



Protecting Zoey

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Category: Romance, Crime And Mafia, Action, Dark

Description: Leone

I meet Zoey at the worst possible time and in the worst possible place. Saving her life is like breathing, something I'm hard-wired to do. She's innocence and sweetness, two things that have no place in my dark world, especially when they make her a beacon for bad men who want to hurt her. But they won't, not on my watch. It doesn't take long for me to realize that protecting Zoey is what I was born to do.

Zoey

My sister is missing. I'll do anything it takes to find her. That is, until I meet the dark, mysterious Leone. He saves me and makes me want things I've never even considered. His touch is addictive, and when he promises me he'll help me find my sister for a price, I'm all too eager to pay up, no matter how much it might cost me.

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LEONE

The club's music pumps a steady beat throughout the building. Even back here in the dark office, the walls seem to vibrate with rhythm.

I kick my feet up on Marvin's desk, my boots scraping against the grubby silver laptop and a half-broken lamp. "This isn't a social call, Marvin. You know you're late on the payment. I'm here to collect."

"Okay, so the thing is..." He looks up at the ceiling, his eyes roving as he tries to formulate a decent lie. "I took in all the cash I was supposed to, but then I was robbed before I could get it to my safehouse."

"Yeah?" I smirk.

"Yes." He steps toward me, agitation all over him. "You, um, you should hunt down the people who stole it from me."

"Hmm. Sounds a lot like OJ trying to find the 'real killer,' if you ask me."

He blinks, clearly confused. "But OJ was the real—Oh. Oh, I see." He swallows hard. "I mean, what are you even doing here? Aren't you too bigtime for my operation? Last I heard you were running your own game, building up your own empire. So why are you bothering with peanuts?"

“Your boss happens to be a friend of mine, and I owe him a favor.” I shrug. “I appreciate you trying to change the subject, but that isn’t going to change the facts. You owe Mr. Davinci money. Where the fuck is it? And don’t lie to me again, or we’re going to have a real problem.” I pull out my Glock and place it on the desk.

His eyes go wide, and he runs his thumbs up and down the insides of his suspenders. “Look, I don’t have it. If I did, I’d give it to you.”

“I believe that part. I really do.” I rest a hand lightly on my gun. “Only an idiot would hold out on Davinci ... and me.”

“Okay, here’s the thing. The real thing.” He sits heavily. “There was this cage dancer here. Xanadu, she called herself. It was love at first sight. I thought ...” He leans over, elbows on knees. “I thought she loved me. I thought we were going to get out of this life together. She made it seem like—”

“So Xanadu took the cash?” I cut through his sob story. If he was dumb enough to believe in love with a woman at first sight, I don’t need to hear anything else.

“She did. My heart, too.” He shakes his head. “The whole time, she was just waiting for her chance to get into the safe. One day, I had to step out to deal with some of the higher-end clientele, and when I got back, she was gone. The money was gone.” He looks up, tears in his eyes. “I’ve never felt so low. I can’t even describe it.”

“Good. I don’t want to hear it.” I grab my gun and stand.

He stands and holds his hands up, palms toward me. “I’m going to get the money, but I can’t get it right this second.”

I holster my pistol and arrange my suit coat to cover it. This is the part where I should shoot him dead and transfer management of this club to another one of Davinci’s

men, but I don't. Because, despite all my efforts to stamp out my emotions when it comes to my business, I still pity this idiot standing in front of me.

"Love at first sight doesn't exist, Marvin. You should know that. This shit isn't a fairy tale." I sigh and think on it. Nick Davinci gave me carte blanche on this debt collection, though I think when he said it, he'd meant "free to deal out whatever damage you see fit" not "free to go easy on a foolish man." Even so, I don't think Nick wants Marvin dead. After all, he's been running this nightclub successfully for years. It's a great front to move drugs, not to mention it sells a shit ton of alcohol and caters to plenty of high rollers.

"The funny thing is"—he shakes his head—"I still love her. I keep thinking she's going to walk through that door." He glances toward it. "But she's gone. Isn't she? Gone for good?"

"Yes." I can't say many things for sure, but that's one of them. Xanadu, whoever she is, is long gone.

"Right. Gone." He swipes at his eyes.

"All right. This is what I'm going to do. One week from today, I'll be back. You'll have the money ready for me. Then our business will be concluded. That's it. No excuses, no whining, no late payment."

"Really?" He snuffles. "You'd do that for me?"

"Don't fuck this up, Marvin. And stay away from the cage dancers. Got it?"

He gives me a weak smile. "Yeah. I got it this time."

I grab the door handle and turn it. Right as I do, a blonde stumbles into my arms.

“Oh! Crap! Is this the men’s room? I’m so sorry. I just really had to pee, and I thought–”

“How’d you get back here?” Marvin steps to her and reaches for her arm.

I pull her away from him, keeping her tightly against me. For some reason, I don’t want him—or anyone—touching her.

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“There was a man who let me through the door. I thought he—”

“A man? What did he look like?” Marvin goes pale.

“Kind of mean, honestly.” She shrugs sheepishly.

“Oh, shit.” When Marvin looks past me down the hall, his mouth drops open.

Instinctively, I push the blonde to the ground and cover her with my body as a torrent of bullets rip through the air above us.

Turning, I see the man who opened the door for the woman beneath me, the man who came here with one goal in mind—to kill Marvin.

Marvin’s already dead. I know that before I hear his body hit the ground. “Sorry, but you’ve seen my face,” the killer sneers and points the gun at the blonde and me.

I’m already firing before he can pull the trigger. A slug hits him in the upper chest, and he staggers back, then darts to the left and out of view as I fire two more shots that should end him.

“What is happening?” the blonde screams.

“Stay here.” I get to my feet and rush toward the connecting hallway. But the gunman is long gone, only a trail of blood drops left behind, and a mass of clubgoers running for their lives from the gunfire.

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ZOEY

My mind screams for me to run, but I stay on the floor like the big man demanded. I'm not sure if it was his hard commandeering order that left me paralyzed here or the fear of gunfire that has finally died off.

The screams, however, have only grown louder. They overpower the loud thump of the music. I lift my head, peeking around. I don't see the man that shielded me from the gunfire with his body or the man that was hellbent on killing me seconds ago anywhere.

Slowly, I push up off the floor, using the palms of my hands to brace myself. I get to my knees but wince when something cuts into one of them. A burning sensation licks across it. I ignore the pain and climb to my feet. I wobble a bit in the stupid heels I'd put on, but I'm able to steady myself.

I give Marvin's office a good glance around, making sure I didn't miss my sister when I first came stumbling in here. I'm not sure if I should be thankful or not that I don't see her. I have no clue where else to look for her, and I know I can't go back to our apartment. I turn, knowing I need to get the hell out of here, but my heel catches on something, and I start to fall.

Two arms catch me before I can hit the ground, but not before I see what I tripped over.

Marvin's dead body lies on the floor, his eyes staring up at me. A whimper leaves me at the sight. I try to fight whoever has their hands on me, needing to escape, but it's useless. Whoever it is only squeezes me harder as he lifts me off my feet and into his arms.

"Don't fight this," the deep voice rumbles into my ear, and I know it's the same man that ordered me to the ground before.

I relax to a degree. If it weren't for him, I'd be in the same situation as Marvin. He saved me, shielding my body with his own when the gunfire exploded all around us. I have no clue who he is, but I think he's trying to help. Then again, he was in Marvin's office. Nothing good comes from him or this club.

His hand comes down on the back of my head, pressing my face into his neck. I tense as more gunfire starts to go off. I cling to the man carrying me now. I try to lift my head when the gunfire once again cuts off and the cool night air touches my skin, but once again, the man presses my head down.

I hear doors opening and closing as my mystery man shifts me around, and another door slams. I know it's a car door this time. My body jolts as we start to move, the vehicle taking off. Slowly, I lift my head again. This time, though, the man doesn't stop me.

My eyes lock with his, and my breath catches as I stare into his dark gray eyes. I've never seen anything like them before. I sit there transfixed for a moment as he stares right back at me, not saying a word.

"You saved my life," I finally say. "Thank you."

"I wouldn't thank me just yet, little one."

I lick my dry lips, and his eyes drop there.

A heated look crosses his face. It's one I know, because I've seen my sister pull it from many men. The only difference about this time is that this man is actually handsome. All the guys my sister messes around with give me the creeps. She doesn't let their appearance—or for that matter, anything else about them—get to her. All she sees is the money.

“Where are we going?” I ask, feeling the vehicle start to speed up. “Are you taking me home?”

“What's your address?”

I let out a small sigh of relief then began to ramble it off. I glance over my shoulder at the driver to see if he heard, but the handsome man grabs my chin gently, pulling my eyes back to him. “Why were you at the club tonight?”

“Why does anyone go to a club?” I shrug, making the strap of my dress slip down. The man releases my chin to move it back into place.

“What's your name, little one?”

“Zoey.” As soon as I answer, I wonder if I should have made up a fake one. Then again, I already gave him my address, so I'm guessing it really doesn't matter. Damn it. I'm terrible at this. Why did I ever think for even a second I could slip into my sister's world? I knew better. Even our own mom told me to stay out of her messes. Not that Mom had been much better. The two of them were always so much alike. Sometimes I wonder how I could have turned out so different. “What's your name?”

“Leone.” Damn. Even his name sounds sexy and fierce. “Now tell me, why were you at the club?” he asks again. He's awfully persistent.

“Maybe I was there to hang out. To have a good time.”

His eyes flicker down my body and back up. I’m still perched in his lap.

I had to go digging through my closet to even find something to wear. I wanted to blend in so I could get into the club. I was hoping to find my sister, but my last resort was Marvin. He has this obsession with her, and he would likely know where I could find her. From the way Leone is questioning me, I’m guessing I look like a girl who was playing dress up in their mom's closet.

“You’re bleeding.” He reaches into his suit jacket and pulls out a cloth and proceeds to press it to my knee. “Now, answer me. I’m not a patient man.”

I nibble on my bottom lip, not sure what I should say or not say.

“Marvin knew who you were, didn’t he? He recognized you despite your little ploy about the men’s room. Do you work for him?”

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“No.” I shake my head. “He knows my sister. I was looking for her.”

His eyes narrow on me. “Who’s your sister?”

I have a feeling this man always gets what he wants, and if he wants to know who my sister is, he’ll get it from me one way or another. He also might be able to help me find her. Who knows what kind of trouble she might have gotten herself into now? I always warned her that one day she was going to bite off more than she could chew. That not every man would fall for her charming seduction.

“Out with it,” he snaps, his tone firm, making me sit up a bit straighter.

“Xanadu,” I blurt.

“Fucking hell,” he mutters.

“Are you taking me home now?” I ask now that I’ve answered his questions.

“No,” he responds, his hold on me tightening, letting me know I’m not going anywhere anytime soon.

3

LEONE

She squirms. I don't care. I'm not letting her go. She's bleeding and clearly involved in Marvin's gigantic fucking mess. If I let her out of my sight, I have zero doubt that the gunman from earlier will find her and kill her. He didn't want witnesses—which makes sense given he murdered one of Nick Davinci's men in cold blood.

"I think I should just go home, okay?" She looks up at me. "I'm clearly in way over my head. My sister is the smart one, the clever one. I'm just, you know ..."

"You're just what?"

She shrugs. "I'm the one who gets caught." She glances around. "Like now. I can't get away with anything. It was dumb of me to even try."

"I don't like that."

"Huh?" Her eyes open wider.

"I don't like the way you talk about yourself."

"You don't even know me." She tries to pry herself from my lap.

I keep her in place, though her efforts are rather amusing.

“I can handle myself.” She smacks my arm.

“Clearly not. If I hadn’t been at that club, you’d be—” I stop before I speak something horrible out loud. I don’t want to think of what would’ve become of this girl if I hadn’t seen the shooter and thrown her to the floor before he could hurt her.

“I know!” she huffs. “Like I said, I’m always doing the wrong thing. In the wrong place at the wrong time, while Xanny gets away no problem.”

“Is your sister’s real name Xanadu?” I ask.

She rolls her eyes. “Yes. Our parents were into LSD and all kinds of witchcraft. They even had a huge altar to Cthulhu in the kitchen where the stove should’ve been.” She shudders. “All the tentacles.”

I stare at her, nearing speechlessness. I’ve met plenty of people, but I’ve never heard anything close to that sort of back story. Is she running a game on me?

“Tell me the truth, little one.” I lower my voice and grip her chin. “Where’s your sister now?”

“I don’t know.” She pulls away from my grip.

This time I grip the nape of her neck and force her to look into my eyes. “Where is Xanadu?”

She glances away, but then when her gaze returns to mine, she softens a little. “I don’t know. I was there trying to ask Marvin what he’d done with her. If she ran. Or if he knew where she was. But then—” Her eyes water. “Then that man ...” She takes a shuddering breath.

“You’re in shock.” I pull her against my chest, holding her tightly. “The whole thing just hit you, didn’t it?”

She nods, a sob shaking her small frame.

“Shh.” I stroke her back as she falls apart. “You’re safe now. I won’t let anyone hurt you. I can promise you I’m bigger and badder than anything life will throw your way.”

She clutches my jacket, all her false bravado from earlier evaporating as she lets it all out. “He’s dead. I didn’t like him. B-but I didn’t want M-Marvin dead. God, there was so much blood.”

I’d kept her clutched close to me as I made my way through the club. Marvin’s blood was just the start. I think the shooter may have sparked some other brawl in the place, or perhaps a stampede to the doors, and someone else began firing. Marvin isn’t the only one who lost his life tonight, but she doesn’t need to know that. I let her cry and rock her gently until her big sobs subside.

My driver looks at me in the rearview. I simply nod at him. We’re going to my place. Like I said, I can’t let this girl out of my sight. She’s the key to finding the money Xanadu stole. Not to mention, she’s got a killer on her tail. The thought alone sends tension shooting through me. I thought I knew all the murderers in this town. It seems I missed one. Whoever this asshole is, I’m going to find him and put him down like a rabid dog.

“Wh-what is it?” She sniffles. “You got all ... Hard.”

“Nothing.” I go back to comforting her, rubbing my hand down her back. Granted, I’ve never comforted anyone in my life. I don’t know what I’m doing, but I can tell that when I touch her, she seems to enjoy it. Her body is warm and seems to relax as I

run my fingers along it. I linger at the soft skin where her top meets her short skirt.

She came to the club looking like a delectable snack, her innocent aura like a beacon to every bad man in the place. It certainly called to me in a way I've never felt before.

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Even now, I once again keep her firmly in my grip, though I'm careful not to hurt her. Like a butterfly caught in a bear trap, she'll be fine as long as she doesn't fight me. If she does ... Well, my cock is already pressing against her ass. I feel every shift in her body, every hitch of her breath—I want her. Here, now, in the back of this car even though she's crying and scared. But that's what I won't do. I'd never crush a butterfly like her. Not if I can help it.

“I need to go home. Bentley will be waiting for me.”

It hadn't even occurred to me that she'd have a man waiting at home. He's a fool to let a woman like this out of his sight. His loss. I hoist her higher, cradling her, her warm breath against the side of my neck.

“You aren't going home. It's not safe there. You're staying with me.”

“But Bentley—”

“Bentley made a mistake by not protecting you. He can't be trusted. He made an even bigger mistake by putting you in my path. You won't be seeing him again.”

She gasps. “What? No!”

“Forget him. I already have.” I settle back, keeping her locked against me.

“Wait, we have to get him! You said it's not safe.” She starts to wriggle again, making my cock jump against her backside.

She stills. “Is that ...”

I laugh, the sound low and, admittedly, somewhat evil. “Yes. Would you like a closer inspection?”

She squeaks. “My cat!”

“You don’t have to tell me twice, little one.” I slide my hand down her side, more than happy to stroke her pussy until she forgets all about the unpleasantness at the club.

“No!” She gasps again when I ease my fingers along her smooth thigh on the way to her panties. “Bentley is mycat!”

4

ZOEY

I shouldn't feel disappointed when Leone's fingers still only a few inches from my panties, but I do. The urge to push my hips forward to make them graze my clit is strong. My body is waking up in a way it never has before. There must be something wrong with me. I'm throbbing between my thighs.

When I felt his hard cock press against me, something inside me was triggered. For the first time in my life, I felt sexy. I'd turned a man on. Not just any man, either. The most handsome one I've ever laid eyes on.

I must be in shock or something. My emotions are all over the place. That has to be part of the reason why I'm feeling this way. I saw a dead man a few minutes ago, and now I don't know where my sister is, and Bentley might be in danger. My body and mind are overloaded, and that's why I'm reacting this way. Has to be.

"Your cat? As in a pet?"

I nod. It's hard to find words with his fingers resting on the inside of my bare thigh. All my thoughts keep going back to his touch when there are a million other things I need to be worrying about right now. "I'll send someone to collect him." He pulls his hand back.

I release a tortured breath. I ignore the voice in the back of my mind screaming to make him put his hand back. Focus on Bentley, I remind myself. He needs you right

now. He's always there for me. I can't let him down. He's the only one I can always depend on. Everyone else has a knack for disappearing on me and coming back whenever they feel like it. I've become accustomed to it over the years. When I was younger, it used to hurt my feelings, but not so much anymore.

"I have to go. He'll hide from anyone else. Plus, he can be a bit fickle at times."

"Fickle?"

"Okay, he can be an asshole." I whisper, but only because Bentley isn't here to hear me call him that. "He's a biter." I chomp my teeth to show him. His lips twitch. He won't think it's so funny when Bentley takes a chunk out of him.

"I can't take you back to your place. It's not safe. I promise one of my men will be able to handle your cat."

