



Screwing the Mob (Mob Lust 1)

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Category: Romance, Crime And Mafia, Action, Suspense

Description: Death? Yeah, she's worth that risk.

Shaye

He never cared about me. He never would. He was always on the take, but this time he took too much. I betrayed my family tonight. I lost my virginity tonight. I was ready to give up this whole life tonight. I loved him, and he treated me like I was no better than the dirt on the bottom of his shoe. One thought makes me smile through the hot tears streaming down my face.

I could have him killed.

Nico

Just plain sex. I tried to convince myself that's all it was. Except there was nothing plain about what we did that night. I lied to myself about how I feel, and I lied to her when I told her I wanted her to leave. Now I'm dodging calls from her crazy brother, who, if he found out I'd so much as seen her naked, would wrap his hands around my throat and squeeze until my eyeballs popped out of the sockets.

And yeah, I've seen my best friend do just that for a hell of a lot less.

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Nico

“You have a lot of responsibilities now, Nico, but I know you can handle things for the family. And I’ll be right there next to you, making sure you don’t fuck anything up.”

My chest tightens as the distinctive scent of lilies fills my lungs. Tears spring to my eyes as I force back the sneeze that’s fighting its way out. I look around at the overflowing baskets and standing arrangements that almost outnumber the mourners packed into this massive viewing room. I can barely see the taupe-colored walls, only cascading leaves and countless flowers whose pollen has declared war on my eyes, nose, and throat.

I guess to some it might make me appear more vulnerable...human almost, but I prefer my signature, stoic façade. Nobody has access to the inside. Not anymore. Not since—

I grit my teeth, battling the name bubbling up from a place where it’s long since been buried.

Nobody.

People dressed from head to toe in black are lined up for what seems like miles, spilling out the door of the viewing room, snaked around the corridor, and beyond the entrance to the funeral home.

Grandpa Vito was loved. Feared. Hated.

But above all? Respected.

But those feelings didn't happen overnight. He had earned that respect a long time ago, back when he'd lived in Hoboken with his mother and two older brothers. After his dad died, there wasn't much money to go around, and his older brothers did the best they could to make ends meet and they'd opened a restaurant that became one of the most popular for miles. But that attracted attention from the neighborhood 'boss', Don Cicero, who wanted a piece of their action. Cicero was a greedy, sick bastard, and he'd send out his crew to rape the wives and daughters of any men who refused to pay him a stipend for allowing them to operate in his area. And when Cicero's men came after Grandpa's mother, he'd pretty much massacred the lot of them. Grandpa didn't stop at the henchmen, though. He went after Cicero and made him pay for the first time ever.

The men in the neighborhood pledged their devotion to Grandpa after that, and he started growing his own empire doing favors for people in exchange for their loyalty. Grandpa never wanted his family to be vulnerable to another monster like Cicero, and he knew the only way to protect them was to inspire fear and head up his own organization. He went after the scum of the Earth who tried to claim control of the neighborhood after Cicero's death and killed plenty of motherfuckers who tried to cross him and screw over his people. Nobody fucked with Grandpa after that. People wanted to feel safe, and they knew Grandpa would protect them and their businesses. He'd always been that strong, that resolute — in his convictions, in his words, and in his values. He never strayed from them, and that's always something he preached to me from when I was a little boy.

“Life ain't easy, Nico. You may get scared sometimes, you may not know the right decision to make. But let your inner strength shine through. You can do anything if you believe in yourself. And if you believe in yourself, everyone else will believe in you, too.”

My eyes fall to his face. He lies still in the ornate casket my father picked out, one he would have hated because it was a frivolous expense. He'd have much preferred a pine box, which I told my father. But more importantly, I know he's finally reunited with Grandma Lou. That brings me some peace. Not a hell of a lot, but some.

He was my confidante; I was his right hand and protégé. He taught me so much through the years, put my ass in its place more often than not, and peppered me with more pearls of wisdom than I can count. A stinging sensation assaults my eyes, but I refuse to bring a hand to them. I don't want anyone to mistake this reaction for sadness. Goddamn pollen. I should have taken a Claritin.

I've allowed myself weak moments and now they're bottled up, buried down deep. I have to be strong, even though the sadness and loss is eating me alive a little more each passing day. I still can't believe he's gone. He was sitting right next to me, only a couple of days earlier, playing poker and robbing my dad of every last cent he had after dessert on Christmas night. He'd pounded his chest and complained of heartburn after the massive holiday meal my mother had prepared for us. Then he laughed and pulled my eight-year-old sister Lily, the whoops baby who showed up on the scene sixteen years after me, onto his lap, claiming my mom's cooking was worth every bit of pain.

Then he said goodnight to all of us and left. He drove home by himself. He let himself into his house, silent except for his own breaths. He went to change for bed, preparing for a night of solitary slumber. And he dropped dead of a heart attack when he'd reached the top of the stairs...completely alone.

That's where I found him the next day when I came by to pick him up for his doctor's appointment. That was the one thing he'd allowed me to do for him. He was always horrible at relaying information, so he let me tag along so another pair of ears could hear the doctors' assessments. But drive him home when the roads were icy and the sky was pitch black? Hell no. He craved that independence. It fed his mind strength

as his body grew weaker.

Merry fucking Christmas.

A hand grazes my arm, and the awful scent of funeral flowers is replaced with something equally atrocious. I can't place it, but it makes my stomach roll. I sniff once and twist away from the casket.

Huge tits rub against my suit jacket as Adria Moreno slips in closer, her breath hot on my neck as she whispers her condolences along with some other things that I'm sure have Grandpa cheering from his perch just beyond the Pearly Gates. And thank God my parents have hold of Lily and are mingling, not paying a sliver of attention to Adria's traveling hands in the most inappropriate setting fathomable. Jesus, the woman is relentless. A complete sex addict, no matter the circumstances. If I'd so much as said the word, I could have her bent over in the coat closet right now, pounding her ass up against the trench coats stored inside.

"I've never seen you so devastated, babe." Adria reaches a hand behind me, under my jacket, over my ass where it settles. Thankfully my back is to the wall and not facing the crowd of people milling around the room. "Do you want me to come over later? I can make you feel better."

Angel, her twin sister, sidles up to my other side and whispers in my other ear. "I'm so sorry, sweetie. Tell us what you need. Let us help you through this."

Okay, Grandpa is definitely having a laugh up there. This must be his way of diffusing the situation. He was always a little unorthodox, but this is pretty damn extreme. Standing next to my dead grandfather while getting propositioned for a threesome...it's fucking sick. I needed to chance a peek at the casket to make sure Grandpa wasn't rolling over in his grave...in laughter, that is.

Not that threesomes are not atypical for me. Hell, I've fucked three-quarters of the women in this room, often two at a time. My eyes absently scour the crowd, and I silence a groan. Why am I always searching for her? I had her, and I let her go. So why do I—?

My throat tightens when she walks through the doors. Her blue eyes are filled with tears, her pouty pink lips quivering. But hard as I try to focus on her sun-kissed face, my eyes break free and rake over her tight body.

She's back.

I'd forced her away like the asshole I am, regretting my decision every day since then. It was my way of protecting her, protecting both of us, but at what cost? And now she's here, just like I knew she would be, and I have no fucking idea what to do about it.

I swallow hard, fighting hard against the memory of her lips on mine, but I fail. Miserably. I can still feel her pressed against me, her eager tongue coiling with mine with such hope...hope I effectively shattered. My cock twitches, and I swallow a sigh. Just add it to the list of things I never thought I'd experience under these circumstances. The twins are still hanging all over me, and my gaze tangles with hers for the briefest of moments before she redirects the glare to the girls.

Then I see something that makes me more limp than a strand of overcooked spaghetti. Rocco Lucchese appears from a corner of the room and slides an arm around her narrow waist, dropping a kiss onto her cheek. An icy cold sensation snakes around my heart.

Sonofabitch. He's back, too.

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SHAYE

I manage a smile for Rocco Lucchese. Barely. It's not because I'm not happy to see him, though I would have preferred it being under different circumstances. It's because of the sight which is currently shredding my insides, at least what's left of them. My vision is blurry from the tears, but unfortunately for me, not blurry enough.

Those whorey bitches pawing at Nico Salesi like he's the sizzling steak to their voracious sexual appetites. Have they no respect? Grandpa Vito is lying in his casket not even a foot away from them, and they can't even keep their disgusting hands to themselves long enough to drop to their knees and say a quick prayer for his soul? They'd rather drop to their knees for other reasons, regardless of the circumstances for why we are all here.

"You look amazing," Rocco murmurs, his lips curling into a smile. "How was the holiday?"

I nod because there's a sob inconveniently caught in my throat and if I try to utter a word, I'm afraid it will explode out of me. I adored Grandpa, yes, and I've cried a boatload of tears for the man who'd adopted me as his own granddaughter when my own passed away years ago. But this particular sob is reserved for the asshole directly to Grandpa's left. And said asshole doesn't deserve one single tear more from me, a fact my annihilated heart can attest to.

Rocco leans in for a hug, taking my silence for sorrow. He's right, he just doesn't know who it's reserved for. I try to tear my eyes away from the Moreno twins. What in the hell are they even groping for? I can't even see their fucking hands anymore!

Bile rises in my throat, and nausea crashes over me.

Nico is not mine. He never was, a fact he'd made perfectly clear when I left for Florida months ago. Something that he'd confirmed with his non-response to my texts and emails. Even after that night...the night I'd felt certain he was going to tell me he loved me, the night I was sure he'd beg me not to leave.

I didn't want to go to Miami for college. It was more my parents' choice than anything. They wanted me to get out of New Jersey and away from the dangers associated with being part of the biggest crime family on the East Coast. But I was willing to accept the risks of staying put, especially because I'd be close to Nico.

And even though they'd never admitted to it, my parents saw right through my bullshit excuses for why I should stay in Jersey, and that made them even more determined to ship me off to Florida.

Nico is dangerous, and they didn't want me anywhere near him.

But it's hard to flip a switch and expect that feelings you've had for the better part of your life will just vacate your heart for good. I couldn't do it, and I clung to every moment we'd had before I left to begin my freshman year, hoping and praying he'd tell me he loved me, too.

He didn't. Instead, he took me to dinner at my favorite pizzeria, brought me to his house, surprised me with rainbow cookies from Amici's Bakery, and kissed me like I was the last woman on Earth. Then, he decimated my dreams for our future and told me he couldn't be what I needed. What I deserved.

God, I am such an idiot.

I should hate him.

But I don't. I can't. I don't have a single memory of my childhood without him in it. Our fathers were closer than brothers, and just as they'd grown up together, their children did the same. Max, Nico, and I had been inseparable, even though I was six years younger than them. Every birthday party, vacation, barbecue, beach day...Nico and his family were there for all of it, until things fell apart a couple of years ago. I still don't know the reason for the grudge, but our parents no longer talk. Hell, they barely acknowledge each other in public, and I know they are only here out of respect for Grandpa and not for Nico's parents. It's a far cry from the powerful alliance the Salesis and the Orianis had maintained for so many years. And even our moms, who are all too familiar with putting on a happy face for the masses, barely exchange a glance when they're in the same room together. But regardless of the bad blood between them and Nico's parents, my parents had always been loyal to Grandpa Vito. He just had that effect on people. He was a tough old man, but he had such a good heart. Until it gave out on him. And it kills me that all of this ugliness kept me away from him before he died. I should have made a visit, I should have called.

I should have done a lot of things.

He'd died alone, and I'll carry that thought with me until my dying day.

"Lucchese." I look up just in time to witness the ugly grimace plastered on my older brother Max's face. He wedges himself between us, forcing Rocco to back away. "You sure didn't waste any time hauling ass back here. Vito isn't even in the ground yet, for fuck's sake."

Rocco shrugs. "I came to pay my respects."

Max lets out a snort. "Respect. That's an interesting word choice for you. How did you not choke on that one?"

"I have a lot of ideas involving choking, Oriani. Wanna see some of them in action?"

Rocco clenches his fists, stepping in closer toward Max.

“Hey, stop it!” I hiss, pushing them apart. “It’s a funeral, for Christ’s sake. Remember where you are.”

Rocco smirks. “Not like the old man can banish me again.”

“No, but it doesn’t mean somebody ain’t gonna plug you on his behalf.” Max glowers at Rocco over my head. “Why don’t you take a fucking walk, asshole?”

Rocco looks around the room and catches a disapproving glare from his father Santino. He squeezes my shoulder, not bothering to make eye contact with Max again. “It was good to see you, Shaye. Let’s catch up before you go back to school next month.”

Max stiffens next to me but doesn’t comment.

Rocco returns to his corner, and I roll my eyes at Max. “Max, you can calm down,” I murmur, giving Rocco a little wave. “He was just saying hi. I don’t get in the middle of your issues, so stay out of mine, please.”

“I think they can be classified as more than just ‘my issues’. And as my sister, I’d think you would want to show loyalty to your fucking family over that dickhead.”

“You know my loyalty is with you. I just think that it’s time to let go. Bygones being bygones and all.”

“Jesus Christ. What the hell kind of shit are they teaching you down there? Since when are you so forgiving?”

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“I’m just saying he did his time.”

“I bet Grandpa would have a very different view.”

“Well, it’s not up to Grandpa anymore. Nico’s dad allowed Rocco to come back. It was his call.”

“It was a bad fucking call. The guy is a thief and a liar. He sees something he wants and then takes it without thinking about anyone else.” He rubs the back of his neck, his eyes darting around the room.

“Max, I know you’re still pissed off at him, but I really think you need to focus on the future now. Forget the past. It’s over.”

He narrows his eyes at me. “That jackass crushed my gambling business. He saw all the money I was making working with deVincenzo and decided he wanted to become a bookie, too. Then he went after our clients. If it wasn’t for that bastard, I’d still be collecting shit tons of cash every week. Instead, I’m stuck being Nico’s peon.”

“Nico helped you get back on your feet after everything happened.” My eyes flit back toward Nico and his harem, and a pang stabbed my heart like an ice pick.

“Yeah, great.” He rolls his eyes. “Did you see where Mom and Dad went?”

