the inside. It's the lasting impression of what you leave behind that counts worth a damn."

The impression I'm leaving as I stand next to my grandfather and flanked by my bodyguards is I am to be seen but not touched.

As the guests come up to us, dressed in their best evening wear, I acknowledge them with a slight nod. They nod back but don't say a word, turning their attention next to my grandfather. He politely accepts his guests' birthday wishes and makes small talk. Grandfather keeps it short. The line stretches out the door of his beachfront estate in the Hamptons.

When I visit Grandfather, I open the windows of my bedroom, lie in bed, and listen to the ocean waves. I fall asleep to the comforting lull and wake up to them in the morning, as well as catch a whiff of salt-laden air. I love Grandfather's beach place. What I don't like is the attention I garner as Devlin Lexington's strange but fascinating granddaughter, the one who will inherit his billions with his death.

My grandfather dead . . . God, my chest aches at the thought, and I return my

thoughts to his eighty-fifth birthday extravaganza. Next in line is a guy. He didn't bring a plus-one or a plus-five. Why not? Each of my grandfather's guests can bring five additional people. It's the reason the line is so long.

The guest is dressed from head to toe in black. Already he is defying my grandfather's one of two requests for this party. No one shall wear his granddaughter's least favorite color. Guess what it is?

Black is death. Black is complete darkness. Black is being buried alive inside a wooden casket with a corpse. A wave of nausea threatens to overcome me, and I do what calms me. I tip my chin and give the fear in my head my best cold stare. I refuse to let my fear win a battle I've struggled with since I was taken out of that coffin by my rescuers.

Looking beyond the color of his suit, I assess the fit. How clothes fit a person or why a person chooses a certain color or fabric fascinates me. What someone wears can make or break them when they're trying to make a first impression.

I'm not impressed with this guest's attempt at getting mine and my grandfather's attention by disregarding his request. What I am impressed with is he knows a great tailor. His suit molds to him like a second skin, and I am reminded of how nicely superheroes' clothes fit them, leaving little to the imagination.

The man is built like Granger, my most senior bodyguard. Granger is six foot one and looks lean, but strip him of his clothing and he is lined with muscles.

I have to give the guest credit for wearing the suit well. I find the larger the man, the more difficult it is for him to pull off the muscle-hugging look. Tight clothing shows rather than hides the obvious. For example, how thick his thighs are. How tapered his waist is. The bulge under his pants.

And my, he is large.

Hot from my cheeks to my hairline, I trail my eyes upward and stare into the most gorgeous blue-green eyes I have come across, and I've come across a lot of men with drop-dead gorgeous eyes.

His eyes sparkle and shine like the marrying of the sea and the sky. Or a unique piece of jewelry made from the combination of sapphire and jade.

I've stared for too long. The corners of his mouth lift, and his smile isn't friendly. I see his kind of smile a lot at parties. He's confident that he'll win me over with his charm, smoking hot body, and swoon-worthy face. There's no need to win me over with how big his bank account is. I have more than enough money, though the majority of it is in my grandfather's name.

Except under this man's cockiness is mirth. He's silently laughing at me for staring at his handsomeness. It's obvious women ogling him is nothing new, and I dislike him more. Similar to my dislike for the color black, I'm not a fan of men who think they are God's gift to women.

Not looking away from the mirth and knowing gleam in his eyes, I give the infamous bachelor Maddox Stassi a slight dip of my head. He nods back.

"Blaise, darling, how are you?"

Darling? An undercurrent of irritation hums along my skin. The endearment is reserved for his lover, which I'm not. Or should be said by someone older, which he isn't. Maddox is twenty-four. I move my hands from my sides and clasp them behind my back.

On cue, Granger steps between us, shielding me from Maddox's open perusal of my

body.

“Sir, please respect Sir Lexington’s request as stated on the invitation and the signage throughout the estate. His granddaughter is not to be spoken to unless she speaks to you first.”

“She did. With her eyes.”

“Sir.”

The warning in Granger’s voice should strike fear in Maddox. Usually, Granger doesn’t have to say a word for men to leave me alone. All he has to do is stay near my side and they don’t dare approach me.

He believes it has to do with the rumors that he is my lover. I politely disagreed and put in my own theory.

Granger has a deep scar transecting his face. No one knows how he got it, and he will be the last to give up that information. Doing so will injure his pride, and Granger is a proud man. The unknown can scare people off. I felt the same when Granger and I met for the first time. Then he spared my life when he had every right to take it, and we have been friends since.

Not heeding Granger’s warning, Maddox steps off to the side and addresses me. I’m not surprised, considering his reputation for going to extremes when he wants something badly enough.

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“My apologies, Blaise. I wanted to hear your voice. It’s been what, six months since we last spoke?”

“Three, Mr. Stassi,” Granger answers for me.

We’ve been together long enough that he can finish my sentences. I also finish his, which he finds annoying but doesn’t think the same when he does it.

“Six months. Three months. It’s all the same when the outcome is the same, is it not, Blaise?”

Maddox chuckles, and the deep sound elicits a strange and foreign response from my neck down. My nipples ache, and the place between my legs throbs. I move my hands from behind my back and clasp them in front of my body, but that doesn’t take away the ache or the throbbing.

“The answer will be a firm no every time, sir.” To selling him my sports car. “Now, please, move along. Otherwise, I will escort you out.”

Maddox has the good sense and the common decency not to make a scene, and moves along in line. I exhale the breath I was holding.

“Interesting chap,” Grandfather says for my ears only.

I agree.

As soon as Maddox handed off to one of my bodyguards a slip of paper offering to

buy my arctic white X-R 85 for a ridiculous sum of money, Granger went digging for everything he could find, including the women Maddox is involved with, in case we need to use the information as leverage.

The leverage thing is Granger's philosophy on dealing with "unpleasantries." Granger grew up in the foster care system, and lucky him, the homes he was placed in were a dog-eat-dog living situation. He had to get creative as well as ruthless if he wanted to eat or survive the backstabbing happening with his other foster brothers.

Granger takes his place behind me, and I give this leverage philosophy some thought, acknowledging my guests with a small smile or a nod. I don't encourage them by smiling too brightly. Otherwise, they'll approach my more approachable bodyguards and strike up a conversation that we as a group are not interested in having. Not tonight, anyway.

Marco's sister is in the hospital, and he wants me there when he becomes an uncle for the first time. My presence is also expected because my best friend, Sylvia, from boarding school, chose me as her baby girl's godmother.

I glance off to the side the same time Maddox looks over his shoulder. Our gazes meet, and for some reason, the thought of a baby doesn't leave my brain. I tear my gaze from the coldness in his gorgeous eyes. He's a man used to getting what he wants, and he's been wanting my sports car "Betty" for a year now.

Men like Maddox are the reason my team spread the rumor that Granger is my lover. When rebuffed, the men can get nasty. They send me distasteful messages through snail mail. Some are so godawful, Granger puts the letters through the shredder. Or the men will leer if I so much as smile their way in an attempt to be friendly rather than the "ice queen" they've labeled me as.

Whether I smile or give them a slight dip of my head, acknowledging but not

encouraging them, I'm in a lose-lose situation. Granger thinks the best way to deal with the men's advances and their glares is to marry.

Ha! This girl doesn't believe in the institution of marriage, though my parents were role models for love, happiness, and commitment. I might only be twenty going on twenty-one, but marriage requires touching as well as conversation. I'm not good at either, and that's the reason Granger and I get along so well. We rarely talk, but boy, when we do, watch out, world: we have a lot to say.

And touching? Yep, out of the question, and that means marriage isn't in my foreseeable future. I would rather lose my billions than get married.

Famous last words.

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Maddox

“Beautiful, isn’t she?”

I look where the guy seated next to me is looking. He doesn’t wait for me to answer. It’s a good thing he didn’t. I’m not in the same camp as everyone else, that Blaise Lexington, with her long black hair, pale skin, and one eye green and the other blue, is easy on the eyes.

Women who are cold as ice, who surround themselves with men just as cold, are not my cup of tea. And if her cold eyes and glacier expression don’t have me running the opposite direction, her traumatic past would. My sister’s is difficult enough to deal with.

“A broken, beautiful creature. I wonder what kind of man can get past her armor.”

Is this guy for real? I must have looked at him like he’s crazy. He laughs and introduces himself.

“Name’s Walter. Walter Spinx. I write romance under W.S. Spinx.”

That would explain his romanticized view of Blaise and her traumatic past.

“Isn’t she involved with the guy with the messed-up face?” I jerk my head at the guy standing behind Blaise.

Blaise and her grandfather are seated at a table in the front of the ballroom. Next to her are her cousins, four large guys who are looking down their noses at the rest of us rich mortals. On the other side of Sir Lexington is his only sibling, Sir Arthur Lexington.

“If so, he got the shitty end of the stick, having to stand behind her rather than be seated at her side.”

Good point. I lift my drink, and taking a slow sip, I study Blaise over the rim of my glass.

What is the ice queen like in bed? My guess is she is as lively as she is now, sitting straight as a board with her gaze forward, shoulders pulled back, and her small hands clasped primly in front of her on the table.

And what is it with her and wearing only silk or satin? Is plain cotton not good enough to touch her smooth, pale skin? Or how about the ridiculous gloves that cover her fingers and the length of her arms?

Tired of studying beauty that is only skin deep, I swing my gaze around the room and lock eyes with a blonde bombshell who is more to my taste. Evie Lawson. Lawyer to the rich and famous. Philanthropist, donating money and her time to causes that help women and children. A great conversationalist. She pats the top of the empty chair next to her. I excuse myself and head over.

She greets me with a smile, and after sitting, I move my chair closer. Her leg rubs against mine, and the friction gets me hot down there.

“How are you, Maddox?”

“Good, you?”

“I could be better.”

“Like how better?” I say near her ear.

“Like my legs wrapped around your waist with you deep inside me better,” she says in a low voice.

Did I mention Evie can talk dirty?

“Should we get out of here?” I walk my fingers down her thigh.

“Too obvious. Let’s wait for the dancing to start.”

“No one is here for dancing, Evie.”

“Didn’t you read the follow-up invite to the first one?”

“Hell no. If I read every goddamn one that crosses my desk, I’ll never get any work done.”

“Then let me tell you why the guests will stay until the party is through. The dance is a cake walk.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me?” I haven’t done the cake walk since the school carnival, and that was grade school.

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She laughs. “No joke. There are cakes to be won, but what people are staying for is the chance to spend a day with Her Royal Coldness.”

“Come again?”

Evie again laughs. “Maddox, did you start the party early? Had one too many drinks before you came here?”

“Evie. Repeat what you said.”

“Whoever wins the last cake walk gets to spend a day with Blaise alone at her Montana estate.”

That’s what I thought she said.

I can picture it. Me, Blaise, and the X-R 85 I’ve been wanting. This is my chance to wear her down until she agrees to selling me the car.

Wanting my cake and eating it too ’cause I’m a selfish bastard that way, I grab Evie’s hand, yank her to her feet, and go in search of the first room I can fuck her in.

Knowing glances be damned.

3

Blaise

“Grandfather, why didn’t you get my okay first?”

As we watch the guests walk in circles to music for the fifth and final time, Grandfather dropped news I’m not ready for.

The prize for the last cake walk is a day with me at my second Montana home. Of course he would tell me last minute. There’s less of a chance of talking him out of it.

“Sweetheart, you’re so lonely there. It’s time you have a visitor.”

“I’m there alone for a reason. My place is my sanctuary.” I school my facial expression. The partygoers will have a field day if my grandfather and I have a disagreement in the open. “It’ll be strange having a complete stranger there. Why didn’t you stipulate that it be at my Montana estate?”

“What’s the fun in that? You hold parties there all the time. Somewhere more private, the ‘road less traveled,’ shall we say, is more enticing.”

“Grandfather—”

“Blaise, the cake walk was your idea. Look how well it’s doing.”

He’s right. I did the head count, and the cake walk is a success, bringing in money

that'll help families find their missing loved ones. Each person who plays is paying ten thousand dollars.

"You're right. My apologies."

"No need, sweetheart. I want what's best for you."

"Invasion of my privacy is what's best?"

"No, Granddaughter. I am giving you the opportunity to be the strong woman you were meant to be had that bastard not kidnapped you. Heed my words, Blaise, a reckoning is coming soon, and you most of all will reap the rewards."

His words are cryptic, as usual.

"Playing the role of a knight from the Dark Ages again, eh?" I tease.

Grandfather smiles. "What else is there to do with a brother named Arthur?"

Next to him, my great-uncle smiles too. His smile widens when the song ends and a number is called.

"Looks like we have a winner," Great-Uncle Arthur says with a sympathetic smile, understanding his brother's meddlesome ways well.

The winner drops a string of f-bombs, and then he whoops. The guests do this weird gasp-laughing thing that gets the blood pumping fast through my veins.

Ignoring the rapid beats of my heart, I utter a wish and a prayer. I hope the winner is someone I can stand to be around for a whole day, who won't give up the location to my private cabin in the woods, and who isn't a serial killer or a stalker.

Faking nonchalance, I look away from my great-uncle's face and stare straight ahead. Maddox strides to the middle of the room and stops. My mouth drops open. He raises a brow, a challenge for me to present him with the "winning hand" as was announced before everyone bought their tickets to the last and most anticipated cake walk.

Darn it, I never saw this one coming. I mean, his chances of winning was one in ten. And the amount to play increased to twenty-five thousand dollars.

"Need us to chaperone, Blaise?" one of my cousins ask, his blue eyes sparkling.

My other cousins duck their heads, but I don't miss their wide smiles. Of course, they're having too much fun at my expense.

It's always been like this with them, and the reason I begged Grandfather for archery and fencing lessons. I would rather be one step ahead of my rambunctious cousins than to be brought down by their signature arrows or a flesh wound from their sharp-as-hell knives and swords.

Behind me, my team is silent. I push back my chair just enough not to hit Granger in the legs. With my head held high, I walk across the ballroom, stop in front of the sexy guy with the smirk on his face, and in a loud voice, congratulate him, tapping him quickly and lightly on the shoulder. There, I have bestowed on him the "winning hand."

"She speaks," he says near my ear as he leans into my personal space. "I can't wait to see your posh place, darling."

Posh? Pfft. Who says that word these days? I don't play into his ploy of goading a reaction from me. Instead, I tilt my head back to the team standing behind me.

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“Give Granger your cell number. He will have my assistant get in touch with you.”

Maddox shoves his hands in his pants pockets, and tipping his head to the side, he looks at me like I’m one of his prized limited-edition sports cars. I’m nice to look at but too valuable to take for a ride.

God, that is such a crass analogy, comparing taking a car for a ride to having sex. But if he’s making that comparison, it’s likely he won’t risk taking me for a test drive and “wrecking” me. Therefore, he’ll spend the day with me and take back with him whatever impression he leaves with. Hopefully, it’ll be I am to be seen but not touched.

He takes my relief the wrong way. A look of relief is my famous blasé expression.

“Do you do none of the heavy lifting, Blaise? Does everyone do the communicating for you? Are you not capable of lifting your own goddamn fingers to do your own work? Never mind, don’t answer. You’re nothing but a spoiled brat who uses her trauma as an excuse to not do a thing but spend money on fancy clothes, an entourage of beef cakes for bodyguards, and a party house in the middle of nowhere.”

Maddox’s words carry in the silent ballroom. I should run away and hide from embarrassment, but I’ve experienced firsthand his kind of misplaced anger. I go with my first guess.

In a low voice, I say for him only, “It’s okay not to be at your top-notch best performance.”

“What are you talking about?”

I tilt my head toward the corner of the room where we'll have privacy.

Granger gets the message. He grabs Maddox's arm and steers him to the corner. The rest of my team split up. Two help my cousins get the guests out the door, shutting down the party. Granger and Marco have my back.

Tomorrow, there'll be headlines about my humiliation at the hands of the notorious “Mad” Maddox Stassi, the guy rumored to have had his sister's rapists castrated.

Maddox was never charged with the crimes. My cousins said the men didn't talk even when offered federal protection. I don't blame them for keeping mum. If Maddox was responsible for the vigilante act, he might have gone after their tongues next.

Yes, that's the stand-up citizen I'm empathizing with though he lambasted me in front of a crowd of partygoers excited for something scandalous to dissect and gossip about.

“Maddox—”

Granger holds up his hand. I exhale, and shrugging, I wait for Granger to put in his two cents. This won't take long. Like me, he's not a huge conversationalist. Action means more to us than words.

“Apologize.”

See what I mean?

“I will after she says her piece.”

O-kay, then.

“Pent-up frustration and you’re taking it out on me.”

“Come again?”

To make my point, I slide my eyes down to his crotch without moving my head and then slide my gaze back to his face again. He smirks.

“I can get it up just fine, Blaise.”

I set my clasped gloved hands over my heart. “Thank goodness. I wouldn’t want to entertain a grouchy eggplant.”

“Eggplant? Seriously, Blaise?”

“If the color fits . . .”

“It doesn’t. So no need mentioning it again.”

“If you say so.”

“I do.”

“Good,” I say.

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“Good,” he volleys back, the smirk never leaving his face.

“Are we done here?”

“Well done. Like an egg boiled until it cracks done.”

I almost smile. Almost.

“Give your number to Granger, please.” I back up, and giving him a small wave, I do smile this time. “See you later, eggplant-a-gator.”

“Yeah, sure, talk a while, crockie.”

Crockie?

God, we’re cheesy. But I would rather have cheesy than his anger. There’s no need to be angry over not being able to get it up when there are more important things in life, like finding closure for families of missing children.

4

Blaise

Is it a coincidence that my grandfather leaves this earth and goes to heaven the same moment my goddaughter is born into this world? As I was celebrating with my men and Sylvia the birth of little Isabel, I received a call from my great-uncle.

Hours after the party ended, my grandfather's live-in housekeeper went to bring him his usual midnight sweet snack.

According to Bethann, she believed him to be sound asleep, worn out from a day of birthday celebrations. She shook him by the shoulder, having been given strict orders in the past to not keep him from indulging in his sweet treats. When he didn't awaken, she shook him harder, afraid he would chastise her if she didn't give it another try. He didn't make a sound or move. She felt for a pulse and he didn't have one. Bethann called 911 then started CPR, but it was too late.

Thank goodness I'm with my men. I drop my cell phone, clueing Granger that something is terribly wrong. Or is it my stricken expression? They make things happen quickly and soon we board a private flight from California, where I grew up and spent many summers and holidays with my cousins and grandfather, back to Long Island.

We arrive back at my grandfather's estate at eight in the morning.

My chest aching and my face streaked with shed tears, I sink into the chair across

from my great-uncle inside my grandfather's grand office. The walls are lined with built-in bookcases, and the shelves are filled end to end with books. Where there aren't books, there are frames upon frames of pictures of me and my cousins.

I stare at the one of grandfather with his bow and arrow and us kids with our own set. We're smiling. Ecstatic at taking pot shots at one another. Grandfather made it his business to equip us with survival skills including learning how to handle knives and shoot a gun.

We'll never know when the skill will come in handy. That's what Grandfather said. The bow and arrow was my cousin Roman's idea. He upped the ante when he suggested a game of cat and mouse behind the walls of our parents' estates. It was more like an ambush from my cousins. To teach me a lesson, they claimed when I whined and groused over being their live target. No mercy just because I'm a girl.

I get it. I'm one of the boys. A treasure in the men of my family's eyes. When I turned thirteen, my rowdy cousins upped the ante more and resorted to dropping me off in neighborhoods hours from where we lived and taking turns hunting me down. The joys of growing up a Lexington. I take a shuddering breath, missing my grandfather dearly.

Is his death less about coincidence and more about foul play? He was the healthiest person I knew.

"How long for the toxicology report?" On the flight, I peppered Arthur with questions in between my uncontrollable sobbing.

"Six weeks is what I was given."

"I see." After my kidnapping for ransom, I never take anything for face value. Neither does my uncle and cousins.

Arthur tents his hands in front of his mouth and blows out a breath. “Blaise, what’s in my brother’s will isn’t good, sweetie.”

My cousins stop pacing and come over to stand by my side and behind me. My team is waiting outside the closed office door.

“Blaise, I’m sorry, but he left his fortune, including the Montana estate, to ten charities. You have seventy-two hours to vacate the premises and give up the keys. The only property he’s left you with is your cabin. In twenty-four hours, all your prior accesses, including to the jet, are terminated. As executor of his will, I must enforce his wishes. Again, I’m sorry, sweetheart.”

The room closes in on me. I’m oblivious to the shock and anger in Roman’s voice when he speaks for them all.

“How could he do this to her? She needs the protection his money gives her. Blaise can’t survive out there. People know who she is.”

What happened to me when I was sixteen and my two eye colors are the bane of my existence. Everywhere I go, people recognize me by my eyes. Or is it the gloves up the length of my arms that has them gawking?

Heed my words, Blaise, a reckoning is coming soon, and you most of all will reap the rewards.

Was it only yesterday that he warned me of what was in his will? Would he have eventually told me of his plan to strip me of my security blanket? His monthly allowance is my shield from the outside world.

“Don’t be mad at Grandfather. He has good intentions.”

“What? To get you kidnapped again?”

“Again?” I shift in my chair and face my cousins. “What do you mean again?” My voice comes to me from a distance. I take deep breaths in and out and talk myself down from my panic.

“We wanted to wait to tell you, but now, after what Grandfather did—” Edward shakes his head, his expression grim. “Rylan found a threat against your life from your kidnapper.”

Five years of silence and now he resurfaces?

“How can you be sure it’s him?”

Rylan walks over to the bookshelf, picks up something lying on top of a row of books, and sets two plastic bags on the desk. Inside one bag is a note. In the much larger bag are the clothes I wore when I was taken.

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“We found the clothes beneath your bedroom window. Taped to the window was the note.”

My kidnapper somehow made it to my third-floor window?

“Security images?”

“There is none from that side of the house,” Rylan says. “It was Grandfather’s request.”

A considerate act.

Grandfather didn’t pry or demand I see a therapist. Instead, he gave me space, leaving the door to his heart open for when I was ready to talk.

The talk never happened.

How could I burden him with my trauma when he gave me nothing but freedom and room to grow as a person? Had I told him what my kidnapper did to me, he would’ve blamed himself, chalking it up to giving me too much leeway and indulging his only granddaughter’s independent streak.

Until evil almost took my life.

“He never told me.”

As soon as Grandfather was given keys to the estate, he had Rylan and his team set

up the security system. That was two years ago.

“Your life is viewed enough through a microscope. Grandfather didn’t want images of you from your place of privacy,” Jakob adds.

Jakob is my age. At thirty years old, Roman is the oldest. Next is Edward, twenty-eight. Rylan is twenty-three.

“What are his demands?” I expect nothing less from my kidnapper.

“Leave the authorities out of his personal vendetta against you; otherwise, he’ll take your life. And, we must renounce your ties to the Lexington family or he’ll expose your father’s secret,” Rylan says.

I’m less concerned about my safety than I am about my father’s good name.

“And what is that, exactly?”

I push back my chair, stand, and look each man in the eye. Years ago, I overheard Arthur beg Grandfather to tell me who my parents were, but I thought he meant my parents as individuals before they became a couple.

“You’re not Jack Lexington’s daughter, Blaise,” Arthur says with a mixture of relief and sadness.

To think he might have held on to this secret for twenty years has my heart hurting for him.

“You are Cillian McCabe’s. He and your father were rivals. Your father was desperate for a child. He gutted Cillian’s woman’s belly and stole the infant. He stole Cillian’s child, Blaise.”

My world shifts off-kilter.

“You’re wrong. My father would never do such a horrible thing. He was the kindest, most gentlest man.”

“A desperate man on the brink of losing the love of his life will do anything. Your mother went through a deep depression after she had a miscarriage.”

My poor mother. “Did she know?”

“No, sweetie. Your father told her he secured you from a young mother who wasn’t in a place financially or emotionally to care for you.”

“Did my supposed mother have different-colored eyes?”

“Cassandra didn’t,” Arthur answers.

I direct the rest of my questions to him. He’s the one who has held on to this secret for my father and my grandfather. If what he claims is true.

“And the members of their families? Do any of them have one eye blue and the other green?”

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“None that we’re aware of, but the bloodline’s been diluted and there are illegitimate children. You could’ve inherited your eyes from a distant relative removed many times over.”

“Did Cillian suspect my father of stealing his child?”

“No. Someone else took the fall and claimed the baby died during the trauma of being ripped from its mother. Cillian killed the man.”

“What you’re telling me is . . . is deplorable and something my father would never do, desperate or not. I refuse to take what is said at face value.”

“I understand. It’s a lot to take in. For now, concede. Give the boys and me time to find the bastard. We can’t have a turf war on our hands.”

He makes a good point. My cousins and the McCabes are competitors in the nightlife industry of the Bay Area. They both have stakes in nightclubs, strip clubs, and the bars that cater to a rougher crowd.

“And when you find him?”

“The choice is yours. Tell or keep our family’s secret.”

“Except you’re not my family. Not if what you’re telling me is true.”

“Family is about more than blood, Blaise. Remember that when we hunt down the bastard and deliver you his head. We don’t tolerate someone going back on their

word.”

My grandfather did the unthinkable when the ransom was delivered to him. He negotiated with my kidnapper. He'll pay, but I mustn't be contacted. Otherwise, hell will rain down on his head.

After five years of silence, why did my kidnapper break his promise? Does he have something to do with my grandfather's death? Most importantly, was he aware of my grandfather's plan of shutting me out of his will, leaving me vulnerable to the big bad world, most especially him?

God, I wish my grandfather were alive. I didn't get the chance to tell him happy birthday or that I loved him. Somehow, I have to make this right. I have to find a way to honor my memories of him.

5

Blaise

After I met with my family, I took a flight to California. On the private jet, I inventoried my assets. Once I pay my team, I'll have a little over three thousand dollars in my bank account. I'm grateful for what I have, but what I need most is time.

The elevator ride to the private office on the top floor seems to take forever, the air stifled with testosterone. Surrounding us are Maddox's security guards. Standing next to Granger is my assistant, Collins. In her hand is a briefcase with the proposal. We put it together on the flight over. The rest of my team is pouring over my kidnapping case.

For now, I've instructed them to steer clear of my family. I don't want to give my kidnapper a reason to expose my family's secret. It's not his secret to tell.

Father was strict but loving, and now, I'm to believe he was a monster, cut from the same cloth as Cillian McCabe, a ruthless mobster?

The elevator dings and the doors open. We step out and approach the double glass doors.

"Blaise, are you sure about this?" Collins hands me the briefcase.

I nod. "It's the only option that will buy me time."

I glance at the glass doors separating me from the man waiting inside his spacious office. This is the part where I go in alone.

On the outside looking in, the office is sterile. White walls. No paintings to liven up the space. The chairs are a solid tan with no lines or designs. Even the lone occupant in the room blends in with the blandness, with his crisp white shirt and unimaginative simple blue tie.

“Are you sure you want us to leave, Blaise? Granger and I don’t mind waiting.”

I give Collins and Granger a slight shake of my head. He is wickedly handsome with the scar across his face, and Collins is flawlessly beautiful with her big brown eyes, naturally sun-kissed skin, and lopsided smile.

You would think Granger would fall hopelessly in love with the Asian beauty, but Granger isn’t into quirky and meddlesome. I wonder what kind of woman will bring my brooding friend to his knees.

“Thank you for being my friends, and cross your fingers this works. If it does, I will see you two soon.”

“And if it doesn’t?” Granger crosses his arms over his chest, looking like he’s ready to knock heads together. Or at the very least knock Maddox’s head into the wall if Maddox refuses my offer.

One of the security guards opens the door for me. It’s my cue to move it or I’ll lose my chance, and the three of us will be escorted back down to the lobby.

“I haven’t thought that far,” I answer.

I haven’t. It’s overwhelming knowing that my grandfather’s death will be lambasted

all over the news and the tabloids. It'll also be revealed that I am, for the most part, broke. But my showing up for a meeting with Maddox has nothing to do with money and everything to do with protection. I text messaged him for a meeting to discuss handing over the car to him, and wasn't surprised when he answered immediately.

From Granger's report on him, Maddox has a one-track mind. If he wants the car, he'll laser-focus on getting the car. I admire his tenacity, though being on the receiving end of it isn't pleasant.

"Good luck, Blaise."

Collins leans in, and we do this air kiss thing, our lips not touching one another's cheeks. It's pathetic that I can't stand to be touched even by those closest to me.

Straightening to my full height, and with my shoulders pulled back, I walk over the threshold and up to Maddox's desk in the middle of the room. He watches me with his hands tented over his mouth. What is he thinking?

From the coldness in his eyes, he doesn't like me. I don't blame him. Though we shared cheesy banter last night, I am not his type. I'm too quiet and strange for his tastes. Maybe more on the boyish side too, with my lean body and small breasts.

I've seen pictures of the women he's been linked to, and they are full figured, big breasted, and tall, and he is into blondes and redheads. Good. If I'm not his type, there's less of a chance of being touched by him.

I lower myself into the chair across from him, pull the proposal out of the briefcase, and slide the contract over. After he's done reading what I've written, he pushes his chair back, comes around his desk, and rests his hip on the corner, forcing me to glance up at him.

Gritting my teeth, I move my chair back and stand with my gloved hands clasped behind my back. For this arrangement to work, he has to see me as an equal and not as the conceding party. There's not much I'm giving away except for my parents' prized car. Parting with the car Dad proposed to Mom in weighs me with this deep loss, second to getting the news from Arthur that my grandfather passed away this morning.

“Why do you need to stay at my place when you have men, money, and a gated and secure estate at your disposal?”

“Your place has fingerprint access and it's on the fortieth floor.”

“You also require use of my security detail?”

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“Only for when I leave your penthouse.”

“I gather from past history, it won’t be much at all. Am I correct?”

“You are,” I answer.

His gaze is searing. I understand his hesitation. I’m not bringing much to the table.

“Marriage to you and I finally get the X-R 85?”

I can’t tell whether his disbelief is in having to marry me, or that he’s getting what he wants after pestering me and my team for the past year.

“Betty? Yes.”

The harsh lines on his face soften. “How are you so sure the car is a she?”

“My dad doesn’t fawn over boy cars.”

His gorgeous blue-green eyes sparkle. “Is that so?”

“Yes. Your answer, please.”

“You’re begging?”

“Time is of the essence.”

“Why are you desperate to get married, Blaise?”

“I need the protection only your name can give me.”

“You’re in danger?”

I blink. “Nothing serious.” Desperation makes it easy to lie.

“What if this not-too-serious danger of yours takes more time to resolve?”

“The maximum is three months as stipulated in the contract.”

Three months is enough time for my team to find my kidnapper, as well as for me to have a solid plan on making money.

“And we can stray from the marriage so long as the affairs are discreet?”

“Per the contract, yes.”

“Will you move your bodyguard into our place, darling?”

“Of course not. That’s the very definition of indiscretion.”

“You’re okay with me fucking other women while married to you?”

“If it’s what you want. I would never rob you of your freedom. Your name is compensation enough.”

“You don’t want my money? My body?”

I blink. “No.”

“Three months max, and then we divorce and go our separate ways?”

“Yes.”

He reaches for the contract, grabs a pen off his desk and signs on the provided line.

“You have yourself a deal. Now hand over the keys and the title.”

6

Maddox

The next few hours are a whirlwind of activity. As soon as I sign the contract, Blaise gets on her phone. Her bodyguard and a sexy young Asian woman dressed in a navy-blue pencil skirt and peach top waltz into my office.

Blaise introduces me to Collins, her assistant, and after formalities are dealt with, I may as well be invisible to Blaise, Collins, and the bodyguard with the messed-up face. Granger. He's driving the SUV that will take us to the County Clerk Recorder's Office.

"I called in a favor. The marriage license and the ceremony will be kept under wraps for at least forty-eight hours. All parties involved have signed NDAs."

I'm very familiar with non-disclosure agreements.

And no kidding on the under-wraps thing. Granger pulls up behind the building that houses the recorder's office. A clerk waits for us by the back door. Collins rolls down the passenger-side window, takes the clipboard from the woman, and after we show the necessary documents, we're given a marriage license.

The piece of paper is on the seat between me and Blaise. I glance at it, never thinking I would go down this road. Marriage isn't for a selfish bastard like me. Marriage is for guys who are up for making concessions, compromises, and promises they'll keep rather than break.

Granger makes his way back on the main drag, and we are off to our next destination. Thirty minutes later, he pulls up to a nondescript gray building tucked in between two tall brick buildings. We get out of the SUV and head for the steel-gray door.

“I pulled some strings. An old friend of mine is an ordained minister. He’ll marry you two.”

“Rings?” I ask.

Granger pulls a ring from inside the pocket of his slacks and hands me the simple gold band. “You can exchange it for something more to Blaise’s liking after she’s settled.”

“And you?”

“What about me?”

The women have walked ahead of us and have let themselves inside the building.

“Pissed off some that your girl is marrying a guy who isn’t you?”

“If marrying you keeps Blaise safe, I am all for it. She means the world to me.”

“So you want fingerprint access to our place?”

“Nah. I’m secure in what Blaise and I have.”

His sinister smile could raise the hair on the back of a man’s neck. Except the darker side of him doesn’t scare me. My own darkness scares the shit out of me.

“What is that? An open relationship to fuck whomever the hell you want?”

“A bond that goes beyond fucking. Years ago, she saved my life and I spared hers. You tell me if you can say the same.”

The door opens, and Collins sticks her head out. “You two coming? We need to get this done pronto. We have a flight to catch.”

Of course. We are heading to Blaise’s place in Montana to fetch her things. Why the rush? Why move her stuff to my place? Why isn’t she keeping her Montana estate? What the hell is going on in her life that she’s tying the knot with a man she doesn’t know? What the fuck kind of danger is she in?