I shake my head. "Please," I beg. Tears fill my eyes. It's all too much. "Bentley is all I have left. We need to go now if you think someone might show up at my place." I swipe at the tear that escapes. I hate crying. Why can't I be strong like Xanny? I've never seen her cry.

"If I agree, will you stop crying?"

I nod.

"Fine," he grumbles, not sounding happy about it. "Change of plans," he tells the driver. "We need to go to her place first. Give him your address, little one."

I rattle it off.

The driver makes a quick turn at the next light as Leone pulls out his phone. His

fingers move quickly across the screen. I'm guessing he's texting someone. "You live in a shit part of town," he mutters, sliding his phone back into his pocket.

"It's not that bad," I lie. He shoots me a dark look that tells me he knows I'm lying. "Okay, it's not as bad as the last place." We lived in an apartment building before. I always felt trapped. So many people came and went from the building. At least at the trailer park, there is some space. No one can try to corner you in a hallway.

"It doesn't matter. You won't be staying there anymore." We have a stare-off. Where the heck will I stay then? If my sister isn't back by the end of the week, he might be right. Rent will be due then, and I don't have the money to pay it.

"We'll see," I finally say, breaking the stare-off because his eyes are too damn intense.

"Sure we will, doll." He taps the end of my nose. A small, frustrated growl comes from me. Leone lets out a deep, sexy chuckle that vibrates through my body.

"We're here, sir," the driver says. I turn to look out the window to see our trailer. The door stands wide open. My stomach drops at the sight. Tears fill my eyes thinking that something bad has happened to Bentley. I go to grab the door handle, but Leone beats me to it, lifting me off his lap and sitting me down in the other seat.

"Stay put," he orders.

"But-" I go to protest but shut my mouth when he levels me with a stare. This one is different from all the others. It doesn't scare me for some reason, but I also know this isn't the time to push back. I sit still. He slips out of the car, telling the driver to stay put and make sure nothing happens to me. The driver doesn't look like he wants to listen, but he does as he's told.

Leone pulls a gun out before entering into my trailer.

Time drags by so slowly. “You should go check on him,” I tell the driver man, starting to worry. What if he gets hurt? Leone has already saved my life once tonight.

“I have my orders” is his only response.

The second I see Leone step back out the front door, I’m out of the vehicle and running toward him. Without thinking, I throw myself at him. He catches me.

“I told you to stay in the car,” he growls at me.

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“You’re okay?” I ask, ignoring his words. His face softens a fraction.

“I’m fine, but your place has been ransacked. I need to get you out of here.” He starts to carry me back toward the car.

“My cat. We can’t leave Bentley.”

“I didn’t see a cat. He must have gotten out.”

I wiggle, trying to get free of Leone’s hold. I know my Bentley is just hiding somewhere. He has to be.

“He doesn’t run away,” I protest. “Please!” I grab Leone’s face with both my hands. “I’ll come with you willingly if we can get Bentley.”

“No more fighting me?” He lifts one of his eyebrows in question.

“No more fighting,” I agree. A smile slides across his face, making me think I fell right into his trap. Not surprising. I always get caught. This time, I’m just not sure what really has a hold on me. Who is Leone, after all?

5

LEONE

She whispers to her cat, who's cuddled in her lap while giving me the evil eye. "Everything's okay. It was smart for you to hide. I'm so glad you weren't hurt." She kisses his head, his yellow eyes still fixed on mine. She turns to me, her mouth in a warm smile. "I told you he was hiding."

I suppose she was right. All she had to do was pop up the steps of the decrepit trailer, and the cat came running from whatever hole it had shoved itself into. After all, Bentley is a rather large creature.

"Where did you find him?"

She smiles even bigger, as if talking about Bentley is the key to her heart. I file away that tidbit of information.

"We used to live in an apartment complex." She wrinkles her nose. "It was far worse than the trailer park. Anyway, we had an old, mean neighbor. Bentley was his cat. I'd see him peeking out the door at me sometimes when Mr. Posey would crack it open to glare at my sister and me."

The cat curls up in her lap and rests his chin on his paws but still doesn't take his gaze from me. I look right back at him, refusing to blink until he does. No one gets over on me, not even a cat.

“Anyway, after a while, Mr. Posey stopped opening the door.” She grimaces. “And then there was a smell.” She scratches behind his ears. “The health department said Bentley should be put down because he’d ... you know...” She stops scratching. “Well, he did what he had to do to survive.”

“So now he has the taste for human blood, is that right?”

“No.” She resumes petting him. “He’s a good boy.”

I get the feeling that Bentley is a “good boy” in much the same way I’m a “good man”—as in, not at all.

“You live here?” Zoey stares through the front windshield as we arrive at the gates to my home, the top of them decorated with two snarling lions.

“Yes.” The guards open the gates for us, and we cruise easily along the narrow drive.

“This whole place is yours?” She turns to stare at the trees and the small pond to our left as we curve up the hill toward the house.

“Yes.”

“You must be like a bazillionaire or something. I mean, Bentley and I could take just a little corner of this place and make a little home.”

“That won’t be necessary. You’re both welcome in my home.”

“For how long?” Her cheeks color a bright pink as we pull to a stop in front of the house. “I mean, not that I ... Not that I think I should stay or anything. I don’t even know you. If I’m being honest, I should go back to the trailer and wait for my sis—”

“No.” I say it more forcefully than I intend because her eyes snap to mine. Doing my best to soften my tone, I continue, “It’s not safe. Someone had been there, and I assure you the ransacking was the least of what they could’ve done.”

Her eyes water. “It’s Xanny, isn’t it? She’s done something again. I know it. It’s why I can’t find her, why people are busting into our trailer. And why Marvin ...” She swallows hard.

“We’ll talk about it all very soon. But first let’s get you settled.” I have to keep her safe until I figure out who the hell killed Marvin. She’s the key to finding her sister, and I suspect her sister is the only one who can clear up this entire fucking mess—including the missing money. Nick Davinci isn’t hurting for the cash and already told me to let it go when I’d messaged him what happened, but that doesn’t matter. I told him I’d do a job to repay a favor, and I intend to do it. I may not be a good man, but I’m a man of my word. And if I’m being honest with myself, I want to keep Zoey safe. She shouldn’t be mixed up in this bullshit in the first place. One look at her, and I knew she didn’t belong in that club, and she certainly doesn’t belong in the dark world I inhabit.

“Leone?” Her voice breaks me from my thoughts.

“Yes?”

“I just want you to promise me you’ll let Bentley stay. No, um, no matter what he does.”

“Why?” I raise a brow. “What will he do?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know. He’s just very ... He’s kind of ...” She looks up as if trying to find the right word.

“You mentioned the word ‘asshole,’ did you not?”

She shrugs again. “I mean, it depends on who you ask. He and Xanny never got along, but he’s always been an absolute angel for me.” She kisses his head, and he lets out a low purr and stretches his paws toward me, the claws out and decidedly sharp. “Haven’t you, Bentley?”

“Wherever you go, he goes. All right?”

She beams. “Thank you.”

“Now let’s go in. I’ve already had my people preparing your room.” I get out and help her from the car, Bentley cradled in her other arm.

“A whole room? I thought you’d just let me couch surf for a while until this blows over.”

“Couch surf?”

“My parents used to get booted from a lot of living arrangements, so Xanny and I got good at making do in whoever’s house we were staying in. We’d sleep on a couch or on the floor, or wherever there was space, you know? Somewhere away from the grownups and all the stuff they were doing.”

I can imagine what ‘stuff’ a bunch of neglectful and high parents might be doing instead of taking care of their children, and none of it’s good. “You have your own room. Bentley can have his own, too, if that’s what he wants.” I walk her in the front doors, and she stops, her wide eyes roving the foyer and the staircase. “It’s like a fancy hotel.”

“Your room is right down here.” I lead her to the left along the side wing of the house. My wing. Showing her in, I watch as she places Bentley on the bed, then spins. “It’s huge. It’s like as big as a house.”

“It’s yours. Bathroom there.” I point. “I’ll have my staff get Bentley set up with whatever he needs. Just tell them, and they’ll do the shopping. I’ll also send up some

snacks, or if you'd rather sleep—"

She shakes her head. "No sleep. I don't think I can. I'm afraid I'll see..."

Marvin. She's afraid to relive what happened in her dreams.

"My room's right next door." I back away, forcing myself to get out of her proximity. If I don't, I have the strangest feeling that I might curl up with her in her bed and hold her until she drifts off. It's the strangest impulse, one I don't quite understand. Fucking her—makes total sense. She's a beauty—big eyes, curves for days, an innocence I want to taste. But holding her? That's not something I could've ever imagined I'd want to do. But with Zoey, everything seems somehow different. Different, but also right.

"Get some rest. The sun will be up soon. You need to sleep off the shock of what happened."

She shakes her head.

"Just try. I'll come by in the morning so we can talk and make a plan."

"A plan?" She sits on the bed. "How about a deal?"

My cock tries to bulldoze my zipper at the thought of this little angel propositioning me. "A deal?" I try to play it nonchalant.

"Yes. I'll help you find the killer guy." She shivers. "If you help me find my sister. Deal?"

"Oh." I swallow my disappointment at rough animalistic sex not being included in her offer. Then again, she's not the sort of woman who'd offer herself up—no matter

how badly I want her to. Given the fact that finding her sister is already at the heart of my plan, I'd be wise to accept. Then again, I'm not above taking advantage of Zoey's innocence. Not at all. "That's a tough bargain, little one. I don't know if I can agree to it unless you add a sweetener."

"A sweetener?" she asks as Bentley's tail begins to twitch.

"Something more to tempt me."

Her gaze slips down my body, and I can't help but feel a rush of satisfaction when her lips part. "Like what?"

I think she knows exactly what I want. In fact, with the way she's eye-fucking me right now, I know she wants it, too. But I can't overplay my hand just yet. Not to mention, I want her to feel safe here. I want her to know that I'll protect her, even when I'm fucking her raw and she's moaning my name.

I scrub a hand down my jaw, my body tense as I take in her flushed skin and hard nipples. Jesus, she's a siren calling me to sin. Tearing my gaze from her, I back away and grab the door handle.

"Get some sleep. We'll talk terms tomorrow." I close the door to temptation, but I already know I won't be able to sleep. Not with her right here. Not when there's a bargain soon to be struck between us that will give me everything I want and then some.

6

ZOEY

I jerk awake, sitting up in the world's most comfortable bed. My heart is pounding as everything from yesterday comes flooding back to me. The reality that I still don't know the whereabouts of my sister is still looming huge in my mind. The only person who I thought might have a clue to where she could be is dead. I can still picture his lifeless eyes staring up at me no matter how many times I try to forget.

I don't have an ounce of sadness in me for Marvin. Seeing him that way only reminded me that some of the people who are searching for my sister have no problem with ending a life. It makes it clear that I have to find her before one of them does.

What I'll do once I find her, I have no clue. I'll deal with it when I get to that point. What I need to do is stay focused on one thing at a time like Xanny always tells me. It's when I try to do too many things at once that I get myself in trouble or hurt.

I have Leone. My racing heart finally starts to slow. I don't know why he's protecting me, but the thought of him calms me. I pull the blanket back, slipping off my bed. Bentley is stretched out on the other side, snoozing away without a care in the world. I kiss the top of his precious fluffy head. He doesn't even open an eye. He must be all tuckered out.

After Leone left us in our room, Bentley did a full inspection a good three times before he was satisfied. Then he plopped down on the bed like he owned the place

before he rolled over to present me with his belly ready for his rubs. I think he's going to take to his new digs rather quickly. I mean, it is a huge step up from the trailer park. Bentley really was made for the life of the rich. He isn't intimidated by this place. As for me, I'm scared to touch anything.

Xanny used to tease that it was best we lived in a trailer. That way we never had to worry about my next incident, as she called them. She always tried to make me feel better about it, knowing whenever I had one I was typically embarrassed beyond belief. Even if no one was around to see it. Pretty sure that has something to do with my parents and how they responded when I was younger.

One of the best days of my life was when Xanny told me that we were leaving. She took me with her, even though she didn't have to. She's always taken care of me. I wasn't ever her responsibility, but without hesitation, she still took it. Sure, not all of the decisions she's made were great, but she's done the best she could. Xanny was still a kid herself when we first left my parents' place. Now it's my turn to return the favor and save her for once.

I poke my head out of my bedroom, not seeing anyone in the hallway. When we arrived last night, there had been a few people lingering around. Leone told me they were security. They hadn't looked too happy about me being here. Especially when Leone told them I'd be staying in the room next to his. Did they think I was some ninja that was going to kill Leone in his sleep or something? I think Leone could end me with his pinky finger.

I keep walking until I get to a set of double doors that I'm guessing are his. I reach out and grab one of the knobs, testing it to see if it opens. To my surprise, it does, and I slip right in. I creep over toward the bed, trying to be as quiet as possible. I can barely make out the outline of it, my eyes still trying to adjust to the dark. But that doesn't stop me.

“Ouch!” I squeal when I stub my toe on something. So much for the sneaking around part.

I don’t get the chance to see anything. One second I’m hopping around on one foot, and the next, I’m pinned to the bed. I know it’s Leone. His warm, comforting smell surrounds me. Who knew a smell could be comforting, but it is. I relax immediately. His massive body on top of mine makes me forget all about the pain in my toe.

“Lights on,” Leone says. The room fills with light, blinding me momentarily.

“Morning,” I chirp when his face finally becomes clear. He’s even more handsome than I remember.

“What are you doing?” He doesn’t look mad. If anything, I’d guess he’s more amused.

“Coming to see you.”

“Sir!” someone shouts a second before his bedroom doors swings open and three men come rushing in with their guns drawn. Leone grabs the blanket, yanking it over me before he sits up.

“Get the fuck out of my room,” he bellows at them.

“We heard a scream,” one of them says, but I can’t tell which with the blanket over my face.

“Why are you so mad?” I yank the blanket from off my face. “They came to protect you. I could be a ninja.”

“A half-naked ninja?” he growls.

The three men depart as quickly as they entered.

“I have your shirt on. It’s like a dress.” I sit up. “Sorry I snuck into your room.”

“You’re always welcome in my room, Zoey. I told you that last night.”

“Careful. I’m a cuddler, and you might wake up to me wrapped around you like a koala.”

“Feel free to wrap yourself around me whenever you like.” He grabs me, pulling me into his lap. A rush of heat floods my body. “How did you sleep?” He tucks a piece of my hair behind my ear. How does this man seem scary at times and at others a sweet teddy bear?

“Good, until I started remembering the mess I’m in. That’s why I wanted to talk to you.”

“No one can hurt you as long as you’re here. I promise you that. There is no safer place for you than at my side.”

It might be crazy of me, but I actually believe him. Being near him is the safest I’ve ever felt in my life. Even when everything was somewhat normal with Xanny and me living in the trailer park, there was always a trace of fear for our safety. Two girls living alone in not a great area. I always worried when Xanny went to work at night.

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“I might be safe, but Xanny isn’t.”

“She seems like a girl that can take care of herself. You shouldn’t let her pull you into whatever mess she’s in.”

I glare at Leone as I try to wiggle out of his lap, suddenly not feeling so warm and cuddly about him anymore.

“But I thought we were going to make a deal.” He smirks.

“I have to find Xanny. Without her, God knows what would have happened to me long ago.” I wiggle harder, but it’s really useless. Leone keeps a firm hold on me without even trying. “You have no idea how many times she’s saved me from the weirdo people that my parents would bring around.” Leone’s hold on me tightens a fraction, I can sense something dark rise up inside of him. I stop moving around. “I’m okay. No one hurt me,” I rush to say. “But that’s because of Xanny. She’s always protected me. Now it’s my turn to save her. Please. I need your help,” I plead. I don’t know what I’m going to do if he decides he’s not going to help me find her.

“All right,” Leone says.

“Really?” A sense of hope rises in me.

“I am a man of my word, and I told you we could make a deal. I just wanted to be sure this is something you really want to do.”

“I do.” I nod my head. “A sweeter deal,” I add, recalling what he’d said last night.

My eyes drop to his mouth. I know nothing about seduction. Not like Xanny. She could get men to eat out of the palm of her hand with only a smile.

“How are you going to make it sweeter, little one?”

“Would a kiss from me be sweet?” I ask, not really knowing what he’s looking for.

“I think any part of you that you let me put my mouth on will taste sweet.” I suck in a breath as my mind thinks of his mouth all over my body. I lick my lips as I lean in to kiss him.

“I might be terrible at this. I’ve never kissed anyone before.”

A deep, sexy sound rumbles from him as he sinks his fingers into my hair and pulls me forward. My mouth meets his. I’m shocked at how soft his lips feel pressed against mine as he kisses me.

“Kiss me back, little one.” I have no clue what I’m doing, but I move my mouth against his, wanting to please him. More than that, I want him to enjoy my kisses. And to even want more of them.

His tongue slides across the seam of my lips. I part them, letting him deepen our kiss. This time, though, he doesn’t have to tell me to kiss him back. I slip my tongue into his mouth, tentatively at first. Not sure what to do, I follow his lead. Then when another one of those sexy sounds rumbles from inside of him, it spurs me on. I shift in his lap so I can kiss him deeper. My hands start to roam his body. I want more of him. This small taste is nowhere near enough. Now all I can think about is kissing him all over his body too.

Suddenly, a loud, manly scream sounds throughout the house. We both jerk back at the sound. Then I hear a hiss I know all too well. Bentley.

7

LEONE

“Stay here.” I ease her to the bed and stand, reaching for the gun in my bedside table.

“No!” She hops up and jets out the door as I swipe to catch her, just missing her.

“Don’t hurt him!”