I shake my head, but I knew they’d been swallowed up by the crowd as soon as we walked into the funeral home. Always presenting a united front even in the face of despair.

“Rocco’s a scumbag,” Max seethes as he pulls me to the front of the viewing room, closer to the very person I don’t want to be near with every step we take. “I don’t want you around him.”

I sigh. “You say that about every guy.”

“That’s because guys are all the same.”

“That include you? Be careful of throwing stones and all. Besides, I think you forget I’m in college now. And I’m more than capable of handling myself.”

“I know. And when one of those jackoffs steps outta line, don’t worry, I’ll show up with my trusty bat.”

“Is it any wonder why I ended up at the University of Miami?”

He turns to me and winks. “You’re just a flight away. I can hop on a plane and beat the shit out of any one of those tools within three hours of leaving my house if I need to.”

“You’re impossible.”

“I’m just trying to protect you.”

“That’s what you all say. I’m a big girl.” Chills slither down my spine when I realize how close we are now to Nico and his harem. I wipe my clammy palms on my skirt. I don’t want to go up to him. My eyes zip around in every possible direction but his as we approach the casket from the right. Breaths come fast and furious, and my heart thuds harder and harder with each step. I’m so focused on the flowers that I slam right into Max’s back when he stops short to grasp the hand of Joe Salesi, Nico’s dad.

I gasp and jump back, now directly in Nico's line of sight. And his deep, dark eyes sear through me, slicing away my anger and exposing what's been festering for so long. I can't break the spell; no matter how hard I try to yank back my heart, his grip is too powerful. Just like his gaze, the one that has me rooted to the spot, making everything around me fade to white noise. I can't breathe, I can't think, I can't speak. I can only feel. And it hurts like a motherfucker. Rejection. Loss. A broken heart. Just a few things I've been battling while navigating my new life in south Florida.

But four months later, I'm still caught in the past.

I swallow past the lump in my throat and turn to Joe, breaking the connection, both physical and emotional, that sizzles between us. "I'm so sorry about Grandpa."

He pulls me into his arms for a quick hug, thanking me for making the visit. "You know how much he loved you, Shaye. He would always reminisce about your marathon games of Scrabble and say how much he missed them once you left."

"I loved him, too. And he was a good contender." I manage a watery smile and swipe at a stray tear. "But you know he's happy with Grandma Lou now."

Joe nods. His face is stoic, but his eyes are vacant. Not something I'd expect from him. He is always on his game, no matter what the circumstances. The whole thing about people sensing weakness and all that. I'd expect nothing different now since he's just taken control over the family in the wake of his father's death. But I guess sometimes you just need to let it go and let the sorrow overtake, if only for a little while. We all need time to grieve. "I know. Thank you again for being here."

"If you need any help with Lily while I'm home, just let me know. I don't have any big plans, and I bet she can use some cheering up."

Joe smiles and squeezes my hand. "I'd appreciate that. She'd love to see you."

I take that as my cue to move toward the coffin, but not before I toss a quick glance over my shoulder to confirm there are not two, but four bimbos crawling all over Nico's black Armani suit. I grit my teeth, carefully kneel before Grandpa and pray not only for his soul, but for the soul of his only grandson. It appears he needs it right now more than ever with the flock surrounding him, not even able to control themselves long enough to let Grandpa's body turn cold.

But really, is it that surprising? Hadn't I always known he'd have never chosen love over his livelihood? If it's one thing I've learned over the years, it's that Nico Salesi doesn't make rash decisions. He's probably the most calculating person I know, and he evaluates all of the risks before taking action. It's one of the reasons why he and Max connect so well and have maintained their friendship despite our family's feud. Max is the exact opposite of Nico, and somehow they balance each other out. My hotheaded brother could probably use a little more of that balance, but hey, hope springs eternal.

For some people, anyway.

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When I stand up from the prayer bench, I catch a glimpse of my parents shaking Joe's hand on my right. No words are exchanged, none have been for longer than I can recall, but they're here and that's the most important thing. I turn to my left and see Max whisper something in Nico's ear. Nico nods, but keeps his gaze locked on me. It's like we're the only people in the room, standing in our own little bubble, preserving the fantasy I foolishly believed could become a reality until he unceremoniously popped it and destroyed my dreams.

I square my shoulders and walk toward him, four pairs of heavily made-up eyes dissecting every inch of me as I approach. Max is already heading out the door, leaving me on my own to handle this situation, a situation he obviously knows nothing about since Nico is still very much alive and breathing. Had Max suspected a thing, Nico would have most definitely been another casualty in the world we live in.

I have to make a choice. Right this second.

I made the wrong one before, and I don't want to repeat my mistake.

But as broken as my heart is, I want it — no, I need it — to become whole again.

Only one person can stitch it back together.

And he's standing right in front of me, the smell of wanton sex and pheromones assaulting my senses...and I honestly don't know if that smell is coming from those harlots or from me.

So I ignore every feeling that I have right now and walk right past him without so

much as a nod.

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Nico

“Did you catch that dickhead Lucchese pawing at my sister last night?” Max grunts and tosses a football into the air while reclining in a plush leather chair in front of my desk. “Fucking guy has some nerve.”

Did I see it? Maybe the more apropos question would be have I been able to think of anything but that dickhead pawing at her? I clench my fist tight around the bottle of Vitamin Water, denting the plastic. “Don’t worry about him. He’s just trying to flex his muscles now that he’s back from California.”

“Yeah, why the hell is he back here again? I thought he was gone for good when your grandfather banished him from northern Jersey.”

So did everyone else in the family. But my father has other plans and ordered him back here. It doesn’t make Alfonse deVincenzo — the bookie he robbed a quarter of a million dollars in bets from — happy. And it sure as hell doesn’t make Max happy, since he was angling to become deVincenzo’s business partner and lost hundreds of thousands right along with Alfonse all because of Rocco. Max is also the one who blew the whistle on Rocco, who had been operating as a bookie without getting the necessary permission from Grandpa. Rats are rats regardless of the good that came from it, and Max’s reputation went spiraling down the toilet after that. Once a rat, always a rat. “I’m sure Dad has his reasons. Don’t worry about him.”

“Worry? Give me a break. He’s the one who should be worried. deVincenzo has been foaming at the mouth, waiting for an opportunity to sink his claws into that douchebag. And you already know how I feel.”

“If deVincenzo knows what’s good for him, he’ll just let it go. Same goes for you. Grandpa punished him, and now my dad claims the debt is cleared.”

“It’s a bunch of bullshit. He’s a fucking two-faced thief who’d cut his own grandmother’s neck for a nickel.”

“You do realize his grandmother died last year.”

“Fine. You know what the hell I’m talking about, man. He’d do it if she were still alive.”

“Max, you have to let this shit go. Just forget it. He’s a thief, but you’re a snitch according to the rest of the family, which is just as bad. Rocco served his time, and now he needs to start over with a hell of a lot of suspicious eyes on him. It won’t be easy for him to rehabilitate his rep. But you’ve had opportunities while he’s been dicking around in California. The job here at the club can be a real stepping stone for you, but only if you don’t let yourself get sucked back into the past.”

“I still didn’t like the way he looked at my sister. I’d fucking kill any of the guys if they laid a finger on her,” Max grumbles, his tirade against Rocco silenced only for the few seconds it takes him to gulp the remaining Blue Moon from his glass.

And what would he do if he knew his best friend had laid more than just a finger on his baby sister? Underboss or not, mine is the throat he’d be cutting. So I snoozed on the most important decision of my life, making it open season for guys like Lucchese who think a fat wallet is the only thing that will make Shaye Oriani happy.

It isn’t. I knew what would make her happy. I just couldn’t give it to her.

“I think they know that.”

“She’s home for the next few weeks. Maybe I should make an example out of Lucchese so the other assholes know I mean business. I don’t want any of them getting any ideas about her.”

“She’s a big girl. I don’t think she’d appreciate you putting Rocco in the hospital for comforting her at the funeral.” I look around my office...it’s large, sleek, and occupies its own floor of Culaccino, the “nightclub” that I singlehandedly opened and turned into the hottest spot in downtown Manhattan. Sex, drugs, top-shelf booze — we can get it all. The Salesi family runs the biggest gambling and prostitution rings in the country, and those businesses have made us very rich. But we don’t play in the drug ring. Breaking into that business is what caused the fallout between us and the Orianis in the first place, and it was decided a long time ago that it would never be one of our primary money-makers. But even though drugs aren’t a primary focus, we can get our patrons anything they desire because of our connections, for a price, of course.

I’ve spent the better part of the past three years making this club famous — or infamous — for Hollywood elite, politicians, musicians...if you’re an A-lister, you’ve either heard of my club or been here for one of the many VIP events we host, especially during awards season. I’m damn proud of what I’ve done here, and I know Grandpa felt the same way. I’ve never been an enforcer. My skills lie on the business side, and they’ve made me a hell of a lot of cash.

But recently, my success has only shone light on the things I’ve had to give up along the way...namely, Shaye Oriani.

Because this isn’t a life for her. It’s not a life for us. And as much as I’d love to give it all up and walk away, I can’t. Too many people depend on me, and too many people have invested in my vision. There are expectations, ones you just can’t escape from, especially if you’re Joe Salesi’s son. And now that Grandpa is gone, there are a lot of rumblings among the families. People are trying to grasp whatever slivers of

control they can, and that includes Tony Oriani, Max and Shaye's dad. Grandpa was the glue that held our organization together. He had proven himself to his allies and made them plenty of money over the years because he knew people, knew what they wanted, and most of all, knew how to deliver. He also knew how to negotiate for the best possible outcome. Now everyone is trying to build their own empires, to see who can rise the fastest and grab the available reins so they can keep the cash flowing. But they will never be Grandpa. Never in a million years be able to fill his shoes.

My dad was never one to control the masses. He always preferred to stay in the background, letting Grandpa exert his will. Truth be told, I don't even know if he really wanted this life or if he just allowed himself to get sucked in.

Like I did.

But now he's front and center, like it or not. He has decisions to make and alliances to build...quickly. Tony Oriani is a problem — he always has been with his big ideas and equally big ass mouth. Dad knows he needs to work fast and smart to hold him at bay before he does something that will throw the whole organization into upheaval. Hell, he's the reason for the feud between our families. Tony had the bright idea to partner with one of the New York families to run drugs, and he laid the plans in motion before letting Grandpa Vito in on the details. That didn't go over well—with him or my dad. And the head of that New York family, Frank Cappodamo, was not happy when the deal crumbled. He lost plenty, as did Oriani.

Oriani was always a power-hungry bastard, and he's carried a grudge against my dad ever since, just waiting for the chance to get out from under his thumb and take over. Maybe he thinks that time has finally come.

But neither he nor Max knows that we have a supplier, one who is in direct competition with Cappodamo and wants nothing more than to decimate his business. Because the Russian bratva has nothing to lose and everything to gain if Cap is taken

out.

“If Rocco shows up here, I’m going to take him outside and shove a baseball bat so far down his throat that it’s gonna come out his ass.” Max picks up a second bottle from my desk and takes a long swig.

Grandpa always liked Tony, and never took sides when he and Dad had their falling out. It’s always business, never personal, he’d say. I agreed, and since Max is my best friend, I wanted to help him out. Nobody wanted the liability of having such a hothead involved with their businesses after that whole thing with deVincenzo, so I gave him a job. I figured, just like everyone else did, if he was affiliated with me and a successful business, doors would open up for him.

But they’re still slammed shut.

Grandpa even tried to give Max jobs to get him exposure to the other family heads, but everyone knew his reputation and how dangerous it would be to have him on the inside, especially after he’d snitched and gotten Rocco banished to California as punishment for his deceit. So now I’m stuck. And Max has given me more fucking headaches than I care to think about. Fucking the staff, knocking a couple of them up, beating the crap out of patrons for so much as looking at him cross-eyed...it’s a miracle I still have a business.

“Are you still pissed off about him and Sloane? You’ve been hot on her this whole time. Is that your problem?”

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Max's shoulders square and he turns his head toward me. I smirk at the fire in his narrowed eyes, something only a best friend could do, especially since the baseball bat he was just referencing is sitting on the floor at his feet. "You don't know what you're talking about."

But I do. I know Max was pissed off about his lost business, but I also knew he'd had a thing for Sloane, who also happens to be Shaye's best friend. He didn't want the competition making a play for Sloane, and I knew that she was also one of the reasons he ratted out Rocco. Sometimes I think Max just wanted an excuse to get him out of the picture, not that he needed one since it was pretty damn obvious she was interested in Max and not his nemesis.

"Yeah, well if you didn't want her to screw him way back when, you should have told her how you felt. You've been carrying this torch for years." Look at me, the irony of doling out relationship advice. As if I've got a fucking leg to stand on.

He shrugs. "I don't care that he nailed her. It happened a long time ago. Besides, we...I mean, she's busy with school and I have my own shit to deal with. You know how things go."

"Bullshit. Something happened between you guys at Thanksgiving when she was home. Don't think I didn't notice." He can deny it all he wants, but Max can't handle being taken down a few pegs. It all goes back to that whole perception of weakness. Just act like you don't care even when you do, and nobody will be the wiser. But I can see the truth even if he can't admit it.

When the regret eats away at your insides and chews up your heart until it's shredded

like the dreams you've long given up...it's hard to act like you don't care. I know. I tried four months ago, and I tried again last night.

It still hurts, no matter what I do, how hard I work, how many women I screw as an escape from my reality. It never helped. It never erased the memory of Shaye's lips on mine. It never replaced the insane fantasy that we could have a normal future together. I drank, I fucked, I snorted. It didn't help. Nothing eased the pain. Nothing filled the void. Nothing soothed my soul. She was my balm and I had to walk away from her.

And I know Max suffers from the same affliction even though he refuses to admit it. Sometimes it's just better to suffer in silence. Shit, we've all got our own crosses to bear and we play with the hands we've been dealt. I've got a Mercedes SK550 parked outside, a Rolex on my wrist, a boat off the coast of Miami, and two houses filled with enough toys to start my own film production company. I know I've got a good life.

