



Ruling the Mob (Mob Lust 2)

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Category: Romance, Crime And Mafia, Action, Suspense

Description: Fear Makes You Weak. Weakness Gets You Killed.

Nico

This life. It becomes more toxic every day. There is no escape for me or the ones I love.

I've done things to claim my rightful place. I've taken care of those who challenged that place, and I've made a mortal enemy in the process.

Now he's back, just like I always knew he would be. He's angry, tortured, and out for blood.

Perfect. That's just the way I want him.

It'll make pulling the trigger so much more satisfying.

Shaye

I'm a princess. But my life is no fairy tale. It used to be...but that was a long time ago, in a land far, far away.

I had it all, until one blood-soaked night when I lost everything I wanted for my future. Now I feel as if I'm locked in a tower, alone and isolated from the man I love.

He's the one who saved me.

But I don't think anyone can save him.

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Nico

“He’s coming. He’s coming!”

“Be prepared. Be ready. Be careful.”

“You have a lot of responsibilities, Nico.”

Bits of conversations ricochet off the walls of my mind, eating away at my confidence to uncover an all-consuming fear that lurks inside me like a predator ready to strike.

Because he’s out there. I know it, Dad knows it, the guys know it.

And most of all...he knows it.

Fear makes you weak.

Weakness gets you killed.

I slide out of the passenger seat of my Audi R8, my feet landing on the concrete of my driveway. I slam the door shut and walk the few feet to the front door. Shaye is waiting for me on the other side, hopefully wearing nothing but the apron she uses when she cooks dinner. My stomach growls, but I’m not hungry. Not for food, anyway.

I slide my key into the lock and grasp the brass door knob, ready to turn, ready to put this day behind me. Each day is just like the last...work, work, work, wonder...work some more...wonder some more. It's the wondering part that has my brain twisted. I never wonder. I always know.

But this time, I'm a sitting duck, waiting for the hunter.

I don't fucking like it one bit, and the loss of control is crippling. And I don't know how much longer I can bury this shit and hang on to my last shred of sanity. Sometimes I think these mind fucks are worse than someone putting a bullet in my brain.

I push open the door, but the house is dark. Even the kitchen. One light is on. Upstairs, in my bedroom. Maybe she decided to just order pizza. Later. Much later by the time I'm finished with her. Works for me. The sooner I can get Shaye naked, the sooner I can dive inside of her and escape all of this other bullshit. Then, it'll just be us.

The way I wanted it to be.

The way I know it never can be.

I toss my keys into a bowl on the hall table, nearly missing it because I can't really see it. I kick off my shoes and take the stairs two at a time. Seconds pass, and I'm no closer to the top. The staircase looms above me. The faster I jog upward, the faster the steps seem to regenerate.

What the fuck is happening?

I place my hand on the railing, but I don't feel the smooth wood grain along my palm. Instead, it's submerged into a sticky, gel-like-liquid...like quicksand. I yank and pull,

but it's useless. My hand is stuck.

I use my other hand as leverage and slap it against the wall. But it slices through the sheet rock, which morphs into the same type of gummy substance. I blink hard at the stairs that seem to lead into the heavens, stairs I can't even climb because I'm literally stuck to the wall now. My heart thumps against my ribcage, blood rushing between my ears.

I can't move. But maybe I can scream. If Shaye is upstairs, she'll hear me and we'll figure this out together. "Shaye!" My mind hears the scream, but my mouth is still closed tight. I try to force my lips apart, but they're also stuck. Just like my body.

"Nico!"

My ears perk up, her voice distracting me from my current situation. She's calling me! She is here! I try again. "Shaye!"

Nothing. Nothing but the shrieks that follow my name. And then...

"Help me, Nico!"

A loud crash follows, along with a sinister laugh.

I know that laugh. I've never heard it before, but somehow I know it.

I yank my body left and right, trying to free my hands. Nothing.

"Help! Please!"

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Bile rises in my throat. I need to break free. Now. All the preparation, all of the planning...none of it matters. This shit is happening now, and I finally need to reclaim my life. I tug and pull some more as her screams get louder and more desperate. I have to get upstairs now. I can't see through walls, but my gut tells me the only thing that I need to know...Shaye is in danger. And even though I've known what's coming for a long time, I still don't have a solid plan for how I can protect her.

It may be too late...

Fuck, no! Strange sounds emerge from deep within my throat, though my mouth is still stretched into a tight line. I can only hear clanging cymbals and heavy drum beats. Noise. Way too much noise. I won't be able to hear if...

My pulse throbs harder and harder with each passing second until the stairs laid out in front of me morph into a darkened road. There is ice on the ground and silence in the cold, gusty night air. I'm not wearing a coat, I'm in a t-shirt and jeans. But somehow, the frigid temperatures don't phase me one bit. My eyes dart left and right, behind trees, around parked cars. Not a soul appears in front of me, but I'm not alone.

I can feel it. I can feel him.

"Nico!"

Shaye's screech pierces the silence again, reminding me of my mission, and I run toward it, my pace quickening, my heart thudding. Seems like I'm running for miles, but the voice grows fainter until I can no longer hear it. Night brightens into day, and hot rays of sunshine stream over the crashing waves on South Beach. Hordes of

sunbathers litter the beach, and I race around them, searching, straining to hear her voice, praying I haven't lost her.

But she hasn't made a sound, and I'm not entirely sure how much time has passed.

And I somehow know that it's been a long time since I've heard her voice.

I've traveled so far, although I can't seem to fathom the distance, and she's nowhere to be found.

Am I too late?

I collapse against the tall lifeguard stand, panting. Beads of sweat drip down the sides of my face as I scour the sand, looking for something, any clue that she's still alive, a shred of hope to convince me that I can still save her, that I haven't lost the most important person in my life because of the irrational choices I have made.

Irreversible choices. Damning choices.

My gaze falls down to the white sand and it's speckled with bright red dots. I follow the path of dots until they become larger red splotches. My heart thuds as the stain spreads over the beach, blanketing the earth in a disturbing shade of blood red as far as my eyes can see.

Blood. Death.

I fall to the sand, clutching my temples. "Shaye, where are you? Please help me find you. Please come back to me!"

But the words are no longer just in my head. They tumble from my mouth, my voice echoing in the still air. I squeeze my eyes shut and when I crack them open, dark,

dank concrete walls close in on me. I creep around a corner, following a trail of large, fluffy marshmallows and somehow I know these ‘breadcrumbs’ that I’m following are significant, and not just some Willy Wonka type of bullshit that is fucking with my mind. I inch closer to a large doorway, toward the muffled cries that haunt my dreams. A thin stream of red liquid trickles out of the doorway, the marshmallows now floating toward me.

Marshmallows. Shaye loves marshmallows. I need to find Shaye.

I fall to my knees once again, next to Grandpa Vito’s motionless body, a devastating image that is forever burned into my memory.

Don’t leave, Grandpa. Please. I still have so much more to learn...

You have a lot of responsibilities now, Nico.

My gut clenches, and I’m back on the staircase at my house, my hands finally free of the binding substance. I leap up the rest of the steps toward the landing and tear down the hallway to my bedroom. I slam open the door, out of breath but hopefully not out of time.

“Shaye,” I gasp, dragging myself through the empty master suite. “I’m here.”

But...she’s not.

* * *

My body rocketsto an upright position, sweat drizzling down the front of my heaving chest. My hand instinctively pats the mattress beside me, connecting with the cool, twelve-hundred thread count sheets that I’d bought when Shaye moved back from Miami a few months ago. I’d wanted to make her feel comfortable here in my house,

to give her a taste of the luxury I'd worked so hard to attain. There was nothing I wouldn't do for her, nothing I wouldn't give to have her next to me for the rest of our lives.

But months later, I'm still trying to figure out how to give her the life she deserves. I thought I had it all figured out. I thought once I pulled the trigger and blew away Frank Cappodamo, I'd paved the way for our safe future. With one single trigger click I sent his family a message. I sent my own guys a message. Fuck with me or anyone I love, and you will die.

It earned me respect and loyalty, which was great.

It also put a bullseye dead center on my back.

The nightmares started almost immediately after the warehouse massacre, and they've only gotten worse over time. I collapse onto Shaye's pillow and breathe in her flowery scent. She should be here with me, but recently the nightmares have gotten so bad, I've made excuses about work keeping me out late and me not wanting her here by herself in the middle of the night. She's much safer staying at her parents' house, anyway.

The truth is, I can't control these damn dreams. And I hate like hell for her see me in a state of complete fucking weakness. I've tried drinking and drugging myself to sleep, and nothing works. Nothing can bring me peace, not even buried balls deep in Shaye.

I let out a deep sigh and flip onto my back. I know I won't sleep again until I take care of the enemy from beyond the grave.

But this time, it's not the memory of Frank I'm battling.

He's sent in a replacement, a crazier motherfucker than he ever was.

And until I stop Cappodamo's poison from leaking into my life, I'm pretty damn sure I won't have a decent night's sleep again.

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2

Shaye

Iflop down on a bench inside Washington Square Park after class and let out a deep sigh. Radio silence from Nico. Again.

I lean my head back against the hard wood and stare at the blue sky. Rays of light peek through the lush green leaves of the trees, making me squint. The power and strength of the sun is guarded by those leaves and branches. Kind of like this whole thing with Nico, although he's guarding me against something much more harmful than UV rays, I just know it. A shiver runs through me as memories of that fateful night come rushing over me. The hate spewed, the terror, the blood...God, all of the blood.

I know exactly why Nico sent me home last night, why he makes up excuses to get me out of his bed most nights. But I've never let on. I swallow his bullshit stories and smile like it's absolutely fine that he wants me to leave. But it kills me that he can only stand to be around me during daylight hours because the horror of what comes over him when he sleeps is too much for him to bear with an audience laying right next to him.

I rub my temples, and flip open my journal. I start to write, watching the swirls of my words fill up page after page as I tell my notebook all of the things I can't tell the man I love for fear of what he might do, say, or think. Writing has become my sole form of therapy. I can't talk to my parents or Max, and even Sloane, my best friend, can't help me with this.

I've pieced together enough to know that trouble didn't end that night. Nico slayed Cappodamo but that's not the end of the story. Nothing is ever that neat and tidy in the mob. There is more, so much more. Unfortunately, my knowledge is limited to what Nico mumbles in his sleep and what I can glean from heated, closed-door conversations between my dad and Max.

"You might want to give that pen a break. I think you're working it too hard."

I gasp, flinging the pen into the air and twisting in the direction of the intruding voice. "Professor!"

Jason Gary, my Psychology of the Human Mind instructor, grins down at me. That lopsided grin is famous among the female co-eds. It was one of the first things I'd learned when I transferred to NYU this fall. His single dimple, thick, dark hair, and sparkling blue-green eyes have students camping out at Student Services to plead their case for an open spot in any one of his classes.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you. I just haven't seen that kind of focus from a student in a while. It's refreshing."

I tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ear. "Oh, well, thanks. I guess I just have a lot on my mind these days. Journaling helps me get it out." What I neglect to mention is that whatever ends up on these pages normally scares the shit out of me and makes me sometimes wish I'd taken up a different major.

He points to the bench. "Okay if I sit?"

"Sure." I swallow hard and scoot over a bit to give him more room. And also because I know I'm way too close when the scent of his cologne permeates the air I breathe. I need my own air. My fingertips turn white as they clench the pen, a shiver slithering down my spine. Something about this just feels wrong. Professor Gary sitting next to

me with that curious look on his face, all of my conflicted emotions about Nico spilled out onto the page in my lap...everything is way too close for comfort, and I feel very freaking exposed right now.

“You know, journaling is a good way to help you make sense of different feelings and emotions. The exercise of writing can help you figure out the why behind those feelings and process them.”

I nod and stare at my notebook. If I make eye contact, what will I see? And do I really want to know? “Yes.”

“But sometimes it helps to talk to someone else. You won’t always have the answers, and you can write for days, months, and years without coming to any conclusions. A fresh perspective might help you find the answers you’re looking for.”

My head pops up. “You mean therapy? I don’t need a therapist!”

He chuckles. “I wasn’t implying that you did. I was just saying that an unbiased, uninvolved person can help you work through things better than you doing it on your own.”

I manage a weak smile. “That makes sense.” Except I could never in a million years share any of this with another living, breathing person. It would be the utter betrayal of so many people. Letting some ‘fresh perspective’ in on my family’s illegal business dealings, talking to a random stranger about my conflicting feelings I have for Nico...if that information got into the wrong hands, I have no idea the extent of the damage it would most certainly do.

“I’m always here to talk if you need to hash anything out.”

I have to keep my jaw from dropping because there’s not a snowball’s chance in hell

I'd ever speak a word of this to him. "Thank you very much, Professor. I appreciate it."

"You put a lot of time into your work, Shaye, and you've demonstrated a very keen ability to see into the minds of others. But it's not always easy to turn that introspective lens in on ourselves."

I feel a hot flush creeping up the sides of my face. Is it only because he's complimenting my work? Or is it more about the dreamy smile that makes me want to bite my lower lip?

Or, maybe it's not about the smile after all. Maybe it's because he's so incredibly uncomplicated and transparent. Here is a guy who makes a living out of fleshing out feelings and emotions. Forget the way he looks. He doesn't bottle things up so that the unspoken words become a huge elephant in a room. He's a fan of talking. I'm a fan of talking, too...except, I can't. Not now. And as far as that introspective lens goes, mine is pretty damn fogged up right about now. "I'll keep working on it." I force my lips to curl upward into a more convincing smile. "I should, ah, get going now. I have another class in a few minutes."

He winks and relaxes back against the bench because he is obviously not overburdened with unresolved feelings of angst. Lucky him. "Have a great afternoon. I'll see you in class, Shaye."

"Thanks...you, too, Professor." My throat is so tight, I can barely squeak out the words. I stuff my journal into my backpack and hoist it over my shoulder. "Have a good day." My feet can't work fast enough to put as much space between us as possible. I feel like I've just been stripped bare, like he could sense exactly what is going on in my mind and in my heart. A tiny part of me wanted him to see it all so I wouldn't have to say anything.

I need help, but I can't get help.

I'm on my own.

And somehow, I feel more alone now in New York, now that I'm actually in a relationship, than I ever was when I was in Florida by myself.

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Nico

Dark, menacing glare. Fists clenched at his sides. Body stiff as a cock in the Playboy fucking mansion. The tall, hulking guy in the newspaper clippings shows no signs of grief, only ones of rage and anger.

Things I've seen firsthand.

I know he remembers.

And damn, how I wish I could forget.

I stare at the pieces of newsprint scattered across my desk and rake a hand through my hair. A knot at the base of my skull screams at me when I dip my head lower to read one of the articles about Cappodamo's memorial service. I don't think I slept more than an hour at a stretch last night.

These days, I wonder if it's worse for me to be awake or asleep, to be honest.

My index finger pokes at Luca Cappodamo's face in the picture. He got back from his overseas tour about three months ago, well after I'd plugged his dad. It wasn't surprising since he'd never been close with his father. They were always battling about Luca's choice to become an MMA fighter instead of the obligatory take over the family business that was expected of him. His dad wanted to groom him as his protégé so he could eventually hand over the reins to him, but Luca wanted nothing

more than to bludgeon and maim on his own terms without anyone looking over his shoulder and critiquing his methods. So, he threw his hat into the MMA ring, beating anyone to a pulp who got in his way; he also spent years all over the world fucking anything with legs and a short skirt in his downtime.

There was no love lost between those two, that's for sure. But that doesn't mean Luca won't do the honorable thing and avenge his father's murder, if not for himself, than for his gin-soaked drunk of a mother who fled to Sicily after all the shit went down.

And if you would have known his parents like I did when Luca was growing up, it wasn't such a stretch to figure out how Luca got so fucked up in the first place. Years ago, before he left the country, we ran in the same circles, when the New York families respected the boundaries of the New Jersey families, and vice versa. Yeah, back in the day, I'd seen plenty, been witness to the casualties of Luca's wrath. Shit that's burned into my memory forever. Things that keep me up at night because I know that the bastard is a certifiable lunatic with a get out of jail free card in his back pocket.

A groan tumbles from my lips. I remember when things used to be civil between the families. We traded favors, struck deals, and got rich. Sure, there were always shitheads on both sides who thought they knew best and tried to muscle their way into places they didn't belong—but they were always taken care of...with a silencer and a single bullet. Maintaining the status quo meant keeping your mattresses stuffed with hundred-dollar bills. But it never lasted. There was always some jerkoff who got too greedy. Case in point—Tony Oriani, Shaye and Max's dad. Shit between the families didn't get tense until that asshole dipped his wick into the wrong pool.

I rub the back of my neck. Months have passed, and I haven't seen or heard a goddamn thing from the Cappodamo side of the bridge. That only means they're getting closer to making a move. Every night when I go to bed, the fear of the unknown consumes me. And every morning when I wake up—if you even want to

call what I'm doing sleeping—I wonder if it will be the day they launch their retaliation.

Shaye needs to stay as far away from me as possible, but without her, I don't know how I'd make it from one day to the next. So, I fool myself into thinking if she sleeps at her parents' house a few nights a week, I'm protecting her.

Knowing what I do about Luca, she'd be safer juggling a dozen flaming batons than being within one-hundred yards of me.

A knock at the door jolts me back to reality, and I swallow a groan when my head pops up from the newspaper. The sharp pain zaps the base of my skull and shoots down my spine. Christ, I need a fucking adjustment so badly. Just one more thing that keeps me awake at night. I open the top drawer and sweep the clippings into it before slamming it shut. "Yeah?"

Viktor Ivanov, one of my business associates and a top Russian crime boss, pushes open the door and drops into the chair in front of my desk with a smirk on his stubbled face. "Nico, this had better be good. You dragged me away from a very tight pussy."

I drum my fingertips on the top of my desk. "How do you feel about horses?"

Viktor shrugs. "I don't ride them, and I don't bet on them."

"You don't have to do either."

"So why should I care? And make it fast. That pussy is calling to me."

I grin and ease myself back into the chair. "I'm in the process of buying a stable up in northern Jersey."

“And you want me to be horse racing buddy?”

“Not quite. Salesi Associates just bought properties in Manhattan that we’ll be developing as part of our ‘entertainment’ business portfolio. We want you to be our main drug supplier, but there will be too much money passing through hands to keep it off the radar of the feds.”

“So you want to pass it through stable?”

“Exactly. That’s how we’ll keep it clean.”

“With all of the horse shit?” Viktor pulls out a skinny black cigarette and lights it, inhaling sharply. A minute later, he nods. “I like that. Clean, but dirty. Just like that pussy you made me leave.”

“So you’re in?”

“I was in, until you pulled me out. Fucking Americans. So impatient. Couldn’t even let me come before you drag my ass down here.”

“Don’t worry, you’ll be balls-deep soon enough.” I push back my chair and struggle to my feet, trying to ignore the searing pain zapping every nerve ending in my back and legs. “We’re done.”

Viktor blows a thin stream of smoke toward the ceiling. “Just remember, I’m not your bitch, Nico. Next time, I fuck first, you hear me?”

I snicker. Bad ass Russian drug lord. Head of the bratva. Paralyzed by pussy. We’ve worked together long enough for me to know his real addiction. “Stop by later this week. I’ll take care of you.”

Viktor grunts his reply and reaches for the door handle. Just as he's about to pull it open, he turns around, an evil smirk on his face. "By the way, I hear our friend Luca Cappodamo is back in town. We should go out for a drink, welcome him home, don't you think?"

My lips stretch into a thin line. "Yeah, we're gonna give him the time of his fucking life."

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4

Shaye

I run my fingers through the long, dark waves that cascade over my bare shoulders. My eyes are shadowed and thickly lined, and my puckered, dark red lips pop against my skin. I take a deep breath and smooth down the front of my dress. Okay, dress is an understatement. It looks more like a long bathing suit that definitely won't cover my ass if I bend over. Actually, I'm not sure it covers it when I'm standing, either.

I stare at my reflection. I look ready to take a long stroll down Hollywood Boulevard, but tonight isn't about putting on a show for the masses. It's about grabbing the attention of one person who is slipping through my fingers more and more with each passing day.

He won't come to me, so tonight, I'm going to him.

I secure the wig with a few more bobby pins and slip my feet into shoes that should be designated as illegal weapons since I could literally slice through someone's chest with the spiky heels.

I just want Nico back, the way he was before he pulled that trigger, the way he was when we were just sneaking around. The way he was when we were happy.

It didn't last for too long, but it was perfect.

I need that perfection back, and it all starts tonight. I have to grab control of this

spiraling situation before it's too late. I have to be the strong one right now...for both of our sakes.

I grab my clutch bag and take a few tentative steps into the hallway of my parents' house. Luckily, Max is already at the club, and Mom and Dad are out. Nobody will be around to witness my slutty transformation, and that's a damn good thing since this dress really doesn't leave much to the imagination. It could, in fact, get me thrown in jail.

I dip my head low as I push open the front door and pull it closed behind me. I don't need anyone seeing me loitering here. I look like a freaking prostitute, albeit a high-priced one.

My heart thumps in my chest as I take quick, tiny steps toward my car. Short, sharp pants escape my lips. The thought of taking a deep breath would be laughable if I could squeeze one out. I'm wrapped so tight in this pleather-spandex fabric mix, I'm surprised my eyeballs haven't popped out of my head from the pressure.

Somehow, I slide into the driver's seat of my Infinity RS50. I pull off one heel, slip on a flip flop, and press the button to start the ignition since I can't very well drive in stilts. I know what I'm doing. I know where I'm going. I just don't have any fucking clue what to expect when I get there.

I've been warned more times than I can count to stay far away from Culaccino, Nico's very exclusive, very mysterious club in downtown Manhattan, and I've listened. For the most part, anyway. Curiosity had grabbed hold on occasion, and yeah, there were times I'd take a drive into the meat-packing district while I was still mooning over Nico—the manwhore version of my boyfriend from long ago.

Nico, my parents, Max...they'd all skin me alive if they knew where I was headed, and in this glorified bathing suit, of all things.

I don't care. I'm desperate. Desperate for Nico and for us to go back to the way things were before that night.

That's why I'm in disguise. Nobody will know I'm there until I want them to.

It's a perfect plan meant to rekindle what Nico and I have been missing for the past four months. It's not just the sex...it's everything else. He can fuck me six ways from Sunday, and it's always incredible. Physically.

But our connection has been broken for too long, and tonight, I'm going to repair it.

I drive past the club entrance. The street is dark and narrow, and there are only a few dimly lit awnings. It's understated, at least from the outside.

I can only guess what goes on inside, of course, because nobody tells me anything. Everyone wants to protect Shaye, but they don't realize that Shaye is a big girl with an even bigger plan.

I pull around a corner and find an empty spot. It's tight as hell, but I manage to squeeze my car into it with some room in the front and back. Miraculous. I normally suck at parallel parking, so the stars must be aligned for me. I'll take it as a positive sign.

My spikes click on the pavement as I approach the club. I nibble at my nail and scour the small groups of people gathering in front of the roped-off area. There is no sign of paparazzi lurking in the shadows, desperate to snap an incriminating photo. Judging by the line of high-end cars parked in the street, it looks like the club's regular millionaire clientele, not the Hollywood elite crowd. I slip into a group of women dressed like me. Jesus, there's a lot of coochie on display tonight. My pulse throbs as I lower my head and follow them in once the door attendant waves us inside. A blonde in front of me flips her hair over her shoulder, strands landing in my thick lip

gloss. I sputter as quietly as I can and manage to detach it from my lips before she can turn around.

Straight through the entranceway is a hallway that leads to what looks and sounds like a dance club. But there's another roped-off area to the left leading in a different direction. Downstairs. Into the underbelly. My gut tells me that's where I want to be. I twist around in the darkened entryway, squinting at the women in front of me. They all move forward toward a staircase lit only along the floor. Beefy security-type guys don't let everyone through, though. They pull aside only a select few women and men, me included. Everyone else is waved to the main club area. Everything is black. I can't see six inches in front of me. I feel bodies moving against me, urging me forward. Low voices rumble through me and large hands slide over my hips and ass. My throat tightens. Shit, what the hell did I just walk into? What kind of club is this, anyway?

"Stay close to the side." A low voice whispers against my hair, and a single chill slides down my spine. "Otherwise you'll get trampled by the freaks."

I nod, but don't dare to utter a reply. I have no idea who is behind me or what he wants. No, scratch that. I know exactly what he wants, but there's no fucking way I'm going to give him any sign of encouragement. I pull my skirt down as far as it will go, which is really not saying much.

Oh, God, what the hell am I doing here?

"You've never been here before, have you?" The voice murmurs against my ear again as we move closer to the stairs, and panic grips me. I reach out for the hand rail and take one tentative step into the dungeon of this...this...place.

I nod, still refusing to respond, still facing forward, moving even closer to the blonde woman with all the hair. I'd gladly eat every strand if it meant I can get away from

this jerkoff behind me. I don't know if they were his hands all over my ass or someone else's, but I want to stay far, far away from wandering fingers.

“Don't be nervous. Once we get downstairs, you'll see how much fun it can be.” Fingertips trail my arm and the hairs immediately stand on end. I yank it away as if I've been stung by an angry wasp. A gravelly laugh vibrates against my neck, and I clutch the railing. Christ, could we move any slower? I just want to separate myself from this asshole and find Nico.

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Not my brightest idea, although my plan was to remain undetected.

So far none of Nico's thug bouncers have picked me out of the crowd, although how could they in this freaking pitch blackness? Besides, my disguise is foolproof!

I can still feel the guy's hot breath on my skin. I didn't acknowledge his innuendo, yet he's still glued to my back. Fuck. I need to break away as soon as I get a clear path. My foot finally hits the bottom step and the crowd spills into a dim corridor illuminated only by red and purple strobe lights. The pulsating electronic dance beats vibrate the floor beneath my feet, making my escape that much harder. I manage to sidestep the woman in front of me, attempting to evade my stalker. I back away from the crowd, twisting away to gather my bearings. My foot slams into something hard and a loud moan makes me jump about two feet into the air. I let out a yelp, ready to apologize and my jaw drops to the floor, right about where my eyes landed a split second earlier.

Two naked, sweaty, writhing bodies are entwined at my feet. And I seriously fucking doubt they felt the hard spike of my heel. Judging by their grunts and groans, they are completely unfazed by anything and everything around them. Jesus, this place is like Pornhub, up close and very freaking personal. I swallow a gasp, trying like hell to peel my eyes off of them, but I can't. For as shocked at what I'm seeing right now, I'm equally turned on. Heat pools between my legs, and my knees buckle enough that I need to back against the wall next to them as I continue to watch. Beads of perspiration pop up along the back of my neck, and I bring a hand to my heaving chest, dragging my fingertips down into my—

My fingers freeze. Holy cow! What in the hell am I doing? This is a freaking sex den!

Am I going to start feeling myself up out here? For these strangers?

I yank my gaze away from the people on the floor and look for something, anything to keep my attention off the man who is now fucking his playmate in the ass. Right out in the open!

I wobble slightly in my heels, squinting as I walk farther down the hallway. This place kind of reminds me of the Halloween parade in the West Village, except way raunchier. And with more nudity. More moans and mewls surround me, and I step around the bodies contorted on the carpet at my feet. Nobody is watching me, but I'm fucking watching all of them, including the people who are viewing this sex fest. Some guys are jerking themselves off, some women are sucking the men off. People are topless, pantless, or completely naked. The area farther down the hallway is blanketed in black lights, which makes this whole scenario that much more taboo.

I've never felt so turned on in my life.

And I've never felt so much like a bad girl...a bad girl in need of a spanking.

I clutch the sides of my head. Jesus, Shaye! Remember why you're here! Get a fucking hold of yourself and find your boyfriend!

"A little too much too soon for you?"

I spin around, clutching the wall as I lose balance for what seems like the millionth time tonight. "I, uh..."

The man from the staircase smirks at me in the darkness. I recognize his gravelly voice, the one that was plastered against my ear not too long ago. Dammit, I thought I'd lost him.

He shifts slightly in the shadows, and my throat tightens like it's caught in a vise. Those eyes...they blare with a five-alarm warning to run the fuck away as fast as possible. Sinister black beads that scream malice stare back at me. Longish, dark hair falls over one eye as he leans against the opposite wall. "You look like you'll fit right in here." He straightens up and slowly walks toward me. A swirl of a heady musk scent assaults my nostrils. "If you have the right partner to show you the ropes."

"I-I..." Shit! If I didn't want the right partner, I wouldn't be here, would I? This guy makes my skin crawl, and it's more than just his leer. If I back away any farther, I'll end up tripping over a woman who just appeared wearing large white bunny ears and pasties. Nothing else, mind you. That's the extent of her costume.

He creeps closer toward me, sidestepping the show in his path. My heart thuds, the pounding sound reverberating between my ears. These heels may make me look the part, but they sure make it hard to move. The scent of carnal sex infiltrates my senses, and my head is woozy from the pure lust exhibited by these people. I should have had a shot of vodka before coming down here...or ten.

My eyes dart left and right. Where the fuck is Nico?

"The first time is always the hardest."

Oh my God, this guy is just relentless. I force a smile and flip my fake, dark hair over my shoulder. "Thanks for the offer, but I'm just fine."

"You are." He folds his arms over his broad chest, his menacing dark eyes narrowed. "Maybe the next time we see each other you'll be a little more willing to try things."

My spine stiffens, and I puff out my chest. Fuck him if he thinks I'll cower. "I'm sure I will be, just with someone else." I flash a toothy grin and try my luck at stepping over a dom whipping her naked sub. Jesus, there's nothing that's not being done

down here...what the hell have I stepped into?

I'd thought Nico wanted to keep me away from here because of the drugs and the guns. I had no idea he was running an underground sex den. And truth be told, I still can't decide if I'm more horrified, shocked, or turned on by what is quite literally coming before my eyes.

I navigate the thick carpet in my heels, trying to avoid any grooves and costumed bodies in the midst of their respective sex shows. Another chill slides down my back, and I can still feel the guy's eyes on me. Once I round the corner, I take a quick peek over my shoulder just to see if he's still back by the staircase, but he's gone. I let out an unsteady breath, again wondering why I couldn't have just done the normal thing and gone to Victoria's Secret for some new lingerie to spark the flames instead of showing up here...instead of sparking flames, I literally jumped into the fire with this plan of mine.

I slink into a corner, just outside of a room where two masked men are fucking a woman. They're double-teaming her, right in the open, with about ten people watching, moaning, flicking their beans, and stroking their cocks. My mouth falls open, and I hate to admit it, but everything on my body is currently tingling...and I mean everything. These are the most erotic scenes I have ever seen in my life, and while my mind tells me I should be appalled, my body screams 'fuck me now!' Yet, the only one I want to be fucking is Nico and I can't seem to find him anywhere.

The people around me who aren't yet undressed are shedding layers faster than these guys can pump their dicks into the women sandwiched between them. A hand grazes the small of my back, but I ignore it because I'm just too damn entranced by what's going on in front of me. Top guy is pounding into the woman, his mouth working both of her fake tits...yes, so fake...and bottom guy slides in and out of her ass, his mouth assaulting her neck. And the screams coming from her mouth...the cries to God, who most certainly is appalled, by the way...the pleas to fuck her harder...it all

makes me want to strip out of this dress and start finger-fucking myself.

Oh Lord, am I a bad girl? I can't even say it's Nico's fault, either. This is all me.

I bite down on my lower lip, debating about whether or not I should inconspicuously slide a finger up the side of my skirt. The music pulsates, adding to the erotic aura of this taboo scene. I am so consumed with lust I can barely breathe. Talk about complete sensory overload. The colored lights, the pounding beats, every accidental nudge by someone angling to get a closer look at the raunchy, but so very enticing scene that is playing out before them...God, I need to get laid.

Which brings me back to the reason why I'm here in the first place. I stumble backward, my heel catching on some guy's shoe. I turn to mutter a quick 'I'm sorry,' but he's so entranced with the girl getting fucked six ways from Sunday that I don't even think he noticed I impaled his toe.

A large hand lands on the small of my back, steadying me. But before I can twist my body around to tell the owner of said hand to fuck off, the whole arm snakes its way around my waist, a strong chest pressing against my back. My spine stiffens at the foreign assault on my body, and the heat of his breath singes the back of my neck. But it's not the stale stench of scotch that teases my nostrils.