“Get it off me!” Tyler screams from somewhere down the hall. “It’s like a fucking demon!”

“Bentley!” Zoey cries.

I leave my gun and run after her. She’s trying to yank her cat off of poor Tyler’s back, but the thing has dug its claws in.

“You are being so naughty right now. Stop it. You’re better than this!” she scolds.

Bentley turns to look at her, then lets out something like a chuffing noise before she can finally pull him free from Tyler.

“He’s, um, he’s just not used to the new place is all. I’m sorry. Are you all right?” She hugs the vicious feline close to her chest as Tyler reaches up to the back of his neck and draws his fingers away with a little blood on them.

“Boss, that thing’s dangerous.” He shakes his head, a look of disbelief on his face as

the cat begins to purr for Zoey. “It’s a monster.”

“You’ll be fine. Suck it up, Tyler.” I take her elbow and lead her to her room. “Go see Madge downstairs. She’ll tend to your wounds,” I instruct him.

I guide Zoey and her devil cat into their room and quickly shut the door behind us. “Lights,” I call.

The room slowly lights with a warm glow as Zoey puts Bentley on the bed and starts wagging her finger at him. “You know better. What were you thinking?” Her tone quickly softens, though. “Oh no, did you wake up and I was gone so you got scared?”

He hunkers down, his eyes looking doleful as he stares up at her.

“Poor baby.” She kneels beside the bed and presses a kiss to the top of his head. “Of course you were scared. I’m sorry.”

“He’s playing you.” I watch as he glances at me, his eyes narrowing. “Like a harp.”

“No. He’s sweet. Really.” She scoops him into her arms and nuzzles him as she gets back to her feet. “You’ll see. I mean, I think you will. I guess it depends on how long we’re staying.”

“You’re staying.” I step to her. No one this innocent should be out in the world alone. Or even with this sister of hers, who’s clearly nothing but trouble.

“I guess we should come to an agreement. You know, the deal?” She sits heavily and hugs Bentley to her before releasing him. He sits beside her and eyes me with feline disdain.

“You’ve sweetened it for me, but I’m afraid that won’t be enough.” I watch as she

reaches up and grazes her fingers along her lips. That simple movement does something to me. Something fucking primal and erotic. Probably because I'm remembering that kiss too—how she was hesitant at first, but then she turned molten, her body tensing, needing mine to give her release.

“What else do you want? Another kiss?” she asks breathlessly.

More. I want so much more. If I had my way, I'd push her back on the bed and fill her with my cock, the cat be damned. But like I said, she's too innocent for that. I was her first kiss. I'm definitely going to be her first fuck—but I have to take my time with a woman as special as this.

“First, I want you to tell me everything you know about your sister, her possible whereabouts, and her dealings with Marvin.”

Her gaze drops, and I could swear I feel disappointment in the way her shoulders slump.

“After that, I'll have a better idea of how our negotiations on terms should go.”

“But you'll help me, right?” She looks up again.

“Yes, for the right price.” I know I'm a bastard, but I can't help myself. “Come on. Let's go down to breakfast, and you can tell me all about you and your sister.” I turn to leave.

“Will you tell me about you?” she asks quietly.

“Me?” I pause at the door.

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“Yeah. I mean, I’m going to be staying right next door, and we sort of um—well, we kissed. I feel like I should know the man I kissed, the man who I’m making deals with. Right?”

I turn back to her. “Some things are better left in the dark.”

“Not this.” She shakes her head. “I don’t want to make another mistake or have another incident.”

“Another incident? What do you mean?”

Her cheeks flush pink. “Nothing. I just mean I don’t want to screw this up. Finding Xanny is the most important thing to me, okay?”

“I get it.” I soften. I have to. This little angel in front of me practically demands it. She isn’t used to me or my thorny world. “And I’ve already promised my help. Once we make our deal, we’re going to find your sister.” And the money. And the asshole who yanked Marvin right out from under me. The money I couldn’t care less about. But that guy, that utter piece of shit who could’ve killed Zoey and who practically promised he’d do so—he has to go. She and her sister won’t be safe until he’s out of the picture.

“Can I wear this downstairs? I don’t have any other clothes.”

I stare at her, at the way my shirt drapes along her shoulders and flows along her breasts, the nipples tenting the fabric. The hem teases her thighs. Every bit of her is mouthwatering, a delectable treat meant only for me. “Absolutely not.”

“Oh.” She frowns.

“I’ll have Madge—my housekeeper—bring something up. I sent a courier to do some shopping for you last night. Madge took the sizes from the things you’d been wearing.” I’d inspected her club clothes before handing them off to Madge. I may have inhaled her scent off them and gotten irrationally angry that there weren’t any panties in the pile.

“I have clothes at the trailer.”

“No.” I cross my arms over my chest. “You won’t be going back to that hell hole.”

She licks her lips, her eyes on my body.

“If you keep staring at me like that, little one, I’ll bend you over that bed and make you moan.”

“What?” She swallows hard.

It just slipped out. Truly. I need to slow down. Even so, when she licks her lips again, my cock kicks against my pajama pants.

“I’ll send Madge.” I practically growl the words and force myself away from her door. If I don’t, I’ll make good on my threat.

I run a hand through my hair and try to calm the rampaging beat of my heart. After all, I will make good on my threat.

All in good time.

8

ZOEY

I've woken up to another life. Bags and boxes cover the floor, and garment bags have been hung in the closet. Others are draped over the bed. While I waited for what I thought would be a few items of clothing for me to wear, a nice woman by the name of Madge came to my room with a tray of food and a robe for me to put on so that the men could deliver the boxes.

She said the robe was for the men's safety. I'm not sure what she meant by that. If she was referring to what happened earlier between Bentley and one of the security guards, then I think a cage would have been better for the delivery peoples' safety. But they didn't have to worry because I held Bentley in my arms as they filled the room with enough clothes to open my own store. A girl could definitely get used to this sort of treatment.

No matter how many times I remind myself that all of this is temporary and not to get accustomed to any of it, I can't help but feel excited. No one has ever treated me the way Leone is.

Xanny would die if she saw all this. We're not the same size, so she wouldn't be able to wear any of the clothes. She's tall and thin where I'm short and curvy, but we do wear the same size shoes. If she were here, she'd steal the heels and tell me it's for my own safety. I smile, hearing her in my head. She wouldn't be wrong. I'm terrible in heels. Most days I'm lucky that I don't trip over my own two feet.

Another knock sounds at the door. My stomach flutters with excitement when I think it might be Leone. When the knock sounds again, I know it's not him. He would have walked right in after he knocked, not waiting for me to tell him to come in.

"Come in," I say, picking Bentley up from the bed. I'm still nervous from earlier, even though I know what happened wasn't Bentley's fault. It's better if I keep him close for now.

"We brought some things for Lucifer," one of the guys says as he enters the room. He's holding a litter box and a few bags. The other guy's arms are just as full. Leone had a few things brought in last night to hold Bentley over. But it looks as though Bentley is getting spoiled today too.

"His name is Bentley," I inform them, not appreciating the nickname they've given my little fur angel. I kiss the top of his furry head to prove how cuddly and loveable he is.

"Right," the man responds, setting everything down on the floor by the door. The other man does the same. "How about you make sure the cat stays in your room? We wouldn't want something to happen to him."

I gasp. "It was an accident. He got scared. This place is new to him." I hold Bentley tighter to my chest.

"Like I said. I'd make sure he stays put. Might end up with a bullet in him." With that, both men turn and leave. I set Bentley down on the bed and run over to lock the door. Anger unlike any I've ever felt before courses through my body.

"They think because we're little they can pick on us. They're a bunch of bullies." I start ripping through the bags to find something to wear.

I snag the first pair of jean shorts I come across, sliding them on before I find a light pink blouse. I almost choke when I see the price tag on it. I rip it off and flip through a few boxes of shoes until I find some white sneakers that have cute little jewels on the sides of them. I can't even enjoy them because I'm too mad.

It's one thing to push me around, but it's another to go for a defenseless, scared cat. Bentley has been my rock through everything. I've spent so much time by myself. Xanny was always scared someone might report us and that Child Services would pay a visit and find out she wasn't my guardian. I'd only been fifteen when she'd taken me from my parents. So Xanny knew they would have taken me and either returned me to my parents or put me into the system.

It's only been over the last few months we didn't have to worry about that anymore. I've aged out, past the time anyone would even bother to care about what happens to me, not that Child Services ever really did. But for two years, Bentley was not only my best friend but my only one. There is no way in hell that I'm going to stand for anyone threatening him. I might not be able to save my sister, but I won't stand by and let someone hurt my sweet baby. They'll have to deal with me first.

I grab all the cat stuff and quickly set it up in the bathroom. "Benny, look what Leone got you," I call from the bathroom as I set the fluffy cat bed down. I've never felt material so soft before. Okay, those other guys might be jerks, but Leone got Bentley all of these wonderful things that I could never afford.

Bentley pokes his head into the massive bathroom. It's easily half the size of our trailer. If this is a guest bathroom, I can't fathom what the master bathroom might look like.

"Come." I pat the bed. He trots over toward it and gives it an inspection before he gets on it and turns in a few circles before finally plopping down. "See, it's nice. You're going to stay here while I'm gone. Take a little nap, and I'll be back before

you know it.”

I grab the container of treats and give him a handful before I leave the bathroom, shutting the door behind me. I feel a bit safer leaving him there. I glance around the room to find something that I can use. My eyes land on the fireplace that has a fire poker in the stand next to it. I walk over and pull it out. It’s a bit heavier than I thought it would be, but it will do.

When I step out of my bedroom, I’m not really sure where I’m going or what I’m planning to do. But then I spot him. The man who threatened Bentley is standing at the end of the hallway talking to the other man that had been with him. They both turn their heads to look my way.

Can I really threaten someone? They did it to Bentley and well, me too. I’d bet anything they wouldn’t have said that to Leone. That’s because bullies pick on people they don’t think will fight back or that are smaller than them.

“Make sure you shut that door,” he calls down the hallway.

I grip the fire poker tighter in my hand.

“What’s she got?” I hear the other one say. I start to march down the hallway toward them. I lift the poker and rest it on my shoulder like a batter heading to the plate.

“Listen here, you jerk faces! If you come in my room or anywhere near my cat, I’ll—I’ll...” I stumble to find the right words. “I’ll make you regret the day you were ever born!”

They both take a couple steps back from me, putting their hands up. “You hear me?” I hiss at them, making sure I get my point across.

“We hear you,” the one who hadn’t even made the threat says. I glare at the other one, making sure he knows I mean business.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean any harm.” Funny how he’s suddenly singing a different tune.

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“You threatened me!”

“The cat. I threatened the cat!” he rushes to correct me, stumbling back a few more feet. He actually looks petrified. He’s a typical bully, pushing around people smaller than him until someone stands up to him.

“Same thing,” I snap. “Don’t let me catch you in this hallway again.” They both nod before they turn and take off quickly. I stare after them. Maybe I’m fiercer than I ever realized.

I spin around to go back to my room, almost running into something. “Ahh!” I jump back, swinging my poker at the same time. Leone’s hand comes out and catches it easily by the rod. His fingers wrap around it.

“Sorry.” I let go of the handle. “I didn’t mean to—”

“Don’t be sorry.” He smiles at me as he lets it slide through his fingers down to the poker end, offering it back to me. “Take it,” he encourages.

I do. “I might have gotten into it with a few of your men,” I admit.

He doesn’t seem mad, but maybe he didn’t hear it all. Will I be in trouble? Will he kick me out and not help me with my sister now?

“That so?” His smile only grows, making me relax. I hadn’t thought about Leone getting upset with me and possibly kicking me out before I took up arms in defense of myself and Bentley. The idea of never seeing him again makes my chest ache. It

dawns on me how much he's starting to mean to me even though I've only know him for a short amount of time.

"They were rude," I tell him.

"I'll handle them." The look on his face tells me that he most definitely will.

"I already did. I think they got the point." I raise my chin, feeling proud. I stood up for myself.

"Maybe so, but they're still my men. What did they do exactly?" Leone wraps his arm around me, pulling me into him.

I melt against him, loving the feel of his body pressed into mine. When he touches me, I can't help but give him what he asks for—which makes Leone a lot more dangerous to me than I ever thought.

9

LEONE

“But boss, we didn’t mean to—”

“I don’t give a flying fuck!” I snarl. “Get out!”

My office door opens, Lenny jerking his thumb behind him. “You heard him.”

The two guards, heads down, tails between their goddamn legs, hurry out.

“Gate duty. Indefinitely. I may decide to kill them later. I haven’t made up my mind,” I grate as Lenny, my top guard, shoves them from my office.

I run a hand through my hair, forcing myself to calm down. I have to. If Zoey senses the rage I’m feeling right now, she might try to escape. But my anger isn’t aimed at her. It’s at the idiots who decided it was a good idea to threaten her cat. Bentley may be a diva, but he belongs to Zoey—which means he’s under my protection, same as she is.

A small chuckle lifts from my throat as I realize I’m fuming over a cat—indirectly, of course. Even so, my decision stands, as does my discretion to bury those guards in the trees behind my house if I change my mind later.

“Is this all right?” Zoey walks into my office, her pink sundress and white cardigan like a lure, along with some little white shoes with rainbow laces. She looks like what

a fluffy cloud might have a daydream about.

“You’re gorgeous. You know that, right?” I make it to her in three steps.

She looks up at me, her eyes sparkling. “Really?”

“Are you kidding?” I run my fingers along a lock of her hair, and I’m pleased when she doesn’t recoil. If anything, she leans closer. “A knockout.”

Her cheeks flare with a flush of pink. “Oh, I don’t know. Everyone always thought Xanny was the pretty one, and I was just the—”

“You’re not ‘just’ anything.” I grip her chin and hold her steady. “Don’t ever think less of yourself. I won’t allow it.”

“You won’t?” Her lips part.

“Never.” I release her, then back up a step, needing to get my bearings. Because when she’s close to me like this, when I have my hands on her—I can’t seem to think clearly. Even now, I’m imagining peeling that dress off her and licking along her skin. “Come. Let’s have breakfast while we discuss our deal.”

“Okay.” She peeks down the hall. “Which way?”

I take her arm and lead her toward the kitchen. Madge has already been at work in here, a platter of food laid out on the kitchen table beside a bay window looking out on the side yard.

“That bacon looks so good.” Zoey’s stomach grumbles.

“Sit. I’ll serve you.” I pull a chair out for her.

She sits, and when I lean over to lay a napkin in her lap, I swear I can hear her inhaling deeply. I can't stop my lips from curving at the thought of her enjoying my scent.

"Xanny and I aren't much for cooking, so food like this is sort of a treasure." She tucks her hair behind her ears as I start loading up her plate from the platter.

"Oh, look." She points at the window as Madge toddles by, a basket at her hip as she leans down and starts clipping some sort of herb from her kitchen garden. "Madge is amazing."

"She is. I'm lucky I found her. She used to be a housekeeper for a certain governor out west, but there was an ... incident, and she had to leave his employ in a hurry and find somewhere safe."

"A scandal?" Zoey's eyes widen as she takes a big bite of the crispy bacon.

"Definitely." I sit across from her and watch her eat, her enjoyment making my lips curl yet again. "She didn't want to testify against her former employer, so she needed somewhere she could lay low. That was here, and she's been here ever since."

"That was kind of you, to take her in when she was in trouble."

"Not kind at all." I pluck a piece of bacon from the tray and chew it, the salty, crispy deliciousness perfectly cooked. "It was utterly selfish. Anyone who can cook this well is an opportunity I can't pass up."

"Smart." She nods as she takes a bite of a well-buttered English muffin.

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“I like to think so.” I pour her some orange juice from the pitcher Madge left. “Now, let’s get our business managed so we can get to work on finding your sister.”

She stops mid-chew. “The deal?”

“The deal.” I lean back, loving the way she squirms in her seat.

She puts her fork down. “Look, I don’t know what you’re expecting.” She swallows hard. “I mean, I’ll do anything for Xanny.”

“Anything?”

Her cheeks bloom pink again, and I swear I can hear her scissor her thighs together. “Anything. But I just want to, you know, um, warn you.” Her words start to run into each other as she speeds up. “Seriously, I mean straightforwardly. Maybe you saw me dressed a certain way at the club or something, but that doesn’t mean I’m any good at ... at ... well, at whatever it is you might be thinking to ask me for, so maybe you should think of something else you want because I’m completely inexperienced. I mean, I’m not some sort of sexy siren like Xanny, so—”

“No.” I hold up a finger. “I told you I won’t tolerate that kind of talk from you.”

She gulps. “Oh, right.”

“Try that last part again.” I meet her gaze, loving the way her pulse jumps in her throat.

“What?”

“Say it correctly this time.”

Her lashes flutter as she considers my words.

“Confidence, little one.” I lean forward. “Grip it by its throat and don’t let it go. Now, try again.”

She hesitates, her teeth digging into her bottom lip for a moment before she takes a deep breath. “I’m a sexy siren, just like my sister, maybe even better.” Her eyes widen as she says it.

“Good. I’m glad we agree.” I toss down my napkin. “Now the terms of our deal will be that you and I will find your sister. You will stay with me. I will find the man who killed Marvin. You will stay with me. I will neutralize that man. You will stay with me. Once you and your sister are safe, then you will choose how you’d like to pay for my services.”

Her face falls. “Pay? I don’t have any money. We were barely—”

“Not money, little one.” I stand, and I unabashedly eat her up with my eyes. “I don’t want money.”

She looks up at me, her doe eyes still wide. “Then what do—”

“You know exactly what I want.” And I suspect you want it, too. “Now let’s get on the road. I have a few places to visit, associates who may have a lead on your sister.” I step around the table and hold out my hand to her. “Are you ready?”