But it's always missing something...the one thing I can never have because the price is just too high to pay.

Max drums his fingertips on the black lacquered desk and snickers. "It doesn't matter. I'm over it. Don't worry, I promise not to have the cops breathing all over you when Lucchesi ends up at the bottom of the East River."

I cock an eyebrow. "You already have the drop point set, huh?"

Max winks at me. "You know I'm a planner."

"Stop acting like a deranged lunatic and tell me about the delivery." I rub the back of my neck and let out a deep sigh. I got next to no sleep last night, and I really want to head home for a few hours before tonight's star-studded event kicks off. I can't leave

Max on his own for too long or shit will go sideways fast. Sometimes, it would be nice to have a business associate on staff who wouldn't beat the ever-loving fuck out of a patron or two in a wild fit of rage over something as ridiculous as failing to acknowledge the great Maximo Oriani.

But then again, my best friend isn't known for his even temper. He's known for landing guys in the hospital for even looking at the female company he keeps. Once, he pummeled some moron with a tire iron because he asked Max's date for a lighter. And I know for a fact that smoking wasn't anything the guy thought about for months after they reconstructed his bashed-in face.

"They sent everything they were supposed to..." Max's voice trails off and his expression hardens.

"But?" I can see there's a but coming. There always is.

"But they wouldn't give me any of the paperwork. Said they'd only deal with you." He slams a fist on the desk and drains the rest of his beer. "It's pissing me off, Nico."

I let out a long breath and settle into my ergonomic yet luxe, leather swivel chair. "Max, you know it takes time."

"Yeah, well, I don't have time. I'm tired of being on the outside of everything going on right now. My old man is up my ass to get into some legitimate shit, but nobody's interested."

I say nothing, but a million thoughts race through my mind. Bloody images, brutal confrontations, drunken, gun-wielding threats, too many shots fired, too many bruised egos. Is it any shock that nobody wants him on their turf? Even though the families in our organization band together, everyone has their own separate interests. The Orianis' interests were the Saleseis' interests until Max's hotheaded father tried to

double cross my dad. That dumb fuck had it made. All he needed to do was just keep his damn mouth shut and follow simple instructions. But no. He needed to make the rules. He needed to make his own mark with the drugs. He thought he'd become Cappodamo's golden boy. His plans backfired. And now, Max and Tony are both scrounging. They were safe until Grandpa died. Now they're trying to figure out how to maintain their cushy fucking existence. I did what I could for Max since I need to keep him close anyway. But Tony dug his own grave, and there's no way I'm sticking my neck out for him.

“You need to give it some time. This is a good place for you to be, to meet people, to establish credibility, to learn the ropes. Trust me, when everything blows over, you'll be in high demand.”

“Yeah, but I want my shot now. I don't want to wait. You know how things go. You either get taken out or you stay in one place for too long and then everyone forgets about you.”

“Not if you're involved with Culaccino. Nobody will ever forget about you. Besides, I don't think anyone's going to take you out. You'd already be dead if that were the case.” I say it, knowing full well that Max has pissed off more than enough dangerous people to be six feet under right now. His only saving grace was Grandpa, and now that Grandpa is gone, he's trapped like a rat in a maze. He doesn't know who's rounding the corner, and even with me on his side, I know he's silently panicking. Fuck, I would be, too.

He lets out a loud groan and collapses against the back of his chair. “I'm sorry, man. I know you have enough of your own shit going on. You don't need to deal with mine, too. I'm not the one paying you.”

“Hey, you've just got to trust me. Hang tight for a little while. Tell your dad to get off your ass, that you've got a plan. You don't want to end up on a plane to Sicily, do

you?” I smirk and fire the football back to him after he nails me with it.

“Sometimes...” His head falls into his hand. “Sometimes, I think I’d actually like that. No pressure, the best bread and wine on the fucking planet, hot Italian pussy for days. The life, man.”

The life. Interesting choice of words. It’s the hand we were dealt, and now we need to figure out how to play the cards to win it all.

I watch him for a moment. It’s rare for Max to display humanistic tendencies. He’s usually swinging around a baseball bat, and not in a Babe Ruth kind of way. It’s more like a Goodfellas kind of way.

I stand, the bottom of the chair scraping against the wood floor. “I’m getting out of here for a few hours. I need to crash for a while. I’ll be back before the party starts.”

Max nods and follows me out of the office. I grab my coat from a chair by the door and turn toward him. “Don’t drink all the booze before the guests arrive.”

He salutes me. “I’ll be sure to save them some, don’t worry.”

I click the key remote to start my car, walk into the frigid afternoon air, and pull the collar of my wool coat up. The tiny hairs on the inside of my nose are frozen by the time I pull open the door to my car. I slide into the plush leather seat and pull out my iPhone.

Stupid ass choices. I’ve got a mile-long list myself, so who am I to throw stones?

You have responsibilities, Nico, a lot of responsibilities. Don’t fuck it all up.

I rake a hand through my hair and stab the keyboard, ready to fuck it all up with a few

screen clicks.

Hell, why not just add to my ever-growing list?

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Shaye

Ashiver runs through me despite the blast of heat from the hallway floor vent that toasts my quivering legs. I reach out, my fist about half an inch from the bedroom door, poised to knock. Wait, why? He knows I'm coming. He left the front door unlocked for me. Jesus, I can't even think straight anymore. Memories pop between my ears like bullets. Me sitting on Nico's bed, watching a video on his iPad, Nico's hand skimming my bare arm, Nico's lips on mine, Nico's tongue...

Stop!

What the hell is wrong with me? His grandfather just died, and all I can do is think about that night...the one that never should have happened, the one I continue to dream about, the one I relive every time I close my eyes.

Forget the fact that I hadn't heard from him since.

And that he's my brother's best friend.

And that he has 1-800-Hoebags on speed dial.

Nico Salesi will never be mine, and I've come to terms with that. Kind of.

I'd hoped to accept it once I got to college, but that didn't happen. None of the guys I'd met could hold a candle to Nico. I couldn't find the same pools of the darkest chocolate brown that begged me to drown in them, the ones that sparkled with excitement over the release of a new Marvel superhero movie, ones that deepened

with lust when they gazed at me. And I definitely couldn't find a pair of lips as bitable, ones that tasted like a wide variety of Jolly Rancher flavors, ones I wanted plastered against my own...and then on other areas of my body—

But I did try to get over him. I'd dated plenty of guys. I went to fraternity parties. I pledged a sorority. I drank away the anger and the despair. I'd done just about everything I could think of to erase Nico's memory from my mind. The problem is, my mind wasn't the only thing he'd claimed. He had complete control over my heart and soul and exorcising him from my entire being proved to be more of a challenge than I'd anticipated.

Hence, the reason why I'm standing outside of his bedroom door. He texted me, and here I am.

I grasp the cool brass doorknob in my shaking hand and twist it. The door creaks open, and I squint in the dimly lit room. His bed is in the back corner of the expansive space, and he's sprawled out on his back, tossing a football up and down. He doesn't look up, and that should be my first clue that he doesn't give a flying fuck about me. I clench my fists, trying to control my disappointment.

He never called, never texted, never emailed. Not until today, and of course, I come running the second he asks. I never fail to make the wrong choices. I'm nothing if not consistent.

He doesn't care about anything except his business dealings. He'd never let anything compromise his place in life, least of all me.

It was a kiss. I have to forget about it. It's not why I'm here. I'm here for Grandpa Vito, not for Nico.

Maybe if I keep repeating those bullshit lies, I'll finally convince my heart that

they're true.

I inch toward the bed, my heart thudding against my ribcage. I can feel beads of perspiration pop up along the back of my neck, a typical reaction to his presence. My stomach is twisted like a Bavarian pretzel. Good God, will I ever be able to get over this guy?

And why doesn't he stop throwing the fucking football? He's the one who called me.

Just like that, he makes one final catch and sits up. His eyes aren't sparkling. They're dark, lost, empty. Soulless. The vacant stare makes my chest tighten and I stop, uncertain about my next steps.

He slides off the bed and creeps toward me. His dark hair is tousled, like he's just woken up from a fitful sleep. There are bags under his eyes, and his normally rosy cheeks are all but drained of color.

Tears sting my eyes when his hands grasp my shoulders. "Shaye," he murmurs in his deep, gravelly voice.

"I'm so sorry," I whisper. "He was such a good man, and I feel terrible for you all."

His hands move to my hair, twisting a hot pink tendril of hair around his index finger. "You dyed your hair."

My hand flies to the chunky streaks I'd just had added to the ends of my blonde hair. "Yeah..." I breathe him in, immediately tipsy on the scent of watermelon Jolly Ranchers.

"I like it."

“Thanks,” I whisper.

He nods over to his desk. “He bought that for you for Christmas. It’s the collector’s edition.”

A sob rises in my throat when my eyes fall to the gift, memories of our marathon Scrabble sessions wallpapering my mind. It felt like a lifetime ago, when things were so simple and the biggest dilemma I had was to decide which word would yield me the most points during our cutthroat games. “That man was a gem among men. I love it. I’ll always treasure it.”

“He missed you at Christmas. Made me promise to get it to you before you went back to school.”

“I should have gone to see him. I’ll never forgive myself for not having the chance to say goodbye.”

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“Don’t beat yourself up over it. He wouldn’t want that. And you’re here now.”

“Yeah...” My heart is pounding like a jackhammer, drowning out all sound, and I almost miss his reply. A lump the size of a golf ball has taken up residence in my throat and squeezing out a response is near impossible.

But, as it happens, talk is overrated.

He pulls me close, bending down to press his swollen lips to mine — hot, intense, and hungry for any crumb I’m willing to drop. His strong hands fist my long hair, his kiss deepening with need. I wrap my arms around his tall, muscular frame, melting into his warmth.

My mind is screaming at me to pull away, to stop this craziness. This behavior is so unlike Nico. He never loses control or shows his hand. It’s why he’s such a valuable asset to the family.

He doesn’t really want me.

Or does he?

His fingertips move to my back, pressing into my spine as they travel under my sweater.

My knees buckle and I collapse against him. This is bad...wrong on so many levels. Am I willing to be used? To be his comfort fuck?

His lips scorch a path down my neck and then to my ear, igniting my desire with each nip and tickle of the scruff peppering his face. My panties are already clinging to my body, soaked with a need that only he can satisfy.

Yes, yes, hell, yes!

Holy crap, Max would kill me if he knew where I was right now. Ugh! Stop! He'll never know. Dad will never know. This can work, this can happen. Oh God, I want this to happen...

A heavy, musky scent swirls around my head, intoxicating me and drowning out any shred of sensibility remaining in my very aroused body.

He grips the hem of my sweater and pulls it over my head. It falls to the carpet in a heap, joined by the black miniskirt and tights he peels from my legs. He takes a few steps back, staring at me like a starving lion eyes his prey. Thank God, my bra and panties match. Thank God, I waxed. Thank God—

Reality smacks me like a rubber glove across the face. I'd never be standing here if Grandpa Vito wasn't dead.

That thought has little time to linger before Nico's lips crush against mine. My fingers fumble with his belt buckle as his hot tongue coils around mine, plunging deep, staking its claim. I push his jeans and boxers to the floor and he kicks them off with his feet before lifting me into his strong arms, then tossing me onto the bed. He yanks off his black t-shirt, exposing pecs and abs I've only dreamed about licking. Heat creeps up my neck and into my cheeks, and the same warmth pools between my thighs.

He inches toward me, looping his fingers into the sides of my lace thong and pulls it away from my throbbing pussy. Without breaking his gaze, he reaches around me and

unclasps my bra. It falls to the floor, and I kick it aside, every nerve ending in my body crying out for attention.

The intensity of his stare sends a shudder through me. The swollen head of his cock rubs against my slit, and I let out a tiny gasp. I have no idea what to do next.

I've never even seen a naked guy before, much less been naked with one. I've kissed guys, even let them cop a feel, but that's about it. It's too hard to squeeze my eyes shut and pretend that any of those faceless guys are Nico. It works for a little while, until the truth stops me from going farther.

But I don't say a word. I've been in love with Nico for as long as I can remember, and if I tell him I've never done this before, he might stop. And he needs this. I need this.

Nobody will ever know - not my family, not his family.

He guides me onto the mattress and slides his body against mine, his ripped, hard muscles flexing as he adjusts his weight. His fingers tangle in my hair, his eyes heavy with lust and an even greater sense of loss. For whom, I'm not sure. For losing his grandfather...or for losing me. But there's something deeper; I just can't read it. Maybe I don't want to.

I pull him down to me, aching to take him in, to feel him move inside of me, to finally know what it means to be alive.

This moment won't mean anything to him, but it means everything to me.

He grabs a condom from the bedside table and slides it on, positioning himself at my opening. I swallow hard, my pulse rocketing with each passing second, bracing myself for...Jesus, I have no idea. His hands run up and down the sides of my torso,

my skin tingling under the pads of his determined fingertips. They grip my hips and tilt them upward, giving him leverage. He dips his head down to my abdomen, his lips searing my skin as they move up toward my mouth. Only when his lips connect with mine, does he push into my body, tearing through my innocence, and making me feel whole at the same time.

In that second, he ruined me.

I press my fingers into his back, biting back the scream that threatens to escape my lips. Each initial thrust burns like a motherfucker, until the blissful point where it feels so damned amazing takes over. His strokes are long and deep, and I clench my muscles to pull him in farther. His hand reaches around the small of my back, tilting me upward, giving him full access to everything I have to offer. A tingling sensation rumbles in my core and explodes as his hard cock rockets me into an orbit I've never known existed. I let out a tiny shriek and he silences it with his mouth.

Our bodies are locked together, moving in perfect rhythm, physically connected. But I can still feel the void that consumes him. Even those delicious aftershocks still zipping through my body can't hide the fact that he's not really here with me, not with his heart.

He grips my ass and plunges deeper, faster, and harder — like he just came to the same realization.

His movements almost become mechanical, impaling me with a determination that is going to hurt like hell later, that is, if I can even walk. He finally roars out his own orgasm and collapses on the bed next to me, facing the window. No words are spoken. I lie next to him, confused, exposed, and pretty much devastated. I've given him everything, and he doesn't even have the decency to look me in the eye?