Something’s happened, but she and her loyal employees aren’t saying jack shit. Instead, they’re deflecting my questions back to the wedding and the trip to Montana.

Ignoring the scarred bastard shooting daggers at me with his eyes, I barge past him and haul ass inside the building. The sooner I get this done, the sooner I can get back to my life and Gia. My little sister’s gone missing again, and I’ll need to hunt her ass down.

Fuck sake, why did George let her sweet talk him into letting her drive herself to her therapy session? I’ve told him time and time again that she’s a flight risk and takes joy in evading the guys I’ve hired to keep an eye on her. Maybe I’m going about this the wrong way and it’s not a guy or guys but a certain woman who can help me with Gia.

My gaze locks on Blaise. She’s waiting for me in the middle of the empty warehouse. In her hands is a bouquet of white roses. The white contrasts with the blood-red dress she’s wearing.

I take in all of her, from the thick, tumbling strands of her raven hair, the paleness of her skin, the fullness of her crimson lips, and the elegant column of her neck to the

tense lines of her shoulders. I keep on going, taking in how her satin dress clings to what little curves she has. On her hands are white gloves that extend up her arms.

Two thoughts cross my mind. The white will stain, and will I be slipping the ring on over her gloved finger?

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“Granger, Collins, please take your positions next to the bride and the groom.”

Granger takes a spot next to me, and Collins, next to Blaise.

“Dearly beloved, we are here to witness the joining of two hearts and two souls. Maddox Stassi, do you take Blaise Lexington to be your wife until death do you part?”

“I do.”

Blaise doesn't remove her glove. Glancing down to hide my irritation, I slip the gold band over her gloved finger.

“Blaise Lexington, do you take Maddox Stassi to be your husband until death do you part?”

“I do.”

Silence followed by deafening silence. I look up. Blaise is staring at my hand. Granger clears his throat. Collins is shifting from foot to foot. And the minister . . . The poor bastard is giving me a pitying look.

Jesus, they're all waiting for me to hold out my hand to her.

Cranking my head side to side before I go ballistic and shred the contract to pieces, I begrudgingly concede and hold out my hand. Without touching my finger, she slides on the thick gold band before her hand falls to her side again. Precise. Methodical.

Lacking any emotion even on her wedding day. Blaise Lexington is indeed an ice queen.

“By the power vested in me, I now pronounce you husband and wife.”

There’s no kissing. No touching. My wife tips her chin at me, thanks the minister, and hurries out the door and into the SUV, the sound of her heels clicking on the cement floor echoing in the warehouse.

Granger thanks the minister, then follows me and Collins out. They’re silent. I’m fuming. Is this how the marriage will play out, with coldness and disdain?

“Patience is a virtue, and in darkness, there is light. Give Blaise the gift of time and you won’t regret accepting her proposal.”

“Still speaking for her, eh, Granger?”

“Just give her time. That’s all I’m asking for for my friend.”

I study him beneath hooded eyes. A friend, huh? Give her time? To have the X-R 85, I’m willing to let the ice queen stay at my penthouse. What I won’t tolerate is giving in to her every whim. I do not compromise. I do not concede. I won’t make promises past the maximum three months.

With how cold Blaise is, save for the short burst of humor, she’s not my type.

Then why can’t I stop staring at the ring on my hand and wondering if with time and patience, she will melt beneath my touch and open to me as she’s never done with any man, including her scarred lover?

7

Blaise

The wedding happened quickly. The flight to Montana didn't. It had something to do with notifying the private airports of our departure and arrival times and getting their authorization.

Waiting in the airport's lobby, Maddox and I manifest in different ways our restlessness in getting this business of mine over with.

He paces, growling whenever Granger shoots him a scowl or when Collins gives him a once-over. His tie is askew and his hair sticks up on end from him jamming his fingers through the strands. I play with my hair too. Rub my palms. Interlace my fingers. Am reminded that I am married now. The ring slipped over my glove shines bright against the white satin.

Finally, we get the okay to board.

On the flight, Maddox and I spoke little to each other. I don't make small talk well so I let him stew in whatever questions are looping in his mind. The air between us is so awkward, I start to apologize for what happened when we exchanged rings. But our flight lands and I lose my chance of putting us on better footing when Maddox leaves his seat and rushes by me to get to the plane's door.

At my Montana estate, Maddox, Granger, and Collins follow me from one master bedroom to the next. There are four total. Each bedroom has a huge walk-in closet

that could've been a bedroom on its own, they're that huge.

Inside the last closet, Maddox sweeps his gaze over the room. He shakes his head. Clenches his jaw. I wait for the other shoe to drop.

"You're shitting me right? All these clothes are yours?" He shoves his fingers through his hair.

"Yes," I say, above a whisper, seeing me in his eyes. I am a spoiled brat who uses her trauma as an excuse to not do a thing but spend money on fancy clothes, an entourage of beef cakes for bodyguards, and a party house in the middle of nowhere. His words from the party.

"We can't take them all, Blaise. Get rid of them."

"Now wait a minute, Maddox. These are Blaise's belongs, and she has a right to bring them with her."

"I don't have the fucking room in my two-bedroom suite, and no way in hell does she need four closets' worth of clothes and shoes."

"These pieces are—"

I hold up my hand. "It's okay, Granger."

It's time I let go of the past. After my parents' deaths in a plane crash when I was thirteen, I kept my mother's clothes and shoes for sentimental value. She loved playing dress-up for me. It's how my fascination with clothing and the fit of them on a person came to be.

"Collins, please have the entire collection donated."

“Blaise, there’s got to be at least a million dollars’ worth here.”

Collins would know. She has an eye for fashion and a nose for money.

“My mother would prefer I give her clothes to charity rather than make money off her collection.”

“These are your mom’s? Fuck. I’m sorry, Blaise. Keep them. I’ll buy a house special for them.”

“Thank you, but the stipulation of the proposal is clear. I come into the marriage with what I have and leave with what I have.”

“It’ll be a gift.”

“Again, thank you, but it’s time I part with my mother’s belongings.”

First, my parents’ sports car, and now, my mom’s clothes. What’s next? I glance at my gloves. I’m not ready to lose these pieces of armor.

“We’ll stay and make certain everything is donated to charity.” Collins puts in her Bluetooth earbuds and starts making phone calls.

“I’ll let the airfield know you and Maddox are ready to depart.”

“Thank you, Granger. You too, Collins.” I express my gratitude before she makes another phone call to a different charity.

“You’re giving away everything?”

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“Everything but my personal belongings.”

“How come?”

Maddox isn't aware of my grandfather's death or the terms of the will, but by tonight, he will. Before I left my grandfather's place, Arthur informed me he would deliver a statement to the news media later tonight, giving me time to get my affairs in order.

“My grandfather bought these items and would want the pieces to go to his charities. They can do with them as they wish.”

My grandfather was a charitable man, and I'll continue his legacy though he left me vulnerable to the world. I understand why he did it, though. His intentions that I not rely on his money to get me through life comes from the right place—the heart.

By the time Maddox's personal driver picks us up at the airport in Oakland, it's after nine. Back at the building he owns, we take the elevator to his penthouse in silence. I can get used to the quiet and will like the arrangement just fine if he continues to not speak a word to me.

“I'll show you to your room.”

“Thank you.”

I follow Maddox across the spacious living area, my heels clicking on the stone floor. I'm beat and in need of solitude. There's also a lot of thinking to do, including how I'll pay respects to my grandfather while having no contact with my family.

Inside what is my new bedroom, Maddox sets my suitcases on the floor.

“With everything that was in your place, you left with only two suitcases of belongings?”

“It’s all I’ll need until our arrangement ends.” I’m not planning on leaving his penthouse until my kidnapper is found.

The doorbell rings. He leaves and then returns with a medium-sized package in his hands.

“This has your name on it.”

“From Collins,” I say, having this insane urge for making small talk. I’m certain this isn’t how Maddox pictured his wedding day. “She’s always thinking of my comfort.”

“She’s a good friend.”

“My friends have big hearts.”

I take the box from him, being careful our fingers don’t graze. I’m not careful enough, and I chalk my carelessness to my grief, the ache in my chest unbearable.

Our fingers brush, my satin glove over his warm flesh, and a zing of awareness zips up and down my body as this electric current that heats me from head to toe.

I clear my throat, avoiding looking him in the eye. “Again, thank you. I’m tired and will turn in for the night.”

There’s no need to make our arrangement about attraction. It’s one-sided, anyway. What he says next confirms my suspicion that it was right of me to put in the clause.

“I’m going out. Don’t wait up. If you call in for food delivery or a delivery of any kind, notify the front desk. One of my guys will deliver it personally.”

“Visitors?” I ask.

“Again, notify the front desk and your visitor will be escorted up here. Hand me your phone.”

I must have a confused expression.

“I’ll add the front desk’s number.”

“Oh, of course.” I pull my cell from my bag, unlock the screen, and hand it over, holding it from the top end so that he’s forced to grab the phone by the bottom end.

Believing he’s good to go, I change out the bedding with the satin ones that came in the box, in record time. I’m dead on my feet, and I don’t want to keep him from his date.

There’s silence behind me. Is Maddox in the same camp as everyone else, that I’m strange? Or is he holding on to his own belief that I’m a spoiled brat? I turn around, ready to unpack my clothes before they become a wrinkled mess.

On Maddox’s face is a look of disgust. He tosses my phone on the bed.

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“When you see Granger later tonight, tell him dick pics lack class and he should up his game with the sexting if he wants to get you off.”

“What?” I grab my phone and unlock the screen.

Sure enough, there’s a picture of a guy’s penis. But it’s not the image that has my heart beating so hard I’m afraid it’ll burst from my chest. It’s the text message.

“Put your mouth on mine and I will breathe life into you. Take my hand and I will pull you out of the darkness and into the light. Renounce your name, take mine, and all will be forgiven.”

The urge to drop the phone like it’s hot embers burns through me, but I can’t panic. He wants me to panic.

I calmly set the phone on the bed. “The sender sent it to the wrong number. And you’re right. The message lacks class.”

Does my kidnapper know I renounced my name and took Maddox’s? How long can I keep Maddox in the dark before he realizes how much danger I’m in? But if I stay within the secure walls of Maddox’s penthouse on the fortieth floor, my kidnapper can’t get to me, right?

My cousins and my team are working to find him, and when they do, all will be well and I can return to my old life. I can also revisit whether my dad committed murder.

Oh, God, my dad killed a woman and stole her baby. He stole me from my mother.

From my father. From my rightful family. The Lexingtons are a respectable family, but the McCabes? They fall in two camps—criminals or law enforcement. What a mess!

“Blaise?”

Maddox’s voice comes to me from a distance. I blink. He reaches for me. I recoil. He drops his hand to his side.

“I’m okay. Go. Have a nice time.”

He’s going out to see his lover, Evie Lawson. I’m certain of it. I saw him taking her away from the party with a huge smile on his face. She looked smitten and just as happy. It must be nice to be so in love. Good God, what have I done?

“Maddox?” I hurry after him. He’s to the door.

He faces me. “Hmm?”

“Just to be clear, I’m fine with you sleeping with other women. What we have is a business arrangement and not a true marriage, so no need worrying that you’ll hurt my feelings or that I’ll think you’re cheating on me.”

He locks his jaw, and having grown up with men all my life, I would say my comment injured his pride.

“Does that mean you’ll be sleeping around too?”

Too. Also. I shake my head. “I don’t like to be touched.”

“Are you telling me you and Granger aren’t an item? Or does he do other things aside

from touching that turns you on?”

“My team and I spread the rumors. I—” I sit on the couch. “Men can get nasty when I turn them down.”

“Nasty how?” He steps toward me, a nerve ticking along his jaw.

“They send me notes. Granger . . . um, Granger destroys them. He became so tired of it, he put forth the idea of he and I as lovers.”

“How long have you known him?” He sits next to me, close but not near enough that we accidentally touch.

“Since I was fifteen.”

“How did a princess come across an ogre?”

“He’s not ugly. Granger is the most handsomest man.”

“Even with the scar on his face?”

“More so because of it.”

“Are you certain rumor isn’t truth?”

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There's no teasing in his voice. However, there is a sharp edge, as though the idea of me with Granger bothers him. Interesting.

"It isn't. He and I are friends."

"And how did that come to be?"

"I pissed off Roman, and long story short, he dropped me off in the bad part of Oakland with nothing but a knife to my name. Granger and I had a run-in of sorts in the middle of the night, and the rest is history."

"The gash on his face, you did that?"

"I'm pleading the fifth."

"He said you saved his life and he spared yours."

There's no harm in telling him. Maddox isn't discreet with his affairs, but he keeps mum when it comes to those closest to him, like his parents and his sister. I hope he puts me in the same category.

"We got caught in the middle of a drive-by shooting. I knocked him out of the way and sliced him in the face with my knife. He had every right to retaliate and kill me on the spot. Instead, he took me to the hospital."

"Holy fuck. Are you okay?"

I smile. “It was years ago, Maddox, so yes, I’m fine.”

“Where’d you get shot?”

“The bullet grazed my shoulder and went under his armpit.”

Not quite the whole truth, but close. I bled like a stuck pig and was in surgery for hours, according to Roman, who felt guilty as sin. I lost consciousness after getting shot and don’t remember a thing other than waking up to a pacing Granger.

“You got lucky.”

“We both were, but boy, he was angry. He said I ruined his good looks.”

Maddox laughs, and the deep sound awakens the sleeping butterflies in my belly.

“You two are truly friends.”

“Yes.”

“And your other bodyguards? Did you save their lives too?”

“Nothing as dramatic as how Granger and I met. Marco is my best friend’s older brother. Shaw is his friend. And Owen is Shaw’s fraternal twin. They’re good guys, and they are all my friends. They’ve been with me since”—I blow out a breath—“since I felt in a right enough place to surround myself with men again.”

“I’m sorry about what happened to you, Blaise. And I’m sorry for what I said last night. I was out of line. I don’t know you and have no right judging you just because you weren’t willing to sell me Betty.”

I glance sidelong at him, biting down on my smile. “Ah, so you do think she’s a girl car. Where is she, by the way?”

“In my garage.”

“From what I’ve read, you have many of those.”

“I have her housed in Montana, near your estate.”

“Ex-estate,” I remind him, somehow not sad that I lost my second place of solitude.

“Whenever you want to see her, I’ll take you.”

“Thank you. That’s kind of you. Now go. Your date is probably wondering where you’re at.”

“How do you figure I’m going on a date?”

Has he seen him? Just looking at him melts my panties.

“What else would a guy like you do on a Saturday night?”

He rises off the couch. “And you?”

“I’m not for going out. My place is behind the safety of four walls. Good night.”

8

Blaise

I wake up in the middle of the night and can't go back to sleep. Finding a spare sheet in the box Collins sent, I wrap it around me and pad to the living room.

My satin tank top and sleep shorts, along with the satin sheet, whispers over my skin, and exhaling a breath of contentment, I sit on the overstuffed chair and stare at the breathtaking view of the city skyline.

What about San Francisco appeals to Maddox?

I'm sure there's a lot to like, and with time, I'll come to love the city as much as Maddox does. For now, I miss stargazing from my bedroom through the skylight in the ceiling.

Dark of night doesn't scare me or cramp up my stomach like seeing the color black. The stars dotting the sky bring me peace, much like water does. Maybe it's because I was rescued and taken out of that coffin in the middle of the night. The first thing I saw when my vision adjusted were the twinkling stars.

Seeing the stars, taking my first shower, and washing rotting flesh from my body . . . Inhaling a deep breath, I return my attention to the city that will be my home for three months. Come morning, the streets will be bustling with traffic and people. I can observe them from my perch up high and wonder where they are headed, who they'll be seeing, and what plans they have for their day.

There's no need for me to go outside of the penthouse, not when I have the power of technology at my fingertips. I'll use my laptop and cell phone to keep in contact with Granger, Collins, and my team. I'll binge-watch movies and television shows on Maddox's big screen TV. I'll read books on my reading apps on my phone and tablet. And if I need anything else, I can order and have it delivered. On the drive here, there were no shortages of restaurants and shops within blocks of the building.

Any items I want, I'll pay using whatever money I have left. This girl can stretch a dollar if push comes to shove, a lesson in thriftiness I learned from Granger. Another takeaway of his from growing up in the foster care system.

Missing Granger and my men, I turn away from the view and reach for my phone. I dial Collins' number, and though it's one in the morning, she answers right away, understanding me well. And I love her so much for being a great friend.

"Good morning, Blaise."

"Ha-ha." It's the running joke between us. I'm an insomniac and was one before my kidnapping and subsequent nightmares amplified it more.

I wake up so often in the night, I'm tired by daylight and sleep best when natural light shines in through my windows. The worst time is when the days get shorter and darker sooner. I spend those days in more tropical places. Except the private resort on an island in the tropics isn't available to me anymore.

Again, I'm not saddened by the changes in my life that Grandfather's will is forcing on me. However, I have promises to keep, and I will keep them.

"Are you up for party planning, or do you have a hot guy in your bed?"

I promised my friend Syn and her boyfriend, Taron, I would throw Dumas

University's football team a big end-of-the-season party at my Montana estate. There'll be an open bar, a five-course meal, and I'll invite young socialites from every walk of life.

"I wish. Let's party plan."

I get straight to the point. "What costs can we cut?"

"In order of least importance? Booze, food, girls, flight."

That won't work. To college guys, food, alcohol, and girls are considered equally important.

"We can't leave out any of those things."

"Blaise, the team will understand if you tone down the party or cancel."

"I made a promise. Let's think on it some more." We have two months.

"I did, but the idea is kind of crazy."

"You are the very definition of crazy, so shoot."

"Okay, here goes. Now remember, it's just a plan. No need to panic or feel obligated to say yes."

"Collins."

She's preempting for a reason. This plan of hers is so outside the box, I'll most likely panic.

“As Blaise Lexington, you were in demand, your presence alone bringing in huge crowds of partygoers to parties no one would otherwise go to. As Blaise Stassi, you can command thousands of dollars just to show up.”

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I suck in a breath. “Collins, you are brilliant.”

“Wait, does that mean you’ll do it?”

For my friend Syn?

“Tell me when and where and I’ll be there.”

I don’t need my grandfather’s money or my family’s name. However, I will have to convince my team I’ll be safe. Or as safe as I can be with Maddox on my arm.

Except there’s a major problem.

Maddox isn’t a fan of parties.

He’ll sleep with celebrities and conduct business with men who have less-than-stellar reputations, but I doubt he wants to play the role of Mr. Blaise Stassi.

What can I do to convince him?

“Gotcha. Talk to you later, Blaise. Enjoy your wedding night.”

There’s a teasing lilt in Collins’ voice. I smile, this time saddened. I’m not a believer in forever-after or love. I’ve resigned myself to a lonely existence, hiding away from the world and surrounding myself with men who can protect me.

However, I do believe in finding some semblance of peace. My sight wanders to the

view of the indoor pool beyond the kitchen. Water is my peace.

“Good night, Collins. Thank you for being my friend.”

“Always, Blaise.”

9

Blaise

Maddox doesn't come home that night or the next or the following night. Am I disappointed in the tone he's setting for our first week as a "married" couple with his absence? Or should I be happy he sent flowers of condolences when the media blasted my grandfather's death to the world?

"Sorry for your loss, Blaise."

The words scrawled on the sympathy card are simple and expected. So is his silence when the media dropped news of my financials. I don't have billions. I have a few thousand dollars, and that has to be good enough.

After tossing and turning all night from my nightmares and feeling the walls closing in on me every time I think of my dad's good name being dragged through the mud by my kidnapper, I take the chicken-shit way out and send Collins an early morning text that I am out for her crazy plan before I promptly pull the covers over my head.

It's best I lay low. Hiding from the world is my expertise. I didn't go to college. Crowds and the idea of being touched or stared at kept me from pursuing higher education. Anyway, I have my grandfather's money. Had Grandfather's money.

I have no skills and did nothing with my time except read romance books and throw parties, observing and living vicariously through the book characters and my party guests. After each romance book I finished, I would think of myself as a hopeless

romantic. But, I'm not clueless.

What's written in the books is fantasy. My reality is a life without romance. Romance is for those who are normal. I'm far from it.

My cell on the nightstand buzzes. Five calls already tonight. On the sixth time, I answer, tired of him toying with me.

"Hello."

"Hello, doll. Miss me?"

I squeeze my eyes shut and breathe in through my nose and out through my mouth. Slow breaths. Slow breaths, Blaise. Otherwise, I'll hyperventilate, remembering vividly the wooden box he put me in before he lowered the coffin into the ground.

"You there, doll?"

"What do you want?" My voice trembles. Oh, God, that's not good. So not good. Fear is what he wants me to feel.

"I want you, Blaise. You've always been what I wanted."

"Then why bury me with your dead sister?"

"Is that who you think the corpse was?"

He doesn't give me time to answer.

"She was your twin, doll. Did you know you had a twin sister?"

He's wrong. He has to be.

"You're a sick man. I'm an only child. My parents are Jack and Violet Lexington."

"Wrong!"

His anger should startle me. I should block his number and destroy my cell for good measure. Except his anger gives me power over him. What other emotions can I elicit that will give me the upper hand? How can I draw him out from whatever dark hole he is hiding in? Can an abnormal girl draw out from the darkness a dangerous crazy who has the power to destroy her family? I can hope.

"What was my sister's name?"

"Maya."

"How did she die?"

"She drowned."

The sorrow in his voice . . . "You loved her."

"Very much."

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“I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Enough to come to me willingly?”

This time. The words hang in the air between us.

“I can’t. I’m sorry. Your threats against my family, they . . . your threats scare me. You scare me.”

There, I admitted my worst fear to my tormentor. His next words send a new wave of fear crashing through me.

“My enemy is my enemy, or is he my friend in disguise, drawing me out from beneath my guise?”

A riddle. Or is he speaking the truth? Am I Blaise McCabe, Cillian’s child? Is my kidnapper a mind-reader, or does he know and understand me better than I do?

“Do I know you?”

“At one point in your life, we knew one another so intimately you gave me the gift of time.”

Gift of time? I can’t recall knowing anyone so well that I gave them time. Time for what? God, this guy is off his rocker.

“When? When did we know one another?”

Silence, but I can feel him smiling on the other end of the line. The line goes dead, and I drop the phone onto the floor, too scared to throw off the covers, dress, and face the world alone.

10

Blaise

“Has that dirtbag contacted you again?” Granger paces in the kitchen.

As soon as I had the energy to acknowledge that the call did happen, and angry that he admitted to loving a sister I wasn’t aware of, I called Granger. Hearing the panic in my voice, he came over right away.

“No. I called the number, but it’s disconnected.”

“Figures he would use a burner cell.”

I follow Granger’s movement with my eyes. His jaw is clamped, and his eyebrows are slanted downward toward his nose. I pepper him with questions, realizing he probably doesn’t have the answers, but I have to voice my thoughts.

“Why did he choose now to resurface? Did he blow through the ransom money and is looking for a way to get his hands on more? But that can’t be it. I don’t have any to barter with, and my family won’t negotiate with him, not when he’s broken his promise. He says he knows me intimately and that I gave him the gift of time. You, the guys, and my cousins are the only guys I’ve been around.”

“Are you certain you’re not suppressing something that you’re unwilling to acknowledge?”

“Plain English, please.”

“All I’m saying is what if there was a guy but your mind is choosing to suppress memories of him because you’re not ready to admit he betrayed your trust and hurt you?”

Is Granger right?

Needing something to do so I don’t pull out my hair strand by strand in frustration, I fix Granger’s favorite breakfast—two eggs scrambled, four sausage links, and a bowl of fruit, and then pour him a cup of coffee, black, no cream or sugar.

“Did you put together a list of people?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Anyone from the groundskeepers to your grandfather’s driver to his team of lawyers could have overheard or have known about the recent change made to his will.”

I set his meal on the table, and sitting, I pick at my oatmeal.

“Your grandfather never once told you of his plans to cut you out of his will?”

“He eluded to it at his party.”

Granger sits and scarfs down his food. Food and exercise is how he deals with stress. I cup the mug in my palms, and sipping my coffee, I give Granger’s theory of suppressed memories more thought. What guy do I know or have known who has the deep gravelly voice my kidnapper has?

My kidnapper was in love with a girl he claims is my twin from when she was in her teens. He said I gave him the gift of time. Is he older? Is that what he means? If he was my age, sixteen, when I was kidnapped, his voice would sound more like a boy's and with the occasional cracking, rather than a man's.

I remember well my cousins going through the changes as they went from teenagers to men. Yet, comparing his voice from last night to the days and nights he spoke to me, his identity hidden by a ski-mask, his voice hasn't changed in tone or pitch.

"You're thinking awful hard, Blaise."

I blink. Granger is right. I'm staring forward with the coffee cup cradled in my palms midair.

"What you thinking?"

"That I shouldn't have snuck past my bodyguards the night I went to see Collins."

"The night you were taken."

"Yes."

He wipes at the corners of his mouth with a napkin and studies me with his elbows resting on the table.

"Having you guarded twenty-four-seven should have started the moment your parents' plane went down."

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“I see you’re still entertaining the idea their crash wasn’t an accident.”

“Just saying.”

“Well, don’t. My parents were good people taken from this world too soon by a tragic accident. End of story.”

We’ve discussed his conspiracy theory ad nauseum, and after going round and round, Granger and I agreed to disagree. My parents did a lot of good during their time on this earth. Why would anyone have a reason to hurt them?

“Either way, the men of your family gave you too much freedom for a girl with the kind of background you have. Wealth. Title. A surname that can be traced to British aristocracy.”

“I’m not a snob, Granger.”

“The reason a man can fall deeply for you, Blaise. You are smart, beautiful, courageous, and have a good head on your shoulders.”

I roll my eyes at his string of compliments. “Too bad my head isn’t giving me ideas for making money fast. I have a huge party to throw.”

Granger cleans off his plate, takes his dishes to the sink, and loads them in the dishwasher. Maddox doesn’t have a housekeeper or a cook, and that tells me he doesn’t spend his time in one place long enough to make a mess. That’s a good thing. The more he is gone, the faster time will fly, and soon, I’ll come up with a grand idea,

make loads of money, dissolve the marriage, and buy my own place.

Except there's one huge problem.

My kidnapper.

"Any word from the team?"

"Nothing. I'll send them your list. Anything from your MIA husband?"

"Flowers. Lots of them."

Granger glances around the room and smirks. Flowers in an assortment of colors fill the living space.

"He better up his game, Blaise, or else I will have words with him."

"And what will you say? Apologize?"

He grunts. "Marriage isn't a joke."

"You forget he and I aren't married in the true sense of the word. What we have is a business arrangement."

"Business or not, he has no right leaving you alone like this. Your grandfather is dead. He was buried this morning, and your family has the nerve to shut you out. Shutting you out publicly tells the world you are no longer a part of their family."

Good. It's what he demanded my family do. No one on my team, including Granger and Collins, is aware of his threat to expose my father's secret. What they know is he's a threat again.

Tired of the heaviness hanging in the air, I stick out my tongue at Granger.

“You talk too much. Now let’s go over the requests.” There’s a stack of missing persons files on the table. “Afterward, I plan on whooping your butt in a game of Chinese checkers.”

He leans in until his nose nearly touches mine.

“Good luck with that, kid. You haven’t creamed me since I taught you how to play when you were in the hospital.”

Kid. Hospital. The gift of time.

They are clues and the answer is a haze in my brain.

Who is my kidnapper? Wouldn’t my father have told my grandfather my biological mother was pregnant with twins? The two people who have the answers, and they’re gone from this earth. Except Cillian McCabe has the answer. But the thought of speaking with him scares me more than facing my kidnapper again.

Cillian shot out a guy’s kneecap for pronouncing his name wrong, and is a stickler that things be in their proper places. That words spoken are refined and correct. With my oddities, I’ll be out of place in his orderly world, and one look at his face scarred by a fire will have me blubbering my words.

I’ll be at risk of getting shot. Or, if I am his stolen child, Cillian will welcome me with open arms.

My fear wins out over my need for answers. I still remember the burning pain of a bullet burrowing deep in my skin. For now, I’ll hold on to my belief until proof says otherwise.

I am Jack and Violet Lexington's daughter, and Sir Devlin's strange and fascinating granddaughter.

11

Maddox

Tired from the events of the past week, I check in with my guys at the front desk before heading to my place.

“Any visitors?”

“One, sir. A Granger Ward. He stayed two nights.”

“Any packages other than the flowers?”

“A few from the lingerie place down the street.”

A burst of jealousy explodes through me. I rein it in and give my men a casual, “Thank you. Have a good night, gentlemen.”

On the elevator ride, I lean against the cool metal and talk myself down from the unexpected urge to pummel Granger until he’s a bloody mess. Did he pull one over on me, letting me believe there’s nothing between him and Blaise except friendship? Am I so clueless, I can’t see the truth written in her handwriting?

She added the clause about going outside the marriage for sex for a reason. Granger Ward is her fucking lover. The elevator stops and the doors open. I let myself inside my place with my fingerprint.

Blaise is near-broke but isn't after my money. No sex. No money. Yet, she wants my name for protection. What can I protect her from that her lover can't? What is the mystery behind the fast nuptials? Jesus, is Blaise pregnant with Granger's child? Is the child of a man with no title or wealth so shameful that Blaise's family cut ties with her?

The thought gets me angry, but what wins out, what is irrational and from left field, is my jealousy. Blaise should only be pregnant with my child, goddammit.

Giving my anger and jealousy a rest—otherwise, I won't sleep worth a damn—I shrug off my jacket and drape it over a kitchen chair.

Other than the light illuminating from the pool room, my place is dark and quiet. It's how I like it. I like my space and my privacy. Never have I brought a woman to my penthouse in the Bay Area except for my sister and Leigh Kim. My little sis doesn't count. She's family. I can say the same for Leigh, though she wasn't family or a woman when I brought her here.

Leigh was a reckless, troublesome teenager in need of guidance when she stole and crashed my Bugatti when she was sixteen. Fast forward two years, and I consider her a good friend. I hope she and that boy she likes, Seven Shanahan, have a nice time at their homecoming dance tonight.

To think it was only two weeks ago that my guys found out Leigh's mother had an affair with Seven's uncle, Tony McCabe. Shit, first my sister and her ongoing testing of the guys I have guarding her, and now a young lady who is like a little sister to me is involving herself with a boy whose father is part of a large family rumored to be mobsters legitimizing themselves as reputable businessmen and women.

And one of the McCabes, the most ruthless, will be paying me a visit, according to the message sent to me. Fuck sakes, who sends someone a box with a hand nailed to a

piece of plywood with “will be in touch” written on flesh?

Needing something other than alcohol or a woman’s body to take my mind off Cillian McCabe’s not-so-subtle message to keep my hands off the strip of businesses in southeastern Oakland, an area he controls through intimidation and bribery, I strip off my clothes. They fall where they land, and I step inside my sanctuary, lowering myself into the heated pool.

Dunking my head in, I swim from one end to the other. Near the ladder on the other side, my fingers brush flesh. My eyes shoot open, and fuck me if I’m not looking into the widest eyes I have ever seen.

“Blaise?”

“Um, hello, Maddox.”

She’s hiding behind the ladder with one arm across her chest and the other down low. I see the reason her hands are where they’re at.

“You’re naked.” I keep my eyes on her face.

“So are you.”

She doesn’t give me the same courtesy. Her gaze trails down my body, lingers on my crotch, and returns to my face. Blood rushes from my head to my cock. I’m robbed of breath. My heart rate kicks up in my chest. I mentally tell my body to calm the fuck down. I’m only turned on because I haven’t had any action between the sheets in a long time. Yeah, that’s it.

“Why are you hiding behind the ladder?” Dumb question on my part when the answer is obvious, but I’ve never had a naked woman in my pool.

“I am not hiding.” Indignation flares in her beautiful eyes.

I cross my arms, needing to do something with them. Otherwise, I’ll strike the same pose, and that’s lame. I mean, come on. I’ve seen plenty of women naked, and plenty of women have seen me in the buff. Blaise seeing me in my birthday suit shouldn’t make me self-conscious.

But hell, does she like my body? Am I too muscular? Is she into guys on the leaner side? Do I have too much body hair?

Blaise looks at me with her head cocked. Shit, am I thinking so hard that she can “see” the gears spinning in my head? Gia and Leigh have mentioned my laser-focused gaze when I’m over-thinking something, and having the two most important women in my life noticing must mean it’s true.

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I clear my throat and refocus.

“Blaise, if it walks and quacks like a duck, it’s a duck.”

“Are you telling me I am one?” She tips her cute chin at me.

“No, darling. I’m saying you’re a coward for hiding your beauty.”

Using the word she dislikes, I get the reaction I’m going for. Jesus, I’m a bona fide jerk.

Blaise ducks from where she’s crouched behind the ladder, and with her hands on her hips and her shoulders pulled back, giving me a view of perfect round tits, she says, “I’m not your lover, so stop calling me your darling.”

“No, Blaise, you are something else altogether. You are my wife. My legally wedded wife. Until death do us part,” I remind her, my voice low and possessive as fuck.

Her eyes widen. She opens her mouth. Changes her mind on what she was about to say. Closes her mouth. Her hand leaves her hip. Flutters to her neck. A hint of color tinges the crest of her cheeks. I suck in a quiet breath. Blaise Stassi is beautiful, and the cold creature I believed her to be isn’t cold after all. She is turned on by me. By my words.

My dick comes to life, and hell yeah, she notices. Her gaze drops to my throbbing member. He’s standing erect in the water. I step toward her. She inches back, then realizes there’s nowhere to go. She’s up against the edge of the pool.