She eyes my palm, trepidation in her body language. But there’s something more,

too. Heat. Unbearable heat that I want to burn me all the way through.

With a shaking breath, she reaches up and takes my hand, her lips parting to say a breathless “ready” as I pull her to her feet.

“I hope you’re telling the truth, little one.” I stroke down her cheek. “Because this is where you and I begin.”

10

ZOEY

“Do you think Bentley will be okay?” I ask Leone as the driver pulls the SUV onto the highway.

I know I set those two men straight, but I worry about leaving him alone since we left the house. I should ask Leone about getting one of those nanny cameras. That way I’ll be able to keep an eye on him, and I won’t have to worry so much.

“I promise you, little one. He will be fine. I’ve made it very clear to everyone that he’s under my protection.” I can’t help but smile at Leone. My body leans into him on its own. It’s natural to me for some reason. I’m drawn to him. How can I not be? He not only saved my life, but now he’s making sure Bentley stays safe too. “Besides, I think Bentley can handle himself perfectly fine.”

“He only attacked those men because he was provoked,” I say defensively. “He was protecting himself,” I add so it’s perfectly clear that Bentley is innocent here.

“I’m not insulting him. Just saying I don’t think he’s defenseless. Could probably take on a dog if he had to.”

“Gross.” I scrunch my nose. “Wait a minute. Are you a dog person?” I peer up at him through my lashes.

There is nothing wrong with being a dog person; I’m just not sure how compatible

that would make us. I guess that really doesn't matter, though. We don't have to be, I suppose. This is only a temporary thing. Once we find Xanny and I pay Leone for his services, it will all be over. The thought doesn't sit well with me.

"I think I'm a Zoey person." He winks at me. I duck my head as a blush starts to bloom, my cheeks warming. How am I supposed to be all sexy if I'm blushing at some comments he makes? I need to get it together. "Don't turn away from me. I like it when you turn pink for me." He grips my chin with his forefinger and thumb, turning my face back toward him.

My eyes drop to his mouth. "Are you going to kiss me?" I ask. As soon as I say the words, I know I've gone and ruined the moment like a dork.

"I always want to kiss you."

"So I'm good at it?"

"You have no idea how good at it you are," he says before his mouth is descending onto mine. I grip his shirt as his mouth moves over mine. His kisses are addicting. They make me want so much more. I try to move closer, wanting to be pressed up against him, but something stops me. A little growl bubbles up inside of me. Leone lets out a deep sexy chuckle.

"I'm stuck. It's not funny," I huff, getting annoyed.

"As much as I want to pull you into my lap and let you have your way with me, I want this seatbelt on you. Especially when we're on the highway."

"Fine." I sigh, dropping back into my seat. "Where are we going?"

"To see an associate of mine. He might have some information on all of this. Nick

Davinci.”

“That name sounds familiar.” I try to think where I’ve heard it before. “It would have to have been from my sister. I don’t really talk to anyone else.” Xanny is the only link I have to the outside world in a sense. I mean, I’m not a total recluse, but I’m pretty close to it.

“You don’t recall in what context she used it in?”

I try to think back, but nothing is really coming to me.

“No.” I shake my head. “I must have overheard her say it to someone else.” That’s the only thing I can think of. She doesn’t really go into too many details about her job with me. Sure, we gossip, and she tells me some stuff but never anything she thinks might worry me. She tries to hide that part from me or maybe shelter me from it.

“He might have something that can help me figure out this mess.”

“I really hope so. Each day that passes I think the chances of me ever seeing her again grow less. I don’t want to think about what that means.”

“I’ll find her for you.”

I believe him. Leone has kept his word to me so far, so I have no reason to doubt he’ll do everything in his power to locate Xanny.

“I can’t lose her, Leone. I’ll have no one. I don’t want to be all alone.”

“Little one, you’re not going to be all alone.” It’s sweet that he tries to offer me comfort, but to him, this is some job and about money being owed. No one but me actually cares about Xanny. Days or weeks from now when this is all over, the reality

is I will be alone and likely heartbroken twice over.

“Is that a fountain?” I point out the front window of the SUV. A giant fountain sits in front of a home that looks more like a castle than anything else.

“It is. The Davincis can be a bit showy.”

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You don't say. "Is there a princess inside that castle?" I tease.

"There is a queen. At least that's what Nick calls his wife." The SUV rolls to a stop in front of the castle.

"That's really sweet."

Leone unclips my seatbelt before opening the door and offering me his hand to help me out. "Am I dressed okay?"

I suddenly feel very underdressed for this place. The rainbow laces in my sneakers stick out like a sore thumb.

"You look beautiful." He's nuts, but still I can't help but revel in his praise.

"What do we have here?" a deep voice asks. I turn my head to see a man in a suit standing in the doorway with a beautiful woman tucked into his side. There is something regal about her. Yes, now that I've seen her, the word queen definitely seems fitting. But there is also a softness in her face that makes her look inviting.

"This is my Zoey. Zoey, this is Nick and Sophia Davinci." Nick nods while Sophia gives me a welcoming smile and offers me her hand. I take it.

"The men around here are dropping like flies," Sophia says with a laugh. "Come in." She pulls my hand so I have no choice but to follow her. Leone's arm falls from around my shoulder. He doesn't look too happy about it, but Sophia steps out from her husband's hold as well. "I made snacks when Nick told me Leone was coming

over with a woman. This is a first.” She practically beams with excitement that I’m here. “I love your style, by the way. You really own it.”

“Oh, thank you.”

Sophia’s in wide leg slacks and some silky blouse. She’s so elegant. Her style is far different from mine. She looks so sophisticated.

“I have a small obsession with clothes and style. It’s wearable art, and I love when people have their own vibe. It also helps you get to know them, and I can already tell I’m going to like you.” Her words put me at ease.

“You’re so sweet.”

“Us girls have to stick together. We have overbearing sweet men. We have to keep them on their toes.” She wiggles her brows at me. I should probably tell her Leone isn’t mine, but I can’t bring myself to do it. So I go along with it.

“What are you plotting?” Nick calls from behind us. I peek back to see Nick and Leone following after us.

“Don’t you men have your own plotting of death and destruction to do?” She teases her husband right back. Their banter is adorably sweet. “Unless you want my advice.” We enter the kitchen, where food covers the giant island. Is this what Sophia considers a few snacks? I can’t even imagine what a full course meal would look like if it is.

“I always want your advice.” Nick responds with a smirk, his eyes on his wife.

“My husband told me a bit about what is going on,” Sophia says as she hands me a drink. I take it. Leone comes to stand beside me. His hand goes to my hip as he tucks

me against him.

Her eyes flit back and forth between us, a glint showing in them. “The best way to offer protection and make sure no one touches a hair on your Zoey’s head is to marry her, of course.”

Did she just suggest Leone and I get married?

11

LEONE

“Idon’t think, um ... I don’t ...” Zoey wrings her hands.

“I’m kidding.” Sophia wraps an arm around her shoulders and hugs her tightly. She may say she’s kidding, but the look she’s giving me is no joke.

“My meddlesome queen.” Nick smiles indulgently, then turns to me. “Let’s discuss business so we can get back to these scheming women before Zoey turns up in a wedding dress.”

Just the thought of her wearing a bridal gown makes my heart leap about two miles ahead of itself. She’d be a perfect beauty, and I wouldn’t waste any time in pushing her skirt up to her hips and—

“You have a kitty, too?” Zoey kneels to pet the cat who’s weaving through her ankles.

I follow Nick as the women coo over the furry interloper at their feet.

“What is it with women and cats?” he scoffs lightly, but I don’t miss the amusement in his tone. “Sophia has always had a soft spot for animals, but with cats, it’s another level.”

I shrug. “Zoey is the same, though her cat is an absolute beast. He drew blood on one

of my guards.” I can’t stop the chuckle that rolls from me.

Nick eyes me curiously as we enter his office. He pours us drinks. “This Zoey, she’s the one you rescued from the club?”

“Yes.”

“And her sister is the one with sticky fingers, right?”

“Yeah, Marvin made it clear Xanadu is the one who took your money. Apparently, he was blinded by love.”

“Now he’s blinded by death. The fool.” He scowls and hands me a drink. “Whatever trouble he was in, he should’ve come to me with it. Now I’ve got two problems instead of one—the missing money and some piece of shit who thinks he can spill blood on my turf with impunity.”

Squeals echo down the hallway, and we both turn.

“Oh my God, look how fluffy!” Zoey calls.

“That’s Ribbon, my new kitten. Nick got her for me as a surprise. Isn’t she adorable?” Sophia’s heels click as they pass, likely following the kitten toward whatever fun it’s chasing.

Nick smiles absently, his gaze on the door. Like me, he wants to go out and watch the women. I admit, I could do nothing but look at Zoey and be perfectly content. It’s the bizarrest thought, but it’s true. Just being near her makes me feel comfortable in a way that I’ve never experienced.

“You have that look.”

I realize Nick's attention changed to me while I was thinking about Zoey. "What look?" I take a drink of my whiskey.

"The same one I must've had when I first realized Sophia was meant to be my queen." He looks at me over the rim of his glass. "You're lovestruck, old friend."

I open my mouth to deny it, but no words come out. Love isn't something I've even considered. It seemed like something a fool would chase after, a fleeting thing that had zero permanence. Then again, when I think about Nick and Sophia, I have to admit their love is so real it's almost a palpable presence. And if I look even closer, I have to admit that the way I feel about Zoey ... Well, it might not be too far off.

"She's quirky. Different. I don't even know her that well, to be honest. But she's got this way about her, you know? And she's so loyal to her sister. She's had a lot of bad luck in her life, but she still sees the bright side." I try to put Zoey into words and find myself falling severely short.

"You don't have to tell me. I felt the tension between the two of you the moment you walked in." He raises a brow in question. "Have you two ..."

"No." I pull at my collar as heat ripples along my skin. "But she's mine, all the same. I told her I'd help her find her sister ... for a price."

He grins, the dark look on his face giving him the appearance of some fearsome beast, perhaps a shark, perhaps a tiger. "A price? I can imagine." He laughs into his drink. "In that case, let's find this Xanadu sooner rather than later. I want to see what comes of Zoey's payment to you."

"You're getting a real kick out of this, aren't you?"

He shrugs. "I've found my queen. It's long past time for you to find yours." He puts

his glass down. “Now. As for information on the trigger man and Xanadu, I’m afraid my leads haven’t produced much. However, I did interview some of the workers at the club. It seems that Xanadu had a stalker, and she was terrified of him. I don’t know what that has to do with her stealing my money, but it might have everything to do with the gunman at the club. Maybe her stalker wanted to get rid of the competition, but he created another problem for himself when he realized there were witnesses. Did Zoey mention a stalker?”

“No.” I place my empty glass on the tray beside us. “I get the feeling Zoey’s sister sheltered her from a lot of bad things, including her line of work, stealing the money, and whoever was after her.”

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He leans back. “You think the money and the stalker are connected somehow?”

“Could be.” I shrug. “I’m going to have to do more legwork. I’ll start at the trailer where they were living. It’s already been tossed, but there could be a lead there. Maybe he left a—”

“Look at her go!” Zoey cries, and the footsteps rush back down the hall.

Sophia laughs. “She loves that catnip mouse.”

Even with our dark discussion, both Nick and I smile when we hear our women’s voices. That thought strikes me. Our women. My woman. Zoey is my woman. Some part of me has already accepted it, and I can already feel the rest of me falling in line.

“Yeah, just look at you, Leone. Lovestruck.” He smirks and opens the office door.

When I catch sight of Zoey, my heart does that leap again, and I realize that not only is he right, I’m glad that he’s right.

Zoey is meant to be mine. I just have to prove it to her.

12

ZOEY

“I’m not sure Bentley would love the idea of a kitten joining our little family.” I give Ribbon a stroke across her head as she snoozes away.

“You could always foster one, and if it doesn’t work, you’d take it back,” Sophia suggests.

While I love the idea of getting a kitten, it’s not realistic right now. I can’t go home because some scary man with a gun wants to kill me, and my sister is missing. I don’t even know when the bills are due. Xanny took care of that. Our lights could go out any day, and an eviction would follow rather quickly.

I don’t have a job to try to cover anything. Who knows where I’ll be when all the cards finally land? I might be in a homeless shelter sneaking Bentley in and out under my sweater. It would be selfish of me to bring a kitten into this situation.

“Maybe one day.”

“Well, you’re more than welcome to come over here and play with Ribbon whenever you want.”

“Thanks.” Sophia has been such a sweetheart. “Can I ask why you made the marriage suggestion? Was it really a joke?” I don’t know why my mind keeps going back to that, but it does.

Now that Leone isn't next to me, I can ask. Xanny always says talking about things like marriage and babies is a sure way to scare a man off. That's the last thing I want to do to Leone.

"I mean, it was kind of a joke." She gives me a wicked smile. "But there is some truth to it. Being married to Leone offers you some level of protection. People know if they even look at you the wrong way that it could mean their heads. Kind of like those jerks you told me about making remarks to you about your cat. If you'd been married to Leone, that would have never happened. Oh, I'm sure they still got in trouble, but they don't know who you really are."

Before I can try to poke around for more, Leone comes strolling into the room. His eyes go straight to me, and I swear they light up. It's silly. Even with how much I enjoyed hanging with Sophia, I've missed him.

"You want one now?" Leone asks, coming right to me. "Not sure how Bentley would feel about that. I don't think either one of us likes sharing your attention."

I melt at his words.

"I think my hands are full at the moment."

Leone offers me his hand. I take it. He pulls me up from my seat.

"Are you ready to head home?"

I stare up at him, not sure what he means. Is he talking about going back to my trailer or to his house? "I suppose," I respond after a moment, still not sure what he means, but he was waiting for an answer.

What's more confusing is the mixture of feelings I'm having over his question. Even

if everything works out and we find Xanny and she's okay and Leone handles this man after me, would I want to go back home with Xanny?

"Remember what I said. You can come over anytime." Sophia gives me a hug as we say the rest of our goodbyes.

The car ride is somewhat silent as I stare out the window to see where we're going. "Are you okay, little one?" Leone asks.

"Yes. I mean fine. I mean perfect," I rush to correct, knowing when people say they're fine they don't actually mean it. Usually they're upset about something but not ready to talk about it. Which is exactly what I am at the moment, but I'm not ready to admit it. Leone's phone starts to go off, saving me. "You can answer it," I blurt out so that he will.

He's always clearing his calls when we're together. Right now, I need a second to get myself back on track and my voice to come out in a normal tone.

From the expression on his face, I know he's not buying what I'm selling, but nonetheless, he still answers his phone. He takes the call before reaching over and placing his other hand on my bare thigh where my pink dress has ridden up a few inches.

It suddenly dawns on me that Bentley is back at Leone's house, so Leone can't take me home to the trailer yet. Some of the anxiety that had started to build in me melts away.

Leone's fingers absently stroke my inner thigh as he speaks to whoever is on the call with him. Ever so slowly, his hand slips further up my thigh, forcing my dress to rise up more with it.

Everything else is completely forgotten. All I can think about now is Leone's rough fingers on my skin and how incredibly good they feel. Though I might love the roughness of his touch, my body begins to ache, and I know there's nothing that can be done about it. Not with Leone's driver here.

My breasts grow heavier as I start to get wet, causing the silky panties Leone had gotten me to stick to the lips of my sex. I try to play it cool by not wiggling around in my seat. My teeth sink into my bottom lip when finally his fingers are there, brushing against them.

It would be so easy for him to pull them to the side and give me the release that I want to scream for. How does Leone seem so calm? He continues to carry on a whole conversation while he's driving me insane. I can't even focus on what he's saying. I drop my head back and close my eyes. What is happening? I can't even process it. It's so fast, but then something inside me says it's been a long time coming. I've been waiting for this man even if I didn't realize it.

Just when I think I can't take anymore, Leone slips his fingers into my panties, brushing right past my clit to grab the other side.

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“What are you—” I’m cut off when he yanks them. The sound of the material giving way fills the inside of the SUV. He tosses them away before unclicking my seatbelt and grabbing my thigh closest to him to spread them apart more. My whole body shifts to the side, and the next thing I know, Leone’s face is buried between my thighs.

With nothing between us anymore, he goes straight for my clit, licking and sucking, demanding my orgasm. It hits me hard. I scream out his name as my body bucks and shakes before I collapse against the door.

Leone kisses the inside of each of my thighs before he sits back up, licking his lips. He looks like the cat that got the cream. As I come down from my orgasm high, I jerk to sit up straighter. My eyes go to the driver’s seat.

“Oh goodness.” I sigh in relief when I see it’s empty and we’re actually back at Leone’s.

“You think I would let our driver see or hear you come?”

“I didn’t think so, but that was intense.” I blow out a breath.

“It’s always intense when my hands are on you.” His words warm me. “Now are you going to tell me why you were pretending to be perfect? Don’t get me wrong, you truly are in my eyes, but something was wrong, and I want to know what it is.”

“I’m not one of your men. You can’t boss me around.” I huff and wiggle my dress back down.

“You want to try that again, little one?” He cocks his head to the side. “I can get it out of you, but I’d much rather you gave it to me.”

“How could you get it out of me?” His hand starts to trail up my leg again. “This time I won’t let you come until you tell me.” My mouth falls open. That sounds horrible.

“You’d do that to me?”

“Shit, don’t give me those kitten eyes.” He grabs me, pulling me into his lap. “Tell me.” He nuzzles my neck. My resolve crumbles immediately.