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I did this to myself. I let him fuck me. I knew it wouldn't go anywhere.

Can I really blame him?

I roll over, facing his back. I place my hand on his arm, too uncertain to speak. I gnaw my lower lip, waiting. Minutes pass, and I take that as a cue to slide even closer, resting my body against his. I close my eyes and take a deep, unsteady breath.

“I want you to go.”

My eyes fly open. “You what?”

He shakes off my hand without even turning around. “Go back to your daddy, go back to school, go back to your little bubble of a life. Just go.”

“But we just...I thought you were...”

“I'm not. I can't ever be. Just...leave.” He flips over, his eyes so dark they almost look black. With a glare that can freeze ice, he pushes past me, goes into the bathroom, and slams the door.

Short, sharp gasps make my chest quiver. I dress as quickly as I can, consumed by the overwhelming need to get the hell away from him, from this house, and from the fantasies I'd clung to for years that had just shattered around me like a pane of glass.

Thankfully, he lives alone, and I can escape without explaining why my sweater is on backward and why my tights are wrapped around my neck instead of on my legs. I

choke back the sobs building in my chest until I collapse into the front seat of my car, the absurdity strikes me that I'd left without my gift. I can't take it. It would be too much of a painful reminder of...everything. I sit there in the dark with the heat blasting. Metallica blares from the speakers, a perfect match for my dark mood.

He never cared about me. He never would. He was always on the take, but this time he took too much.

I betrayed my family tonight. I lost my virginity tonight. I was ready to give it all up tonight. Give it all away for just a chance that we could repair what was broken between us.

I loved him, and he treated me like shit.

He fucked up.

One thought makes me smile through the hot tears streaming down my face.

I could have him killed.

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Nico

Goddamit! I pound my fist on the Corian countertop in my bathroom. Hard. Hard enough to make me think I might have fractured something in my hand from the impact.

Two days had passed since Shaye had invaded my life, yet again. I knew she'd come to the funeral. And I knew I needed to get her alone, to make things right. But as usual, I fucked it all up. This time, beyond repair.

For all of the luxuries this life affords me, it's forced me to give up so much...too much, and for once, I just wanted to know what it felt like to have it all.

I did, and it was fucking incredible. Somehow, though, I need to get back to my reality because the dream of having the perfect life with the one girl who my soul can't seem to function without? It'll turn into a nightmare faster than a bullet will hit me between the eyes if I don't give her up once and for all.

I didn't give her a reason to come back. In fact, I'd given her every reason to stay away.

But she couldn't.

And neither could I.

I squeeze my eyes shut to block the image of her creeping into my bedroom the other night. I'd tried to keep my attention on that damned football, anything to keep myself

from wandering over to her. The girl I'd loved for as long as I could remember. The girl I'd wanted more than anyone else. The girl I could never have.

I'd lured her to my house with a bullshit excuse, and when she snuck into view, one glimpse was all I needed to jump her fucking bones and rocket her into oblivion. It's what I'd been fantasizing about since that night before she'd left for school.

It was too dangerous then, and even more so now.

I could have nailed fifty other chicks, but I let Shaye wiggle her sexy ass under my skin. Then I pounded it with everything I had, emptying my entire soul into her.

The tiny drops of blood streaking my bed sheet screamed major fuck up on my part, and I couldn't get her out of my house fast enough. Christ, I'd thought she was just tense because it was our first time, not her first fucking time. She was a virgin, and I took that away from her. Yanked it away with my suppressed lust-induced rage for everything I'm dealing with right now. I ruined her, and then I kicked her out of my house, living up to my prick-ass reputation.

The very reputation I'd warned her about a very long time ago to keep her safe.

My iPhone blares from my nightstand. I slam open the bathroom door and lunge for it, tripping over a baseball bat laying on my floor. Regrettably, baseballs aren't the only thing I've hit with it.

"Hey, Dad." I rake a hand through my damp hair and search a drawer for a clean t-shirt.

"Nico, I need you to get over to my office. We need to talk. Now."

My brow furrows. "Okay, I'll be there in twenty minutes."

“Make it ten.” Click.

Something’s up. Dad has been heads-down since the funeral, and I’ve given him space to deal with everything. But this life doesn’t give you too much time to grieve since there’s always a nemesis lurking in some dark corner, stalking, plotting, just waiting to swoop in and seize what’s up for grabs...namely, the Salesi empire.

Nobody fucked with Grandpa. But with the Salesis and Orianis at odds and no referee keeping shit civil, people sense vulnerability. And opportunity. Dad has already stepped into his rightful place, but that doesn’t mean it will go unchallenged.

I grab a Mets baseball cap from my desk and pull it on. Keys in hand, I tear out of the house and jog toward my blacked-out Range Rover. I slide onto the pebbled leather and the car roars to life. My dad’s office is about fifteen minutes away, so I’m already late, and Joe Salesi hates when anyone is late to a meeting. No exceptions for blood.

I managed to hit every red light along my route. Motherfucker. I finally pull into the parking garage adjacent to the building. I throw the car into park and jump out of the front seat. The elevator bank is the only thing on my side since the doors open before I can even press the Up button. The elevator zooms up to the fifth floor, and I step out, looking up and down the corridor before opening the door to the office. Occupational hazard. You never know who’s ready to jump out and pummel you with a tire iron.

Being the son of Joe Salesi affords me a lot of luxuries, but it also puts my head on a chopping block for people who don’t feel we have a right to said luxuries. Dad and I have always been more about the businesses than the blood. But Grandpa always knew if something happened to him, there would be people who’d try to muscle my dad out because they’d proven themselves to the family, proven that they would be feared, basically by way of murder. Just like Grandpa did. So the time came for my dad to send a clear message to the rest of the family, and he did what he needed to

secure his place. It happened years ago and was a favor to Rocco's dad, who'd run into some trouble with another family. That's about all I ever heard. He never spoke about it, and I never asked, knowing full well that I'd eventually face the same situation.

Because I've never plugged anyone, either. And that makes my father very nervous.

I let out a breath I didn't even realize I'd been holding when I confirm the hallway is empty. I pull open the door and walk into the reception area. The office is bustling with activity. Salesi and Associates is a real estate investment firm. If there's a business to be constructed, he supplies the property. He buys it up and flips it so fast the ink barely has time to dry on the mortgage contracts. His firm takes in major cash from the families here in the New York/New Jersey area, as well as counterparts in other states.

Janelle, one of the junior brokers, spots me from across the lobby. She has an armful of papers that she lowers, no doubt to make sure I can enjoy the view. And it's fucking fabulous. She's got porn star tits and an ass to match, one I can ride for days. And I've spent many hours doing just that. But my head's all fucked up right now. These older chicks think fucking me means they're gonna get in good with the boss, that if they land me, they'll be rescued from the hellish land of appraisals and real estate comps and showered with freshly laundered hundred-dollar bills.

Not a fucking chance. Mainly because I'm already taken. It happened a long time ago, and it's nothing I can change. Maybe because I don't really want to change it.

I inhale sharply, recalling the way Shaye's body looked in all that frilly lace the other night. I don't usually pay much attention to lingerie, since naked is always my goal, but on her, it was sexy as fuck. All grown up and innocent at the same time. Made me harder than an iron pole. My cock twitches at the memory.

“Nico,” Janelle purrs. Yes, she sounds just like a fucking kitten. I don’t know why chicks think that’s sexy. I’m deathly allergic to those evil creatures, so this is an instant dick deflator. Good timing, Janelle.

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“Hey, Janelle. My father around?”

Her bright red lips curl upward and she puffs out her chest. “He’s in his office.” She grazes my forearm, her long, matching red nails trailing a somewhat innocent path toward my bicep. “I’ll walk you back.”

I smile at everyone in the office who greets me as I walk next to Janelle. They treat me like I’m a celebrity. I like it. I love the action and being in the middle of it all is an adrenaline surge like nothing I’ve ever felt before. At least, not before the other night.

Janelle’s plump ass is wrapped in a skirt so tight, I’m not sure how she can even move. But she finds a way to swing those hips, and yes, on another day, I might be tempted to shove her into one of these empty conference rooms, spread those cheeks, and fuck her senseless.

But not today. I’m all business, and sex with anyone but Shaye is the furthest thing from my mind.

Janelle stands aside as I walk into my dad’s office. “See you later, sexy,” she murmurs before retreating down the hall.

My father looks up with a raised eyebrow and nods toward the door, my signal to close it. He’s not stupid. He knows I’ve worked my way through nearly all of the women in his office. But there are rules, and he likes to make sure I remember them. Never share any details about the family business. Never bring them home. And most importantly, never drill without a mask.

I shrug and sink into a chair in front of his large mahogany desk. “What’s up?”

Dad pulls off his glasses and rubs his eyes. Grandpa’s death has really taken a toll on all of us. A pang attacks my chest. We were so close. Grandpa probably knew more about my conquests than Dad, and he always egged me on. I think sometimes he liked living vicariously through me, especially since Grandma Lou died so many years ago. He never remarried. I think he liked being on his own. Or maybe the lifestyle just didn’t call for it.

“We have a problem.”

Fuck me. Don’t we always? With the shit my dad sees on a daily basis, I can’t imagine there’s a day he doesn’t think that at least once. But for him to actually acknowledge it out loud? Must be big. “Tell me.”

He lets out a deep sigh and runs a hand through his thinning hair. I’m surprised he’s not completely bald from stress alone. “Nico, there are a lot of things I’ve shielded you from over the past several years. But now Grandpa is gone, and as my only son, you need to be aware of how things work.”

“Pop, I get it. I’m not an idiot.”

He faces me, a sad smile on his face. “No, you’re not. I also don’t like the idea of thrusting you into this. But you need to be aware in case something...happens.”

“Dad, just tell me what you need me to do.”

“Tony Oriani is at it again. He’s quietly meeting with some of the other men, and they’re looking at new opportunities to branch out. He never learned his lesson after all that shit with Cappodamo went down.” He pauses and stands up, turning toward the large picture window behind him.

“And nobody has his back right now.” Tony is a fucking idiot to be flexing his dick right now. Frank Cappodamo is the most dangerous drug dealer in the Northeast, and if you engage with him, you’d better be willing to sign the deal in blood. If you don’t like the terms and try to walk away, he’ll draw the blood out of you first and then leave you for dead.

But somehow Tony is still alive after being dragged away from the negotiation table by Dad and Grandpa. What a dumb fuck. Cappodamo doesn’t take rejection lightly. If you make the mistake of initiating a deal, you’re either with him or you’re with him.

Luckily Dad and I made our own play in anticipation of the fallout with Cappodamo that we both know is coming. We call it the Vodka Connection. Nobody knows any of the details. Can’t risk a rat fucking up our plans. We needed a supplier, and Grandpa made an introduction to a Russian organization awhile back. Dad and I handled the logistics directly with the head, Viktor Ivanov, Cappodamo’s biggest competitor in the narcotics circuit.

“That’s why we contracted with Viktor Ivanov. His crew and his connections will help us resolve the Cappodamo situation when it comes to a head, but they’re still not family. They have limited loyalty to us. Money talks, but when push comes to shove, we can only count on our own.” Dad’s shoulders sag. “Look, I know Rocco fucked up, and I stood by Grandpa’s decision to get him out of New Jersey. But now, I need him back here. He wants another chance to prove his loyalty to the family. And Grandpa would say I need to do whatever I can to keep the organization strong and tight. That means working with the Luccheses. They have the right allies and access to a lot of the suppliers we need for our other businesses.”

“Max’ll go ape shit when he hears about this plan.”

“He’ll swallow it easier once you name him capo. You know that’s what he’s after. Being a captain with his own crew will give him the credibility he needs with the rest

of the family.”

Little hairs on the back of my neck stand at attention. “If he finds out I’m bringing Rocco into my business, you know exactly how he’ll react.”

“He may be pissed, but he’ll have to swallow it if he wants a shot at running things in the future. Bringing in Rocco and his family shows a united front and shuts down any potential for an uprising. Having the Luccheses on our side gives us the muscle we need to carry out our plans and maintain control. The other men will follow suit if they see they can advance in the organization when they support our new direction. And then we can focus on taking down Cappodamo. That’s the goal.” Dad gets up from his chair and walks toward the large window. He stares out at the tops of the trees lining the office park. “There is a lot of risk involved here. But I think it’s the only way to show the families that our organization isn’t going to crumble because Grandpa is gone. We need to be strong and swift in our actions.”

I let out a loud groan. “Christ, Dad. Isn’t there any other way? Rocco is a scumbag, and he can’t be trusted. You know it as well as I do. He’s not looking to take orders from anyone. He wants to give them. How the hell am I supposed to work with that?”

“I have faith in you, son. This is important, to all of us. Cappodamo will be back, and we need to be ready for him.”

I rub the back of my neck to relieve the ache. I’d rather shovel a jar of peanut butter into my mouth than work with that guy. A deep sigh deflates my body. Much as I hate to admit it, I know there isn’t another way. “I get it. And I’ll do whatever you need me to do.”

“Meet with Rocco and make him an offer. He won’t grovel because he’d never want to be seen as desperate. He’s always been a cocky bastard. Handle it however you want, just make sure he’s with us. Don’t let him walk, Nico.” Dad scrubs a hand

down his face and turns away from the window. “Keep this quiet, and don’t let on to anyone that we had this conversation. This feud with the Orianis...” He sighs and shakes his head. “I always knew it would come to this. I wish like hell that we could have resolved things like normal people, but Tony is Tony. And since you’re the next in line, I just thought it was time to let you in on what’s happening and what we need to do to keep things running smoothly. Always be ready to make your move. I think you know very well what can happen if you miss your cue.”

Next in line. Ominous words laced with meaning that knots my stomach, but shit happens fast in this type of life. And you need to be prepared for whatever comes next.

Shaye

“You haven’t touched your no foam, triple shot, nonfat caramel macchiato with extra drizzle.” My best friend Sloane giggles and then slurps her mocha Frappuccino. “Can you be any more of a pain in the ass when you order?”