It's a much more familiar scent...one of my favorites, actually.

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Watermelon Jolly Rancher.

Nico.

That motherfucker!

“You look tense. First time?” he murmurs against my ear.

Rage bubbles in my veins and my hand twitches at my side, aching to twist around and smack the shit out of him. But as much as I’d wanted to surprise him and rekindle our connection, I’m fighting the urge to pummel the crap out of him for trying to hit on me right now. A stranger, as far as he knows! My chest tightens. Is this his game? And Max? My rat ass brother must know what Nico has been up to, and yet he never said a goddamn word. Sonofabitch. They’re both dead to me.

I give a quick nod since I don’t want Nico to hear my voice. Yet. I am such an idiot! I swallow hard to find a golf ball-sized lump lodged in my throat. How could he? Jesus Christ, I knew there was some seedy shit that went on here, but I never imagined he’d be unfaithful.

I’m so fucking naïve!

He still hasn’t seen my face, but his grip tightens around my waist. “Come with me. I have a private room. Let me relax you.”

My eyes sting with tears, and I have to bite my lip to keep the expletives from exploding out of my mouth. I blink fast, staring up at the ceiling. If this is how he

plays, better that I find out now before I'm too devastated by his betrayal.

Images of Nico in his elusive private room screwing random women with fake boobs and killer bodies rapidly wallpaper my mind as the seconds pass. The threads of my heart have already begun to unravel. Oh, crap. Who am I trying to kid? I'm already beyond devastation.

Christ, how much more pathetic can I be?

I spin around and peel his hand off my waist. "You are fucking disgusting!" I hiss, pushing past him and the rest of the onlookers who are much more interested in the threesome that has just become a full-on gang bang.

He grabs my wrist before I can navigate this damn carpet in these heels and flips me around so my back is against the wall. Electronica pounds with such force that I can barely make out his next words. "You want to make me work for it?" he growls at me. His hand reaches under my dress, sliding against my lace thong. "This pussy is dripping for me. I know you want it."

I'd love to say I didn't hear what he said. But I did. And I can't unhear it.

I wiggle in his grasp, gritting my teeth. "Let me go, you scumbag!"

"Why are you struggling?" Nico's lips curl into a sexy smirk as he leans farther into me. "Is that the kind of game you want to play tonight, Shaye? You missed my cock so much that you came here to find it?"

I gasp. "H-how did you know it was me?"

He runs a hand down the front of my dress, his breath hot against my skin. "You think I wouldn't recognize this body?" His head dips lower, lips scorching a path

down toward my breasts as his voice nuzzles my skin. “This neck, these hips, this ass...you think you could ever fool me? You really thought a wig would throw me off?”

I let out a deep sigh and throw my head back, giving him full access. He can peel me out of this dress right here and now, and I’d be just fine with it.

“I thought you were trying to hit on me,” I mumble.

“I was. Did it work?”

I narrow my eyes. “Maybe. Do you make appearances at all of the shows down here, or just the really sick and twisted ones?”

He leans forward, his lips grazing mine. “I think the more pressing question is why haven’t I seen that dress before?”

“Well, I was saving it for you. But since we never spend the night together anymore, I figured if I wanted you to see it, I needed to bring it to you at your ‘home away from home.’”

Nico pulls away, a conflicted expression shadowing his face. Even the strobe lights can’t eclipse that look. It’s the same look I’d seen that night he killed Cappodamo, the same look I see every now and then when he thinks I’m not paying attention.

But I am. Always.

“Come with me.” He pulls me out into the hallway of harems, sidestepping the crowd of gaping voyeurs and their entertainment. I try to keep up with his pace, but the heels make it impossible. Luckily, he turns a corner and pulls out a key from his pocket. He glances around, sticks the key into the door, and pushes it open.

A few candles are scattered around the room, so I can make out some key shapes, the most impressive being the large bed in the center of the space. But Nico doesn't pull me over to it. He rests his hands on my shoulders and leans his forehead against mine.

“Why did you come here tonight, Shaye? It's dangerous for you to be here. I told you to stay away.”

I shake my head. “I couldn't,” I mutter. “Not anymore. Everything that's happened...it's taken a toll on you. On us. I just wanted...” I run my fingers through my hair. “Look, I need you, Nico. I want things to be the way they were before. I feel like I'm losing you, and I thought if I came here, we could...” I shrug and avert my eyes. “I don't know. Find ourselves again? I know that probably sounds stupid, but I—”

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His lips are plastered against mine before the rest of the jumbled thought can tumble from my lips. They're hungry, passionate...almost desperate. His tongue plunders my eager mouth, coiling with mine. A lust-infused flame rages throughout my body, tingles shooting out to every extremity.

"God, I've missed this," I murmur against his mouth, running my fingers through his thick hair. I press myself against him, taunting him with the fact that there is still a hell of a lot of fabric separating us. He must get my silent plea because I can feel his fingers toy with the zipper in the back of my dress. He lowers it slowly, exposing every inch of bare skin begging to be touched.

Like he means it, not like he's doing it as an escape from everything plaguing him.

I know the difference, and tonight, I want the real thing.

He slides the shoulder straps off, pulling down the top so that my breasts are exposed, beckoning him to taste. "You're fucking beautiful, Shaye," he whispers. "Inside and out." He dips his head, kneading one breast and taking the other into his mouth. I squeal as his tongue and teeth nibble at my nipple. They could slice through glass right now, they're so hard. I lean my head back as he continues to feast, showing no signs of stopping. I fumble with his belt buckle and yank it open, attacking his pants next. I pull them open and slide them down to his feet, along with his boxers. His cock is long, thick, and hard in my grasp. My knees buckle at the thought of him inside of me and the sudden image of him fucking me in the den of sin in front of all of his 'guests' has me so fucking wet. I stroke him a few times and rub the head of his cock over my panties.

Nico lets out a loud groan. “No teasing. Those panties need to come off now.” He loops his fingers into the sides and slides them to my ankles. “And keep those shoes on. They’re hot as fuck.”

I manage to shimmy out of the dress and kick off the panties without losing my balance in these shoes, a pretty big accomplishment if I say so myself.

Nico stares at me, the glow emitted by the candles casting the dimmest light on his face. It’s enough for me to see the hunger in his gaze. He unbuttons his shirt, never averting his eyes. He strips off every inch of clothing, his movements slow and methodical, as they are with everything he does. He always has a purpose, a plan, and a strategy. I hope his strategy for tonight is to keep me coming because, Lord, do I ever need it after drinking in that whole erotic circus outside his door.

He inches closer to me, wrapping his arms around my quivering body, cupping my ass. His mouth crushes mine, his teeth nipping at my bottom lip. I let my legs fall open, my pussy screaming for attention. He grips his cock, teasing my slit with the swollen head. He slides it up and down my slick opening, and after a few seconds, I’m ready to scream out in the most delicious agony imaginable. How is he so controlled? How can he not just throw me down on the bed and fuck me into oblivion? Isn’t he a guy, for Pete’s sake?

I grab his hand and press it against me so his cock hits my clit. A gasp escapes my lips, followed by a loud moan. “Please, Nico. Don’t make me wait. I need this. I need you.”

“Always so impatient,” he whispers, his lips caressing the side of my neck, the exact area where my pulse is about to explode out of if he makes me wait another millisecond. He backs me toward the bed, reaching down to grab a condom from the drawer of a nearby table. I fall onto the mattress, sinking into the softest of furs. I run my hands over the smooth, glossy pelts covering the bed. The luxurious texture

coupled with the hard body angling over me is enough to launch my senses into overdrive. He pushes my legs apart and runs his hands down the front of my chest before looping his arms around my knees and diving into the pool of lust and desire between my legs.

I thrust my hips into his greedy mouth as his tongue works my folds, teasing my clit before plunging in and out of my wet heat. God, the things this man can do with that deliciously devious tongue...

It swirls and swivels, the coiling heat igniting my core. His fingers dig into my flesh, pulling me closer until my lower body is off the mattress. I fist the furs, whimpers morphing into full-fledged cries for God. His thumb and forefinger work my clit, flicking and pressing until the explosion blasts out to every limb, paralyzing them with a euphoria so powerful, it renders me motionless. I don't even want to blink because any movement might make this amazing sensation end.

And it can't. Ever.

I won't let it. I'll do whatever I need to make sure I never lose it.

Never lose him.

Nico's hot, wet lips drag across my skin, sending a shiver down my spine. His stubble-peppered face tickles the insides of my thighs and a jolt zips through me, making me giggle. "You are amazing. What you can do with that dirty mouth is so fucking amazing."

He crawls up my body, his dark eyes boring into my soul. "Dirty mouth, huh?"

I nod, heat creeping up the sides of my face. "So dirty."

“And you love it, so what does that say about you?”

“That I’m a very bad girl.” I wrap my arms around his neck. “Who needs to be punished in the best possible way. What do you think about that?”

A mischievous smirk lifts the corners of his mouth. “I think we need to get started. If you’ve been that bad, I need to teach you a lesson. A very fucking long lesson.”

My heart thuds against my chest as he pulls away, tearing open the foil package and rolling on the condom. I bite my lower lip, digging my fingers into his hips. “You’d better get started. I feel like the bad girl is ready to come out and play again. Are you gonna put her in her place or what?”

Nico leans into me, inhaling as his nose grazes my bare skin. He fingers one of my fake dark waves splayed across the fur. I shudder against his hard body, a smile teasing my lips. He’s totally with me in this moment, not even inside of me and yet I feel closer to him right now than I have in the past few months. The heat of his gaze sings my insides, the way it always has. Electricity crackles between us, pure energy hovering in the space between our lips. “I love you, Shaye. I always will, no matter what happens.”

And just like that, the spell is broken. Reality bitch slaps me, and my gut clenches.

That’s the one thing about our life. You feel, you feel, and you feel...until you feel no more.

You can prepare and plan and strategize, but in the end, there are no guarantees. Nico’s life is a very dangerous game, but he’s not the only competitor. And sometimes, even the strongest players will be crushed like cockroaches.

And there go all the feels.

He strokes the side of my face, studying me as if he wants to memorize each and every detail. He traces the slope of my nose, the arch of my brows, the apple of my cheeks. I blink fast to hold the tears at bay because I don't want anything else to ruin this night.

He's here with me now, and there's nowhere else I'd ever want to be. These moments may be few and far between, but I'll gather them and bury them deep in my heart where this love...our love...will live forever.

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“Make love to me, Nico,” I whisper. “Please.”

I let out a gasp as he pushes into me, his thick cock stretching me like a glove. His thrusts are slow and deep, his hips rocking against me. I lock my ankles around him, urging him closer. My fingers press into his hips, keeping him cocooned inside of me. He swivels his hips, in the way that always drives me over the brink of sanity. He trails his hands down the side of my torso, caressing every inch of my overly stimulated body. Then he puts one finger in his mouth, reaches around and grasps my ass, squeezing one cheek and then the other before he grazes the tight ring of muscle between them. I let out a yelp as he inserts the finger. My pussy clenches immediately, and my body rockets to that place where only he can take me.

Sparks of euphoria ignite in my core. “Harder! Oh my God, Nico, fuck me harder!”

Nico pumps his cock deeper and harder, growling through his own orgasm. Rays of blinding white light flicker behind my eyelids and I can no longer see. Or think. Or hear. I can only feel. And it’s amazing.

Somewhere in the depths of my mind, I register a muffled creak and low voices. My eyes fly open and I gasp, clutching Nico’s waist.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Nico! What the hell...who in the motherfuck is that?” Max’s voice pierces the otherwise blissful sounds of our marathon sex session. He flips on the light switch and narrows his eyes. “You fucking bastard! I knew you could never keep your dick in your pants, you sonofabitch! What the fuck about my sister? I said I’d kill you if you fucked around on her!” He grabs a lamp from another table and, like a possessed and rabid predator, he lunges for Nico, lamp in hand and ready to

strike.

“Max, stop!” I scream. “It’s me!”

He lands on top of Nico, the lamp about an inch away from bludgeoning the man I love.

I yank off my wig, bobby pins flying in all directions. “See? It’s me!”

Max’s eyes widen, and he covers his mouth as he gags. “Christ Almighty, not again. I don’t know what’s fucking worse. Seeing you fuck some random chick or seeing you nail my sister wearing a wig and fuck-me heels. The last time that shit gave me nightmares for months, you assholes!” He throws the lamp to the floor and rakes a hand through his hair. A quick glance at the door confirms that we have an audience. A tall blonde model-type is twisting her hands around, not sure where to look or what to say.

I crack a smile at her. “He’s not actually a complete lunatic.”

She grins and gives a little shrug. “We can’t all be perfect, right?”

“Dude, will you get the fuck off of me now?” Nico pushes Max away with his foot.

“I’m tired of seeing your ass, man.” Max jumps off the bed and grabs the girl by the wrist. “Let’s try to forget we ever saw any of that, okay?”

“I love you!” I call out.

He flips us off and slams the door shut.

My jaw drops. “Holy shit, can you believe he almost took you out for the second

time?”

Nico scrubs a hand down his face and collapses on the bed next to me. “Your brother has some pretty fucking serious rage issues, you know that?”

I nod and lie on his chest, tucked under his neck. It’s the most comfortable spot in the entire world. “I guess I never have to worry about you cheating on me as long as good ol’ Max is around.”

“I know things have been strained lately, babe.” He cups my face with his hand. “But you never have to worry about anything with our relationship.”

I let out a sigh and trace the outline of his pec. “I worry about everything, Nico. I want you to be honest with me. I can handle it.”

“Is that why you came down here? To talk?”

“Well, yeah. But then I kind of got sidetracked with...” I wave my hand around. “...all of the action out there. I got caught up, and we never actually got to the talking part.” I roll off of him and lean on my elbows. “This place is unreal. We have to come back here again together. I really want to...you know, try some stuff.” Her cheeks turn pink and she flashes a devious smile at me. “Like, in public.”

“Really?” My cock thickens at the mere thought of her being turned on by this place.

“Yes. And soon.” She winks at me. “Hey, how did you find me down here, anyway?”

He smirks. “You really think you were just gonna waltz in here and fly under the radar?”

“So you really did spot me in the crowd?”

“Nah, I knew you were in here because I have a GPS tracker installed in that watch on your wrist.”

I stare down at my brand-new, diamond-encrusted Tag Heuer. “You put a tracker on me?”

His expression darkens again. “I can’t take the risk that you’ll be taken again. It’s my way of protecting you.”

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“So that’s why you told me to wear it all the time?”

He nods. “Be pissed off at me if you want, but it’s only because I’m worried about your safety. If anything ever happened to you, I don’t know what I’d fucking do, Shaye. I’m desperate, okay? I need to keep you safe.”

I swallow hard and look down at my watch.

A loud ping makes me jump as I consider my next words.

Nico grabs his phone from the table. “Fuck,” he mutters.

“What is it?”

He looks up from the phone. “It’s Carlo Batta, one of my security guys. He’s dead.”

* * *

NICO

I stab Max’s phone number into the keypad of my phone then pull Shaye close while I wait for him to answer. I stroke the back of her head, biting back expletives that I will let fly as soon as she’s safe.

Somewhere. Anywhere but here.

“Yeah?”

“Max,” I growl. “Get in here now.”

“Dude, I’m balls deep in this chick. What the hell is so urgent?”

“Carlo is dead. Duke just found him out back. Get the fuck over here now.”

“Oh, shit.” I hear him mumble something to the girl he’s with, and a second later, he responds. “Give me five. I’ll be right there.”

Shaye’s shoulders quiver against me, and I wrap my arms around her, tossing the phone onto the bed. Her tears soak through my half-buttoned shirt, her hands clutching at my back. “Nico, I’m so scared. Who did this? Are they inside the club? Are they...are they...?”

I know the words she wants to ask, but doesn’t dare.

And the answer is...yes, they are coming for me.

But I keep that to myself. She already knows too much, has seen too much.

Where the fuck can I even send her? To my house? To her parents’ house? To my new place here in the city which less than a handful of people know about? I bought the place after everything happened because it’s off the radar, but I can’t hide it forever. And who the fuck knows how many guys Luca has in his back pocket? They could be camped out all over the tri-state area for all we know, ready to pounce.

Even though deep down, I know they aren’t. He wants me.

But he’ll take out whomever he can to send me a message just in case I missed his point with Carlo. And that would be fucking impossible to ignore. The image in Duke’s text made my gut clench. I knew Luca had been overseas doing some half-

cocked MMA tour since he was kicked out of the World Fighting Alliance for illegal drug use, but what he did to Carlo...Jesus Christ. And I sure as hell know he didn't use a weapon other than his fists.

MMA regulations in Southeast Asia, where he had been touring, are pretty lax, and from what I hear, they don't do drug testing. So Luca spends most of his time in the ring hopped up on PCP, or whatever else he uses, so he can't feel any pain.

He can only inflict it in the most brutal possible way.

I've also heard about his own personal mortality rate. If you climb into the ring with him, be prepared to stay there. Indefinitely. Or, if you're lucky, you'll only get wheeled out on a gurney and hooked up to a respirator.

That image was bad enough. It tells me exactly what I want to know...confirms exactly what I've been fearing.

Because I'm not a trained killer. I'm not a murderer. I'm not a fucking assassin.

I'm a guy who was trying to save his girlfriend from certain death. I killed Luca's father. I did what I had to do to save the woman I love.

And now Luca is out for blood.

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Sometimes I don't even think he gives a shit that his dad is dead. He loves the kill, and he'll take any excuse he can get to add another notch to his belt.

I don't want to be a killer. I don't want this life.

Sonofabitch.

There is no way out, Nico.

You have responsibilities.

Shaye squeezes her arms around my hips, sobbing like the world is about to end. And I can't even fucking reassure her that when we step outside of this door, we'll be safe.

Because the truth is, I just don't know.

A loud knock makes me jump. "Yeah?" I call out.

"It's me." Max. Thank fuck.

"Only you?"

A second passes. "Yeah. Duke is waiting outside your office."

I bend down and cup Shaye's chin in my hand. "Babe, try to calm down a little. We're fine."

“But what if they’re out there? What if they’re just hiding until you open the door? What if—?”

“Shaye,” I whisper. “I promise, we’re fine.”

How many more fucking lies, Nico?

I stroke the back of her head. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

She shakes her head, tears streaming down her face. Black eye makeup is streaked across her cheeks, but her wig is securely in place. There is no way I’m going to have her walking around this place without her disguise. I drape my jacket around her shoulders so she doesn’t look as much like a felony waiting to happen.

I drop a kiss on top of her head and cross the room with a few steps. I crack open the door and pull Max inside, shutting it tight and locking it behind us.

“Okay, what happened? Do we know who did it?”

I shake my head and rub the back of my neck. “I’m waiting to hear back from Duke.” I toss him my phone so he can see the damage done to Carlo in the back parking lot. One of the best things about this location was probably the worst one for Carlo. It’s dark and desolate behind the club, and the cops stay far away because I pay them to do just that. Nobody would have seen or heard anything, and the only way he’d have been found was if someone went outside for a smoke.

And that’s exactly what happened.

“Holy fuck,” Max mutters. “Where is he now?”

“Max, I don’t fucking know anything!” I let out a deep sigh and slap my hands on my

pants. Christ, I can't lose my shit right now. Not in front of Shaye. Not in front of anyone.

Max furrows his brow at me, his lips stretched into a tight line. "Relax. We'll figure it all out."

"I know. I'm sorry." I button the front of my shirt and slip on my shoes, avoiding Shaye's tearful stare. Keep it together, asshole. If not for you, then for her.

He tosses my phone back to me and I dial another number, one that seems to be on speed dial for me lately. "Doc? Yeah, it's me. I need you down here. Yesterday."

"I'll leave now."

Click.

I look up and meet Shaye's gaze. I kneel down on the carpet in front of her, lacing my fingers with hers. "Babe, we need to go."

She nods, her hands shaking in my grasp. "O-okay." I pull her to her feet, steadying her in her heels.

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“Where are you taking her? She’s not leaving.” Max shakes his head. “She needs to be here with us. She’ll be protected if we’re all around her.”

I cup her quivering chin and look into her eyes. The fear, the panic, the terror...fuck, this is all on me. “We’re going to my office. She can stay there until we take care of this. It’ll give me time to figure out what to do next.”

Shaye clutches the jacket around her shoulders, and I look over at her. “Stay close to me. Don’t look at anyone, understand?”

She nods, and I open the door, scanning the hallway, seeing nothing that would make me raise an eyebrow. My guests are very occupied at this moment, in some capacity or other. Getting off is their primary goal for the night. I grasp Shaye’s hand and pull her close, Max following close behind. We snake our way through the crowd in the direction of my private elevator when a hand grabs my shoulder.

I stop short and take a deep breath before turning toward the owner of that hand. A deep scowl settles into my face as I make my move. Jackson Brody, a cocksucker of a real estate investor, smirks at me.

“Salesi. I need a meeting.”

I cock an eyebrow and shrug off his hand. “You know what to do.”

“I’m tired of talking to your bitch secretary. I’ve got a deal that—”

Rage bubbles in my chest and in a few seconds, I’m gonna let it erupt the fuck out of

me. Brody, beware. I drop Shaye's hand and push into Jackson's chest, hissing just like the snake he is. "Don't fucking touch me, Brody. I don't talk business down here or anywhere in public, for that matter. You have something for me? Get a fucking meeting on my calendar. And if you see me again before that happens, walk in the other fucking direction."

I can actually see Jackson's Adam's apple bob in his throat. I like to think I'm pretty civil when people approach me, but tonight is a very fucking bad night, and I have zero tolerance for shitheads like Jackson Brody right now.

He manages a weak smile and nods, backing away from me. It's only then that I notice a petite redhead standing next to him. Dipshit is probably trying to nail her and figured if he could get a reaction out of me, he'd have her on her back before the night is over.

Too bad for him the reaction he got isn't the one that's gonna get him laid.

"Dude, calm the fuck down," Max grumbles as I pull Shaye past Brody around the corner toward the elevator.

I stab at the Up button and turn the key into the lock since it's my own private one. Nobody enters unless I'm along for the ride.

"Don't tell me to calm down," I growl, stepping into the elevator once the door opens. My throat is tight, and I can barely squeeze out the words. Sweat beads pop up along the back of my neck. I have no idea what to expect once we get off this elevator. I have no idea what to expect once we leave the club tonight. And I have no fucking idea how to make this okay for Shaye.

"He drops a shit ton of cash here, Nico."

“I don’t need his money,” I grumble, cracking my knuckles one at a time. It’s a bad fucking habit, one I really need to drop once I’m stress-free.

Which will be never, so I guess I’m destined for arthritis—that is, if I live long enough.

“You can’t treat clients like that because you’re having a bad night.”

“You’re telling me not to lose my shit?”

“Yep. I’m trying to do my fucking job, asshole. That includes keeping the guests happy.”

I shake my head. I’m in the Twilight Zone.

The elevator creeps up to the second floor, and thoughts rattle my brain as the seconds tick past. I haven’t told anyone my suspicions yet about Luca being the killer. I wonder how long it’s going to take for them to realize what...or rather, who...we’re dealing with.

I can see Max studying me out of the corner of my eye, but I won’t meet his questioning gaze. I don’t want to encourage him. I’ve said plenty already. Let him figure it the fuck out from here. And I don’t want to answer any questions in front of Shaye. I hope he keeps his mouth shut until I can get her into my office and away from the reality that has become my fucking life.

Ding!

The doors open, and I poke my head out, saying a silent prayer just before my eyes dart up and down the darkened hallway. I don’t see anyone, so I walk out, pulling Shaye behind me. I unlock my office, push her inside, and point at Max while I grab

my gun from the top drawer. “Stay here. Don’t open the door for anyone. Wait for me, understand?”

He nods and shuts the door. I hear the lock flip, and I turn on my heel in the direction of a nearby private staircase. No elevator leads to the back entrance of the club. This area of Culaccino is always on lockdown. The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end as I round a corner and jog down the steps. My hand slides over the gun tucked into the back of my pants, and I take a deep breath before pushing open the back door.

I peer around the parking lot and spot Duke hunched over a motionless Carlo next to the dumpster. Rocco is kneeling next to him, his head lowered.

“What the fuck happened?” I growl, running over to them.

Duke runs a hand over his shiny bald head and lets out a deep sigh. “I came out for a smoke and found him laying here. Nico...” He lifts one of Carlo’s arms. “This wasn’t just a fucking beating. Someone crushed his bones. This wasn’t done with a weapon. This shit was done by hand.”

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Brutalized. The guy was fucking decimated. His limbs are twisted like noodles, his chest smashed in, his neck...Christ, someone punched right through his goddamn throat.

I fall to the ground next to my guys. "Did you ask around? Did anyone see anything? What about the security cameras?"

Duke shakes his head. "I checked the feeds. Nothing."

"How the hell is that possible? One of the cameras shows this parking lot. How come we didn't catch who did this?"

Duke shrugs, not able to formulate a scenario that would make this shit-show possible, and rubs the back of his neck. I know he and Carlo were close, and this has to be torture for him to see. He doesn't need me shitting on him right now, but the panic twisting my gut makes me anxious for any information I can yank out of him.

I sit back on my heels and fold my fingers together, trying like hell to pull myself together. "Okay, the doc is on his way. We have to take care of this quickly and quietly."

"What about his old lady?" Rocco looks up. "What are you gonna tell her?"

"I'll tell her," Duke says, still staring down at his friend. "I'll take care of it. Right after Doc takes care of him."

I clap him on the arm. "I'm coming with you. In the meantime, let's get him inside.

We'll wait for the doc in there."

It takes a few attempts, but we manage to hoist Carlo up and carry him into an empty room right inside the club. There are a few spare areas we use for private meetings. We lay his bloody body on the floor in the center of the room, and I turn to Rocco. "Come with me. Now. Duke, I'll be back."

Duke nods, sinking into a chair next to Carlo. "Okay. I'll wait."

"I've never seen him look so human before," Rocco mutters once we get back into the hallway.

"He just lost a good friend in probably the worst possible way, and he couldn't do anything to stop it." A sharp pang in my chest makes me wince. Great, because all I need is to have a fucking panic attack right now. I crack my knuckles again as we walk, my voice dropping. "This is just the beginning, Rocco."

He nods. "I know. This stinks of Luca Cappodamo. He's back, and he wants revenge. And the guy is as sick as they fucking come. He was out in California at the same time I was, you know, after your grandfather kicked my ass outta Jersey a few years ago. I'd heard he was doing some amateur shit since he was booted from the WFA for being hopped up on PCP for all of his fights. Dude, you have no idea what he did to those poor fuckers. He takes that shit so he doesn't feel. He thinks it makes him invincible. He's a twisted bastard, and if you're next, man..." Rocco shakes his head and lets out a whistle. "You're fucked. I hate to say it, but—"

"Screw you, Rocco." I grit my teeth. "I can handle myself just fine."

Rocco snorts. "Why? Because you gunned down his old man? Once? You really think that's gonna help you? What if he goes after Shaye? Or your mom? Or Lily?"

“He won’t. It’s not how he operates.” I know that better than anyone. I’ve seen his MO in action. If you fuck with him, he fucks you up. But only after he sends you a message that he’s coming. And if you get that message, read it, put your head between your legs, and kiss your ass goodbye.

I got my message. I know he’s coming. But kissing my own ass goodbye isn’t an option. I need to change the game, but time isn’t on my side. And Shaye’s dad Tony is already on the shit list of the Cappodamo family since he screwed them on a business deal awhile back. His guys know about us. And they’ll feed Luca whatever information he needs to get his revenge, including my girlfriend.

I can’t take that risk.

“So you think you can analyze him to death, Mr. CEO? Do you have any idea who you’re dealing with, Nico? This guy is a lunatic. Certifiable, for Christ’s sake. He only knows how to destroy. He doesn’t understand the talking thing.”

“Thanks for the pep talk, but what I really need you to do is watch over Shaye for me.”

His mouth drops open. “So this is a promotion, yeah? To babysitter? Why can’t I be on the fuck ’em up team?”

“Because I need someone I trust watching out for her. If I end up in another warehouse in Bayonne, it won’t end as well as it did last time for us. Lightning doesn’t strike twice. I need to keep her safe and keep running shit here. I can’t let things fall apart. That’s what he wants. I won’t give that to him.”

“And you think he’s doing all of this...and using his dad as an excuse...just to get you back for—”

I hold up a hand. “If I had to guess, yeah. But the reason why he’s here doesn’t matter. It only matters that he is here. He’s finally come home, so now it’s time to settle up. He’s gonna pay. Not only for Carlo, but for everything else he’s done.”

And fuck, I remember it all...screams that could shatter glass, the sickly sound of fists connecting with bone, the wailing sirens, and the blood...all of the fucking blood.

My gut clenches as an image of Shaye’s tear-streaked face floats in front of my narrowed eyes, short, sharp breaths slicing into my lungs.

I can’t let what he did happen again. I won’t.

* * *

NICO

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“Crushed windpipe, compound fractures to the ribcage, left and right forearms, dislocated shoulder, and based on the level of damage I can assess to his skull, I’d say there is clear evidence of a cerebral hemorrhage.” Doc lets out a sigh and turns toward me and Duke. “He took quite a beating. Any idea who did it?”

I walk toward the portable table where Carlo lies—motionless, bloody, and bruised. “No eyewitnesses,” I reply, avoiding the question. I know the answer, but without real proof... I rake a hand through my hair, averting my eyes from Carlo’s swollen, blueish-gray face.

How the fuck can I look Carlo’s wife in the eye and tell her I don’t know who did this to her husband? How I let the love of her life get pummeled by the hand of some sick bastard? How I could put him on the radar like some selfish asshole who couldn’t do his own dirty work? How I let him walk into the lion’s den with a fucking raw steak, knowing he’d be mauled before he got the chance to drop it?

“Does his family know?” Doc pulls off his latex gloves and tosses them into a nearby trash can.

“We’re going to his house now.” I rub the back of my neck, but the knot that has taken up residence there refuses to move. I glance at Carlo. I’d say it could be worse, but who the fuck am I kidding? It will be much fucking worse, sooner than later.

I bend down to pick up Carlo’s jacket and a folded-up piece of paper falls out of the inside pocket. I grab it before it hits the floor, and I stuff it into my back pocket before the other guys can see it. I don’t know why, I can’t explain it. But my gut tells me it was meant for my eyes only.

Duke rises from the couch in the corner of the room. “Thanks, Doc.”

Doc nods, a somber expression on his face. “Carlo was a good man. A loyal man. He didn’t deserve this.”

No, he fucking didn’t. Wrong, place, wrong time, wrong all the fuck around.

“Doc, do you need anything else, or can you handle it from here?”

Doc scrubs a hand down the front of his face. “I’ll take care of it and make the arrangements tomorrow. We should have everything squared away in a day or so.”

“Thanks. Keep this off the radar, Doc. I don’t want it to leak yet.” I clap him on the back and nod at Duke. “Get the car. I have to make a call before we leave.”

I follow Duke out of the room and watch as he exits the club. I pull out my phone and shoot off a quick text to Rocco.

Take Shaye to my place in the Village. I’ll call and let them know you’re coming. Whatever you do, keep her out of Jersey.

Luca will expect her to be at my house. He won’t think about staking out my apartment here in the city, mainly because I just bought it, few people know about it, and it’s protected by armed guards. A second later, my phone pings with a reply.

What about the club?

I stab the keyboard and click send. Let Max close tonight. Tell him you’re taking her to my house in Jersey.

Why?

Just fucking do as I say. And tell Max to keep this quiet.

I can't fucking trust anyone anymore, not even my best friend. Rocco took a bullet for me the night I popped Cappodamo. He went head to head with that asshole for me. That earned him a lot of fucking respect.

But Max...he's a loose cannon. I never know what he's gonna say or do. And he's always looking to climb the ranks and stomp on whoever gets in his way. I can't take a chance that he'll open his big-ass mouth to the wrong person...that person being his asshole father, Tony.

And I don't want Tony involved. Yet. Even though it's his daughter who's in the line of fire.

No, I need answers first. In the meantime, I have to keep this shit on lockdown.

I pull the piece of paper from my pocket and unfold it. My pulse throbs against my throat as my eyes read the words scribbled on the paper, carelessly torn from a spiral notebook. An icy sensation blasts through my veins, frosting my insides.