“I got scared.” I blow out a breath, throwing Xanny’s advice about men and keeping them on the hook out the window. “When you said you were going to take me home, I thought you meant you were going to drop me off at the trailer. I mean you can’t ‘cause Bentley, but—”

“You’re not going anywhere. Thought I made that real clear.” He nips at my neck.

“I don’t want to go there either,” I admit.

“See how easy that was?” He really does make it sound so easy, but it’s not. At least not for me.

“But later when you fix this and my debt is paid? Then it will—”

He cuts me off again. “Don’t make me burn that fucking trailer to the ground, little one. Because I’ll do it.” I snort a laugh.

He lifts his head from my neck. “I’m not joking.”

“I know.” I close the space between us, claiming his mouth in a kiss. Leone should be

careful. He might get more than he bargained for. All of me. Forever.

13

LEONE

The trailer looks even shoddier in the evening light. Some other similar homes nearby have music or the yells of children reverberating through them, but this one is silent, the door still halfway off its hinges and swinging in a light breeze.

I can tell some people have been through it since the day before, a few belongings strewn through the high grass and various windows already busted out. I'm glad I left Zoey at home with Madge. She doesn't need to see this.

Stepping from my car, I scan the area but don't see anything unusual. Only a stray dog wandering between the trailers, probably looking for scraps.

Climbing the stairs, I step over a few more belongings—mostly clothing and a few kitchen odds and ends. The refrigerator is missing, and someone already scrawled their tag in spray paint on the front wall.

I ignore the mess and move toward the back of the trailer, toward the main bedroom. Xanny's room. I can tell it's hers from the smell of cheap perfume that some asshole decided to bust while they were looking for something to steal.

Stepping in, I glance around, then pop on my flashlight. It's trashed, stripper clothes on the floor along with feathers—all the pillows in the room ripped apart. I can't tell if the killer or a neighbor did it, but it doesn't matter. I'm not looking for the obvious in here. If Xanny has secrets—and I'm certain she does—she's going to hide them

somewhere clever. Zoey's made clear her sister is the slippery sort, and the fact that Xanny made off with Marvin's cash is a testament to that fact.

I ignore the obvious and look deeper, training my flashlight on the wall and then scraping my foot along the floor to see what's underneath the piles of tattered clothing. Nothing jumps out at me, so I glance in the closet, then turn away. Not there. Too easy.

"Where would you hide your most important secrets?" I mumble as I scan the walls again, then the floor. I pause when I see the glint of glass.

Kneeling, I push aside a busted dresser drawer and pick up a picture frame, the glass shattered, but the photo underneath still intact.

I stand for a while, just looking at Zoey's face, her smile bright, exhilaration turning her skin a bright pink in the fading daylight. They must've just ridden the carnival's Gravitron, because they're standing in front of it, sisters arm in arm. Xanadu is in provocative clothing, but she wears them and a bright pink wig with an air of devil may care. Zoey is in an oversized kitten T-shirt and ripped jeans, her hair whipped up in a messy bun atop her head. She's goddamn adorable. Even though it's a photo, I can feel the love between them, the bond. Opposites, but drawn together all the same.

With a sigh, I shake off the busted frame and pocket the photo. That's when a small piece of paper flutters from the back of the frame and lands at my feet.

I snatch up and shine the light on it. It's a series of numbers, likely the key to a combination lock. Something tickles in the back of my mind, and I pull the photo from my pocket again.

Triumph curls my lips into a smile. There, to the right of the girls, is a series of lockboxes, a safe place for people to store their belongings while they ride the rides

and see the sights.

I have to show this to Zoey. With any luck, I'll be able to find those lock boxes. And with a whole lot more, whatever Xanny hid inside one of them is still there.

* * *

I sit on Zoey's bed. She's asleep, her breaths long and easy. Bentley is stretched out beside her, his eyes on me, and I don't miss the way his claws slowly reveal themselves as he paws at the comforter.

"I'd never hurt her," I whisper to him.

He doesn't seem convinced; he only digs his claws deeper into the comforter, gaze still locked with mine. A real tough customer. I have to respect a creature like that.

"You're back." Zoey stretches, her body tantalizing beneath her T-shirt. No bra, and I'm hoping no panties either. My need for her kicks up a notch, and when visions of how she looked when I ate her pussy in the car dance in my head, I have to adjust myself.

She follows the movement and licks her lips.

Damn, she's got me by the fucking balls, and I'm not even mad about it. I never expected to find her in that club, but I find myself giving silent thanks several times a day—hell, several times a minute—that I was there to save her.

"What's wrong?" She leans forward and runs her fingers along my brow, smoothing away the wrinkles and my worries with a soft touch.

"Nothing." I won't lie to her. "I was just thinking how glad I am that I was there for

you at the club, that's all."

"You saved me," she says quietly. "No one's ever bothered much with me, but you—you're different."

"So are you." I cup her cheek. "You're something special. I want you to believe that, little one."

She smiles and presses her cheek against my palm. "When you say it, I do."

"Good." I lean closer, our mouths almost touching. "Because I don't tell lies. Not to you." I kiss her, tasting her sweet mouth as she clutches my shirt.

God, I need her. Just being away from her for a few hours was almost harrowing. She's not a want. Not a desire. I need her. So I kiss her in such a way that she feels it too. How much I have to have her.

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When I press her back against the bed, a sad meow breaks out.

“Oh, Bentley!” She reaches for him, and he crawls between us, laying claim to her right in front of me. “Did we squish you?” She scoops him closer.

“He’s fine.” I sit up, my hands still itching to pull away the covers and see if I’m right to hope for no panties.

He starts to purr. The little shit.

“Sorry, baby.” She hugs him again.

It isn’t normal to be jealous of a cat, but here I am, shooting daggers at him with my eyes. He shoots them right back.

“So did you find anything at the trailer?” she asks.

“Yes.” I give Bentley one more glare and pull the picture from my pocket. “Do you remember where this photo was taken?”

She sits up, and Bentley scampers away to the end of the bed. “That was last year at the fair close to the waterfront. You know the one with the big yellow and purple tent they put up?”

“Barnaby’s.”

“That’s the one.” She nods. “We had so much fun! Oh my God, I thought I was going

to throw up when we were at the top of the Ferris wheel. I didn't know I hated heights until it stopped with us at the tippy-top." She grimaces. "But Xanny talked me through it. She was always—" She chokes up. "I meanis, sheisalways there for me."

I don't waste a second pulling her into my arms and holding her in my lap. "Hey, we're going to find her, all right? That was the deal, and I don't break my promises."

"Never?"

"You'll see, little one. I'm a man of my word."

"I believe you." She snuffles. "You've been nothing but kind to me. You saved my life and gave Bentley and me a place to stay ... at least for a little while."

I tilt her chin up. "You're going to stay here for as long as you like."

She blinks several times, her tears wetting her lashes. "What?"

"You heard me. I promise you and"—I cast him a sideways glance—"even Bentley can both stay here for as long as you like."In fact, forever sounds good to me.

"Really?" She bites her bottom lip.

I press my forehead to hers. "I don't break my promises, little one. Remember that."

She breathes out, her breath soft against my skin. "I remember." When she leans in, I take her kiss, take all of her I can get.

14

ZOEY

Islip my hands up Leone's chest, wrapping them around his neck as he deepens our kiss. I'm starting to think that this isn't all about money anymore. Leone doesn't have to really do any of the things he does for me, but he continues to do them. At every turn, he gives me more and more. I don't only mean material things either. Little by little, he reveals himself to me. I love that way more than any of the materialistic stuff.

He groans against my mouth, standing from the bed with me in his arms. I wrap my legs around him, never breaking our kiss as he carries me out of my bedroom, making sure to close the door behind us. I'm guessing he's taking me to his room. I have an idea of where this is going, and it's somewhere Bentley's innocent little eyes don't need to witness.

Once we enter his room, he carries me over to his bed, laying me down on it. I release my arms and legs from around him but still grip the front of his buttoned-up shirt with one hand.

"Are we going to..." I trail off, not sure what to call it. Sure, I might not have done anything when it comes to the whole sex thing, but is this making love or like a one-night stand?

"I'm going to love every inch of your body if you'll let me."

Oh, I love what he calls it. I'll take that.

"I want that, but what about our deal? I'll have nothing left to offer you once we do this."

"You have so much more to offer, Zoey. You really have no idea, but sex isn't what I want from our deal."

What else could he want? He grips the bottom of the oversized shirt I'm wearing, pulling it up over my head and tossing it away. His hands roam over my body, slipping between my thighs to cup my sex. "You'll give me this because you want to, not because of some deal." His words only heighten my desire for him. He's right. I want this more than I've ever wanted anything in my life.

My hips lift of their own accord as I try to grind my clit against his palm to relieve the ache that has formed there. A sexy grin forms on his lips.

"It's yours to have." I'm desperate for him at this point.

"I'll be the only one to ever have it," he says before he takes my mouth in a kiss that is all consuming. His hand between my thighs slips a bit lower, and he thrusts one of his thick fingers into me. I'm already so wet it easily slides in. He quickly adds a second, thrusting them in and out of me as he kisses me. All I can think about is his cock being there soon.

I break the kiss as a moan pulls from me. "You want my cock, little one?" He nips at my bottom lip.

"Yes." I move my hips with his fingers.

"It's going to be more than that. Do you think you can handle it?" he asks as he starts

to work a third finger into me. It's tight, but he grinds his palm down on my clit, and my body opens up more for him. "There you go. Getting ready for me. Such a good girl."

I whimper. My sex clamps down around his fingers as I start to come. "Eyes on me. I want to see it." With my body under his full control, my eyes fly open, locking with his, and I come undone beneath him.

"Leone!" I cry out, gripping the front of his shirt as intense pleasure courses through my body. I yank him down for another kiss, my tongue slipping into his mouth. "I want more." I remove my lips from his momentarily. "All of it," I say before kissing him again.

"Getting greedy on me?" He smiles against my mouth as he pulls his fingers from inside of me. I huff, not ready to be empty. I love the sensation of him stretching me so that he'll eventually fit inside. My body aches for more.

"For you I am." He slips back off the bed.

I watch as he brings his fingers to his mouth, sucking the remnants of my orgasm off them. I sit up on my elbows, about to complain that he better get back here until I see him start to undress. My mouth suddenly goes dry when his shirt hits the floor first before he's toeing off his shoes.

"Open those legs. I didn't tell you to close them." He grabs one of my ankles, sliding it over to reveal me to him. He yanks at his belt, pulling it free before the rest of his clothes go and he stands before me completely naked.

He wraps his hand around his cock, stroking himself as his eyes eat up every inch of me. I see a small trace of cum leak from the head. I lick my lips, wondering what he tastes like.

“Not today, little one.” He crawls back onto the bed, lowering his head to swipe his tongue across my clit before he keeps moving up my body. “I love having your taste in my mouth.”

“But I can’t have yours?”

He knees my thighs open more to make room for his broad frame. Sometimes I forget how much bigger he is compared to me. “Not tonight. I’m barely hanging on to my control.”

“I test your control?” That’s ludicrous. Little me testing Leone’s control?

“Yes, from the moment I laid eyes on you.” He comes down fully on top of me. His cock brushes against me. “And now you’re giving yourself to me.” The head of his cock slips through my folds before it starts to press into me.

I gasp, grabbing his shoulders, my nails digging into him as I feel a small burn. Leone freezes, his whole body going stiff.

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“Don’t stop,” I whisper against his mouth. “I gave it to you. You’re not going to take it?” My words do as I thought they would. Leone thrusts fully into me.

A small scream leaves me as I’m stretched to fit him. A mixture of pain and pressure fills me. Part of me wants to tell him not to move while another wants to demand he do it.

“Zoey. Little one. Open your eyes. You know I need them.” They flutter open for him. The second they lock with his, the pain starts to fade, and there is only him. “There you are. I don’t like it when you try to leave me.”

“I’d never leave you, Leone. Not willingly,” I admit.

“Promise?”

“Promise.” He claims my mouth in a kiss. I wrap my arms around him, holding him close. “Move.” The second the word leaves my lips, the tension melts from his body. He pulls out and thrusts back in.

Another gasp escapes me. This one is only filled with pleasure. He’s deeper than his fingers were inside me. The sensation is different.

“You feel so damn good. Too good,” he grits out between his teeth. “I’ll never last.” I stare up at him, watching him try to fight for his control but lose it. I marvel at the fact that I’m the one doing that to him.

I lift my hips, meeting his thrusts. “Little one,” he growls at me.

“Don’t stop,” I moan out. Another orgasm is building inside of me. This one is deeper than all the others.

“I’ll never stop,” he says before he starts to thrust harder. His hand slipping between us, his fingers going to my clit. It’s too much. I come. My body locks down all around him. Leone groans my name, his body jerking over mine a moment before I feel his warm release spill inside me. He buries his face in my neck as he thrusts hard one more time like he’s trying to get himself deeper.

“Leone,” I whisper into his ear. My hands go to his back.

“Yeah, little one?” he says against my neck.

“You, ah—” I lick my lips. Why am I being shy? The man is inside me. “You came in me.”

“I did.” He doesn’t freak out. Maybe he thinks I’m on something. Lots of girls just do those shots or whatever. Maybe we should have discussed this beforehand.

“I’m not on anything.”

“Didn’t think you were.” He nuzzles my neck, his cock jerking. I let out a small moan.

“You’re still hard,” I point out next. His whole body shakes with laughter. He lifts his head.

“I want you again, but we shouldn’t.” He starts to pull out, but I wrap my legs around him to stop him.

“I’m greedy, remember.”

“No, you’re mine is what you are,” he declares before he gives us both what we want.
Taking me again and again.

15

LEONE

“I’d much rather you stay home.” I sigh as Zoey fiddles with her seatbelt. Reaching over, I thread it along her front and between her breasts so it doesn’t bother her.

“Thanks.”

I take her hand. “It could be dangerous.”

“Not when you’re around.” She squeezes my fingers.

“Are you sore?” I’ve taken her virginity, and I wear it like a badge of pride on my heart. After that, I had her again and again, wearing her out until she finally fell asleep all tangled up in me. It’s how I want her to be always. But when I tried to creep out this morning, Bentley decided to let out the loudest, angriest meow possible from his post in the hallway outside my bedroom. The little tattletale.

Her cheeks flame pink. “I, um. I’m good.”

“So you’re ready for more?” I want to pull her into my lap, but I settle for pressing my lips against her neck and sucking her sweet skin between my teeth.

“I am, but ...”

“But?” I pull back and look into her eyes.

She glances out the window at the tattered bigtop tent as we slow down and pull into the huge, empty parking lot. “I’m just worried about Xanny. I mean, what if the locker is really here, and we get in it, and we find out something bad has happened to her? I don’t know if I can deal with it.”

I press my forehead to hers. “We’ll deal with it together, okay?”

She takes a deep, settling breath. “Together?”

“Always.” I brush my lips across hers as we roll to a stop.

Lenny steps out from the driver’s seat. After a few moments, he opens the door for me.

“It’s clear except some broken-down beaters along the back over there. Probably been abandoned for a while.” He tucks his suit coat around his holster, giving himself quick access to his gun if he needs it.

I step out and help Zoey to her feet, then I do the same move. Her eyes go to the gun at my side.

“Just in case,” I reassure her.

“You think he might be here?” She looks around nervously.

“Maybe you should stay in the car. It would be safer for you to—”

“No.” She glues herself to my side. “If Xanny left something here, I need to see what it is. She wouldn’t be afraid, so neither will I.”

“Little one, you only have to be you. Not her. All right? You’re enough.” I kiss the

top of her head, but she doggedly stands her ground.

“I’m ready.” She loops her arm through mine.

“Lenny, take point up ahead.” I jerk my chin, and he takes off. The sun is low on the horizon and casting long shadows at our feet.

The fair closed up last year and then shut down for good. When Zoey and her sister went, they probably didn’t realize it would be for the last time. Or maybe Xanny did. After all, she hid something in a locker that would no longer be here if the carnival had moved on as it did in years past.

“Your sister is pretty clever, isn’t she?” I muse out loud as I lead Zoey through the front entrance, past the rusted turnstiles and under a cracked sign promising ‘Fun for the Whole Family.’

“She always has been. Sometimes I think it’s the only reason we were able to make it on our own after we left our parents.” She looks up at the shredded bigtop tent, the flaps of fabric blowing in the breeze off the water nearby.

“There’s something I’ve been meaning to ask about that.”

“What?” She casts me a sideways glance.

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“I know your parents neglected you.”

She stiffens slightly.

“But did they ever hurt you?” I ask it gently even though the thought of anyone putting their hands on Zoey makes my blood reach lava levels.

“No.” She shakes her head. “I mean, they put us in sketchy situations with sketchy people sometimes.”

I lead her around a decrepit ‘test your strength’ machine and deeper into the rusty machinery and abandoned rides. “Did any of them hurt you?”

“No. Well, I mean one of them tried something with me. I was too young to really remember it, but Xanny told me about it. She stopped him, and he ended up bloody. She cut him pretty bad with a kitchen knife. But no one called the cops, of course. They’d never do that. My parents moved us to someone else’s house after that, but they always blamed her for messing up their ‘situation’ at that place.”

I say a silent prayer of thanks for Xanny. “She sounds like a good sister.”

“She really is.” She squeezes my arm. “We’re so different, but we always take care of each other.”

Something skitters across the ground to our right. Thankfully, Zoey doesn’t seem to notice the pair of large rats that seem to have made a large trash barrel their home.

“This is it. Up here.” I spy the lock boxes up ahead, their position still the same as it was in the photo.

Zoey quickens her steps until she’s practically running.

We skid to a stop in front of the small metal bank.

Zoey lets out a disappointed groan when she realizes every single box has been busted open. None of them have a lock left.