“What can I say? I know what I want.” I tap my fingernails against my cup. Truer words have never been spoken.

Shaye wants what Shaye wants even if it’s no good for her. Shaye never learns her lesson. Shaye likes to get kicked in the teeth. Shaye really needs to have her head examined.

Yep, it all equates to Shaye being a glutton for punishment.

“I guess that’s the difference between us. I’m willing to be flexible.” Sloane winks at me and slaps the cover of a biology textbook. “Ugh! I don’t know why I decided to torture myself by taking a winter session class! At least you get to study this boring shit while sunning yourself on South Beach instead of in a Starbucks during the dead of winter. In Jersey, no less.”

I twirl a strand of hot pink hair around my pinkie and page through a notebook, my relationship psychology journal. I flip through the handwritten pages, realizing that I’ve become my own biggest case study. Should make for a pretty damn interesting thesis. Good thing I’ve got plenty of material for it. “It’s too hot to study on the beach. You know I sweat like a beast. The last thing I want to think about is social cognition in psychology while I’m baking in the sun. Besides, there’s a lot of wind.

Sand blows all over the place. Trust me, it's not as glamorous as you think."

"It sure beats my dorm room at NYU. And any of the cafés down there. I'll take the sand over the crackerjacks in the Village any day, thank you very much."

I sip my coffee and pull out a pen. I have my laptop bag, but I find writing to be more cathartic. It connects me more to my feelings since they're flowing from my fingers directly onto the paper, and I like to watch my handwriting change as the emotions take hold. I can feel my words take on their own meaning, my scribble depicting the fleeting happiness, the ever-present regret, the loss, the pain...God, I must be some kind of masochist.

Forcing myself to dig deep and find what lies within hasn't really helped me get over Nico. It's only made me realize that when it comes to him, I am tangled in a jumbled mess of emotions that only constrict me when I try to escape.

The words flow slowly at first, and my hand grips the coffee cup tighter as they pour onto the page. Why can't I break free of this sick fantasy? What keeps me coming back to Nico? Why do I constantly push other guys away? Talk about mixed signals. I gave myself to him entirely, and he took it all then told me to leave. And even now, two days later, I'm replaying every second of that experience, trying to figure out how things went so far beyond my control.

He called me, and I felt empowered. He ditched me, and I fell apart.

I haven't pieced myself back together just yet, either. A tiny part of me hopes he'll be the one to do it.

See? Sick and twisted. I really am a head case. I hope that by majoring in psychology, I'll be able to fix my head and my heart simultaneously. I slam a hand on the table and close the notebook before stuffing it into my laptop bag. This paper I'm

preparing for my upcoming online winter session class will shred my insides by the time it's completed. At the very least, I'd better get a fucking A on it.

Sloane narrows her eyes at me. "Are you going to tell me what's up with you? Your shitty mood is hanging over this table, and it's smothering my good one. If you need to talk, and I suspect you do, let's get to it so I can finish this freaking assignment." She folds her hands and rests them on top of her textbook. "It's Nico, right? You saw him the other night at the funeral. What happened?"

I let out a deep sigh. "Do you have to be so brutally perceptive?"

"I'm your bestie, babe. That's my job."

"Sloane, why can't I just forget about him? He's so wrong for me, and he's made it abundantly clear that I am not what he wants. Why am I torturing myself? Why can't I walk away?"

"Because you love him." She rests her chin in her hand. "You always did. And I really thought you'd end up together. But Shaye, he can never be what you want. That's why you went to Miami. You knew it then, and I think you got another dose of the universe telling you it told you so the other night, although you won't accept that as a final answer."

"I hate him," I whisper.

"You don't hate him, but you need to move on. Lamenting about the past, about the guy he used to be, it isn't going to bring that person back. He's created a new life for himself, and it doesn't include a plus one forever." She smirks. "Seems like it only has room for a plus one for tonight, you know?"

"I keep hoping things will change and that he'll—"

“Realize what he’s been missing?” Sloane shakes her head. “Wouldn’t that be nice? Shaye, you need a diversion. I refuse to watch you moon over him for the next three weeks. You stayed at school until Christmas Eve because you didn’t want to run into him, for Christ’s sake! I won’t let you be miserable for the rest of the break. I know plenty of guys who would be more than happy to distract you.” She picks up her iPhone. “Say the word, and I’ll make a call. You need a date for New Year’s Eve anyway.”

I roll my eyes and toss a balled-up napkin at her. “I’m not going to whore myself around now that my cherry’s been popped.”

Sloane’s mouth drops open. “Your what? You slept with him?” she screeches.

I bite down on my lower lip and look around. Thankfully, the café was empty, save for a couple of people in a far corner. “Shh! You’re so loud!”

“Holy crap, Shaye! You give it up to Nico Salesi, and you’re only telling me now? How the hell did it happen? Was he good? Did you cry? Did you get—?”

“Oh my God, stop! It was amazing — all of it. I mean, yeah, it hurt like hell at first, but...” A giggle escapes my lips and despite the rejection looming like a black cloud, I allow myself to get immersed in the delicious sensations he made a reality for me. His strong, muscled torso sliding against me, the thrusting that drove me into the stratosphere multiple times over, the pain that was so harsh and satisfying at the same time, wanting to laugh, scream, and cry all at once...was it worth it? Hell, yes. “It was perfect.” Until he opened his damn mouth and destroyed me. But before that, for those precious fleeting moments, he was mine, and I was his. That spark between us, the one that had always lain dormant, it ignited into a raging inferno when our bodies and souls connected. We were one — connected in every way. His desire coursed through me, his lust permeating my entire being. It was an experience I won’t ever forget...a memory my heart will always cherish, despite the crushing aftermath.

That's why I can't let go. He detached himself to protect me, but a safe life without him isn't one I want to live. I welcome the danger, the risk, the uncertainty...I'd happily accept it all if he's part of the package.

Can you say sicko?

Sloane lets out a slow whistle. "No wonder you're walking around looking like you've just been fucked six ways from Sunday and put out with the trash. It actually happened."

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“You’re such a bitch.”

“Sorry, I couldn’t resist. You know Max would skewer Nico if he found out.”

I cock an eyebrow. “Which is exactly why nobody except you knows. You can’t breathe a word of it to anyone in one of your drunken stupors, okay?”

“I resent that.” Sloane takes another gulp of her drink. “I handle myself with complete decorum while enjoying a few cocktails with friends.”

“Sure, motor-mouth. Believe what you want, but if you say anything, you know what will happen. Do you really want a bludgeoning on your conscience?”

“You’re exaggerating. Max just wants to make sure his baby sister is protected from the scourge of the earth. He’d never really hurt Nico.”

“I love Max with all my heart, but even I know what he’s capable of doing.”

“I think there’s more to him than meets the eye.” Sloane picks up a pen and doodles across her notebook pages. “I suspect there’s a lot below the surface that nobody knows is there.”

“Really.” I lean forward, grateful for the distraction from my own misery. “And when did you come to this conclusion?”

A light pink blush colors Sloane’s cheeks, and she averts her eyes. “Call it intuition. But it doesn’t matter.”

“Care to explain?”

She shrugs. “Not really.”

“Did something happen between you guys?”

“Look, I didn’t want you to find out this way—”

“Find out what?” My eyes are about to pop out of my skull, they’re open so wide.

“Look, we went out a couple of times before Thanksgiving. And then he pulled away. Just stopped calling.”

“You let it go without asking him about it?”

She snorts. “Please. What do I look like? I’m not scrounging for dates. If he’s not interested, there are plenty of other guys who are.”

I can’t help the smile from lifting my lips. “You are so smitten with my brother.”

“Am not.”

“You are!”

“Aren’t either.”

“Wow, what a pair we are, huh?”

Sloane smirks and holds up her cup. “Here’s to the lovelorn and the jerkoffs who’ve scorned them. May their dicks shrivel up and fall off.”

“I’ll drink to that.” Sad to say that even if Nico was dickless, I’d still want him with every fiber of my being.

Lovelorn and hopeless. What a fantastic combination.

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Nico

“Do you want some ice cream with your hot fudge?”

My sister Lily giggles, dribbling chocolate ice cream down her chin. It’s a nice complement to the hot fudge goatee she’s rocking right now. She’s normally such a happy kid, but ever since Grandpa died, she’s been a little lost.

Just like me. Just like everyone.

So, I promised her a trip to the mall. Ice cream and toys can work wonders on a little kid. And the proof is in the fudge smeared all over her face.

“Can I have some of yours?” Her big brown eyes widen, and she clasps her hands together. “Pleeeeeease?”

I snicker and push my half-eaten bowl of vanilla with strawberry syrup toward her. I have this thing about berries and sugar. Maybe it’s because I act like a complete asshole a lot of the time and need the sugar to battle that alter ego. You know, to keep me human. That’s why I practically live on Jolly Ranchers. I can’t get enough of the fruity flavors. They battle the dark and make it bright, if only for a little while.

Maybe it’s my mind’s way of telling me that I’m in the wrong line of work. Maybe I should have become a dentist instead.

I glance at my watch and sit back in the hard, plastic chair. It’s pretty damn obvious that the food court doesn’t want people taking up residence here. Twenty minutes in

one of these chairs and my back will be out of whack for the next hour. I shift myself as Lily slurps the melted ice cream from her own bowl before digging back into mine.

“Nio, loo oh eeh!” Lily’s mouth is full of ice cream, but that doesn’t stop her from trying to speak.

I furrow my brow. “Um, wanna try that again?”

She points to something behind me. “Loo! Yay!”

I twist in my chair, still unable to decipher my baby sister’s ice cream language. A sharp pain zips down my back mid-twist, and I silence a groan. Fucking chairs. Within half a second of seeing what Lily saw, the pain is forgotten. It is quickly replaced by embarrassment, regret, and disgust.

Hot pink strands of hair peek out from under a gray wool beanie, cheeks rosy from the cold, and full glossed lips are curled upward for the benefit of the sticky little person sitting next to me. Yes, there is absolutely no confusion about who is lucky enough to capture Shaye’s attention. In fact, her eyes never once stray from Lily. She approaches the table with a bright smile plastered onto her mouth and drops to her knees next to Lily without so much as a flip of her hair in my vicinity.

“Hey, Lilibelle.” Shaye gently tugs on one of Lily’s pigtails and flashes her a dimpled smile that I wish to God was directed at me, not that I deserve it.

“Hi, Shaye!” Lily throws her arms around Shaye’s neck.

“Lil, you’re covered in chocolate, and I don’t think Shaye—”

There it is. She turned so fast in my direction and glared at me. The look that can freeze water in a hot tub. One second, and I already feel the blood chilling in my

veins.

“You don’t know anything about what I want.” She plasters a sweet smile on her face for Lily’s benefit because I sure as hell know she’s hiding a look that would give my baby sister nightmares if it surfaced.

“Yeah, boys don’t know anything,” Lily chimes in, snuggled up to her partner in crime. Great, now I’m getting it at both ends.

Shaye slings an arm around Lily’s shoulders and focuses on her once again. “I heard your dad got you a puppy. What’s his name?”

Lily claps her hands and lets out a little whoop. “His name is Snickers! He sleeps with me at night. He’s so warm and cuddly. Will you come over to meet him soon?”

Shaye twirls Lily’s hair around her little finger. “I sure will. I’d love to meet him. Snickers, huh?” Her eyes flicker over to mine. “Does he love peanut butter as much as your brother does?”

Despite the tension, I can’t help but allow the smirk to lift my lips. The dog loves peanut butter more than anything else they’ve fed him, and it’s one of the reasons why I have steered clear of my parents’ house as much as possible since Snickers showed up on the scene. The last time peanut butter so much as hit my lips, my face blew up like a Thanksgiving Day parade balloon. And since the dog has an exclusively peanut diet, I don’t need him slobbering all over me and risking facial edema.

“Yes! He eats it all the time!” Lily giggles and scoops up another spoonful of ice cream. “Want some?”

Shaye rubs her belly and groans. “I would, but I just ate lunch.” She peeks at her

watch. “I promise to come and visit soon, okay?”

Lily nods and shoves the heaping spoonful into her mouth. “Mm-hm.”

Shaye rises and tickles the underside of Lily’s chin. “See you later, pumpkin.”

“Wait!” I jump out of my chair, and Shaye stops, her back to me. “Why don’t you sit for a minute?”

She turns slowly, giving me time to peel my eyes off of her ass. It should be illegal to wear jeans like that. Seeing her tight ass swing from side to side is enough to plunge me over the brink of sanity. A smile lifts her lips, and her tone matches the sugary sweet concoction in Lily’s bowl. “I think you made it pretty clear the other night that your table is full, so thanks, but no thanks.”

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“Yeah, but...” My eyes drop to my sister, who is now feeding ice cream to her stuffed bunny rabbit, Mr. Pickles. “I think a seat might have just opened up.”

“I’m not interested, thank you.” She hoists her bag over her shoulder and twists in the direction of the escalator to leave, but not before bending down and whispering sweet nothings to me. “If you had the only available seat in the world and not taking it meant I’d suffer a lifetime of pain while standing in the most uncomfortable heels imaginable, my answer would still be the same.”

“There are three other chairs, Shaye.” Lily wipes her mouth with her hand and points to the plastic chairs surrounding us. “You can sit in any of them.”

Shaye’s smile looks dangerously close to cracking, and the only reason she hasn’t unleashed a string of expletives is because Lily is here.

“Hey, Lil.” I reach into my pocket for some tokens I’d gotten earlier. “Why don’t you play one of the games in the arcade over there for a few minutes?” The arcade is only a few feet away from the mall food court, so she’ll be close enough and that’ll allow me and Shaye to talk.

Lily leaps to her feet, her hand outstretched. “Thanks, Nico! I’m going to win a chickie. Mr. Pickles needs a new friend!”

She darts over to the video games, leaving us alone. It’s exactly what I wanted, it’s mostly what I feared. Being alone with Shaye, free to talk this out. But there are things that need to be said, and I’ve waited too damn long to say them.

“Shaye,” I murmur. “Why didn’t you tell me? I had no idea.”