Blaise sticks out her hands, palms out. “Maddox, please. I . . . I don’t like touching of any kind.”

I point out the obvious. “The water is touching you. Satin and silk touches your skin. Granger was over for two nights. You ordered in lingerie. Am I missing something, Blaise?”

“Yes, he was here. I can’t go into the reason, but the lingerie is for me and not to show him. I—” The color on her cheeks deepens to a fiery red. “I forgot to pack more panties and bras. And the touching thing, I . . . I can’t stand flesh on flesh, skin on skin. I can’t. Please understand.”

Flesh on flesh abhors her so much that she’s begging for me not to touch her? Is her repulsion the reason she wears the softest materials on her skin? I shake my head. I am wrong about this woman. She isn’t wearing the most expensive materials because she’s a spoiled brat. She does so because the bastard who kidnapped her did something that made her hate the feel of someone touching her.

“What the fuck did your kidnapper do, Blaise? Did he—” I close my eyes, relieving the nightmare of finding my innocent sister with blood staining her inner thighs.

“Did he violate you?”

Fuck sake’s, I can’t even say the word rape. I open my eyes. When will I have the courage to speak with my sister about her trauma rather than watching her suffer from a distance? Or having other men keep an eye on her when it should be her big brother doing the watching over? But at twenty-two, Gia is her own woman, and she’s given me the proverbial middle finger for meddling in her life more than I should have.

“None of that. He did other things, but never that.”

“When you’re ready to talk—”

“I won’t be, so please don’t bring it up again.”

A fair request.

“My apologies for missing our wedding night, Blaise. For not being there as you grieved your grandfather’s passing.”

I’m a selfish prick for leaving her when she needed someone around the most, business arrangement or not.

But it’s my selfishness that made me a millionaire by the age of twenty. Four years later and my drive for more money hasn’t died. In fact, I’m hungry to add to my growing billions. Marriage is a distraction I can’t afford to have.

Marriage entails compromising, concessions, and faithfulness. With the world at my feet, I can have any woman. Every woman I come across wants a piece of me. Why settle with one woman for life? Yeah, I’m a selfish and self-indulgent bastard like my father. I look like a younger version of him too. No wonder Gia doesn’t want anything to do with me.

My father would rather disown her than deal with Gia’s trauma. She’s a disgrace, he’d said before he slammed the door in mine and Gia’s faces. As though Gia was to blame for what happened to her. He would welcome me back with open arms, but only if I abandon Gia. I’m selfish, but I’m not cold. Fuck Dad and his plans for me assuming control of his shipping company when he retires.

“Don’t be sorry, Maddox. I’m not your responsibility. Anyway, a man like you has needs.”

Blaise's soft voice brings me out of my anger for my father. He and I are alike, and someday, I'll be like him. It's the reason marriage and children aren't in my future. Something bad will happen, and I'll turn my back on them too, just like Dad did with Gia.

Having returned to my thoughts, I let the silence continue for too long, and Blaise takes it the wrong way.

"We should get out before we become raisins."

Hurt on her face, and it cements what I believe of myself, that I'm not fit to be a husband to any woman. All I'm good for is making money and fucking women until they can't think worth a damn.

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“Speak for yourself. I’m more of a prune.”

The hurt disappears from her face, and laughter shoots from her. I chuckle, her happiness worth the cheesy-as-fuck line.

“Thank you for the flowers and the card. I miss my grandfather very much.”

“He was a good man.”

“Yes.” She sinks further into the water. “Um, we should get out. Or at least, I should. This is awkward.”

Agreed, however . . . “Is it only flesh on flesh that you don’t like?”

“Yes.”

I back up until I’m at the other end of the pool.

“Come here, Blaise.”

Without hesitation, she swims to me, her long black hair trailing behind her like a cape. With what she’s been through, she’s my superhero.

Blaise is resilient, showing up for this long game called life rather than giving up and letting the darkness pull her down. She stops arm’s length from me, her hair floating around her face like the petals of the flowers in the bouquets I sent her. I get a crazy idea.

“Can I touch your hair and only your hair?”

“I’d like that.”

Lowering herself into the water, she fans out the strands with her fingers and closes her eyes. I reach out and stroke the strands. Wrap my fingers around them. Gently tug.

Her lips part, giving me a glimpse of the tip of her tongue peeking out from between straight white teeth. Her brows pull together in concentration. She’s beautiful, and when she moves her arms out of the water and does these soft strokes near my body, I see the gold of her ring and am reminded that she is my wife.

“Blaise?”

“Hmm?” Her eyes flutter open. Thick, dark eyelashes cling together, drawing my gaze to her eyes, one blue, one green.

“How about my mouth on yours? Does that count as flesh on flesh?” As her husband, I take liberties with how much she’s willing to indulge me.

Her dark brows angle low to her nose. “I’m guessing so? It’s, um, it’s pathetic, but I’ve never kissed anyone, so I wouldn’t know if it repulses me or not.” She stares at my mouth. “Should we try?”

“I’m up for it if you are,” I tell her in a gentle voice. Never has a woman threatened to bring me to my knees with her insecurity and her confession as well as her innocence.

“If I don’t like it, promise you won’t take it personally? I’m sure if I asked the women you’ve been with, they’ll say you’re the best kisser, hands down.”

A lopsided grin from her and my heart does this weird somersault. I give Blaise my truth.

“I don’t give two fucks what other women think. Your opinion is all that matters, baby.”

Shy smile from her. “Baby. I like that. Beats darling.” She swims back to the other side of the pool, and resting on the edge, she crooks her finger. “Come closer, Maddox.” Same lopsided smile.

This woman . . . She’s too charming and sexy for her own good.

I swim over, and holding on to the edge of the pool so that our bodies don’t touch, I bracket my arms on either side of her. She tips her face up and closes her eyes. This is my chance to soak up her beauty.

Long, dark lashes caress her pale skin. Faint freckles on the bridge of her nose, and a few scattered on her cheeks. Full red lips. A drop of water clings to the dip of her upper lip, and I long to flick away the drop with my tongue, jealous that it gets to touch her there.

Except I can touch her. My tongue darts out. I flick at that drop of water. Press my mouth to hers. Groan at how soft her lips are. How salty she tastes. It’s her first kiss. Make it good. Her first kiss. Make it good.

The words loop through my brain. I shouldn’t think so hard. Thinking ruins the moment. Takes away from how soft her lips are. How her whimper reverberates on my mouth. I move my mouth side to side over hers. Tunnel my fingers through her long hair, being careful to touch only the inky strands. She whimpers again. Opens to me.

Blaise likes the kiss. Isn't repulsed. Satisfaction courses through me, and I tug slightly on her hair, giving me better access to her mouth. I deepen the kiss. Taste the wall of her mouth. Tease her tongue with mine.

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The kiss starts off tentative, then exploring, but this explosion of heat and desperation that sears through me . . . I fist her hair in my hand and answer the fervor of her mouth on mine, her tongue tangling with mine, one kiss right after the other.

Like me, is Blaise longing to feel something other than the ache of loneliness? It can be so fucking lonely at the top.

In this moment, who gives a flying care? I'm all about making this the best first kiss for Blaise. I cocoon her head with my forearms and give her my all. Or is she the one giving me her best? 'Cause this is the best fucking kiss.

I run the tip of my tongue along the seams of her lips. Suck her bottom lip for good measure.

"Blaise, baby, Jesus, you taste good."

"I like you too," she murmurs over my mouth, her eyes glazed with desire. "Since we didn't have a proper wedding night, can I put in a request?"

Curious, I nod.

"Promise you won't make fun of me."

"I'd never do that, unless you poke fun at me in return, pun intended."

To make my point, I stroke my erect cock. She isn't put off by my crassness. Instead, she surprises me, covering her smile with her hand, her two-color eyes twinkling.

“Okay, here goes nothing.” Her smile slips. She avoids my gaze.

Blaise is unsure of my reaction to her ask, and wanting to reassure her that I’m true to my word, I reach out to caress her face, then remember flesh on flesh repulses her. My hand falls to rest against my side.

Well, damn. We’ll have to find different ways around this repulsion of hers. Again, she surprises me when she comes up with the idea on her own. With her courage, this woman is giving the bastard who hurt her the middle finger.

“Will you touch me using my satin sheet? No skin on skin. It’ll be me, you, and the satin.”

How can I say no? I’m a selfish bastard through and through, and we bastards don’t like to give, but we certainly take and take.

But when I’m through with Blaise, will I give her what I see clear as day in her eyes, hope for a way out of her lonely existence?

Not likely. I am a selfish bastard, and I’ll make certain Blaise never forgets I’m not good for anything past what we agreed on—three months.

Yeah, that’s all I’m willing to give her before I take everything, including the protection my name affords her, away. Just like my father did to my sister.

12

Blaise

After we showered in separate bathrooms, I wait for Maddox in my bedroom.

I would never move this fast with a man, but Maddox isn't any man; he's my husband. And I've changed my mind. I want his body.

When he's in the city, I'll entice him into my bed. He'll be so satisfied sexually, he'll forget other women.

Shutting out thoughts that an innocent and peculiar woman could never tie down a man who loves the women as much as they love him, I do what turns him on. I crook my finger and demand he come to me.

It's a side of me I don't indulge in. My overconfidence and fearlessness are what had me wandering down an alleyway I shouldn't have taken. I also shouldn't have mouthed off to my kidnapper. It's the reason he put me in that coffin. To scare the confidence from me.

Thinking these morbid thoughts isn't helping me convince my husband I'm the only woman for him. I mentally tell memories of my time with my kidnapper to take a hike. Otherwise, how could I seduce the cocky and domineering Maddox Stassi?

He comes to me fully clothed.

I quirk a brow. He raises his own.

“You’re dressed,” I point out.

“Are you not?”

I shake my head.

He smiles. “Well, damn. I better rectify that quick.”

He does a strip tease, this agonizing pace that heats me from the inside out. First, he undoes the buttons on his PJ top one at a time. Chiseled chest. Dark hair. Sinful strip of hair disappearing under the waistband of his pajama bottoms. I lick my lips. Press the satin into the wetness between my legs. He watches my every movement. Groans when I stroke myself through the sheet.

“Do that often, babe?”

Babe. Baby. I like them better than darling.

Too turned on to speak, I nod. He comes closer but doesn’t lose the PJ bottoms that hang loose on his hips, giving me a mouthwatering view of his V-cut. My gaze dips lower and lingers on the outline of his erection. Maddox tsks.

“Patience.”

His voice is low, raspy. My sex throbs. My nipples tighten. My breasts grow heavy. I raise my arm under the sheet and reach for him. Maddox caresses up and down my arm over the sheet. Skims his fingers over mine. I tremble. Moan with longing. Whimper with need.

“The noises you make. Jesus, Blaise, you’re sexy as fuck.”

Maddox gets on the bed and keeps his weight off me with his arms resting alongside my head.

Careful to not touch him, I slide my fingers under my hair and fan the strands out over the pillow. He takes the hint and sifts his fingers through the inky strands. Dark pieces of his fall over his eye, and I long to grasp the errant pieces between my fingers and press my lips to them. His damp hair would be like touching a blade of grass lined with dew from early morning.

With his thick fingers in my hair, he lowers his hips onto mine. I gather the satin sheet in my hands and grasp his hips through the material. He is solid. Layers upon layers of muscle. Needing more wiggle room than the sheet can give me, I reach under my pillow, find the gloves I’ve hidden there, and slip them on.

I cup Maddox’s face. Strum my thumb over the sharp edge of his cheek. His kind of handsomeness and sexiness isn’t soft lines and curves. Maddox’s face is a contrast of edgy lines and sharp edges. I find his granite bone structure fascinating and enviable. How can a man have stern features and be so mouthwatering?

Using the flat side of my palm, I caress along his jawline. He closes his eyes and takes a shuddering breath. My touch did that? Gave him the expression of longing? Needing to make him feel as good as he’s making me feel with the bulge between his legs nestling in my heat, I glide my gloved fingers over his shoulders.

“Hold my hand, Maddox.”

He untangles his fingers from my hair, brings his hands low, and interlaces our fingers. His thick fingers stroking my small ones, his groan reverberating on my chest through the satin, how his thickness pulses along my folds . . . I tighten my hold on

his hands, and lifting my head, I claim his mouth with mine.

He opens for me and swallows my whimper and moan with his devouring kisses, taking me to new heights with his demanding mouth and how sweet he tastes. I need more. God, I need to feel his strength and the heat from his body.

Using the sheet, I lift my legs and wrap them around his waist.

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“Please, Maddox,” I beg between kisses.

“Blaise, I need to taste you, babe. Let me.”

“Yes. Oh, God, yes.”

He is the consummate pleaser, doing everything possible to make me feel good while keeping to not touching my bare skin. He lowers his head and takes first one taut nipple, then the other, in his mouth, his tongue leaving a wetness on the satin that clings to my skin in this tantalizing way that has me thinking of a cool breeze on heated skin.

I can picture us making love out in the open. Skin on skin. His mouth on my skin. Someday, I hope we can do exactly that. I close my eyes. Smile. Someday.

“That feels so good, Maddox.”

My words spur him on. He grazes his teeth over my nipples. I arch my back. He sucks on the little buds. Blows on the wetness he’s left behind on the satin.

“Can I taste you more?” He rests his head between the valley of my breasts, eyes darkened with desire.

I’m a virgin. Have never kissed a man. But I know about oral and what men and women do to one another’s bodies to make the other shatter with pleasure.

I nod. He goes low. Beneath the covers, I let my legs fall to the sides. Balanced on

my elbows, I take in the sight of his dark head of hair between my legs. Eyes on me, he tongues my virgin opening. Licks along my slit. Laps up the wetness soaking through the satin.

Moaning, I tip back my head. My arms shake. My thighs do too.

“Blaise?”

“Hmm?”

“Have you ever had a man’s cock inside you?”

“Never.”

“Good. ’Cause mine is the only cock that will fill you full.”

His words are possessive, and grabbing him by the hair, I push him into my heat. He mouths my sex. My sex weeps and throbs. I tunnel my fingers deeper in his hair. Guide his face over my sex. He tongues and mouths my clit and folds through the satin. Heat uncoils in my belly. My body trembles.

“I . . . I’m close. So close.” I move my head side to side. Groan in frustration that I’m not ready for him to fill me full with his erection. He must’ve understood. His next words confirm it.

“Give me your glove, Blaise. Let me help you come, baby.”

Oh, his words. I love his words. My body on fire, I yank off one of my gloves and hand it to him. His hand is too big to fit inside my glove, but a finger or two is enough. He slides his finger over my arousal until the satin is shiny with my juices.

I wait in anticipation of him slipping his thick finger inside me, stretching me. Instead, he licks my juices off the satin gloves, and I can't stop the moan slipping from my mouth.

"Too much?"

"No, not at all." I close my eyes. He slides his fingers along my folds, soaking up my wetness.

I'm so turned on, I can wet the glove with my arousal.

"Can I touch your cheek and your lips with the glove, Blaise?"

"You want me to taste myself?"

"Yes, but only if you want to."

"I do."

I open my mouth. He sticks one gloved finger inside. I run my tongue over his finger. Suck my flavor from the satin. Close my mouth over his finger. Suck up and down the length of his finger. Lick it like a lollipop. His groan is heat in my belly. I open my eyes.

Maddox's finger is in my mouth. His face is buried in my stomach. I reach down, and tunneling my fingers in his hair, I let go of his finger.

"Too much?" I see him through a haze of desire.

He yanks off the glove with his teeth. "Not enough. Jesus, Blaise, what you can do with your mouth." He moves off the bed. Looks at the wet spots on the satin sheet.

There are three. One over each nipple and a big wet spot over my sex.

He stares at my sex.

“Satin or silk panties, Blaise?”

“Silk.”

“Sexy choice. Put on a pair, baby.”

13

Maddox

A call from the front desk with news of a visitor is not something I want to deal with after an unexpected night of making love to my wife in the most unusual of ways.

Fuck, the satin sheet, the satin glove, her sucking her pussy juices off the satin, her silk panties, me mouthing her folds and sucking on her clit through the silk, her writhing on the satin sheet, her soft sigh of contentment as she came on my face . . . I can go on and on.

In my pajama bottoms and with my coffee mug in my hand, I saunter to the door, not in a hurry to move this day along. Blaise is still asleep. With what she's going through with her family, I leave her be.

When Dad cast Gia aside, my little sis slept for days.

At the door, I glance at the monitor mounted on the wall. It's a wide-angle camera including a back view of any visitors. Wouldn't want surprises. My dad is on the other side of the door.

I buzz him in, and he barges inside without so much as a polite greeting. Go figure. My dad isn't into niceties or common decency. That went out the door when he made his first billion years ago. Money changes a man. I have first-hand knowledge. I'm aware of who I was and who I'm becoming. I'm more selfish. More of a prick.

“Why are you here? Couldn’t you have called my secretary?”

“The one I caught you fucking over your desk?”

I smirk. “Yeah, that’s the one.”

“Or maybe I should have called over to the gym first.”

“The same gym where you caught me fucking the owner over her desk?”

He clenches his jaw. “Keep it in your pants, Maddox. No need sharing your fortune with bastard children.”

“Eloquent, Dad. By the way, those bastard children would be your grandkids.”

He visibly blanches. Chuckling, I drink the rest of my coffee.

“Again, why are you here?”

“Your mother. She heard you married.”

“Is that so? How is she?” I rinse off the mug and stick it in the dishwasher.

The dishwasher is empty. So was the fridge when I went looking for creamer for my coffee. Huh. What has Blaise been eating? Or did she order in? I make a mental note to ask Blaise what she likes and doesn’t like food-wise.

“Exploring all those damn historical old-as-fuck places in Greece. Well, is it true? Or is it more tabloid trash?”

“I did marry.”

“Who? When? Why weren’t we invited?”

By “we,” he’s speaking of him and his latest girlfriend.

“A week ago. Blaise Lexington. And because it was a private affair.”

“The same Blaise Lexington who was left out of her grandfather’s will?”

“Yes.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Why would I joke over something as serious as marriage?”

“She’s a strange and sheltered woman. My son deserves better. You need a woman who can navigate social circles with class and sophistication. You need someone like Evie Lawson. She’s the last woman the media has linked you with.”

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“You’re right, Father. Now please leave. Tell Mom hello, and as always, you two are welcome to join Gia and me for Thanksgiving.”

Six weeks is enough notice for my father to clean up his act, apologize to Gia, and make amends. Discord in the family is another heavy weight on my shoulders.

He marches to the door and leaves without so much as a terse goodbye. See what I mean about niceties and common decency?

Pissed that he dare think Blaise is strange, I grab my wallet and jacket and head into the office.

Otherwise, I’ll want to wake up my wife with feather-like kisses to her body, from her lips to her pussy lips, using the satin as our kink of choice.

Kink. Feather.

I get a delicious idea, and with lightness to my steps, I make a mental note to fire my secretary and, on my way home tonight, to stop by the lingerie store.

14

Maddox

My plans of seducing my wife are derailed by a woman who is my equal with her drive and ruthlessness.

“Hello, Becca. How are you?”

“I’m good. Congrats on your marriage. What a surprise.”

“The marriage or the woman I married?” I undo my tie and put the call on speaker.

“Both, of course.” Low laughter from her, sexy and suggestive, meant to get a man hard.

I text Blaise.

Me: Should I pick something up for dinner?

Blaise: Have you? I made dinner.

Me: Wait, you did?

Blaise: Surprised?

Me: Hell yeah

With what I thought of her, that she was a spoiled brat, I had expected Blaise to move in her bodyguards, personal chef, and housekeeping crew in addition to Collins.

“Are you still there, Maddox?”

“Sorry, Becca. I’m making dinner plans.”

“I hope it’s with me or else I’ll be sorely disappointed.”

I jam my fingers in my hair. My now ex-secretary has been attempting to set up a meeting for me with Becca Ferguson for months without success, and a week into my marriage, she calls?

“What do you want, Becca?”

“You. Jet on over tonight and I’ll do that favor for you. Delay and you won’t hear from me again.”

Becca is one of the biggest influencers out there. An endorsement of a product from her, and the product is guaranteed to be a success. Gia is in need of a break for her clothing line, and Becca is my last resort. Otherwise, Gia will pull the plug and return to what she was doing before this passion for fashion of hers started—nothing.

“If you leave now, we can get in a nightcap.”

“I’m married.”

“To a freak, Maddox.”

“She is my freak. Don’t ever forget that.” I yank off my tie. “You know what? Forget the favor. Good night.”

I hang up. Damn everyone for not seeing what is in front of them. Blaise is brave, funny, kind, and beautiful. So what if she has quirks? Or can't stand to be touched? Everyone has something about them that is a bit off.

I'm not a fan of crusts. Pizza crusts, bread crusts? Not for this guy. The car rolls inside the underground garage.

Dennis parks and turns in his seat. "Should I call it a night, sir?"

"Yes, thank you. How is your wife?"

"Finished with her first round of chemotherapy. She's very tired, sir."

“Take time off.”

“Sir, you need me.”

“Your wife needs you more. Anyway, I have an X-R 85 to test drive.”

“You finally got the car, eh?”

“I got something better. I have the girl.”

Dennis chuckles. “Congratulations on your marriage, and thank you, sir. Good night.”

“Good night, Dennis.”

He walks to his car. I take the elevator to the lobby and check in with my guys, asking them the same questions.

“Visitors?”

“None.”

“Packages?”

“One, sir. Again, from the lingerie store down the street.”

“Thanks, Charles. Good night.”

“Good night, Mr. Stassi.”

I do the same routine I always do. I get in the elevator and unbutton the top buttons of my shirt, looking forward to a few laps in the pool. Except this time, I have a shit ton of questions for my wife. Forget the foreplay and the box of scarves and thong panties I forewent buying when I stopped by the lingerie store on the way home.

A pregnancy isn't the reason for the fast nuptials; Blaise is a virgin. I suspect the business arrangement and our subsequent marriage has to do with her grandfather's will.

Without the security of his money, Blaise had to find security fast. Hence, needing my name for protection. I have loads of money. But she doesn't want my money or my body, her words. Then why the change of mind? Will she change her mind next and go after my billions now that she's near broke?

Pressing my thumb to the pad next to the door, I put up my guard. I know as much about Blaise as the rest of the world. After her parents died in a plane crash when she was thirteen, she went to live with her grandfather. He assumed guardianship.

At the age of sixteen, she was kidnapped and held for ransom. Her grandfather paid the reported five million dollars for her freedom. When her kidnapper released her to the FBI, Blaise lived with her cousin Roman at his Montana estate before she moved into her own large mansion with her four bodyguards when she was eighteen.

Other than hopping from party to party with her bodyguards in tow, or throwing huge parties at her Montana estate, Blaise rarely went out in public. At the age of nineteen, she was linked romantically to her then twenty-five-year-old bodyguard, Granger Ward.

Inside my place, I shrug off my jacket, set my briefcase on an overstuffed chair, and

saunter to the kitchen. Blaise has on an apron over her dress, and she's taste-testing whatever she's cooking, the tip of her tongue flicking over the spoon.

Jesus, what will it be like to have her tongue flick my cock from base to head? For her to wrap her small mouth around my big cock? Her mouth would be like a fist. Warm and wet too. I jam my hands inside the pockets of my trousers and demand my cock calm the fuck down.

There will be no touching or conceding to Blaise's on-the-down-low charm and innocent seduction until I understand what her motives are and what this "danger" is she's in that'll take at most three months to resolve.

"Smells good."

She sets the spoon down. "I hope you're hungry. I made beef roast and butternut squash soup."

"Starving. Need help?"

"Nope. Did you want to shower and get into something more comfortable?"

"I made plans. I'm sorry to dine and dash on you."

"No need to be. I should be the one apologizing, having forgotten that we have separate lives and this is a business arrangement."

How we should keep things. Business, no pleasure.

“Last night—”

“Shouldn’t have happened,” she says.

Did she pick up on my wariness? I wouldn’t put it past her. Underneath the air of iciness is a perceptive woman. I didn’t miss how keenly she observed the guests at her grandfather’s party.

“If it were a different woman in the pool, you would have come on to her too. Said and did to her what you did to me. It won’t happen again.”

I should say something, but Blaise is right. For the rest of our time together, we eat in silence. The air is thick with hurt and confusion. I let her work through her emotions without reassurance from me that I like making her feel good and that she makes me feel good too.

Jesus, I’m a complete dick, and not giving her the reassurance she needs cements into my mind the reason I’m poor husband material and further convinces me that love is for people with better hearts than mine. I have no heart. Otherwise, I wouldn’t hurt a gentle soul like Blaise, if she is one.

The more I think through the quick nuptials, the less I’m convinced her intentions were good.

“Is there a reason I had to hear of your grandfather’s death from the news media rather than at our meeting, darling?”

She lifts her head from the focus she has on her soup. Blaise has barely touched her soup, and apparently, my wife doesn't eat meat. The only plate of roast she dished up is for me.

“You said time was of the essence and that you're in danger. Explain yourself, darling. Otherwise, I will go to my attorneys and find a way to annul this marriage on grounds of deceit and withholding information.”

She rises from her seat and takes her bowl to the sink. Behind me, the water runs. There is the distinct sound of my dishwasher opening and closing.

Blaise walks over, and facing me, she undoes the ties on her apron. She takes off the apron, pulls her royal-blue satin dress over her head, and lets it fall to her feet. No panties. No bra. Smooth, pale skin. Puckered nipples. Shaved mound. I flick my eyes to her face. Defiance in the slight tip of her chin.

“Do what you must, Maddox. I'm going for a swim. Have a good night.”

With her head held high and her shoulders pulled back, she walks away from me. Blaise Stassi is a regal queen on the outside. Inside, she's hurting. I watch her naked form disappear around the corner and don't hear the splash of water. Like how she is hurting, she slips into the pool in silence.

I grit my teeth. Shit, I'm a cold bastard. Blaise cooked me dinner and I repaid her kindness with doubt. Needing a drink and a warm body, I put my dishes away, grab my jacket, and head out to a nightclub where the ladies know me well.

Explain yourself, darling.

Do what you must, Maddox.

If she won't explain herself, then I'll do what I must. The best way to forget a woman is to get another woman under me. Yeah, that's what I'll do.

There are no shortages of women. Blaise is but a small fish in the big sea.

15

Blaise

Before . . .

“Collins?” I cup my hands over my mouth. “Collins, get your ass down here or else I’m taking the food with me.”

That got her ass moving. From my place hidden away from the flickering streetlights, I watch Collins come down the fire escape ladder. At the bottom rung, she pushes off the ladder and lands on her sneakers.

“Here.” I hand her the bag of takeout food. “Take this too.” I give her another bag.

“What is it?” She peers inside.

“Converse.”

Her eyes widen. “You didn’t.”

“Happy belated birthday. Sorry I didn’t make it last night, but Roman has been on my ass like white on rice. That guy takes my grandfather’s ask that he watch my back too seriously.”

“Roman is serious, period.”

“I should tell him to take a chill pill.”

“Last time you told him that, he made you put on armor and run around for his target practice.”

I roll my eyes. “Fun times.”

Collins laughs and pulls me in for a hug. “Thank you, Blaise, for being my friend. Best sixteenth birthday.”

“Friends for life, right?”

“For life.”

We pinky swear.

“Did Rylan or Edward give you a ride?”

“I took the city bus.”

“At ten at night in Oakland? What are you thinking? This could’ve waited until morning.”

“Roman doesn’t spend mornings with his latest girlfriend. He spends nights with her. Night is the best time to slip away.”

“Blaise, it’s not safe. Call your cousins and have them come get you.”

“No way. They’ll tell Roman, and then Roman will stop spending nights with his girlfriend, and like the others, she’ll blame the crash and burn of their relationship on me.”

“Blaise.”

“Good night, Collins.” Walking backward, I give her a small wave. “Don’t forget I won’t be around until Christmas. Grandfather is taking me to the Virgin Islands.”

“The cold and the shorter days messing with your sleep, huh?”

“You know me too well.”

“Since I jumped you when we were thirteen too well.”

“Broke my ribs, but I wouldn’t change how we met for the world.”

“Me, too. I love you.”

“I love you too. See you for Christmas?”

“Will Rylan be there?”

Collins has a huge crush on my cousin.

“Collins, I don’t want to be the bearer of bad news, but Rylan has a certain type and—”

“I’m not it.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m not. His loss.”

I smile. “That’s the attitude. That’s how you’ll win him over.” I give her a double thumbs-up sign. The girls give in too easily to Rylan. What will happen if a girl rebuffs him? I believe he’ll see it as a challenge and give chase. I’ll encourage Collins to run far and fast and hope to God that Rylan sees her as a challenge.

Collins is my best friend, and her shipped with any of my cousins would make me happy. Glancing over my shoulder, I watch her disappear inside her bedroom through the window. I beat feet to the nearest bus stop.

On the main road, I tug the hood of my hoodie over my head. There is a lingering

smell of burgers and garlic fries on my fingers, leftover from the takeout food I picked up for Collins from her favorite burger joint.

At the bus stop, I check the bus schedule. I missed the bus by ten minutes. Crap. I hurry to the other stop a few blocks down with my head lowered and my fingers crammed inside the pockets of my hoodie. Inside one of the pockets is a knife.

Making my way down the main road, I keep my eyes and ears open for trouble, not too worried for my safety. I know how to handle a knife, and it's dark, but on this busy street, the streetlights are bright and so are the headlights from the cars.

A block from the bus stop, I hear whimpering. I stop near the mouth of the alleyway and lean in, believing I am hearing wrongly. More whimpering. I edge closer and concentrate on separating the whimpering from the street noises and the hard thumps of my heartbeats in my ears.

“Help me.”

A little girl's voice.

“Are you okay?” Of course she's not. She asked for help.

But I'm cautious for a reason. Collins asking for help is how she lured me into an alleyway too. She jumped me, robbing me of the gooey cinnamon roll I was devouring with zest. That girl and her sweet tooth.

“I'm hurt.”

“How?”

“My ankle. I rolled it. Please. I live down the street.”

I step into the alley and make my way to the figure on the ground. She's tiny and looks to be around ten or so.

What is she doing in an alley alone at ten at night? I approach her with my hand on my knife inside my pocket and the other hanging loose at my side in case I need to sucker punch someone in the throat. My gaze shoots to the emptiness in front of us.

The nearest object that someone could hide behind is a dumpster a few feet away. The person would have to have a running start to get to me.

"My name's Blaise. Can I look at your ankle?"

She nods.

I crouch in front of the little girl and peel her pants leg over her ankle, being careful not to jostle her leg. I pull my cell phone from my back pocket and shine a light on her ankle. It could be the poor lighting, but her ankle looks fine. She must've sensed my doubt. The little girl speaks fast, like she's trying to get me to hang out with her longer.

"I was out walking my dog. She got out of her leash. I ran after her and rolled my ankle on a crack."

I shouldn't believe her, not after what happened with Collins, but what if this little girl ends up becoming my friend too? A girl can't have too many friends.

"Can you walk on it?"

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“I tried, but it hurts too much.”

“How about you get on my back and I can carry you to your place?”

“You’ll do that?”

“Well, yeah. I’m not leaving you here. You’re hurt.”

“He lied. He told me you’re selfish and mean.”

Wait, what? Before I can ask her who he is, a cloth is placed over my nose and mouth. The little girl opens her mouth. Her mouth moves but nothing comes out. Her face is a haze. A bone-deep weariness blankets my body, and I close my eyes, barely feeling the needle in my arm.

My nightmares have just begun.

* * *

“No, please. Please don’t put me in there.”

My words are slurred. He’s doped me up.

“You are stubborn. You are defiant. You’ve mouthed off to me one too many times, doll, and I am fucking tired of it.”

He sets me inside the coffin, naked. My skin rubs against the corpse’s skin. Her body

is decomposed. Her face is a slimy mess beneath the veil of long jet-ink strands. Is there a reason he concealed his sister's face from me? Is he afraid in death, she'll judge him to be a monster? Because that is how I see my kidnapper.

"This will teach you a lesson. You are not my equal; you are beneath me. You do not walk alongside me; you walk behind me."

"The ransom—"

"Is none of your concern."

He puts an oxygen face mask on me and then puts the canister of oxygen between mine and the corpse's legs. She and I are the same height and build. He turns the oxygen on, moves the lid over the coffin, and hammers the nails into the wood.

I am shrouded in darkness, skin on skin to someone who has been dead for weeks. I smell her stench through the oxygen mask, and gagging, I will myself to get past the smell of rotting flesh; otherwise, I'll throw up in my mask. I have to live through his lesson for me. If I do, I'll get my freedom. That's my hope.

Through my haze of being drugged up, I heard my kidnapper speaking to my rescuers. My grandfather is willing to pay the five million dollars my kidnapper is demanding. Five million dollars for freedom I took for granted. How will I face my family after they hear of my humiliation at the hands of my kidnapper?

Unless I don't talk at all. I'll tell them and the authorities the minimum. If my grandfather suggests I go to therapy, I'll refuse.

I will bear the weight of my humiliation alone, having put myself in this situation. I should have listened to my grandfather and my cousins, that every time I snuck out of my family's estate, I was in danger of being kidnapped.

It sucks to be a Lexington. It's horrible to be born with two-color eyes. I'm a freak of nature. A free spirit who shouldn't have rebelled. I should have stayed within the walls of my grandfather's place. I should have listened to my older, wiser cousin, Roman.

Instead, I didn't listen, and this darkness, this aloneness, is my just punishment. Inside the coffin, there is the hissing of the oxygen. I lie still and clasp my hands over my chest. Her skin beneath mine moves, and I squeeze my eyes shut, my heart beating a mile a minute against my ribcage.