“Oh no.” She stares, her eyes welling. “They’re all empty. Someone stole whatever she left here.”

“Hang on.” I pull a flashlight from my pocket, the waning light not enough to get a clear view. When I click it on, I train it on one box after another.

Zoey’s right. They’re empty.

I click the light off, but then see a faint scratch mark on one of them. Clicking the light back on, I lean down and peer at it.

“Do you see this? It’s an X scratched into the edge here.” I show Zoey.

She leans down, too. “It’s Xanny’s mark!”

I push the creaky door to the corresponding box all the way open and train my light on the inside.

“Look!” Zoey points. “In the back. It’s like the metal is sort of–”

“Different.” I reach in and tap on it. “It’s a false back.” Shoving against one corner, I

pop the back panel loose and pull it free.

“It’s just cardboard covered with aluminum foil.” Zoey smiles to herself. “Xanny, you’re too smart for your own good. She must’ve done this more recently.” She chews her bottom lip and bends down again. “What’s in there?”

I grab a small black box, the front of it secured with a combination lock. “I’m not sure what—” I stop.

“What?” Zoey looks at me.

I turn around and listen, then scoot Zoey behind me.

“What?” she whispers, her voice edging higher.

“Lenny hasn’t checked in.” The hair on the back of my neck stands on end, and I pull my gun before I even hear the first shot.

But it comes soon after.

16

ZOEY

My heart sinks when Leone yanks me behind him before shoving the box into one of his pockets and pulling out his gun. I realize he's moved me to use his own body to shield mine.

I want to protest, but I know right now the last thing Leone needs is to bicker with me. Not even a half a second later, the sound of a gun going off fills the air. I gasp when a bullet whizzes by both of us, hitting the metal locker right where I'd been standing moments before.

Leone pulls me into his side as more gunfire starts to sound all around me. I can't tell if it's coming from Leone or whoever might be shooting at us. I'm guessing both. I stay glued to Leone as we run back toward the car. Suddenly he stops, releasing his hold from me. I lift my head to see that we're behind the small brick bathroom. I watch as Leone reloads his gun before turning to me.

"No matter what happens. If I fall, you keep going." He thrusts a set of keys into my hand.

"What are these?"

"They're to the car. Lenny hasn't checked in, so I don't know if he's dead or alive."

I choke back a sob.

“Remember, if I go down or tell you to run, don’t hesitate. You run as fast as you can to that car, and you get the hell out of here. Don’t look back.” Does he really think I could leave him?

“Leone.”

“Zoey, do you trust me?”

I nod. I more than trust him. I’m completely, hopelessly in love with him.

“Then do as I tell you.”

“Okay.” I agree even though I don’t want to.

“That’s my girl.” He presses his mouth against mine in a hard kiss.

When he starts to pull back, I grab him. I may have already lost one person I love with so many things left unsaid. I won’t lose another without letting them know exactly how I feel.

“I love you,” I tell him. Leone closes his eyes for a moment.

“I love you too, little one.” He gives me one last long kiss before he grabs my hand, pressing his back firmly against the wall before he peeks out around it and fires off a few rounds. Then we’re running again.

“Fuck.” Leone grunts, his whole body going stiff on me.

I can’t hold it back any longer. Tears slide down my cheeks. He’s been hit. I know it. That doesn’t slow him down, though. My legs burn, and I can barely catch my breath. We come to a halt behind the ticket booth, and Leone starts to reload again. Blood

leaks down his arm.

“Where’s the wound? Your arm?” I ask, trying to pinpoint where the blood is starting.

“Yeah,” he says a bit too calmly for my liking. “I got one guy, but there’s still one more.”

I nod. “We’re almost there.”

He drops his forehead against mine. “Are you still with me?”

“I’ll always be with you, Leone.” He smirks, kissing the tip of my nose.

As soon as he pulls back from me, his expression completely changes. His eyes are now dark. He looks nothing like the Leone I’ve come to know. He looks lethal and sexy as all hell. This is so not the time for me to be thinking about any of that, but I can’t help it if my mind went there. Leone’s movement breaks me from my inappropriate thoughts. I watch as he starts to lean out again but pulls back when bullets rain into the old metal ticket box.

“Come on, motherfucker,” I hear him say under his breath. His mouth moves again, but I can’t hear what he’s saying. A few more shots hit the ticket box as I realize Leone is counting. My heart drops when he starts to lean out again as bullets are still flying our way, but the second he turns the corner, they stop, and it’s his gun going off now. “Got him.”

He pulls me, and we take off again on a dead run. Leone isn’t holding his gun up as we make our way back toward the car. His hand is to his side. His blood is still dripping and leaving a trail behind us. His steps start to slow down.

As we draw closer to the car, I don't see Lenny anywhere. The driver's side door stands open. "Do you want me to drive?" I ask. Leone slows down more when we're about twenty yards out from the car until he comes to a complete stop. "What?" I squeeze his hand, worry filling me.

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Leone lifts his other hand with the gun pointing it in the direction of the car. I follow his line of sight. All the air I have left in my lungs leaves when I see Xanny standing there on the other side of the car pointing a gun right back at us.

“Where's Lenny?” Leone asks as his hold on my hand tightens. It's something I've noticed he does when he thinks I might try to leave his grasp.

“Both of you put the guns down!” I shout. They have them trained on each other.

“Where's the box?” Xanny asks her own question, ignoring not only Leone's question but me as well.

“Xanny, where is Lenny? Is he okay?”

“He's still breathing. I only knocked him out.” She shrugs. “Give the box to Zoey.”

“If you think I'm going to give her the box and send her to you, you're dead wrong.”

Xanny's eyes narrow on Leone.

“Stop pointing guns at each other,” I hiss. This is ridiculous. When neither do as I say, I try to step out in front of Leone, but he jerks me right back. “The hell!?”

“You can have the box,” Leone says again to her.

“I'm not leaving without my sister.”

“Funny. You had no problem leaving her before.”

“Hey!” I snip at Leone, not appreciating him talking to Xanny that way.

“I didn’t have a choice.” Her eyes start to fill with tears, but she quickly pulls it back. She’s always been so good at masking her emotions. It breaks my heart for her.

I reach into Leone’s pocket and pull out the box for myself before shoving it in my own pocket.

“Now who’s driving?” I ask. Again, I try to move but don’t get anywhere.

“Let her go, or I swear I’ll kill you.” I’ve never heard Xanny sound so cold before.

“You can’t kill him, Xanny. I love him.”

She shakes her head at my words. “Zoey, you can’t love this man. You have no clue who he really is. But I know who he is and the things he’s done.”

“I don’t care what he’s done. He’s kept me safe, and he loves me too.”

“Of course he loves you.” Xanny rolls her eyes.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I say defensively.

“She means that anyone would love and want to keep you. Your innocence and sweetness is like a balm on the black souls of men like me.”

“That’s oddly sweet.” I reach up to touch Leone’s cheek, his face whiter now. He’s losing too much blood. We need to get him to a doctor or a hospital.

“Both of you knock it off. Leone needs medical help, and if he dies, I swear on Bentley I’ll never forgive you, Xanny. Now everyone get in the damn car already. I’m not going to say it again. You’re driving, Xanny.” Both of them remain standing there. “Now!” I shout, fed up with this whole situation.

Finally they both lower the guns and do as I say.

“Leone. There’s so much blood,” I whimper as I finally get his stupid shirt off him. When Leone doesn’t say anything, I jerk my gaze to his face. He’s staring at me, but he’s fading quickly. “Leone, you stay with me. Don’t you dare leave me.”

“You hear me?” I pull my shirt off to press it against the wound in his arm.

“Put your shirt back on,” he half-growls. I’d laugh if my heart wasn’t falling apart.

“If you don’t stay with me, I’m going to become a stripper. How about that?” I taunt.

“You wouldn’t do that to me.” He half-smiles. “I love you, little one.”

“You stop saying sweet things to me right this second.” He’s acting like he’s leaving me.

“When did you get so bossy?”

“When you started building me back up. Now do as I say and don’t leave me,” I order.

“Never,” he promises, giving me hope. My Leone is a man of his word when it comes to me. He won’t leave me. I know it.

17

LEONE

Zoey fusses with my arm as her sister tears out of the parking lot.

“I’m all right.” I reach across her and fasten her seatbelt. “Better.”

“You’re shot!” She reaches for the belt, but I take her hand.

“I’m shot, but your sister is driving like a maniac.” I grit my teeth against the wave of pain that rockets up my shoulder.

“Hey!” Xanadu shouts from the front.

“Leave it on.” I squeeze Zoey’s hand.

“Fine.” She wrinkles her nose, then goes back to feeling for my wound. “What are we going to do about this? I don’t know what to do.”

“Wait, little one.” I use my good hand to pull out my phone and dial a number. When my phone begins to ring, I hear it echoing in the trunk.

Xanadu smirks at me in the rearview mirror. “I told you he’s still breathing.”

“Boss,” Lenny croaks as he answers.

“Get Doc Ray to meet us at the house when we arrive.”

“Boss, I’m trapped somewhere, and I–”

“You’re in the trunk. Make the call.” I hang up and try not to wince as Zoey pulls my shirt down my shoulder and gasps when she sees the bullet hole in me.

“There’s so much blood.” She blanches. “Oh, no. Oh no, no, no.”

“Deep breaths, sis.” Xanny takes a hard left toward the freeway.

“Put your shirt back on.” I hand it to Zoey, even though it has my blood on it. “Xanadu, go north. To my place. It’s right off of–”

“Route 433,” Xanny cuts in. “I know where you live, where you’ve been holding my sister captive.” Her eyes narrow.

“What?” Zoey slips it over her head, then rips off a piece of the bottom and puts it against the wound again. “I’m not his captive!”

“Zoey, this man is a killer. He’s no good. He stole you and kept you just to get at me, to try and make me return some money to his piece of shit boss Davinci!”

Zoey looks at me, her eyes wide. “Is that true?”

“The killer part...” I can’t deny it, so I don’t. “I can tell you about my past later, and I swear I’ll give you every bit of information you want to know. But the rest of it—keeping you captive? No. That’s not true. I kept you safe because I wanted to, because you didn’t deserve what happened to you, because I love you. And you met Nick Davinci yourself. Draw your own conclusions. He’s not my boss. He’s a friend.” I turn and glare right back at Xanadu in the mirror. “Because of you, she

almost died. She was almost gunned down in Marvin's shitty club because of whatever game you're playing!" I say it with more vehemence than I intended, but I can't help it. When I think about what might've happened to Zoey if I hadn't been there that night ...

"What?" Now it's Xanadu's turn to look shocked. She turns onto the freeway, heading north, possibly in spite of herself.

"It's true!" Zoey leans forward. "I was there looking for you, and then this guy came and started shooting. He killed Marvin. He tried to kill me. He made it seem like he'd do it, too, if he could find me, because he didn't want witnesses."

"What did he look like?" The earlier fire from Xanadu's voice is gone as she glances at her sister.

"Dark hair. Kind of greasy. I didn't get a great look at him. Leather jacket, I think?"

"Carlov." She sighs and shakes her head. "It has to be." She swerves a little, straightening up into the lane after she'd drifted.

"Who's Carlov?" Zoey sits back and keeps yanking at her shirt, finally tearing off a piece at the bottom.

Lenny groans from the trunk. "I think I'm gonna be sick." His muffled voice comes through.

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“Carlov. I’ve heard of him.” I grit my teeth as Zoey ties her makeshift tourniquet around my arm above the wound. “He’s a nobody, a punk who likes to do wet work, but his name came up a while back when he got into some pretty deep debt with Davinci.”

Xanadu nods. “That’s him.”

“How do you know him, Xanny?” Zoey finishes tying my arm. She doesn’t meet my eyes as she pulls back.

Her sister tenses. “I don’t think we should get into that right—”

“I think we should,” Zoey says quietly. “I think we should put everything out on the table. I’m tired of being left in the dark. Manipulated. All of it. I need to know the truth.” She clutches her hands in front of her. “From both of you.”

“Zoey ...” Xanadu starts, then sighs. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry for all of it. I met Carlov when he came into the club. He seemed like an easy mark, so I played him for a while. What I didn’t realize is he was playing me. Collecting information on me. He found out about you.”

“Me?” Zoey asks.

“Yeah.” She takes the highway exit toward my estate. “He used that information against me. He knew about Marvin’s stash in the safe, and he said if I didn’t get it for him, he’d find you and hurt you. Really bad. In ... in all ways ...” She swallows hard.

I can feel a muscle ticking in my jaw, the way my blood turns to ice, the rage rising in my gut. Even if Zoey feels uncertain right now, I want to comfort her, so I wrap my good arm around her. To my relief, she doesn't pull away.

"You did all this to protect me?"

Xanadu nods. "I took Marvin's money. I was supposed to turn it over to Carlov, but I thought I could double-cross him, grab you, and go. So I told Carlov I'd tried, but I couldn't get to the safe. He didn't like that answer." She turns her head to the side and wipes her fingers along her skin, revealing a concealed bruise on her cheek. "He was desperate for the money. I thought he was going to kill me. Instead, he tied me up and locked me in his place. I was trapped there for days. I tried to make it back to you." Her voice cracks. "I was so scared he'd hurt you. But when I finally escaped, I found out he'd gone after the money head-on and killed Marvin, and then I heard a rumor you'd been taken by Leone." Her gaze shifts to me. "Held hostage over the money."

"No." Zoey shakes her head. "It's not like that. He saved me."

"You shouldn't have been at the club," Xanadu snaps back. "That's no place for you. You can't handle the—"

"I was looking for you!" Zoey yells.

"I can take care of myself."

"You obviously can't!"

"I've kept us safe for all this time. You have to trust me when I—"

"You were gone!" Zoey explodes. "I was so scared. You didn't tell me anything! I

had no idea what happened to you! And all you left for me to even begin to track you down was some random clue behind a picture frame? Do you know how impossible that is? I need you to trust me, Xanny! To tell me the truth!" She breaks on a sob and buries her face in my chest.

"Zoey." I stroke my hand down her back. "You're both safe now. We're going to figure this out, all right?"

"You need to get your hands off my sister," Xanadu snaps.

"Don't talk about me like I'm not here!" Zoey shouts right back. "Of the two of you, Leone's the only one who's been straight with me! And you're worried about this hands on me?" She scoffs, then turns to me, cups my cheeks, and lays on me the most aggressive, lust-filled kiss I've ever felt.

I can't stop the roar in my breast, the answering ferocity of my kiss as I claim my angry temptress, the fiery angel who's stolen my heart and soul. God, I love this woman.

18

ZOEY

“And what are you doing now?” I ask the doctor. He turns his head slowly and gives me an annoyed expression. I can’t help it. He showed up here with his gray hair sticking every which way, reminding me of Dr. Brown from Back to the Future. He opens his mouth to start saying something, but Leone cuts him off before he can.

“Watch it, Doc,” Leone growls at him.

“I was only going to say maybe I should give her something to calm her down.”

“I love her just the way she is,” Leone responds. I’d stick my tongue out at Doc, but he is saving my man.

“Ahh, you’re always so sweet.” I lean down and give Leone a kiss.

“Sweet?” Doc mutters under his breath. “Maybe she needs a CT scan. Did she hit her head?”

“Can we finish this?” Leone growls again. The doc gets to it.

“This part is going to hurt. You sure you don’t want something stronger?”

“No.” Leone shakes his head.

“Maybe a little something?” I try to encourage, not wanting to see Leone in all this pain. He’s in this mess because of Xanny and me. I hate that he got hurt because of us. I’m still finding it hard to believe that this is about whatever money was in Marvin’s safe that is owed to Nick Davinci.

Sure, the money is owed, but I think Leone could and would easily cover it. To my Leone, this is about a man wanting me dead. And while Xanny might also think Nick is hard up for the money, I don’t think he’ll be coming for her head. Sophia already texted me about hanging out again sometime soon. She even asked if there was any luck on finding my sister yet.

She’d been so sweet about all of it when I told her. She actually understood a bit the position I was in. Once upon a time, she too had a sibling that could get himself into trouble, and more often than not it was because he wanted to protect her, so she got it. It was nice to hear from her that things all worked out for the best and her husband and brother are now close. I don’t think Xanny and Leone are going to be BFFs, but I do think that maybe they could get along eventually. After all, they both have one giant thing in common: me.

Leone shakes his head again, refusing any sort of anesthesia, so I go about distracting him the best I can.

“You did it,” I say as I see Doc picks up some long metal forceps-looking thing. That’s my guess of what it is.

“Did what?” Leone asks. I put my hand on his cheeks and turn his face toward me, dropping another kiss on him. I want all his attention.

“You got Xanny back. Time for you to collect.”

A slow, sexy smile slides across his lips. I see Doc start to slip the forceps thing into

Leone's wound. "What is it you'll be collecting? I mean you already collected one thing, but you said that wasn't it. I really want to know what it is."

"You haven't figured it out yet?"

I tap my finger to my lip, trying to figure out what it is that Leone could want from me that he hasn't already gotten. Then it hits me. Heat blooms through my cheeks.

"I, ah—" I start getting flustered. "You're so big, and I'm so small. I mean, you even call me your little one." A confused expression crosses Leone's face. I guess he thinks it would fit. "I'll try. I know you wouldn't hurt me, so if you think it will work, then okay."

"I'm not sure what you're thinking, little one, but I don't think it's what I'm after."

"Anal," Doc says.

"Watch your—FUCK!" Leone bellows as Doc pulls out the slug that was lodged in him.