A deep pink stains her cheeks. “It doesn’t matter. None of it matters. You’re an asshole, and letting myself get caught up in that whole...” She clenches her fists and sharply inhales. “It was my poor judgement. I should have known to stay away. But I never learn. I never fucking learn.” She twists away from me for the third time, and I reach for her. My fingers grip her wrist, and I hold on with everything I have.

“Please don’t go.”

Still, she keeps her back toward me. “You never called. You never emailed. You didn’t acknowledge me at all after that night. I left feeling like I’d lost my best friend. I had no idea why. And you just went on with your life, fucking every girl in your path.” She inches closer, a murderous glare in her blue eyes. “Yeah, I know all about it. And every time someone mentioned your latest conquest, it felt like a butcher was slicing away at my insides.” She looks down at her wrist but doesn’t make an attempt to escape my grasp. “It’s so ironic that you’re holding on to me so tight now. Why? You had me before, and all you ever did was push me away. And I was stupid enough to think that you could really care about me, that it wasn’t all bullshit. But it was. I gave you everything, and you just took it without a second thought. Like you were entitled to it, like you deserved it. But you don’t. You never did. And rest assured, you’ll never get it again.”

It was stupid to allow myself to fall for her. I knew it could never work. You don’t mess around with your best friend’s sister. It’s part of the guy code. But I fell anyway. Hard. And I deserve everything that comes with it. “I never meant to hurt you.”

“Shame on me for giving you that power,” she spats, flicking her wrist out of my grip. “I think we’re done here.”

“Please, Shaye. I need to make this right. Don’t go. Just...don’t...leave...” My eyes drift behind her, through the throngs of little kids jumping on the trampoline, racing in all directions, zigzagging through the play gym, winding around the carousel.

But none of them was Lily.

My chest tightens, and I clutch the side of the table, my fingertips losing all circulation. Fuck, where is she? I run toward the kiddie area, my heart bobbing in my throat. “Lily!” I shout.

“Lil!” Shaye is beside me, her eyes darting in all directions. She laces her fingers with mine and drags me into the center of kiddie chaos. “Come on, let’s go!”

We cover the entire perimeter, but she’s nowhere to be found. I took my eyes off of her for a minute, and now she’s gone. I rake a hand through my hair.” “Shit,” I mutter. “I can’t believe I let her go in there by herself. Shaye, if something happens to her—”

“Stop,” she says. “I’m going to find security. You stay here and keep looking, okay?” She squeezes my shoulder. “We’re going to find her, Nico. Just stay calm.” She runs over to the security booth and I head back inside the arcade, asking every kid I can corner if they’ve seen Lily. I don’t get very far with that brilliant plan, since all of the moms are pulling their kids away from the crazy man staking out the kiddie room.

Shaye comes running back to me with a security guard in tow. He’s on his walkie-talkie giving Lily’s description to whomever is on the other end of his radio.

“Has anyone seen her?”

Shaye shakes her head. “Not yet. Come on, let’s look for her in the food court. Maybe she got lost trying to find you.” She nibbles her fingernail and looks around. “Why

did this have to happen at lunchtime? It's so crowded."

We dart back over to the food court, weaving our way through the crowds of people in line for pizza, pasta, salad, Chinese noodles, and every other type of fast food imaginable. My stomach drops further and further with each inch of space covered. She's gone. My baby sister is gone because I'm a fucking asshole who took his eyes off of her to apologize for his shitty behavior. What the hell am I going to do? Who am I going to call? How ironic that the one who has an answer for everything has no fucking clue what to do next.

I stop in the middle of the seating area, my temples throbbing. "Shaye, I don't...where do I..." I let out a deep sigh, struggling to hold my shit together. "I can't—"

"Lilibelle!" Shaye screeches, tearing past me and through the maze of chairs toward the Cinnabon counter. "Where have you been? We've been looking all over for you!" She throws her arms around Lily, clutching her tight.

My legs feel like wet noodles, and I almost collapse on top of Lily. Until my eyes meet his.

"Rocco," I growl. "What the fuck is wrong with you? You almost gave me a fucking stroke."

"Relax, man. I saw Lily and asked if you were around. She said you were talking, so I took her for a snack to kill time." Rocco's eyes flicker in Shaye's direction. "If I'd known who you were talking to, I would have come straight over to interrupt."

Shaye rolls her eyes and rises to her feet. "Seriously, Rocco? I have security combing the place looking for Lily."

“Maybe next time you’ll pay a little more attention to how bad things can get when you lose sight of what’s important, Nico.” Rocco flashes a smirk. “I’ll see you tomorrow, man. Shaye, I’d love to see you tonight.”

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A deep flush creeps over her face and she averts her eyes. “I, um, have plans. But maybe we’ll catch up again before I leave.”

“Count on it.” Rocco bends down to ruffle Lily’s hair. “Enjoy the Cinnabon, little lady. Make sure your big bro watches a little more closely next time. Shit can happen real fast.” His eyes narrow at me when he speaks those last few words. My spine stiffens, and I suddenly wish for the baseball bat sitting on my bedroom floor to magically appear in my hand, despite the fact that I’m supposed to be working with this douchebag now. I’m not trusting this asshole at all.

“Bye, Rocco!” Lily looks up at me and grins, a stream of glaze drizzling out of the corner of her mouth. “This is yummy. I wonder if Snickers would like it. I think I’ll bring it home for him.”

Shaye lifts her head, her blue eyes holding the question that I still have yet to answer. Then she blinks, and it’s gone, as if she already knows the answer. She thinks she does, but she doesn’t. Only I do.

That sonofabitch Rocco thinks he was sending me a message with that little stunt. Like I’ve never considered what can happen to the people I love if I make one misstep, piss off one too many goons, take a little too much away from those who can’t catch a break.

It’s why I sent Shaye away all those months ago.

It’s because I love her, and I need to keep her safe. There’s too much at risk, especially with Cappodamo lurking in the shadows.

Sounds good in theory, but the reality? Fucking torture of the worst kind, more so now that I've had a taste of what can never be mine.

It doesn't stop me from wanting her, but it has to stop me from taking her...again and again and again.

My self-control when it comes to Shaye is stretched to the point where it's going to snap like a rubber band. I need to keep her safe. I need her with me. I need to keep her safe. I need her with me. Christ, I feel like there's a ping pong ball bouncing back and forth between my ears, goading me.

"I'm glad you're safe, Lilibelle." Shaye gives Lily a quick hug and tucks a stray strand of hair back into her hat. "Goodbye, Nico."

She's gone before I can even respond. Maybe it's better that way. I can't seem to get the right words out, not that I have a clue what those words even are. I don't deserve to have a captive audience if I can't figure out how to deliver my message. Still, I watch as she disappears into the crowd of mall-goers, wondering why I can't get this right, and if she'd even give me a chance to do just that.

Lily shoves another spoonful of yogurt into her mouth. "I still need to get another friend for Mr. Pickles." She holds out a little chick in her tight fist. "You only gave me enough money for one stuffed animal."

Lucky Mr. Pickles. Guy has more friends than I do. I guess they're easy to keep when you can't speak or move...basically, when you can't do anything that'll alienate them.

Hmm. Maybe I'll have that kind of luck in my next life.

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Shaye

“What the fuck were you doing with Nico the other night?”

I jump about three feet into the air, my fingers freezing over my laptop keyboard.

“Jesus, Max! You almost gave me a heart attack!”

Max glares at me with his large arms folded over his broad chest. You never want to meet my brother in a dark alley. At twenty-four, he’s more built than most older guys, and he’s fast. He can have someone on the ground kissing their own ass in seconds. But he doesn’t only use his body. He’s always packing. It’s something he’s tried to hide from me, something he still denies to this day. But baby sister is on to him. On to a lot more than they give me credit for.

“Tell me why you were at his house, Shaye.”

“Seriously? I went over there to give my condolences. His grandfather just died. I’m not completely heartless.” I smirk, hoping to lighten the moment, but he’s still not convinced. I can tell by the way he’s seething. Dammit. How the hell could he possibly know anything, unless...no. No fucking way would Nico ever tell him, right? I mean, the way he kicked me to the curb? He must know Max would shoot him between the eyes for treating his sister like that, after stripping her of her virginity. Oh yeah, that’d be grounds for cold-blooded murder in Max’s eyes. Best friend or not.

“You were at the funeral. You didn’t tell him you were sorry while you were there?”

“I didn’t speak to him at the funeral. He was kind of...occupied.” The memory of Nico flanked on all sides by girls in tight black dresses with huge boobs, dark red lips, and bleached blonde extensions makes my stomach roll. His typical whore-type times about five. Go big or go home? No, his MO is more like go big and take them all home.

My pulse throbs against my neck. God, the thought alone of his tongue taunting every inch of my body makes my skin prickle with need. Sonofabitch. How did I let this happen? I was so good while I was away. I’d only fantasized about him a few days a week, tops. Maybe there were vibrators involved, but who cares? I’d gotten over the hump, came to terms with the loss of my friend, the one I’d carried a torch for since I was old enough to notice boys.

Oh, for Pete’s sake. Can I not think of anything other than humping right now? I’m trying to maintain my cool so my brother doesn’t go ape shit on me for seeing Nico. I know the rules. Stay far away or else. Nico’s life isn’t a safe one. Nico makes dangerous choices. Nico is on the radar of too many thugs. Nico is Max’s best friend.

Bottom line? He is not allowed to see me naked.

Except...he did.

I’d managed to avoid the rumblings from deep within my core every time we were in the same room together growing up. I fought them hard, but in the end, I fell victim. And that fall felt so fucking good. I’d do it again, and again, in a hot second. Totally worth the risk of being murdered by my father and my brother for disregarding their wishes.

“I think you’re full of shit.” His dark eyes narrow and he creeps toward me. “What happened when you went over there?”

I slam the lid of my laptop and jump out of my chair. “I told you! Nothing! You know, I’m an adult, Max. I am perfectly capable of handling myself. I’ve known him and his family for how long? It was only right to go over there.” Oh, yes. So very right.

“Look,” his voice softens. “I’m just worried about you. The past couple of days...I don’t know, you haven’t been your normal, annoying self.” He reaches out and gives me a noogie, of all things.

I squeal and jump backward. “Asshole! I just flat-ironed my hair!”

“Drama queen.” He flashes a smirk, displaying the dimple in his left cheek. For all of his less-endearing qualities, like running as hot as a fireplace poker, he’s got dark Mediterranean looks that make women swoon at his feet. No joke. I’ve seen it firsthand. I, on the other hand, take after our northern Italian side. “Hot date tonight?”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, with my psychology textbook.”

“Want to go out and get some ice cream?”

“It’s freezing out!” I wrap my arms around myself as if the cold from outside had suddenly infiltrated the house.

“We’re not going to eat it outside, dipshit.” He pulls on his jacket. “Come on, if the cold is too much for you to bear, I’ll take you to Starbucks instead. You can get a tall, nonfat, caramel macchiato, no foam with an extra shot, or some frou frou shit like that.”

“Actually, I could do with a hot chocolate. With regular old marshmallows.” I lift an eyebrow at him. “Not everyone needs frou frou.”

“Glad to hear it.” He tosses me my coat and I slide my arms into it. “Did you see Mom and Dad?”

I nod. “Yeah, they took off an hour ago for that dinner.”

He doesn’t say anything, just mumbles in response.

The front door swings open, and a cold gust of air chills my bones. Good Lord, do I love going to school in Miami. I can’t wait to get back there. A shiver runs through me. Especially after...everything.

That bastard. If I so much as breathe a word of his behavior to Max, he’d be over there pummeling the shit out of Nico in less time than it’d take me to blink.

But I can’t for two reasons.

Number one, I’d have to come clean about being so very dirty.

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Number two, my dad would have a coronary.

Thank you, no. I'll just suck it up and count the days until I can hop a plane back to sunny Florida. I'm sure I can find some hot basketball player back at school who can take my mind off that dirt bag. And yes, campus is crawling with six-and-a-half-foot, tanned, muscular men, so no shortage of potential candidates there.

I slide into the front seat of my brother's Escalade and buckle up for the ride. I usually end up clutching the sides of my seat when Max takes the wheel. Judging by the amount of ice lining the streets, I'm hoping he'll go a little easier so I can make it to tomorrow alive and in one piece.

And yay, chocolate. Because I really need to be even more stimulated than I am right now, courtesy of the salacious memories that continue to loop through my mind.

NICO

I rub the back of my neck to loosen the knot at the base of my skull. The conversation with my father has been weighing on me all day, and as much as I need to talk to someone, I know I have to keep my mouth shut.

Talking has no place in this life. We don't share our feelings because that is perceived as weakness. No, we bottle shit up until we're ready to explode.

Then we continue to keep a lid on it, because if you don't, you can get your ass severely mutilated. And since I like my ass just the way it is, I keep quiet.

The streets shine under the glowing light of the full moon. Sheets of black ice lay before me, slick under my Range Rover's tires. I pull into the Starbucks parking lot and throw the car into park. I lean forward, my head in my hands. Now that Grandpa's gone, Dad's stress levels have hit the roof and then exploded out of it. I'm sure there's more he's not saying, and I only know what I need to know, which feels like a hell of a lot. But I know there's plenty to come.

I grab my phone from the center console and glance at the screen. Ignored texts, missed calls...all from Max. I still have to figure out how to break the news about Rocco to him. I can't avoid him forever.

Our dads had been college buddies, closer than brothers through the years. Naturally, Max and I had been thrown together. The expectation was that the only sons of Joe Salesi and Tony Oriani would have their own bromance. Except Max is a fucking lunatic, always dangling over the edge of sanity, and I'm the complete opposite. But I do what I need to do to keep the peace, and to keep things on an even keel for the family. I play a role. It's what we all do to survive. You need to know your strengths and keep yourself sharp.

Something told me not to answer his messages yet. Something is off, and I need to figure out what before I open my mouth. My parents were acting strange when I saw them earlier, and nobody volunteered as to the reason why. It amazes me that we can't even take time to grieve the loss of Grandpa. Too much shit is happening, and it's time to move on. At least, that's the expectation.