The coffin lurches forward. My skin slides over her skin. Her skin peels off her bones and sticks to my skin. Bile rises in my throat. The coffin moves faster, like it's being pulled across the wooden floor of his house, out the door, and onto the field in the back of his farm. The coffin jostles, and more of her skin comes off her body and clings to mine. Then there isn't movement forward. Instead, there is movement downward.

Oh, God, oh, God, he is going back on his word. He doesn't intend on taking the ransom and giving me my freedom. He intends on burying me alive. I'm going to die. No one will know where I'm buried. I'll die alone. I didn't get the chance to tell my family I love them.

I love them.

I love my family.

I pound on the lid. Pound on it until my palms throb.

"Let me out. Let me out, dammit. Please. Oh, God, please."

He doesn't listen. He leaves me like that until the oxygen stops hissing. The coffin is

pulled from out of the ground, and when he removes the lid, his face is covered with a black mask, as usual. Only his eyes are visible.

My kidnapper removes the oxygen canister from between my legs and replaces it with another before nailing the lid back on. I am lowered back into the ground. The corpse's ribs poke into my back. He removes and replaces the canister a few more times, and soon, I lose track of time.

I don't see the light of day until my rescuers unearth me from the ground.

16

Blaise

I wake up drenched in sweat and my mouth sandpaper dry.

I throw off the covers, ditch my tank top and sleep shorts, and wrap the satin sheet around my nakedness. Covering my yawn, I pad to the kitchen and wet my mouth with a glass of water. The blinking lights from the city skyline call to me, and I curl up in the overstuffed chair and stare at the view.

I can understand now why Maddox loves San Francisco. The city is lively and bright. It would be difficult to feel lonely here when there is so much to do and so much to see. Then how come I can't get rid of the ache in my chest? Why do I feel more alive at my cabin surrounded by the sounds of wildlife and the bubbling of the small creek in the back?

I rest my head on the chair. Why did I challenge Maddox when he demanded the truth for the reason I kept my grandfather's death from him? Why didn't I tell him how much danger I am in? Isn't that what married couples do, they talk and work through problems together? Except our marriage isn't conventional. It's a business deal. And the way he treated me earlier confirms that what we have is all business and no pleasure.

Had it been a different woman he found in his pool, he would proposition and make her feel good too. I'm by no means special. It's not me he wanted, per se. Any woman would do. Or he is intrigued by my peculiarity enough to indulge my

“requests.” God, I’m a fool for hoping he would see me for me. That I’m a woman and not a freak.

The ache in my chest not going away, I press my face into the satin. My throat burns with unshed tears. I’m right. Forever-after isn’t in my future. Forever-after is for someone normal. Normal is whatever woman is with Maddox, wrapped in his arms.

“Blaise?”

Speak of the devil. I raise my head. He’s shirtless and his PJ bottoms hang low on his hips. His dark hair is a tousled mess.

“Uh, hi, Maddox. I didn’t think you were home.” I start to rise from the chair.

He shakes his head. “Don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t leave. Let’s talk.”

“It’s three in the morning.”

“Exactly. Not sleeping well, baby?”

Baby. I smile, though I shouldn’t be pleased he’s back to calling me baby rather than darling.

“I have nightmares,” I admit.

“About your kidnapping?”

“Yes.”

“Can I make you tea? My sis likes to drink tea on the hot side when she has trouble sleeping.”

“Tea is good. Thank you.” I again rise from the seat.

In a soft voice, he tells me to leave everything to him. “Let me take care of you, Blaise. Will you do that?”

Is this his olive branch for the outburst earlier?

“Okay, sure. Thank you.”

With his back to me as he makes our teas, I take the chance to study my husband’s state of half-nakedness. His shoulders are wide. His back is stacks upon stacks of muscles. Tapered waist. Long legs. He turns, and with two mugs in his hands, he walks over and sets our teas on the coasters that are on the windowsill.

“Ah, so that’s why they’re there.”

“A gift for my sis.”

Each coaster is in the shape of a heart. One is blood red and the other a royal blue. “They’re beautiful. It was very thoughtful of you.”

“It’s how I get her to visit. I bribe her with gifts and tea.”

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I laugh. “I used to do the same with Roman when I lived with him, but it wasn’t to get him to visit me. It was to get him to stop being a class-5 clinger.”

He raises a brow. “Class-5 clinger?”

“Yes, you know, the worst kind. They follow you everywhere, bathroom included. I told him enough was enough unless he wanted to watch me ‘handle’ a tampon. That stopped him.” I reach for my mug, and cupping it with both hands, I sip my tea. “Mmm, chamomile and hibiscus.”

“My sister’s favorite.”

“She has yummy taste.”

We sip our teas in silence and stare at the view. The silence is comfortable. The satin on my skin is cool. The warmth of the tea, soothing.

“I’m sorry to have woken you. I didn’t think I made that much noise.”

“You didn’t. I don’t sleep well either.”

“Nightmares?”

“Nah. Too much on my mind.”

“Like what?” I ask.

The city lights twinkle, this mix of red, white, and yellow lights.

“Business.”

“Does business keep you up a lot?”

“Too much, unfortunately.”

I didn't share with my family what my kidnapper did, yet they love me and continue to though I pushed them away those first few months after I was rescued. I'm grateful my family gave me the gift of time and patience rather than give up on me. I can offer the same courtesy to Maddox.

“What kinds of things, if you don't mind me asking?”

I glance sidelong at him, having this insane urge to reach out and pat his arm. To reassure him that I'm here if he wants to talk, but if he's okay with not sharing, I'm fine with that too.

“Contracts. Meetings. Politics. There are days my brain is ready to implode.”

“I imagine there are a lot of moving pieces in the day and life of a real estate developer. And one who is in demand as you are.”

“Delved into my life some, Blaise?”

“I know as much as the public does.”

“The tabloids?”

“And the business journals Roman makes me read.”

“He’s prepping you to help with the family’s business.”

“The nightlife of the Bay Area doesn’t interest me.” I set my mug down on the heart-shaped coaster, and bringing my leg up and onto the chair, I hug my knee to my chest.

“The nightlife would befit an insomniac such as yourself.”

“How—”

“I overheard one of your guys at your grandfather’s party.”

“You were eavesdropping?”

“Well, are you?”

“I asked first,” I say, having this ridiculous urge to stomp my feet.

In the corner of my eye, I catch Maddox smiling before he coughs into his hand.

“I don’t consider it eavesdropping when it was said loud enough for anyone within earshot to hear.”

“I won’t dispute your claim, but for the record, my men are very discreet. Anything they have to say is said above a whisper.”

“If they didn’t, will you reprimand them? What would their just punishment be for disobeying your orders? Would you withhold their pay? Tar and feather them, like in the Dark Ages?”

He’s teasing. I face him, and when he stares back, I roll my eyes.

“Again, for the record, my men are loyal and follow orders to the T. They don’t disobey, and should they ever, I make them recite my rules.”

“And what are they, may I ask?”

I open my mouth. He sticks up his index finger.

“First, answer the question. Are you or are you not an insomniac?”

“I am.”

Satisfied grin from him. “Now the rules.”

“Bossy,” I say. “But since you’re my husband, I’ll tell.”

His grin transforms into a smile I can only describe as delighted.

“My rules for my men are: respect, protect, and trust one another.”

“That’s it?”

I shrug. “That’s it. So, tell me something I don’t know about you, and I’ll share something you might not know about me.”

“Everything you read in the tabloids is a bunch of BS.”

“Ah, so all those women you were romantically linked with you’ve never met in real life, right?” I tease.

Slight smile on his face. “I take that back. I did wine and dine the celebrities I was linked to, but that’s the extent of the relationship.”

“Are you a romantic at heart?”

“I’m not for romance, Blaise. I’m after what happens in the bedroom.”

“I see.”

“My apologies if you thought there would be more from our arrangement than the physical.”

“No need to apologize.” I reach for my tea and take a sip. The tea has cooled down, lending no comfort to the rawness in my throat.

I’m right. Maddox Stassi is a heartbreak waiting to happen, and falling for him would be a disaster in the making.

“I don’t expect anything other than the physical, anyway. I’m a non-believer in romance and love.”

“Because of your kidnapping?”

“From hearing my men and my cousins talking.”

“Eavesdropping?”

“Guilty,” I admit with a sheepish grin. “The women they’ve dated want more time and attention. I thought maybe my cousins and my friends are in the wrong, but observing how they interact with them, that’s not the case. They are very attentive men.”

Holding on tight to the satin sheet with one hand and the mug with the other, I rise from my chair.

“I don’t want to be a source of frustration for any man. My oddities are enough to aggravate one.”

Before he can answer, I pad over to the sink and set my mug in it. Then I return for his.

“Are you done? Can I put it away for you?”

He nods, and I reach for his mug on the coaster on the windowsill. My hair falls forward, and thick fingers weave in and out of the inky strands.

“I find your oddities fascinating, Blaise.”

“Maybe in the beginning.” I straighten and walk over to the sink, setting his mug next to mine. “Later on, they’ll stop fascinating you.”

“Like you, I’m not a fan of black clothing. I prefer colors in my wardrobe. The

insomniac thing mirrors mine. We should spend a day sleeping and the night clubbing. As for silk and satin, they are my new favorite fabrics.”

Catching his reflection in the floor-to-ceiling window, I take my seat, letting the satin fall off my shoulders and around my elbows, giving Maddox a glimpse of my cleavage. He stares at the hint of skin and licks his lips. I hold back my smile. Can I give what he suggested a try? Could he and I sleep all day and party the night away, clubbing and just living life without a care in the world?

“Does anything help you sleep?” I return us to the topic at hand, the idea of sweaty bodies rubbing against mine on the dance floor upping my heart rate.

“A swim.”

Another thing we have in common, and I like that a lot.

“A swim helps me too. There’s a pool in my Montana home.”

“I saw.”

“I miss my pool.”

“I bet you do. You went for a swim yet you’re up in the middle of the night. Swimming must not be as effective. Something else might work better for you.”

His gaze is heated, and I concentrate on his choice of words rather than the ache between my legs.

“We’re up in the middle of the morning,” I clarify.

“Toe-mae-toe, toe-ma-toe.”

I smile. “Seriously?”

“Seriously.” He smiles back.

“You didn’t go for a swim when you returned here?”

“With as much action as I got last night, I figured I’d sleep until the afternoon.”

“Got that much tail?” I ask.

“Tail?”

“Isn’t that what the guys say when they’ve gotten laid?”

“Gotten laid?” His smile widens. “Been around guys much, Blaise?”

“Well, did you?”

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“Did I get laid? No. I drank too much and made an ass of myself on the dance floor, but no getting tail for this guy.”

“So is that a no to swimming?” I ask, pleased he wasn’t with a woman or women.

When Granger was here, we ran a check of Maddox and the women and men he surrounds himself with.

For as wealthy and powerful as he is, he doesn’t have many male friends. I find that to be interesting. Maddox seems like a man’s man. I didn’t find it the least interesting that he is into threesomes. Or that the women think it’s something to be proud of posting on social media scandalous pictures of them with the playboy billionaire.

“Does a shower count?” His blue-green eyes twinkle.

“You know it doesn’t.”

He stretches his long legs in front of him and stares at the view with his hands tented over his mouth. “What made last night different from the last time we went for a swim?”

“Do you have to ask?” I also stare at the view, grateful the city lights aren’t showing the obvious, that I’m blushing up to my hairline. It’s the downfall of having pale skin.

“Enlighten me, Blaise. And use the dirty words. They turn me on when you say them.”

He's blunt, holding nothing back. I give it to him in kind.

"You touching me through the satin. Your mouth on my pussy through the silk. You getting me off with your tongue and your mouth, licking up my slit. Sucking on my clit. Me coming hard on your face."

He groans. Utters a husky, "Fuuucck. You are hot. Do you, baby, want to get off again?"

I do, but can I keep what's happening between us strictly physical? I feel safe with Maddox. He melts my panties with looks alone. If I can do this, I could get over my revulsion of skin on skin. I could someday have a "normal" relationship.

"No falling for one another? No asking for more? What we have will be a friends-with-benefits arrangement only, right?"

"Right."

No hesitation. No questions. Just one word from him, said with conviction.

"I would like for you to touch me again, but do you mind if we have a do-over? Get to know one another better before we move at lightning speed?"

"Forget how I made you come on my face? How you licked your pussy juices off the glove? How sexy you are whimpering and moaning into my mouth with every stroke from my tongue?"

"Yes," I squeak, squeezing my thighs together.

"I won't forget anytime soon, Blaise. And what you want, I'll give, baby. You control the pace. Are we good?"

More than good. This is my chance to give Maddox the truth.

“There’s something I should tell you. With what I tell, you might decide you would rather cut your ties now, and I’ll gladly agree to annulling the marriage.”

Tucking my leg under me, I sit straight in the armchair, finding comfort in the cool satin wrapped around my body.

“The morning of my grandfather’s death, Rylan and his security team found a note taped on my bedroom window from who we assume is my kidnapper. That same morning, my great-uncle tells me I’m written out of my grandfather’s will. I”—I puff out a breath, missing my grandfather dearly—“I think my kidnapper has inside knowledge of my grandfather’s plan of leaving me without protection and security.”

“The private estate in Montana. The bodyguards. Living life away from the world until you die if you wanted to. That’s what his billions would have given you.”

“Yes.”

“Then why not sell me the car for an inflated price? I would have paid whatever price you asked for.”

“I thought of that, but the money doesn’t take care of the other issue—time and security. Marriage to you buys me time for my cousins and my team to find my kidnapper. Marriage to you also gives me access to your secured penthouse and security team.”

I don’t tell him his vigilante act has the power to make my kidnapper have second thoughts about hurting me; otherwise, Maddox will rain down hell on him.

“Being out of the limelight also gives me time to figure out how I can make money to

survive on my own.”

“No hitching your cart to a rich husband, eh, Blaise?”

He’s serious.

“The men who would want me wouldn’t want me for me. They want what I can offer them, a spectacle. I would be Blaise Lexington, the sheltered and strange woman who was kidnapped and held for ransom.”

“You overheard my father.”

“He’s not wrong.” I shake my head. “I’m not naïve, Maddox. I hear what they say behind my back. I’m the ice queen. The freak with expensive taste in clothing. Who thinks she’s too good to be touched or to touch another. It’s the reason I wear gloves up the length of my arms.”

My parents would be so angry hearing me bring myself down. They’re the ones who harped on me to be someone to be proud of. To be an individual separate from the Lexington name.

I remove my hands from where they are hidden under the satin sheet and open my palms to him, the sheet slipping from around my shoulder as I lean forward.

“I’m not normal. Am not meant for a life with a husband and kids. I don’t even know if I can make love in the true sense of the word. It’s pathetic. Someday, you’ll want children.”

The sheet slips all the way down my shoulders and bunches around my waist. His

gaze slides down my body and lingers on my belly.

“Having children means having lots of sex.” I laugh, the sadness in the sound not lost to me. “What if sex disgusts me? What if I can’t stand having a man inside me?”

My eyes prickle with unshed tears. My throat is raw.

He pats his lap. “Come here, baby.”

I stare at his lap. At how much space he takes up on the overstuffed chair. Listening to my heart, I gather the sheet in my hands, wrap it securely around my body, and seat myself on Maddox’s lap. One of his arms rests against my back, keeping me near him. The other curves over my belly. My bare feet hang off the arm.

I tip closer and nudge the side of my head on his, liking how well we fit.

“First off, my apologies for my father’s comment. He’s an ass, and you’re not strange. What happened to you is traumatic, and if touching or keeping to yourself helps you deal with your trauma, then the world can fuck off for all I care. Secondly, I’m putting my hat into the ring. As soon as I put you to bed, I’m calling the head of my security team. We’ll find the bastard who hurt you and put him out of his misery. Thirdly, my apologies for my earlier behavior. I’m an insensitive jerk.”

I tunnel my fingers in his soft strands of hair, being careful not to touch his skin with my bare hand.

“There’s no need apologizing for wanting to be in the know. I’m sorry for keeping you in the dark.” I tug on his hair and bring him close until we’re looking into each other’s eyes. “You have such beautiful eyes.”

He reaches up and weaves his fingers in my hair. “One eye green. One eye blue.

Hands down, your eyes are the prettiest I've seen."

"Is that so?"

"So."

"I like us getting to know one another better."

"Me too."

"Maddox, um, would it be too soon to ask for a kiss?"

"Not at all. You set the pace."

"My pace says we should kiss."

"Good call."

His gaze locked on mine, he pulls me closer, his fingers still entrenched in my hair. My heart rate picks up. My breaths hitch in my chest. Will his mouth be just as soft as when we shared our first kiss? I don't have to wonder long.

Maddox presses his lips on mine. There's a slight hesitation from him, as though he's memorizing the feel of my lips. I'm doing the same. His lips are soft, and when he coaxes my mouth open, I close my eyes and brand into memory how sweet he tastes and how good he smells. A hint of cologne, sweat, and man.

Aching with need, I whimper. He deepens the kiss. Our tongues tangle. The place between my legs throbs. I reach down and touch myself.

Maddox covers my bare hand using the satin sheet. His mouth on mine, he guides my

fingers up and down my folds. Helps me stroke my clit. I rub the swollen nub over and over. Moan as he helps me up the pace. I shatter with a deep moan into his mouth and my thighs cocooning his hand to my sex.

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“Blaise. Fuck, baby.”

“Someday,” I say, my mouth curving over his.

“Jesus, that’s fucking hot. I can go a round two.”

“Are you hurrying me along?” I tease.

“Is it working?”

I laugh. “Do you have to ask?”

“Should we go back to bed?” He grasps pieces of my hair and runs his fingers down the length.

I nod.

He brings my hair to his face and rubs the pieces over his nose and his mouth, and drops feather-light caresses over my lips. Never have I thought of locks of my hair as instruments of foreplay. I squeeze my thighs together. His fingers flick and rub my clit. I groan low in the back of my throat. He strokes the sensitive, throbbing nub. I again shatter on his hand.

“Alone or together, baby?”

“Do you have to ask?” I drop a kiss on his smirk.

“Will you be covered from head to toe in satin or silk?”

“Satin.”

“Satin is becoming my new favorite material. For this next part, I don’t want any barriers, Blaise. Can I?”

His fingertip touches my swollen flesh. I jerk back my hips. His brows furrow. I can do this. He’s my husband. Maddox isn’t out to hurt me. He wants to make me feel good. I remove the satin from over my sex, and bunching the covers in my hands, I hold on to his thighs and seat myself on his hand.

I’m wet. I’m ready. I move my hips over his hand. Slick his flesh with my arousal. He slips a finger inside me. Pumps in and out as I hold myself up with my palms flat on his thighs. Looking me in the eye, Maddox strokes my clit with his thumb and slips another finger inside me, filling and stretching me. I go up and down. He goes in and out.

“Maddox.”

“Baby, you are so fucking hot.”

His tongue darts out and flicks my nipple. I lean forward, offering him a bigger sample of my flesh. His warm mouth wraps around my nipple. He sucks and nips at the hardened bud. I arch my back. Up my pace on his fingers.

“Now, oh, God, now, Maddox.”

He finger fucks me and I fall apart, my inner muscles clenching his fingers. Sated, I tip forward and rest my forehead on his. Maddox isn’t done with me.

Using the sheet, he slips his hands under my arms and helps me off the chair. Then he sits on the floor and leans back against the chair. He crooks his finger. I see him through a haze of desire.

“Come here, babe. I’m hungry for more.”

With the sheet wrapped around my lower half, I take the step that will put my sex near his face. He’s not taking the little distance between us. He grasps me by the back of my thighs and tugs me forward until his face is buried against my sex. He licks up my slit, and I can’t take the electric jolts of need zipping up and down my spine. I tip forward and rest my forearms on the arm of the chair. He laps me up like a hungry man sitting down for his first meal after a long fasting. I shove my fingers in his hair. Push him against my sex.

He takes a slow draw of my clit. Glances up at me with desire bright in his beautiful eyes. I am lost to the heat in their depths. Can’t look away even if my life depended on it.

“Jesus, baby, you taste so good. So fucking good.”

His words . . . They are so dirty. My sex throbs. My toes curl. I move my hips. My sex is making love to his tongue and his face. He’s so good with that tongue of his.

“Maddox.” I’m panting. He gives a leisurely lick up my slit. I come apart for the third time. Or is it the fourth? I’ve lost count.

Unsteady on my feet, I use the sheet and help him off the floor. We head for the bedroom.

“Ladies first.”

Is that so? I walk to the bedroom ahead of him. My hips sway. My stride is unhurried. Halfway to my bedroom, I drop the sheet. There's more where that came from.

His heated glance follows me to the bedroom before I feel him stalking toward me. I'm the prey and he is the predator on the hunt for his next meal.

God, it's a horrible analogy, but I'm ready for him to eat me out and stroke me with his tongue and his fingers to more mind-blowing orgasms.

The doubts in my head grow. Can I keep our arrangement business and physical touching only? His large shadow fills my bedroom door, and in the moment, I couldn't give a care. I crawl on top of the bed and crook my finger.

"Come here, Maddox. I'm hungry."

17

Blaise

He said I made him come so hard as I sucked him off that he forgot his name. Welcome to my world, buddy.

After I went down on him and he came in my mouth, I dressed from head to toe in satin and put back on my satin gloves. We fall asleep. Or at least he did, his breathing rhythmic near my ear.

I'm cocooned to him, his arm across my waist comforting. He is strong, his body solid and lined with muscles. His warm breath coasts over my hair and caresses my forehead as this puff of air when I tip my face up to him.

Is he asleep or, like me, awake, his heart thumping against his ribcage like mine is doing?

What is Maddox thinking?

What is he feeling?

I set my gloved hand on his chest.

Will he spend more nights with me? Or will he decide I'm too much of an oddity to waste his time on? I'm a spectacle. A woman with no meaningful skills. I bring nothing to a relationship.

“You’re thinking awful hard, Blaise.”

I sigh. “Called out.”

“Damn right. Why the sadness in your voice, baby? If you don’t want to talk, feel free to tell me to mind my own business.”

“I don’t want to burden you.”

“You won’t. You’re my wife.”

“I’m a business deal.”

“We can be more. You wanted a do-over. Let’s give it a try. I share something and you reciprocate. Does that work?”

“Sure.” I stretch out the word, wondering how personal this reciprocating will get.

“Spiders scare me.”

“Really?”

He chuckles. “That surprises you?”

“It does. Whose bigger, you or the spider?”

“Who has more legs, me or the damn things?”

“Answering a question with another. Not cool,” I say.

“Speaking of cool, are you warm enough?”

“Perfect, thank you.” For good measure, I burrow into his warmth.

With my head already tipped back, my mouth coasts over soft and warm flesh. What would Maddox taste like were I to flick my tongue over his skin? I long to know the answer, except it’s my turn to share something of myself.

“I’ve never been in love and have no idea what it would feel like.”

I expect him to laugh or make fun of me. What I’m not expecting is for him to share the opposite of falling for someone—heartbreak.

“Falling in love is exactly how they describe it to be. It’s like walking on clouds. Feeling like you can conquer the world.”

“Invincible?” I ask.

“Yes. Nothing can get you down, and when something does, you pick yourself right up knowing that person would be there. Until they’re not anymore. Then it’s nothing but a gnawing ache and going through the grieving process. Anger. Denial. Bargaining. Acceptance.”

“Did you go through all the stages?”

I remember the authorities going over with me these stages, afraid I would sympathize with my kidnapper. Or worry I’d get stuck in a stage and never get to accepting what happened to me. How could anyone accept two weeks of torture and pain at the hands of another human being?

“It took me two years, but yeah, I did.”

Two years to get over a breakup?

“You must’ve loved her very much.”

“I do. I did.”

Do. Did. Why do I have the feeling he still loves her?

“It doesn’t seem like you got closure. Maybe you should find her and speak with her. I don’t know much about love, but two years is a long time to get over someone.”

“Are you, as my wife, encouraging me to find my ex and make amends?”

“If it’ll give you closure and peace, yes.”

“What if feelings come back?”

“I personally don’t think your feelings for her died.”

“That doesn’t bother you?”

“Why should it?” It does. Oh, God, the idea of Maddox with this woman somehow rips my heart to pieces. “A person should be happy and at peace.”

“Will you be happy and at peace when I put your kidnapper out of his misery?”

“No. I would be saddened by the act of violence. Violence begets violence.”

“Did you not think of taking his life for putting you in the ground with a corpse, Blaise?”

I squeeze my eyes shut, hating yet respecting Maddox for daring to speak of my kidnapping when I’ve asked him not to.

“I didn’t. I thought of my family and how sad they would be not knowing where I was.”

I open my eyes, and shifting onto my back, I stare up at the night sky through the skylight in the ceiling with my gloved hands clasped over my chest.

“He hurt me. Did horrible things to my body. Said things to me no one should have the right to say to another. I hated him, but I never once thought of hurting him back

or taking his life. My father would never condone it no matter how deserving my kidnapper was.”

Yet, my father cut open a woman’s belly and snatched a baby from the womb. Isn’t he as much of a monster as my kidnapper?

“You should find her and speak with her, Maddox. Kindness and forgiveness begets kindness and forgiveness.”

“Are you saying I was unkind and am in need of forgiveness?”

“She hurt you. It’s you who needs to do the forgiving. Be kind and forgive her.”

“How are you so certain she hurt me? That she was the one who broke it off?”

“I don’t know you that well, but like my cousins and my men, you have a good heart. The good ones get their hearts broken the most.”

“Will you break my heart, Blaise?”

“There’s no chance of that happening.”

“Why is that?”

“You have to fall for me first.”

“How do you know I haven’t?”

“Is it possible to fall for someone when you’re still hung up on someone else?”

“Answering a question with another question. Not cool, baby.”

“Hey, that’s my line.”

“That so?”

“So.”

“Whatcha gonna do about it?”

I glance sidelong at him. He’s on his side, checking me out with a huge smile on his face.

“I dare you to do your worst, baby.”

“Are you sure about that?” I ask, unable to hide the smile in my words.

“More sure than I’ve been in a long time.”

“Okay, you asked for it.”

I pounce, and knocking him onto his back, I straddle his thighs and tickle him. At first, I surprised him. He raises his arms. It’s a defensive move I know well. Collins used to do that. Someone else did too. Someone more ticklish than Collins. A boy. No, he wasn’t a boy, but closer to becoming a man. His face is a fuzzy haze, and the shock that Granger’s theory about repressed memories could be true steals my breath and immobilizes me.

Maddox takes advantage, misreading my shock as a pause in what to me seems like foreplay. He gets me on my back in one fell swoop, keeping his weight off me with his arms alongside my head. I stare up into a face made of jagged lines hidden by shadows. He’s blocked my view of the stars and the moon. My breaths come out in spurts, and again, he misreads my shock as something else—passion.

He lowers his head. Strands of dark hair fall forward. This is how I find myself when I wake from the sedatives my kidnapper’s given me. The ski mask he wears stretches across his face, outlining his prominent cheekbones and the sharp jut of his chin.

He nuzzles my forehead and down the side of my face, his mouth cool on my skin, as though he’d come in from the outside. His clothes reek of cigarettes, but his breath is minty. He’s brushed his teeth. Does he want me to like the smell of him? It’s the question that runs through my mind.

He continues nuzzling my skin until his face presses into the crook of my neck. He bites, and the pain is excruciating, but I don’t cry out. If I do, he’ll bite so hard he draws blood, and I refuse to give him another taste of my family’s blood.

He hates my family. That’s what he ranted about over and over. Which one? The

McCabes, my supposed real family? Or the Lexingtons, the one who stole me?

“I haven’t eaten meat since I was returned to my family.”

My confession is met with silence. How do I tell him, in the dark and in that pose, that he reminds me of my kidnapper without hurting his feelings? It’s better to be vulnerable and share a part of myself than to hurt someone with my words.

Maddox rolls off me and stares at the ceiling. In the moonlight, I catch the tense outline of his jaw.

“I’m sorry. That was too much, wasn’t it?” I edge away from his warmth and his body. “Maybe this reciprocating isn’t a good idea.”

And what I’ve known to be true is still true. I’m horrible with holding a decent conversation, tending to overshare or ask awkward or uncomfortable questions to fill the silence. I sigh.

“Can I tell something less morbid? I probably scared you off.”

“You didn’t. Knowing why you’re the way you are helps me understand you better. And it’s not morbid. What you went through is real. Reality is suffering and pain, and when I get ahold of the bastard, he’ll regret ever hurting you.”

Maddox’s words should give me comfort, but a small sliver of apprehension zips up and down my spine. What if Granger’s right and I know this guy so well I suppressed memories of him to keep from acknowledging how much someone I trusted hurt and betrayed me?

When his day of reckoning arrives at the hands of Maddox, can I condone whatever pain and suffering Maddox plans on inflicting? But does my kidnapper deserve mercy

after the hell he put me through? Maddox is right and wrong. Reality is suffering and pain. But forgiveness is what will give me peace.

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Tired of my past complicating the present moment, I scoot closer to Maddox, nuzzle the underside of his jaw with my nose, and inhale his scent. There's a hint of soap mixed with the distinct smell of a man. I could lay in bed all day with my head resting in the crook of his neck and never tire of his scent.

"Blaise, fuck, baby, you doing that turns me on."

"Really?"

He brings my gloved hand to his crotch. His erection under his boxers is thick beneath my fingertips. I linger, trailing feather-light caresses up and down his length.

"You said I get to set the pace. I have an idea."

"I'm liking the sound of that."

"Good. Condoms?"

"Blaise?"

"Condoms, Maddox. Now, please."

He chuckles. "Fuck, I love your take-no-prisoners tone. Top drawer of my nightstand, baby. Don't be long."

"Gotcha. Hang hard. I mean, hang tight."

“Ha-ha. Don’t leave me hanging, Blaise.”

“Never that.”

And I hope to God, when I need Maddox the most, he’ll come through for me and won’t leave me hanging.

18

Maddox

My wife has an erotic side to her I find pleasing. She's my wet dream come true with her dirty imagination and those damn satin gloves of hers.

"You sure white is the wisest choice, Blaise?"

Straddling my thighs, she's an ethereal vision wearing a white silk bra, matching thong, and white gloves up the length of her arms.

Her dark brows tug together. "This is what I wore on our wedding day, and I want to relive that day had we been a normal couple."

Normal? I'm grateful Blaise is far from normal. Life with her is interesting as fuck.

"Should I find a different color? I have matching sets in all colors and in satin and silk."

I groan, imagining stripping her of her strips of satin or silk in all colors of the rainbow with my teeth and my fingers.

"Well, would you like me to change?" She flips her long hair over her shoulder and sets her hands on her hips.

I suck in a quiet breath. Jesus, she's a magnificent sight to behold, with her raven

hair, pale skin, breasts that fit perfectly in my palms, and the indignation on her face.

Unable to resist her pull, I grasp her hips using the satin sheet between us and rock my hips into hers the same time I pull her down on my cock.

Her juices slick the satin. Her desire is a sharp inhalation of breath. I guide her over my length. She rocks back and forth over my cock. The color of her gloves, thong, and bra are forgotten. I want to get her naked. Explore her pussy with my fingers. Lap up her wetness with my tongue. But only if she's willing to go there.

"I got you something."

"You did?"

She dangles a pair of red satin gloves in front of me. "Your own pair."

Fuck me. I put the gloves on. Blaise sticks out her chest. Chuckling at her tactfulness, I palm her breasts through my satin gloves and her silk bra. She tugs the bra down. Tweaks the little raspberries. Moans.

"Ah, so it's going to be like that, eh, baby?"

"Like what?" Her eyes darken. Her lips part.

"Me taking my cue from you? Or should I take what I want?" I grab the back of her bra and yank, hard.

The clasp breaks. I toss the bra onto the floor. Her silk panties are next. I tear them off her and run my gaze up and down her body. Smooth pale skin. Perky tits. Flat stomach. Smooth mound. Growling low, I weave my fingers in her hair and bring her down to me, ready to kiss her the fuck senseless.

Never has a woman turned me on as much as Blaise. Before I can clamp my mouth on hers, she grabs my head and shoves my face against her tit the same time she leans into me. I tease her nipple with my tongue. Swirl the taut bud. Lick around her dark-as-fuck areola.

“You’re so beautiful. So fucking beautiful, baby.”

I suck on her nipple. Squeeze her breasts between my palms. Feast on her tits. She grinds on me. Goes faster. She’s moaning. Lets out a growl of frustration.

“Baby.”

“I need you.”

“I need you too.”

“I want to suck you off again.”

Jesus. “How, uh, how do you want to do this?”

Earlier, I fed her my rod. Now, she wants to feast on my beast in a different position. I’m digging any position she wants to put me in so long as she’s the one doing the asking. It’s been a long time since my cock’s been rearing for this much action.

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“Carefully.” She moves off my body. “Spread your legs wide.”

I do as she says.

“Bunch the satin around every part of your body except for the important part.”

I chuckle. “What part would that be, babe?”

More fire in her eyes. “Your cock.”

“Better.” I keep every part of my body covered except for my erection.

Small gloved fingers wrap around my cock. Wet, warm mouth mouthing the head. Groaning, I watch her watch me as she goes up and down my big cock with her small mouth. She’s sexy as fuck, her eyes lit up with desire. Bright green. Bright blue. A sharp contrast to her raven hair and pale skin.

I brush my fingers down the side of her face. Skim my palms down her arms. She trembles. Closes her eyes. Sighs over my throbbing member before she lavishes attention on my cock with her tongue. Jesus, what Blaise can do with her mouth.

Needing more from her, I fist her hair in my hand, and guiding her up and down my length, I fuck her mouth with my cock. She takes in my thickness and length with ease, the slurping noises she makes upping the pressure in my groin. The pressure builds. My balls tighten. Does she know I’m ready to explode in her mouth? Fuck, yeah, she does. She goes harder and deeper. Slicks my rod with her saliva.