You dumb fuck. So desperate to get pictures of me for your boss, huh? I bet they came out better than the ones I just took of you, cocksucker.

5

Shaye

“Look, I appreciate your concern, but I don’t need a babysitter, Rocco.” I fold my arms over my chest and tap my foot against the hardwood floor in Nico’s new apartment. “You don’t have to wait here. I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself.” Jesus, I just need some time to process everything that happened tonight. And I don’t need an audience for that!

Besides, I probably have better aim than Rocco can ever hope to have. But that’s not something I need to share right now. I need Nico. I have to see if he’s okay. I want to know that he’s okay.

“I promised Nico. I can’t go, Shaye.” Rocco lounges in a plush, burgundy leather chair, stretching his long legs in front of him. “You know that.”

I let out a deep sigh. “You’re locked down like fucking Rikers Island. Why can’t you at least tell me anything? If I have to put up with you sitting here, at least talk to me!”

“Shaye, cut it out. If I could, you know I would. Just wait for Nico, okay? He’ll explain everything.”

I stomp my foot. “Goddammit! You’re impossible!”

He smirks at me. “That’s one I’ve never heard from a smokin’ hot chick.”

“Argh!” I slap my hands on my legs. “You’re such an ass. I’m getting some hot chocolate. And you can suck it because I’m not making any for you!”

I pad into the kitchen. The ceilings are high, the cabinets black and glass. Very modern. The granite countertops are shades of gray, a compliment to the rest of the sleek décor. Such a grown-up looking kitchen, I muse as I sift through the pantry for any sign that he knew I was coming here.

He’s only had the apartment for about a month. I’d originally thought it was just another place for him to hide out. But after I’d enrolled at NYU, he told me he got it just in case I needed a place to crash after a late class instead of going all the way back to New Jersey. I think he was hoping we’d eventually move in together. Not now, obviously since I’m still in school, but maybe at some point.

At some point. I’m hoping a lot of things happen “at some point,” like Nico and I getting back to the place we were last year when we first got together. I’d actually hope to see that at some point in the not-too-distant future.

I pull a box from the second shelf and tear open the top, salivating at the chocolatey goodness soon to be gracing my taste buds. Marshmallow Lovers. God, I love that man. I open two envelopes and dump them into a mug from one of the cabinets. Okay, now the big question...is there milk in the fridge? Because drinking hot chocolate made from water is just criminal.

I pull open the refrigerator. Jackpot. And it’s full fat to boot.

“Any beer in there?”

I slam the door shut, startled by Rocco’s voice. “Even if there was, I wouldn’t give it to you because you don’t deserve it.”

Rocco hops onto one of the counter stools. “Don’t give me that shit. You know what he’d do if he found out I told you anything. Besides, I’m sure he knows more than he let on to me. Just wait for him to get back. Let him give it to you straight.”

I cock an eyebrow, pause for a second, and open the refrigerator door to grab a Blue Moon. I hand it to Rocco. “Fine. Here.”

He pops the top off using his keychain and takes a long swig. “Fucking guy was beaten to shit. Never seen anything like it. Even from Max.”

I roll my eyes at his crack about my brother. “No weapon?”

Rocco shakes his head and takes another gulp.

“And this guy...” Here’s where I play a little bit dumb because they don’t need to know the truth...that I have my own source, who just so happens to be a Russian mafia princess named Katarina Ivanov. Viktor’s daughter and second in command has become my own personal shooting coach as well as a reliable informant. But Rocco doesn’t need to know that part. “...he’s MMA, right? Kicked out for drug use?”

Rocco rubs the back of his neck. I can see the internal debate. Should he confirm? Should he deny? Should he ignore my question altogether?

I already know the answer. I also know why he’s back.

This is why you don’t screw with a woman. Because they have ways of finding out things that you thought were buried deep...very creative ways. And now that I know, I can use the information.

“This life is pure poison sometimes, isn’t it?” I join him at the counter and climb onto

the stool next to him.

“Says the girl who has a pretty damn charmed existence.” Rocco scrubs a hand down the front of his face. “Cars, money, clothes, vacations...everything you want but nothing you have to sacrifice for.”

“Is that what you think?” I tap my fingernails against the granite. “That I just live in my perfect little bubble waiting for luxury to be handed to me?”

Rocco swivels around and stares at me. “Look, Shaye. I know you’re not like most of the women in these families. You’ve got your shit together. You’re trying to make something for your future. I respect that. But you don’t know what kind of fucked-up crap goes on behind closed doors to keep you in that Mercedes Benz of a bubble.” He leans closer. “I know you think you do, now that you’ve seen some of the shit that goes down with the other families, but you don’t. And there’s good reason for that. Nobody wants to see you get caught in the crossfire. It’s why Nico is a fucking disaster. It’s why Max is about to go off the deep end. And it’s why your father...” He stops and looks away.

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“What about my father?” I slap him on the arm. “You can’t just start that sentence and stop talking, Rocco.”

He narrows his eyes. “It’s why your father tried to make that deal with Cappodamo in the first place. Yeah, he wanted to be on top again, but it was mainly to protect you and your mother. He was promised a shit ton of cash if it went through. And now?” He shakes his head. “Now we’re all on the fucking chopping block, and everyone is on edge.” After another long gulp of the Blue Moon, he leans back against the stool. “Except Carlo. He’s not on edge anymore.”

“So you’re saying we’re all screwed? Or is that just me?”

“I’m saying that there are a lot of people who want to pop your bubble. Can you blame Nico for wanting to keep you safe?”

“No.” I wrap a lock of hair around my pinkie and blow on my hot chocolate before taking a sip. I recoil when the hot liquid hits my lips, immediately scalding them. I place the mug back on the counter, considering my next words. He’s right. Nico is a fucking hot mess these days. It gets worse every day, and now with Carlo being beaten to death...I need to get through to him. I can help if he lets me in. But the poison just keeps seeping in deeper and deeper as each day passes. Pretty soon, what we have will be completely toxic. I know it’s because he’s torn. He wants to keep me safe, he needs to run the business, he has to take care of the family...all of this was just thrust upon him.

Nico needs to take action. Swift action. If he doesn’t, Luca Cappodamo will smell the weakness and blast him into another dimension. Because he is that dangerous and he

has a fucking lot to lose now.

Poor Carlo was bait. Luca used the guy to call out Nico. But is Nico going to respond? Is he going to get into the ring with that lunatic and stake what's his?

That's what he needs to do. For the family, for himself, and for us.

It's the only way to move forward.

The front door creaks open. I hop off the stool and run into the foyer to meet Nico as he pushes the door shut and flips the multiple locks to keep us safely tucked inside his penthouse apartment. He turns toward me, his eyes drawn and heavy, his lips stretched into a tight line.

I cross the floor and hurl myself into his arms. They wrap tight around me. He squeezes me like it's the last time he'll ever hug me, and while I love the comfort and the security of it all, I can feel the sorrow permeate the air between us.

"How did it go?" I whisper, but all I get is a quick head shake. He buries his face in my hair as I clutch his waist tighter, a sob rising in my throat. I'd always liked Carlo and his wife. A sharp pang in my chest reminds me that the kind of news Nico delivered tonight could have just as easily been delivered to another unsuspecting wife. It could have been delivered to my mother.

Nobody is ever really safe.

But these are the cards we have to play.

Rocco walks into the foyer to meet us, and I pull away to give Rocco a quick hug.

"Thank you," I murmur. "Be safe."

“Always. You good?” he says to Nico, who nods his head.

“Thanks for taking her back here.”

“Call Max. He’ll want to know she’s safe.”

“I will.”

Rocco releases the deadbolts and opens the door. “I’m staying in the city tonight. Let me know if you need anything.”

“Thanks.” Nico closes the door once Rocco leaves and he collapses against the back of it, facing me, the pained expression on his face squeezing my heart like a vise.

A sad smile lifts his lips. “Kitchen light is on. I guess you found the stash, huh?”

My throat tightens. “Yeah,” I rasp, the lump in my throat making it almost impossible to speak. “Nico—”

He shakes his head and pulls me close. “No talking,” he whispers. “Just let me hold you, okay? I really need to hold you right now.”

* * *

NICO

I run my fingers through her soft hair and breathe in the scent of vanilla. I take in every bit that I can, allowing her to infuse my senses. She is part of me, always has been, and I’ll do anything I can to keep her safe.

Seeing Carlo’s wife fall to her knees when I delivered the news, weeping over her

lost love...all I could think of was Shaye and how devastated I'd be if I lost her. I'm the reason Carlo is dead. Knowing that my actions might put her in the same danger scares the hell out of me.

Shaye's heart beats in time with my own, faster with each passing second. Her hands slide up and down my back, as if to soothe me. But I'm beyond that...so far beyond it. I have Carlo's blood on my hands now. There is no relief from knowing that my actions took a good man away from his family forever. He was one of the most loyal of my guys and always did right by the family. Loved his wife, loved his kids, and always managed to pull a half-dollar out of Lily's ear whenever he saw her.

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And now he's gone.

Because of me.

I run my hands up the sides of Shaye's arms, sliding them over her shoulders, my hands cupping the sides of her face. I tilt her head back, leaning into her so our foreheads touch. "I love you so fucking much," I say, my voice thick. "Do you know that?"

She nods, tears in her eyes. "I love you too," she whispers, rising on her tip toes to graze my lips with hers. I hug her body tight against me as I drink her in, her tongue plunging into my needy mouth. And I do need her...need this...to bury everything else, if only temporarily.

I unzip her dress and peel it off of her, letting it pool around her ankles. Her breasts are bare, the deep pink buds beckoning me to taste. I dip my head, taking each one in my mouth, swirling my tongue around each of her nipples, my cock thickening with each soft mewl that falls from her swollen lips.

I lift her body into my arms and she locks her ankles around me, raking her fingers through my hair. My pulse nearly explodes out of me when her tongue and teeth assault my neck, moving toward my ear and that sensitive spot she always remembers to visit. I tighten my grip and move slowly into the bedroom a few feet away. I don't bother with a light; I lay her in the center of the California king bed and unbutton my shirt, dropping it on the floor. I kick off my shoes and lean down, looping my thumbs into the sides of her thong and slide it down her legs. Her knees fall open, exposing her perfect pussy to me. Her blue eyes are hooded; her gaze of longing shadowed by

long lashes.

I can't get my clothes off fast enough. Buttons pop off my shirt, my belt clatters on the floor, my pants and boxers flung to the side of the room in my haste to dive inside of her.

I climb on top of her, my legs straddling her body. "I want to feel you, Shaye." The head of my cock teases her slick opening. "Just once." I sink inside of her wet heat, groaning as her walls clench me tight. "Fuck, that's incredible." There's a condom laying on the nightstand, but I just needed to be inside of her for a second without any barriers. Just her and me, like it was always meant to be.

I thrust once, deep inside of her, and she gasps, her nails digging into my hips. "Oh my God..."

"We can't do this, babe," I grunt, thrusting once more. "Let me put on a condom."

Her pussy is so wet, I can't help sliding into her once more, a long, deep stroke that makes her scream and lance my back. Fuck, are those nails or knives? "I know you should, but holy crap, this feels so amazing."

I stop moving and lean on my forearms, whispering against her mouth. "I promise someday we're gonna do this the right way. But now I have to take care of you, okay?"

She nods, and I pull out, leaning over to grab the condom. I tear open the package and roll it on and slide back inside of her. Her pussy is so tight, and my cock stretches her wide, filling her again, inch by inch, a slow tease that always drives her fucking crazy. She presses her hands into the small of my back, urging me deeper, the way I know she loves it.

I reach around her, gripping her ass and angling her so I can drive into her with everything I have. I rise to my knees, my hands holding her hips steady as my cock throbs and pulsates deep within her. She fists the comforter, turning her face into a pillow to muffle the screams.

The deep, dull ache in my balls makes me grit my teeth. “Fuck, Shaye,” I groan, my hips thrusting faster as the slow explosion rumbles deep in my groin and blasts out to every extremity, igniting every cell in its path. The flames shoot through my insides, feeding on pure carnal energy. My gut clenches as I fill her, the way I long to do without this condom. I want to give it all to her, the way she’s given herself to me.

I release her gently, guiding her back to the mattress, and I collapse next to her. She flings an arm across my chest and pushes away the pillow. “Baby, what was that?”

I furrow my brow, my breathing labored. “What are you talking about?”

She flips onto her side to face me. “You didn’t wear a condom to start. Why?”

I let out a breath. “I don’t know. It was a stupid thing to do. I just...I needed to be as close to you as possible. I didn’t want anything between us, even a piece of latex.” I stare at the ceiling. “After what happened tonight...”

Shaye rolls closer to me. “What happened, babe? Talk to me, please.”

“It was one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do.” I push back my hair. “Telling Mrs. Batta that Carlo was dead. Murdered. On my watch. Her husband, the father of her children, beaten to death like a fucking dog.”

“You couldn’t have done anything to stop it.” She trails a finger down my arm. “It wasn’t your fault, Nico.”

“Yes, it was.”

“Why? Because you think you know who did it and since that person is your enemy—?”

I sit up, my head in my hand. “I don’t think it, Shaye. I know it.”

“How can you say that without having any proof? Just because it doesn’t look like a weapon was used, that doesn’t mean it was Luca.”

I nod and lean over the side of the bed, grabbing my pants. “You’re right.” The piece of paper is still tucked inside one of the pockets. I pull it out and drop it next to Shaye. “This is why I know who killed Carlo.”

Shaye holds out the note, her brows knitted. “Pictures? I don’t understand. Who was taking pictures?”

“I sent Carlo to Frank’s memorial to get pictures of Luca. I needed to have them on hand to alert the guys. He’s been gone for a long time, and I wanted to know I was looking out for the right guy. The same guy I remember.” My chest tightens. And it was the same fucking guy that I last saw years ago, right before his life fell apart.

Right before I escaped his downward spiral within an inch of my own life.

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She nods. “So he went after Carlo after you put him up to the task.”

“It’s my fault he’s dead. Luca did it to send me a message. He wanted me to know he’s out there, he’s watching, and he’s coming.”

Shaye bolts up from the bed and grabs the bedsheet, yanking it up to her neck. “Then why don’t you do something about it? Why are you going to wait for him to come to you?”

I rise from the bed and yank on my boxers. “Because I’m not a fucking killer, Shaye! Don’t you think I’ve been struggling with this over the last few months? Don’t you think I’ve been planning for this? I figured he’d come after me, and I’d take care of it. I didn’t expect him to go after one of my guys to bait me. It’s almost like he wants to call me out, but he’s not using his own voice. He’s taunting me, challenging me to see what I’ll do next. It’s all a fucking sick game to him. He doesn’t value life, not the way he...” I pause before I say something I’m going to wish I hadn’t. “I’m handling it.”

“How?” she demands. “By ignoring this? You just said how devastated you were about telling Carlo’s wife. Do it for his family, Nico! Do it for your family! Just do it, because the longer you wait, the more broken we become. Don’t you see that? Don’t you feel it?”

“Broken?” I raise my gaze to hers, my mouth stretched into a straight line. “You think we’re broken?”

“I think there’s a rift between us, one I can’t seem to close and one you won’t

acknowledge.” She crawls toward me, resting her hands on my shoulders. “I get little glimpses of the way you used to be before all of this happened. I know you’re trying to protect me and your family. I know you’re trying to keep everything running smoothly. But you’ve shut me out, Nico. You’re here with me, but somewhere else entirely. You won’t let me spend the night with you when we’re in Jersey, and you think I don’t know why. I know everything, babe. I know that killing Frank and dealing with the aftermath is destroying you on the inside. And that’s making us fall apart.” Tears pool in her eyes and her voice cracks. “I need you, Nico. Please don’t shut me out. Let me be here for you. Let me help you through this. I want to get back to the way we were before—”

“But I’m different now, Shaye,” I say it quietly. There is no reason to yell. There is no fight to be had. I made choices in the past that shaped my future. Now I have to deal with the consequences. But I’ll be damned if my next actions poison the lives of anyone I love.

I don’t want to make the wrong choice again.

“You’re still the man I love, the one I want to be with for the rest of my life.”

“And I want to be sure you get your wish, so you need to let me handle this my way.”

“What happens if he comes after someone else? What happens if you ignore his message? Who will be his next victim, Nico? And will you be able to live with that outcome, knowing you could have done something to stop him?” She swipes at a tear streaming down her face. “Will it have been worth it?”

6

Nico

A muffled crash startles me from sleep and I jolt upward. My eyes are heavy, but my heart jackhammers inside of my chest, panic forcing out the exhaustion. Shaye is still breathing quietly next to me, her head buried in a pillow. I swing my legs over the side of my bed, my feet hitting the hardwood floor. A loud creak is followed by another, and I dart my eyes around to find my gun...the gun I've carried but haven't had to use in months.

I don't have to look for long. It's sitting right next to my watch on the nightstand.

When did I put it there? I'd never leave it exposed like that...

I swallow hard and creep over to the door.

Footsteps. I hear them coming closer. Heavier. Louder.

I flip off the safety and twist the door handle.

How did he get in here? How did he find me?

I pull open the door and there are even more footsteps. Now those footsteps are coupled with loud voices, and the scent of lilies assaults my nostrils.

Lilies. Pollen. Allergies.

My eyes tear up, my throat tight. I step into the hallway, gun pointed toward the kitchen.

But it's not the kitchen I'm looking into anymore.

I take a few steps, entering a large, taupe-colored room filled with chairs and noisy people. And pollen. Lots of fucking pollen. My nose immediately suffers the effects. I creep forward, shirtless, barefoot, and in sweatpants. Nobody seems to notice. They all nod and smile at me before going back to their loud conversations.

Where the fuck am I?

"Nico, thank you so much for coming."

Who is this person? And why is she thanking me?

"I'm Carlo's sister. He always had such wonderful things to say about you." She smiles, her expression friendly.

I force my lips to curl into a smile. "He was a good man."

More footsteps. These are angry and coming from behind me. I spin around, but not in enough time to prevent the attack.

"He was. Until you got him killed! You're a murderer!"

Carlo's wife lunges for me, her long red nails lancing my neck. Nobody tries to stop her though. They just let her attack me like a wolverine.

I deserve it. I know I do. This is my fault.

“You let him die! My husband was killed because of you!” Her voice pierces my brain, the screams and threats pummeling me as hard as her fists.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. So sorry,” I mumble, gripping the bedsheet in my fist. I gasp and jump out of the bed, pulse throbbing, sweat pouring down the front of my chest.

Fuck me.

Lilies. Death. Grandpa. Carlo.

I’ll never buy another one of those fucking flowers again.

7

Shaye

One of my eyes floats closed, and I steady my hand. It's stretched straight out, my arm stiff as a corpse. My heart thrums, as it always does whenever I line up for a shot. The target taunts me from twenty feet away, waiting to see if I have what it takes.

I do. I haven't missed in weeks.

I pull the trigger, my body jolts from the force of the bullet exploding from the gun barrel. My lips curl upward as the bullet tears through the cardboard head, leaving the target dangling listlessly on its cord.

Katarina says I'm a natural.

I say I'm just pissed off.

The satisfying scent of burnt gunpowder fills my lungs. Under other circumstances, it'd probably make me hurl, but on days like this, when I know I'm coming closer to the time when these shots will be directed to actual live humans instead of cardboard cutouts, it empowers me.

I never thought I'd be standing in a shooting range, speckled with gunpower from my own gun, as the protégé of a Russian mob boss's daughter.

Nico was serious about me learning how to protect myself. But I'm sure that when he introduced me to Katarina Ivanov, Viktor's daughter, he had other ideas. Like kung fu. Or jujitsu. Maybe knife play.

But screw that. Martial arts are all fine and good, but while they may get me out of a chokehold, they won't do much by the way of stopping a predator. Permanently.

And Katarina...she's as alpha as they come. And since she looks like a Victoria's Secret model, they'll never see her coming. And that's just the way she likes it. That's what she's taught me.

With each passing day and each mutilated target, I can see my training hard at work. Katarina critiques every single move, every stance, every position until it's perfect.

"They'll never expect it from you, Pinky." Katarina smirks. "When you get your shot, it's going to be beautiful. You'll blow their minds and then blow off their heads."

"No pun intended?" I snicker. She's called me Pinky since that first night. It's because the ends of my blonde hair are dyed a vibrant fuchsia color. Whatever. The nickname reminds me that there's a sense of humor buried deep inside of this assassin in training.

That's exactly the kind of instructor I need. Nico would never have been able to detach himself from the situation to give me this kind of training. Hell, he has no idea I've spent so many hours at this gun club over the past months, especially since I haven't worn my watch here. I don't wear any jewelry at all.

And he'd flip if he knew I carried a handgun in my purse.

A roundhouse kick to the head will only buy me a sliver of time. These motherfuckers carry weapons, badass guns, and I refuse to be the victim again. I can

still feel the duct tape tearing at my skin, the dank smell of the abandoned warehouse where, if things had gone differently, I would have been killed at the hand of Frank Cappodamo. Brutalized first, raped most definitely...he was a sick bastard who hunted me in an attempt to bait Nico. And while we left that warehouse pretty much unscathed, there was plenty of emotional damage done.

A shiver runs through me. Never again. I refuse to be in that position ever again. I know I'm a target. I've worn that bullseye since birth, for Christ's sake. And I'm tired of waiting for someone else to save me.

This time, I'll be prepared. This time, I'll do the saving.

I place the gun down and stretch my arms overhead. "Another satisfying session."

Katarina smirks. "Stress begone."

"Completely." I pull out the hair band and let the blonde waves fall loose around my shoulders. "But damn, I'm starving. Plugging a cardboard cutout really makes me hungry. Lunch?"

Kat nods. "After we shower. I don't think you want to stink of gunpowder when Nico ravages you later."

"Yeah." I stuff my things into a duffel bag. "That hasn't really been a problem."

"What do you mean?"

"I haven't really seen him too much lately." I avert my eyes, zip it, and hoist it over my shoulder. "He's been working late at the club, so I've been staying at my parents' house."

“Except for last night.”

“Yes.” A shiver runs through me. The delicious memories from the most passionate night we’ve had in...shit, I don’t even want to think about how long it’s been since we’ve made love like that. All I know is we need to get back to the place where it was a nightly occurrence, not just something that happens when I surprise him at the club incognito or when someone gets killed.

Kat narrows her eyes and sticks her hands on her hips. “You mean to tell me he chooses not to fuck you? To work late instead?”

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“It’s not that simple.” I squirm under her piercing, blue-eyed stare. “He’s been really busy...and preoccupied...”

“With some other pussy?”

My mouth falls open. I love Kat, but she’s cruder than most guys I know. “No! Just with...things.”

“Well, if he’s not fucking you and he’s not fucking someone else, then what is keeping him away?”

I shrug. “He doesn’t really talk about it. I know he’s going through a hard time, trying to keep his guys in line, watching over his shoulder for that lunatic...I guess he’s stressed, too.”

“Shaye, he’s next in line to take over the family business. He has to be prepared to become the boss at any time. That means he needs to have his shit together. He can’t be some fucking pansy ass burying himself in work when he needs to be swinging his dick around.” She walks closer to me, her eyes narrowed. “There’s no room for stress in this life. It’ll fucking cripple you. And then it’ll kill you.”

Stress clouds your judgement. It’s a distraction, a potentially lethal one. Nico is wound like a top these days, and last night was the first time I’ve seen him somewhat back to normal. He was always so calm and controlled. But he lost his shit at the club, went after that guy for trying to talk to him...it’s like his emotions are blasting out of control.

Not that Kat needs to know any more than what I've already told her. I've probably said too much, and since her father is one of Nico's business partners, I really don't need to give her any more personal insight.

We walk into the ladies' locker room at the gun club and strip out of our clothes. I stuff mine into a plastic bag so I can bring them straight to the dry cleaner.

What my family doesn't know won't hurt them.

It might kill me, but that's another story.

Half an hour later, we're showered and on our way to Villa Laura, my favorite pizzeria. I'm dying for a pepperoni calzone.

Kat drives us in her car since she picked me up for our weekly gun date. I can't let my car be seen at the club. It's also why I go under a fake name. Nobody needs to know my plan.

Until I want them to know.

She pulls her Range Rover Volar into the parking lot and we go inside. I inhale deeply...the scent of pizza infiltrating my senses. My mouth waters as I stare at the fresh pies being slid out of the giant pizza ovens and onto their own display trays.

Okay, maybe a calzone plus a couple of slices...

Kat wrinkles her nose. "Can I get a salad here?"

My eyes pop wide open and I twist to face her. "A salad? Are you insane? This is the best pizza on the planet!"

“I don’t really care for Italian food. Or any food, really. You know my diet mainly consists of vodka anyway.”

I snicker. “Whatever you’re doing works.”

She flips her long, dark hair over her shoulder, and out of the corner of my eye, I see the guy behind the counter literally drool a little bit. I swallow a giggle, but this is the kind of reaction she generates pretty much anywhere we go. She’s about five inches taller than me, with lean, toned legs that go on for days. Her arms are sculpted, her waist tiny. But her presence? It’s huge. And menacing when she wants it to be. You’ll never see her coming...not until she wants you to.

And that’s an advantage she’s taught me. While they’re busy eyeing you and trying to figure out how best to fuck you, that’s when you lash out and slit their throats.

We order our food and walk into the dining area to pick out a table. She always opts for one close to an exit because you just never know.

“That last place you want to be stuck in is a corner. Like a rat.” She winks at me and flops in the chair closest to the back exit.

I tap my fingernails on the ceramic table top. Katarina has never been particularly open with me about her life, her past, or her family. But with my whole existence in upheaval, I feel like I need to find a kindred spirit...someone who’s gone through this before, someone I can relate to on some level. Our relationship to date has been very superficial. We train, and then we say goodbye. She’s not my friend, even though I sense she might need one. I tap faster. She may shut down, or maybe my instincts will be right and she’ll want to open up to someone. I raise my gaze to meet her curious one. “So, tell me, how did you learn to shoot like a sniper?”

A faraway smile lifts Katarina’s glossy pink lips. “My mother taught me. I was

young, younger than she wanted me to be when she started training me, but things were very dangerous for us back then. My father was working hard to rise up in the organization, and people above him didn't like that." Her shoulders sag and she toys with a straw wrapper. "She decided it was time for me to learn how to defend myself. So I did. I was her best student."

"Wow." My eyes widen. "I can't imagine my mother even holding a gun, much less teaching me how to fire one."

Kat runs her fingers through her hair. "You learn what you live. When death stares you in the face enough, you have to take matters into your own hands."

"She must be really proud of the badass you've become, huh?" I take a sip of my Diet Coke.

Kat looks away. "Yeah, well, she's dead so it doesn't really matter."

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“I’m so sorry, Kat.” I reach out to pat her arm and she stares at my hand for a long second before pushing back her chair and standing. “I’ll be right back.”

Dammit, I had no idea...I feel like a complete ass right now. Me and my stupid psychoanalysis. I should just learn to keep my big mouth shut. Although...maybe my instinct was right after all. She did tell me something personal about herself, something that was probably painful to share. But she did it anyway.

Maybe the Ice Queen is prone to thawing if she so chooses.

I’ll take that as a positive sign. I need her on my side.

My stomach growls, and I let out a groan. I’m so hungry, my arm is looking pretty damn good right about now. I’m very close to gnawing it off. How much longer is it going to take for—?

“Hey! Where the hell were you this morning? I came by at ten, and Max said you’d already taken off. What the fuck, Shaye?”

I gasp and twist around in my chair. “Rocco! You scared the hell out of me!”

He lowers himself down to my seated level and points to me, his eyes menacing. “Do you know what Nico will do to me if anything happens to you on my watch? What happened to Carlo will be me times a thousand!”

“Keep your voice down!” I whisper-shout. “I’m not a baby. I told Nico that last night. And again this morning. I appreciate your concern, but trust me. I’m good.”

Rocco's finger comes closer to my face. "Take it up again with your boyfriend. In the meantime, don't fuck around with—ahh!"

Katarina rushes toward Rocco, stealth like a fucking ninja if I ever saw one. Within a split second, she's looped an arm through his and has her other arm tight under his neck in a chokehold. His eyes pop wide open and he struggles to get a glimpse of his assailant. But she's good...damn good. He struggles for breath, and I jump up from my chair. "Kat, it's okay. You can let him go. He's a friend of mine."

She tightens her grip. "He doesn't sound so friendly."

Rocco sputters, his face turning an alarming shade of purple. "I c-can't b-b-breathe," he rasps.

"Seriously, Kat. I don't think he'll ever do that again." I smirk at Rocco. "Right? Buddy?"

He nods, pulling at Kat's arms. "Y-y-yes!"

Kat releases him and he drops to his knees, clutching his neck and gasping for air. "Fucking sick bastard. Who the hell do you think—?" His eyes are pure venom at this point and he leaps to his feet, spinning around to face his attacker...the attacker who looks more like a runway model than a trained assassin. To say the look on Rocco's face is priceless really is the understatement of the century.

Katarina lifts a perfectly shaped eyebrow. "I don't wait for danger to become a reality. I believe in exterminating it before that happens. And even though you don't look like you pose too much of a threat..." A tiny smile curls her lips upward. "I don't like to take unnecessary chances."

Rocco's mouth falls open. I've never actually seen him struck speechless. It's quite

comical. I'm enjoying my vantage point, happy to know there's somebody who has my back and can do pretty severe damage as she so clearly demonstrated.

This is just too good all around.

He rises to his full height, puffing out his chest though he's still struggling for air. "I don't know who the fuck you are, but I'd appreciate it if next time you mind your own fucking business when I'm talking to my friend."

I put a hand to his chest. "Okay, relax, Rocco. She was just looking out for me. Exactly what you're trying to do. We're all on the same team here."

He rubs his neck, glowering at Katarina. But I can tell he would much prefer to rake his eyes over her body. The wheels start to turn. Maybe that time will come...

Kat flashes a toothy grin and sidles back to her chair. "That's right. We're all on the same team, buddy."

He clears his throat. "It's Rocco, not that I give a fuck whether or not you know my name."

Yep, that's a bunch of bullshit.

"Rocco," she repeats, her grin widening. "Rocco Lucchese, yes?"

"Yeah," he grunts, narrowing his eyes in my direction. I shrug. I may have mentioned him once or twice. Or a dozen times.

He needs a girl, and Kat is his perfect match.

Not that he looks convinced of that.

“Rocco, this is Katarina Ivanov.” I let the name sink in and wait for his reaction. It doesn’t disappoint.

“Viktor’s daughter?”

She nods. “The one and only.”

His lips stretch into a straight line. “He’s a good guy, your dad. Saved my ass once.” He adjusts his jacket and looks at me. “Next time, just text me if you’re not gonna be home.”

I nod. “Do you want to sit down?”

“Nah, I’ve got to get back to the club right now. But, um, maybe another time.” His tone, normally so gruff and grim, sounds hopeful. His eyes flicker back toward Kat, whose appraising stare tells me she’s as curious as he is. Perfect. How gifted am I at this matchmaking crap?

If I could only figure out the little kinks between Max and Sloane, my best friend, I would consider myself the setup whisperer. But their dynamic is a little more challenging, especially since neither one of them will let me in on what the hell happened between them all those months ago that keeps them drooling over each other from a distance.

Kat says nothing, but continues to stare him down. For a second, I almost feel like walking away since I am so clearly intruding on their silent and lustful exchange.

Rocco finally tears his eyes away from Katarina. “I’ll give you a call later, okay?”

“Yes.” I smile. “Now get to work.”

“Bye, Rocco,” Kat sing-songs, straining her chest against the tight shirt stretched against her skin. The action doesn’t go unnoticed, either. Rocco grins at Kat and winks at her before turning and sauntering toward the exit.

I let out the snicker that’s been building in my throat. “Oh my God, that was awesome. I’ve never seen him cut down like that.”

Kat smirks. “I figured you’d like that.”

“But you must have known he wasn’t a threat.”

“Maybe. But it was fun anyway. I needed to get my fix. Sometimes a good chokehold does the trick and brightens my mood.”

I gasp as the steaming hot slices of pizza are set down in front of me along with my calzone. “Thank God! Can you guess what has just brightened my mood?”