But I'm not ready. The only comfort I've had in the past months came from Shaye. Her soft lips, deep blue eyes I could lose myself in forever, that hot pussy clenched tight around my dick...

Just plain sex. I tried to convince myself that's all it was. But there was nothing plain about what we did that night.

I'm a goddamn liar. I lied to myself about how I feel, and I lied to her when I told her I wanted her to leave.

I didn't. I wanted her...no, needed her...to stay.

And now I'm dodging calls from her maniacal brother, who, if he found out I'd so much as seen her in that sexy-as-fuck lingerie, would wrap his beefy hands around my throat and squeeze until my eyeballs popped out of the sockets.

And yes, I've seen my best friend do just that to someone for a hell of a lot less.

I take a deep breath and step out of the car. No sense in fantasizing about what I won't ever have again.

The front door to Starbucks chimes when I pull it open, and a whoosh of hot air blows into my face as I step inside. I promised a tearful Lily a hot chocolate and a birthday cake pop. Poor kid has no clue what kind of a life she's in for, so sweet treats are the least I can do to make my baby sister smile, especially after everything she's been through this week.

I step up to the counter and open my mouth to order when my eyes fall to a white and green cake pop with eyes and what looks like sprinkles on its head. Is that supposed to be a parrot? Maybe Lily would like that one, too.

"Dude! What the fuck?"

Jesus Christ, do I have GPS on me or something? Not that I'd be surprised, but shit. I never come here. What the hell are the odds? With a slight roll of my eyes, I slowly twist around. But Max isn't the person my gaze lands on first.

Shaye's cheeks are pink from the cold, her lips stretched into a straight line, eyes a

million times more frigid than the temperature outside the café. They narrow at me, as if she's trying to ice me from the inside out. She's still pissed. Fuck, is that why Max has been trying to get in touch? Did she tell him?

She folds her arms over her puffer jacket, fists clenched. My gaze wanders to Max. He doesn't have that murderous look in his crazed eyes. Yet. That's a good sign.

"Hey, guys." And my brain shuts down, just like that. I can't even form a single thought while Shaye's eyes burn a hole into me.

"How's your dad?" Max's expression is sympathetic. It only lasts for a short time, but it's more than anyone else ever gets to see of his human form.

"Hanging in there. Working nonstop. You know how he deals with shit." I try to keep my eyes focused on my best friend's face, but Shaye's menacing glare is almost magnetic. I want to look away, but I can't. It pulls me back every time my eyes stray. "How's everything with you guys? No big dates tonight?"

"Nah. My parents left for that dinner about an hour ago, and I figured I'd hang out with my best girl." He slings an arm around Shaye's shoulders.

"Best. That's impressive, considering how big the pool is," she mumbles, never breaking her icy stare.

I furrow my brow. “Dinner?”

“Yeah, you know, the thing down in Atlantic City? Dad and some of the guys have been planning it for weeks.” Max rubs the back of his neck and averts his eyes, almost as if he realized he’s said too much. “Maybe he didn’t want to bother you guys with the details, you know, since you had so much going on with your grandfather.”

That’s him shoveling bullshit. And it’s piled pretty high behind him. Nobody told us anything about this dinner. My parents are at home, cuddled on the couch watching Inside Out with Lily. If there had been an invitation, I’m sure my dad would have at least mentioned it when I’d met him at the office. Was he accidentally on purpose left off the guest list because of what’s going on with Tony Oriani and his pathetic power play?

Shit’s about to get real. This missed invite has to be about my dad’s recent promotion. Tony is trying to edge out my dad because he wants a chance to grab control, and that’s why they’re all in AC. He might as well have just pulled the trigger and pushed my dad into his own shallow grave.

And now I have to deal with Rocco. Faster than I’d thought, based on this new information. I need to get Rocco on our side and figure out how I’m going to break the news to Max that I betrayed him. It won’t matter that I was the only one willing to help him get back on his feet after he blew the whistle on Rocco. The only thing that will matter is that I’ve taken his arch nemesis under my wing in an attempt to cripple Tony’s plans for a coup.

I'm so fucked.

The tension in the air almost chokes me. I need to get home. My phone pings, and I grab it out of my back pocket. It's Lily. She wants to know when I'll be back with her cake pops. Fuck it, I'll grab her some Starburst jelly beans from the drug store on my way home. I can't stand here for another second while the fate of my family is being decided by a bunch of fucking goons. And I can't look at Shaye without wanting to pull her close and bury my head in her neck, praying that all this shit around us could just disappear and leave us alone to be together.

I take my coffee from the barista and pull down the rim of my baseball cap. "Guys, I've gotta go. Have fun. Max, I'll text you tomorrow."

"Okay, man. Drive safe. That ice is dangerous." He takes one final look at me, one I recognize all too well, and it sends a jolt zipping down my spine.

That nagging feeling is back to gnaw at me. I need to get the hell out of here. I sidestep a large sheet of ice on the way to my car and slide into the driver's seat. So many thoughts are flying through my mind, and while I should really be focused on the ones about my dad's business dealings and why he's suspiciously been left off of an invite list, it's Shaye who's front and center.

I turn the key in the ignition and the engine roars to life, heat blasting out of the vents at my face. I fucked up, big time. I let this happen, and now I've put her in danger, too. Danger by association. These people, they have eyes everywhere. If they're trying to push my dad out of the way, they'll be tracking his every move...my every move.

They'd have seen Shaye come to my house.

I'd been warned time and again to stay away, but I couldn't control myself. Too

much had been weighing me down, and for once, I wanted to give in to my own emotions. So I did a fucking horrible thing. And then I did something even worse.

Now she hates me, and there's not a damned thing I can do about it.

I throw the car into drive and head toward the parking lot exit. I flip on my right turn signal and pull onto the road. I can feel the slick road beneath my tires, and if I brake too hard, I'll spin out. I tap the gas lightly since there's a stop sign not too far up the street.

Snow begins to fall, and I turn on the windshield wipers. My eyes fall to the center console. Fuck me! I forgot the jelly beans. I let out a deep sigh. Dammit. I can't go home without something for her. I'll have to go around the block.

At this point, I'm going about twenty, but I'm not taking any chances.

Ha. Ironical that now I'm concerned about taking chances.

I slow down for the stop sign and peer around me. There's barely any light, other than what is coming from the houses lining the street. It's one of the things I hate about the suburbs of New Jersey. You can't see anything at night. And with all the deer lurking, waiting to run across even the busiest of roads, you could be severely screwed if you're not careful.

I remove my foot from the brake and slowly press down on the gas. The tire makes a loud sound, but the car refuses to move. Shit, I wonder if it's stuck on a patch of ice. I press a little harder and the car chokes again, but the tire is now loose, and I roll through the sign. If I were going home, I'd have gone straight through, but since I need to go back to the drug store, I'll hang a right that'll take me back to the nearest strip mall.

I let out a breath since the last thing I want is to plow into the tree at the corner. I turn my head left once more just to double check, spin the steering wheel, and lightly press on the gas pedal. A bright flash of light comes from out of nowhere. I squint at the high beams, waiting for the car to slow down since it's a four-way stop.

It doesn't.

I slam on the brake mid-turn, the tires skidding on the icy pavement. My chest tightens, and my fingers grip the steering wheel in anticipation of the impact. Because there's no fucking way I'm going to escape the impending wreck. My car screeches to a halt, tires scraping against the sidewalk. I try to pull in a deep breath, fearing it may be my last, wishing to God that I'd stayed another minute at Starbucks and gotten the fucking cake pops. Then I wouldn't be alone facing death, just like Grandpa. In my periphery, I see the SUV fly through the intersection, and that's when all sound is muted. I'm pretty sure I let out a scream, but my ears are numb to it. The smell of burning rubber and searing metal assault my nose as my car is crushed against a tree by the SUV. I grit my teeth, my body pinned to the seat. A shooting pain explodes down my spine, and even though it hurts like fucking hell, at least I'm not paralyzed.

I try to turn my head, but the motion brings tears to my eyes. I'm still alive, still breathing, but I'm trapped between the steering wheel and the door. Jesus Christ, if I hadn't made a right turn, that asshole would have plowed right into the driver's side and mangled me beyond repair. As it was, he'd come damned close. Another two inches, and I'd have been smashed, too.

I peer out the window, trying to get a look at the fucknut driving the SUV. But the snow is falling too hard and the SUV's windows are all blacked out, making it impossible to see anything.

I fumble for my phone and grab it as the SUV pulls away from the wreck and speeds

down the street. My hands are shaking, and I can't zoom in to get a picture of the license plate.

Sonofabitch.

The ringing between my ears won't stop, and I don't know if it's just the memory of the crashing metal, or if another car is skidding toward me to finish the job.

The job...interesting. At least I'm lucid enough to know that there was something fucking odd about the way that SUV waited before peeling down the street. It could have been some deadbeat driving like a jackass in this weather who just wanted to see if I was still alive after being plowed into a tree.

Or it could have been something else.

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I've always been paranoid. I guess when you have a father who deals with mob thugs disguised in BOSS Black suits for a living, you learn to watch your back, no matter how many dipshits tell you you're a rising star in the organization. Someone is always jealous, or plotting, or just simply taking an order.

It's never personal.

It's always only business.

And with my dad at the helm, ready to implement his own plans for expanding the organization, they'll come for me first. I'll be their first attempt at sending a message. Thank fuck they didn't go near my mother or Lily. But that doesn't mean they're safe, either.

In Tony Oriani's eyes, my dad has cost him a shit ton of cash, and his objective is to make it, not watch it spiral down the toilet. And now he needs a new way to maintain his relevance in the organization since Grandpa won't be around to protect him. Then there's his long-lost pal Cappodamo who has a bone to pick with us. Who the hell even knows who's on my tail right now? Enemies. They're fucking everywhere.

The pain slices through me like a dagger shredding my insides. I definitely need a doctor. I unbuckle my belt and try to open the door, but it's stuck, and if I press my weight against it to open it, I might put myself into traction.

I squint at the flashing lights coming up behind me. A car pulls off the side of the road, the high beams still blinding me. Doors slam, and my chest tightens. For a few seconds, I think I'm about to get my ass whacked, until I hear a high-pitched voice

from outside. Shaye?

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Shaye

“Max, stop the car!” I shriek. Even with the snow falling, I can see the passenger side of Nico’s Range Rover crumbled like an accordion.

The car slows and before it’s even come to a full stop, my seat belt is off, and I’m out the door. My Hunter boots pound into the deep snow drifts as I run toward Nico’s car. Smoke is coming from the side smashed against the tree, and my throat constricts when I round the car toward the driver’s side.

Oh, God, please don’t be dead, please don’t be dead...

Tears spring to my eyes as I grab the door handle and pull, not knowing what I’m going to find inside. I yank once, twice, but nothing happens. The lock must have gotten damaged in the crash or the frame of the vehicle is bent from the impact. Max appears next to me with a tire iron. Of course, he’d have one on hand. “Watch out, let me try.”

With one swift tug, he has the door open. My hand flies to my mouth once I see Nico. His face is twisted in agony, but he’s alive. And even though I still want to kill the bastard, I’m so thankful he’s safe.

“Fuck,” he groans, holding his right side. “Thank God you guys were behind me.”

“Dude, what the hell happened?” Max peers into the car. “You are so goddamned lucky. You can’t imagine what the other side of the car looks like. Thank God there wasn’t anyone in the passenger’s seat.”

“If I hadn’t made the turn, the driver’s side would look the same way.”

“A-are you hurt?” I mumble, swiping at my eyes, cursing myself for showing any modicum of emotion. Even though he crushed me, I’m still in love with him. Not that he deserves it.

“Yeah,” he growls. “My back is all sorts of fucked up, and I banged my head against the window when that asshole plowed into me. I need to get to a hospital.”

Blaring sirens appeared from out of nowhere, and I flash a questioning look at Max who grins. “While you were mourning Nico’s car, I made the call. I’m shocked to hell they showed up this fast, especially in this weather.”

I try to calm my breathing, but I can’t. So many conflicting emotions rumble inside of me, and I’m torn between gratitude and rage. He could have been killed, and here I am, wanting to unleash a toxic tirade against him, the man I’ve obsessed about for the better part of my life.

An ambulance slows and pulls in front of the car. EMTs jump out, clad in all-weather gear to battle the frigid air. A cop car with obnoxious flashing lights stops next to us. An officer approaches, a suspicious look on his face. “Anyone been drinking?”

“No, sir,” Nico replies, flinching as he shifts in the seat. The EMTs are working fast to load him onto a gurney, and he lets out a few choice words as they ease him out. “I was making a turn and some asshole crashed into me, then drove away.”

“Did you get the license plate number?”

“No, I tried, but...” He lets out another groan. “...the car was going too fast.”

“What was the make and model?”

“Don’t know. It was too dark. All black, I think. Big SUV, tinted windows, front and sides.”

“Ok.” The officer rubs the back of his neck and looks at me and Max. “Were you in the car behind him? Did you see anything?”

We both shake our heads. “So, what happens next?” I ask. “Are they just going to get away with it? I mean, he could have been killed!” My voice rises, and Max gives me a strange look. I press my lips together to keep any other tells from escaping my big, fat mouth. My eyes follow Nico to the back of the ambulance, where he’s being loaded in. I swallow hard. He shouldn’t be alone...

“Do you want to go with him?” Max mumbles after the police officer goes back to his car to write up the report. “I’ll wrap things up here and meet you guys at the hospital. Call his parents. too.”

I nod, nibbling at my chipped thumbnail, trying to appear nonchalant even though I feel like I’m about to crumble on the sidewalk in tears. “I’ll see you there.”

He gives me another long look and nods toward the ambulance. “Go.”

I turn and trudge through the snowdrifts just as one of the EMTs is about to close the doors. “You coming with us?”

“Yes.” I take his hand and climb into the back, collapsing on the bench next to Nico. He’s got a neck brace on, but he’s no longer complaining about the pain. He flashes me a crooked smile and points to his wrist and the IV. “This is the good stuff,” he murmurs.