I lift my hips. Thrust my cock in her mouth the same time she sucks me.

“Fuck, baby. I’m close. I’m fucking close.”

Her mouth takes a long pull of my cock, and I can’t hold on. I come so hard I must be shooting a bucket of cum in her mouth.

“Jesus, Blaise. Fuck, you are sexy.”

Grabbing her by the arms with my gloved hands, I yank her up, seat her on my face, and press my mouth to her pussy. She grinds on my face. Holds on to the headboard. I lick up her slit. Suck on her clit. Lap up her juices. I inhale a breath and drag my nose along her inner thigh. Kiss up and down her smooth skin.

“That feels so good. Your mouth feels so good, Maddox. Do it more. More. More.”

She doesn’t need to ask again.

I drag my nose through her folds. Eat her out. Nip up and down her inner thighs. Her small fingers grab at my hair. Her nails dig into my scalp. Her thighs clamp the sides of my head, and needing more of her flavor, I interlock my fingers on the small of her back and lick and suck to my heart’s content.

Her body tenses.

Her thighs tremble.

She arches her back and comes on my face.

I hold her to me and give her clit and her slit a slow lick with my tongue. She comes again, her juices slicking my tongue and my lips. Fuck, she tastes good. And to have

her shatter on my face? Priceless.

“You okay, baby?” I run my palms up and down her back.

“I—” She gets off my face and lays next to me. “What you did—” She cups the side of my face. “That felt so good.”

I smooth my palm over her hair. Glide my finger over the beads of sweat along her upper lip. Trace the curve and dip of her upper lip, unable to stop touching her.

“I take it oral is okay?”

“Very.” She presses her mouth on the underside of my jaw. “You don’t mind that we’re not going all the way right away?” Her gaze strays to the unopened condom package on the nightstand. “I thought I could. My idea was to just put a little bit of you inside me. Not all the way, but enough to make us feel good.”

“I’m up for it if you are.”

“You—”

“I’m up.” To make my point, I grab my cock and yank it back and forth. My rod is erect and ready for more action. Jesus, it’s great to have my stamina back after a long dry spell.

“Okay. We won’t go all the way, right? I heard the first time is painful. I don’t deal with pain well. When Roman nicked my arm with his knife, I passed out. When Rylan grazed my ear with his arrow, I passed out. When I got shot in the shoulder, I passed out. You get the point.”

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And I am going to rip those guys a new asshole for causing my girl pain. My girl? Yeah, that's who Blaise is. She's my woman. My wife.

"Cross my heart, babe, I will be the utmost gentleman. Like I said, you set the pace."

"Thank you, Maddox." She reaches over, grabs the condom off the nightstand, and rips into the package. Blaise takes my cock in her hand and rolls it on like a champ.

"Do that often, baby?"

"No need to be jealous. I practiced a lot on bananas."

This woman . . . I sling my arm over my eyes. Smile. "You'll be the death of me with your comments from left field ."

She laughs, the sound low and husky. "And you're killing me slowly with your rock-hard body."

"Get on your back, babe."

Blaise does as I asked.

"Spread those legs."

She doesn't protest.

I bunch the satin around her body but leave her breasts uncovered. I want to suck

those little buds into my mouth and taste the raspberries with my tongue.

“Ready?”

She bites down on her bottom lip. Nods. I finger her sex until she’s wet. It doesn’t take long to get her wet. She’s already dripping with desire.

I line up our hips and slowly nudge her opening with the head of my cock. Blaise lifts her arms and holds on to my biceps. Her small fingers dig into my flesh as I slide another inch inside her. She’s tight, wet. I groan. Tip back my head. She will be the death of me. I’m certain of it. I slide in and out. Her inner muscles clench my rod. It’s erotic as fuck holding on to my restraint and knowing she trusts me fully to keep to my word.

“Mmm, that feels so good. You feel so good.”

She squeezes my arms. Closes her eyes. A serene look on her face. Color high on her cheeks. I slide another inch inside her and hit a barrier. I move out. In and out. Go faster.

“Blaise, I can’t hold on much longer.”

“Come for me.”

I come on command, and damn, the power she has over me. Shaken up by her control over me—something no woman’s had, including Kris—I pull out of her and get rid of the condom in the bathroom trash bin. I return with a warm, wet cloth, and pressing it on her sex, I clean up our sex mess.

“Thank you, Maddox.” She curls up against me, a satin sheet separating us.

“For what, baby?” I put another set of sheets over her nakedness.

Someday, she’ll let me hold her naked form against mine. Skin to skin. Someday.

“For putting up with my odd asks.”

“I like your oddities.”

“You’ll tire of them.”

“Never. Patience is a virtue, and in darkness, there is light.”

She caresses up and down my face with her gloved fingers. “Your understanding means the world to me.”

“I’d do anything for you.”

The words are out before I can stop them. But after everything is said and done, will one woman be enough to keep me on the straight path of faithfulness? Or will I be like my father, going through women as though they’re a flavor of the month?

Yet when Blaise reaches for my gloved hand with her own and intertwines our fingers, setting our clasped hands in the space between us, a twinge settles in my chest on the spot where my heart is.

The better question would be: when all is said and done, can I let Blaise go if she decides to end the marriage?

19

Blaise

“I want to help them all.”

“‘All’ isn’t in the cards, Blaise. We’re down to ten cases.” Out of hundreds. “Choose five.”

Granger and I are seated on the couch, pouring over the missing persons’ files again. The last time he was here, we didn’t come to a consensus on what cases to help with and which ones to send a personal note to notify the family that my foundation won’t be helping them find their missing loved ones.

We’ve been helping families for two years and have come to the conclusion that not everyone is truthful. There are people out there who take joy in sending us bogus missing person’s cases. It’s the reason Granger and I take so long to weed out the legitimate ones from the falsified stories.

“Pick five. Pick five.” I glance from one manila folder to the next. The files are spread out on the coffee table. Before I can choose, my cell phone rings.

It’s the front desk.

I pick up the call. “Hello.”

“Mrs. Stassi, there is a visitor here to see you.”

“Who?”

“It’s Gia Stassi, ma’am.”

Maddox’s sister?

“Bring her up.”

“Of course.”

“Collins?” Granger asks as soon as I end the call, noting the front desk’s number lighting up my cell’s screen.

“Gia Stassi.”

“I see. Should I leave?”

“That’ll be up to her, Granger.”

We wait in heavy silence. Like with me, the world knows of Gia Stassi’s trauma, not because she’s the little sister of a billionaire, but for what was done to her rapists. Did Maddox mutilate those men? Does it matter? The men are forever scarred, mentally and physically, and so is Gia.

The doorbell rings. We stand. I approach the door. At the door, I check the image on the screen.

Were I clueless as to what had happened to Gia, I would think she’s a normal woman. Long hair the color of dark roast coffee cascades around her heart-shaped face. Her eyes are bright blue rather than bluish-green like her brother’s. She appears younger than twenty-two and is out of place in the colder weather dressed in a white tube top

covered with butterflies, paired with a see-through royal blue skirt with slits down the sides from her bikini line to her ankles.

In that outfit, Gia is a mix of innocent beauty and sexiness, the see-through material giving everyone a view of her lace-trimmed boy short panties.

I must've kept her waiting longer than what she's used to. Arms crossed and foot tapping, she glares at the camera. I open the door, and though she probably knows who I am, I introduce myself anyway before I step aside to let her in.

Gia steps over the threshold. I close the door and turn around, not surprised she's staring at the large, formidable male staring back at her in the middle of the living room. Gia is as tense as a piece of string strung tight. A prey caught in the predator's line of sight. And yeah, I can see Granger as the predator. He looks ready to pounce on Gia with the hunger in his eyes.

I make introductions.

"Gia, this is my bodyguard and friend, Granger Ward. If you would like him to leave—"

"It's not necessary. What I have to say won't take long."

Beneath her terseness is something I recognize. Curiosity. Does she wonder how Granger got the scar on his face? Or is she curious as to whether her brother knows that his wife is alone with her rumored lover?

"Can I offer you tea or something to eat?"

It's after one.

"No. Like I said, this won't take long."

"At the very least, have a seat." I move aside. "Please."

She looks from Granger to the couch. He's blocking her path. I tilt my head. On cue, Granger moves to a spot behind the island in the kitchen.

Gia walks over and plops down on the couch with her arms crossed. The glower hasn't disappeared from her face.

"Did you marry my brother for his money?"

Straight to the point, and I like that. It beats guessing her intentions.

"Our marriage is a business deal. He gets the sports car he's been wanting, and I get his protection." If she can be straightforward with me, I can be truthful with her.

"You're in danger. Can I help?"

After what she went through?

"Maddox wouldn't want you in harm's way."

"My brother doesn't speak for me."

I understand stubbornness and the yearning for independence from men with misplaced overprotectiveness. I also understand the amount of danger I'm in.

"Thank you for the offer, Gia. However, my men, Granger, and your brother's security team are working on keeping me safe."

Before he left for work this morning, Maddox, Granger, and I had a video call with his security team. They'll work with my men, and at the end of the week, we'll regroup.

"What are those?" Gia tips her chin at the manila folders.

"Missing persons' files."

"May I?" She picks one of the ten up.

"Go ahead."

Granger and I watch in silence as Gia reads over the ten cases.

"These are the ones you'll help?"

"Unfortunately, the foundation can only cover the expenses to help five families."

"How will you choose?"

"We have the most success with the recent cases. Older cases take more resources."

"Half are older. Half are within the year."

"Yes," I say.

“Have you asked Maddox for help?”

“I would like to keep my personal affairs separate from his.”

“But you two are married. What is his is yours. What is yours is his.”

“It’s not what we agreed to.”

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“So it truly is a business deal.” Defeat in her voice. Is she wishing for more for her brother from this arrangement?

Before I can think over the reasons Gia would want her brother’s marriage to be about something more than money or business, my cell phone rings. It’s the front desk. What now? More unexpected visitors? I answer.

“This is Blaise.”

“Mrs. Stassi, there are more visitors.”

Goodness.

“They’re Miss Stassi’s bodyguards.”

“Okay, hold please.”

I mute the call.

“Your bodyguards are in the lobby. Maybe you should let them know you’ll be down soon.”

“Or your boyfriend can keep them company.”

She glances over her shoulder and gives Granger a scathing look. Granger stares back with stony silence. Why didn’t he set the record straight, that we’re not lovers? Or did I read him wrong and he’s not interested in Gia?

Men.

I unmute the call and inform the front desk that Granger will be down to speak with the men.

He leaves, and Gia peppers me with questions.

“Is he so intense?”

Intense isn't how I would describe my friend.

“Not normally.”

“How is he normally?” She separates the ten cases into two piles. I'm guessing she's made up her mind on which cases my foundation should take on.

I hold back my smile. Gia Stassi is straightforward and decisive like her brother.

“Granger is thoughtful, perceptive, and protective. Those qualities can be mistaken for intensity.”

“You love him.”

“I care for him. He's my best guy friend. I love your outfit.” I change the subject. My friendship with Granger is no one's business but ours.

“My design.”

“All the pieces?”

“Down to the panties.”

She ducks her head, but I don't miss her smile. She's proud of her work, and rightly so.

"Classy. Sexy. Beautiful. I love how you pulled off the entire look."

"You do?"

"Absolutely. My bestie would've put in an order the moment you walked through the door."

Her eyes widen. "Really?"

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“Yes.” Collins. The end-of-the-season football bash that I don’t have money for. My kidnapper. I get an idea. “What do you offer in the way of dresses? How long does it take from paper to me wearing one of your designs?”

“I have the drawings on my phone. And a week if you need them right away. Four weeks if it’s intricate. But I can make it happen within your time frame, no probs.” She sticks her hand in the pocket of her boy short panties and pulls out her cell.

“Wait a minute, those have side pockets?”

“Yep.” Shit-eating grin on her face. “Here are the designs. I can send you a screenshot and you can pick. Feel free to send to your friends too.”

“Sure thing.”

We exchange numbers.

“Are those boy shorts available in satin and with side pockets?”

“Yes. I also have garter belts and thigh highs with pockets. They’re great for storing cash, cell phone, or a weapon. A girl never knows when she’ll run into danger.”

She shrugs as though she couldn’t care less, but like me, she carries with her the nightmare of her trauma.

“I had a knife in my pocket when I was taken, but my kidnapper caught me by surprise. He came up from behind and drugged me.”

“Though you protected yourself, you were still helpless.”

“Very much so.”

“Do you have regrets about that night?”

“Many. I regret not listening to my family. Regret that my bodyguards took the punishment for my sneaking off. I regret putting my grandfather and cousins through the heartache of searching for me.”

“The news media said you were kidnapped on your way home from seeing your friend.”

“That’s what they were told. What no one knew is that I snuck out three days prior. My cousin Roman later told me my grandfather had his men looking all over Oakland for me.”

“You went missing for three days. The first forty-eight hours is the most important before the trail goes cold. It’s the reason you started your foundation.”

Gia is smart and perceptive.

“Yes. Putting my grandfather through my disappearance and kidnapping—” I heave a shuddering breath. “I’ll be forever remorseful for putting him through that kind of uncertainty.”

“What was your bodyguards’ punishment?”

“Gia—”

“Please, Blaise. I need to know. There was no mention of your bodyguards in the

media.”

“They were beat for leaving me unprotected. That’s all I know. I’m sorry.”

“Have you made contact with them? Apologize for what your cousins did?”

“How do you know it was them who did the beating?”

“I’ve seen your cousins, Blaise. See the way they keep a watch over you. They’ll do what is necessary to make sure no one hurts you again.”

“My cousins and your brother are cut from the same cloth.”

“They are.”

Is that an admission of her brother’s involvement in her rapists’ mutilation? The doorbell rings. Gia rises from the couch.

“That’s probably your bodyguard. I should go.”

I stand and walk her to the door.

“When will you need the dresses by?”

“Is two weeks good?”

“That’s doable.”

“Thanks, Gia. And it doesn’t have to be a dress. Put me in an outfit of your choosing as long as the pieces are silk or satin.”

“You trust me that much?”

“You have style. Let’s show it off.”

“Silk is difficult to make happen quick.”

“Satin it is.”

“How about lace?”

“I’m open so long as it doesn’t touch my skin,” I tell her.

“Casual, dinner party, or clubbing?”

I smile, thinking of Maddox’s idea of sleeping in all day and going clubbing all night.

“Dinner party and clubbing. Casual is what you’re seeing now.”

She runs her gaze up and down my body. I have on a satin cream top and an ivory skirt. Up the length of my arms are gloves in a blood-red shade. Granger likes to call this my Snow White look.

“Your casual is chic.”

“Thank you.”

The doorbell rings again. We both glance at the monitor. Granger is on the other side. He’s scowling.

“You should let him in. He looks ready to take a chunk out of someone.”

I open the door. Granger steps off to the side and lets Gia by. His heated gaze follows her as she makes her way to the elevator.

“Do you need me to escort you down?” he asks, not hiding well the unhappiness in his voice.

I shake my head. This guy. He can’t decide whether he should leave Gia alone or ask her out. In the years I’ve known him, Granger’s never had a serious relationship. There’s the rare second date he insinuates to me about; otherwise, he keeps mum about his personal life. He’s too busy sticking his nose in mine.

“I’m more than capable of taking care of myself.” She disappears inside the elevator.
“See you soon, Blaise.”

The doors close. Granger looks from the elevator to me with a mixture of annoyance and anticipation.

“Get used to her being around, big guy. Now let’s get back to work. Gia’s made the decision for us.”

“It’s like that now, huh?”

“Like what?”

“Opening your life to another person in need.”

“Gia’s not in need of anything or anyone. You heard her. She’s more than capable of taking care of herself.”

“Not from what her bodyguards yapped about. She’s on the verge of being homeless, Blaise.”

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A flood of anger washes over me. “How could Maddox not help his only sibling?”

“My guess is he has, but Gia refuses. Is pride worth going hungry and living on the streets?”

“You tell me, Granger? You were in a similar situation.”

Granger tsks and, leaning in close, says near my ear, “Remember, little one, I could’ve taken your life for what you stole. Instead, I gave you the gift of time. Don’t ever forget it.”

His breath is hot on the shell of my ear. From any other man, I would’ve taken his words as a threat, but from Granger, I interpret it as something else—a reminder of our bond.

I cup his face and whisper near his ear, “Never. I’ll never forget.”

And if my hunch is true, Granger is more than my bodyguard and friend. Granger Ward could be my half-brother.

20

Maddox

The hallways of the high school located in the center of the development I'm aiming to redevelop reeks of pot and a mustiness that I assume is attributed to age and neglect. The building could use a refresh, or more like a bulldozing over if I had my way. But the school district gave me strict orders to leave the building alone.

The surrounding businesses, though, are fair game.

At the door to the principal's office, I knock.

"Come in."

As soon as I walk inside, the principal rises from his seat, walks over, and extends his hand to me.

"Maddox. It's nice to see you."

I shake his hand. "Nice to see you too, sir."

"Please take a seat."

I occupy the chair across from him. Joe Williams is a big, burly African-American man with a booming voice and a friendly smile. He is my in to convincing the surrounding businesses that redevelopment is the best course for the survival of their

homegrown businesses.

“How is Leigh? Last I heard, she’s living in Washington.”

“She’s doing well, sir.”

“How’s the Bugatti?”

“Still burned to a crisp and crushed like a soda can.”

“You haven’t sent the thing to the junkyard?”

“Nah. I’m keeping it for sentimental reasons.”

“It’s how you and Leigh met.”

“Yes, sir.”

People love a great tale of how a friendship came to be, and Joe is one of them from the smile on his face.

“Congrats on your marriage.”

“Thank you, sir.” I resist the urge to check my cell. The head of my security called earlier saying he had a development in Blaise’s kidnapping case but would rather the conversation happen in person rather than over the phone lines.

Figures. Roland is paranoid as fuck after his experiences working undercover for the narcotics unit back in Atlanta.

“You’re a busy man, and though I welcome your visit, school lets out in ten minutes,

and my presence is needed at the front entrance. I keep the kids in line and scare off the misfits.”

He pulls aside his jacket. The big man is packing some serious firepower.

“What brings you in today, Maddox?”

“I’d like your help convincing the businesses that redevelopment is in their best interest.”

“Tearing what they’ve built and replacing their hard work and source of pride and joy with a white man’s vision is in their best interest?”

“Sir, if I can be blunt, Leigh was carved up like a pumpkin and whipped with an electrical cord a few blocks from here. No one should have to endure what she went through. The redesign will include ample lighting and security cameras. Streets, buildings, and the layout will be designed with security and safety in mind as well as a sense of community. The businesses will have a say in what their storefronts look like. I aim to please.”

“Out of altruism for Leigh and what she’d endured?”

“Yes.”

The warning bell sounds. He pushes back his chair and rises. I stand too.

“I’ll speak with the businesses, but first you must give them the promise that Cillian McCabe won’t rain hell on them. This is his territory whether you like it or not, Maddox.”

“Of course, sir. I’ll do my best.”

I leave Joe’s office with my hands jammed in the pockets of my trousers and my shoulders hunched. Getting Cillian’s cooperation is comparable to convincing a dentist to gorge on a bowl of Halloween candy.

The final bell rings. Kids rush out of the classrooms. A familiar voice rises above the chatter and the slamming of doors on walls. I make my way to the classroom where the voice came from. Sure enough, a ghost from my past is picking up chairs off the floor and setting them on the desks, seat down.

“Let me help you with that.”

Kristine looks up. Surprise on her beautiful face.

“Maddox?”

“Hi, Kris.”

My palm cups the back of my head. My sight strays to her left hand. No ring.

“How are you?”

“How am I? How are you?”

Pieces of hair fall over her eye. I reach out and brush away the fiery red locks. Her jade-green eyes widen.

“I’m good.”

We stare at one another. Time stops. It’s been six years since Kris broke my heart and moved away to Massachusetts for college. I wasn’t invited to follow her.

“Congrats on your marriage, Maddox. She’s beautiful.”

Her voice is soft and filled with regret. Regret for what? That she broke up with me and now I’m married to someone other than her?

“She is,” I answer, not regretting my decision to marry Blaise.

Will she ever leave the safety of my penthouse? What can I do to break through her armor? Is three months enough time or do I need a lifetime? What exactly does that look like? Nights filled with kink using satin and silk, but never going all the way?

Shit, what if she never lets me touch her with my bare hands? Something’s gotta give, and I have a feeling that something is me conceding to Blaise’s whim. Otherwise, permanent isn’t in the cards. Am I ready to concede?

I refocus on the woman in front of me. I conceded to Kris and got nothing in return except heartache. Conceding to Blaise won’t get me far. Conceding leads to

compromising, and compromises are land mines filled with heartache.

“What are you doing teaching here? I figured you’d be at some Ivy League college.”

Kris’s dream was to get her graduate degree in mathematics and teach at the university level. She’s beautiful as well as smart, a willowy figure who looks vulnerable but is one of the strongest people I know. She helped her mother through her cancer diagnosis, and all while making arrangements to bury her father after he died in the line of duty as a cop.

“Principal Williams is an old friend of my dad’s. He asked if I would like to work for him. The school’s been having a difficult time getting teachers in here. The pay’s not the best, and the learning environment is horrible. Fights break out daily. Drugs are sold inside and outside the school. I’m here to do my part and honor my dad’s memory.”

That’s right. Her father was involved in a lot of the community outreach programs.

“He’d be proud of you, Kris.”

“I miss him.”

Tears pool in her eyes. I pull her into my arms.

“I’m sure you do, darling.”

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“Maddox, I’ve missed you.”

Her bare hands splay across my shoulders. Warm. Small. There are no barriers between her skin and my shirt. No satin gloves or sheets preventing her from feeling my body heat.

“Can I see you again, Maddox? There’s so much I’d like to tell you.”

She needs closure. I do too.

“How about I take you out for lunch on Saturday? Shit, are you free? Will your boyfriend or fiancé mind?”

“No boyfriend, so no worries. I’m free Saturday. Pick me up at noon? We can catch up at our favorite hangout.”

The café a few blocks from my penthouse with to-die-for French dip and Kris’s favorite dessert—eclairs. We exchange numbers.

“Maddox, will your wife mind?”

“She’ll be fine with it.” Didn’t she encourage me to get ahold of Kris and get my closure?

“Good. See you Saturday.”

“See you, Kris.”

Yet why do I have the gut feeling this decision will come back and bite me in the ass?

21

Maddox

“Give me what you have, Roland.”

As soon as I left the school, I booked it to Roland’s place. We’re seated at the kitchen table. Minus the stack of dishes in the sink, his modest-sized house on the east side of San Francisco is spotless, thanks in part to his OCD for cleanliness. He’s also a stickler for attention to detail.

And the devil is in the details.

“Look at these pictures carefully and tell me what you see.”

“I see a picture of Blaise with a bunch of guys in security gear carrying guns. These here”—I tap at the picture—“are naked dead guys missing their heads and their hands. How recent and what are the men’s connection to Blaise?”

I pick up the picture of Blaise and the men. She’s smiling, a vision of innocence in her school uniform. The picture must’ve been taken before her kidnapping.

“A week ago. The dead men are Lance Charon and Randall Daly, identified by their tats. They are two of three men assigned as Blaise’s bodyguards. Tobias Phelan, the third bodyguard, is unaccounted for.”

“And the others?” Three men on either side of Blaise.

“They are part of the same security detail hired on by her cousin Rylan. They are also unaccounted for.”

“Four missing men. Two dead guys.” Sounds like the punchline to a sick joke.
“What’s your hunch?”

“Revenge killings. Word on the street is their deaths are mob hits.”

Heads and hands cut off, making it difficult to identify the men.

“My men and Blaise’s are attempting to track down the missing guys.”

“And the girl who lured Blaise into the alleyway, did you find her?” I set the picture of Blaise and her security team over the one of the dead men.

“No, and I doubt we will. Everyone in that neighborhood aren’t saying jack shit, Maddox. They’re scared.”

I push back my chair and rise. “Thanks, Roland. Keep me apprised. When you find the men, let me know ASAP.”

“Yeah, sure.” He walks me to the door. “There’s something else, Maddox. You were right to listen to your gut. A quarter of a million dollars was deposited into Arthur Lexington’s account the day after his brother’s death from a business I’m having a hard time locating. Toxicology reports came back negative. The autopsy report rules cause of death as a heart attack in his sleep.”

“How come you got ahold of the results before the family or the media?”

I’ll later mull over what role Blaise’s great-uncle could’ve played in having her written out of the will. Was Blaise’s loss of protection and funds worth a quarter of a

million dollars? I'm betting it is, but for what reason does he need the money?

"I have someone on the inside. Don't ask for the name or how I know this person. I won't give it."

I clamp my hand on his shoulder and squeeze. "Loyal to the core. I understand, Roland. Follow the money's trail. Let me know what you find."

"Will do."

I leave Roland's place with more questions than answers.

* * *

Time with Blaise and my chance to ask more about her old security team are interrupted by a visitor I'd expected.

However, business is business, and I'm not happy Cillian McCabe is in my home rather than confronting me at my office or setting up a meeting at a different location that doesn't entail making himself comfortable with my wife.

"The reclusive Blaise Lexington. It's nice to make your acquaintance, beautiful," he greets Blaise, taking her gloved hand in his.

Interesting that the jackass with the jet-ink hair and features as sharp as cut glass has a firm grasp on my wife's left hand, his gaze scrutinizing the simple wedding band slipped over her ring finger.

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“He’s worth billions, yet at his core, he’s a cheapskate.”

I ignore his baiting of me and ask if he would like something to drink.

“Red wine, if you got any, and go easy on the antifreeze, yeah?”

His blue eyes twinkle. I’m not amused.

“If I wanted to kill you, I wouldn’t be subtle, Cillian. Believe me, you’ll see it coming.”

“Ah, so you did cut off those wankers’ junks.”

“I’m pleading the fifth.”

“Did they plead for mercy when you and your men stood over them with machetes, Maddox?”

I lock my jaw. How the fuck did he know that detail?

Blaise looks from Cillian to me with questions in her eyes. Buried in those questions are revulsion and fear, I’m certain of it. Great, my wife is revulsed at the idea of touching me with her bare hands and she’s fucking scared of me too.

I march over to my stash of wine, find the cheapest bottle, and pour the bastard in the well-fitted suit a drink. Jesus H. Christ, for a house call he is certainly formal. Jeans and a T-shirt would’ve put me more at ease, but a fucking suit? His attire tells me his

presence here is all about business. Fuck business. This is my turf, my home he is trespassing on.

He seats himself at the kitchen table, makes a show of sniffing the air, and asks in an arrogant tone, “Smells good, sweetheart. What’d you cook for Daddy tonight?”

Daddy? What the hell kind of game is Cillian playing?

“Please refrain from talking to my wife in that manner, Cillian.” I set the glass of wine in front of him and take my seat next to Blaise, my spot across from her taken by the bastard with the scarred face.

We were sitting down for dinner when the front desk called with news of a visitor in the lobby surrounded by an entourage of men with concealed weapons strapped to their hulking bodies.

“Or else what?”

“I’ll cut off your dick, that’s what.”

He laughs. Blaise loses color from her already pale face.

“Maddox.” Her hand settles on my thigh under the table. Tap, tap, tap from her fingers. She’s imploring me not to let Cillian’s baiting get to me. For her, I’ll do my best not to go with the urge to sock him in the face.

“Why are you here, Cillian?”

“I have a proposition for you.”

“And what is that?”

“One night with your wife and you can develop the southeastern blocks to your heart’s content.”

“Fuck no.”

“I’m only asking for one night.”

“One minute. One hour. One night. The answer will always be the same. She’s mine.”

“I’m not your property, Maddox.”

Wait, what? My attention swivels to Blaise. She’s siding with the arrogant bastard?

“You’re willing to spend a night with him?” I point my finger at Cillian, not being shy with my middle finger.

“A night of conversation and that would be the extent of it.”

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I shake my head, floored she's willing to side with a prick like Cillian McCabe. "I won't allow it."

Cillian tsks. "How about I make this easy for you both?"

He pulls out his cell, and swiping his fingers over the screen, he finds what he's looking for and sets the phone in front of us.

"She's not loyal to you, Maddox. Blaise will always be loyal to the one who's been there from the beginning."

On his phone is an image of the front door of my penthouse. Blaise has her gloved hand on Granger's face, and from the angle, it looks like he's nuzzling the curve of my wife's neck. I see red. Grabbing her hand that's still on my thigh, I set it on hers.

Blaise doesn't refute what is obvious in the picture. Her silence is her admission of guilt. But what is she guilty of? The proposal was clear. Either of us can go outside the marriage for sex. Except what Blaise and Granger have goes beyond the physical. He completes and knows her in a way I never could. Not in the short amount of time we have together.

"And here, my dear, is proof Maddox isn't the doting husband you'd wish him to be."

Cillian swipes his finger over the screen. The next image is of me holding Kris in my arms.

"This is his old flame, Kristine Holland. Beautiful, isn't she? She's a creature more to

Maddox's liking, a schoolteacher at one of the most impoverished neighborhoods. She has a master's degree in mathematics. Smart and beautiful."

He whistles. Blaise looks down at her plate of vegetables. I dig my nails into the underside of the chair. Otherwise, I'll lurch across the table and pummel him into a bloody mess.

"Is tomorrow night okay?" Blaise mumbles.

"So long as you spend the next day with me too, beautiful."

Friday night and Saturday day?

"That's too much time," I point out.

She tips her damn cute chin at me. "It's not your decision to make."

"I have a say in this. You're my wife."

"A business arrangement."

Laughter bursts from Cillian. The scarred skin on the left side of his face moves as though it has a life of its own.

"This gets more and more interesting."

He rises from his chair.

"I will send a car to pick you up tomorrow at five. Make contact with her at all during her time with me and I will rescind the offer, Maddox. Understood?"

Do I have a choice in the matter?

“Understood, but if any harm comes to her, there’ll be hell to pay.”

“I prefer my dick be attached to my body. You have my promise.” He flicks his attention to Blaise. “Good night, sweetheart.”

He leaves, and my appetite gone, I head for the door too.

“Where are you going?” Blaise calls after me.

“Out. I need fresh air.”

“Okay. I’ll be in the pool in an hour if you want to join me,” she says in this soft, pleading voice that has my gut clenching.

I close the door behind me, not glancing back. If I did, the sadness in her eyes would have me rushing to her. Yet, it’s not me she wants. She’s after something far more dangerous. Cillian.

Damn her.

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Well after midnight, I make my way inside my place and stumble into my bedroom, drunk off my ass. My clothes fall where they land, neatness be damned.

I crawl under the covers, a gnawing emptiness eating at me. I'll be sleeping alone. Except I'm not alone. A small body scoots close to my nakedness. Blaise's arm tucks under mine. Her leg rubs against mine. Satin on skin.

"I missed you."

I stay quiet. Does she think I'm Granger?

"Please don't be mad at me. Cillian has answers. This is my chance."

"You're willing to give him your body for answers?"

"I'm willing to give you what you want. Redeveloping the neighborhood where your friend was attacked is an honorable thing to do, Maddox."

"How—"

"The TMZ article on you and Leigh a few weeks ago. I had Granger look into her life. You care for her. Enough to want to destroy a piece of her past and rebuild it, starting from the foundation up."

"And your past? How should I help you start over, Blaise?"

"Help me move forward away from my past."

“Except your past has come knocking on your door. Is Cillian your plan B for when your three months with me are up, darling?”

Will she go from one man to another, searching for whatever it is that eludes her? Security. Money. But not love. Blaise has never been in love, so how will she know when she does fall for someone? Or is she right and someone like her, with a traumatic past, isn't capable of opening herself up enough to allow in love? To love someone is to be open and vulnerable to getting hurt. A place I never want to be in again after Kris shredded my heart to pieces.

“Cillian will do whatever I ask.”

Blaise's soft voice brings me back to the matter at hand—Cillian.

“How are you certain?”

“He's an important part of my past.”

“Care to share?”

“Not yet. Eventually, I will. I promise. Now get on your back. I want to suck you off.”

Jesus.

My wife will be the death of me with her demands.

But I'll take this heavenly death any day as she sucks me off so well and thoroughly, I shoot hot cum in her mouth.

What is heaven, though, is holding her after she breaks apart on my face with her own

orgasm. Her butt is nestled against my crotch. My arm is across her waist. My face is nestled in her hair, the strands tickling my nose. Blaise smells good. A hint of pears ripened by the hot sun. I inhale a deeper breath, curve my body over hers that's clad in satin, and fall asleep with her in my arms, with a lingering question.

What ties does Blaise have to the dangerous mobster Cillian McCabe?

22

Blaise

I pace in front of the door. It's Friday night, and I'm waiting for Maddox to get home from work. Hopefully he gets here first before Cillian and his men do. I would like to kiss him goodbye before leaving.

The doorbell rings the same time my phone in my purse chimes. I glance at the monitor in anticipation of feeling Maddox's warm mouth on mine. To my disappointment, it's Cillian. I check my messages. There's one from Maddox.

Maddox: Remind Cillian I will cut off his junk if he breaks his promise

I bite down on my nervous smile. How can I convince the men to be civil to one another? More is at stake here than egos. My connection to Cillian could affect Maddox's business. I would never want to rob him of the source of his wealth. I return his message.

Me: I will. TTYL

Maddox: That's all u have for me?

I send him an emoji blowing a kiss.

Maddox: That's better

The doorbell rings again. Men and their impatience.

I open the door, and glancing back at the safety I'm leaving behind, I follow Cillian to the elevator. We take the ride down to the lobby in silence. I don't blame him. There are cameras everywhere, and where there are eyes, there must be ears listening in on our conversation.