* * *

NICO

“Where did you find her?” My blood pressure has to be through the roof right now. Why is Shaye purposely trying to evade Rocco? Does she want to end up like fucking Carlo? I slam my hand on the steering wheel, glaring at the red light hanging over the intersection. I shouldn’t have told her about the watch. I know she didn’t wear it on purpose to prove a point.

There’s a lot of static on the line, and Rocco’s voice is fading out. I swallow hard. This isn’t a game. I’m trying to keep her safe by keeping one of my best guys with her.

“Katarina Ivanov.”

That’s a step in the right direction. At least I heard that.

“She was with Kat?”

“...lunch...pizza...bitch...chokehold...”

I furrow my brow and turn into the parking lot outside of my dad’s office building as I piece together his words. “Fuck! Did someone come after her? Did you need to take someone out? Rocco, what the fuck happened? I can’t hear you for shit right now! Where is Shaye? Is she okay?”

Suddenly the line clears and the static fades away. “Dude, relax, it’s fine. That chick she was with put me in a chokehold, okay? She swoops in from outta nowhere and attacks me. Fucking crazy bitch.”

Despite the panic that set in seconds before, I let out a chuckle, thinking about Kat subduing Rocco, big, bad Rocco who is probably twice her size in mass and muscle. “What did you do to make her think you were a threat?”

“Do you really think she needed an excuse?”

“Knowing Kat, probably not.”

Rocco lets out an exasperated sigh. “Look, maybe I got in Shaye’s face a little, but it was only because I was pissed off that she left without telling me. I’m doing this little babysitting gig as a favor to you, but your girl doesn’t seem to want anything to do with it. I can’t watch her if she disappears.” He snorts. “Besides, I don’t think she needs me when she has her own private bodyguard.”

I collapse back against the leather bucket seat and let out a deep breath. “Yeah, Kat can be pretty brutal.”

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“Thanks for letting me know Shaye was hanging out with fucking Nikita.”

“I would have loved to be a fly on the wall.”

“Fuck off. I’m going back to work.”

“Okay, I’ll see you later at the club.” I click off the phone and push open my car door. The stress knots are back in force, and my neck is stiffer than a fucking week-old corpse right now. Something tells me shit’s about to get worse. I sidestep Tony Oriani’s sleek black Jaguar and let out a groan. Why the hell did Dad need to call that douchebag? I wanted to have a private conversation with my father first, before Tony hears the story and goes off the deep end, which is his typical reaction to most situations, the one that put us all in this position in the first place.

Motherfucker.

I stab the Up button next to the elevator after checking in with security. The building looks like a normal place of business, but what visitors can’t see are the automatic weapons stored behind the polished wood reception desk or the concealed weapons on the bodies of the ex-military security guards. Nobody knows that with a simple push of a button, this whole place gets locked down like a maximum security prison and if somebody is trying to pull a job on the inside, rest assured that person won’t ever make it out.

The elevator creeps up to the fifth floor where my dad’s office is tucked away into a corner. I step out of the elevator once the doors open and walk through the expansive reception area. It’s empty, thankfully. I don’t really feel like dealing with—

“Nico...” A low, female voice purrs into my ear. “I haven’t seen you here in a long time. Something keeping you away?”

I twist around to find Janelle, one of the accountants here at the firm. Her bright red lips are twisted into a pout, her shirt unbuttoned about three too many. She flips her long wavy hair and sticks a hand on her hip. “You don’t call anymore.” She leans closer, eyes narrowed. “Did you get tired of me, Nico? Did you get tired of fucking me?” She taps a finger against her mouth and pretends to think about her own question. “I let you do anything to me that you wanted. I tried to make you so happy, and you just disappeared. Why?” Her voice has taken on a pretty damn menacing tone, and I berate myself again for ever getting involved with this crazy bitch. Christ, over the years I’d let my dick make way too many decisions for me...fucking bad decisions. Thank God those days are over.

I grasp Janelle’s shoulders to hold her in place. She’s getting too close, and I don’t need my father, or worse, Tony, to see the whole scorned lover scene playing out here. I glance around the room. Hell, I wouldn’t be surprised if this woman had a camera set up somewhere, capturing the whole sordid episode.

“Look, I’m sorry. It was never a good idea for us to get involved. You work for my dad. It was fun, but it’s over.”

I feel like I say the same thing to her every time I show up here, vocalizing it over and over again after she manages to corner me. I wish she’d just quit.

Her lips stretch into a straight line. “You’re a fucking womanizing asshole!”

“Look,” I hiss. “I never made you any promises. It’s done, okay? Just move the fuck on.” I really hate being such an asshole, but every time she sees me, it’s like she forgets we’ve already had this conversation a thousand times before. It gets old, but no matter how I put it, she’ll no doubt air her grievances again the next time I show

up here.

I have to start meeting my dad for lunch instead. Fuck this office visit shit.

Her nostrils flare, and without another word, she spins around and stomps down a hallway. I let out the breath I'd been holding. Fucking Stage 5 clinger. I know I'm good, but still...this is a little extreme.

Christ, I have made some shitty decisions in the past.

I straighten my shirt and walk in the opposite direction as Janelle since my dad's office is clear across the room. Thank fuck.

The door is closed, so I twist the handle and pull it open. Six pairs of eyes hit me at the exact same time, and they are full of questions. And accusations, judging from Tony's death stare.

"Why didn't you go after that motherfucker and stuff the barrel of a gun down his throat?" Tony jumps up from his chair and closes the space between us. I don't back away. I stand by my decision. Besides, no one besides Shaye knows about that note. It's in my pocket, and I guess that's where it'll stay since present company is already all over my ass to make a move.

"Tony, relax," my dad says, rising from his position behind the desk.

"Don't tell me to relax, Joe! My daughter is at risk now." Tony turns to me and points a finger between my eyes. "You put her in the line of fire, Nico. You were the reason why she got snatched the first time, and now she's a target again."

"You don't think she's always been a target, Tony? Because of the stupid ass decisions you've made?" I lean toward him, refusing to back away. "You've put her

in worse situations because of your fucked-up priorities. Or are we just brushing them under the rug right now because you think you found a new scapegoat?"

"Dad, calm down." Max lets out a deep sigh and rolls his eyes at me. "Shaye is fine. From what Rocco told me, she's got her own personal bodyguard tailing her right now."

"You took unnecessary chances, Nico." Tony growls through clenched teeth. "What's your big plan this time? Sit on your ass and wait for someone else to be fucking mauled on your watch?" He turns to my father, eyes blazing. "Grandpa Vito would never have let this go without taking swift action. But you have Mr. CEO here, who finally found an organization he has no idea how to run. This isn't a sex club, Nico. This is our fucking livelihood. If you don't do something to show strength, the other families will stop doing business with us. And you think the Russians will have your back? Fuck that! Nobody wants to be part of a sinking ship, Nico. Nobody!"

Dad gets up and walks over to the large floor-to-ceiling window overlooking a lush green park down below. It's ironic how tranquil this area is, how peaceful and quiet our surroundings are, especially when there is so much toxicity within these walls. Somehow, though, it never leaks to the outside.

At least, it hasn't just yet.

"Tony, I trust Nico's judgment on this. He knows what he's doing, and I respect his decision."

"That's fucking insane! An eye for an eye! Why the fuck aren't we on the move to take that asshole down?"

"Because he has a whole army on his side!" I shout, the panic bubbling in my chest. I struggle to keep my voice even, but it's damn hard. I know what this motherfucker is

capable of, and if I go after him, guns blazing, I'd better be sure I have the backing to deal with the fallout. I need to make sure Viktor Ivanov has my back. That's why I initiated the whole deal with that fucking horse farm, to solidify a partnership with him. Viktor's got a shit ton of drug money that needs to be laundered, and the farm is a perfectly legitimate front for it. I'm giving Viktor more reasons to stick with the Salesi family. More ways to make money, to clean said money. The other families fear Luca because his father made sure he had his claws embedded into all of their drug dealings. His influence runs fucking deep. The Russians are our allies. They've proven it once before. I just need to make sure they'll be there for us again before I take action.

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That's why I haven't gone after Luca. I'm fucking scared for my crew. Scared for Shaye, for my family. I trust so few that I don't have the confidence we'll be able to withstand a full-blown war. And that's exactly what this will become. Money can buy a lot, but fear buys much more.

And right now, Luca can afford way more than we can.

I clench my fists, struggling to keep my voice even. "Look, Tony. I know what the fuck I'm doing."

"Well, it doesn't look like you do...that either of you do. You think your grandfather would be deep in this shit right now? He'd have already taken care of this threat to his family, and there are plenty of people who'd have had his back, who would have followed his command without a second thought. Because he was that strong. He was a fucking leader!"

"Dad, relax and let them do—"

"Don't tell me to relax, Maximo!" Tony shouts at Max. "There's a lot at stake here, and we're facing a war none of us has the confidence to fight, much less win. So, how does it feel, Joe? To be the captain of a sinking ship...a ship that was once king of the fucking fleet!"

The mention of Grandpa makes my gut clench. And what Tony said is true. Grandpa was revered. There was no shortage of people who would do anything for him. He did a lot of favors, and he made a lot of friends in the process.

Dad and I don't have that luxury. Our favors come in the form of hard-earned money, and people are more confident about the leaders who grant favors in the form of protection. It gives them hope. It empowers them. They may never be rich, but they know they will be safe.

Tony is an example of someone who wants both, and he sees my dad and me as two obstacles holding him back from attaining either.

Fuck him. Fuck them all.

I inch closer to Tony, to my girlfriend's hulking, sneering father, and narrow my eyes. "If you want any part of this family, you'd better remember who you're talking to. Don't fucking challenge me again. We are handling this, and you? You're fucking lucky to be here in the first place after the shit you pulled. Let's not forget that we're here because of you, Tony. You fucked all of us, so consider yourself lucky to be standing in this room, in my presence."

"Don't you fucking—"

"I'm not finished!" I bellow. "You have a job. You're running a construction site for a new strip mall. I suggest you do your fucking job and stay the hell out of mine, or else you might find yourself in a very different position very soon. You get me, Tony? Because I'm done dealing with your bullshit."

"I want you to stay the fuck away from Shaye," he growls, glaring at me so hard I'm convinced he's trying to smoke me from the inside out. "I don't trust you or your plans, and I don't want my daughter caught in the middle again."

"She's a big girl. It's her choice, not yours." I fold my arms. "Besides, you didn't seem to give a shit about her getting caught in the middle when you were playing both sides of the fence with Cappodamo. Let's be honest. You want her as leverage."

I shrug. “She’s not a pawn in your fucking game, to strategically move at your whim. And trust me, there is no amount of leverage that will help you, Tony.”

Max springs up from his chair. “Dad, let’s get to the construction site. We need to meet with the contractors in half an hour.”

Tony doesn’t move a muscle. He just stares me down, his eyes dark and menacing. Kind of like his soul. If there was anything behind that anger, he’d be a force to be reckoned with. But he’s a fucking pussy. He talks about strength, which is ironic because he’s got none. He’s just a manipulative fuck who talks out of both sides of his mouth, and I’m done with this asshole.

All that talking he does just makes him dangerous and . Not strong.

I peel my glare off of Tony’s face and focus it on Max. My best friend who allowed me to be ambushed by his dickhead father. Is there anyone out there who can fucking be trusted?

He averts his eyes and pushes past Tony to open the door. “Dad, we’re gonna be late. Let’s go.”

But Tony isn’t one to follow orders. He’s going to leave when he damn well pleases, not when someone else recommends that he gets the fuck out of this office. Everything has to be on his terms. He turns back to my father. “Joe, let’s talk later about the building schedule. I’ll bring over the plans so that we can review them.”

His glacial stare returns to me. I’m sure he’s disappointed that I don’t immediately fall into a deep freeze, but he has my blood boiling to the point where I could combust any second.

He leaves the office without another word, slamming the door so hard, the walls

shake.

Cocksucker.

I fold my arms and turn toward my father. “Was that really necessary? Did you need to bring him in here? I wanted to talk to you in private. I thought I made that clear when I called you.”

“Nico, you know how he is. Max told him what happened, and he wanted to know how you’re going to respond. I can’t blame him. He’s worried about his daughter.” Dad runs a hand through his hair.

I let out a snort. “He’s not fucking concerned about Shaye. He just wants inside knowledge so he can figure out how to exploit it for cash. Besides, you know I can’t give him the information he wants. I told you what needs to be done, and you agreed with me earlier. What the hell changed your mind?”

“Nico, you’re putting all your eggs in one vodka-soaked basket. Are you sure this is the right path? Because once you get the ball rolling, there’s no turning back. You need to make sure Viktor has your back.”

“Why are you doubting me all of a sudden?” My spine stiffens. “I know what I’m doing. Shaye is taken care of. Nobody suspects anything.”

“And you really think that hooking her up with Katarina is going to cement your relationship with Viktor?”

I slam a hand down on the desk. “We’ve been over this. I couldn’t train her myself. I’m too involved, and I won’t be able to detach myself to teach her what she needs to know. I needed someone else to handle it for me, someone she could trust. Kat’s a perfect shot, and it was Viktor’s idea to get them together in the first place. If anyone

can teach Shaye how to blow off someone's head without so much as a blink, it's Kat." I sink into a chair in front of the desk. "Dad, I hate like hell that this is happening. I hate that I can't have her with me all the time, that I spend most of my time worrying about her. And I fucking hate not knowing what's coming next, knowing that I can't plan my way out of it."

"Nobody ever said this would be easy. Things have gone to shit since Grandpa died and there's a lot of rumbling within the ranks. Taking out Frank Cappodamo was a good short-term move, but the long-term effects can crush us if we don't have the right backing. Does Viktor know about your history with Luca? The real reason for his vendetta against you?"

"No." I crack my knuckles one at a time. "It doesn't matter. It's all in the past."

"It might matter to Viktor."

"Why?"

"This is about trust building, Nico. If you want to keep Viktor as an ally, you have to offer him more than just money. Anyone can line his pockets. Don't let him get blindsided, even if you think it won't matter to him." Dad looks at me and reclines in his chair. "We're very vulnerable right now. I know you don't like to hear that, but it's true. We need a strong alliance with the Russians to be taken seriously. That will give us controlling interest of the top money-making businesses in the tri-state area. That loyalty won't come cheap, but it will keep us at the top of the food chain. The Russians don't need us, Nico. Don't kid yourself. They can align themselves with any of the other families unless we offer them something that nobody else can. Give them a reason to stick with us. We need them if we're going to survive this fallout."

8

Shaye

“Do me a favor and just wear the damn thing.” Nico smacks the top of the steering wheel with his hand. “Yesterday could have turned out very fucking badly. That watch is meant to protect you.”

I let out a deep breath, fighting the urge to roll my eyes since I know how much it pisses him off. He doesn’t need to be so worried, not that he knows it. “Fine, I’ll wear it.”

“And don’t take off on Rocco again, okay? He’s doing me a favor by keeping an eye on you.”

“Okay,” I grumble, gathering all of my books together in a pile on my lap. We’re still about twenty minutes away from school, and I’d like to be done with the conversation. I’d much prefer the us version.

“How’d the meeting with your dad go?”

His fingers grip the steering wheel even tighter and his back stiffens. “It didn’t go as I’d expected.”

“How so?”

“Because your father showed up and hijacked the whole thing, shooting off his mouth

about shit he doesn't understand."

Okay, this deserves a definite eye roll. "Nico, I'm sure he was just trying to help. He's worried about the family just as much as anyone else."

"It seems like he's more worried about his interests than the family's."

"I know he doesn't always handle these things the right way, but he means well."

Nico's knuckles are white right now. That must mean there was way more said than he's letting on right now. I know the background. I know what my father did to incite Frank Cappodamo. And I know he's a big reason why there's a big-ass target plastered across my back.

But he's still my dad. And I hate being in the middle of their never-ending dick slinging contest. There's never been any love lost between Nico and my dad, and things have gotten more prickly since Grandpa Vito died and Nico rose in rank. Dad doesn't like taking orders from anyone, much less from his daughter's boyfriend.

And he's not shy about airing his grievances, which is only going to cause more trouble for him.

"He needs to keep his fucking mouth shut. He says the wrong shit to the wrong people again, and..." Nico's voice trails off and he pounds on the wheel again. Poor steering wheel. What the hell did it ever do to him?

I tug on a strand of my hair and twist it around my index finger. This is not the direction I wanted the conversation to take. "You sleep okay last night?" I slam my mouth shut, but it's too late. The words are already out. And I know damn well he didn't sleep well at all.

I'm tired of him shutting me out. The whole biting his tongue so he doesn't say too much thing has to stop.

He slows at a red light outside of the Holland Tunnel. "Not bad."

I snap my head around to face him. "Really? So you didn't have another nightmare that made you jump out of the bed again, panting because you can't even breathe?"

He narrows his eyes at me. "What the hell are you talking about?"

I point at the traffic light. "It's green."

"I don't fucking care."

I lean back against my seat and glance in the side-view mirror. Luckily, there's nobody behind us. I guess it's a random time to be heading into the city. "I know you're having trouble sleeping. And I also suspect it's because you carry all of this family bullshit on your shoulders every day. You're the one making decisions, taking risks, dealing with the mess that comes along with it all." I turn to him, cringing at the look of defeat in his eyes. His face is twisted into a grimace, but the eyes...they tell me everything I need to know. Everything I'd already suspected. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the light has flickered back to red. "You're responsible for so much, and I'm worried about you, Nico. I can't watch you do this to yourself anymore."

"It's my job." His voice is tight, teeth gritted. I get it. I just called him out on something he's been desperate to hide from me, something nobody else knows. Something that can change people's perception of him in a hot second.

Fear. Weakness.

They'll either break you or kill you.

Beep! Beep! Beep!

“You need to drive.”

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He slowly turns to face the road again and presses the gas, my body jolting forward as the car picks up speed. We speed through the toll plaza and are plunged into the darkened tunnel before he speaks another word.

“Why can’t you just talk to me, Nico?”

“Because if you knew half the shit going on in my head, you’d run in the opposite direction.”

“Do you really think you could get rid of me that easily?” I lace my fingers with his tense ones wrapped around the gear shifter.

“I wouldn’t blame you if you did take off.”

“Don’t you understand that I’m in this? That I want to help you? I signed up for this, Nico. I knew what I was getting into, but I didn’t care because I love you.” I sigh. “I always have, and I always will.”

“This isn’t the kind of life you deserve. To always be watching and worrying and—”

I squeeze his fingers. “The only one I’m watching and worrying about is you.” I take a deep breath. “I think that you need to talk to someone. If you don’t want to scare me, that’s fine. But there has to be someone who can help you work through all of this. You won’t go after Luca because you’re afraid of the consequences, yet you let the fear of the unknown eat at you.”

“I can’t talk to anyone, Shaye! Don’t you get it? I can’t trust anyone. I can’t tell

anyone the shit that keeps me up at night. Anything I admit makes me vulnerable to attack. I have to handle this on my own.” His voice softens. “Look, I know you think talking shit out is the best way to work things out, but in my line of work, it’s the worst fucking possible thing. Better to keep your mouth shut and your thoughts to yourself before someone uses them against you and shoves an ice pick into your skull.”

“I just thought—”

“I’m not one of your case studies, babe.”

“Don’t you at least trust me?” I try so hard not to let my voice crack, but dammit, it does. I want him to see me as more than just the princess in her ivory tower, waiting for her prince to rescue her. I need him to see me as someone who is just as strong as he is, someone who can protect herself, someone who doesn’t need to rely on others for her security.

“You’re the one person I do trust.” He pulls over to the side of a dark gray building on West 4th.

“It doesn’t feel that way.”

“I tell you more than I should, more than I’ve ever told anyone.” He cups my quivering chin. “I know you don’t believe that, but it’s true. But I can’t share everything with you because I need to protect you. As much as you think you can handle it, you can’t. Fuck, sometimes I don’t think I can handle it all.”

I nod. “I understand.”

“I don’t think you do. You’re saying that, but thinking the exact opposite.”

“Now who’s the case study?”

The corners of his lips lift. “I’ve never opened up to anyone the way I’ve opened up to you, Shaye. Before you, I’d never let someone in—to my life, to my heart, to my soul. I need to protect you with everything I have. If I don’t tell you something, it’s because I want to keep you safe. And since you have a nasty little habit of taking matters into your own hands...”

I snicker.

“...I think that some things are better left unsaid.”

“It must be genetic.”

“Must be,” he murmurs, grazing my lips with his. It’s amazing how much more that sensation can awaken my body than a triple shot of espresso.

Why can’t he be like this all the time? I’m so damn tired of getting little glimpses into the guy I fell in love with. I need him to break out of this impenetrable shell and come back to me.

His fingers graze the side of my face, and I let my eyes flutter closed. I’m drifting, into him, through him, around him. He consumes my body and mind with little more than a half-hooded gaze, he breathes energy into my soul.

The most freaking complex man I’ve ever met is the only one who can undo me with the simplest of actions.

Irony.

“Nico,” I breathe against his mouth.

“Yeah.” His fingertips drag along the back of my neck, and for a split second, I forget my next words.

But then they come rushing back to me, the words I’ve been bottling up, the words he needs to hear, the words he’s been avoiding for months, whether or not he even knows it.

I pull away slightly, my forehead touching his. “It’s time, Nico. You have to take control of this family. You have to protect it. End this war, babe. Don’t wait for them to end it for you.”

9

Nico

I pull into a parking spot outside of the club about half an hour later. Right next to Max's car.

End this war, babe. Don't wait for them to end it for you.

Sometimes I wonder which war I'm supposed to be fighting.

I slam my car door shut, pull out my key, and unlock the back door. Duke and some of the other guys are moving crates of liquor to the bar area, prepping for tonight's 'anything goes' crowd.

"You seen Max?" I ask.

He nods and points toward the staircase. "He's downstairs."

I don't bother with my elevator key. I take the stairs two at a time and head into the exclusive labyrinth of kink I've single-handedly created. Me. Nobody else.

I did it by myself—raised all of the money, built all of the buzz, hooked all of the clients. And they're all hungry for more of what I have to serve. I built the kingdom, and I fucking rule it.

Nobody is going to stab me in the back in my fucking domain.

Nobody.

“Max!” I yell, not bothering to search him out. I want him to come to me. Best friend or not, he really fucked me today, and Christ only knows how many times he’s done it in the past.

He pops out from one of the private rooms, hands stuffed into his pockets. “Yeah? What’s up?”

I let out a dry laugh. “What’s up? Well, let’s see. Other than me finding out that you’re fucking mouth can’t be trusted to stay shut for even twelve hours? I don’t know, why don’t you just ambush me again right now and go two for two?”

Max lets out a sigh. “Look, I’m sorry—”

“Sorry? Don’t give me that bullshit!” I slam a hand against the wall. “I told you not to say anything to anyone, much less your father. But he’s the first one you ran to with the news about Carlo. Why the fuck would you do that?” I inch closer. “Unless he has something up his sleeve, and he pulled you into his fucking trap. What’d he promise you, Max? Money, power, pussy? All three? Your own fucking empire?” I shout.

“He didn’t promise me anything!” Max yells. “He has a right to know if his daughter is in danger. He has a right to protect her. You know how he feels about you two being together. And you’re too involved in this shit to think clearly. Luca is a fucking psychopath and if he gets his hands on Shaye...” He shakes his head. “She’s my sister, Nico. My sister! Do you know what Luca would do to her? Do I need to say again that she’s double-fucked because of you and my dad?”

“You think that doesn’t keep me awake at night? Every fucking night?”

“Well, let me tell you, if something happens to her, you won’t have to worry about

insomnia ever again.” He inches forward, a murderous look in his eye, the same one I’ve seen a million times before. The one I know he’ll act upon without a second thought.

I clench my fists. “Don’t you fucking threaten me, you asshole. You see all of this? I gave it to you! I made a place for you here! And you have the fucking nerve to challenge me, here of all places?”

“You’re always so focused on what you’ve given to me. You want me to kiss your fucking ass every time I see you? Would that make you happy? Yes, I fucked up awhile back, and yes, you pulled me out of the shit. You took care of me, and I’ll always be grateful for that. But you don’t control me. I’m not your fucking puppet. You wanna pull strings? Pull Rocco’s. He’s not far enough up your ass already.”

“Is that what this is about? You’re pissed off about Rocco?”

Max fists his hair and lets out an incredulous laugh. “You’re a real piece of work. This is about Shaye.”

“Is it? Or does it have to do with the fact that I brought in Rocco to help run things here?”

“This is my job, Nico! And he swoops in here like he’s your fucking number two. Do you remember why he was banished in the first place? Because he’s a slimy piece of shit who would rather steal from other people and lie about it than do actual work. He crippled me, Nico. And you let him inside. But you didn’t stop there.”

“He saved my life, Max. Or don’t you remember that night?”

“So, because I didn’t shoot myself in the stomach, I’m not worthy? Is that how you gauge loyalty now, Nico? Should I just let you slit my throat? Will that restore your

faith in me?” Now he’s pacing and pounding the wall as he stomps around me. And the murderous look is still in force. “You told Rocco everything the other night! And then you made him lie to me. About my own sister. You let him take her back to your place in the city, and you didn’t even have the decency to let me in on it. That crazy motherfucker was lurking, and I could have helped! But you didn’t invite me to the party. Nope, you saved it all for fucking Rocco! But,” he sneers at me, getting right in my face. “You don’t have control over Shaye. And you didn’t tell her to lie to me or my dad.”

That’s how he found out. I didn’t even think about telling her to keep things quiet that night. My only concern was keeping her alive. Good to know that my girlfriend was responsible for the ambush on me. Gotta love the irony.

“How do you like that, brother? Shaye is the one who fucked you. Not me. Not my father.” He twists around and walks toward the staircase. “You sit on your high horse accusing me of all sorts of shit before finding out the real story.” He snorts. “Typical. You’re an entitled asshole who got this far because of his bloodline. Not because you have any clue what the hell you’re doing. My father was right. You’ve got no backbone. For someone who’s so concerned about the family, you’re not doing dick to protect it.”

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I rush toward Max and shove him into the wall. “Fuck you! Don’t you dare talk to me like that! I fucking made you!”

“Yeah, you made me alright...into a fucking peon! You kept me nice and close and turned me into your bitch!” He shoves me backward, and I stumble, tripping over some BDSM prop laying in the middle of the floor.

“You sonofabitch!” I launch a fist at his jaw and he blocks it so fast and so hard, the fist almost flies back at my own face. I take another swing and he ducks out of the way before I can make contact. I leap toward him, backing him against another wall with my chest, and he elbows me in the ribs. I clench my teeth and clutch my side. He stands over me, barely out of breath. I’m smart enough to know I’m out of my element here and that there will be no mercy shown if I launch a full-blown attack on him.

“Don’t mess with me, Nico,” he hisses. “I won’t go easy on you. I will fuck your shit up.”

I drag myself up to face him. His jaw is tight, eyes narrowed. I’ve seen him pummel plenty of people into the ground over the years. He’s always been the muscle. Today is no different. And he might have punctured a lung with that elbow, fucking asshole that he is.

“Get the hell out, Max. I don’t want to see you here again.” I rake a hand through my hair and lean back against the wall, my breathing labored.

“Good, ’cause I’m fucking done with you, asshole. And when the rest of the family

figures out the truth, that you're a big fucking pussy who can't do shit to keep his people safe, you're gonna be done, too."

10

Shaye

“Post-traumatic stress disorder?”

I nod my head at Professor Gary. “That’s my opinion, based on what I’ve seen. But this...friend...he won’t let anyone help him.”

“Why do you think he’s so resistant to getting help?”

I shift in my chair. I don’t know what the hell I was thinking by coming in here. I obviously can’t tell Professor Gary the truth, that my boyfriend is a next-in-line mob boss who killed a guy in cold-blood and is haunted by the memory of me being abducted and held at gunpoint.

Yeah, I think I’ll reserve the full story with all the gory deets for now.

“I think he would see it as an admission of weakness, that he’s not strong enough to battle his demons on his own.”

“But you think talking to a professional would help.”

“Well,” I say, twisting my hands in my lap. “It might, if he’s open to it. If not, it’d be a big waste of time.”

“True, people get out of therapy what they put into it.”

“But, the thing is...he’s burdened with so much anger and anxiety that I’m afraid if he doesn’t get his mind in order soon, he might cause himself a lot more trouble...at his, um, job. He won’t talk to anyone, so he bottles up a lot. I’m afraid he’s going to snap one day, not thinking clearly about how his actions may impact the others he, um, works with.”

“Does the root cause of this PTSD have to do with his job?”

I nod again. “Yes.”

“And his employees, what kind of relationship do they have with your friend?”

“Uh, they’re pretty loyal, I’d say. He treats them well. Respects them.” For the most part, unless they make the stupid-ass decision to cross him.

“He’s a good manager, then?”

“Yes.” I’ve never seen a more loyal bunch of thugs.

“Is your friend’s job very high-pressure? Is he acting as a barrier, absorbing the stress from his superiors so that it doesn’t impact his subordinates?”

“You could say that.” Except in Carlo’s case.

“And is he suffering from substance abuse? Is there an immediate need to get him help against his wishes? Do you feel like he’s a threat to himself?”

“Definitely not. He rarely drinks, doesn’t use drugs. I think it’s because he’s afraid it will compromise his judgment, making him vulnerable. And since he already feels that way, he’ll avoid anything that can put him in a more, um, questionable position.”

Professor Gary leans forward into his hands. He's quiet for a second as his eyes search my face for clues about what in the hell my friend does...or did...that could bring on PTSD since I have been more than evasive since I sank into this office chair half an hour ago. "Can I be frank right now, Shaye?"

"Please," I whisper.

"I feel like you're not giving me the whole story, which is fine. But if you really want to help your friend, you need to be more forthcoming about details. I don't want to pry, but it's a little bit hard to psychoanalyze someone who only seems to have a stressful job by your account. I suspect the traumatic situation has to do with much more than a bad day at the office, and if I'm going to recommend some different treatments for you to suggest, I need to be clear on the severity of the situation. And right now, I'm just not."

I let out a sigh. This was a stupid idea. "I know, and I'm sorry that I can't share more insight with you. It's just that..." Just that my boyfriend has pretty major criminal dealings and an assortment of guns, prostitutes, a raunchy sex club that caters to the elite, and drug dealers in his back pocket. "I'd hoped that maybe there was some general advice you could give me, under these, um, delicate circumstances."

Professor Gary rises from his chair and grabs his tweed jacket, shrugging his arms into it. "It's very subjective, Shaye. Not every patient displays the same symptoms, and every case is unique. It takes a lot of time to properly evaluate a person's mental and emotional health to determine the proper treatment path to take."

I collapse against the back of my chair. "I figured you'd say that."

He comes around and sits on the edge of his wooden desk. "You're a smart girl. You'll figure out how to help your friend."

His knees almost touch mine...something tells me that it's on purpose...and the realization forces me to jump out of the chair. I swallow hard and grab my jacket, looking in every direction except his. Did I come here to help Nico? Or did I come to get a taste of normalcy, to have a real...well, almost real...conversation with a man? A man who is open and transparent and self-aware, a man who is unencumbered by death threats, night terrors, and chaotic sex dens, a man who has a simple job and a simple life and simple needs.

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I'd always thought communication was key to resolving issues. It's what I've learned in every psych class involving relationships. It's ingrained in me.

But somehow, communicating with Nico brings us closer together only to drive us apart afterward. It's like I can crack into the ice, but, hard as I try, I just can't seem to melt it. I'm not making an impact. Nothing I've told him has jolted him into action and that frustrates the hell out of me. If I can't get through to him, who the hell can?

Professor Gary stands up and inches toward me as I struggle with my jacket. A quick glimpse at the clock on his wall confirms that Sloane should be meeting me any second. I've already been in here too long, and judging from the look on the professor's face, it's definitely time to go.

This was a colossally huge mistake. I don't care about transparency. Or night terrors. Or death threats. We can get through it. We have to, because the only man I want is the hot mess I have.

"I'm glad you stopped by, Shaye. I hope I was able to help," he murmurs, moving closer still. I can smell his spicy aftershave, and that is way too damn close for comfort.

Shit! I gulp, backing away from his outstretched hand. I'm sure this is always how it happens. Dumb blonde co-eds make a bogus appointment with the professor for his insight into some bullshit problem when they really want insight into something else. My heel hits the back wall of the office, and I bang my head on a bookshelf. A sharp pain explodes across the base of my skull. "Yes, Professor, thank you. I, um, I'll see you in class."