"Meow!" Out of nowhere, Bentley lands right on top of Leone's stomach. His teeth show as he hisses at the doctor. Doc stumbles back and slips right off the side of the bed. The forceps go flying into the air along with the slug. They end up hitting the floor while the crushed bit of bullet drops onto the bed.

"He's protecting you." My eyes fill with tears. "He thinks Doc is trying to hurt you." Bentley steps off Leone and walks to the end of the bed, where he proceeds to growl and hiss at Doc who's still down on the floor.

"Can someone get the damn cat out of here?" Doc grumbles, but he doesn't make a move to return to the bed. Bentley goes to jump down towards the doc—I'm sure to

finish this fight—but I grab him.

“You’re so sweet,” I tell Bentley as I give him kisses and cuddle him close. “You’ve always been my protector, and now you’re Leone’s too.”

“Starting to see she has a different definition of the word ‘sweet’ than the rest of the world.” Doc comes to his feet.

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“I can put him back down.” I smirk.

Doc holds his hands up. “Stitch up my man,” I order, holding Bentley out like a live grenade. He gives a nice loud hiss.

Leone chuckles as he sits there, his back to the headboard, enjoying the show. Job well done for me, I suppose. Bentley too. I think we distracted him pretty good. Doc grumbles something but gets back to it. I give Bentley another kiss on the top of his head before I set him down on the floor. He walks over to the cat house in the shape of a castle and settles in for the night.

“So it’s not....” I trail off.

“Not today, but it’s nice to know it’s on the table,” he teases me.

“Leone, most things are on the table when it comes to you. I trust if you’re asking me to do something, it’s safe for me to do.” I slide my hand into his.

“You’re too good for me, little one, but I can’t let you go.” He squeezes my hand.

“I thought the trunk was a safe place for you. It’s bulletproof. You should be thanking me. Not ordering me to clean up your throw-up in it,” I hear Xanny shout. A second later, she’s in the doorway to Leone’s and my bedroom. “Wow, these are your digs?”

A hiss comes from the castle. “Hush, Roadkill.”

“Xanny!” I shout. I hate it when she calls Bentley that.

“He started it,” she huffs. “That cat hates everyone.”

“Not true. He just protected Leone. He thought Doc was trying to hurt him.”

“Maybe he thought Doc was trying to save him.” Suddenly a growl comes from me. I put my hand over my mouth, not sure where that sound came from.

“And I’m done here. You know the drill. I left everything here you’ll need. I’ll check back tomorrow.” Doc starts packing up his tools while Xanny and Lenny bicker about cleaning up throw-up.

“All right, everyone out,” I say, slipping from the bed and walking over to the door to motion for everyone to move their booties through it. “I want a moment alone with my Leone.”

“We need to talk,” Xanny whispers under her breath when she passes me. I only give her a nod. I don’t know why it’s a secret, but right now, I don’t care. I need to be with my man, so whatever it is will have to wait.

“Thank you, Doc. I’m sorry if I was a bit much. I just love that man and only found him recently. I can’t lose him yet.”

“I understand.” He smiles. “Congratulations, by the way. I’ll accept an invite.” With that, he’s out the door. What a weird way to respond to a thank you. I close the door and lock it for good measure.

“Now.” I rush over to the bed and hop in before I rub my hands together. “Deal time.”

“Later. You need sleep.” He pulls back the blanket. I crawl in.

“I’m not that tired.” I yawn as I say it.

“Here.” He pulls me over to rest my head on his chest. “Rest, little one.” He kisses the top of my head.

“I’m fine. You’re the one who needs rest.” My eyes grow heavy. I open my mouth to tell Leone we never did open that box, but only a stupid yawn comes out again before sleep pulls me under.

19

LEONE

“You shouldn’t be doing that.” Zoey plies the fork from my fingers and brings a bit of waffle to my mouth.

“I still have one good arm, little one.” I take the proffered bit and chew.

“I know, but I want to take care of you. You always take care of me.” She smiles and cuts another piece for me.

“I always will.”

She smiles, her eyes lighting up as she brings another bite to my mouth. “Madge is so good at cooking. I’ve never wanted to learn, but she almost makes me want to reconsider. Then again, the last time I tried to make mac and cheese, I exploded the microwave. I still don’t know how it happened. I mean—”

“You left your fork in the Instant Mac bowl when you put it in. It’s metal. You can’t put metal into the microwave.” Xanny strides in, her blond hair up in some sort of fauxhawk with braids and twists.

Zoey’s mouth drops open. “Oh, you never told me that. You said it must’ve short circuited or been bad from the factory or something.”

“I know. I didn’t want to hurt your feelings.” She shrugs and pulls a plate of waffles

over to her. “Thanks, Madge.” She waves two fingers.

“Of course, Miss Xanny.” She taps the side of her nose. “And thanks again for the herbs.”

“Anytime.”

I raise a brow at Madge, but I don’t ask any questions. I learned long ago that a woman like Madge has a lot of secrets and skeletons in her closet, and I don’t need to know any of them. Despite all that, it seems Xanadu has somehow managed to charm the tough old bird.

Lenny leans on the kitchen doorframe, his eyes on Xanadu. I haven’t told him to keep an eye on her, but I’m glad he is. Zoey trusts her, I’ve no doubt about that. But I need to know more about her motivations and her dealings with Carlov before I make any judgments.

“Glower much?” Xanadu shakes her head at me and stabs a large piece of waffle before stuffing it into her mouth.

“He’s not glowering. He just has a very stern resting face.” Zoey kisses me on the cheek.

Though I don’t say it, I have to disagree with her. I’m definitely glowering at her sister.

“I need to know everything you have on Carlov. Once I neutralize him, we’ll talk about you returning the money to Nick.” I shift in my seat, pulling Zoey closer to me, my bad arm aching as I use it to muscle her against me.

“Returning the money?” Xanadu says around a mouthful of food. “No way. I stole

that fair and square. That's for me and Zoey."

"Xanny, it's not our money. You can't—"

"It is." She slams her fork down. "I've done what I had to do to get it. And now it's ours. We don't have to live in that stupid trailer anymore. And fuck Carlov. Once we get out of town, we won't have to worry about him. He's not smart enough to track us anywhere. We can disappear. Live the life we deserve. Get away from all these assholes who think they can control us." Xanadu gives me a pointed look.

"I'm not controlling Zoey." I level her with a stare. "And she isn't going anywhere."

Xanadu stands, her hands going to her hips. "You can't keep her here against her will. I don't care how many goons you've got, I'll fight until my last breath to—"

"No fighting." Zoey scrambles to her feet, though I keep her tight to my chest. "I'm not his hostage, Xanny."

"Wake up, Zoey. He kidnapped you. He's working for the guy who wants the money I took." She holds her hand out to Zoey. "Let's go. Let's get the money and take off. Do all the things we talked about. Okay?"

For a fraction of a moment, fear overcomes me at the thought of Zoey going with her sister, choosing her instead of me. But I don't give in to it. I know down to my bones that Zoey belongs with me, and I have to have faith that she feels it too.

"Xanny." Zoey shakes her head. "We don't have to go. Leone has kept me safe this whole time, and he can do the same for you."

"We don't need him," Xanadu scoffs. "Come on."

“You’re wrong.” Zoey lifts her chin, her shoulders back. “I need him.”

My heart, that broken husk, seems to beat anew when I hear her words.

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“I love him, Xanny. Nothing will change that. I’m staying.”

Xanadu drops her hand, her eyes watering as she looks at her sister. “You can’t mean that.”

“I do.” Zoey reaches for her hand and takes it. “But you can stay, too.”

Lenny gives a slight nod from his spot in the doorway, though he doesn’t say anything.

“Stay here with one of the most dangerous mob kingpins in the world—that’s your idea of safe?” Xanadu swipes at her eyes and pulls her hand from her sister’s grip. “Do you even hear yourself?”

“I love her, Xanadu.” I stand with Zoey. “I know you don’t believe me, but you need to trust your sister. What we have is real. I never would’ve thought it was possible for me, but the moment I saw her, something in me justknew.” I shrug, my arm aching with the movement. “So she isn’t leaving. I can’t let her go.”

Xanadu’s gaze bounces between Zoey and me.

“Please, Xanny. Stay. We need to make a plan.” Zoey steps toward her. “Please?”

Xanadu focuses on her. “Can we talk in private?”

Lenny glances at me. I nod. “Go and talk to your sister, Zoey.” That fear tries to creep in again, but I shove it down.

Zoey wouldn't leave me. Not when she holds my heart in her hands.

"Okay." She gets on her tiptoes and kisses my cheek. "I'll be right back."

Xanadu strides out, and Zoey follows.

"Want me to keep an eye?" Lenny asks.

"From a distance. Don't interfere. Just make sure they're safe."

I force myself to sit down, even though everything in me is screaming for me to follow Zoey. But I can't. Instead, I have to trust her. And I do. With my life. With everything that I am.

20

ZOEY

“You know he’s got cameras all over these trees?” Xanny points out one of them.

Up close to the house, it’s all open with perfectly mowed grass that has those fancy lines in it. There are flowers and bushes placed all around. Some run along the house while others line the driveway. I’d noticed the pink ones out back that surrounded a bird bath. I mentioned how pretty they are to Leone one morning when eating breakfast. Now they line the entire patio area. Those are the things I’ve been noticing. Not the cameras in the trees.

“I don’t see them.” I squint, trying to see what she’s talking about.

“Yeah, most people want you to know they’ve got cameras to deter you, but not Leone.”

I mean, there is a giant gate with guards on it. I think that makes it pretty clear he doesn’t want people trespassing, but I don’t mention that to her.

“But you said you saw it.”

“I knew what I was searching for.”

I fight to not roll my eyes. I came out here to listen to what she had to say, and I need to do that.

“Honestly I like that he has the cameras. He’s keeping me safe.”

“This is bad, Zoey.” Xanny drops her hand.

“What? Why? That’s what you’re not getting. It doesn’t have to be bad. Leone can fix it.”

I wish for once she’d see me as a woman and not the little girl she has to take care of. That she would realize I have my own opinions, and I also have my own dreams.

“I can fix it too!” She raises her voice. “I’m sorry.” She takes a deep breath.

“You don’t have to be sorry, Xanny. You’re allowed to shout at me if you’re mad.” She shakes her head in response, not agreeing with me.

“I’m not a child anymore, and you’re not my mother.”

“You’re still a bit of a child, Zoey, and I’m not saying that to be mean. It’s partly my fault. We might live in a trailer park, but I sheltered you because we didn’t have much of a choice. We couldn’t let people know about you. You did all your schooling online ‘cause we couldn’t send you in case we got busted. You lost out on getting to know people and interacting with them.”

“Are you saying I’m gullible?”

“Those cameras. The ones outside your room are new and overkill. He had them added. Not to keep you safe, Zoey. To keep you in.”

I’m not sure what to say to her about that because I don’t care. “So he kidnapped or is keeping me captive for what?”

“To keep you!”

“I want him to keep me.”

Xanny closes her eyes and drops her head back in frustration. I’m not sure what to do. We’re going in circles here, and she’s about to blow. When Xanny loses it, everyone needs to get the hell out of the way.

“He’s not a good man, Zoey.” She tries again.

“He’s a good man to me. No, strike that, he’s a great man.”

Xanny ignores me and keeps going. Leone listens to me too.

“We can get out of here. You’ve always wanted to live on the beach. We could get a little house on one. We have the means to do that now.”

“You wanted to live on the beach,” I remind her. It’s always been her dream, I just kind of went along with it.

“We both did.”

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“I mean, you made it sound nice. I’d agree to live a lot of places that weren’t that crappy apartment or the trailer park. Both of which I couldn’t go outside of unless we were sneaking around.”

Xanny’s face falls. She stares at me for a long moment. “You have Stockholm syndrome,” she says like the revelation just hit her. “I really have to get you out of here.”

I take a step back from her.

“Zoey.” Her brows pull together.

“If you try to force me to leave, I’ll fight you.”

Her eyes widen, hurt ghosting across them before she tamps it down. “Do you hear yourself right now?”

“Do you ever hear me? Or listen to me?”

“Think about it, Zoey. You’re freaked out because I haven’t come home. You know some creep has been stalking me, so I’m sure your mind is going crazy with what might have happened to me. So you go to that club. Not only do you watch someone die, you almost die yourself. Then this handsome man—”

“Watch it,” I growl, sounding a bit like Bentley. She rolls her eyes.

“This man saves you. You get back to our place, and it’s trashed, but you manage to

find Bentley, and Leone brings you back here.” She waves her hands toward the house. “Where he spoils you and the furry devil.”

An image of Bentley wearing devil horns for Halloween pops into my head. That would be adorable. I could be the angel. Leone could be the grim reaper.

“All that sounds great.” I thought she was trying to talk me into leaving. Now she’s giving me a list of reasons as to why I should stay. I suppose it’s not a great time to suggest Xanny be a ghost.

“All that sounds like one of your books you love so much. The ones you always gush to me about and say one day you’ll find your hero. It’s not real, Zoey. He’s not a hero. Sure, he saved you, but he’s one of the bad guys.”

“I don’t know what you want me to do, Xanny. We’re at a crossroads here. What would prove to you that I really want to be here?”

“Come with me.” She holds her hand up when I start to say no instantly. “For a month. You and me. The trip we could never have but now we can.”

“I don’t know.”

“Two weeks,” she tries again. I feel terrible that I don’t want to go. At least not without Leone.

“You’ll just leave Lenny?” I point behind me where I know he’s lurking somewhere.

“He’s over there.” Xanny points in another direction. “And what does that even mean?”

“You know what it means.”

“Not a clue.” She makes her face have the most bored expression. I’m not buying it. I might not know how to read people, and I might be a touch gullible and naïve like she thinks, but I can read her.

That’s why I take a step back from her. She might have had a hurt expression on her face, but we both know she’s thought about kidnapping me herself. Which is a crazy idea that could get her hurt. Leone would come for me and would never stop until he found me. I don’t think he’d hurt her out of love for me, but something could go wrong. She could even end up hurting him, and then I’d have to hurt her because she instigated it. No, I would like to choose the “nobody gets hurt” option.

“I’m not willing to risk going out beyond the gates of my home with this psycho still hunting us. I know you said he won’t find us, but I can’t be too sure. I’d love to spend time with you on a beach.”

“So if he’s out of the picture you’d go?”

“Ahh, yeah.” I nod.

“Without Leone?”

“No.”

“Ahhh!” She throws her hands in the air.

“I know who Leone is, Xanny. That he lives in the gray area of life. Same as you,” I point out. She’s no angel, so I’m not sure why she’s being so judgmental. “I even think if I asked him if we could leave here and all of us go live on this beach, he’d do it. Because he loves me and all my weird quirks. You said it yourself. He’s handsome and rich. He could have anyone, but he wants me. He’s obsessed with me!” Now I throw my hands up in the air.

“I’m not going to win this one with you.”

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I shake my head. She's not.

"It's you that needs to make some decisions here. Then we all go from there."

She nods, but I swear I see her mind still working. "Xanny, one more thing."

"What?"

"Don't try to drug me or do something to knock me out."

Her lips purse, and she doesn't try to deny it.

"I could be pregnant." I whisper so only she can hear it. Her mouth falls open.

"That was always my dream, Xanny. Those books I read showed me what love could be. I wanted to find my true love. A love so great he'd do anything and everything to have me and keep our family safe."

"Unconditional love. Nothing like our parents," Xanny whispers. I'm not sure if she's talking to herself or both of us.

"And I'll give my Leone unconditional love right back," I vow before I head back into the house. Xanny needs to do some soul searching on her own and without having to worry about me.

When I enter, I find Leone pacing back and forth. He stops the second I come through the door.

“You’re staying?”

I run over to him and fling myself in his arms. He catches me. “I am, but don’t be acting like you’d let me leave even if I wanted to.”

“I want you to want to be here.”

“I do, too, more than anything.” I press my mouth to his. “Plus I still have a deal to complete,” I tease.

“She’ll come around.” Leone sees right through me trying to pretend I’m okay.

“I want her to stay.” Tears fill my eyes.

“She has to choose it.” He strokes the back of his hand down my cheek. “I’ve already chosen you; now she has to do the same.” He leans closer and brushes his lips against mine. “And she will, because you, little one, are irresistible.”

When he kisses me, my cares melt away, and I’m lost in Leone, in all of him—the dark and the light, the gray, the totality of him, of the man I love.

21

LEONE

Zoey paces, her hips swaying as she moves back and forth beside our bed. Bentley and I sit and watch her.

“She’ll come back,” I tell her again.

“She just left. I didn’t think she’d do that.” She shakes her head. “After we talked last night, I thought she’d realize she should stay. I mean, I told her we could all go to a beach or do whatever it is she wanted. I told her how much I love you. I thought she understood.”

“Maybe she needs time to process it.” I stand and walk to her, stopping her gently and pulling her into my arms, ignoring the ache from the bullet wound.

“I know, but she just ran off. It’s like the last time. She thinks she can do whatever she wants and leave me in a holding pattern. That I’ll be waiting for her when she comes back.”

“You weren’t last time.”

She looks up at me with watery eyes and a wry smile. “That’s because, according to her, you ‘kidnapped’ me.”

“I’d do it again in a heartbeat.” I scoop her into my arms and sit on the bed, cradling

her in my lap.

“I’d run away with you. You wouldn’t even have to save my life or anything. I’m yours,” she breathes against my neck, her body still tense as her mind worries over what made Xanny take one of my cars and tear out of here last night.

I don’t know either. Lenny came banging on our bedroom door to say she’d gone, and I had to stop him from taking off after her. But that’s the thing about Xanny—she can take care of herself. For better or worse, she makes her own choices and follows through on them. I learned that when I realized she was the one who took Nick’s cash from Marvin’s safe.