Should I feel safe or intruded upon that someone shared the image of me and Granger with Cillian? Which begs the question, is one of Maddox's men working for Cillian?

At the lobby, large men wearing dark suits greet us. They surround us the moment we step out of the elevator. Cillian grabs ahold of my arm and leads me to the blacked-out SUV parked in front of Maddox's building. His men are my shield from the paparazzi waiting by the line of SUVs with cameras in hand.

Once we're inside the SUV and the doors are closed, his security detail packs into the SUVs parked behind and in front of the one we're in. I don't say a word until we're on the road.

"Did you tip off the media?"

"Guilty."

"Why?"

"Gotta give the world something to talk about. Imagine the headlines, sweetheart. The Reclusive Blaise Lexington Canoodling with the Scarred Lord of the Underworld."

"You acknowledge your connection to the mob?" I shift in my seat and look at him, amazed he's admitting rumor to be truth.

“A matter of semantics. I’m a businessman.”

“Who uses intimidation and violence to get his way.”

“You have proof, sweetheart?”

There’s a sharp edge in his voice.

“None.” I return to my initial pose, staring forward with my gloved hands clasped in my lap. I must remember that Cillian McCabe is a dangerous man.

“Good. Keep it that way. Otherwise, I will not welcome you into our family, Blaise.”

“Come again?”

“You heard me. You are my child.”

“My father—”

“We were business partners.”

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“I couldn’t care less what you were to him. He did not steal me from you and my . . . my mother.”

“You’re right. He would never dare take you away from me. Otherwise, I would’ve slit his throat from ear to ear. No, sweetheart, he graciously offered to take care of you. You see, men with more firepower and manpower had set me in their sights, and no way in hell will I let harm come to my children.”

Children. Plural.

“How many of us are there? Did you give them up too? Did our mothers have a say?”

“Three, sweetheart. Yes, I did. Cassandra and Julia didn’t have a say. They were murdered.”

Two women. Three offspring.

“Was I a twin?”

“No.”

Then who was in the coffin with me?

“Are you positive?”

“One hundred percent. I was in the delivery room when your mother, Cassandra, had you.”

“Where are my siblings?”

“One you know well. My other child is dead.”

“W—Was her name Maya?”

Faster than I can blink, he grasps my jaw and forces me to look him in the eye with a forceful yank that makes my head spin.

“How do you know that?”

“My kidnapper. He buried me alive with her corpse.”

“Fuck. Fuck.” He lets go of my jaw. “I’m gonna skin that bastard alive.”

“You know who he is?” I rub at the ache he’s left behind. His hold was like a vise.

“No. If I did, he’d be six feet under the ground, rotting like the POS he is.” He runs his palms on his slacks over and over.

I follow the movements, mesmerized. Cillian touched my skin with his bare hand, and I wasn’t revulsed. Why not? Is it because I didn’t have time to anticipate or react to his temper?

“When did he tell you this?”

“A week ago.”

“Fuck me.” Cillian jams his fingers in his hair.

This is not good. It’s so not good when a mobster is scared shitless.

His next words are for the guy in the front passenger seat. He's been listening intently. Same with the driver. I've caught him checking me out in the rearview mirror.

"Send a message to Six. I need him and his old lady's help."

"Got it, sir. And the rest of the family?"

"No need involving them yet or else we risk them burning the city to the ground searching for this motherfucker." He addresses me next. "Excuse my language, sweetheart."

What am I supposed to say to that? Thanks for being considerate of my feelings, Dad, but touch me again and I'll sucker punch you in the throat? God, where is this violent side of me coming from? I'm not a violent person. What I am, though, is pissed.

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“Why did my sister die? You said you wouldn’t let any harm come to your children. Why didn’t you protect her? And who is this sibling I know well?”

He must be speaking of Granger, but I need him to admit it. I swear the necklace I stole from Granger the night he chased me down straight into the crossfires of a drive-by shooting is the same necklace I remember seeing around Cillian’s wife’s neck. Cassandra, my biological mother, was Cillian’s lover.

To love and have a wife and a lover in addition to being a father to both women’s children, will I be in the same predicament if I stay with Maddox? Cillian very much loves the women as much as they love him, and marriage wasn’t enough to tame his wilder side. If Maddox decides to take a lover, will I be okay with that?

I doubt I will be. I would rather leave him than share him with another woman.

“Do you have to ask, Blaise? Do you think the meeting with Granger was pure chance? Did you think you getting shot was a matter of wrong place, wrong time? No, sweetheart. I gave the order for my best marksman to get in the shot.”

“You purposefully shot me?”

My hand shoots out and my palm smacks skin. There’s a resounding smack. Cillian covers his stinging cheek.

“My girl’s got her dad’s temper.” He smirks. “I’m proud of you, sweetheart. Keep those hits coming. We need to toughen you up. Someday, you and Granger will inherit my piece of the McCabe empire. My children will rule the underworld next to

their cousins. First off, we send a clear message. No one messes with a McCabe.”

“And how will you go about doing that?” I almost added “Daddy dearest.” Puke. I cannot believe my father ordered his men to deliberately shoot me in the back.

Will he stab me in the back in the proverbial sense? Or can I put my trust in a mobster who couldn’t keep my sister safe? When push comes to shove, will Cillian sacrifice my life so that he can live?

“You didn’t tell me why Maya died. How could you live with yourself knowing you gave up on her when she needed you the most?”

“That’s the thing. I regret and am remorseful every day that I wasn’t there for her. But Maya made her choice. She didn’t want to come home, Blaise. She said she loved him and he loved her. Except he wasn’t in love with her. He was obsessed with having you, and Maya was the next best thing.”

He stares off and shakes his head, his jaw locked as though remembering anew the talk he had with my sister that got him nowhere.

“I begged her to listen to reason. She didn’t. Finally, I had enough. I sent my men in to extract her. They were staying at a cabin near a river swollen with heavy rain. She threw herself into the river. Maya wasn’t a great swimmer. We looked for her. Now I know he found her first and took her body. Buried you with her. Mark my word, he will pay with his life. He won’t get the chance to take you from me again.”

“You said he has an obsession with me. He says he knows me intimately.”

“You let him fuck you?”

Geez, he’s crass and tactless. My cheeks heat. The driver’s eyes lock with mine in the

rearview mirror before he returns his attention to the road. What is it with his intense checking out of my reaction? He should mind his own business. Otherwise, Cillian might have the inkling to skin him or shoot him in the back.

“No. But I think he’s someone from my past. Someone I saw on a regular basis.”

“Like a boyfriend?”

I shrug. “Maybe. He said I gave him the gift of time.”

Then there’s the riddle. God, what was it again? I wrack my brain, and finally, what he said lights up bright in my mind.

“He also said something else. My enemy is my enemy, or is he my friend in disguise, drawing me out from beneath my guise?”

“What the fuck?”

“Cillian.”

Cillian grunts. “My apologies, sweetheart. I’ll ease up on the language.”

“Thank you.”

The SUV stops in front of a gated estate. The driver doesn’t roll down his window. He brings out his cell phone and taps something on the screen. The gate opens, and after setting his phone down, he drives down a long driveway before parking in the circular driveway. The other SUVs park behind us.

I open the car door. Cillian stops me with a hand on my arm.

“My estate is well-guarded, but anyone can take a shot at you. Wait for my men.”

The door opens, and the driver extends his gloved hand to me.

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“This is Hale. He’ll be your personal bodyguard. Where you go, he does too.”

“Bathroom included?”

“Yes.”

“For my safety or am I a prisoner?”

“You can come and go as you like so long as Hale and the rest of the men I’ve assigned to guard you are along for the ride.”

“And where will you be? I thought we would talk.”

“Daughter, there’s a lunatic after you. Once I put him down, we’ll have all the time in the world to catch up on this thing we call life.”

“What about the men who have more firepower and manpower than you do? Won’t you have to deal with them, too, before we get to the catching-up part?”

“Nah, sweetheart. Those threats are long gone.”

As Granger would say, Cillian wasted them all.

God, what have I done, agreeing to spend a night and a day with my mob father?

I wish I were anywhere but here. Most of all, I wish I were wrapped up in Maddox’s strong arms. Where is he, by the way? I’ll know soon enough.

23

Blaise

I wake up drenched in sweat. The room is dark. There's no light. Of course there isn't. I'm not in my room at Maddox's penthouse. I'm at Cillian's sprawling estate, tucked inside one of the master bedrooms. Outside my door is Hale, my personal bodyguard.

Swell.

Needing a glass of water, I climb out of bed, open the door, and pad to the kitchen in my satin tank top and shorts. Hale follows close behind me.

We're alone, but not. Cillian says there aren't cameras inside his place. Only on the outside. There might not be cameras, but I can feel the other guards' gazes following my movement. Do they think I'm a freak too? If they do, I doubt they would ever voice that thought. Otherwise, my father will dole out swift punishment.

It happened earlier. One of the servers gawked and stared a little too long for my father's comfort. The guy was fired, then escorted out. It's no wonder Cillian has so many enemies, and the reason he is feared.

Inside the kitchen, I reach for the glass way up high. Does a giant live here that everything is placed high above the reach of my arms?

A body brushes up against mine and grabs the glass for me. His warm breath coasts over my hair. His arm is muscular, wrapped in a tight, black long-sleeve shirt. Hale

fills the glass with water from the tap and puts the glass in front of me. His fingers are bare.

“Thank you.” I take the glass from him, holding the glass from the bottom. I don’t have my gloves on. “Please step away from me,” I say over my shoulder. “I don’t like to be touched.”

He does as I say. I slowly turn around, my parched mouth forgotten. Hale peers down at me through eyes hooded. I glance up at him. He’s taller than Maddox by at least three inches. My gaze never leaving his, I take a drink of my water. What’s with the intensity in his eyes?

After I drain my glass, he sticks his hand out, palm up. I raise a brow. He smiles and dips his head at his palm.

“You want me to set the glass there?”

He nods.

Why didn’t he just say so? Irritated, I hold the glass by the rim and set it on his palm. He puts my glass on the counter and does something else that irks me. He points at the bedroom door.

I cross my arms and tip my chin at him. “Ask nicely, please.”

He does something with his hands. Huh? Then it hits me. He’s signing.

“You’re mute?”

He nods. Smiles. Hale reaches into his back pocket. In his hand is his cell phone.

“Oh, you want my number so we can communicate?”

Another smile and a nod from him.

Everything makes sense now. And here I thought the other guards didn't talk to him because they didn't like that Hale's eyes were glued to his cell phone the entire time Cillian and I talked over dinner. He wasn't not doing his job. He was—checking messages from the other guys. What were they texting back and forth about?

I step around his large frame and walk over to the bedroom. I find my small clutch and fish out my cell phone. Grabbing my phone by the bottom end, I hand it over to Hale. He dials, and his phone rings. He hands me back my phone, being careful our fingers don't touch.

He's a fast learner and a gentleman, though I wouldn't want to meet him in a dark alley. His dark hair is cut high and tight. What Granger would call a military cut. His brows are thick and frame intense brown eyes. His lips are on the fuller side, making me wonder if his mouth would be as soft as Maddox's.

Goodness, why am I having these thoughts? I shouldn't be thinking of another man. I'm married. Except what Maddox and I have is a business arrangement.

My phone chirps. I glance at the screen. It's a text message from an unknown number. One word.

“Hi.”

I type back a response. “Hey there.”

Hale's phone dings. He glances at the screen and smiles.

We text back and forth.

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Hale: Would you like to get in bed?

“Nope.” I pop the P. “I’m a married woman.”

He shakes his head. Smiles. I glower. He points at my phone. I missed the chirping, too caught up in my annoyance.

Hale: I meant so you would be more comfortable

Ah, okay. I climb onto the bed and slip under the cover. Hale brings a chair from the corner of the room and sets it on the side of the bed. He sits, and I swear the chair creaks under his weight.

“Can I ask a personal question?”

Hale: Sure

“Were you born mute?”

Hale: Accident when I was nineteen.

“What happened?”

Hale: Explosion

“I’m so sorry.”

Hale: Me too.

He glances away. His jaw is clenched. His hand is balled on his lap. Poor guy. To be robbed of the ability to speak and voice everything that's inside him, it's got to be hard. My phone chirps. I draw my gaze away from his handsome face and look down at my screen.

Hale: I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but your husband is living it up at his favorite nightclub.

Another chirp and my phone fills with images upon images of Maddox. Hale is right. My husband is living it up all right. He's got a drink in one hand, and his other arm is slung possessively on the small of Evie Lawson's back.

Hale: Would you like to go clubbing? Surprise him?

I shake my head. "I can't dance."

He doesn't send me a text, but I can read his mouth.

"Seriously, I have no coordination at all."

Hale: Dancing is easy.

"Easy?" I scoff.

Hale: Put on your gloves and follow my lead

O-kay.

"Promise you won't touch me?"

He makes an “X” over his heart.

“Cross your heart and hope to die. Nice.” I give him the thumbs-up sign. Chuckling, he rises from the chair, strides to the door, and opens it.

“Wait, you want to practice out there? All the guys will see my epic fail.”

My phone chirps.

Hale: I won’t let you fail, Blaise. I promise.

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What can I say to that?

He pulls out his gloves from his back pocket and slips them on. I follow him out to the main room. The guards stand with their hands clasped behind their backs. How they stand reminds me of my men's stances. God, I miss them. My phone chirps.

I glance at the screen before setting the phone on the arm of a couch.

Hale: Any preference for music?

"Anything but rock music."

He scrolls through his phone. Seconds later, a song comes on over his phone. I recognize the tune. "Save Your Tears" by the Weeknd.

He extends his gloved hand to me. I set my hand in his. His other hand cups my hip. Our gloves don't stop me from feeling his heat. He tugs me close but not close enough we touch. He steps forward, forcing me to take a step back. Forward. Back. Side to side. I sway my hips in time to his. Step forward as he steps back.

We're in tandem, our bodies in tune. I smile. Laugh. My heart soars. The hand he's not holding goes to his chest. Beneath my fingers, splayed on the spot over his heart, I swear I can feel the thump, thump, thump of his heartbeats.

Something flares in his eyes. Possession. Desire. Longing. Hale tips forward the same time he pulls me to him, his hold on my hip gentle but firm. He dips his head. I know what's coming, and I turn my head. His mouth presses on my cheek. I push at him but

not hard enough that the others will come rushing in. I can't go through again someone being beat near death for something I did.

"Please," I say, my voice low, "I'm married."

He clenches his jaw. Drops my hand. Points at the door. How dare he boss me around. I storm to the door and slam it shut behind me. I pace in the room. Maddox is out with his lover and I am stuck wallowing in my past.

When will I get over my fear of being kidnapped again? Will I ever let him touch me skin to skin? Evie sure has no problems with touching or going out. If she can do it, I can too, right?

My eyelids grow heavy. I crawl under the satin sheets, and tired of fighting the fear in my head, I close my eyes and fall asleep.

24

Blaise

The next day is worse than the night before. There's an awkwardness between me, Hale, and the other bodyguards that wasn't there before.

Finally, after a full day of their curious stares and whispering, I march to Cillian's office. He's been holed up in there with this Six guy and his wife since they arrived at the estate late afternoon.

No introductions were made. I was given a terse, "Stay in your room. I will come for you," before Hale, with a tip of his head, bossed me to my room.

God, I'm not a kid, but if they're treating me like one, I'll act like one. Goodness, Granger will surely accuse me of being a brat.

I rasp my knuckles on the door. No answer. I turn the knob and barge inside Cillian's office. The man and woman seated across from him turn in their seats. I suck in a breath at her beauty and his handsomeness. Like Granger, the scar transecting Six's face doesn't lessen how good-looking he is. His scar lends him a dangerous don't-fuck-with-me look.

"Can I help you, Blaise? Or can this matter of yours wait?"

Six and his wife wait for me to say something. I shift from foot to foot. Being a brat sucks. I back out of the room.

“I’m sorry to interrupt. What I have to say can wait.” I’m ready to shut the door, when Six’s wife speaks up.

“Blaise, pull up a chair and come sit with us. We’re working on your kidnapping case.”

That gets my attention. I hurry inside the office, shutting the door behind me. I grab the closest chair and put it next to Six’s wife. She introduces herself.

“We haven’t been properly introduced. I’m Emilia Shanahan, and this is my husband, Six.”

“It’s nice to meet you.” I clasp my gloved hands in my lap.

Emilia and her husband aren’t gawking or peppering me with questions about my life and growing up a Lexington. Instead, they give me a friendly smile. I relax into the chair.

“Blaise, have you heard from any of your bodyguards?” Six asks.

“Shaw, Owen, and Marco text me every day.”

“That’s nice. What my husband meant is the ones assigned to you when you were thirteen.”

“After my parents’ deaths.”

“Yes,” Emilia says.

“I haven’t. Roman said they were given security positions elsewhere.”

“Did your great-uncle notify you of your grandfather’s toxicology results?”

“He didn’t. I read about my grandfather’s cause of death in the papers. He died of a heart attack in his sleep. The tox screen was negative.” I wring my hands. What point are they trying to make with this line of questioning?

“After your rescue, did your kidnapper make contact?”

“No. He made a deal with my grandfather. Grandfather upped the ransom to five million from a million. The guy gave him the promise he would leave me alone.”

“At any point in time, did you send men to locate your kidnapper?”

“No. So long as he kept his promise, I was supposed to keep mine. I would never search for him. That’s what my grandfather promised in my place.”

“Yet he made contact on the morning your grandfather died.”

I rise out of my chair so fast, it tips over.

“How do you know that? No one is supposed to know. Did you contact the authorities? He’ll kill me.”

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I pace. Jam my fingers inside the pockets of my trousers. Emilia rises from the chair and sets her hand on my shoulder.

“I hacked into your great-uncle’s e-mails as well as his financial accounts. He’s been communicating with Jeff Tenant about your life. Are you familiar with that name?”

“No.” I shake off her hold. My uncle isn’t guilty of anything except oversharing.

“A quarter of a million dollars was deposited into your great-uncle’s bank account the day after your grandfather’s death.”

“So? That’s a drop in the bucket for Arthur.”

“Another quarter million was deposited yesterday, Blaise.”

“What are you accusing him of, may I ask?”

“Nothing yet. We thought you should be aware.”

“I couldn’t give a rat’s ass about that prick,” Cillian interjects. “Go back to what you said earlier, sweetheart. What do you mean he’ll kill you if you contact the authorities?”

I tell them what happened that morning. Of how Rylan found the note taped to my third-floor window and the bag of clothes found beneath my window.

“Why wouldn’t your grandfather put cameras on that side of the house?” Six asks in

disbelief.

I give them Rylan's explanation.

"Can you get us a list of the men who helped set up the security system?"

"Yes." I address Emilia. "My men and Maddox's are also working to find him. Would you like me to get you in touch with them? I don't want you to duplicate their work."

Six rises from his chair and slings his arm around his wife's waist. "We work alone, Blaise. Less of a chance of egos getting in the way."

Emilia rolls her eyes. "His is so big, there's no room for anyone else's."

"Not true, babe. You wear the pants in our family."

Her eyes light up. "Make sure you remember that, big guy." She tips her head back and bats her long lashes at him.

His eyes darken with desire. His gaze hangs on her mouth. Oh my. I resist the urge to fan my heated face. Those two have it bad for one another.

"If you love birds will quit acting like hormonal teenagers for a second, how about we deal with this secret shit Blaise is speaking of. Do we tell the world?"

"My advice is to wait until everything blows over, Cillian," Emilia responds. "Then the decision has to be Blaise's. Is she a Lexington or is she a McCabe?"

"Neither. I'm a Stassi."

Huge grin on Cillian's face.

"That's my girl. Claiming what's hers. Now you go out there and bring him to heel."

"Bring him to heel?"

He stands and walks over to me.

"The guys sent me this. Does she look familiar?"

The video is of Maddox with his old flame, Kristine. They're inside a diner. He says something. She laughs and glances down at their clasped hands on top of the table. Pieces of her hair fall forward. Maddox reaches up and tucks the strands behind her ear. I don't miss his fingers grazing the curve of her ear.

First he spends the night with Evie. Now, he's spending time with his ex.

This morning, I woke up to a text message from Hale and none from Maddox. Maddox didn't go home after a night of clubbing with Evie. He checked into the same hotel Evie is staying at. She lives and works in New York. Did he fly her over on his private jet for a quickie?

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God, I'm a fool for thinking I would ever be enough for him. Tired of his silence, I make contact first. I send Maddox a text.

Me: Don't wait up. I'm staying an extra night

The message is delivered. Gray bar with three dots show up on my screen. He's typing out a response. I wait. The bar and dots disappear. Nothing.

"Sweetheart?"

I glance up. They're staring at me.

"I—I have a headache. I'll be in my room if you need me."

I leave the office and shuffle to the bedroom with my head down. Snippets of my conversation with the Shanahans run through my mind like a song I can't get out of my head.

At any point in time did you send men after your kidnapper?

So long as he kept his promise, I was supposed to keep mine. I would never search for him.

I would never search for him. My grandfather's promise.

I would never search for them. My promise to Roman. That I would never make contact with the team of men who were beat unconscious for failing to realize I had

snuck out of Roman's place. No one knew I was gone until Tobias checked on me. Then all hell broke loose from what Rylan told me.

Well, didn't everyone all around break their promises to me? Roman promised never to hurt someone I cared about. I cared for all those guys. They were good to me. Grandfather said he'd always take care of me. That's what he said the day my family buried my parents. Worst of all is Maddox. Didn't he vow to love me and only me until death do us part?

I'm a fool. A lovesick fool.

Oh, God, I fell for him.

I groan low in the back of my throat. Throw my hands in the air. Stomp to the bedroom.

How can someone fall in love after knowing a person for less than two weeks? A person can't, and I'll prove it. It's cliché, but I'll kill two birds with one stone. I'll conquer my fears and nab my kidnapper.

All this time, I've been on the defensive, surrounding myself with men who can keep the threats at bay. My fear of skin on skin, of being kidnapped, of having to answer questions about my time with my kidnapper, of having to make small talk with strangers because it's expected of me as a Lexington . . . Bullshit.

It's time I take control of my life. I write my own destiny. My fate won't be decided by my kidnapper, my family—the McCabes and the Lexingtons—or my husband. I'll go on the offensive, starting with one fear first before I move on to the next.

The best way to kill fear is to pit it against anger, and I know just how I'll bring Maddox to heel.

25

Maddox

Whoever came up with the word “chilling” is off base. I’m “chilling” on the couch with my foot on the coffee table watching another episode of a real-life crime show, with a drink in hand and my cell phone next to me.

I should be relaxed. Chilling. Then why do I have the burning need to smash my fist into the wall?

Blaise is spending another night with that prick? What happened with our agreement that she would only hang around for one night and one day?

Dammit! I glance at my phone. I haven’t answered her text for a reason. I am pissed. Jealous. Never have I been this angry or jealous. The narrator’s voice drones on on the television. I channel flip. There isn’t anything interesting on. I’m wallowing in my loneliness, missing my girl.

The phone rings. No one calls me at midnight unless it’s to tell me shit’s hit the fan. I pick up the phone. Granger’s name lights up the screen. Panic has me shooting out of my seat.

“If that bastard hurt her—”

“Calm the fuck down and get your ass to the Venus Nightclub. Blaise is there.”

Not only is she spending another night with Cillian but she's at his nightclub? Damn her. I end the call and strip off my clothes on the way to the bedroom. After changing into something more presentable, I take the elevator down to my personal underground garage. To take back what's mine I need a fast ride. My sight lands on my gun-gray McLaren. Yep, she'll do.

* * *

Is it at the bar with a view of Blaise. She is in the middle of a group of men. One male holds her gloved hand to his chest. They move as one. Side to side. Back and forth. Hips swaying. They're too close for my comfort.

I should step in. Yank her from the guy's hold. Except this is my chance to soak in her beauty. She is smoking hot in a red satin dress, the sides held together by strips of material. The fit of the short dress shows off her tiny waist and the curve of her hips. And those sky-high skin-tone heels? Fuck me. I'd strip her of her dress, leave her in the heels, and fuck her from behind.

She'd cry out my name. Beg me to go faster and harder. Help her come with my fingers, my mouth, and my cock. But she doesn't like to be touched skin to skin.

Can I live with that?

Or will her "oddities," as she calls her coping mechanisms to her trauma, be a deal breaker for me? Sex is all about touching. Giving and receiving. So is conversation, and Blaise has listened. Has given of herself by dropping her guard and being vulnerable. She hasn't eaten meat since she was rescued. Blaise didn't have to tell me that. She could've explained it away with a different reason.

Maybe she's an animal lover and the thought of eating meat doesn't sit well with her. Or she doesn't like the taste. There's many reasons she could've given me. Instead,

she gave me a truth that set her up for being judged as a freak, an oddity, a strange woman.

Blaise isn't any of those things. I find Blaise to be very normal. She has fears, hopes, and dreams just like everyone else. Has suffered loss, losing her parents and her grandfather. What she hasn't experienced is falling in love. Can I give her that? Or will my selfishness for skin on skin win out?

The guy leans close to her. Whispers something in her ear. My doubts fall to the wayside, replaced by anger. I drain my drink. Slam the glass down on the bar. Dropping a one-hundred-dollar bill next to the glass, I rise from my seat and storm onto the dance floor.

The men surrounding Blaise see me. They cross their arms over their chests and form a solid wall of testosterone. To get to my girl, I'll have to go through them.

Gladly.

I slam my fist into one man's face. Must've broken his nose. The cracking of bone rises above the music. I pound my fist into his friend's stomach. The guy doubles over. I shove him aside. The guy holding Blaise's hand drops it like it's burning embers.

Good.

I snatch her hand in mine. She sways on her heels. I pick her up.

"What are you doing here?" She's slurring her words.

"You were drinking," I accuse.

“Guilty.”

“This is a twenty-one-and-over club and you’re not legal, Blaise.”

“No shit.”

“Watch the language.”

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“Or else what?”

“I’ll put you over my knee and spank the living daylights out of you, that’s what.”

“I’d like to see you try.”

“Blaise,” I growl. “Don’t test me, darling.”

“God, I hate that word.”

“Did you let him fuck you?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Did you and Cillian sleep together?”

“Does it matter?”

“Answering questions with more questions. Not cool, Blaise.”

She swats my shoulder. “That’s my line.”

“Well, did you?”

“Does it matter?”

I grit my teeth. We’re going round and round. Thank fuck we’re outside. I’m

sweating balls. I head for the valet. A large hand settles on my shoulder.

“I’m only going to tell you once. Let her go.”

Lethal. Sharp as steel.

I turn around. The group of men have regrouped and are surrounding us. I recognize the tat on the side of their necks. Cillian’s men.

“Not on your life. She’s mine.”

“She is Cillian’s.”

“Is that true, Blaise?”

“Set me down and I’ll tell you.”

Goddammit, she is not making this easy for me, and . . . I fucking like it. Women give in too easily to me. I set her on her feet.

“Yes, I’m his.”

I see red. They did do the dirty. Fuck me.

I grab her hand and demand the men move. “I’m taking my wife home. Now, move.”

“We don’t take our orders from you.”

A crowd is gathering around us. I bring my fingers to my mouth and whistle. It pierces the air and brings in the troops—my security detail. They form a circle around Cillian’s men. My men pull aside the front of their jackets. They’re packing serious

firepower. An SUV pulls up to the curb and parks. Granger and Blaise's men storm out of the blacked-out SUV.

Granger demands they move aside and let Blaise and I pass.

"We don't take our orders from you," the prick with the high and tight cut says, enunciating each word.

Then it dawns on me. Blaise is Cillian's. His men are her men. They are loyal to Cillian and his newest lover, my wife.

“Call off your dogs, Blaise.”

“Don’t speak of them like that. They are good guys.”

“One had his hands on you. Call off your dogs or I will cut off his hands and his dick, darling.”

“Why are you being such a jerk?”

I’m the jerk? The red in my vision flares into this molten hot anger that takes over my being. I push through the first layer of men. Command my men to hold off Blaise’s dogs. I glance over my shoulder, making certain there’s not a bloodbath behind us, and catch Blaise exchanging heated glances with the guy who was holding her hand on the dance floor.

Who the hell is the douchebag who didn’t say a word? He stood by and observed everything with a calm and confidence that annoys the fuck out of me. Is he Blaise’s lover too?

“Where are we going?”

“Somewhere private to talk. I’m too pissed at you to drive us home right now.”

“Who says I want to go anywhere with you?”

“You’re mine, Blaise. Don’t ever forget that.” I stomp off into the darkness, putting distance between us and the onlookers.

“I’m a business arrangement.”

“You’re my wife.” Gritting my teeth, I up my pace and yank her behind me.

“I’m a means to getting what you want. Betty.”

“I’ll give up Betty if I can have you. I only want you, Blaise.”

“You’ve never wanted me.”

“Don’t put words in my mouth.” I pull her to me and push her up against the nearest wall. “I’m telling you now, I want you.”

She tips her chin. “You don’t.”

I growl low in my throat. “What did I just say, Blaise. Don’t put words in my—”

She grabs me by the hair, and wrenching me down to her level, Blaise clamps her mouth on mine. She robs me of breath. Steals any attempt on my part of thinking rationally. I need to touch her. Need to show her who she belongs to. My hands settle on her waist. Caress up and down her sides. Her skin is soft, warm awakening the nerve endings on my fingertips. She moans into my mouth, and I can’t hold back my hunger for her. Deepening the kiss, I slide my fingers in her luscious thick hair, and tilt her head to the side.

I end the kiss, and she protests. Her protest doesn’t last long. I kiss down the elegant column of her neck. Linger on her pulse point. Inhale her sweet scent.

“Jesus, baby, you smell good.”

I drag my nose across her cleavage, and craving a taste of her, I tug down the front of

her dress and circle my tongue over her nipple before I take the little bud in my mouth.

“Maddox, oh, God. More. Please, I need more.”

What she wants, I’ll give. I cup her other breast. Pinch and tweak her nipple. Slip my other hand under her dress. The dress is tight. There’s not much wiggle room. Time to change that. With both hands, I tear up the side of her dress. The flimsy strips break off along the edge, and the dress falls open in the front.

I narrow my eyes. “You’re not wearing a bra or panties.”

Eyes hooded and lips parted, she whispers a breathy, “Guilty.”

Fuck. Fuck.

I cup her tiny waist. Feast on her round, perky breasts with my eyes. Take in all of her from her flat stomach to her smooth mound. All mine.

“You’re mine.”

“Then take what you want, Maddox.” Defiant tip of her chin.

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Growling low, I slam my mouth over hers. Tangle our tongues. Taste the inner walls of her mouth. She moans. Clasps my head between her palms. Strokes down the sides of my face with fingers that are warm and . . . bare.

Jesus H. Christ, she's taken off her gloves. Her bare hands go under my shirt. Her fingers skim over my chest hair and down the ridges of my abs. My abs flex beneath her soft touch. My dick hardens more when she trenches her fingers in my chest hair and tugs. Pleasure and pain.

"I gotta have you, baby," I say against her mouth, hating that I had to break off our scorching hot kiss to tell her I need her.

"Make me yours."

"Not here. Not in an alley."

"Cillian would."

Fuck me. Fuck me, why'd she have to go and say those words? I lock my jaw. Ball my hand. Blaise covers my hand. Unfurls my fist. Brings my hand low.

"Touch me. Please, Maddox."

She pulls me down again. Captures my mouth in hers. The kiss is slow. All-consuming. This woman unravels me with her words. I press my thumb to her clit. Stroke the swollen nub. Circle her clit. She is wet, ready. I slip a finger inside her tight, wet pussy. Slip in another. Finger fuck her until she's begging me to help her

come.

I aim to please.

I get down on my knees and eat her out. Her legs shake. She trenches her fingers in my hair. Guides my face over her sex. I lap up her flavor. Inhale her musky scent. Take a slow drawl of her clit. She shatters on my face. Comes down from her orgasm with a soft sigh.

“Make me yours, please. Please, Maddox.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.” I glance up. She’s rolling her head side to side on the wall, her eyes closed.

“You’ll hurt me more if you don’t give this to me.”

“Are you sure?”

“As sure as my name is Blaise Stassi.”

Blaise Stassi. My wife. My woman.

I get up off my knees and undo my pants. I let them fall and pool at my feet. Blaise stares at the outline of my erection.

“I want a taste.”

Jesus.

I nod, too turned on to speak worth a damn.

She tugs down my boxers and my cock springs free. I grab my rod and yank it side to side and back and forth. She gets down on her knees. No way in hell will I let my woman kneel on grimy pavement. I haul her up before her knees hit the ground.

“Wait, baby.”

Buttons be damned, I grab the front of my shirt and yank until the top buttons fly off. I pull my dress shirt over my head and drop it on the ground at my feet.

“Now you can blow me.”

She gets down on her knees, grabs my cock in her bare hand, and strokes up and down my length. Her touch is softer than the satin gloves she’d worn.

“You feel so good,” she purrs, her lips on my rod. “So soft. Velvety head. All these ridges.” She licks up and down my length. Mouths the head. I groan. Tip my head back. Put my palms on the wall for leverage. Otherwise, I’ll keel over from how good her small mouth feels on my cock.

“Jesus, baby, your mouth is tight like a fist.”

I slide my fingers in her hair. Guide her up and down my cock. My legs shake. The air is cold on my bare ass cheeks. She goes harder and deeper. My balls tighten. I’m ready to blow my load.

“I gotta get inside you, baby.”

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I yank her up by her arms, and grabbing the back of her legs, I hoist her up and onto my rod. I slide inside her tight, wet pussy inch by inch. She sets her hands on my shoulders. Wraps her legs around my waist. Goes up and down on the head.