I grip the doorknob and twist it left and right, unable to get the damn door open.

He slowly reaches around me and flips the lock. "It locks from the inside when it closes."

"Oh, right. Uh, thanks again." I push past him and his delicious musky scent. "Have a good day." I manage a half-wave and spin around...directly into Sloane.

I cringe at the mischievous gleam in her eye as she regards Professor Gary and then me. And like most of the women on this campus, she peeks her head around me for a second to look at Professor Gary. And it's a long look. I can't bear to meet his gaze again, so I stare straight ahead, plaster a fake smile on my face for Sloane, and say, "Ready?"

"I think he definitely is," she whispers, waving at the professor as I rush her out of the building.

"Holy shit, Shaye. What the hell happened back there? The temperature in that hallway was about a thousand degrees!"

"I had a meeting with him." I cover my face with my hand. "I never should have gone. He totally got the wrong idea, and I—"

"And what, exactly, were you meeting about? I mean, I know psychology is all about the mind, but I think there was another head that wanted to get in on the action." Sloane lets out a loud chuckle that tauntingly echoes in the open hallway of the building. Damn high ceilings.

"Just...a paper I'm writing." I peek at Sloane out of the corner of my eye. Sometimes, the urge to sit my best friend down and spill all of my secrets is overwhelming. After all of this time, I've managed to keep her in the dark about most of the inner

workings of my life. She's my escape. She's my normalcy.

Unlike Nico, who's my chaos.

But the balance works for me. Sloane keeps me grounded, and Nico? He keeps me in the clouds.

She knows nothing of prostitution, sex clubs, drug running, or thug beat-downs.

There are plenty of times where I wish I knew nothing of those things, either.

"This paper...does it read like a dirty novel?" Her glossy lips curl into a wicked smile. "Is that what got him so hot?"

I let out a groan. "No, it's actually about post-traumatic stress disorder, if you need to know so badly."

She scrunches up her pert nose and jogs around to the driver's side of her black Honda Accord. "Doesn't sound sexy to me."

"It's not, trust me." I pull open the door and sink into the leather seat.

"I don't think Nico would be happy to know that his hot girlfriend's hot professor wants to get inside of more than just her head."

I smack my forehead with my hand as we fly through the West Village in the direction of the Lincoln Tunnel. "You're impossible."

"Nah, just bored on the guy front. I'd much rather focus on your drama than my own lack thereof."

“Trust me, drama is way overrated.”

“It somehow finds you, though. Must be a gift.”

“More like a curse.”

“Is everything better with Nico? I remember you mentioning he’s a little stressed about work. Aren’t there enough bachelorette parties happening in the city every weekend to keep his business booming?” She laughs and speeds through a light leading us down into the tunnel.

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That's pretty much the extent of what Sloane knows of Nico's business. She thinks he owns a dance club in lower Manhattan. Hell, I didn't even have the full story before the other night, and it was more of an epic novel compared to what I'd conjured up in my head.

"He's working through it. Things have been a little better." And a little worse. It seems to depend on the hour these days.

"That's good. I'd hate for you guys to have problems right after you give up your life in Miami to be with him up here."

"Jesus, it was only college."

"Oh, don't get me wrong. I'm thrilled to pieces that you're home. But you wanted to put distance between your life here and your new college life. I get it. I know how overbearing my parents can be, and I would have been out of here in a hot second if I was..." She coughs and clears her throat. "I mean, it doesn't really matter. We all make decisions for ourselves. Some good, some not so good. You know how it is." She rushes to finish her sentence and bright sunlight blinds me as the Honda flies out of the tunnel and lands in New Jersey.

I turn a curious gaze on my friend. She obviously said too much for her own liking and tried to pull it back. "If you were?"

Sloane drags a hand through her long dark hair and taps the steering wheel. "Um, if I was, you know, interested in other nursing schools."

I nod. “Right. Or maybe if you weren’t hung up on something that happened in the past?”

The car screeches to a halt at a red light, and I grip the oh shit bar to keep me from kissing the windshield.

“Sorry,” Sloane mumbles.

“I guess I struck a nerve.”

“I guess your professor is going to whack it later while he pictures his head inside of yours.”

“Ha ha. You’re a real comedian.”

“It’s my fallback in case this nursing thing doesn’t work out.”

“It’s always good to have a Plan B.”

She smiles, but it’s a sad one, not a happy one. “Yeah, but sometimes Plan A is the only one that really fits, you know?”

“I do.” Hence, my current predicament.

Twenty minutes later, she’s pulling down my street. I need to grab some things to bring over to Nico’s later, and figure out what excuse I’m going to use to get out from my father’s watchful eye.

The car pulls up to the curb. “Your palace, madam.”

I roll my eyes and gather my things together. “Come inside. I want to show you a

dress I just bought. I think I need to find a reason to wear it pretty damn soon. Maybe you can help me come up with a reason.”

She turns off the engine and hops out of the car. I don’t say anything about the fact that Max’s car is nestled in the back of the house, and she clearly missed it, too, otherwise I’m pretty sure she would have told me to text her a picture of the imaginary dress that I didn’t actually just buy.

She wants him. He wants her. They need each other. And now that Max is getting into more ‘respectable’ business dealings with the club and the real estate businesses, and not beating the shit out of goons on a daily basis, maybe things can work between them.

Unless her overbearing father puts a bullet in Max’s head first.

I stick my key into the lock and grasp the brass handle, pushing open the door. Both of us coming to a standstill at the loud voices assaulting our ears.

“What are you going to do now, Max? You’ve got nothing! How the hell am I supposed to help you when you keep fucking yourself?”

“I was doing just fine on my own, Dad! I don’t need your goddamn help! Every time you say you’re gonna help me, I end up getting fucked in the end. Don’t drag me into your big plans anymore, okay?”

“You say that now, but tell me, where are you gonna be in six months? Back to fucking square one! You had a good thing going, but you had to fuck it up as usual!”

“I know what I’m doing.”

“Just like you did when you ratted out Rocco? Look how well that turned out for you.

In fact, it looks like your little buddy made out better than you did in the deal.”

Oh, crap.

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Sloane's eyes are so wide, I'm afraid they may pop out of her pretty little skull at any given second.

"Maybe I should just go—"

The door to my dad's office swings open, and Max emerges, his face red, his jaw twitching, and his eyes spitting pure fire. My father appears behind him, looking perfectly calm. He even manages a smile for us, his captive audience.

"Girls, how was school? I picked up a pizza on my way home. Are you hungry?"

Sloane is still speechless. The look on her face tells me she wants to flee, but her feet are not ready to go just yet.

Maybe it's because my brother is busy drinking her in like a dog at his water bowl on a hot summer's day.

"Um, thanks, Dad." I glance at Max, who can't seem to peel his eyes off of Sloane.

"Max, want to join us?"

He blinks fast, his head twisting in my direction like he was caught doing something he shouldn't be. "No. I have to get home. There are some things I need to take care of."

"Like your resume," my father mutters under his breath, brushing past us. God, he can be a real tool sometimes. I know he's my dad, but really? Did he have to cut Max down in front of Sloane like that?

“Everything okay?” I murmur to Max, placing a hand on his arm.

“Yeah.” He shrugs and forces a smile. “You know, same shit, different day.” His gaze flickers back to Sloane and his lips curl into a wistful smile. “Still okay with the blood and guts? You must see plenty with your internship.”

Sloane’s mouth falls open, and mine follows suit. He’s actually...engaging. Wow, what kind of a wake-up call did he get today?

“It’s, um, been more blood than guts so far, but there’s always next semester.” Her cheeks turn pink and she giggles. It’s a nervous one. One that shows she has no idea how to navigate this path. One that confirms she is still very much into Max.

And judging by his return smile, I finally feel like there may be a story there after all.

Why shouldn’t everyone get a happily ever after?

Events of the past few months have proven that life is just too damn short to waste lusting after something you want.

Take it, enjoy it, and then pray for a whole lot of tomorrows.

Ones without mobsters, baseball bats, and guns.

11

Nico

The subway doors creak open at the Bleecker Street station, and a hot gust of urine-scented air blasts me as I step onto the platform. I usually avoid the subway like the bubonic plague, but today, I want to fly under the radar, and rolling up to a dingy shithole bar in Hell's Kitchen in my Audi R8 is a definite red flag.

A red flag for a lot of people, namely the enemies tracking my every move.

They're out there. I can sense them, just like they can sense me.

It's only a matter of time before they make their move, and I'm trying to buy up as much of that time as I can in the meantime. It'll give me a chance to get my plans in place. I need to make sure Viktor is in my corner, and that's why I'm sweating my ass off in this hot-as-fuck subway station. This meeting, our meeting, is going to set us up for the future. I've already laid the groundwork. I just needed to find the right partner, a partner with resources...and I'm not just talking about money.

Money can buy you power, but loyalty can buy you so much more.

It's the so much more that I'm after.

I wind through the maze of dirty, dank corridors in the underground station, sidestepping bums and panhandlers. I finally spot the staircase leading to the outside where the air will most likely still smell like piss, but at least it won't be so damn

thick, choking me like a noose around my neck. I jog up the steps, taking them two at a time in my Nikes. Perspiration drizzles down my back, and as soon as I hit the cool air on Bleecker Street, it morphs into icy cold trickles.

My Apple watch pings, and I see an incoming text from Shaye.

We need to talk.

Great. Talking. My favorite pastime these days, aside from eluding death.

I send her the thumbs-up emoji because I'm already late for my meeting, and I really don't feel like recapping my blow out with Max right here on the street. I know that's what she wants to talk about. But I am nowhere near being in the mood to rehash the whole thing for her, especially since it's just one more reason for her to lay into me about the need to air my feelings. As if I really want to admit to my fears about this whole Luca shitstorm and its potential long-term effects on my life, Shaye's life, the lives of my family members...

Yeah. Fuck talking.

Another ping.

Now.

My phone rings a second later. I clench my fists and round a corner to get out of sight.

I stab the Accept button because I know what'll happen later if I don't. "Hey."

"You fucking fired him? Now? Are you insane?"

My eyes dart left and right. “Listen, now isn’t a good time to talk about this.”

“Why not?” I can see her hand on her hips, blue eyes narrowed, nostrils flared. “Is your best friend’s welfare not important to you anymore, either? Is anything fucking important to you anymore? Because you’re drifting farther and farther away, and I have no idea how to pull you back!”

I grit my teeth and press my hand against my temple. “You don’t under—”

“Of course! That must be it! I just don’t get it!” Shaye’s voice rises about ten octaves. “You know what? I’ve tried to help you, Nico. I’ve tried to get you to talk to me, and you give me a little crumb here and there. Is that what this relationship is going to be from now on? You let me in the slightest bit and then shove me out the door again. Who the hell are you?”

“Listen,” I seethe. “You have to trust me. I’m trying to evade a fucking killer, to keep my business intact, to keep this whole family operational! And, oh, by the way, I’m trying to see if there are any fucking rats trying to sell me and my dad out! I’m sorry if I don’t always feel like talking about the shit I’m dealing with right now!”

“We’re supposed to be a team, Nico.” Her voice is no longer angry. It’s sad. And that’s something that makes my gut clench. I never want to see her upset. It’s my job to make sure she’s happy. And safe. And happy.

But I’m fucking failing...on all fronts. I don’t know who I am anymore, and I have to figure it out pretty fucking fast before I lose everything. There’s one person I can trust, and she’s stuck with me through all of this even though I’ve given her every reason to bolt.

“Babe, we are. I know every time you bring this up, you want to hear me say that things will be different, that we can go backward. But we can’t. Not yet.”

“When?”

“I don’t know.” I look around at the faces passing me by, wondering what their lives are like, wondering what their biggest fears and challenges are. Is someone hunting them, lurking in the shadows, angling to stick a gun to their temples and blow their fucking heads off? Fuck, is the money and all this power really worth it?

I feel like I ask myself that question a lot...more than I probably should, considering how I make my living. I wasn’t given the choice to do it any other way, and now as much as I hate to admit it, I’m scared. Scared to fail everyone. Scared to lose it all. Scared to lose myself in the process.

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Jesus, though, I don't know that I'd know how to live a normal life, to not always be looking over my shoulder, wondering which bullet has my name on it.

Shaye's right. I'm not the same. I may never be again.

But can I be better this time? That's the million-dollar question. And fuck me if I know the answer.

"Look, we can talk more later. I need to get to a meeting."

"Okay." She pauses, and I know she's nibbling at her lower lip, the way she always does when she's contemplating a question. "Can we really do that this time? Talk?"

"Yeah. I promise. I love you."

"I love you, too."

I click off the phone a second later. There are so many reasons why I keep things to myself. Shaye is number one. She doesn't need to get lost in the murk that pollutes my mind. But ironically, she's the only one who actually wants to help me work through this. I hate the psychobabble bullshit, but she's the only real partner I have. And she's the only one I want for the future.

Maybe it's time to really listen, to prove to her that we are a team. I can't let this fear crush our dreams.

God, I wish I could have a few more minutes with Grandpa Vito. He'd never tell me

what to do, but he'd make me believe what I'm capable of. I've lost a lot of that confidence, and I need it back. This time, I'm going to have to find it on my own.

I stuff my hands in the pockets of my jeans and walk a couple of blocks until I reach my destination. I furrow my brow, staring into a dirty, dark window on the side of the blood-colored door.

Red Square.

It's go-time.

I grasp the door handle, pull it open, and step inside the smoke-filled room. I peer around the dimly lit space, illuminated only by a single, flat-screen television in a far corner, the bar, and a few scattered table lamps. I can see clearly enough that the place is near-empty, save for a few tall, lanky goons in a corner. Their arms and necks are inked up and down, most of the symbols recognizable.

Bratva tattoos always are, which is something I never really understood. I mean, I get the whole brotherhood thing, but they're damn incriminating. Like a lot like the Mexican drug cartels, they wear their ink as badges of honor, but I still can't figure out why they'd want to brand themselves as known associates to major crime rings for all the world to see.

Pride, I guess.

I have plenty of pride. I just prefer to keep it hidden to anyone who might be able to lump me in with other criminals.

I look over to the bartender and he nods his head toward another red door in the back of the room. He must know they're expecting me. And the fact that I stick out like a dick on a cake probably gave him a clue. I cross the bar area, my sneakers sticking to

the floor with each step. A couple of guys raise their menacing glares in my direction, but I don't pause. I don't look. I only walk.

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see one of them rise from his seat and step into my direct path. I recognize him from the night he showed up to help rescue Shayne from the warehouse where she was being held by Frank Cappodamo. He's no less threatening today, but I'm not in the mood for any bullshit. I raise my steady gaze since he has a good six inches on me, and mind you, I'm six-two. I guess alcohol and tobacco don't stunt your growth after all, since these guys pretty much survive on vodka and skinny black cigarettes.

"You looking for more help, Salesi?" He folds his arms and narrows his eyes, bloodshot from all of the drugs and day drinking. "Because it's time for payback the way I see it. We helped you. Now it's time for you to help us."

"Alexi, shut up and sit the fuck down." Katarina wedges her way between us and gently pushes Alexi away with her hand. "Let us work out the details. You just keep sitting here and looking badass, okay? We don't want to scare away our new friend, do we?"

Alexi's mouth stretches into a tight line, staring me down as if he's trying to decide what the right response is. He backs away toward his chair without a word. Just a lot of grumbling in Russian. Damn, she's fierce. Either that or he wants to fuck her. And judging by the way they're all drooling into their shot glasses, it's a fantasy they all seem to share.

Kat winks at him and flips her hair over her bare shoulder. Alexi's eyes are glued to her right now, as if her spell on him is too powerful to challenge. Or maybe it's because her shirt is just a little bit too tight. Or maybe he just doesn't want to fight it...it being her super power, the reason why she is such an asset to her father. I've heard plenty of stories and seeing her in action confirms for me, yet again, that I

never want a daughter.

Ever.

She turns her ice-blue eyes toward me and flashes me a bright white smile. This girl is as gorgeous as she is deadly. “Papa is waiting for you. He sent me out here to make sure the guys didn’t give you a hard time.”

I shrug. “Nothing I can’t handle.”

A little giggle escapes her plump pink lips. “If you say so.” She nods her head toward the back corner where there’s another beefy Russian flipping around a butcher knife. “Maybe I should have let you use your Italian charm on these guys. How far do you think that would get you?”

“I like to think I have more to offer than just the charm.”

“Yeah, but your pretty face wouldn’t work on them.” She snickers. “You’d need my tits and ass to go along with it.”

“If that were the case, I’d have other problems.” I nod toward the back. “Should we go?”

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Kat nods and nudges me forward. She leans close, her breath hot against my ear as we walk. “Your girl has quite an eye, Nico. She’s a natural. Dangerous. And hot as fuck. Be good to her, because if you’re not, someone else will be.”

“Is that a threat?”

Kat shrugs. “Maybe. I’ve dabbled a little in that area. And I don’t think she’d need much convincing. She seems open.” Another long-lashed wink.

I won’t lie. Even with the threat of death looming over me, my cock still manages to twitch at the thought of Kat and Shaye in a scissoring position, naked, sweaty, moaning... Christ, that’s a fucking fantasy and a half. I swallow a groan and try to eradicate the image from my mind, saving it to the highlight reel for future reference.

And trust me, I will be returning to it as soon as I make this pitch.

Kat walks ahead of me, swinging her hips in skintight jeans. Her long hair bounces as she struts in what have to be five-inch heels. Looking at her, you’d never think she could pull your asshole through your mouth if you so much as looked at her the wrong way.

It’s her gift, one which the enemy is always too stupid to realize they are receiving. And too late to figure out it’s one that can’t be returned.

Viktor is sitting at a table just beyond the red door, blowing thin streams of smoke into the air. He runs a hand through his greasy blond hair, his blue eyes crinkling at the corners when he sees me.

“Nico,” he mumbles in his thick Russian accent. “It’s about fucking time. I aged ten years just waiting for you today.”

I grin and sink into a chair across from him. “I was enjoying the show outside. Most guys don’t have a female number two. I can see why you’re the exception.”

Viktor nods at Katarina, who is scrolling through her phone. “Alexi?”

“??.” She responds without looking up.

“She’s the only one who can keep him in line.” Viktor grins. “She’s my secret weapon.”

“So death threats don’t scare him? Only Kat does?”

“What’s the difference?” Viktor asks, a hearty laugh shaking his shoulders. He stands and walks over to a table in the corner, pulls out a bottle of vodka, and fills six shot glasses.

“I only cause pain when necessary.” Kat deadpans, finally raising her eyes from the phone.

I smirk. “That’s not the story I heard from my friend Rocco.”

Kat shrugs. “I didn’t like the way he was talking to our girl.”

“Oh, so now she’s ours?”

“Until I graduate her, yes. She’s still part mine.” Kat leans in close. “Unless you want to make sure she knows she’s yours. If you don’t, someone else might.”

“You seem pretty focused on this whole making her mine thing. I think she knows my intentions with her.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe you need to be more clear.”

I narrow my eyes at Katarina’s cocked eyebrow. I don’t like where this is going at all. I’m not an idiot. Girls talk. They bond. They connect. But that’s why I chose Kat. She’s not an ordinary girl. She doesn’t connect; she slaughters.

Viktor returns to the table with three shots. “In preparation for your news, Nico.”

My mind is still reeling from Kat’s comments. Innocent enough, but they indicate a much deeper meaning, one which is clearly escaping me since I thought I’d made it pretty fucking clear that I want to spend the rest of my life with Shaye. At this point, I don’t know how long that will actually be, but—

Dammit! I need to focus right now!

“Ypa,” Viktor mumbles, holding up a glass. “Let’s toast now before we get into details.”

“Ypa,” Kat and I say in unison. We all toss back the shots of Beluga and slam the glasses on the table.

“You like?” Viktor asks. “I spare no expense for friends.”

I smile. “And I only bring the best business opportunities to my friends.”

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Viktor folds his hands, his blue eyes sharp and calculating. “I am very anxious to hear more. So tell me, what do you have for me today?”

My chest tightens, the weight of my family’s livelihood suffocating me. I have one chance to make this happen, but focusing on the cash isn’t going to seal this deal. Viktor doesn’t need money. He’s got demons to crush. He wants to expand his reach, to steamroll the competition, to decimate his enemies.

Our goals are very similar.

Seize the power, and money will follow. If you get too greedy up front, you lose your credibility, and people will find another leader.

“First, I’m going to waive the street tax for you, Viktor. This proposal is about a long-term partnership between our families. You supply the drugs, we’ll handle the distribution. We have associates as far south as Miami and as far west as California. Your product will be everywhere across the country, and you won’t be charged a cent for operating in any of these areas.”

Viktor exchanges a look with Katarina who suddenly seems more interested in the conversation than what’s on her phone. I’ve seen Viktor in action during this type of meeting, and I know this is the point where he’d shut it down if he didn’t like the offer. But he’s silent, so I keep talking.

“Nobody else is going to cut a deal like this for you. They’ll let you bring in your drugs, but they’ll charge you out the ass to get them on their soil. And distribution will be a bitch because you’ll get charged double for that. No other organizations can

offer you what I'm offering. Nobody has the network we do. When our associates need to move money, they invest in our real estate properties and we move it for them for a fee. We have plenty of contractors, banks, appraisal agencies, and trucking, and management companies that work with us. When that money comes out the other side, it's so clean, it fucking sparkles."

"You mentioned horses during our last meeting. Is that part of this proposal?"

I nod. "There is a quarter horse farm in Saddle River, New Jersey. It's just been purchased by a shell company we recently formed."

Viktor nods. "I'm listening."

"Quarter horse racing is a big money maker, but there are a lot of requirements for running a farm. Financial requirements."

"But why horses?" Katarina speaks up. "If the real estate business is so profitable, why risk the operation with a new type of business?"

I sit back in my chair. "Because when you get too comfortable in one area, you miss out on new opportunities. You think you have the system beat, but then you forget that you need to keep coming up with the next big thing to keep the authorities off your scent. You constantly have to innovate to stay ahead and maintain your power and control. The quarter horse farm is far off the radar. Money comes in through horse sales. Money goes out to private insurers who offer coverage on the horses and the property, trainers, food companies, farmers, horse doctors...unaffiliated with the farm, but all shell companies that will be used to funnel money. What I'm proposing are ways we can shelter your money at no cost to you, in exchange for your loyalty and backing. We both have a lot of enemies, Viktor. Aligning our business interests will strengthen both of our families and fatten our bank accounts."

Viktor taps his fingers together and stares at me for a minute. “I like these ideas. Forming an alliance is smart business, but I want my people on the inside too. It will be a joint effort, Nico.” His lips curl upward. “You understand.”

“Yes.” Can’t trust anyone a hundred percent in our business. I understand that all too well.

“And who will run the horse farm on your side?”

“I’ve thought a lot about that, and I have a few people in mind. It’s not a one-person show, though. There’s a lot of management that will go into this type of business. I’m sure you’ll pick the right people on your side to balance things out.”

Viktor plays with the scruff on his chin. “It is a risky proposition, this horse business.”

“Yes, which is why we will start small. We’ll keep a close eye on the money movement, making sure we don’t move too much, too quickly. We’ll arrange for the horses to be listed under alias buyer names and race them to make the farm look legitimate. This opens up tremendous opportunities for both of our organizations, Viktor.” I stop speaking because I need to let this offer sink in for a second.

So does Viktor. He slides the other three shot glasses in front of us and we clink once again before downing the clear liquid. It’s not enough, though. Viktor decided he needs another for good measure and gets up to grab the bottle and pours us all another shot.

Shit, I’ll do this all day if I have to. But at the end, once I drag my ass out of here, I need to know that Viktor is on board. It’s more than just being an investor in the horse farm. It’s about being an investor in the Salesi family. And from where I sit, it’s the key investment in our future.

Viktor turns toward Katarina. “?????? ???.”

She nods and pushes her chair away from the table. Without another word, she walks through the red door and back into the bar, leaving us alone, per his request.

“Nico, I know what you need from me. I know why you are really here, and it’s not about horses or street taxes.”

I clench and unclench my fists under the table but keep my gaze focused and unwavering. I’ve worked too hard to uncover his demons. Even with all of his money and power, he couldn’t snuff them himself. But it’s just the leverage I need to tip the scales in my favor. I open my mouth, moving in for the kill.

“Viktor, you’ve proven to me that you have the strength to function on your own under the radar. You have a solid crew and a great operation. But let’s face it, you have no distribution channels. That’s why my grandfather connected with you years ago. But a lot of things have changed since then, for both of our families. We can help each other, Viktor, because we each have something to offer.”

“Money?” Viktor snorts. “I don’t give a shit about the money.”

“I know you don’t.” I lean forward. “But that’s not why you’re here right now. There’s something else you want, something you need my help to get.”

His blue eyes narrow. “And what makes you think you can find it?”

I smile. This is the part I’ve been waiting for...the big pitch. Fuck the horse farm. That’s just a dangling carrot. Something to sweeten the deal. But I have something even better. Something he hasn’t been able to get on his own. Revenge. “It’s like I said, Viktor. We each have something to offer. From here on out, we’re partners. You give me your loyalty, and we’ll punish the motherfuckers who took everything from

you.”

“So you know where they are, yes?”

“Yes. It took some time to find them, but they’re in California.”

Viktor lights a skinny black cigarette and inhales deeply, his blue eyes half-closed. He’s drifted far away from me and this conversation, most likely plotting the brutal deaths of those bastards who killed his wife and other daughter. It’s something we can make a reality after all of this time. I wait, allowing him the time he needs to consider my offer because I need to know he’s got my back. My family’s future depends on it. He finally blinks, focusing on me, his eyes now watery. It could be from the smoke, but I suspect it’s much more than that. “I’ve been searching for a long time. Too long and with no results.” He sits up straight, narrowing his eyes at me. “You have much to lose if you don’t deliver on this. I give you my protection and my loyalty, Nico, as long as you give me something real. I want to make them suffer for every second that I have mourned over the past fifteen years. For every second my wife and daughter did before they died.”

I swallow hard, leaning forward. I know exactly what’s at stake, and he’s right. I’m fucked if I don’t deliver. “We will get them and make them pay for what they did to your family. You have my word, Viktor.”

12

Shaye

“So you think it’s because he’s having a rough time at the club? Is business slow?” Sloane blows on her steaming hot coffee before raising her cup. We’re sitting at a table tucked away in a quiet corner of the food court, away from the countless kids tearing through the place. “I mean, it’s a dance club in one of the hottest areas of Manhattan. How hard could it be to get people to go?”

If Sloane has any clue about what really goes on at Culaccino, she’s never hinted to it. I watch my best friend sip her coffee and a tiny spark of jealousy ignites. Ignorance really is bliss, and I make sure to keep things about my family quiet for Sloane’s benefit. I always have. She’s my bridge to sanity, and the less she knows, the safer she is. I think that’s one of the things that originally drew Max to her. He could be himself and not worry about keeping up appearances.

I’d like to meet that guy. I think he has a lot to offer, apart from his ability to do severe damage with a Louisville Slugger.

“He’s just been...stressed about work.” I press a hand to my forehead. “This business—it’s his baby, you know? He’s done so much to get it to this point, and I guess...” I shrug. “...he’s trying to figure out how to stay on top.”

Understatement of the century.

“Well, I’m sure you can come up with plenty of ways to relieve his stress,” Sloane

waggles her eyebrows.

I force a smile. If only. Looming doom and gloom overshadows the intimacy. It's always on his mind, no matter what we're doing. And there isn't a damn thing I can do to bring him some peace.

But Sloane can't know about any of that. I have to protect her from it all, the way Nico tries to protect me.

"I have a few ideas." I pick up my cup and sip my hot chocolate. It's not Swiss Miss, but it'll do for now. I pull off the lid and frown at the whipped cream peaks at the top of the cup. I bet there aren't any marshmallows swimming underneath. If only that could be my biggest problem in life.

"Shaye." A deep voice startles me, and hot chocolate sloshes out of the side of the mug as I twist around.

"Professor Gary?" My eyes widen, and I can see Sloane's jaw drop out of the corner of my eye. It's hard not to gawk at an insanely sexy man whose bulging biceps and muscular chest are on display for the world to enjoy. I've never seen him dressed in anything other than one of his signature blazers. And I never could have guessed what lay underneath all of that tweed.

He grins at me, his blue eyes even bluer against the tight t-shirt clinging to his body. Good Lord, if the girls at school could see him now. "Funny meeting you here. I just finished reading your paper last night."

A nervous laugh escapes me. "Oh, well, I hope you enjoyed it." Dumb, dumb, dumb!

"I was actually hoping to catch you at school, but since you're here..." His voice trails off and Sloane finally finds her voice.

“You know, I think I’ll just grab a napkin to clean up all of this hot chocolate. I’ll be right back.” She practically jumps out of her chair and trips over her own feet in her haste to escape, even though I know she’s dying to hear every word.

He sinks into the chair across from me, folding his massive forearms over the top of the table. “Listen, if I made you uncomfortable the other day, I’m sorry. It wasn’t my intention to send you mixed signals.”

“It’s really okay. I didn’t mean to flake out on you. I’m just not used to talking about the, um, issues my friend is having.”

“Well, for what it’s worth, I’m really impressed with your insights, and I think you’ll find a lot of success in this field. You’re a very bright girl, Shaye. You have a promising future ahead of you.”

“Really? Wow, thank you so much.” I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. “That means a lot to me.”

“I look forward to reading your thesis in a few years.” His grin widens, exposing a dimple in his left cheek. He looks at his watch. “Listen, I’ve got to run. My girlfriend is waiting for me downstairs.”

Girlfriend? Duh! How could Adonis not have one?

“By the way, this must have fallen out of your backpack in my office the other day. I was going to bring it to you next week, but I’m sure you were missing it.” He opens his laptop bag and pulls out a notebook. My throat tightens as he hands it to me with a knowing look. “I’d imagine you have a lot to catch up on with your writing.” Holy fuck. It’s my journal! Did he read any of the entries? Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God!

“Who the fuck is this guy?”

I gasp, jumping at my brother’s angry voice bellowing behind me, still fighting a near panic attack that my professor has read all of the sordid details about my mafia prince boyfriend, his sex den, and a mess of other crap I can’t even begin to recall writing about. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Maybe I should ask you the same question, sis. You screwing around on Nico?”

“Who’s Nico?” Professor Gary furrows his brow.

My knuckles are white from clutching the edge of the table so tightly, and the breath I’ve been holding slowly expels from my mouth even though Max looks ready to pummel Professor Gary. I must have referred to Nico by name in the journal. Is it possible he didn’t read it after all? Am I just being unrealistically paranoid?

“Who the fuck are you? I think I asked that already, and I don’t like to ask things more than once, douchebag.” Max edges closer to the table with clenched fists, and my eyes dart around the food court. A nearby security guard eyes our table, and the need to diffuse this spiraling situation is pretty much immediate.

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“Max, stop it!” I hiss, pressing my hands to his chest. “This is my psych professor!”

He narrows his eyes at me. “Oh, yeah? Do you have coffee dates with all your professors?”

“I’m not on a coffee date with him!”

“Yeah, she’s on a coffee date with me.” Sloane approaches the table with a handful of napkins and a cake pop, which she holds out to Max. “Looks like you need this more than I do.”

Max’s eyes glaze over and their fingers graze each other as he takes the sugary treat, all concerns of me cheating on Nico dissipating into the air like a fart in the wind. Huh. I bet my brother’s enemies would find that bit of insight useful. Trade your life for a cake pop?

“Max!” I raise my voice, and he blinks, breaking the spell Sloane unknowingly cast upon him.

He takes a bite of the pop. “What?”

“Apologize for acting like a complete lunatic.”

He chews the cake for a few seconds and eyes Professor Gary, whose face has drained of all color by now. “Sorry, man. I thought you were moving in on my best friend’s girl.”

I roll my eyes and look at my professor. “I really am sorry. My brother is loyal to a fault.”

Professor Gary backs away from the table with a nervous smile. “It’s fine. No harm done. Shaye, I’ll see you in class next week.” He bolts away from our table and makes it to the escalator in a hot second.

Oh, crap. I’m sure Max made an appearance in the journal. I remember two distinct entries...neither of which would leave someone with a warm and fuzzy feeling about him. I watch Professor Gary meander through the crowds on the escalator, almost as if he’s trying to put as much distance between us as possible, all while glancing behind him in our general direction. Jesus Christmas. At least I didn’t use any last names.