“Maybe she’s gone to get the money and find her own beach.” I hug her tighter. “Do you think that’s it?”

“No way.” She shakes her head. “She wouldn’t leave me. Not when—Wait!” She wriggles from my hold, and I let her go.

“What is it, little one?”

“The box! I still have it.” She dashes to the closet.

I follow and watch as she pulls it from the back of her underwear drawer. “Here, see? I thought Xanny and I would open it together.”

“Come.” I take her hand and bring her back to the bed. “Let’s see what she was hiding.” I hate seeing Zoey so upset. “I’ve been assuming whatever is in here will lead to the cash.”

“Me, too. That’s why I sort of put it aside. But maybe that’s where she’s gone, you know? To get the cash.”

“Likely.” I examine the lock on the box, then grab my phone to find the photo of the scrap of paper Xanny left behind the photo. “Here’s the code.” I use the combination, and the lock springs open.

With shaking hands, Zoey opens the small box, then makes a ‘hmmph’ noise. “What is this?” She pulls out a casino chip.

“Looks like ten bucks from the Golden Pearl.”

She gives me a blank look.

“A casino over on the county line.”

“Oh, I think maybe Xanny was working there. She said she was serving drinks at a casino.” She looks up, thinking. “Maybe that’s where she stashed the money. She had a locker there or something for her change of clothes and personal items.”

I can’t help but chuckle. “Honestly, it’s brilliant.”

“What?”

“There’s no place on earth more secure than the inner workings of a casino. If she stowed the cash inside, it’s perfectly safe.”

“That’s Xanny.” She stands and nods. “Come on. Let’s see if we can find her before she makes any big decisions.”

“Hey,” I say softly.

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“What?” She yanks on some pants.

“If she chooses to go, Zoey...”

She shakes her head. “I can’t let her go by herself. Not like this.”

“Zoey.” I tilt her chin up. “You know how it felt when you realized she made all the decisions for you when you could’ve been making them yourself.”

“Yes.” She snuffles. “You showed me that.”

“The same goes for her. You may think you know what’s best for her, but she has to make her own choices, same as you. Okay?”

She nods. “Okay. But that doesn’t mean I won’t help her make the right one.” She gives me a determined smile.

I kiss her forehead. “That’s my girl.”

She grabs her bag and heads for the door with me on her heels. Her phone begins to buzz, and she stops and whips it out. “What?” She holds up the phone for me. It says “blocked number.”

I take it and answer it. “Who is this?”

“I could ask you the same” is the instant retort. “Doesn’t matter. Tell Xanadu’s sister to meet me at the trailer and bring the money or poor little Xanny isn’t going to see

another day dawn.”

A muffled “fuck you” sounds in the background in Xanny’s voice. Then I hear a thud, and Xanny groans. “And there’s another fucking broken rib for you if you make another sound, bitch!”

My blood goes cold. Lenny hovers at the end of the hallway, his gaze on us. I hold up a hand to keep him from bolting at my next words.

“Do you know who you’re fucking with, Carlov?” My words are measured, deadly.

Zoey grips my arm, her fingers going white as she clutches me. Carlov? she mouths.

“I don’t know, and I couldn’t give two shits. Tell the girl to bring the money or her sister’s a dead woman.”

He ends the call.

I calmly hand the phone back to Zoey and motion Lenny to me. He dashes down the hall. “Mobilize the men. I want all hands on deck to Zoey and Xanny’s old trailer. Carlov is there.” I turn to Zoey. “He has your sister.”

Lenny takes off toward the stairs and starts barking instructions into his phone.

“What?” She goes pale.

“He wants the money and thinks you have it. He’s holding her hostage until you deliver it.”

“Then let’s take it!” She tries to pull me along toward the stairs. “Come on!”

“We aren’t taking him a dime.” I hold on to her. “Zoey, I need you to stay here.”

“Like hell!” She turns and tries to free herself from my grip.

“Little one, it’s not safe. And it’s going to get ugly.” I let the full weight of my words linger in the air. “Carlov isn’t going to survive the hour. You don’t need to see that.”

“I won’t leave her alone. I can’t.” She turns back to me. “Please, Leone. Please don’t leave me behind. Please.”

Her pleading is something I can’t abide. I can’t stand to see her in pain.

It goes against my better judgment, but with Zoey, I’ve never been able to put reason over my love for her.

“You stay in the car.” I take her arms and stare down at her. “Youhaveto stay in the car. Promise me.”

Her bottom lip trembles, but she gives me a nod. “I promise.”

I kiss her forehead. “All right. Let’s go. We finish this tonight.”

22

ZOEY

The whole ride over to the trailer park is oddly quiet. All I want to do is burst into tears at the thought of something bad happening to my sister. Crawling into bed and pulling the covers over my head sounds nice, too. Why can't I be strong like Xanny? She's so fearless.

"It's going to be fine, little one." Leone gives my hand a gentle squeeze. We're sitting in the back of the car together. Lenny is driving, and another one of Leone's men sits in the passenger seat. My nerves are all over the place, and I hadn't even thought to ask the man his name. I actually don't know a few of the guys that lined up to go with us. I feel like I should, especially if they intend to fight for my sister and me. They're all in a separate SUV following us.

"I can't ask these guys to put themselves in harm's way, Leone." I lean forward to speak to the guy in the front. "I'm sorry. I, um, didn't get your name."

"If something affects you, we all know it's going to affect Leone, and that we don't tolerate," the man in the passenger seat says. He turns his head to face me. "I'm Tomas, by the way."

"Zoey," I say, even though I'm sure he already knows that. All of Leone's men seem to know who I am. It shouldn't surprise me with how seriously Leone takes my safety.

“Besides, pretty sure you’re going to be one of us soon enough.”

“I think I’d really like that.” I give Tomas the best smile I can muster right now.

“Thank you, Tomas.” He gives me a nod before turning back around.

Leone lifts my hand to his mouth and kisses it. “Are you going to tell me why you thought Bentley should come along?” Leone asks, glancing over to my baby sitting in the seat next to me.

“Cause no one but him can get into that trailer without being seen.”

“How does that help?”

“Because of this.” I hold up the little box that snaps onto Bentley’s collar.

“What is that?” He takes it from my hand.

“I might have ordered it from that website you showed me with all the pet gear.”

I’d gotten a couple of cat houses for Bentley along with his favorite food and treats. When I came across the little camera you could snap onto your cat’s collar to see what they’re up to when you’re not around, I was intrigued. I decided to order it once I realized how big Leone’s house is. Bentley could get lost, and this might help me find him.

“Is that a camera?” He takes it from my hand, inspecting it.

“Yes, and it goes to my phone.” I pull it out of my pocket and click the app to show him. “Now we’ll have eyes on the inside.” A sexy smile spreads across Leone’s face. “He’s basically the James Bond of the cat world.” I reach over and rub Bentley’s little head, causing him to let out a loud purr.

“Very clever thinking.” Leone hands me the box back, and I clip it onto Bentley as we pull into the rear of the trail park.

I glance behind us and see another black SUV follow us while one keeps driving past. I’m guessing they will come in from another direction. This is actually a bit of overkill for one man inside of a pretty small trailer. This just convinces me more that Xanny is crazy when it comes to her opinion on Leone. He is one of the good ones. He might not follow the laws of the government, having his own code, but he’s a good man. No one will ever convince me otherwise.

“Sir?” Lenny asks as he pulls over to the side, putting the vehicle into park.

“It’s yours, Lenny,” he tells him. “Leave the keys in.” Lenny nods before he gets out. Tomas follows suit, leaving Leone and me alone.

“What’s Lenny’s?” I ask.

“The kill shot if one has to be taken.”

“Oh.”

“Does that bother you?” Leone’s brows pull together, and I can see the worry on his handsome face.

“I mean, I figured Carlov was going to ... you know ...”

“Die,” Leone finishes for me.

“Yeah.” I try to hide my disappointment. I want him to die. He’s hurt Xanny already, and God knows how much more he’s done this time. I might not be as sweet and innocent as everyone thinks, after all.

“He’s going to die,” Leone says with unflinching certainty. “You want that, don’t you?” He smirks.

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“He needs to.” I don’t want him hurting or killing anyone else. Carlov is a menace. He’s made his bed.

“Couldn’t agree more. It’s just a matter of how. Lenny would rather we take him alive, but we don’t know how things might play out, and a kill shot might be needed to prevent someone else getting hurt.”

“Oh.” I perk up at that. “Wait, why do you want to take him alive and then do it?”

When Leone pauses for a long moment, I start to put those reasons together for myself. The shed that sits towards the back of the property through a bunch of trees comes to mind. “Never mind.”

“Remember what you said, little one. Stay in the car.”

I nod, not too happy about it.

“I need to stay focused. I can’t do that if I’m worrying about your safety.”

“I get it. You’re right. I’ll stay put. I promise. You do what you need to do to save my sister.”

“I love you.” He presses his mouth to mine in a hard kiss. “When this is over, I will be collecting.”

“About time.” I lean in for one more kiss. “I love you, too.”

I hand him over my phone, then pick Bentley up. I kiss the top of his little head. “Benny. Go get your treats,” I tell him. His eyes light up at the word ‘treats.’ I open the door and let him jump down. He takes off, knowing exactly where to go.

“He’s fast for as fa—”

“Hey!” I cut Leone off.

“Fluffy. For as fluffy as he is, I was going to say.”

I glare at him. “Go get my sister and bring my Bentley back,” I order him, ready for all of this to be over.

“On it,” he says before he’s out of the car. They all slip off to the left, disappearing from my sight. I crawl to the front until I’m sitting in the driver's seat. I roll down the windows a crack to see if I can hear anything. It’s dark out, but lights line the gravel roads. Only about one in three work, but it gives off some light. Most of the trailers have their porch lights off. Time drags.

When I hear a scream, I sit up straighter and look around. Then it starts again, only closer this time. I pull the seat up so that I can reach the pedals in case I need to move or something. Not that I know how to drive, but how hard can it be?

I put my foot on the brake before taking it out of park and shifting it to the D. The second I do, I see a man running toward me screaming. I can’t make out what he’s saying or make out his face. I squint trying to see better, but I make out one of the man's words. Cat.

I hit the button for the headlights and finally get a clearer look. It’s then I realize the man is running down the gravel road with a cat latched to his face. My cat.

I roll down the window and shout out at Bentley to see if I can get him to stop.

“Bentley! Go home!” I scream as loud as I can. He reacts immediately, releasing his clawed death grip of the man and jumping to the ground. I wince when Bentley does a small roll after he lands, but he’s up and darting in the direction of the trailer that we once called home. I don’t know what everyone’s talking about. Bentley isn’t a devil. The cat listens to all my orders. I’ve never seen any other cat do that.

The man stops running and turns to look back the way Bentley went before he starts to lean down, his hand going to his ankle. It’s Carlov, and a pang of fear hits me, thinking he might be reaching for a gun. I let my foot off the brake and push it down on the gas as hard as I can. The wheels spin, gravel spraying up before I take off.

Carlov jerks back up, his hand empty. I’m headed straight for him. Thankfully he didn’t have time to grab whatever he was reaching for. He tries to take off and run between two trailers, but it’s too late.

For some reason, Leone’s words pop into my head about not wanting me to see what is going to happen to Carlov, so I close my eyes right before I hit him. When I feel the impact, I hit the brakes. Something loud hits the hood, but I keep my eyes closed.

“Zoey!” Leone bellows my name. I search with my hand and find the stick thing and put the vehicle into park. My door flies open. “Zoey.” Leone’s hand grips my chin, turning my face toward him.

“I didn’t have time to put my seatbelt on,” I rush to say.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, but can I open my eyes now?”

“Yeah, little one. Open them but keep them on me.” I open them to see Leone. He’s got Bentley in his other arm.

“Is everyone okay? Xanny?” I ask, hoping she’s not hurt too bad.

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“Everything is fine, little one.” He leans in to give me a kiss that has me forgetting about everything that just went down. Until I feel a small tap on my face that brings me back to reality.

“You did so good! I knew you could do it.” I break the kiss, reaching out and taking Bentley from Leone’s arms. “I swear. You’ll get treats when we go back to our real home,” I promise him.

“Put him in the trunk. I’ll deal with him after I deal with her,” I hear Lenny growl. Leone takes a step back, and I see Lenny walking past with Xanny draped over his shoulder.

“Put me down, you caveman!” she hisses at him. I notice she’s not actually fighting him hard at all. She’s only wiggling around.

“If I recall, you rather enjoyed me being a caveman last night.”

My mouth falls open. I thought I’d seen tension between them and heated stares, but I didn’t know it had gone that far.

“Do you want me to intervene or—” Leone motions toward them with his hand.

“No way,” I say before he can finish. I’ve never seen Xanny this way with a man before. She’s pretty much letting him manhandle her.

“Good.” Leone relaxes. “I think he might have challenged me, and it wouldn’t have ended well. Lenny is like a brother to me.”

“Let’s make a deal that we stay out of all that.”

“Pretty sure you already owe me another deal.”

“Take me home, and I’ll pay up.” Leone doesn’t have to be asked twice. He has me back home in record time.

23

LEONE

“This could be dangerous, little one.” I pull her closer to my side as she throws dice at the craps table.

“Look!” She squeals when she rolls a seven again.

My Zoey is a lucky charm.

“Be careful, or the casino will accuse you of cheating and toss us out of here.”

She turns to me, her eyes wide. “Really?”

I smirk and pull her against me. “You think I’d let that happen?”

“Nope.” She gets onto her tiptoes and kisses me.

I take her mouth, claiming her and reaching down to grip her ass as I lean her back over the table.

The dealer clears his throat.

I ignore him and continue enjoying my soft, sweet Zoey, tasting her until she pulls back to catch her breath.

“Now you’re the one who’s going to get us thrown out.” Her tone is scolding, but her voice is breathy.

“Wet for me, little one?” I slide my hand up her thigh.

“Leone!” She squeals as I drag my finger across her panties. “Focus!”

“I am focused.” I press up on her clit, loving the way her breath catches.

“Sir, I’m sorry, but I must ask—”

“It’s fine.” I pull her back and put her on her feet. “Throw again, my love.”

She glances up at two people passing by on the other side of the table. “Oh, I think maybe we should cash out.”

I follow her look and see Lenny and Xanny strolling by, both of them chit-chatting as they case the gaming floor.

“If that’s what you want.” I toss a tip to the head of the table, then collect Zoey’s winnings. “Let’s go to the window.”

She takes my elbow, and I lead her through the tables until we reach the line of windows along the back wall.

“Cash out, please,” I say to the clerk and push her winnings through to him.

Zoey leans close, her lips at my ear. “I think it’s go time. I’m so excited.” She moves to the window.

I grip her ass again, unable to help myself. “The way you love these little spy games

is a turn-on.”

She looks at me over her shoulder. “You just like it when I’m bad.”

“I love it when you’re bad.” I glance toward the security guards standing in front of the hall that leads to the back of house operations.

Lenny and Xanny stop at a window a few spots down and begin to trade in their chips.

“Ready?” I whisper to Zoey.

“Born ready.”

She gives the signal to Xanny.

Xanny then takes in a deep breath, and with a shrill yell, she starts up, “Are you trying to cheat me? What kind of casino is this?” Her tone is high and piercing.

Our clerk stands. “Please wait. Just a moment.” He hurries off to help his counterpart, who’s currently dealing with Xanny’s wrath.

“You know what you did! I turned in chips worth over \$5,000 and you think you can give me a few hundreds back? Where’s the manager?” She lays it on thick, and Lenny adopts a stern expression to back her up.

The security guards are already in motion. The moment they sweep past us, we both move toward the back hall.

Xanny is going even crazier, threatening violence to the point where Lenny has to hold her back while the guards are yelling for her to calm down. It’s quite a scene—and the perfect distraction.

“Oh my God, there’s the room!” Zoey hurries down the hall and stops at a nondescript door. Just like Xanny said. She keys in the code, but the lock flashes red. “Oh no, they changed it.”

“I’ve got this.” I attach a small electronic device to the lock. After a few beeps and red lights, it turns green.

“Let’s go.” Zoey opens the door and creeps into the staff break room. It’s empty, but

the scent of some microwave meal is still hanging in the air.

“To the left.” I guide her past the small round tables and into the locker room.

“Let’s see. Number 1147. Not this one. Nope.” She goes down the row until she finds Xanny’s old locker.

She uses the combination lock, spinning back and forth until it opens with a click.

“This is great. I should work for the FBI.”

I groan. “Let’s not.”

Her laugh is musical, a beautiful sound I love to hear. “Okay, I suppose that might cause some complications.”

“Let’s get the cash and get out.” I watch as she opens the locker then pauses. “What is it, little one?”

She stands, frozen, then slowly raises a hand to her mouth. When she turns to me, she has tears in her eyes, and when I drop to one knee, she lets out a little gasp of surprise.

Reaching up, I take the ring from the locker and hold it out to her.

“I’ve loved you from the moment I first saw you. It’s only ever been you, and it will only ever be you. Will you marry me?”

She nods, a tear dropping down her cheek. “Yes!”

“Of course she said yes.” Xanny punches Lenny in the arm as they and the security guards watch us from the break room. She’s holding Bentley in her other arm, a little white tie around his neck.

“You were all in on it?” Zoey gawks at them. “Even you, Bentley? Oh my God!”

“We couldn’t turn this down. Watching you get the surprise of your life? Come on.” Xanny grins.

“And you.” Zoey looks at me, love in her eyes. “You got me.”

“That was my plan.” I slide my ring on Zoey’s finger, then rise and pull her into my arms. “You’re mine, little one. Forever. Our deal is finally done.”