“You okay so far?”

I’m breaking a sweat. I don’t want to hurt her. I want to make her feel good.

“More.” She seats herself further on my dick.

Down.

Further down.

She bites down on her bottom lip. Runs her fingers up and down my arms.

“I love how soft your skin is. How strong you are.” Her fingers trace the outline of the muscles on my arms. I flex my muscles. Her eyes widen. I slide in more. Break through a barrier. She’s a virgin. Blaise is still a virgin.

Overjoyed is an understatement.

Tears fill her eyes.

My gut clenches.

“Was I too rough, baby?”

She shakes her head.

“Then why the tears?”

“Touching you with my bare hands. You touching me without gloves on . . . I miss what touching someone feels like. I missed out on so much because of my fears.”

“Aw, baby. You’re the strongest person I know.” She is so fucking strong. And she is mine.

Grabbing her by the waist, I help her move up and down on my cock. Her nails dig into my shoulders. There is no barrier between us. No gloves. No condom. The last thought doesn’t linger long.

I slam her up and down on my rod. Her inner muscles clench my cock.

“Kiss me, Blaise.”

She cups my head in her palms, and kissing me so well and thoroughly my toes curl, I come the same time she does. We’re in harmony. Flesh on flesh. Sweating and panting in the cold open air.

“Maddox?”

“Hmm?”

“I care for you.”

“Aw, babe, I care for you too.”

No falling for one another. No asking for more. A friends-with-benefits arrangement.

How exactly does that work in a marriage that is becoming more of a marriage than a business arrangement?

There's a way to find out. I'll do everything I can to show Blaise what we have is more marriage than business.

26

Blaise

“Maddox, this is wonderful.”

We’re lounging on a bed beneath a cabana. The ocean is a stone throw away. After we made love in the alley and then again back at the penthouse as a show of his apology for making love to me in the alley, Maddox jetted me off to his private island in Belize.

“And you shouldn’t have indulged me. Fuck, Blaise, your first time shouldn’t be in an alley.”

He pours me a glass of cider. I reach for his mojito and take a sip. He tsks.

“You’re not legal to drink yet.” He takes back his drink, and putting his mouth where my lips were, he drains his glass.

“What’s five weeks, anyway?” I ask, watching him as he watches me over the rim of the glass.

“The difference between twenty and twenty-one, legal and illegal.”

I slide down my sunglasses and peer at him above the rims. “I bet you didn’t follow the rules.”

“You’re right; I didn’t.”

“But you’ll hold me to them?”

“Jesus, Blaise, let it go already.”

“Only if I can have a drink.”

“Is that wise?”

“Wisdom has nothing to do with wanting a fruity alcoholic drink.”

“Fuck’s sake, baby, you could be pregnant. We didn’t use a condom our first time, and I certainly haven’t gloved up every time after that.”

Which is a lot.

We’re the only two people on the island. The staff made sure the fridge was well stocked before they left. The seaplane won’t be returning for us until the end of the week. On our flight here, Maddox let slip his plan of putting together a birthday bash for me. He was so excited, he also let slip that he’ll be surprising me on my birthday.

“What is it?” I asked, pulling him in for a kiss and kissing him so ardently, I hoped he would slip some more. But he caught on fast. “Not telling,” he said. Then he proceeded to take me to the bedroom on the plane and kiss me from head to toe. After he made love to me, he declared we are now officially a part of the mile high club. That guy of mine.

“You’re right,” I say, feeling stupid for not thinking over the possibility of a pregnancy. “I’ll call my doctor’s office. It’s not too late to get on birth control.”

“Is that what you want?”

He sits, and swinging his legs over the side of the lounge chair, he waits for my answer with his hands tented over his mouth. A lock of dark hair falls forward and brushes his dark brow. I sit and, facing him, swipe aside the piece of hair with my fingertip.

He grasps my hand and drops a kiss dead center on my palm.

“I like that you ditched the gloves when around me.”

Only with him do I put aside my pieces of armor.

“Like when you touch me skin on skin.”

“Only with you, Maddox.”

“Exclusive?”

“Isn’t that what marriage is? Or do we still have a business arrangement?”

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“That’s up to you, baby.”

“Do we model our marriage after your parents’, mine, or Cillian’s?”

After we made love back at the penthouse, I told Maddox of my kidnapper’s demands. One confession led to another. I’m a McCabe. Cillian is my father. I haven’t told him Granger is my half-brother. I want to tell Granger that news first.

“Our marriage will be what we make of it.”

He didn’t answer my question. If he’d asked me the same question, I would say I want a marriage like the parents who raised me. Committed. Faithful. Loving. Supportive. My father took in a child who wasn’t his, not only to help Cillian, but to bring happiness to a woman he called the love of his life.

I recline back on the lounge and stare at the ocean. I brought Maddox to heel. Got him to make love to me. Wasn’t revulsed by skin on skin. Cried for what I missed out on when I withheld my touch from others. I can stand to touch him and will let him touch me with his bare hands on my bare skin to our hearts’ content.

But can I hand over to him my heart?

I haven’t asked him the questions that has me doubting his feelings for me. Did you sleep with Evie Lawson? Is she your physical release while you court your first love, Kristine?

“Babe?”

“Hmm?”

“You didn’t answer my questions. Are we exclusive? Birth control or not, I won’t be raising another man’s child, Blaise. Accidents do happen.”

“You’re the only one I want.”

But will I be expected to share him with other women? Raise his lovers’ children?

“And the guy from the nightclub, the one with his hand on yours?”

“He’s my personal bodyguard.”

“I’m the only man who gets to guard your body.” He stands and tugs down his swim shorts. His erection proudly rests against his six-pack abs. “Strip, baby.”

I tip my chin. “Bossy.”

He smirks. “Please.”

“Better.”

I undo the clasp on my strapless bikini top. Discard the bottoms. He sits and pats his thighs.

“Straddle me.”

I take my time getting up. Make a show of stretching out the kinks in my back from doing nothing all day other than enjoying the sunshine, Maddox’s rock-hard body, and our conversations that run the gamut of favorite food, to what pet we’d get if we had a huge house and property, to the kinds of movies we like to watch.

“Blaise,” he growls, and reaches for me.

I sidestep his outstretched hand. My boobs jiggle. He groans.

“You’re going to be the death of me.”

God, I hope not. “Take that back.”

“Take what back?”

I straddle his thighs. “That I’ll be the death of you.”

“It’s a saying.” He slips a finger inside me. Circles his thumb on the slippery knot.

“It’s bad juju.”

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He chuckles. Groans when I nip and suck on his bottom lip. He pinches my ass cheek. I raise my hips, and wet and ready, I grab ahold of his erection and slip his length and thickness inside me. He fills me full. We're a perfect fit. Our moans and groans are in tandem. We're panting. I need more. God, I need more. I drag my nose through his hair. He smells good, a mix of salt from the ocean and salt from his sweat. I kiss his forehead. Drop kisses along the side of his face and down his jawline.

"You taste so good. You inside me feels so good." I go up and down on his cock. Cup his head between my palms. Deepen the kiss.

His fingers knead my ass cheeks. Clasp my hips. He guides me up and down his cock. I need to see him. See how much he wants me. I break off the kiss. We're panting. His gorgeous blue-green eyes darken to the point they are one uniform color—aqua. Oh, God, he has such beautiful eyes. My eyes flicker to his mouth. And those lips. Full. Gentle one minute. Rough the next, devouring and consuming me. He kisses with his being. Doesn't hold anything back. I like that about him.

He's generous.

Makes me come before he does.

What's the best is when we come together.

I want to be equally generous.

I lift my hips until he's half out of me. I stroke up and down his length with my

fingers. He closes his eyes. Draws in a long breath.

“That feels so good, baby.”

My arousal slicks my fingers. He likes tasting me. I want to give him what he likes. I pull down his bottom lip with my fingers. Slide my fingers into his mouth. He sucks my arousal off. I moan, and seating myself on his erection until he stretches and fills me full, I move my hips back and forth, up and down.

His eyes snap open. His gaze hangs on my eyes, my parted lips, my breasts, my stomach. He lingers on my stomach. There are unanswered questions in his eyes. I see the gears cranking in his head. He’s thinking too hard.

“Let go, Maddox. Don’t think. Just feel.”

I grasp his hands and set them on my hips.

“Make us feel good. Us. You. Me.”

He guides me up and down his cock. His length strokes my inner walls. His thickness fills me full. I clench my inner muscles. Groaning, he ups the pace.

“Ride me, baby.”

I grab on to his shoulders, and digging my nails into his flesh, I ride him hard. We stare into one another’s eyes. He caresses up my arms. Goosebumps rise on my flesh. The pressure between my legs builds. The throbbing intensifies, and my toes curl. I’m ready. Is he?

“Fuck, baby. Come for me. I’m close.”

I come on command. It never ceases to amaze me how my body gives in to his every whim. He touches me, and I react. My heart rate speeds up. My sex throbs and weeps. My head spins from his nearness and the thought of him filling me with his thickness and length. He comes with a grunt. I settle my forehead on his and look into the most beautiful eyes I've come across.

“I have your answers. Exclusive. No birth control.”

He grasps my chin. Jerks my face to his. Ravishes my lips with a kiss I feel straight to my soul.

“You sealed your fate, Mrs. Stassi.”

An undercurrent of defiance hums along my skin.

Not so fast, husband of mine. I write my own destiny.

27

Blaise

“Let’s go pay our boy a visit.”

I glance sidelong at my father. Do we have to? It’s the loudest thought in my head, drowning out my excitement at seeing my handsome husband dressed to the hilt in his form-fitting business suit.

The moment we returned from our “honeymoon,” Maddox went back to his routine. Work in the morning. Time at the gym afterward. Dinner with me. During the week, we go for a nightly swim, then make love. On Saturday, we stayed up all day and went clubbing all night. He touches me. Makes me feel so alive on the dance floor with his eyes and hands on me only. He’s the only one I let touch me.

I stare out the passenger-side window. The scenery of debilitated buildings, streets riddled with garbage, and guys my age smoking in front of the store fronts passes by in a blur. This week with Maddox has been great. I look forward to our next two months together. But what will happen when his fascination with me fades?

Will he replace me with Evie?

“Blaise?”

“Sure, Cillian. Should I let him know we’re coming?”

“Nah, sweetheart. We’ll surprise him.”

Why do I have the gut feeling visiting Maddox at the site of his newest project is about something other than the element of surprise?

“Have you thought over what you’d like for your birthday? Twenty-one. I can’t believe my little girl is all grown up.”

“What’d I like is the truth, Cillian.”

“Will you ever call me Father or Dad?”

“Someday.” After I go through the grieving process of losing my parents, Jack and Violet Lexington, a second time. I was so certain they were my biological parents.

“Fair enough. Ask your questions.”

“Why didn’t the authorities inform me the corpse inside the coffin with me was Maya? It would’ve been easy to identify her using dental records or her DNA.”

At least I believe it to be so. I watch a lot of true crime shows. Something else Maddox and I have in common.

“Bribery.”

“You paid people off to keep the truth from me? How could you?” I turn in my seat. Have this urge to shake the living daylight from him for messing with my life.

“I had a handful of ex-colleagues to deal with before I could risk exposing your identity and Maya’s. Granger came to me. Demanded the truth. Said he was indebted to you for saving his life.”

“Staged. What you did was stage a drive-by shooting that didn’t happen between gang members who didn’t exist except for in your imagination. You orchestrated the meeting between Granger and me. Nothing was left to chance. It was all planned.”

He has the nerve to clap.

“You can call what I did anything you like, sweetheart. The fact of the matter is, you and your brother are my flesh and blood. He protected you all these years for me, his father. In memory of the mother who was taken from him too soon.”

“You left him to be beat and starved in those homes the state sent him to.”

“You’re wrong, Daughter. He learned to use his fist and his head. He is stronger for the experience. If he wasn’t, he’d be dead, and that, my dear, would be a tragedy and make him no son of mine. Same goes for you. You could’ve wasted away in despair. Refused to eat. Died a shadow of your defiant, independent self. Instead, you rose out of the flames like a phoenix. From the ground, buried alive in that coffin, you are reborn.”

I sigh.

“Are you done?”

He laughs. “You’re unimpressed by my impressive speech.”

“I’m tired of your manipulation.”

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“Would you prefer I give you a monthly allowance, a sprawling estate in Montana, and your own security detail?”

“My grandfather didn’t manipulate. He was a generous man.”

“He sheltered you. Indulged you. He cut off your wings with his billions, not giving you the chance to soar above the clouds like you used to.”

“Like I used to? Have you been keeping tabs on me?”

“Since Jack took you in.”

“All these years you’ve been watching me and I never knew. Were you or your men there the night I was kidnapped? Did you ‘orchestrate’ my kidnapping?”

“Never. I would never inflict that kind of pain on you. It was my words that drove Maya into that bastard’s arms. He knew my weakness, and my weakness is control over everything, including my children’s lives. Maya hated being controlled.”

“We all do, Cillian. If you loved her, stop controlling what happens in my life.”

The SUV parks in front of a high school. The men get out first. Hale is seated in the front passenger seat. He opens my door and extends his hand to me. Ever since what happened at the nightclub, he’s been moody. Calm and professional one minute. Brooding and possessive the next, just like now. His grip on my hand is tight as he helps me out of the SUV.

His hand on the small of my back is possessive as he guides me to the school's entrance. The other guards flank our sides or trail behind us, having our backs. The second SUV pulled into the lot soon after we parked. A third, filled with more men, waits in the parking lot. They'll be on the lookout for any trouble, and will notify Shane, the head guard, right away.

If Cillian keeps this up, traveling in a pack, the residents of this poor neighborhood will snap our pictures and sell the pictures to the tabloids for a quarter of a million or so. An idea pops into my head.

While Cillian shakes hands with who I think is the principal, I pretend I'm rummaging in my bag for lip gloss, and rapid fire Collins a text message.

Me: I'm at Seventh and Broadway. Get lots of shots of me with Cillian and his men. Sell them to the highest bidder

Collins: Woo-hoo! Miss Moneybags is in the house

Me: That's MRS. Moneybags. I'm a married woman, remember?

Collins: How could I forget? You've been gushing about that sexy guy of yours since returning from your honeymoon. Are you still on for Saturday's party?

Me: Of course. Remind me again how much the Stantons are paying?

Collins: Ten thousand dollars

Me: Up it to twenty.

Collins: You're getting greedy. I like. A lot. Okay, I'll send them the new amount. Cross your fingers they're willing to pay up. If they do, 20K will cover the cost of the

party

Good. Long term, I can't imagine going from party to party and calling it making a living. I want to use my brain and not benefit monetarily from my kidnapping. Same with the pictures that Collins will be selling to the highest bidder. The pictures and the party are temporary fixes for a long-term problem.

What do I want to do with the rest of my life?

28

Maddox

“How long’s it been since you sat inside a school cafeteria, Maddox?”

“Last time was when we decided I should tag along for a full day of school with you as your cousin from Wisconsin.” I bite into my dry hamburger and chase my lunch down with bottled water.

“Why did we pick Wisconsin of all places?”

Kris’s green eyes sparkle. She knows the story but wants to hear me retell it. It’s what we’ve been doing this week. I spend lunch with her. We reminisce. She hints at us getting back together. I change the subject to a topic that makes her less than thrilled to spend more time with me—my wife.

Waiting for my answer, she takes a sip of her soda. I stare at her mouth. She sets her soda down. Her fingers toy with mine. I hone in on her eyes. They shine with a different emotion. Hope.

Her eyes used to fill my dirtiest teenager’s dreams. Now, all I dream about is a girl with one eye green and one eye blue.

“We decided on Wisconsin the night I snuck into your room. You had a US map on the wall. I had a knife in my pocket. I threw it and the tip embedded on Wisconsin.”

“What’d you do afterward?”

Her voice is low, breathy.

“I gave you your first kiss.” We were fifteen.

“What’d I give you two years later, for your birthday?”

“Your virginity.”

Jesus, the good old days of thinking I knew what I wanted and who would be in my life for the long term. Until everything came crashing down when Kris broke things off between us.

“Why’d you leave and without me, Kris?”

She’s been skirting the question. We met for lunch at our favorite diner the day Blaise was with Cillian. We’ve met for lunch every day since I’ve been on the job site, taking my time getting to know the business owners and the people who live and work in this community.

My vision isn’t mine any longer. Their vision is what’s important. Blaise taught me that through our talks while lazying around in the cabana or taking nightly strolls on the beach.

The dark doesn’t scare her. She said the moon and the stars will always be high in the sky. That darkness cannot mask the light. The light is hidden but not lost. But vision is something she did lose in the darkness, and metaphorically, she would hate for me to rob the people of their vision. Our vision guides us. Gives us hope. She hopes through my handing over the design to the people, I’ll give them hope for a better life.

“Do we have to talk about this now? Maybe we should save it for somewhere more private.”

Yet she doesn't have a problem setting her hand over mine and leaning in. Anyone looking on would think we're sharing an intimate conversation.

“There you are, Maddox. You have surprise visitors.”

Joe's booming voice rises above the kids' conversations. My head snaps up. I dislike surprises. Cillian strides over to the table with a knowing smile on his face. I slide my hand out from under Kris's. Dammit, why is he here and with Blaise? He was supposed to drop her off at our place by one. Then I'd go home and surprise my wife with crotchless silk panties, a silk scarf, and satin blindfolds.

“How are my two lovebirds?”

What game is he playing? Gritting my teeth, I show him exactly what his lovebirds are up to. I rise from my seat, head over to where Blaise is standing with her bottom lip caught between her teeth and her brows slanted low to her cute nose, and kiss the fuck out of her. In front of everyone. Long and hard. Our kiss is so hot, the kids whoop and holler. Yeah, I'll show these boys and the men how it's done. She kisses me back, answering my fervor with her fingers shoved in my hair and her body pressed up against mine.

The whooping and hollering fades from my mind.

All I feel and hear is Blaise. Her soft body. Those luscious curves I love. How sweet she tastes. Her moans that stroke my mouth as our tongues tangle. Her sex noises get me hard every time.

“Maddox.”

“Yes, baby?” I dislike her breaking off our kiss. Air is overrated.

“You’re in deep shit.”

“How come?”

“You know I don’t like PDAs.”

“I kissed you at the airport in front of a crowd and the paparazzi and you’re not a fan of PDAs?”

It was the day we left for Belize.

“Will you punish me later for forgetting?”

“I’m planning on it.”

“Good,” I say near her ear. Then proceed to tell her what is in a gift bag stowed in the backseat of the McLaren.

“I . . . but you said you wouldn’t be coming home today. That you had a business trip in New York.”

“And Cillian was supposed to drop you off at home rather than bringing you here. I planned on surprising you.”

We speak in low voices. The others have moved away, giving us privacy. Her pretty eyes widen. She wrings her gloved hands.

“I ruined your plans by agreeing to come here with Cillian. I’m sorry, Maddox.”

“No need to be, baby, so long as you dole out my punishment as soon as I get in the door.”

“I can do that.”

“I’m counting on it.” I chuck her under the chin. She looks like someone kicked her puppy.

Cillian clears his throat. “Are the business owners treating you right? If they’re not rolling out the welcome mat, you let me know. I’ll give them an earful for treating an upstanding businessman such as yourself like shit.”

“They’ve been nothing but kind and helpful, Cillian.”

Not true. There’s grumbling from some obstinate owners who are doing more harm than good for this neighborhood. I plan on putting pressure on these good-for-nothing bastards and hope they clean up their act. Otherwise, my men will be sending them a personal message as well as a well-deserved beating.

Shit, that puts me in the same category as Cillian, the mobster who happens to be my father-in-law.

“That’s good to hear, Maddox. Who is this lovely lady with you?”

I stare a hole in Cillian’s face. He knows exactly who Kris is.

“Kristine Holland. Maddox and I grew up together.”

“Her father was a police officer with Oakland PD. He died in the line of duty when Kris was seventeen,” Joe volunteers.

“To lose a husband. Your mom must’ve been heartbroken.”

“She was.” Kris’s eyes tear up.

“Her mother died from cancer the week before Kris left for Massachusetts for college,” Joe says, filling in the silence of Kris’s sadness.

“Aw, my dear, I’m sorry for your losses.”

“Thank you, Mr. McCabe.” Kris’s eyes flicker from Cillian’s face to my hand in Blaise’s. “We should go, Maddox. We can’t be late for our appointment.”

“Appointment?” Blaise looks from me to Kris.

“Apartment shopping. Maddox and I are touring apartments together.”

“You should go, then.” She slips her hand out of mine. “Hale, take me home please. Cillian can catch a ride with the others.”

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She pivots and walks away from me. Blaise is a regal queen with her head held high and her shoulders pulled back.

“Blaise, wait up.” I catch up to her. “It’s not what you think.”

“What am I to think?” She stops in her tracks. Jabs a finger into my chest. “Will you take her as your lover? Will you be like your father, going from one woman to another? Or will you be like Cillian, taking a lover yet vowing to love his wife until death do them part?”

This Hale guy scrutinizes me. Peers down his nose as though I’m undeserving of Blaise’s words, her kisses, and her touch. Why do I hate the guy and have since I saw him touching my woman? I take Blaise by the arm and guide her away from his watchful eyes.

“Our marriage is what we make of it, baby.”

“You didn’t answer my questions.”

“You are my lover and my wife.”

“One woman is enough for you?”

“You. You’re all I want and need, Blaise. Please believe me. Do you?”

I cup her face in my hands. Implore her with my eyes to say yes. She loves my eyes. My eyes are her weakness. That’s what she confessed as I made love to her nice and

slow in our bed after I took her virginity in that alley.

“Those puppy eyes . . . ” She presses her mouth on mine, and I’m in heaven. “Get your closure, Maddox, then come home to me.”

God, I love this woman.

Holy fuck. I love Blaise.

Then why can’t I say the words?

I glance over my shoulder. Kris is waiting for me.

I haven’t gotten my answers for why she broke up with me. That’s the reason I can’t let go and give all my heart to the woman standing before me with hope in her two-color eyes.

29

Blaise

Saturday finally arrives and I pace in the penthouse, waiting for Granger and Gia to arrive.

My makeup and hair are done. The only thing that will complete the party look is the dress. The doorbell rings. I hurry over and glance at the monitor. Granger and Gia are on the other side. Both look stunning in their evening wear.

I open the door and gesture for them to come inside. Gia follows me to the bedroom. In one hand is a garment bag. In the other is a brown bag. I glance over my shoulder and catch Granger checking out Gia. She's decked out in a royal-blue beaded halter neck dress, the hem hitting above her knees. I waggle my brows. He glowers.

That brother of mine! Geez, wait until I tell him we're related and he can never get rid of me now. He'll crap his pants.

My mood light, I sit on the bed and clap my hands. "Open, open, open."

Smiling big, Gia pulls the bag over the dress. Black. The dress is black. My anticipation pops like a balloon stabbed with a needle. Gia sees my reaction; I don't hide my emotions well. Her smile slips.

"You don't like the dress?"

I blink. “I love the dress. I don’t have matching black gloves. Do you suggest red or white gloves?”

Maddox told me of Gia’s passion for fashion. That she aspires to someday have her own line of clothing and open a boutique. I can help her make that happen.

“White will go well. A great contrast. Light and dark. Innocence and danger. You’re going to look so good my brother will be on you like white on rice.”

“I doubt it. There’ll be many beautiful women there.”

“Why do you do that?” She hangs the dress on the hook on the back of the door and sits next to me on the bed.

“Do what?”

“Doubt his feelings for you.”

“His history with women. The fact that he’s still heartbroken over this Kris woman.”

“He cares about you, Blaise. I see the way he looks at you when we FaceTime.”

“That’s his constipated look.”

Pregnant pause. Then she bursts out laughing. “You’re a hoot, you know that? By the way, where is my brother?”

“He said he has business to take care of and will meet us at the party.”

“What kind of business does he have on a Saturday night?”

I stare at my gloved hands. “No clue.”

“You didn’t ask?”

“It’s none of my business.”

“That ass is your husband.”

“We’re a business arrangement.”

She sighs. “Blaise—”

“Hey, it’s his loss. My other bodyguard Hale is picking me up and taking me to the party. I can’t wait for you to meet him. He’s nice. Taught me how to dance. Now, come on.” I rise, and grabbing her hand, I tug her up off the bed. “Help me get into this gorgeous dress, why don’t you?”

I stare at the dress. Black satin. Off the shoulder. Cinched waist adorned with clear jewels in the shape of a tiara. Lining the edges of the mermaid-style dress, from the waist to the hemline, is tulle. It truly is gorgeous, and Maddox is definitely missing out. I had wanted him to be the first to see me in this, but now he’ll probably be the last. He won’t show up at the party until halfway through.

* * *

“You two don’t need to wait with me. Hale is on his way.”

Gia and Granger are with me in the building’s lobby. Hale texted that he’s running late.

“I’m not leaving until I see the whites of his eyes.”

The glass double doors open. Hale walks into the lobby with his hands behind his back. I smile. What is he up to?

“Look, there he is.”

Hurrying to him, I grab Hale by the arm and tug him over to Granger and Gia. I make introductions. The men size one another up. Gia studies him beneath her thick mascara-laden lashes. I hold my breath. My night cannot start with a bloodbath or daggers shooting from Gia’s eyes. She likes me. Is hoping for something more between me and her brother.

“Thank you for offering to take Blaise to the party. Keep an eye on her. Don’t let her out of your sight. Otherwise, I’ll quarter you alive,” Granger warns.

Hale nods. On the elevator ride down, I mentioned to Gia and Granger that Hale is mute.

“O-kay, then, we better get a move on it.” I let go of Hale’s arm and practically shove

the Gs out the door. “Don’t want to be late for the party.” Otherwise, the hosts might have the nerve and the inkling to shave off hundreds or thousands from the twenty grand they’ll be depositing into my account tomorrow morning.

Why are large sums of money being routed to my great-uncle’s account? As far as I’m aware, he’s retired. Rylan took over Arthur’s security business two years ago.

After waving goodbye to Granger as he glances over his shoulder at me, I focus on Hale.

“Ready?”

He shakes his head.

“No?”

Shaking his head again, he removes his hands from behind his back. In his hand is a bouquet of white and purple lilacs.

“My favorite. How’d you guess?”

He reaches inside his suit jacket. When he removes his hand, he’s holding a small white jewelry box.

“More surprises? You didn’t.”

Smiling, he takes my hand in his and sets the box in my palm. I open the box. My breath catches in my throat. I pull the heart-shaped necklace out. Hale takes the box from me and pockets it.

“It’s beautiful. Thank you.”

He pulls his cell phone from the inner pocket of his dress jacket next. My phone chirps. I take my phone out of my matching purse and check my messages. There are none from Maddox. I don't let his silence get to me.

Tonight isn't about moping. It's about helping Gia make her dreams come true one dress at a time.

Hale: It's a mood necklace. And I chose the lilacs because their scent reminds me of your perfume

Sweet of him. We put our cells away. For his ask, I'll need both hands and so will he.

I hand him the necklace, and lifting my hair, I turn away from him. Being careful not to touch me, he slips on the necklace, then offers me his hand when I face him again.

I walk out with a man who isn't my husband. He's my bodyguard. Maddox made it clear he is my husband and the one who gets to guard my body.

Why isn't he here?

Is business more important than a night out with his wife? Is another deal more important than being there to support his sister? She confessed to me on one of our private calls that she rarely goes out, fearful for her life after what was done to her rapists. Does he need more money for him to be happy?

I'd rather be dirt poor and happy than abandon my loved ones for the sake of more money.

Another day.

Another dollar.

Money comes and goes.

What Maddox won't get back, though, is time.

30

Blaise

We arrive at the party a half-hour late. Good thing we did. The commotion I garnered as I entered the grand estate's ballroom with Hale at my side is enough for me to raise my rates for the next party.

"Blaise, how are you, dear?" Mrs. Stanton addresses me before her eyes flicker to Hale.

I can guess the questions running through her mind. Where, oh, where is my husband? Who is this man with me? Is he my lover? Why is my rumored lover, Granger, with the beautiful brunette?

"I'm doing well, thank you for asking. Mrs. Stanton, this is my friend, Hale Stafford. Maddox is running late. He sends his apologies."

My answers appease her. She turns to Hale with a radiant and flirtatious smile. "Any friend of Blaise's is a friend of mine. If there's anything I can get you, please search me out."

She moves on to the other guests. The empty space she leaves behind is soon filled by a group of eager partygoers in search of the latest news. How am I doing? Where've I been holed up? How's married life? What's with the TMZ article and pictures of me with the mobster Cillian McCabe?

I detest small talk but make it anyway. I answer their questions with more questions. If Maddox were here, he'd laugh, then chastise me, followed by a kiss that would have me craving for more to the point I'd demand he take me home right away so he can make love to me until I fall apart in his arms.

“How else would I be doing? Holed up? Who says anything about keeping to myself? What do you think marriage life should be like? TMZ? Pfft. A bunch of nonsense.”

The crowd laughs.

I gingerly run my hand across my bodice and down the front of my dress as though I'm smoothing out imaginary wrinkles. The ladies' eyes widen.

“Love your dress, Blaise.”

“Where'd you get it? I'd love to order something just like it for a party next Saturday.”

“As far as I know, you can't find this dress anywhere. It was made special for me from an up-and-coming designer.”

“Who?”

“Gia Stassi. She's over there.”

I point to where Gia is loading her plate with fruit. Granger hasn't left her side. That dog. Is he hoping he can scale the walls she's put around herself to somehow get to her heart and body? Good luck with that, buddy. Gia's armor is thicker than mine.

“I'm sure she'll love to take orders.”

“Awesome. Thanks, Blaise.” The women leave and hurry over to Gia. I hold back my smile. First one to Gia will get her order in first.

My cell chirps. I pull it out of my purse and check my messages.

Hale: Sneaky

I smile. “You wouldn’t have me any other way.”

His eyes light up with delight.

For the rest of the night, we make our rounds with the crowd. I miss Maddox, but it’s nice to have Hale with me. People give us curious stares. I ignore them and listen intently for my phone to chirp. Hale always has something funny or interesting to say.

We’re talking to one of the guests, a romance author by the name of W.S. Spinx, when out of the corner of my eye, I catch Hale looking at me. My phone chirps. I excuse myself from the interesting conversation about his struggles keeping the sex scenes in his books fresh and lively, and read Hale’s message.

Hale: There’s a garden in the back. Would you like some fresh air?

Don’t I ever. I return to him, and taking his hand in mine, I ask him to take me there. Along the way, he lets go of my hand and settles it on the small of my back. His hand is large and warm. His hold is gentle yet possessive.

A sliver of apprehension settles in my stomach. I inhale and exhale and let go of my fear. I haven’t been completely alone with Hale. The only man I’ve been alone with is Maddox. I suspect Hale wants more from me than friendship. I’ll have to set the record straight. That Maddox is the only man for me.

Where is he?

He should be here by now.

Hale leads me to the garden through the French doors. The moon is high in the sky. The stars twinkle. There are white lights strung up on the branches of trees, the bushes, and the trellises.

“It’s so beautiful and much cooler out here. Thank you for thinking of me and my comfort.”

My words spur him on. He tugs me against him, his hand going from the small of my back to my hip. Damn it, I’m giving him mixed messages. I need to do a better job of staying within the boundaries of our friendship. Pretending I almost ran into an imaginary object in our path, I shimmy out of his hold and keep a sizeable distance between us. He has the nerve to laugh. I shoot him a sideways glower. He laughs some more and reaches for me. I sidestep his reach and hurry ahead of him. Hale follows me, his steps unhurried.

He’s hunting me.

Oh, God, am I wrong about the silent, brooding man?

Is he more foe than friend?

Is he hiding under a guise of friendship when he all along is the threat I didn’t see coming?

I stop at a dead end, having placed myself in further danger when I made the mistake

of entering a maze. Who the hell has a maze in their backyard these days? I start to turn. He stops me with his hands on my waist. He pulls me back against his solid body. His erection presses into my back.

“Got you.”

I suck in a breath. “You—you can talk,” I stammer.

“Just like you take off your gloves for that damn husband of yours, I’ll only speak to you, doll.”

Doll.

My vision goes in and out. My mind screams at me to come down on his shin with my heels. Jab him on the underside of his jaw, followed by a hard hit to the stomach with my elbow. After he lets me go, I’ll sucker punch him in the throat and kick him in the balls.

Except he’s stronger. Can easily catch up to me in my three-inch heels. Then what? He’ll hurt me. Drag me off to wherever he wants to bury me alive. Maybe for good this time.

“What do you want?”

“I want you, doll.” He lets go of me, pulls a pack of cigarettes from his front pocket, and lights one up. “I’ve always wanted you.”

“How could I forget? You come to me in my dreams.”

He tsks. “Sarcasm not appreciated.” He steps closer. Blows a smoke ring. “Say it again.”

“Say what again?”

“The part about your dreams.”

“You come to me in my dreams.”

He slips a finger under my chin. Tips my face up until our eyes meet. “Is that so?”

“Yes,” I whisper. “How do we know one another, Hale?” If that’s even his real name.

“How do we know one another intimately? How did I give you the gift of time?”

He swipes aside my hair. Drags his nose down the column of my neck. Nestles his face in the curve of my neck. His breath is warm on my skin. And when he cups my jaw in his hand, there’s a lingering scent of lilacs. He brings my face to his. Brushes his lips over mine. I close my eyes and imagine it’s Maddox kissing me.

“We met when you were thirteen and I was seventeen. In the same neighborhood you met your friend Collins. We spent every waking hour together. You snuck off to come see me more than you did Collins.”

“I don’t remember you.”