“Great.” I poke Max in the chest. “Are you crazy? Why would you assume I was cheating on Nico? And after what happened between you two, why would you even care?”

Max takes another bite of the cake pop, mellowing by the sugary second. “Okay, so first...I didn’t like how that guy was looking at you. I know guys, and I know the way they look at a girl when they want to fu...” He bites off another piece and chews it hard, leaving his unspoken word hanging in the air. His eyes dart over to Sloane and then back to me. “If you were cheating on Nico, at least it’d explain his fucking crazy ass mood lately. And second, yeah, we had it out, but he’s still my best friend. He just needs some time to pull his head out of his ass. You telling Dad about, um...Carlo’s accident...didn’t go over too well either.”

I furrow my brow, very aware, as is Max, that my best friend knows nothing of sex dens, mobsters, and murder. “I didn’t realize it was a secret.”

“That was a tough blow, losing one of his guys to a competing club.” He clears his

throat. “Like that.”

“I need to get through to him,” I muse, tapping my fingertips on the table top.

“Look, Nico’s got a lot of shit on his plate right now with work. I get it. That’s why I’m laying low. I could have beaten the hell out of him when he came after me, but I didn’t because I’m a sensitive guy like that.” Max winks at Sloane and bites the last bit of the pop off the stick.

“You actually threw punches?” I let out a deep sigh and shake my head. This is getting out of control, and I have no idea how to stop it. Telling my dad about Carlo...why was that such a bad thing? I was so scared that night...of course, I’d call my father! And why won’t Nico talk to me and tell me why it was such a bad move, dammit? Why am I hearing about it from Max? “Do you really think he’s okay out there on his own?” Because I’m not very convinced right now. Not at all. I glance at Sloane, who is still watching Max. I doubt she’s even listening at this point. I think she’s more focused on what she’s doing to him in her lust-filled mind right at this moment. Or maybe what he’s doing to her.

Max pushes his hair back. “He’s a big boy, Shaye. And he’s got friends. Friends other than me. Friends with a lot of power. Do I think he knows what he’s doing? Fuck, no. But he’ll figure it out because he always does. And if he does manage to pull his head out of his ass, he knows he can call me. I’m always ready.”

I roll my eyes and take another sip of my hot chocolate “That’s so comforting.”

He shrugs. “You can’t help someone who doesn’t want it.”

Truer words were never spoken. “So, what now? You’re shopping to fill the hours?”

Max grins. “I need some new sneakers. I think I’m gonna take up running.”

“Something productive and healthy. What a nice change of pace for you.” I snicker and look up at Sloane. “Do you need a ride home? I think I’m going to head out now. I’ve had about as much mall excitement than I can handle today. I’m afraid of who else I may run into if I stay here any longer.”

She drags her eyes away from Max and looks at her watch. “It’s fine. I’ll just order an Uber. I still have a few stores to hit.”

“Want some company?”

My head jerks back over toward Max. Something is happening here. Or it already happened. I’m not sure, but I’m liking the direction.

A look of shock flits over her features, and she looks exactly the way I feel at this second. “Oh, um, yeah. Sure, that’d be great.”

He grins at me. “See ya later, sis.”

Sloane grabs her handbag, and I almost have to shield my eyes to protect them from the blinding light radiating off of her face when she faces me. Shocked, yes. Elated, most definitely. “I’ll call you later,” she murmurs, leaning in to give me a quick peck on the cheek.

“You’d better,” I whisper back, settling back against the extremely uncomfortable plastic chair. I watch them walk over to Foot Locker and the corners of my lips lift in amusement.

There really is a Prince Charming for everyone.

I just hope mine hasn’t disappeared forever.

13

Nico

“Please tell me you locked away the peanut butter.” I grin at my mother when she opens the door.

“Don’t worry. I have a full body HAZMAT suit for you inside. You’ll be just fine.” She opens her arms and pulls me in for a long hug even though it has only been a few days since I last saw her. But deep down we both know that each time may be the last. It’s just the way things are in this life.

“Nico!” Lily runs at me once I’m inside the foyer. I reach down to catch her as she launches herself into my arms and I hold her high in the air. She squeals and laughs, like a normal little kid. Except she’s not normal. But she doesn’t know that yet, and it’s my job to protect her from it all.

You have a lot of responsibilities now, Nico...

Grandpa’s words. Christ, if I’d only known then the kind of responsibilities I’d end up having later, I may have considered running away to a remote island and living off the grid.

“I missed you!” Lily shrieks.

“I just saw you! You didn’t even have time to miss me!”

“Okay, fine. I didn’t miss you!”

“What? How could you not miss me?” I put my little sister down on the floor and tickle her until tears run down her cheeks. That belly laugh. God, it gets me every time. I laugh right along with her, and damn, it feels good. Therapeutic. I can’t remember the last time I laughed like that.

I’d like to be able to do it again. I have to find a way to close this chapter, to move the fuck on. I’m on the path, but it’s a slow move.

I lean back and let her catch her breath. She rolls to her feet and bounces around me. “That peanut-addicted mutt of yours better be in the garage, Lil. If he drools all over me, you’ll be hauling me to the Emergency Room.”

“Don’t worry. He’s upstairs in my room.”

I cock an eyebrow at my mother. “Really? Like, on her bed?”

“Oh, yes. He sleeps with me!” Lily beams.

I furrow my brow. “Mellowing out in your old age, Mom? What happened to him only sleeping downstairs in his crate?”

“He’d whine and cry all night when he was by himself, and I didn’t want a re-do of the baby years. So I caved. Sue me.”

Lily grabs my hand and pulls me into the kitchen. “I’ll make you breakfast! Cap’n Crunch or Cocoa Puffs?”

“Cocoa Puffs, please.” I look at my mother, who is making a cup of coffee for me. “Where’s Dad?”

She points to the hallway. “I think I just heard him come down.”

Dad appears in the doorway to the kitchen a second later. “Morning, son.”

Lily places a bowl of cereal in front of me, and I shovel in a few spoonfuls. “Mmohning.”

He lets out a chuckle. “Maybe we can talk for a few minutes in the office once you finish chewing.”

I swallow the oversized bites and give Lily the thumbs-up. “You’re a master chef. Thanks for the best breakfast I’ve ever had.”

She smiles and curtsies for me. “Anything for you!”

I ruffle her hair, grab my coffee mug, and follow Dad into his office. He shuts the door behind me and sits on a leather cordovan chair behind his large mahogany desk. I sit across from him, sinking into a buttery leather cushion. This room always calms me, despite the business conducted between these walls. Dark wood paneling, rich hues, antique brass accents. It makes the place feel comfortable somehow. Safe. Secure.

Ironic.

“I have to meet Tony at the construction site so I don’t have much time, but there are a few things we need to discuss.” Dad gathers some papers together and places them into his briefcase. “How’d the meeting with Viktor go?”

“It was good. Kat was there.”

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“So you made the offer.”

“Yeah.” I rub the back of my neck, a nagging feeling in the pit of my stomach. I made the pitch, but have no fucking clue how to deliver on it.

Dad stops for a second and looks at me. “Losing his wife and child like that...” He shakes his head. “I can’t imagine it. But what’s worse is not being able to bring those people to justice. Viktor is a good business partner, and aligning ourselves with this organization beyond just the supplier-distributor relationship is smart because it gives us leverage. He has a lot of enemies, yes, but he also has a lot of allies...allies we need on our side. Allies who can help us manage our territories here, allies who can pave the way for us to expand into other areas without the red tape.”

“Dad, that’s a great little speech but how are we going to find these people? Do you have any idea where they are in California? Baiting a guy like Viktor is bad news. You know his crew. If you screw with them, you’re pretty much fucked.”

“That’s why I needed you to stop by this morning. There’s something I need to talk to you about.” Dad lets out a deep sigh and reclines in his chair. “We know exactly where to find them, Nico.”

“Who do you mean by we, because I sure as hell have no idea.”

“You remember that your grandfather was the one who made the introduction to Viktor, right?”

I nod. What the hell does Grandpa have to do with any of this?

“He was making inroads with the Russians because he knew that the Cappodamo family had plans to infiltrate the other families and their interests. Our only means of survival was to align ourselves with a completely separate organization, one that needed something from us as much as we needed something from it. A balance of power, so to speak. They could supply the drugs, and we could distribute them.”

“Dad, give it to me straight. This isn’t just about the drug running, is it? What are you really telling me here?”

“Nico, the people who killed Viktor’s wife and daughter are in Los Angeles.”

I furrow my brow. “How do you know that? Who told you?”

“It was Rocco.” Dad sighs again. “I wanted to tell you sooner, but—”

“Tell me what sooner?” I slam my hands on the desk. “Dad, you tell me all the time how I need to be ready to step up, but how the hell can I do that if you hold shit back from me? How the hell is Rocco involved with this, and how long have you been keeping me in the fucking dark?”

“This was all part of Grandpa’s plan. He was trying to set up the family for the future, knowing that the Cappodamo family was closing in on our territories. He put these plans in motion to bring in more muscle, Russian muscle that couldn’t be compromised by Frank Cappodamo. They were and still are enemies, Nico. Frank was the one to put the hit on the Ivanovs.”

I shake my head, trying to process everything my father is pelting me with. “What does Rocco have to do with all of this?”

“When Grandpa found out Rocco was taking bets without his permission and stealing clients from Max and deVincenzo, he gave him a choice. He said he’d spare Rocco if

he went to California and found the people who made those hits. He wanted Rocco to get close, to find out about their organization, and to figure out their vulnerabilities. It was all top secret, Nico. Only Grandpa, me, and Santino, Rocco's father, knew about the arrangement. Everyone else was told Rocco had been kicked out of New Jersey by Grandpa as his punishment. That's what we needed everyone to believe to make this plan work."

"And that's why you brought Rocco back after Grandpa died. You made everyone think it was because Grandpa wasn't around to enforce his punishment, but the reality is you'd gotten what you needed from him. And that's why you wanted me to give him a job so badly. To keep him close and under my thumb." The legs of the chair scrape against the polished hardwood as I push it back and jump up. "How the hell could you keep this from me?"

"You didn't need to know any of this before."

"That's bullshit!"

"It's not. I needed you to grow to trust him without knowing any of the details. I wanted you to see for yourself what he brings to the table without knowing what he's done for the family. And you did. He took a bullet for you, Nico. He may be a greedy bastard, but he's loyal. He didn't want you to know anything until he'd proven himself to you personally. He did the job for Grandpa because his life was threatened. He did the job for you because he wanted you to trust him."

"And you let him get away with what he did to Max and deVincenzo."

"He put himself in a hell of a lot of danger for us, Nico. I think he paid his debt."

I rake a hand through my hair and pace the floor. "What if Viktor had asked me for details about these people? What the hell would have happened then? He'd have

blown off my head if he knew I was full of shit!”

“You never told him you knew specifics. You only said you’d put your weight behind his search. Period. You were never in danger with that offer.” Dad stands up and walks around the desk. “Nico, I didn’t want to keep you in the dark on this, but I had my reasons. Now you’re in a power position that requires a need to know everything.”

“Power position, my ass! You’ve been keeping me in the dark for years! How the hell am I supposed to manage shit without having the full story? You knew when I killed Cappodamo what would happen, but you never thought it was important enough for me to know it until now?” Rage courses through me, and I struggle to keep my voice even. “How much more do I need to know, Dad? What else have you been keeping from me?”

“This is it. You know everything now. And you’ll make the right decisions with this information.”

I rake a hand through my hair, my pulse throbbing. As pissed off as I am, I can still read between the lines. And I don’t like what I see at all. “Why are you talking like you’re bowing out? You’re still the head of this family.”

Dad’s shoulders sag as he lets out a deep sigh. “I never know what will happen from day to day. You’re my second in command, but you have to be ready to step into that top spot at any time. I’ve given you all of the tools you need to rule. We’ll run things together, until it’s just you.”

“But, Dad,” My voice shakes with anticipation, but I can’t stop the words. Keeping them buried is killing me, and dammit, they need to be said. Christ only knows how many other people are saying it behind our backs anyway. “That’s the problem! We’re not running anything! We’re floundering, and people are getting fucking killed

because of it!” I clench my fists. “Grandpa wouldn’t have sat back and let Luca Cappodamo pull this shit. He would have faced it head-on. We’re not doing anything about this! We look...” I fist my hair. “Weak.” Max was right. My dad doesn’t have the same cunning instinct that Grandpa did, he doesn’t have the same strength. He doesn’t act; he analyzes.

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Fuck. Don't I do the same thing?

I could have gone after Luca, but I didn't. I made excuses, reasons not to take action, and who the fuck knows what this asshole will pull next?

I force my eyes to my father's face, and a pang assaults my insides when I see the expression of disappointment. He knows what I said was true. He can't argue it.

And I'm just as screwed as he is because I didn't get that killer gene, either.

My spine stiffens. "I don't want to run an organization that doesn't have faith in its leaders. There's too much doubt, too much distrust. It needs to change, Dad. We need to change." I grab my keys. I know what to do. I just need to figure out the how.

I walk over toward the front door and look toward the kitchen. I wave to my mom. "I'll call you later. I've got to run."

I slam the front door shut behind me and get into my car. I grab a Jolly Rancher from the center console and pop it into my mouth. I let the watermelon flavor consume my taste buds as I consider what I've just berated my father for. Anyone could say the same things about me. I haven't done dick about Luca, other than let him haunt my subconscious. I've let him get inside of my head and I've done nothing to stop him.

Because I'm afraid.

Dad walks out of the house a minute later and grabs the handle of his car door. But before he opens it, his eyes meet mine. It's a quick look, and it slices through me. I'm

just as much at fault, and yet I've done nothing to fix things. He gave me the power to act, and I folded it up and stuffed it into my damn back pocket, endangering everyone I love in the process.

My phone pings with an incoming text, and I pick it up to see if it's worth a response.

One of our Russian terriers escaped from the house. Can't find him anywhere. He won't be home for dinner.

I slam both hands on the steering wheel. "Fuck!" Duke is telling me one of our trucks was hijacked...one of our drug shipments from the Russians. That bastard Luca is behind the heist. I'd bet my fucking life on it. He's not just out for blood; he's looking to squeeze the life out of my businesses too.

I throw my car into drive and follow my dad's Escalade. Rage courses through me, but I can't deal with this truck bullshit right now. It'll have to wait. I have something more important to take care of first. I need to meet Dad at the construction site and apologize for unloading on him. This Luca thing is fucking with me hard, and I feel like all I do these days is alienate people who are closest to me.

Maybe it's because I'm afraid they'll see right through me.

They'll see my fear.

And if that happens, I'll crumble.

I furrow my brow as Dad turns a corner onto a side service road. Why the hell is he going this way? Route 3 is a straight shot up to Bergen. I frown at the clock on the dashboard. Traffic shouldn't be that bad now. I grip the steering wheel tight. He must be using Waze, and that app knows a shit ton more about traffic patterns than I do.

He slows to a stop when the next traffic light turns red. I tap my fingers, anxious to get there before Tony so I can talk to my father without that cocksucker lurking. I don't need him hearing any of this. He's still a slimy, conniving bastard as far as I'm concerned, and I don't trust myself not to tell him that to his face, regardless of the fact that he's my girlfriend's father. She's the only reason I bite back those caustic words.

The light finally turns green, and Dad's Escalade accelerates through it. I tap on the gas, and stomp on the brake just as quickly when a dark blue minivan jerks across lanes and cuts me off. I veer right, narrowly missing the bastard. He's not even making a turn. He jumped lanes to slow me the fuck down.

Asshole.

I lean on my horn, my eyes willing death on the driver in front of me. This jackass is going to hold me up and I'll miss my chance to—

The sound of crushing metal and screeching tires grabs my focus, and the images in front of me blur to the point of incomprehension. Flashes of blue, white, and black streak my vision. I can't make out shapes; everything gels together as the noxious smell of burning rubber fills my nostrils.

My heart hammers in my chest, my throat tight. A sea of memories rushes forth, temporarily blinding me to the chaos in my direct line of sight.

Grandpa Vito clapping me on the shoulder right before leaving my house on Christmas night. It was the night he'd died.

You have a lot of responsibilities now, Nico.

Walking along South Beach, talking to my dad on the phone.

He's back, Nico. It's not safe for you. Not safe for any of us.

The look of disappointment and shame on Dad's face only minutes earlier.

You're in a power position now.

I've given you the tools to rule.

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We'll run it together until it's just you.

Just you.

Just you.

Those words echo in the depths of my mind, clanging between my temples like clashing cymbals.

It's just me.

Blaring sirens in the distance jolt me from my thoughts. I blink fast, but the scene in front of me remains. My legs are tight, my hands trembling.

Dad. My father. The head of the Salesi family.

Trapped. Crushed. Immobile.

I push open my door and step out of the car, gripping the door.

Suddenly, I'm looking at my own car when it was destroyed by Frank Cappodamo's crew months earlier. I'd narrowly escaped death because of one factor.

I'd been making a right turn.

I wasn't going straight.

Dad was going straight.

If he'd only been making a right...

The Mack truck that plowed into Dad's car doesn't wait for the cops to show up. And the blue minivan follows close behind.

I close the distance between my car and Dad's, my pulse pounding harder and harder with each step I take.

I never got a chance to tell him I'm sorry.

I never got a chance to tell him I love him.

I never got a chance to tell him a lot of things.

His face is a twisted mask of blood and bruises, his glasses knocked off of his face in the collision. I grip the door handle, dropping my head, letting the tears finally flow.

Maybe I never will.

14

Luca

“You’re a total disgrace to this family! You let them take what was yours, and you did nothing to stop them! I can’t fucking trust you at all!”

“But, Dad, I—”

My father Frank puts up a hand. “I don’t want to hear any of your bullshit excuses, Luca. I’m sick of watching you fuck up, over and over again. Salvatore would never have let this happen! He was the one I could count on!”

“Sal is dead, Dad!” I pound my fist against the wall. “He’s fucking dead, goddammit, so stop comparing me to him!”

“You’ll never be half the man he would have been,” my father hisses, stretching to his full height, pushing his chest into mine.

I stand my ground, refusing to cower. My heart thumps, rage coursing through my veins because I know what comes next. It always does. He thinks he’s teaching me a lesson, showing me how to be stronger, more fierce, more deadly.

More like him.

But I know it runs deeper than that. He’s trying to turn me into the son he’d always wanted...the son he lost...the son he’ll never get back.

The son he actually loved.

He lost control, and as a result, he lost so much more than that.

We all did. But he doesn't care about what he has left. His focus is always on the one who is no longer here, his protégé, his shining star.

I'm a disappointment, a liability, always living in Salvatore's shadow. Even in death, he outshines me like the night sky on the fucking Fourth of July.

"Tommy!" He bellows. "Get in here!"

With a thick finger, Dad pokes me in the chest, backing me toward the fireplace. The logs crackle, spitting orange embers into the air.

"You make me do this to you. Remember that, you little bastard! You bring this upon yourself."

Heavy footsteps crash on the hardwood floor behind me as Tommy, one of his faithful soldiers, approaches. Dad picks up a poker and hands it to Tommy before turning back to me.

"Maybe next time you'll remember who you work for, Luca."

I rub the back of my left shoulder, my fingertips sliding over the length of the scar. It's only one tiny piece of my father's legacy. He wanted to toughen me, to breathe the same hate into me that fueled him on a daily basis. It worked, but that hate...fuck, it poisoned me inside and out. Once it infiltrated my insides, it made me do things, sick things, things I should have been punished for. Shit, things I should have been put to death for.

It was all a test to see if I'd finally become a lethal force, the role I'd been groomed to play in this sick and twisted life.

I guess I passed.

The image of Nico Salesi falling to his knees next to the pile of crushed metal that was once his father's Escalade...I didn't think I'd feel shit when I witnessed that scene. After all of this time, I figured my soul would be deadened to any emotion.

But for a split second, an emotion flickered somewhere deep inside of me. It wasn't sadness or remorse, though.

It was envy.

I was jealous, so fucking jealous I couldn't think straight.

He had something I'd never have, something I'd been after for years and years until I came to realize I'd never get it—no matter what I did, no matter what I said.

His father's love and respect.

I fucking hate Nico for having that. But I don't hate him for killing my father.

Hell, I'm actually glad somebody had the balls to blow off Frank's fucking head. I'd heard enough shit spewed from his mouth over the years, and I was glad someone finally shut him the hell up for good.

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Salesi finally pulled the trigger. After all of those years prancing around in Armani and HUGO BOSS letting his peons do the hard work for him, he steps up and fucking plugs the head of the Cappodamo crime family in cold blood.

I should have felt something.

But I didn't.

It wasn't a loss as far as I was concerned.

Salesi, the one who crushed my MMA career into fucking sand, the one who started my downward spiral into the core of the fucking Earth, the one who yanked away my livelihood because I had something he could never get...

Ironic how things come full circle.

No, I don't give a flying fuck about him killing my dad. I don't feel anything for that sack of shit. I hope he's rotting in that fucking crypt.

But I give a fuck that he came after me and tore me down.

My father would call me weak, a disappointment, a pathetic excuse for a man.

That's why I'm here. I don't give a shit about the family. I don't care about anything except for what I've lost.

What I will never get back.

I want revenge, plain and simple. Nico knows it, too. And he's scared. That's why he hasn't made his move. He doesn't know which one to make. He knows I'm out for his blood, and I'll get to him in my own time. I've already proven it twice, with his security guy and his father.

And now I've shown him I can grab his businesses by the balls too.

He's fucking shitting bricks right now.

Good.

He has no idea what's coming next. I pick up my iPhone and scroll through some screens.

Dad would be proud.

Rest in hell, motherfucker.

15

Shaye

“Baby, what’s wrong?”

Sirens blare through the phone lines, and my pulse picks up speed with each passing second that Nico doesn’t respond.

“Nico, what—?”

“It’s my dad.” His voice shakes like I’ve never before heard it. “He’s..he’s been hit.”

“Hit? Hit by who? Where are you?” I tug on the ends of my hair. “Babe, just calm down for a second and talk to me.” But I’ve already realized there is nothing I can do to soothe him, at least not from my parents’ kitchen.

After a pause that knots my stomach like a pretzel, he finally speaks. “I went to the house this morning to talk to him. He’s been holding out on me for years, and today he decided to fill me in on everything after all this time. He knew something was happening. He must have. And we argued. I lost my shit with him. Shaye, I told him things, things I never should have said. I was angry and I...I...”

“Take your time,” I whisper, tears springing to my eyes. His words are tumbling out faster than I can process them, and all I want to do right now is wrap my arms around him and squeeze, to tell him everything will be okay.

But I don't know if that's true.

Maybe nothing will be okay again.

I try to follow Nico's jumbled thoughts and then just wait for him to finish. I'll piece it all together soon enough. I furrow my brow as his voice grows more and more faint. The line cuts in and out, and his words are drowned by the sirens.

"...red light...truck...smashed...internal bleeding...coma..."

An icy hand squeezes my heart. "Oh my God, Nico," I gasp, my fingertips gripping the back of a counter stool. "Is he...is he—?"

Footsteps clomp down the stairs, and I clap a hand over my mouth, tears spilling from my eyes when my father appears in the doorway. I expect him to mouth something to me, to ask what's wrong, who I'm talking to. But his eyes just narrow and he grabs his cell phone, charging into his office and slamming the door shut.

I swallow hard and wipe away the tears. "I'm so sorry, baby. Tell me what you need. I can go to your house and talk to your mom..."

His voice is clear now. "No, I have to tell her."

A lump lodges itself in my throat, and I can barely take in enough breath to speak. "Of course."

"I fucked up, Shaye. I keep fucking up, and people keep getting hurt. Or killed." His voice cracks again, muffled by background noise.

"Stop. You can't do this to yourself. You have to stay positive right now."

“Everything I’ve done...or haven’t done...is to blame for this. I let this happen. I told my dad he was weak, but I’m no better,” he says, his voice hollow. “I’ll never forgive myself if he doesn’t make it.”

“Don’t even say that!” I snap. “Never, ever say those words. They won’t help anyone.”

“I didn’t take care of what I needed to. I should have done something.”

“Nico,” I say, struggling to keep my voice even. “You did what you thought was best. Please don’t blame yourself. You can’t—”

“I let Luca get away with too much. I waited too long to make a move. I’m the fucking reason why my father is lying on that gurney and why Carlo is dead. Who’s next, Shaye? Because you know this isn’t over. I know it isn’t over.”

A sob lodges itself in my throat, and I swallow hard to keep it from bursting forth. “Then end it, Nico. It’s up to you to stop this bastard. You have the power to take him down, so do it before anyone else gets hurt.” My fingers tremble, my grip tight around the phone. “Just...do it.”

He’s silent for a few seconds, and when he speaks again, his voice is hollow. Flat. Empty. “I’ve got to go. Stay at your house. Don’t open the door for anyone. I’ll call you when I get more details about my dad.”

“Nico, please. I want to be there for you. I’m not staying here. I’m worried about you, babe.”

“I’m worried about you, too. I can’t protect everyone, Shaye. That fucker has already proven it. The only way for you to be safe is to stay away from me.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! You shouldn’t be alone right now. I can be at the hospital in twenty minutes. Please let me be there for you.”

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“No!” he roars, and I gasp at the sharp tone of his voice. “I don’t want you here! I want you as far away from me as possible!”

Click.

Tears stream from my eyes as our connection is broken. The strain and stress in his voice makes my stomach clench, and all I want is to wrap my arms around him and assure him that all of this will be over soon, that we can go back to normal and live our lives like we’ve always wanted to. God, I want so much...but is any of it realistic?

He wants to keep me far away.

All I want is to be close to him.

It’s all I’ve ever wanted.

For years, he avoided his true feelings because they would have put me in danger.

Now here we are facing the most ominous threat to everything we’ve built over the past months.

Isn’t it ironic how everything comes full circle?

I won’t let anyone dictate how I should live—not Nico, not my father, and surely not Luca. This is what I’ve been preparing for, and I’m ready to claim my future because nobody on Earth is going to yank that freedom away from me.

Nobody.

I stab at the keyboard on my phone.

There's been an accident. Nico's dad was hit. I need to get to the hospital.

Seconds later, Max replies.

I'll be there in ten minutes.

I pad over to my father's office door, furrowing my brow at the muffled sounds coming from inside of the room. Dad's voice gets louder, enough that I can only make out a few words.

"...building contract...time...warning...money..."

I knock, and the sounds dissipate. "Daddy?"

"Come in, Shaye."

I push open the door and wipe away the tears. "There's been an accident. Joe's car was hit a little while ago. It's really bad." My voice cracks before the sob erupts out of my mouth. "He's at the hospital now."

My dad's eyes widen before he leaps up to hug me. "Is he gonna be okay?"

I cry into his chest. "I don't know, Daddy. But I really need to get to the hospital. Max is on his way over here to pick me up."

Dad rubs my back. "Did Nico say where Joe was going when he got hit?"

“N-no,” I whisper. “I feel so terrible for them. Nico thinks it was Luca.”

“Did you tell Nico I’m here?”

I shake my head, sniffing. “I didn’t expect you to be here this late. I thought you’d have already been gone for the day.”

“Yeah, I had a few things to take care of before heading over to the site.” He ruffles my hair. “I’m just glad you didn’t have to be here by yourself right now.”

“I’m so scared for them. It doesn’t sound good at all.” I pull away to look up at my father’s face. “I know things are still a little strained between you guys, but I’m happy to see that you’ve put the past behind you. It’s so important to me, Daddy.”

“I know, pumpkin,” he murmurs.

The tears roll down my face. “I just hope he comes out of this. That monster needs to be stopped.” I clench my fists as my dad’s grip around me tightens. He needs to pay. And I have plenty of ideas about how to collect on that debt.

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“Joe’s strong. He’ll pull through.”

“I hope you’re right.” My shoulders quake, tears soaking through the front of my father’s shirt. “I’m going to the hospital. Max is on his way over now.”

“I’ll come by later. I have to get to the site for a couple of hours first.” Dad rubs the back of his head, averting his gaze. “Listen, don’t mention to Nico that I was home this morning, okay? There’s a delay with one of the contractors that I had to deal with, and it’s going to cause all kinds of issues unless I get it handled as soon as possible. I don’t want him worrying about it, today of all days. He’s got enough on his plate right now.”

“Okay.” I manage a small smile. “I know you’ll get it taken care of, Daddy.”

“I will.” His expression darkens. “I always take care of everything, Shaye. No matter what it takes.”

His tone changes from one of concern to something much more foreboding and my mouth opens to ask why, the question on the tip of my tongue when the front door swings open. Max stomps in wearing a black leather jacket, black t-shirt and black jeans. He looks a little more thuggish than usual. His eyes are narrowed, dark hair sticking up in all directions like he’s been tugging at it the entire way over here, plotting the demise of our enemies.

At times like this, I adore my older brother even more than normal.

“You ready, sis?” He cracks his knuckles and flexes his fingers, a menacing smirk on

his face. “I got a feeling that there’s a lot of fucking ass to be kicked today, and I don’t wanna waste any time.”

16

Nico

No more fucking questions. I can't think straight anymore. I've rehashed the scene too many times to count in my own head on the way over here, and to have to speak the words, to see those horrific images come to life again, to hear the sounds of screeching tires and crushing metal...it all makes my stomach roll.

Heavy pounding between my temples drowns out the alarms, elevated voices, and incessant beeping sounds of the Emergency Room at Holy Name Hospital. I take a deep breath, cringing as the sharp smells of bleach and antiseptic assault my lungs. Cleanliness and death. That's the association my brain makes once the scent of the chemicals invades my nostrils.

There are a million other words that could be coupled with cleanliness...health, protection, safety...why do I automatically think death?

Is it just my defense mechanism? If I expect it, does that mean I can act to prevent it?

So far, that theory has yet to be proven.

The cop taking notes in the chair opposite me taps his pen on his leg. His line of questioning screeches to a dead stop. Finally. There were no eyewitnesses other than me. The truck and the blue minivan took off before I could get plate numbers. There are no leads, which is exactly the way the hit was planned. This cop has no information to go on, but I don't bother to restate the obvious. We both know that

nothing will come of this pathetic excuse of an investigation. “I think I have everything I need, Mr. Salesi. Thanks for your help. If you think of anything else, please give me a call.”

He hands me a card, and I stuff it into my pocket. I won’t be using it. I’ve thought about plenty else in the time I’ve been sitting here, and none of it involves Officer Whatever the Hell His Name Is.

He won’t hear from me.

The cop stands and holds out his hand. “I’m really sorry about this. I hope your dad is okay.”

“Thanks,” I mumble.

He backs away, heading toward the group of cops and EMTs near the exit. I stare at the phone clutched in my hand. I told Shaye to stay away, but fuck, I need her. So badly.

I won’t call. I can’t. She needs to keep her distance from me. I meant every word I said. It’s for her own safety. Christ only knows who’s out there lurking, waiting to take out the next victim. I can’t let it be her. I’ll protect her until my last fucking breath.

I pace the lobby because sitting is the last thing I want to do right now. If I sit, then I’ll think. I’ll remember. And I can’t get caught in that net right now. It’s not the time to think. It’s time to make my move, something I should have done a long time ago.

But this time, I’m not thinking about plans. I’m not considering a crew. All of my brilliant ideas about bringing together the guys who’d ultimately help me take down the enemy? Not worth a damn right now.

This is something I need to do on my own. That's what Luca wants. Carlo, my dad—they're just collateral damage to him. I know how that fucker thinks. He's using them to get to me. He's calling me out.

And fuck me if I can stay away any longer. The longer I hide, the more people get hurt. Or worse. I can't have any more blood on my hands.

This ends tonight—one way or another. It's either him...or me.

"Nico?"

A soft hand grazes my forearm, and I twist around to see Sloane's frightened expression. "I just got here for my shift. I saw your dad's name on one of the charts, and I heard you were out here. I'm so sorry about the accident."

I nod, rubbing the back of my neck. "Thanks."

"Has the doctor talked to you yet?"

"Only for a few minutes when we got here. He's still in the operating room with my dad. He needed emergency surgery because of a collapsed lung."

"Well, Dr. Jameson is one of the best emergency surgeons on the East Coast. Your dad is in great hands with him." Sloane shifts from one foot to another, her eyes scouring the Emergency Room waiting area. "Is your mom here?"

"Not yet, she's on—"

"Nico!" My mother's high-pitched voice jolts me from my thought, and I spin around as she rushes toward me, her hand clutching Lily's. My heart clenches when I see their tear-streaked faces. I hug them close, tightening my grip, thanking God that

Duke got them here safely. I nod at him, and he gives me a little salute before retreating to the opposite end of the waiting room to stand guard against whoever would be stupid enough to show up here looking for me.

Mom pulls away, her eyes red-rimmed and puffy. “How did this happen?” she whispers. I know she’s doing it for Lily’s benefit. I lean down to pick up my sister, and she lays her head on my shoulder, quietly crying into my shirt.

“I want to see Daddy.” Her body quivers. “Where is he, Nico? I want to see him!”

“I know, Lil.” I rub her back, trying to settle her down even though the urge to crumble is overwhelming. Her little body trembles against my chest, each soft whimper slicing into my heart. Christ, I need to hold my shit together right now and keep my head in the game. Rage bubbles beneath the surface, rumbling in my core, ready to spew at any given second. But I have to hold back for the time being. I need to be strong for my family. I need to make sure they feel safe and secure. I can’t give them that security if I erupt like a fucking volcano right here in the waiting room.

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“Is he going to be okay? Have you heard anything yet?” Mom wipes away the tears streaming from her eyes. “Will he—?”

“Mrs. Salesi,” Sloane interjects. “I don’t mean to interrupt, but why don’t I take Lily for some ice cream and give you two a chance to talk privately?” She looks at me. “I’ll find you as soon as Dr. Jameson is out of surgery.”

“Thanks, Sloane.” I graze the back of her shoulder. “I really appreciate it.”

Mom forces a smile. “Yes, thank you.”

“Lilibelle,” I murmur, setting Lily on the floor and smoothing down her hair. “My friend Sloane is going to take you to the cafeteria for some ice cream. Is that okay?”

Lily looks up at Sloane, sniffs, and nods. “Yes.”

Mom gives her a quick hug. “I’ll come to meet you in just a few minutes, pumpkin.”

“Okay, Mommy.” She holds out her hand to Sloane and they walk down a corridor toward the cafeteria.

I take my mother’s hand and lead her toward a row of unoccupied chairs in a corner. An image of Carlo’s mangled body flashes across my mind, followed by one of his wife crumbling to the floor once Duke and I delivered the news to her that night. He was her life. And she lost him because of me.

Tears pool in my mother’s dark eyes, her mouth quivering as she struggles to

maintain some degree of composure. My dad, her best friend and confidante, is lying on a table in the operating room with massive internal bleeding from the hit, and at this minute, I have no idea if she's about to lose him, too.

"I'm so sorry, Mom," I whisper. How can I comfort her when her soulmate is clinging to life, hooked up to machines that need to breathe for him because he can't do it on his own? He should have never been in that car. If I hadn't stormed out of there, if I'd have just stayed and talked to him instead of losing my shit like that...

They would have still found him

I know that in my heart.

My gut clenches. He may die, and I never got a chance to tell him I'm sorry. I need to apologize for so damn much. I can't lose him. Not yet. Not this soon, not this way. He has so much more to see and do. His wife, his baby girl...fuck! This was in my control and I fucked it all up!

I clutch the sides of my hair and tug at them, letting out a low growl. "I'm sorry for doing this to you, to Lily. It's my fault! It's my fucking fault!"

And in a blink, my mother's arms capture me and hold me tight. I try to pull away, to force myself out of her grip, but it's too strong.

I don't deserve any mercy. I don't deserve her comfort.

She doesn't agree. "Stop this," she murmurs, rubbing my back. "You've been given a lot, Nico. Dad knew it would be hard for you to step into this role, but he always felt confident you'd be able to handle it. It's a dangerous life. Always has been. And you know as well as I do that Dad has done plenty to make himself a target. Don't think for a second that you put your father in there, because you didn't. This is the life we

chose and with it comes a lot of decisions and consequences.”

Her voice quivers, but her words hit me like a cement block. I stay in that spot for several minutes...I think, but I can't be sure. It feels like time stopped when that truck plowed into my dad's car. Seconds drag, feeling like hours. I let the grief pour out of me, allow myself to really feel the losses instead of suffering in silence. I don't give a fuck if it makes me look weak. Somehow, just the opposite happens, and I feel empowered. The sadness, the guilt, the remorse...there was so much polluting my soul, so much I could never allow to be seen because of peoples' perceptions of who and what I am...what's expected of me.

Fuck that. I'm letting it all go. I have to if I'm going to do what I need to do to finally make things right. I can't allow myself to be crippled by these useless emotions anymore. As they vacate my body, the grit and focus that have long been buried are finally exposed. Those are the things I need right now, not all of the other bullshit that's been plaguing me.

I may not be a killer, but I'm not a fucking pussy either.

I'm the CEO, and this family is my business.

My first task is to find the competition. Right now, they're underground, working in the dark, undetected like fucking cockroaches afraid of being exposed.

But I'm gonna shine a bright light onto them, making them scatter and panic so they can see their end...right before I crush the bastards.

17

Nico

I pace in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows, watching heavy dark clouds consume every last sliver of light in the sky. Dad is still in surgery, and nobody can tell us if he's going to be okay. All I keep hearing from Sloane is that the doctors are working hard to put him back together. Seems like a collapsed lung was the least of his problems. His body was crushed like a fucking accordion, and there was more internal damage than they'd anticipated.

I glance back at where my mom is sitting with Lily. They're huddled together, and Mom is rubbing Lily's back the way she rubbed mine earlier. She's always been focused on other people, making them feel safe and secure, instead of worrying about herself. I know she's devastated, and I wish to God for the millionth time I'd have done things differently today. It would have only prolonged the inevitable, but at least Dad would be with us right now instead of lying on an operating table somewhere in the bowels of this fucking hospital.

Air. I need some air. This hospital lobby is toxic—the air is polluted with fear, anguish, and pain. I need to get away from it all, even if only for a few minutes. I push open one of the doors and take in a deep breath. I can smell the rain coming. The impending storm is so close, anxious to unleash its force through pelting rains and crashing thunder.

Exactly how I feel at this moment.

I sink onto a deserted bench and stretch out my legs, hunching my body forward. I squeeze my eyes shut, but the scene continues to loop through my mind, complete with the chilling sound effects. But this time I'm on the outside watching myself react...seeing myself jump out of my car, taking a few cautious steps toward my dad, falling to the ground when I see the tangled mess in his front seat....

I fist my hair as if that's going to black out the images.

It doesn't.

I need to leave. I have to find these fuckers. I will make them pay...every last one of them.

My iPhone vibrates against my leg, and I grab it out of my pocket. Nobody but Shaye knows what happened, and I don't feel like rehashing anything right now. My finger hovers over the Decline button on the screen with the unknown number but before I can press it, my index finger hits Accept. I can't explain it. I just needed to do it.

"Yeah?" I ask the "unknown" person on the other end of the line, unknown since the number didn't even come up when I answered. For all I know, it could be a fucking telemarketer.

But still I answered.

"Salesi," a deep gruff voice growls.

Tiny hairs on the back of my neck prickle. "Who the fuck is this?" I ask the question even though I know exactly who the fuck it is.

"It's been a long time, Salesi. But lemme refresh your memory. I'm the guy whose life you fucking destroyed five years ago. And guess what? I've been waiting a long

time to pay you back. But every time I call you out, you run away like a scared little bitch. What the fuck is up with that?"

"Fuck you, Luca." My hand shakes, but my voice remains strong and steady. There is no way I'll give this bastard the satisfaction of knowing what's going on in my head.

"You're just weak, Salesi. Always were. Pretty rich boy, banging chicks three at a time, without a care in the world because you had Daddy and Grandpa feeding you money and power. You had a great fucking life. But it wasn't enough. It was never enough unless you had everything. You had to be the best, have the best. You could never be happy knowing someone may have had more than you, right? So you picked me because I was on top. And you couldn't rest until you knocked me down, you sonofabitch."

"Don't give me your fucking sob story, you asshole," I hiss. "You brought it all on yourself. What you did..." I slap a hand to my forehead to block out the images, images that I'd stashed away a very long time ago. "Jesus Christ, you deserved everything you got and more. I didn't give a fuck what you had. I only cared about what you took. And I'd do it again without a second thought. The world doesn't need a scumbag like you in it. You ruined lives, Luca. Not me. You."

"You don't know shit about my life, Salesi. But then again, you never bothered to find out because it was always all about you. At least I've made it about other people—Carlo Batta, your dad...whoever comes next..."

I clench my fists, struggling to control my breathing. "Only one person is left, Luca. You."

Luca snickers. "Such strong words. You got anything behind 'em, Salesi? Are you finally gonna show your fucking idiot crew that you have a set of balls? Or are you gonna keep hiding from me, you pussy?"

“Does it make you feel better, Luca? Hurting people to get back some of the control you lost when your father cut you out, humiliating you?” I seethe, swallowing past the growing lump in my throat. “You tried to get his attention and approval, but he got rid of you like the trash you are because you were a fucking cancer to his operation.”

“Keep talking, asshole. You’re just giving me more reasons to blow your fucking head off.”

“I’d rather save the rest for later...when I find you and bust a cap in your fucking skull.”

“I’ll be waiting. I know you remember the place. Oh, and hey, sorry about your pops. I was gonna send flowers, but I hear they don’t take them in the ICU. Maybe I’ll just save ’em for the funeral home.”

“Go ahead and save them for your own funeral since you’ve got no one to mourn your sorry ass now...but I hear Daddy is waiting for you in hell. See ya soon, motherfucker.”

18

Shaye

Iwring my hands together as Max's car hits every damn red light between Rocco's house and the hospital.

"Should someone call Viktor?" I gnaw at my lower lip, doubting Nico would have already reached out. He's waiting with his mom and Lily, probably too focused on them to think about what he's going to do next.

"Fuck Viktor," Max growls. "Why the hell are we even going to the hospital right now?" He points to me as he swerves around a slow-moving car in his lane. "You should be home, and Rocco and I should be on our way to tear that cocksucker apart."

"You know you can't do that," I start. "Nico would—"

"He's got enough to deal with right now."

"Relax." Rocco clasps my shoulder. "We're gonna take care of it, okay?"

"Yeah, the golden boy has it all figured out," Max grumbles, veering into the parking lot next to the Emergency Room.

"Fuck off, asshole." Rocco ruffles Max's hair. "Don't be a jealous bitch. Admit it, you're a goddamn lunatic. Nico needs someone who doesn't pull the trigger first and then asks the questions later." He snickers. "As if you'd ever get to the question part."

“At least I’ve never had my ass kicked by a girl.”

Rocco pokes me from his spot in the backseat. “Nice. I can’t believe you sold me out like that.”

I shrug. “Don’t worry. If he was up against Kat, I’d take her any day.”

“Thanks, sis.” Max shakes his head and turns off the car. “This has been a really nice ride, guys. Let’s never fucking do it again, okay?”

I let out a deep breath. “So what’s the plan? What should we do?”

“You’re not doing anything except staying here at the hospital. Leave the Grim Reaper shit to us. And don’t worry. That fucker will get his ass shredded by our sickle.” Rocco slides out of the backseat and slams the door shut.

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” I murmur to Max, nibbling on my thumb nail. “This guy is dangerous, Max.”

“Hey.” Max’s lips curl into a small smile. “Danger is my middle name.”

“Well, actually, it’s not, but—”

“Shaye, it’s gonna be fine. I promise.”

“What if you can’t find him in time? What if he’s hiding?”

“That dickhead is too much of a fucking idiot to hide. He wants to be seen. He wants to be found. He’s like a peacock shaking his ass feathers around.” Max rummages in the center console and pops a magazine into his shotgun before sticking it behind his back and into the waistband of his jeans.

“Just be careful,” I whisper, tears pooling in my eyes. So much death. Even more danger and uncertainty. Sometimes, it chokes me so hard I can barely breathe.

He flashes me a crooked grin and winks. “I’ve got a lot to live for, Shaye. That motherfucker ain’t taking it all from me.”

I throw my arms around his neck and squeeze, breathing in his cologne. “I like the fact that you remembered to spritz yourself in Prada for the occasion.” Sniffle.

“I like to smell good when I bust heads.”

I let out a little giggle. “You really are crazy.” I don’t know how he manages to be funny at times like these when he’s talking about maiming some unlucky person who’s about to cross his path. It’s kind of a sick gift. That or he really is hovering over the brink of insanity.

“I keep shit interesting. Now get the hell out of the car so we can get this party started. My trigger finger is getting itchy.”

I push open the door and swing my legs around so my feet hit the pavement. I stand slowly, my knees wobbling against each other. A sense of impending dread seems to settle around me. It snakes around me like an overgrown vine, sprouting thorns of fear, angst, and panic. They come closer and closer to penetrating my skin as I follow the guys into the hospital, but they don’t make contact. They’re just looming, a threat of the most dangerous kind. A harbinger of what’s to come.

The presence gets heavier and more ominous with each step we take, and ignoring it is impossible. My throat tightens as a whoosh of warm air blasts us. The lobby is full of people waiting, worrying, and praying. I scout the room, but there isn’t a single person I recognize. I clench and unclench my fingers to get the blood circulating. An unexplainable chill settles deep in my bones despite the heat. I know what’s about to

happen, and there isn't anything I can do to stop it.

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I can't. It has to be done. I wasn't lying when I told Nico he needed to act. It's the only way he can win this war. But the churning in my gut is telling a very different story, one where I just want to find him and run away with him so we never have to deal with these people...this life...ever again.

Talk about giving mixed signals.

I hug myself, the chill spreading to my hands and feet. It feels as if I'm being iced from the inside out, but the numbness doesn't affect my heart or my mind. I still know what comes next in the story.

I just don't know how it will ultimately end.

We walk to the nurse's station, and Sloane comes out to meet us, her grave expression making my chest clench. I fall into her arms, tears pooling in my eyes. Is he dead? Oh God, please don't let him be dead...

"Mr. Salesi is out of surgery," she murmurs to us, squeezing me tight. "But there were complications during the operation. He went into cardiac arrest, and he fell into a coma."

I pull away. "Oh my God," I whisper.

Sloane rubs my arm. "They don't know when...or if...he'll wake up, sweetie. I'm so sorry."

I try to swallow the sob lodged in my throat, but the tears spill over, running down

my face in torrents.

Max rubs my back. “Thanks, Sloane.”

She nods. “Nico and his mom are in recovery with him now.”

“Where’s Lily?” I rasp, swiping away the tears from under my eyes.

“She’s with one of the nurses. Mrs. Salesi came straight here when she got the news and she didn’t have anyone to leave Lily with on such short notice. I’ve been with her since they arrived.”

“I’ll take her.” I clear my throat. “But I need to see Nico first.”

“Okay, I can tell him you’re here. You have to keep positive, sweetie.” She manages a small smile before turning toward the large red door leading to the patient rooms.

I look up at Max. “This is really happening, isn’t it?”

He nods, rubbing my shoulder. “Yeah.”

I cough and the sob explodes out of my throat. “P-please take care of him, you guys. P-please d-don’t let anything happen to him.”

“You know we have his back, Shaye.” Rocco rakes a hand through his hair. “We’ve got this, okay?”

“J-just be careful,” I whisper, sniffing hard.

Rocco catches Max’s murderous gaze. “You know where we’re going, right?”

He nods. "I've got the address. They're not gonna know what fucking hit them."

"Make them pay, guys." I wipe my eyes. "Make them wish they'd never brought Luca back."

The red door swings open, and Nico walks out. His clothes are rumpled, like he's been hunched over in a chair for the past hour. His hair is a mess, spiked and standing on end. But it's his gaze that chokes me...the pain, the guilt, the anger, the void.

When he speaks, his voice is hollow. "Sloane told me you guys were here." He grasps my wrist and leans down to whisper into my ear. "I thought I told you to stay away."

I shake my head, afraid if I open my mouth to respond, I'll lose my breakfast right here in the middle of the waiting room.

"We came as soon as we heard. I'm really sorry, man." Rocco shakes his head. "Thank fuck he wasn't with your mom and Lily."

Nico nods. "Yeah..." I follow his eyes to Max. "I thought I fired you."

"Yeah, but I'm willing to overlook your pretty large error in judgment," Max replies, his face deadpan.

A shadow of a smile lifts Nico's lips, and he pulls Max in for a hug, clapping him on the back. "Thanks for coming."

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“I love you, man,” Max grumbles, clasping Nico’s shoulder. “Even though you’re a walking fucking disaster these days. How’s your pops?”

Nico rubs the back of his neck. His eyes are heavy and sad, his face drawn like he hasn’t slept in weeks.

And I know he really hasn’t.

He won’t sleep again until this war ends.

“Not good. There’s a lot of internal damage, but he’s too weak for them to operate on again. As it is, he went into cardiac arrest during the surgery.”

“So now what? We just wait?” Max’s voice rises. “They can’t do anything else?”

“Not right now.” Nico’s fingers lace with mine. “Guys, I need to talk to Shaye for a minute.” Before waiting for them to even acknowledge his words, he’s pulling me toward an open corridor. I walk fast, trying to keep up with him. Once we’re alone, he backs me against the wall and leans down, so close his warm breath flutters against my cheeks. Pain is etched into his features, anger glimmering in the depths of his soul.

He tightens his grip on my hands, squeezing them as I wait for him to speak. He’s riddled with guilt and the fear of what comes next, I can feel it. It hangs in the air between us, just like the pending doom that’s been overshadowing our lives over the past few months.

“You were right, babe. I waited too long, and now my dad may not...he may not make it. I put him here. I fucked up, and now I have one shot to make things right.”

“I know you will, Nico. The guys are waiting for your direction. Just keep focused. You’ll make this right, babe. Max and Rocco have your back, and they’re ready to—”

He shakes his head. “No,” he whispers. “I have to do this by myself. This was a personal strike, babe. He wants me. I can’t risk anyone else’s life. I’ve already got too much blood on my hands.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” The blood coursing through my veins morphs into ice, snaking around my insides and slicing through my heart. I shake my head. “N-no! I never meant for you to do this on your own! It would be suicide! You have no idea what you’d be walking into!” I pull my hands away from his and grip his jacket with both fists. “Nico, please listen to me. It’s okay to need help.” My voice shakes, desperation weaving its way into my pleas. “They’re here to help you. Please let them go with you, Nico. Don’t be a hero. I need you, baby. My God, I need you more than you’ll ever know!”

He caresses the side of my face, his lips grazing my forehead. “You don’t need anything or anyone. That’s one of the reasons why I’m so crazy about you. That ferocity, that fire deep inside of you. It rages, Shaye. It always has. You’d jump in front of a Mack truck to save anyone you care about. You’re so loyal and strong. I love you so much. You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me. You’ve been by my side this whole time, never judging, only supporting. You knew I fucked up, but you never stopped believing in me.”

My shoulders quake as the tears silently fall. “I’m begging you not to do this,” I whisper.

“If you believe me when I say that I love you more than my life, then you know I’m

going to do everything in my power to protect you. It's my responsibility, and I've avoided it for too long already."

"No, you haven't! You've done everything you can to keep me safe."

"Except face the one person with the power to yank you away from me." He rakes a hand through his hair. "I have to do this."

"Look, I know you need to handle him. I know you've just had your world rocked by this guy. But think about your mother. Think about Lily. Think about your dad! Don't do it. Just please don't go alone." Another whimper escapes my lips. "How can you protect me if you're—?" I bite back the word before it can escape my mouth, but it's still there taunting me. My stomach clenches. "Nico, please think about this. Be smart about it. You're upset and angry...take a little time to think about what you're doing. Why would you do this alone? Please, Nico! Let your friends help you, for Christ's sake!"

He shakes his head, silencing my protests with his soft lips. I squeeze my eyes shut as his warmth consumes me, pretending we're somewhere else, anywhere else, and that this kiss is only the beginning, that any second he's going to lay me back and tear off my clothes, that all of this is just a horrible nightmare.

But then he pulls away. I feel the loss deep within my heart and soul, and I pray to God it's only temporary.

"This is what I have to do. Alone." His fingers wind their way into my hair. "You're my everything, Shaye. I'm doing this for you. For us."

"B-but without you, there is no us!" My voice quivers, the golf ball-sized lump in my throat preventing me from taking in a deep breath. That tormenting chill has now settled into my gut and the warmth I crave, the one I need...he's about to walk into

the lion's den with no guarantee that he'll be coming out.

"Without you, there's no us either." He pulls me in tight to his chest, our hearts beating fast and furious in unison. "I love you so much, Shaye."

I cling to him, digging my fingertips into his jacket. "Then let the guys come with you. Call Viktor. Please!"

He drops his arms and steps backward. "I can't. This is my responsibility. Don't be sad. Be hopeful." He manages a small smile. "I know I am."

19

Nico

“Are you sure this is the right address?” I pull open the driver’s side door of my R8 and slide into the front seat, speaking into my iPhone.

“Yeah.” Santino Lucchese, Rocco’s father, responds. I can almost see him rub a hand over his shiny bald head, something he does when he’s nervous. It’s his tell. I know he thinks this is a fucking crazy idea, and he’s right. I have no business walking into Christ only knows what with a handgun and nothing else. I’m not a soldier. I’m just fucking pissed off.

“Nico, it’s not a good idea for you to go alone. Let me pull together some of the guys—”

“Santino, you’ve always been a good friend to my dad. I know he’d appreciate you helping me out. But it’s my job to handle this guy. He’s taken too much already, and I can’t let him take any more.”

“No disrespect, Nico, but you’re not exactly the muscle of this family. What’s your plan? Business isn’t this guy’s thing. Killing is. You of all people should know that.”

“What I do know is that because I haven’t made a move sooner, Carlo is dead and my dad is hanging on by a thread. I don’t have a grand plan, Santino, other than to end this.”

“Do you at least have a gun?”

I roll my eyes. “Yes, and it’s got bullets in it, too.”

“I had to ask.”

“Thanks for getting me the address. And don’t give it to Rocco, okay? I need to handle this on my own.”

“I think you’re making a pretty damn stupid move by going, but I wish you luck, Nico.”

“Thanks.” I click off the phone and toss it onto my seat, ignoring the frantic text messages from Shaye. She called a couple of times when I was on with Santino too. I close my eyes before starting the engine, trying to focus and block out the voices, sounds, and images that are plaguing me. I can’t go into this with so much shit flying through my mind.

But my mind doesn’t cooperate. It betrays me as usual.

I press my fingertips to my temples, willing my mind to block out the images – the one of that Mack truck pounding my father’s car into oblivion, the one of Shaye’s tear-streaked face, the one of my mom weeping at my father’s bedside...

I can’t fucking operate like this! I slam my hands on the steering wheel and try again.

Focus, focus, focus for fuck’s sake!

All I can hear is the sound of glass shattering and metal crushing as it reverberates between my ears, making my pulse throb. Those sounds are on repeat over and over in my head. I push back my hair, pressing my palms to my forehead, desperate to

clear my mind but instead a flash of white floats into my mind and suddenly, Shaye is front and center in a long, white wedding dress. Smiling, laughing, happy, exactly the way she deserves to be. Shaye in a hospital bed smiling down at a baby, Shaye walking along the shore of a white, sandy beach with two little girls with blonde pigtails dancing along next to her...

But where the fuck am I in all of this?

Am I there? Is this my life? Or, deep down, is it what I'm afraid to miss?

I clench my fists around the steering wheel. I'm fucking afraid. I have too much good in my life, too many plans for the future...what happens if I lose it all?

It only takes one bullet...

I let out a shaky breath, my heart thudding in my chest. I know one thing for sure. Sitting here isn't getting me any closer to finishing this shit.

I can't fail. If I do, I'm leaving the lives of everyone I care about hanging in the balance. He'll go after them next because he's a vindictive motherfucker who doesn't believe in leaving loose ends.

The engine roars to life, and I press my foot on the gas, the tires squealing on the pavement as I race out of the parking lot. I've wasted enough time. He's not that far away, and I know he's waiting for me. Hell, he's waited for this for the past five years. I tighten my grip on the steering wheel in the direction of the dump he's holed up at in Rutherford. I pull onto Route 46, rotating my neck to knock out the crick that is making it so damn stiff. No surprise it doesn't work.

I stomp on the gas, flying past strip malls lining the road and through traffic lights. I glance at the clock on the dashboard. Only another ten minutes, and then...

I have no fucking idea. But it's not that far into the future, and I should probably come up with a plan before I go in there, my gun cocked and ready to spit bullets. The strip malls fade away, and the rest of the stretch is barren. No trees, no grass, just concrete. My navigation system pings and tells me the exit is coming up in another mile. Thankfully, traffic is pretty light right now, which rarely happens here in northern Jersey. Luck must be on my side today.

I wish I could say the same for my dad.

I flip on my blinker when the sign for the exit appears. The ramp is steep, and I take it too fast because I'm just a little fucking nervous about what awaits me once I roll up to Luca's place.

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A loud screeching noise jolts me, and a shiny black sports car swerves in front of my Audi.

“What the fuck?” I yell, shoving the steering wheel to the right so I avoid plowing into the jackass in front of me. A loud horn blares behind me, and I veer off the road right before hitting the guardrail along the exit ramp.

Gravel flies up around my car as it skids about fifty feet into the dirt, stopping right next to the one fucking tree on this road. I slam my hands on the steering wheel and take a deep breath. It does nothing. A sharp pain explodes down my back, and I let out a loud groan. “Motherfucker!”

I ease my foot off the brake and swivel the steering wheel back in the direction of the road. And just as quickly, I slam it back on the brake. “Jesus Christ!”

Katarina is standing in front of my car, arms folded, her blue eyes glowering at me. She shakes her head and crooks her index finger at me.

I throw the car into Park and push open the door. “Are you fucking insane, Kat? Why the hell would you do that? Did you ever hear of using your flashers to get someone’s fucking attention instead of running them off the goddamned road?”

“Nico,” she says, stepping forward in ridiculously high heels. “Trust me, I just saved your ass by doing that.”

“What the fuck are you talking about? There’s nobody else on the road!”

She cocks an eyebrow. “Dude, I’m talking about Luca Cappodamo! You’re on your way to find him, aren’t you? Do you have a death wish going in there alone?”

I let out a deep sigh and scrub a hand down my face. “Shaye called you.”

“Of course, she did, you dumbass! She’s petrified for you! So are your two sidekicks, by the way. They jumped into the game a little bit late, but lucky for you, my schedule was clear.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m so glad you all have such faith in me.”

“Listen, I respect what you’re trying to do, but let’s be real. This ain’t your bag.” She sticks her hands on her hips and flashes a wide smile. “Besides, my dad is away right now, working through some drug deal in Miami. So you’ve got me instead.”

“I appreciate the gesture, but I don’t need backup,” I grumble. “This has nothing to do with anyone but me, and I’m not going to let anyone else get hurt because of something I need to own up to. That’s why I didn’t call Viktor even though I knew he wanted a crack at Luca, too.”

“Don’t be a hero, Nico. This guy will split you in two with his bare hands. You saw what he’s capable of. Do you want to end up laying in a casket with your head sitting next to you instead of on your shoulders?”

“I’d like to not be in the casket at all.”

“Then let me come with you. I’ll stand down, but don’t go in there by yourself. I promise, I’ll let you take the shot. I won’t steal your thunder. But if shit goes sideways, at least someone’s got your back.”

I throw my hands into the air. If anything, my crew is fucking loyal to a T. “Fine, but

you're following me. And I go in first. I don't need a bodyguard."

She snickers. "I never offered protection. I just said I'd have your back. I'm not taking a bullet for you."

I narrow my eyes at her. "You're not exactly going for inconspicuous in that outfit. And you're okay fighting in those shoes?"

"I'm not running a marathon. I'm potentially plugging a few bad guys." She shrugs, checking herself out from behind. She smooths down the front of her low-cut, black tank top and runs her hands over her hips. The denim looks painted on, it's so tight. "Why not look good doing it? Let them get a last look at the goods before I gauge out their eyeballs, you know? It'd be a nice parting memory for them, don't you think?"

I shake my head and throw up my hands. "I don't even have words, Kat." I slide back into the driver's seat and fire up the engine. "Let's try to make it there in one piece."

She salutes me and jumps back into her car, peeling out of the dirt after me. I pull back onto the exit ramp that spits us out onto a service road. Late afternoon sunshine peeks between the buildings lining the road. I glance down at the navigation system. Only a few more miles to go. The thudding in my chest becomes more intense with each passing minute. Shaye knew I needed backup. She always seems to know what I need.

I definitely need her, and I also know Kat isn't about to stand guard and let me go in there alone. If anything, she gets off on the plugging part. She'd never let her friend down. Or me.

I flip on my blinker to take the next right turn down what appears to be a more desolate road than most around here. I pull into a parking lot next to the dilapidated restaurant I'm about to invade. There are a few cars scattered around, and the last

thing I need is to have my car spotted. I want a quick getaway...from what, I still have no idea. But I don't need anyone tipping off my old friend if my Audi should roll up on their turf.

I shut off the engine, and Kat jumps out of her car seconds later, waving me on. I take a deep breath. What's the plan, Nico? Is there a plan? How the fuck is this going to play out? I've never been the guy who goes into something without a clear exit strategy.

I hope to hell the exit strategy for today doesn't include wheeling me out in a body bag.

Kat raps on the window. "Wake up, Nico. Let's shred his ass."

I swallow past the lump in my throat and almost choke, it's so damn big. I push open the door. "Did you ever want to fly under the radar? Just once?"

"Oh, hell no," she responds with a big toothy grin. "I'm more of a Bam! Here I am! Let's start this fucking party! kind of girl in case you didn't already know that." She winks at me and cocks her gun before sticking it in the waistband of her jeans. I have no clue how there is any bit of room in there, but somehow she manages.

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“Yeah.” I roll my eyes. “I got that. But let’s not blow the roof off the place right away, okay? Can you handle that?”

She pretends to think about it, tapping a finger against her cheek. “You’re asking a lot. That’s not exactly my MO.”

“I’d love it if you can make an exception, just this once.”

She taps the toe of her shoe on the concrete and lifts an eyebrow. “I hate to break it to you, but strutting your fine ass in there is going to get you noticed. You’re officially on the radar once you walk through those doors.”

“I don’t want a massacre, Kat.”

“I get it. Except they’re never going to let you leave unless someone has bigger plans for you. Someone named Luca Cappodamo. How do you even know he’s here? Do you really think he’d be waiting for you to show up like this?”

“I think that’s exactly what he wants.”

She shakes her head. “I think whoever gave you this location knows you’re walking into a trap.”

“Impossible. Rocco’s dad gave me the address. He’s one of my most loyal guys.”

“Rocco, Rocco...” She furrows her brow. “Isn’t that the guy I almost popped?”

“Yeah. He and his dad are with us, not Luca.”

“And you’re sure about that?”

“I’d bet my life on it.” Ninety-nine percent, but I keep this last bit to myself. I have a lot of reasons to be suspicious of everyone right now, but I still can’t imagine that Santino would set me up. Not after everything my dad has done for him and his family.

Right?

The lump gets bigger and bigger with every passing second. I left without telling Max and Rocco to stay behind, but they haven’t shown up. Was that on purpose? Do they know something I don’t? Could it be because—?

Fuck! I hate feeling suspicious of every goddamn person surrounding me. My throat tightens as if it’s being squeezed by an invisible hand...a strong, beefy one at that. Breathing has become a definite issue, and it’s a really inconvenient time to pass out.

A sharp pain shoots down my left arm and no fucking way will I have a panic attack right here in front of Kat. I’m here for Luca. I’m not running away again. I’m going to face whatever waits for me beyond those dingy doors. If my guys fucked me, it’ll be a harsh reality to swallow but it’s not stopping me.

No fear. Just plain old fucking fury. It’s what courses through my veins and pushes me toward the entrance of the old hole-in-the-wall restaurant.

Kat’s heels click on the pavement behind me. “I think I should go in first. I’ll distract whoever is inside and that’ll give you some time.”

I don’t answer. I just keep walking, my focus on the door. What lies beyond is the

great unknown. Could be death. Could be salvation. Either way, I'm about to find out.