“I counted on it.” He takes a long draw of his cigarette then tosses the butt on the ground, stomping it with his shoe.

Is that the reason he kept checking for my reaction in the rearview mirror?

“Cillian said you manipulated Maya into falling in love with you. Is that true?” I ball my hands at my sides. “How could you bury me with her? How could you keep her body from her family? My family?”

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“I hate your family,” he spats, the kindness and humor gone from his eyes. His stare is cold and dark. “It was your father, Cillian, who murdered my father. He wiped out my entire family. Do you know how he got the scar on his face?”

I shake my head. Dread wracks my body. I don’t want to hear how my father manipulated and destroyed more lives.

“He confronted my dad after hours at his restaurant. He accused my father of betraying him. My father denied sending his men to off your dad. Cillian took it a step further. Rather than killing my dad, he would give your hand to a different man. You were my betrothed, Blaise. My father was so angry, he threw a pan of hot oil at Cillian, burning his face. Cillian shot him then went after the rest of my family.”

“He killed your family?” My hand flutters to my throat. My father is a murderer. God, how will I live with his crimes? Violence begets violence. Kindness and forgiveness begets kindness and forgiveness.

“How did you come to work for Cillian if you hated him so much?”

“To understand that part, you have to hear the rest of the story.”

I gesture with my hand for him to proceed. Inside, I’m formulating an escape plan. Forgiveness is peace, but not if I’m dead or buried alive six feet underground.

“I saw the fire. You were with me. I took you with. I rushed inside and demanded you wait outside. You didn’t listen. Of course you didn’t. You never do.”

He rakes his fingers through his hair. Blows out a breath.

“I got knocked out by a falling beam. Somehow, you lifted that beam off me and dragged my ass out of the building. On the way out, you were knocked unconscious.”

“Knocked unconscious or did you knock me out?”

The pieces come to me slowly. Hale rising to his feet. Anger contorting his handsome face. A fist flying at me. Hale ignores my accusation.

“When I came to, Cillian had you in his arms. He demanded an explanation. I hated him so much, I couldn’t speak. He asked if I was mute. That’s how my ploy came to be. I wrote on the back of a menu that you saw the fire, played hero, and got knocked out before I pulled you out. He offered me a job, thinking I was a nobody off the streets.”

“How could he not know who you are?”

“He’s never met me. My father doesn’t post or keep pictures of his kids. No one knew what I looked like.”

“What is your real name?”

“Brady Fitzpatrick.”

I tip my chin at him. “I like Hale better.”

He smirks. “You can call me anything you’d like when we’re in bed, doll.”

“I’m married.”

“Divorce Maddox. Announce your upcoming nuptials to me. Do so, and I won’t go to the FBI and the DEA with evidence implicating your father in distributing weapons as well as committing murder.”

“If that was your plan all along, why did you kidnap and torture me? How were you able to explain your absence to Cillian when you kidnapped Maya then me?”

“More damn questions, Blaise? Doesn’t it matter that I’m here for you when your husband isn’t? Tell me it matters, doll. Tell me you give a fuck.”

He reaches out and grasps my chin between his fingers. I don’t give him the satisfaction of crying out in pain when he tightens his grip.

“Answer my questions, and I’ll answer yours.” I glance to the side, freeing me from his grasp.

“A trip to see my only family, my grandmother, back in Atlanta, explained my absence. Your father ate up the lies like he goes through his hard liquor; without a care in the world so long as I came back.”

“And my kidnapping and torture?”

“To teach you a lesson. You are not my equal, my dear future wife. You are beneath me. You do not walk alongside me; you walk behind me. Understood?”

“I would rather die than hurt Maddox.”

He grabs ahold of my arm and yanks me up and against his body. We’re eye to eye.

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“I can make that happen.”

“You’ll always be looking over your shoulder. As long as my kidnapper is believed to be out there, my family and my men will never stop looking for him.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. The news should be out by now.” He lets go of my arm.

I don’t rub the pain from where he gripped me. What he says numbs me. “What news?”

“Answer my questions first. I answered yours. A tit for tat.”

I blink. “You being here means the world to me.”

“Good. That’s good, doll.” He holds out his arm for me. I growl low in the back of my throat and rein in the urge to sucker punch him in the throat.

He tsks. “Play nice, Blaise, or else I send the files to the authorities. You wouldn’t want your father to spend time rotting behind bars, would you?”

For as much pain and suffering he’s caused, I can’t do that to Cillian. Someday, he’ll answer for his crimes, but he won’t be doing so because of me. I’m not a snitch. And . . . I’m starting to care for the old guy with the sick sense of humor. He doesn’t think I catch on, but he’s as lonely as I am. Cillian McCabe needs more laughter and love in his life.

I slip my arm through the crook of Hale’s, and we make our way back to the

ballroom. On the way, he shares the reason he won't need to look over his shoulder.

"Your kidnapper is in police custody."

Sure enough, the news broke. People rush up to us, showing us their cell phones.

"Blaise, your kidnapper showed up at Oakland's Police Department and confessed. It was one of your security guards all along. Tobias Phelan."

If I could, I'd cry out, "Bullshit. My kidnapper is right here."

Except from across the room, I feel his eyes on me. I glance up and lock gazes with the sexist man in this room. Lucky me, he has the most gorgeous eyes I've come across.

Too bad I have to break his heart.

I walk over, and all eyes on me, everyone leaning in to hear what I'll be saying to my husband while holding on to a different man's arm, I deliver more gossip-worthy news.

"Hello, Maddox. My lawyer will be contacting yours. Our marriage is done. I'm in love with Hale. He and I plan on marrying as soon as our divorce is finalized."

"So it's like that, eh, Blaise?"

So it's like that, eh? I pinch myself. Am I having a nightmare? This can't be real. His reaction, so cold and blasé, can't be real.

"Good riddance. Have a nice life."

My heart shatters. I'm right. I was a temporary fascination. He could never love me, oddities included. Maybe I am destined to be with someone as odd as me. I mean, how can someone pretend to not speak since he was nineteen?

A freak, that's who.

31

Blaise

When we arrive at Cillian's estate, ending our time at the party promptly after my disastrous and short interaction with my husband, Cillian congratulates me and Hale on our engagement, but never once questioned me about my pending divorce from Maddox.

After news broke of my kidnapper's confession, news of my divorce from Maddox circulated on various news sites as well as trending on social media. Cillian would have to be somewhere without service in order to have missed the breaking news.

Does he hate Maddox that much?

What's worse is he's set us up in the guesthouse that's on his estate. The place has three bedrooms and two bathrooms. We've been living in the guesthouse on Cillian's estate for a week now. I hide from the media storm. For Hale, it's business as usual.

At night, I lock my bedroom door. Hale, for now, leaves me alone. He conducts business for Cillian during the day. On some nights, he pulls extra shifts as a bouncer at Cillian's nightclub, the Venus. It's on one of those nights that a visitor pays me an unexpected visit.

There's a knock on my window. I stop reading, and holding my breath, I listen again. Another knock. I set the romance book down. Reading is my escape. Otherwise, I'll bawl my eyes out, replaying in my head my time with Maddox and how badly it

ended.

I exhale softly and wait for more knocking. Or some other noise. Nothing. Irrked, I gather my satin robe around my nakedness and pad to the window with an aluminum bat in my hand, courtesy of Granger. He dropped by with the large package yesterday for in case I have unwanted visitors. This knocking at my window counts.

Who the hell is knocking on the second-floor bedroom window? Why didn't they ring the doorbell?

Standing off to the side, I free the latch on the lock and lift the window, giving the person room to climb inside. I lift the bat over my head. Am ready to slam it down across the person's shoulders, when the person lifts his head and I'm staring into the most beautiful blue-green eyes.

"Maddox, what the hell are you doing here?" I put the bat down.

"Shh." He places his finger over my lip.

My insides quiver from his nearness. I long to lick his finger like a lollipop. Take the length in my mouth and suck and suck until he groans and demands I go down on him before he goes down on me. After he makes me come, he'll slide his length and thickness inside my heat and make me come while kissing me breathless. Except, he doesn't want me. He told the world that.

I step back, away from his reach and his heat. He drops his hand to his side.

"No one's here except me. Why didn't you ring the doorbell?"

"Didn't want to show up on the security cameras."

“You snuck into Cillian’s place? He’ll kill you.”

“Good. I might as well be dead if I can’t have you with me. I’ve been miserable this past week, baby.”

“And drinking way too much. You reek.”

“I haven’t showered either, babe.”

He’s slurring his words. He stinks to high heaven. But what sticks out is he misses me as much as I’ve missed him.

“Maddox, why are you here?” I sit on the bed. He takes a spot next to me. Scrubs his palm over his face. He hasn’t shaved either, and my girl parts are singing at seeing his unshaved face. Goodness, he’s sexy as hell.

“I came for the truth after a shit ton of thinking on my part. You see, when Kris left me, I conceded to her wish that I not contact or follow her to Massachusetts. I thought conceding and compromising was my road to heartache. It’s not. What I did was give up. Did a disservice to myself when I didn’t demand an answer. How can anyone have closure when the answers are kept from them? I love you, Blaise, and refuse to give up on you unless you don’t love me back.”

“How can you say that when you’re still in love with that Kris woman? When you spend the night with Evie?”

“Wait, what? What gives you that idea?”

“Hale showed me a picture of you at the diner with your first love. Said you stayed at the same hotel Evie was at when she was in town.”

“Shit.” He rests his elbows on his knees and holds his head in his palms. “I had agreed to meet Kris thinking you would be okay with it. You told me to get my closure. I got my answer, Blaise. My father paid for her graduate degree in exchange for breaking things off with me. He told her love was a distraction I didn’t need. What I needed was to make loads of money.”

“Oh, Maddox, I’m so sorry.” I comfort him the best I can. I slip off my glove and interlace our fingers.

“I should’ve run the plan to see her by you first. I’m sorry. As for Evie, yes, I stayed at the same hotel as she, but in a different room. Nothing happened. I walked her to her room, then went to mine. I couldn’t go home knowing you weren’t there, Blaise. I missed you, babe.” He looks up at me with earnestness in his eyes. “Do you believe me?”

I nod.

“Do you love me, baby?” He grasps me by the chin and forces me to look at him.

“Give me the truth.”

“Even if the truth hurts?”

An agonizing, “Yes,” from him.

I blink. “I don’t love you.”

“Liar,” he growls.

“How—”

“You blink before you tell a lie, Blaise.”

“Like when?” I challenge.

“That you weren’t in danger. Or how about when you said you didn’t want my money or my body.”

“I’m not in danger any longer, and being with you isn’t about your money or your body. You make me laugh. You listen without judging. You’re smart and driven. You compromise but also ask for what you want. There’s no guessing with you except with how you feel about me.”

“I love you, Blaise. I’ll scream the words at the top of my lungs. Make sure everyone on this planet understands the depths of my feelings for you. I never want you to doubt what I feel for you, babe. So help a guy out and tell me why you’ve changed your mind. Why are you so intent on marrying this Hale guy?”

My eyes tear up. “He’ll hurt Cillian if I don’t marry him.”

“How?”

“He has files on my father. Said the files will prove Cillian is selling weapons and has committed murder.”

“He has the nerve to blackmail you?”

“He’s done worse. He’s my kidnapper, Maddox.”

“What. The. Fuck. I’m gonna kill the bastard. Where is he now?”

“The Venus. He’s pulling a shift as a bouncer.”

Maddox stands and heads for the door. I hurry after him. “Maddox, the authorities won’t believe you. Tobias confessed.”

Maddox wipes away the tear running down my face. He pulls me into his arms. “Are you sure Hale is your kidnapper?”

“Yes. His voice sounds just like my kidnapper’s.”

“I thought the bastard was mute?”

“He fooled everyone.”

“That mother-effer.” He lets go of me, and pulling his cell phone from his back pocket, he begins making calls to his security team and Granger.

“Come get her, Granger. Take her home. Cillian? What about him? If he or his men get in your way, I’ll kick their asses. Hey, no need coming to my rescue, man. I can take them all on.”

Granger must’ve given Maddox a smart-aleck response.

“Go fuck yourself, Granger. First, come get my wife. My fist has a coming to Jesus with Hale’s face. While you’re at it, send men to Oakland’s police headquarters. Find out why Tobias confessed. I have a feeling Hale’s holding something over his head.”

After he instructs his security team to meet him at the Venus, he paces in the living room.

“What the hell could he have over your ex-bodyguard?”

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“It could be anything,” I mumble, wracking my brain for what I remember of Tobias.

“He does have a little sister he loves more than life itself.” A sister he loves more than life itself. My words echo in my mind. “Oh, God, Maddox, what if he took Tobias’s sister? What if he hid her away? Buried her under the ground?”

Maddox grabs at his hair. “Shit, shit, shit! We gotta rewind.”

He makes another call. “Roland, buddy, get me what you can ASAP on Tobias’s little sister. Get the address. Do a welfare check.”

He hangs up and paces some more.

“Now what?” I wring my hands.

“We wait.”

32

Maddox

The line “good things come to those who wait” is worse than the word “chilling.”

We wait in agony. Granger joins in on the fun times.

Finally, Roland calls me with the bad news. Tobias’s sister is missing. Her mother filed a missing person’s report the day of the party. Shandy Phelan is the same age as Blaise when she was kidnapped.

Roland has the good sense to send men looking for Shandy without my begging him to. He knows I hate begging.

“I’m putting you on speaker, Roland. Blaise and Granger are with me. Give us what you have, buddy.”

“My men and Blaise’s as well as Cillian’s are fanning out across the city, searching every nook and cranny.”

Knowing Roland, he’s instructed the teams to be as discreet as possible. One word to the media, and Hale will catch wind of the search and rescue—or search and recovery of Shandy’s body. Blaise talked me into roping her father into this growing mess. His cousin Six and Six’s wife are currently scrubbing his hard drives.

I shake my head. My mobster father-in-law and his beautiful daughter will be the

death of me.

“Is there a place that’s sacred to Hale, Blaise? Somewhere you two went a lot when you were kids?”

Blaise gave us Hale’s reason for why she couldn’t remember him. If she didn’t remember the guy she spent the majority of her teenage years with, how can she recall the special places they went? Red fills my vision. I ball my hands. I cannot wait to punch the bastard in the face until his face is a bloody mess. I’ll come down so hard on him, he’ll be begging me for mercy.

“He said I gave him the gift of time. I didn’t understand what he meant until he told me I saved him from a fire. The fire was at his father’s restaurant.”

“Do you remember his father’s name?”

“I don’t. Hale says his real name is Brady Fitzpatrick. Can you check records for a business in Oakland owned by a Fitzpatrick?”

“We can do that. Thanks, Blaise.”

We end the call. I steer my swaying wife to our couch. We’re back home. I bring her a glass of water.

“Thank you, Maddox.”

“What time does Hale get off?”

“One.”

Three more hours.

We're running out of time.

Her phone on the coffee table rings. Speak of the devil. Hale's name lights up the screen. Blaise grabs the phone before I can give the bastard a piece of my mind.

"Hi, Hale." She tucks pieces of her hair behind her ear. Leans forward with her elbow resting on her knee. I sit on the arm of the couch and rub her back. My beautiful, brave wife with the big heart. She would rather protect her mobster father than stay married to me.

"I'm doing good. Turning in for the night. Cillian asked you to stay over for drinks with him? You should. He'll like that. I'll leave the door unlocked. Of course I mean it. You make me happy when you indulge my father. Thank you, Hale. I'll see you soon."

She hangs up the phone. Tosses it on the table. Blows out a breath.

"Let's get you to bed, baby."

"I'm not tired."

"A catnap. That's all."

"I need to know. Please, Maddox."

"Okay, babe." I sit on the couch and pull her into my arms. "Anything you want, I'll give. You know that, right?"

"I have your heart. It's all I'll ever want." Her bare hand settles on the spot over my heart, and just like that, a calm settles over me.

It doesn't mean I won't beat the shit out of Hale.

I just won't be cutting off his junk.

33

Maddox

As soon as Blaise falls asleep, I rally the troops. Thank fuck Blaise has great friends. Collins comes over right away and keeps an eye on Blaise while Granger and I pile into my Jeep. My McLaren is too conspicuous.

After we leave the rest of her men keeping guard over the lobby and the front door of my penthouse just in case this Hale dude gets a clue that my wife is no longer waiting for him in Cillian's guesthouse—that bastard—I head for the Venus in record time.

I shimmy the Jeep between two sedans a few blocks from the nightclub. The place is hopping and all available curbside parking within a mile radius is taken. Dammit, I should've played it smart and have one of Blaise's men drop me and Granger off. Too late now.

We beat feet to the nightclub.

I'm dressed for a fight in my ratty jeans and dress shirt from my days of wining and dining women I didn't give two fucks for, not minding at all if I get a shit ton of Hale's blood on the damn thing. It'll give me a reason to burn the shirt.

"You doing okay there, man?" I glance sideways at Granger. He's keeping up with my sprint.

"With the shit way you drive, I'm not fine. Did you have to drive like a shithead?"

What if we got into an accident and died? You think Blaise will appreciate that?"

"Not at all. You're right. Sorry, bro." I sock him in the arm mid-sprint. "I'm sure Gia will rip me a new asshole if anything happened to you."

"Wait, she cares?"

"Nah. I was just seeing if you did." I stop and catch my breath. Granger does too. This is my opportunity to give it to him straight.

"There'll be no dating my sister, understood?"

"Why's that? Am I not good enough?" He clenches his jaw. Balls his hand.

"You're not. My sister deserves a guy that will treat her like a queen. You"—I point my finger at him—"see her as a challenge. She is anything but. Gia needs patience and understanding but also a firm hand to let her know what she can and can't get away with."

"You don't believe I can give her that?"

"Even if you could, you won't withstand her testing of you long enough to break through the armor she's placed around her heart."

"I'll try."

"There'll be no trying. I'm warning you now. Stay the hell away from her."

"Or else what?"

"Or else I cut off your fucking dick."

He smirks. “Duly noted. Now lets give a motherfucker a much deserved beating for putting our girl through pain and terror she shouldn’t have endured.”

“Here. Here.” I smack him across the shoulder.

He shoves me. I push back. We keep going on like this until we’re at the back door. We got news from Cillian that Hale is working the back exit.

He’s sending his men over for backup.

Backup?

Who the fuck needs backup?

Hale?

“Hey, Hale.” I saunter up to the prick with my hands balled at my sides. “Remember me? Blaise’s husband?”

He stares a hole in my face with his steely gaze.

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“Yeah, I remember you. She sure as hell doesn’t. Did you know she called out my name when I royally fucked her the night she asked you for a divorce? Ouch.” He brushes off an invisible piece of lint from his black polo shirt. “Must be an ego buster for an egotistical prick like you.”

He’s standing beneath the light above the door. His shirt should help him blend in with the night. Except the color stands out for one reason. Blaise hates the color black and the fucker in front of me is to blame.

Red fills my vision.

Growling low in the back of my throat, I swing my fist and land a blow on the side of his head. He tips over, but doesn’t fall over. Hale has a good three inches on me as well as bulk. He swings. I duck but am not fast enough. He clobbers my head. I see stars. He gets me with an upper cut. My jaw slides to the right. He comes at me again and again with his fists.

My skin swells up. My lip splits, and I taste blood.

Gritting my teeth, I sock him in the stomach. Grab him by his head and jacking my knee up, I slam his noggin on my knee. There’s the satisfying crack of his nose breaking.

Good.

He deserves more than a broken nose for what he did to Blaise.

The bastard's not done with me.

Grabbing me by the waistband of my fucking jeans, he slams his fist into the spot above my kidney, over and over. Shit, by tomorrow I'll be pissing blood.

I grunt. Prying his fingers off my pants, I shove him away then charge him, pummeling my fist into his face again and again. My knuckles catch on his teeth. The skin breaks. Dammit, now I'll have to get a tetanus shot or something. Don't want no damn infection from shoving my fist into the dirtbag's mouth.

I hit him with my fist. Get him with an uppercut like he did to me. Go below the belt with my knee to his groin. He doubles over. I skitter back, and hunched over, I catch my breath.

Bad move to make.

I look up.

Hale has a gun aimed at my head.

I straighten. "You don't want to do this, Hale."

"Why the fuck not?" He undoes the safety. "She doesn't want you. She's only ever wanted me. Blaise belongs to me. She was promised to me."

"That so?" In the corner of my eye, I see Cillian's head of security with his gun drawn. "As far as I'm concerned, Blaise doesn't belong to anyone. Who she loves is her choice to make."

"Then make her change her mind."

“I can’t make Blaise do anything she doesn’t want to. Let her go. Give yourself up. Confess.”

“I’d rather die.”

He got his wish. Cillian’s man pushed me aside and shot Hale point blank between the eyes.

Shit, that man can do a fast draw.

A real cowboy.

Remind me not to mess with the dude, ever.

After we wait for the cops and give our statements, I return home to my wife, ready to hold her in my arms.

I hope with time, my love for her will help her forget her nightmare at the hands of a guy that couldn’t seem to let go of their past together. Or at least, I hope my love can give her a reprieve from her nightmares.

Violence begets violence.

Kindness and forgiveness begets kindness and forgiveness.

I look back at Hale’s lifeless body.

Reality is suffering and pain.

May he never rest in peace.

34

Blaise

I wake up from a fitful sleep, disoriented.

I glance around my room. Moonlight pours in through the skylight.

I'm home. God, I love the sound of that. Home.

"Blaise, baby, you're awake."

I turn in the direction of the chair tucked in the corner of the room. Moonlight doesn't hit that spot. The spot is shrouded in darkness.

I sit.

The sheet falls from my nakedness.

"You undressed me."

"Guilty." Said with no guilt whatsoever. More like he took pleasure in stripping me of my clothes. His voice is soft as crushed velvet, stroking me from head to toe.

"Come here, Maddox." I crook my finger.

Much to my surprise, he refuses.

“No can do, baby.”

“How come?”

“I’m not in the best shape, babe. I’m sorry.”

He’s sorry? Not in the best shape? With the muscles lining his body, he’s in great shape.

“What time is it?”

My gut clenches. Why do I have the suspicion I missed something big? That he wasn’t here the entire time I was asleep?

“Three in the morning.”

I suck in a breath. “Hale. He’ll be at the guesthouse by now. He’ll see I’m not there and hurt Shandy.”

“No need worrying about the good-for-nothing bastard. Or for Shandy. Roland and the team found her, Blaise. They located the restaurant. A new building replaced the one ruined by fire. What didn’t get replaced is the old wine cellar hidden in a compartment in the flooring. Those men put their ears to the walls and the floor and listened like their lives depended on it. They heard Shandy pounding on the cellar with her cell phone. It’s got one of those indestructible cases. Lucky girl.”

So lucky she should go out and buy a lottery ticket.

“How’d you find the restaurant?”

“Our bastard was dumb enough to list himself as co-owner. Brady Fitzpatrick. His

business partner is Chance Flanagan. Does the name sound familiar?"

"He works for Rylan. He introduced himself, and I thought it was cool that he's Irish and has the name Chance. Do things happen by chance or luck?"

Maddox chuckles. "Of course you would wonder, love."

Love.

"I like 'love.'"

"Better than babe or baby?"

“Equally so?”

“Answering a question with another question. Not cool, baby.”

“Speaking of cool, come keep me company in bed.” I pat the spot next to me. “It’s cold.”

“I’m warm.”

“I’m cold and you said you’ll give me anything I want and I want your warmth.” I pout.

“Blaise, if I come near you, I’ll jump your bones.”

“Show me how you’d do that.”

He groans. “Babe, I’m not in the best condition right now.”

“Why’s that? Tell me what you did, Maddox.”

“How about I show you instead, love?”

He steps out of the darkness and into the light. His face is swollen. His lip is split. Maddox shows me his hands. Like his face and his lip, they are swollen, and his knuckles, split. I hop out of bed. Gently take his hands in mine. I drop kisses on his knuckles.

“You tell me right now who did this. I’m gonna rain hell on their heads.”

“His head, baby. And no need to rain hell on him. He is in hell. Hale is dead. I beat the shit out of him.”

“You killed him?” I step back. “Violence begets violence.”

“You’re right. He got what was coming to him. He gave it to me punch for punch. Made the mistake of going for his gun when I went easy on him and gave him time to take a breath. Cillian’s head of security shot Hale dead, right between the eyes.”

Hale dead. “He’s dead. He’ll never come for me again.”

“Never, love.” Maddox pulls me into his arms. “Collins is crashing in my bedroom. She stayed with you while I hunted Hale’s ass down. Granger went to Chance’s place and hauled his butt to the police station. He confessed to taping the note to your bedroom window and leaving the clothes for Rylan to find. He and Rylan are tight.”

“Poor Rylan. Betrayed by a friend. Poor you.” I drop more kisses on his hands. “Let’s get you some ice.”

“Already iced it.”

“And it still looks like that?” My gaze shoots from his hands to his face.

He gives me a sheepish grin. I utterly love his sheepish grins. It brings out the dimples in his cheeks.

“So no hand job from you anytime soon to take away the pain?”

“You’ll be getting more than a hand job.”

I help him undress. Thank goodness he has on a button-up shirt. I don't know if his face can handle me pulling a shirt over his head.

“Maddox, Emilia, Six's wife, told me my great-uncle, Arthur, has been getting large deposits into his account. Half a million dollars. Could he have worked with Chance?”

“What do you think?”

I undo the button on his pants. Unzip the zipper. Strip him of his pants and his boxers. He's soft. I'm fine with snuggling. We have all the time in the world to make love.

“I'm thinking not. He's been nothing but kind.”

“You're right, love.”

We crawl in bed. Being careful of his swollen face, I nestle my head in the crook of his neck.

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“He’s been taking some of your monthly allowance and investing it for you. He finally cashed it and was planning on giving it to you for your birthday. Surprise, baby, you’re half a mil away from becoming a millionaire.”

“Money isn’t important, Maddox.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes, you’re all that matters. You and my family, the Lexingtons and the McCabes. Arthur is right. Family is about more than blood. Family is made up of friends. My cousins are my friends. My men are my friends. Collins and Granger are my friends too, though Granger is my blood. He’s my half-brother. Holy shit, I haven’t told him yet.”

Maddox laughs, then stops laughing. “Ow. Ow. I love you, baby, but please, don’t make me laugh again. My entire body hurts. And no worries on not telling him. Granger’s a smart guy and probably put two and two together a long time ago.”

“I stole his mother’s necklace. He had every right to kill me for taking his only memento of his mother’s love for him. Instead, he spared my life. I saw a picture of Cillian’s wife wearing it in one of the fashion magazines my mom loved to flip through. I told him who she was. He refused to believe he is a McCabe. Deep down, though, I think he knew he was meant for a different life other than bagging groceries. But he had too much pride to accept his position at my father’s side. Our father gave us up. Manipulated our lives.”

My eyes water. The tears fall. I wipe them away.

“How could I love him after what he’s done? How could I break your heart to protect a monster?”

“Because you’re a good person with a big heart, Blaise. A wise man once told me ‘patience is a virtue, and in darkness, there is light.’ Give Cillian the gift of time, love. I think you’ll find he won’t disappoint you.”

What he says has me crying harder. “I love you so much.”

“I love you too, Blaise.”

I snuggle into his warmth. “Thank you.”

“For what, baby?”

“For sparing me from seeing how you dole out Hale’s punishment.”

“We’re done with violence. Kindness and forgiveness begets kindness and forgiveness.”

“Forgiveness is my peace.”

“I know, baby.” He rubs up and down my arm. “Forgive your father and Hale, and be done with it, sweetheart. We have a birthday to plan and baby Stassis to make.”

“I’d like that. I want lots and lots of babies.”

“Whatever you want, I’ll gladly give. However, do you mind if we just snuggle tonight?”

“How can I refuse?” I tilt my head and drop a kiss on the underside of his jaw. “You

went to battle for me. Now, rest, husband of mine. Tomorrow, we slay a dragon.”

He chuckles. “I love you, baby.”

“I love you, too. Good night.”

“Good night, my love.”

Epilogue

We're speeding down the interstate with the top down. I raise my hands in the air. Tip my face to the cool breeze. Check out my hot-as-sin husband. He's driving.

"Best birthday, ever."

We celebrated at my great-uncle's home in the Hamptons first, and then Maddox and I took a flight to Montana. We're staying at my cabin. He did win the cake walk, and I'm good for my word.

"It's not over yet."

"It's not?"

"Nope."

That butt, he popped the "P."

I slacken my seat belt and plant a kiss on his cool cheek.

He pulls off the interstate and turns onto a road I've never been on before.

"Where are we going?"

"A road less traveled."

“Is this part of the surprise?”

“One of them, yes.”

“How many surprises are there?” I ask. I sure have a doozy of one for him.

“You’ll just have to wait and find out.”

“Huh.”

“Huh. That’s all you got for me, wifey?”

I laugh. “Wifey? Seriously?”

“The most serious I’ve been.”

I glance sidelong at him. He has a shit-eating grin on his face. I sit back in my seat. God, I love him.

For the rest of the drive, we enjoy the silence and each other’s company. The weeks leading up to my birthday have been busy. Between the media storm, the party, planning with Collins and Gia a party for Dumas’s football team, and the morning sickness, I am due for much needed quiet.

I also wish my cabin had a pool. I would love to go for a swim right now.

“How’s Betty handling the curves?”

“Like a champ. Are you sure she isn’t a boy car?”

“Positive.”

We come up to a gate. Maddox pulls Betty to the gate and types numbers into the keypad.

“Are we visiting a friend of yours?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

I cross my arms. “You’re being evasive.”

“Guilty.”

“What else are you guilty of?”

“How about wanting you all to myself? I want your smiles, your laughter, your humor, the sparkle in your eyes. I want it all, Blaise, 'cause I'm a selfish bastard that way, baby.”

“You're not selfish. Who the hell accused you of being selfish?”

“My father,” he admits, his jaw clenched.

“Your father is an ass and wouldn't know what selfishness was if it hit him in the head. Had I known, I would've laced his gravy with laxatives.” When his dad and his dad's girlfriend came over for Thanksgiving dinner.

I reach for his hand that's on the gear shift and interlace our fingers. He's cruising at a steady speed. There's no need to shift gears yet. We have a ways to go before we get to the house at the end of the road. I see it. It's a large country-looking home sitting atop a hill. The view from inside must be glorious.

“You are the most selfless man I know, Maddox. Who would've known you give so much money to charities? You know why the world doesn't know? You keep it hidden away well, putting the gifts under your father's name. He's an ass yet you still have the heart to try to make him look good in the world's eyes. He doesn't deserve a son like you.”

“Aw, Blaise, baby, your words, they undo me.”

“Does that mean you’ll undo my dress later?”

“Do you have to ask?”

I open my mouth. He beats me to our punchline.

“Answering a question with another. Yeah, I know, so not cool of me. Will you punish me good?”

“So good you’ll forget your name.”

He turns to me. Waggles his brows. “I’m looking forward to it.”

Soon, we’re at the house. He lets go of my hand and shifts gears. He puts Betty in park. I wait for him to get out, run around, and open my door. Believe me, I’m not an entitled brat. Maddox insists he opens doors for me.

I wait. He drums his fingers on the steering column. Wipes the back of his hand across his forehead. Is he sweating? How can he be sweating when the top’s down?

“Blaise?”

“Yes?”

“Babe?”

“Maddox?”

“Baby?”

I unbuckle my seat belt. “Push the seat back as far as it’ll go.”

He does as I ask. I climb onto his lap. Straddle his thighs. Cup his head in my palms.

“Say what’s in your heart. I won’t judge.”

“Okay, here goes.” He opens the glove compartment and reaches inside. When he pulls out his hand, it’s a small red jewelry box. “Blaise, love, will you do me the honors and say yes to being my friend, my lover, my love, for life?”

My hand goes to my mouth. I tear up. “Yes. Yes, I do. Oh, God, I do, Maddox. I love you so much.”

He slips the ring on my bare finger. The diamond ring looks good nestled next to my wedding band.

“Do you like it?”

I put my hand up and do a mini wave side to side. The stones catch the sunlight and shine bright.

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“I love the sapphires and emeralds.” Surrounding the diamond, they are like little stars circling the moon.

“They match the color of your eyes. I had the ring made special for you. Had to go to Italy to get it, though.”

“What? No free shipping?”

“Not this bugger.”

“Cost you a small fortune, didn’t it?”

“You’re worth it.”

“Was the trip to Italy your ‘business trip’?”

“Guilty.” He takes my hand in his. Presses a kiss dead center on my palm. “My apology for showing up late. For not telling you how beautiful you looked that night. Every man’s eyes, young and old, were on you, and I wanted to take them outside and smash their faces to the back of their skulls for looking at you with hunger in their eyes.”

“I’m yours. We are yours. Always, Maddox.”

“We?”

I lean back and rub my belly. “We’re pregnant.”

“Pregnant? You’re having my baby? Our baby?”

“Yes.”

“Aw, sweetheart.” Tears in his eyes. “I’m one lucky bastard. You make me so happy, Blaise.”

“And all because of Betty. Did you know my father, Jack, proposed to my mother, Violet, in this car?”

“I do now. Thank fuck for Betty. And thank fuck for you. I love you, Blaise Stassi.”

“I love you, Maddox. Now let’s get inside. We have more babies to make.”

“Wait a minute. That doesn’t make any sense.”

“It doesn’t. It’s my excuse for you to make love to me utterly and thoroughly.”

“What you want, I’ll give. Always, my love.”

* * *

Nine months later, we have a baby girl. Two years later, another girl. We tried again, hoping for a boy. Finally on the fourth try, we did have a boy. We named him Jack Devlin after my father and my grandfather. We named our oldest girl Cillian. Go figure.

Maddox and I lived happily ever after.