"Nico? At least let me—"

I stop short, right before grasping the door handle. "Look, Kat. I appreciate the enthusiasm, but this is my shit show, okay? I'm here to settle up with Luca. I don't need a diversion."

"Stupid is as stupid fucking does," she mutters as I pull open the door to the darkened space.

I squint, stepping into the foyer. The stench of rotting garbage immediately assaults my nostrils, and Kat gags a little behind me. My stomach rolls as the smell consumes me. The only light that streams into the place comes from the blinds covering the dirty windows. A couple of the slats are cracked enough to allow some brightness, but it's not nearly enough to get a long and hard look at the apparently deserted restaurant. Flies buzz around my head, but I can't see too far in front of my face.

"What the hell is that? It's goddamn rancid!"

The smell gets stronger as I inch my way farther inside the place. It's dark, dank, musty, and reeking of death. I take a few steps toward what looks to be a bar, my foot crashing into a heavy wooden chair leg. "Shit!" I hiss. My toe throbs from the impact, but I don't let the pain stop me from trying to figure out why the fuck I'm here and who the fuck is waiting for me.

"You said Rocco's dad gave you this address?" Kat whispers, creeping next to me with her gun in hand.

"Yeah." I twist my head around to see a doorway in the far corner of the place. Light

shines from underneath another door. “Someone’s back there,” I mumble, pointing.

“I can’t wait to find out who...or what...is waiting for us.”

A loud squeak sends Kat flying into me. She covers her mouth to prevent the shriek from erupting in the empty space. “Holy fuck!” she whisper-shouts.

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I let out a quiet snicker. “Don’t tell me you of all people are afraid of a little dipshit mouse.”

“Screw you, Nico.” She flips her hair and shudders next to me. “I can’t stand those disgusting little fuckers.”

“Hmm. Noted. Mice freak you out, but you’re fine walking into a restaurant that’s potentially full of assault rifles. Interesting.”

“Everyone has a...motherfucker!” Kat yelps, her body jerking backward toward what looks to be the kitchen. A thick arm winds its way under her neck, a butcher’s knife poised to pierce her skin.

“Drop the gun, fucko.” A deep voice with menacing dark eyes comes from behind Kat’s head.

“Don’t do it, Nico!” Kat gasps as his grip on her tightens.

Jesus Christ, what the fuck did I walk into?

“Who the hell are you?” I hold my gun steady, pointed directly at the ominous glare opposing me.

“We knew you’d come.” He speaks slowly and deliberately, his words dripping with disdain. “Must mean I finished the job. And now that your old man is out of the picture, looks like you’re sitting at the top. And trust me, it’s gonna be a painful fucking fall, Salesi.”

“Where’s Luca?” I grit my teeth, knowing full well he’s not here. Santino. Goddamn it, he totally fucked me, and as of this second, I can’t say for sure I’m going to be able to return the favor.

“You think he’s sitting around, waiting for you to come and blow him away for giving the order?”

My shoulders tense. “Let her go. It’s me you want. Leave her alone.”

“Fuck that, dickhead. I’m gonna have some fun with her first.” He runs a hand down the front of Kat’s chest. She cringes as his thick fingers plunge into the front of her shirt. Her shoulders shudder, quivering as the tears fall from her eyes. “Don’t cry, bitch. Not yet anyway.” He presses the knife to her neck and nods to me. “Now drop the gun before I cut into her like she’s a fucking steak.” With his free hand, he pulls her gun out of her waistband and drops it on the floor.

Kat widens her eyes as I move toward a table and drop the gun on top of it. She’s mouthing something...looks like Russian. That’s no fucking help.

Why did I think it was such a great idea to come here alone again?

The guy who always has a plan now has absolutely nothing except an apparent death wish.

“Good move, Salesi.” He yanks Kat backward, making her stumble. He’s got one hand on the knife, one hand over her chest, her gun clenched in his fingers. Her shoe gets caught on the ratty carpet as he’s dragging her and she grabs one of her spiky heels faster than I can blink. She twists away, shoving the heel of her shoe right into his beady black eye.

“Ahh, you fucking whore!” Kat’s shoe is still sticking out of the asshole’s head when

he raises his arm at me and cocks her gun.

“??????? ???? ?????!” She screams in Russian, kicking him with her other shoe before ducking out of the line of fire. “Shoot him, Nico! Fucking do it now!”

Crack!

A glass vase explodes next to me as he manages to fire off a single shot.

Crack!

A pitcher shatters, liquid and glass flying through the air. I pull Kat toward me and fling her to the ground before I can pick up my gun and blow away the bastard who attacked my father. My hand juts out, my fingers gripping the cold metal.

He swings himself to a seated position and points the gun at me again. Blood pours down the side of his head, courtesy of the four-inch heel protruding from his eye socket. “You’re dead now, asshole!”

Crack! Crack! Crack!

Blood spurts out of the guy’s skull, bits and pieces of bone and brain now decorating the mouse-infested restaurant. His body lands backward on the floor with a loud thud, the knife and gun landing on the floor next to him.

“Yeah, that’s what it looks like to me, dick.” Rocco’s voice booms as he picks up the gun and swings it around his trigger finger. Good Christ, the guy won’t learn until he shoots himself in the fucking head.

“It’s still cocked!” Kat yells at Rocco. “?? ?????????? ???!”

“Jesus, woman. English!” Rocco rolls his eyes and bends to free her shoe from the guy’s eyeball.

“No, he’s not fucking crazy, Kat. Just fucking stupid.” I grab the gun from him and hand it back to Kat.

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Rocco dangles the bloody shoe in front of her. “That’s not a nice thing to say when I come bearing gifts.”

She recoils and grabs her gun, pointing it at him. “Get that bloody thing the fuck away from me.”

“But they’re...” He peers into the shoe. “Jimmy Choos. And really? You’re gonna shoot me after I saved your life? Don’t you think I at least deserve a thank you? And maybe a blow job?”

She snorts and pushes past him, hobbling on one shoe-clad foot, headed in the direction of the door. “As if I’d ever willingly lay a finger on you.”

“Who said anything about your finger?”

Kat flips him off and reaches for her gun again, but I hold up a hand. “Shut the hell up, guys. Someone’s back there.” I squint at the bottom of the door and dark shadows move around in the light.

Kat reaches out to grab the door handle, but I push her straight into Rocco right before it swings open, slamming against the wall. We fall to the floor and duck down behind some tables, guns raised.

“Guys! Don’t fucking shoot!” Max’s voice echoes in the empty back room, and a hand suddenly appears from one side of the doorway, waving in mock surrender.

“Max! What the hell are you doing in there?” I leap to my feet and rush past Kat and

Rocco.

“I came in through the back. Just in case there was trouble up front.”

“So he could make a fast getaway.” Rocco snickers.

“No, dickhead, it was so I could surprise the enemy.” Max glowers at me. “Seriously, Nico? This guy?”

“Can you guys cut this shit out for now? We already took out the asshole who hit my dad, but there’s no sign of Luca. That means he’s somewhere else.”

“Great detective work, Sherlock.” Max rakes a hand through his hair. “But there’s something else you should see. Luca was here, and from the looks of it, pretty recently.” Max waves us into the back room.

Kat is on my heels as we follow Max inside, craning her neck to get a look at what Max already found. “Jesus Christ!” she gasps.

“Goddamn...” Rocco mumbles. “It’s Matteo Fabrizzi, with a hole punched through his fucking throat.”

Just like Carlo Batta.

Luca had been here.

That was what smelled so rancid when we came in.

And he killed his second in command. Beat him to death, and for what?

Because he knew I’d show up here, and he wanted me to know that there are no limits

to what he'll do to get what he wants and who he will destroy if they get in his way.

As if I didn't already know that.

I'd seen it first fucking hand.

20

Luca

I pick up my phone and hit redial. It rings once...twice...and then...

“You dumb fuck. Did you really think I’d make it easy on you and those tools you brought with you? Except the chick. Makes me wish I’d waited around a little longer.”

“Where the fuck are you?”

I let the corners of my lips curl upward. He sounds more angry than scared. Good. That’ll change real fucking quick. “Oh, are you finally ready to make a move, you pansy ass? Always too afraid to get your hands dirty, so you leave the grunt work to everyone else. Can’t mess up the Armani, right? Have you decided to jump in the deep end, Salesi?”

“Enough of this bullshit, Luca. You want me, you’ve got me.”

“Oh, I have a lot more than that. But one thing at a time. It took you a long fucking time to answer my messages, so don’t think I’m gonna cut the game short because you finally decided to play.”

I tap my fingertips on the steering wheel and peer up at the dark sky. A flash of lightning illuminates the horizon, followed by a crash of thunder. I feel electrified for a split second, adrenaline coursing through me. I’ve waited a long fucking time for

this.

Another flash of lightning crackles across the sky, and with it, an image of her...my Lia...lying on her back on a white sandy beach and smiling up at me.

There aren't many times when I allow myself to force her beautiful face from my mind, the face of the one person I've ever loved in this fucked-up life of mine, but right now, I need to focus. I clench and unclench my fists, cracking my torn-up knuckles and flexing my fingers.

My life and my love were stolen away from me.

I want him to know how that feels.

Fucking mafia prince. He needs to know that pain. I can't stop...won't stop...until he does.

"You're scared now, aren't you?" I hiss.

"Listen, you fucking psycho, I came here for you! But in your twisted fucking head, you needed to send me another message by killing Matteo Fabrizzi. I know why you did it. You need to be the one calling the shots. You always did! Whenever someone else had more power, you felt threatened. It's why you left the family and got into MMA. That's how you battle the loss of control now. You fucking pound people into oblivion. That's your power. Guess what, asshole? It doesn't scare me. And it's not gonna stop me from finding you and making you pay. I won't let you hurt anyone else. You deserve everything you got years ago, Luca. Every fucking thing!"

"Thanks for the ten-cent therapy session, Doctor Fucknut." I lean forward, peering out the window as the rain pelts the windshield of my car. "But let's talk about you instead. You're sitting on top right now, very fucking high up in your ivory tower

since the big guy is lying in a hospital bed, fucking mangled beyond repair. And I want you to know how it feels to crash to the fucking ground, to land head-first in a sea of complete shit, knowing that you'll regret everything and beg for my mercy. God, it makes my cock hard to say those words. Maybe I need someone to help me out with that. Good thing I have an idea about where to find that someone."

Click.

Two lone figures rush out of the hospital, huddled under an umbrella.

Yep. A very fucking good idea.

21

Shaye

Heavy rain pelts the windshield and after a few seconds trying to figure out the controls in Mrs. Salesi's fancy car, I flip the wipers on high speed so I can see. Somewhat. At least the slapping sound of water against glass drowns out the horrifying sounds of bullets exploding and people screaming that keeps reverberating between my ears. A bloody massacre flashes across my mind, and I say another silent prayer for the safety of my friends, that these images are not real, that they were able to escape an unfathomable fate at the hands of Luca Cappodamo.

I run a trembling hand through my wet hair and twist around in the driver's seat, my lips stretching into a smile that is one-hundred-and-fifty-percent fake. They quiver as I force them upward, and I struggle to keep my voice even.

"Lilibelle? Are you all belted in?"

She nods, her face pale and her dark eyes heavy. "Yes," she murmurs, her voice completely void of her usual bubbly, child-like energy. Her eyes drift closed before I can back out of the parking spot. Poor baby. Sitting in this hospital all day, knowing her daddy is hurt, seeing her mom so upset...it's been a shitty day for all of us.

Taking her back to Nico's is the least I can do to help them. She needs to rest, and there's only so much ice cream you can shovel into a little kid before she gets sick. I told Duke to stay back at the hospital, but he insisted on following us home. Said Nico would skin him alive if he let me leave alone, not that he's answered any texts

from Duke, either. The cops are still swarming the Emergency Room, so I know the Salesis will be safe until Duke can get back here.

A chill slithers through me, my mind full of questions I have no answers to because nobody will tell me what's going on. I've sent plenty of texts—to Kat, to Max, to Nico. But nobody's responded. I know they're together, and with Kat to back them up, I have a little more faith that things haven't gone completely sideways. But that's pretty much the extent of my knowledge, and the dark thoughts keep creeping in. I squeeze my eyes shut to force them away. I can't focus on them now. I have to stay positive, but it's hard when nobody is telling me what the fuck is happening!

Please just come back to me, Nico...

I know I don't have the right to lament since it was my brilliant idea for him to go after Luca in the first place. But dammit, why did he have to be so stubborn about it and leave without the guys? He's smarter than that!

But rage trumps intellect when push comes to shove.

I take a few deep breaths, trying to calm my pulse, which has been raging out of control for the better part of the afternoon. Duke flashes me from across the parking lot. I flash back, put the car into Drive, and head toward the hospital exit. Thunder claps and rumbles as I slowly accelerate onto the road, the ominous sky completely black save for the occasional crash of lightning. I peer into my rearview mirror to confirm Duke is still behind me, but the rain is coming down in torrents. I can barely see three inches in front of me, much less what's behind me. I slow at a traffic light right before easing onto the main road back to Nico's. No other cars are even on the road. The only set of headlights I can see are pointed directly at the back of Mrs. Salesi's car, so I know it's just us and Duke. The light turns green, and I press my foot on the gas, and...nothing. The engine fires, but the car doesn't move. I try again, only to hear the tires spin, hydroplaning on the wet ground.

Damn sport tires. I gas it again and the car juts to the right, skidding on the slick pavement before hitting a deep pothole on the side of the road with a loud thud. I swallow a yelp, thanking God that no cars were in the other lane and that the huge oak tree to my right wasn't a foot closer. I glance over my shoulder to see that Lily's eyes are still closed. With a hammering heart, I ease back onto the road and flip on my right turn signal.

Jesus Christ, the threat of death is lurking everywhere today.

I grip the steering wheel tighter as I drive, effectively killing circulation in my fingertips. Long, deep breaths do absolutely nothing to calm me.

Raindrops smash against the sunroof with even more force than before as we near Nico's house. The wipers are already on the highest setting, and I just pray that nothing crosses my path because there's no way in hell I'm going to see it. Just a couple of more blocks, a couple of more minutes, and about a thousand more prayers.

A few agonizing moments later, I finally turn into the driveway and shut off the engine. I quickly glance into my rearview, but no headlights shine back. Duke probably didn't make it through that last traffic light around the corner. I barely squeaked through it myself. A loud ping from my iPhone blares, piercing the silence.

Where are you?

I cover my mouth to silence the squeal, tears pooling in my eyes. He's alive. Oh my God, he's alive!

My fingers, cold and stiff, tremble over the keyboard. I just pulled into your driveway with Lily.

Are you fucking insane, leaving the hospital like that?

I furrow my brow. If he's texting me, Luca must have been taken care of. I admit, leaving the hospital without first hearing from Nico wasn't my brightest idea, but Lily needed to get out of there, and Christ knows, I couldn't sit around for another second not knowing the fate of my friends. Being at Nico's makes me feel closer to him when he's not there, closer to the way we used to be, the way I'm desperate for us to be again. I don't know, maybe in some crazy way I figured I could channel that energy and use it to will him back to me. Stupid, yes, but slightly more comforting than waiting around in that hospital.

We're fine. Duke followed me. Are you okay?

For now.

What the hell does that mean?

Where's Luca?

A pause...much longer than I would like. Lily stirs in the backseat, the quiet stillness in the car deafening while I wait for his response.

I don't know.

Fuck.

Are you with Kat and the guys?

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Yeah. I'm coming home now. Just get into the house and set the alarm.

I swallow hard, my head darting left and right. It's so dark. Anyone could be out there. I unclip my seatbelt and lean over the center console to unhook Lily. "Sweetie," I whisper. "We're home."

"Mmmph," she murmurs, eyes still closed.

I fling open my door and open the one on Lily's side, thick raindrops pounding my skin and clothes. I pull up her hood and gather her in my arms, covering her face. I slam the car door shut with my hip and jog to the front door. The house is completely dark, except for the tiny, flashing red light that tells me the alarm is set. I fish out my key and stick it into the lock, shifting Lily against me. The alarm bleeps, and I enter the code to shut it off. Duke will be here in a minute, and then I'll reset it. I flip on the foyer lights, kick off my shoes, and peel off Lily's jacket.

I head upstairs, shooting off a quick text to Duke that we're here and the front door is open for him. I switch on as many lights as I can, praying we don't lose power anytime soon. But judging by the winds that have picked up speed, I know it's only a matter of time before lights start to flicker. I hear the alarm bling downstairs and let out a breath I didn't realize I'd been holding. Duke is here. Nico is on his way. Everything's going to be okay.

It has to be.

I lay Lily in one of the guest bedrooms and drop a kiss onto her forehead. "Sleep tight, sweet girl." I pull the door closed most of the way, allowing a sliver of light

through so she doesn't wake up in complete darkness, if she stirs at all.

I hear the refrigerator door open and close in the kitchen. Jesus, I'm not a drinker, but I could really use some vodka right about now.

The front door is still unlocked so I flip the deadbolt as I pass, ready to join Duke. "I hope you poured me a glass of whatever you're having."

The lone figure sitting on the counter stool swivels around holding up a shot glass filled with clear liquid. He narrows his beady eyes at me, a menacing glare icing my insides. "I'm gonna guess that you're wishing for a bottle of it right about now. Am I right?"

Holy fuck. I know those eyes. I've seen them before, shivered under their lecherous leer. And that gruff voice...I've heard it, felt it slither over my skin like a snake. The hairs along the back of my neck prickle at the memory.

Holy crap, it's him. The man from Nico's club. The one who propositioned me that night. The one whose face is burned into my memory. But how did he—?

I clutch my stomach, realization smacking me square in the face.

Oh my God...no, please, no!

"You're putting it all together now. Good. I knew you weren't a real brunette." He gulps down the contents of the glass, hurls it at a wall, and hops off the stool. Shards of glass fly into the air, shattering on the ceramic tile floor, but he just steps around them, creeping closer toward me. My feet feel like they're weighted down with cement blocks, and as much as I plead with them, they refuse to move.

He's dressed head to toe in black, his heavy work boots thumping along the polished

hardwood floor as he walks in my direction. He leans close and sniffs. “You smell good. I knew you would.”

Breaths come fast and furious, my heart galloping faster than a thoroughbred.

Need to get away. Need to protect Lily!

Out of the corner of my eye, I see my handbag laying at the foot of the stairs where I’d dropped it before heading upstairs. My gun is inside of it. Locked. Loaded. Ready for this moment. It’s what I’ve been practicing for, what I always knew would come. I glance at his fists—huge, torn-up, bandaged, and bloody. “Where’s Duke?”

Luca laughs, the sinister sound curdling my blood. “Oh, he didn’t make it through that last traffic light. I doubt he’ll make it through another one again.” He leans closer, his smile fading. “And I’m sure of that because I took care of it myself. You know how it is. If you want something done right, do it your fucking self. That asshole who hit Salesi earlier...I knew he’d fuck it up. But it doesn’t matter. Took the old man out of commission, and that’s what I needed.”

My gaze flickers toward the upstairs bedroom. The door is still cracked open, but at any second, Lily might wander down here. I can’t let that happen. I can’t let him hurt her. I can’t let him hurt anyone else.

Luca circles me like he’s a starving lion and I’m a raw steak. My chest tightens, the smell of vodka making my stomach roll. “So, tell me, do you think your pussy of a boyfriend is gonna know what hit him when he shows up here and sees me fucking his girl? Because that’s exactly what’s gonna happen.” He fists my shirt and forces me backward into the first-floor bedroom, shoving me onto the bed.

I pop up to a seated position as soon as my back hits the mattress and elbow him in the jaw before rolling out from under him. “Fuck you, asshole!” I leap off the bed and

reach out to grab a lamp from the nightstand.

Too fucking slow.

He fists my hair and yanks me backward, making me yelp. “Oh, no, you don’t.” One fat fist closes around my throat, slowly crushing my windpipe. He lifts my flailing body, my toes now barely grazing the floor. White spots dance in front of my eyes as I struggle for oxygen. “Don’t be stupid, sweetheart,” he hisses. “It’ll be much more enjoyable for both of us if you’re alive.”

He loosens his grip, dropping me on the bed, and I grab my throat, gasping and choking on the air I suck into my lungs. His demonic face hovers over me, his eyes narrowed. He leans closer, dragging his fingertips down the side of my face, an incredulous look shadowing his features. “You look just like her, just like my Lia. When I saw you that night at the club, I knew it couldn’t be, but fuck...” His gaze becomes trance-like, like he’s possessed by something...someone...who the fuck cares what. It’s my chance to get away, to get to my bag, to get to my gun.

His broad chest presses against me, pinning my arms against the mattress, still studying, still questioning, still in another world. “But she’s gone.” His voice is menacing. “Murdered, because of—”

I swallow hard, his breath heavy on my cheeks. I don’t think. I don’t plan. I don’t even pray.

I just act.

Leaning forward, I open my mouth, my teeth slicing into his cheek, tearing through flesh and skin. The taste of metal fills my mouth, making me gag, but I bite down harder until his screams pierce the air around us and he recoils, falling backward against the tall dresser.

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A creaking sound jolts me. The stairs...shit!

“Shaye, what’s that noise?”

I gasp and jump off the bed and stumble over the corner of an area rug, slipping across the floor in my haste to get the fuck away from the psychopath struggling to his feet behind me.

“Lily!” I yell. “Get back upstairs and lock that door! Don’t come down here!” A firm hand grips my ankle, yanking me backward, but I grab onto the door handle for leverage, kicking at the bloody hole in his face with my free foot.

A loud roar that sounds more like it came from the lungs of a jungle predator than a man shakes the walls. Milliseconds are all I have before his beefy hands close around my neck again, and this time, I’m not so sure he’s going to care whether or not I’m alive when he fucks me.

The sound of screeching tires registers somewhere in the depths of my mind, but my window is about to slam shut. I slide across the floor, pulling my bag with me.

Thump, thump, thump!

“You fucking whore!” he yells, stomping into the foyer, reaching out to grab me by the neck again. I fumble around inside the bag, my fingers closing on the cold metal. Sobs explode out of my throat as I roll onto my back and point the gun at the evil monster staring down at me. “Die, you motherfucker!”

I pull the trigger, but my eyes are too blurred with tears, my hand trembling with an uncontrollable force. I fucking missed! All of those months of target practice, and I missed! He reaches down and pulls me up by the shirt, slamming me against the wall. Hard. So hard that my brain shudders inside of my skull. My hands fly up to my constricted neck, the gun clattering to the floor. I kick my feet against his shins and squeak out some imperceptible sounds, trying like hell to pry his fingers away from my neck as I gasp, flail, and pray for mercy.

Nico...Nico...please save me...

The front door slams open and Nico barrels in, my unspoken prayer answered, yanking Luca away from me. My body hits the floor, cold and limp. Lifeless.

I need to move. I need to help him. I need to do something before...before...

But the tingling sensation in my arms and legs is replaced by an all-consuming numbness that seeps into every cell of my body, draining me of any and all remaining energy. My vision is hazy, but I can see blood. So much blood.

He saved me.

But I don't think anyone can save him.

* * *

NICO

Luca twistshis hulking body toward me, blood gushing down the side of his face, pure malice in his demonic eyes. A slow smile lifts his lips as he takes a few steps toward me. My fingers twitch to grab my gun, but in my haste to get inside the house, I left it in the car. I glance quickly around the foyer to see if there are any potential

weapons close enough to grab. Where the fuck is Max's baseball bat when I need it?

"Salesi," he grunts, closing the distance between us. "You finally found your balls. I was afraid you'd lost them for good, that I'd never get a crack at you because you were too much of a pansy ass to show your face."

With a hammering heart, I look past Luca to see Shaye lying motionless on the floor where he'd dropped her. Her limbs are twisted, eyes closed, neck bruised and covered with welts. Rage courses through me as my eyes return to his twisted grimace.

"Don't worry. She ain't dead. She'll wake up soon, hopefully in time to see me fuck your shit up. Maybe I'll make her suck my cock before I kill you. Give you a good show as a parting gift. It'll be a nice memory to take to the afterlife. Something to haunt you for fucking eternity."

He lunges for me, and I duck around him, grabbing a brass candlestick holder from the entryway table. I launch my arm back and swing it to the side of his head, but he slips away before it crashes into his skull. Motherfucker!

"Come on, bitch. That's all you've got? I'm gonna tear your fucking ass apart with my bare hands, Salesi. I don't need a weapon. Remember your pal from the club? The guy whose throat I punched a hole through? You know what I'm capable of, so don't fucking bother." He leans closer, his breath hot against my face. "You can't escape me anymore. Nobody can save you."

I throw my weight against him, pushing him back against the wall, framed pictures crashing to the floor from the force of impact.

"Nico?" I look up for a split second to see Lily's tearful face peeking out of one of the upstairs bedrooms.

“Go back inside and lock that d—!”

A piercing shriek erupts as my body flies backward, airborne for long enough that I know the landing will be fucking hell. Sharp pain slices through my jaw, but it's nothing compared to the crushing agony of cracked ribs and mangled limbs. I lay in a corner like a rag doll, hunched over, trying to catch my breath, thanking God I can still feel my fingers and toes after being flung across my front hall. This guy doesn't need a gun, but I fucking do. Panic settles into my shattered body. How the fuck am I going to battle this lunatic? There isn't time to get to the gun safe, and if I can even manage to grab a knife from the kitchen, he'll grab it and fillet my ass before I have a chance to use it.

I'm out of my fucking league here, but I have two people to protect. I take a deep breath as he kneels in front of me. “That was quick. I expected a little more from you. Now get up so I can knock you down again.” He fists my hair, yanking my head back. “I want you to feel real pain. You think this is it, but it's not even close. And it won't be quick, either. I wanna enjoy every goddamned second of it, so I'm gonna work nice and slow on both of you.” He nods his head back at Shaye, whose body stirs on the floor. Her eyes flutter open and then close again. “I want you to watch me fuck your girlfriend, Salesi. I want you to see me fill her with my hot cum. And then I want you to watch me kill her. You need to feel that loss, asshole. It's what I've waited five years to do to you. Pain! Like you've never fucking felt before! You're the reason I'm here right now, you're the reason she's gonna die!”

“You're not gonna fucking touch her, you bastard!” I gather every sliver of strength in my bruised and broken body and shove him backward, cringing in pain. Adrenaline rushes to the surface, arming me with power I never thought I had. He tumbles back, caught off-balance, and I jump on top of him, pounding at his open facial wound, the only thing I can think of that might slow him down and give me a chance to get us the hell out of this alive.

Left, right, left, right. My fists are flying, and he laughs like the fucking psychopath he is. “Does it feel good? Do you feel like more of a man? You’re tickling me, jackass.” He shoots upward and pushes against my chest with his two huge hands. I groan and fall backward, the candlestick holder on the floor next to me. He grins, still taunting me. “Go ahead. Grab it. Take another shot.” He points at his face. “Come on, ya pussy! Right there! Hit me! Show me you’re a real fucking man, not some jealous asshole who needs to steal shit away from people to feel better about himself!”

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He grips the collar of my shirt and pulls me up, pinning me against the wall. He says nothing. He doesn't need to.

People use the term "death glare" all the time. I doubt they've ever seen one up close and personal.

And I have no fucking gun, so Luca looking at me like this shows that he's confident in how this struggle will end.

I push against him, wiggling out of his grip only because he let me. I'm not stupid. This guy is almost guaranteed to be doped up on Christ only knows what, and when, not if, he wants to kill me using his bare hands, he will. In his own time.

It's his MO.

Where the fuck are Rocco and Max? They were right behind me. I'd raced over here, expecting to find Duke with the girls, not shot dead around the corner from my house. I can only pray nobody got to the others.

But it still doesn't buy me enough time.

I straighten up as much as possible, a loud groan rumbling in my throat. But I swallow it down. I take a few deep breaths and lunge forward to bury that asshole's smile into his skull. I land the punch, hearing the satisfying crack before my arm immediately recoils, a shattering pain exploding up my arm.

Thank fuck I'm ambidextrous.

I twist to my other side, clench my other fist tight, and launch it at his chest with as much power as I can channel. Jesus, it's like fucking steel. I grit my teeth. I'm so screwed.

Those are the last words I remember thinking before a massive fist flies at my face. I didn't even see it coming since I was trying to figure out how to save my girls without the use of two hands.

That concern was beaten out of me pretty fast, and I'm pretty sure it was joined by a couple of teeth. I crash-land against a table, the sharp corner jutting into my spine. I wipe away the blood streaming from the sides of my mouth, and with labored breaths, I straighten up as best I can to protect what's left of my mangled body.

Luca creeps toward me again. "You having fun yet? I sure as fuck am and cannot wait to pump my cock in your lady's tight pussy!" He swings another fist, but this time I'm prepared, my fingers closed around a weirdly shaped vase I battled my decorator on years ago when I bought this house...she said it added character, I said it looked stupid. In the end, she won because she's a woman and gave me a blow job since this place was her big calling card.

I've never been happier to see that vase than in this moment.

I slip away from the punch, which promised to be brain-shattering, and swing the vase at the side of Luca's head. He doesn't flinch. Fuck me, it's lead crystal, and the guy doesn't even blink. He just laughs. Motherfucker.

His eyes spit venom and reek of insanity, and that was my only shot to knock him off balance so I could get to my guns.

I blink fast, my head darting left and right, but there's nothing here to grab...nobody to call...no fucking way out of this.

Lily's cries pierce the air from her hiding spot in a corner of the upstairs hallway, and my gut clenches. What the fuck will he do to her once he's finished with me?

Who the hell is going to save them both?

Luca's face twists into a menacing grimace. "I can see the wheels turning. Trust me, you don't wanna waste the energy." He flexes his fingers as he inches toward me. "And it's gonna be a long night. I'm having fun watching you suffer. But that ain't nothing compared to what's gonna happen when that girlfriend of yours wakes up. I'm gonna shove my cock in her mouth while you bleed out next to us, you son of a—"

Crack!

A glass-shattering explosion makes me flinch. Luca's body buckles, back arching as the bullet tears through his spine. But he doesn't fall. He doesn't even grit his goddamn teeth. His eyes are wild, his breathing labored—the only indication that he feels the searing bullet now lodged in his body. He turns toward Shaye, lumbering toward her, swinging his fist at her head.

All it takes is one bullet...

Except when you're trying to kill the devil.

* * *

SHAYE

My breaths are short and sharp, hands clammy but steady. I grip the gun tight, pointing it at the man who has overshadowed our future for too fucking long. Luca's eyes are wide, his mouth agape, but still he doesn't fall.

He takes another step toward me, bringing his bloody fingers to his face, a look of disbelief momentarily veiling the rage. There's no exit wound so I know that bullet is lodged somewhere inside of his body. How he's even still walking is a damn miracle.

All of the emotions roiling inside me are not enough to stop me from pulling the trigger again.

"You're not gonna shove your cock anywhere tonight," I hiss. "In fact, the only thing that'll be shoved is your body into a drawer at the fucking morgue, you bastard!"

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He lets out a resounding roar, a frightening predatory sound that reverberates between my temples. “Fucking whore! You’re nothing like her! You’re a—”

Crack! Crack! Crack!

I’m not taking any chances.

Luca collapses to the floor, his body crumpled, torn, and bloody.

Dead. Retribution for all of his sins is finally granted.

His gruesome acts will be judged, his soul forever caught in a fiery hell for eternity.

He took so much from so many. Now he will suffer the same fate.

The gun clatters to the floor, and I crawl around his massive body, salty tears stinging the scrapes and scratches as they stream down my face.

“Nico,” I whisper, reaching out to grasp his hand. “It’s over. He’s dead.”

One of his eyelids float open, the other already swollen shut. His lips are split and bloody, his jaw bruised and shattered. And that’s only what I can see on the outside.

“You did it,” he rasps, wincing as he shifts himself on the floor. “I thought you were...fuck, I don’t even want to say it.”

Lily’s screams get louder and louder as she scrambles down the stairs and collapses

on the floor next to her brother. He struggles to a sitting position, lifting his arm and draping it over Lily's shoulders, his face twisted into an agonizing mask of anguish.

"Try not to move. You're pretty mangled, babe. We need to get you to the hospital."

"I don't care. I need to keep my girls close," he chokes, holding out his hand to me.

I lace my fingers with his and bring it to my lips.

I didn't think anyone could save him.

But I was so very wrong.

I did it.

I saved him.

And he saved me back.