Tears pool in my eyes, and I look toward the ceiling of the ambulance to prevent them from falling and dripping all over the guy who has a tighter hold on me than

anyone on this planet.

“Hey,” he whispers. “It’s okay. I’m gonna live.”

“I know.” I sniff, refusing to look at him.

He lets out a low chuckle. “I get it now. You’re upset ’cause you’ve been wishing me dead, and it almost happened?”

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My mouth drops open. “You asshole!” I hiss.

“I know I am.” His tone is sober now, although a little thick, almost like the drugs are taking effect. “I’m sorry. You didn’t deserve it.”

My eyes shift toward the EMT who is in the back with us, and I silently thank him for pretending not to listen and for focusing on Nico’s chart.

“We don’t need to talk about this now.” I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. “Just worry about yourself.”

“But it’s important, Shaye.” His hand creeps over to mine and squeezes. “I was messed up that night. Really messed up. I never meant to hurt you.”

“Look, it’s fine. I’m a big girl, Nico.” I peel his hand off mine, feeling piercing stabs to my heart at the loss of his touch.

“I need you to forgive me,” he mumbles, his eyes drooping closed. “I want you to know...mthat ah loobe woo.”

My ears perk up, and my eyebrows shoot upward. What the fuck did he just say? Did he...no, it’s impossible. It has to be the drugs. Maybe his tongue is numb. I want to reach out and shake him, but he’s drifting off. The EMT flicks his gaze at me and then back at his clipboard. I must look like some sorry twit right now, but I have to hear him say those words again.

“Nico?” I whisper-talk.

“Sss?” His eyes are closed now, but he’s still responsive. Kind of. My heart thumps, drowning out any ability to hear intelligible words, much less those tinged with drugs.

“What did you just say? I didn’t catch it.”

“Mmahlubwho.”

The EMT looks up again. “If he says it one more time, does Beetlejuice show up?”

Heat singes my cheeks and creeps down my neck. I manage a tiny smile, forgetting about the fact that whatever he said was courtesy of a shitload of drugs. “I hope so. I’ve always loved that movie.”

NICO

I open my eyes a crack, shifting on what feels like a bed of some sort. It’s definitely not my Sleep Number, that’s for shit sure. I twist my head to the right and let out a loud yelp. Pain assaults my neck and shoulders, a harsh, burning sensation that feels like I’ve been stabbed repeatedly with a bunch of hot poker. Not fucking pleasant.

I squint, my eyes adjusting to the light of what appears to be a hospital room. Everything rushes back — the dinner, the crash, that SUV, Shaye...

The curtain next to my bed opens and a nurse steps inside my little sectioned-off space in the emergency room. “Nico, you’re finally awake. We were afraid the EMTs doped you up a little too much.” She was on the shorter side and very perky — almost a little too perky. But she had a kind smile, so I grinned back. “I’m thinking it wasn’t enough since turning my head almost made me cry like a bitch.” I cough-groan. “Um, shoot, sorry. I meant like a baby.”

The nurse...I squint my eyes to read her nametag...Stacy...laughed. "I know, that's why I rushed in here, sweetie. We have your neck protected, but Doctor Rabi wants to send you in for an X-ray. He's concerned your spine might be out of alignment from the impact."

"Good thing I got hit in the back."

Her expression sobers. "If it had been an inch closer to the driver's side, you'd very likely have been paralyzed from the waist down."

"Shiiiiit," I grumble. I wiggle my toes, almost instinctively. Thank God I can feel them beneath the blanket. "You know, it was a hit and run. Bastard got away."

"I believe in karma," she replied with a wink. "Everybody gets what they're due."

"Yeah..." After what I'd done to Shaye, I'm surprised I'm still breathing on my own.

"And your sweet girlfriend has been pretty anxious, waiting for you to wake up." Stacy grins as she takes my blood pressure. "Really pretty, too. I hope you're good to her."

"She's not my girlfriend. We're just...friends. I think."

Stacy raises an eyebrow. "Is that so? Well, it's certainly nice to have a friend who hasn't left your side for all of this time." She peels off the armband and places it back on the machine. "You're a very lucky young man, in more ways than one. Now, can I get you anything?"

I slowly lay my head back onto the pillow. "Drugs. More drugs, please."

Stacy laughs. "All in due time. The doctor is going to examine you first, to see if we

need to move you to a private room and keep you overnight. But you're doing well, so you may be able to leave earlier than later."

"Okay." I sigh. "Hey, um, Stacy?"

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“Hm?”

“Can you ask my, um, girlfriend to come in here?” A half-smile pulls my lips upward. It’s not true, but it feels good to say it.

“You’ve got it, handsome.” She closes the curtain, leaving me in my cubby of isolation.

I haven’t given Shaye any reason to be nice to me, to stick around here, or to be any bit concerned about whether I live or die. But somehow, she’s here. And according to the nurse, she cares, too. Maybe more than she should.

The flimsy blue curtain jostles as Shaye pulls it back, her face pale, her eyes filled with worry. All for me; the dipshit who did something really stupid, and then did something even more fucking stupid.

“Hey.” She smiles, but I can see her eyes are watery and hear the quiver in her voice.

“Thanks for being here.” I pat the side of the bed. “Come here.”

“I’d rather stand.” She peers into the hallway behind her. “Besides, your dad will be here soon.”

“Thanks for making the call. I appreciate it.”

“I didn’t think they’d want to hear the news from the cops. Coming from me was a little better, I guess.” She twisted a lock of hair around a finger, her eyes still

wandering, focusing on everything in the space except my face. And I am desperate to see those eyes, to see what Stacy saw, even though I know in my heart what's there.

My dad. I need to warn him. Dammit. This whole thing can go sideways so fast; he has to hear everything. I pick at a loose thread on the blanket. "Shaye."

"Yeah?" She still won't look at me, and it's making me crazy. I want to feel her next to me, her breath against my face. But she won't come near me. Self-preservation, I suppose.

"Please look at me."

Her eyes want to, I can tell. But she's fighting against the urge. She knows the impossibility of it all, knows there's no future. Rather, she thinks she does.

"Shaye, you have to believe that I never wanted to hurt you."

That gets her attention. Her eyes flash with anger. Good, now we're getting somewhere. I want to see her feel, yell, and scream. It at least proves she cares. If she was completely ambivalent...well, I probably wouldn't be in love with her in the first place.

"You know what, Nico? Fuck you. You treated me like shit the other night, and you hurt me so badly. After all this time...we were supposed to be friends. You were..." She pauses, her head shaking from side to side. "You know what? I was right about you, about all of it. You're a self-centered asshole who only cares about getting off. You don't care about anyone or anything else."

Ouch. That stings. "Did you ever think there might be a reason why I did what I did?"

“Um, yeah, because you’re a complete dickhead!”

“No.” I let out a sigh. “Look, I admit, sleeping together was the wrong thing to do.” Her face falls, despite the venom in her voice. “Don’t give me that look, Shaye. You’re killing me right now. Just let me finish. It’s not because it wasn’t good. It was fucking amazing. You giving yourself to me like that...I’ve never felt anything like it before.” This next part is gonna be hard to swallow, for both of us. “But there’s a big problem.”

“Max,” she whispers.

“And your dad. And my dad. Our lives, Shaye. When we kissed that night before you left for school, it was torture for me. I knew what I wanted and that I couldn’t have it. And after the other night?” I can’t help the grin from spreading across my face. “Mind-blowing.”

A deep pink flush inches up her neck, spreading across her cheeks. “It was,” she whispers.

“Come here.” I watch, seeing the conflict of emotions within her. But she steps closer to the bed, leaning toward me. And my heart lurches as her face lowers to mine. “Kiss me,” I whisper, pressing my luck. I know at any second someone might walk in here, see her in this position, and shoot me in the fucking head. But it’s a bullet I’d gladly take.

I’m finally clear on what I want. I want all of her, and I just don’t know how to keep what we have once I’ve claimed her.

I’ll worry about that later. Right now, I want to taste those plump, delicious lips. They graze mine, soft and demanding at the same time. Just like Shaye. It’s a perfect combination, one I need in my life.

She pulls away, panic settling over her delicate features. “Oh my God,” she murmurs, jumping backward. With a quick glance over her shoulder, she relaxes her shoulders and lets out a deep breath. “Nico, we could have been so screwed if one of our family members walked in right then.”

“In another time and place, we definitely will be.” I wink and twist onto my side. I have to bite the inside of my mouth to keep from screaming, it hurts that fucking bad. Christ, I need some more of whatever they fed me in the back of that ambulance to dull the pain I’m in now.

She puts her hands on her hips. “So, I’m just supposed to fall under your spell now? Let you call all the shots? Wait around until you get tired of the forbidden?”

I lace my fingers with hers. “No way. You’ve got it all wrong, Shaye. I’m the one caught in your net. And trust me, there’s nothing tiring about it.”

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With a roll of her eyes, she squeezes my hand. “I’m going back to school in a few weeks. Max is your best friend. My father will kill me, and then you—”

“Hey, I’m not saying it’ll be easy. And I wouldn’t advise saying anything to anyone about it. But, Shaye...I’ve waited too long to taste you, and now I’m fucking addicted. You’re just gonna kick me to the curb and fly back to Miami?”

“I have to go back.”

“I know, but it doesn’t mean this has to end. Give us a shot.” I snicker. “No pun intended.”

A giggle escapes her lips. “It’s not funny.”

“Agreed. So let’s keep it quiet. I’d really like to be able to fuck you again, but I can’t do that if they chop off my dick.”

Her expression sobers. “Do you really think this can work? Are we kidding ourselves? There’s nothing normal about the way we live, Nico. Why should this be an exception?”

“Because it’s us. It can be whatever we want it to be.”

She looks at me, her light eyes filled with hope, her face shadowed with doubt.

“Trust me, Shaye. You just have to want it bad enough.”

She lets out an unsteady breath and nods, her pink-tipped blonde curls bouncing over her shoulders. “I do. I always have.”

“I’ll figure it out. It won’t be easy, but it’ll be worth it.”

A knock at the side of the wall startles her and she releases my hand, jumping back against a chair. The curtain opens, and my dad appears, his face lined with worry. He manages a smile for Shaye. “Thank you so much for letting us know what happened and for getting Nico here. We’re so grateful to you and Max.”

She nods. “Of course. I’m just going to wait outside.” Her eyes float back to mine. “I’ll come and say goodbye before we leave.”

“Okay.” I watch as she pulls the curtain aside and tosses a quick glance over her shoulder. “Thanks.”

Dad watches her leave, and when he turns back to me, his eyes are heavy, laden with worry and fear. “Nico, the police said it was a hit-and-run. Did you see anything suspicious about the car that hit you?”

“No, nothing. The snow was coming down really hard. I could barely see. The car, it was a big, black SUV. But nobody inside made themselves known.” I pause. “Dad, there was a—”

“I know all about it, son. The dinner in Atlantic City.”

“What the hell is going on? Does this have to do with what you told me? Is Cappodamo involved?”

He nods, pressing his fingertips to his temples. “Nobody is safe, Nico. This was a warning, and it could have been a lot worse.”

“What are you going to do? What if somebody tries to come after Mom or Lily?” The blood boils in my veins at the thought that one of those asshole thugs would even consider laying a finger on either of them. If it happened, I would bury the motherfucker that dared touch them.

“I don’t know. But what I do know is that you need to keep a low profile. Meet with Rocco, focus on your business, and let me try to figure this out. I’m waiting for some more information, and once I get it I’ll let you know.”

“Okay, Dad. But you know this will get worse once word gets out that Rocco and I are working together. Tony will flip the fuck out if he knows we’re trying to expand our crew without including them. And Max...I don’t think I need to tell you what he’ll do.”

My dad’s eyes narrow. “Be careful. I’ve already told you too much, enough to put you in severe danger. Keep your eyes open. Any situation you wander into is an opportunity for them to send another message.”

“Dad, I think they’ve made it pretty clear that they’ll find me, one way or another.”

“Just do what I say, Nico.” His expression implores me to agree, but he’s hiding something. I can always tell when he is trying to withhold information. He has one tell — he always cracks his thumb and forefinger. I never see him do it any other time except when he’s trying to avoid giving an explanation about something. This is one of those times. He knows something, but he’s not saying. That means it’s big. And bad.

“I promise, Dad. I’ll lay low. Whatever you need me to do.”

Except I won’t...because I can’t.

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Shaye

Itoss and turn all night after leaving Nico at the hospital, my only comfort coming from the fluffy down comforter blanketing my body. Sunlight streams through a crack in the drawn curtains and I moan, throwing the cover over my head. I have no idea if he was released, if he's home, if he had any internal injuries...nothing. Max didn't say a word about it on the way home, and I didn't dare to ask. I already aroused enough suspicion with my behavior last night. And Max has been acting odd, stranger than usual, especially where Nico is concerned. I don't need to give him any reason to suspect there is anything between us other than friendship. I've seen what Max can do with a tire iron.

How doped up must Nico have been last night to say such insane things to me? As if we could get away with sneaking around. As if we could outright defy our families and have a normal relationship despite who we are and who our fathers are.

It's impossible, but for a few minutes it was nice to believe it could be true.

And then Max's face pops into my mind, the crazed look in his eye sending shivers down my spine. I adore my brother, but he's not the most stable person on two legs. He tries to keep his temper from me, but I have friends...friends who have witnessed things...friends who have filmed things...and said things that have made my stomach turn.

But we don't talk about any of it. He and my dad try to shield me from their business dealings, but I don't exactly live under a rock. I know why they sent me down to Miami. And after that night with Nico, I was more than happy to flee New Jersey.

My phone pings with a text, and I fling the comforter off of me and lunge for it. My heart is caught in my throat for the millisecond that it takes me to enter my passcode. But the text isn't from Nico. It's from Sloane.

I let out a sigh and fall back against the pillows to read the message.

Heading to the gym. Get your ass up and come meet me.

I roll my eyes and reply.

No shot in hell. How about coffee instead?

It takes a second for Sloane to reply, but I know how easily she can be talked out of a workout. Bitch has a ridiculously fast metabolism anyway. She doesn't need to go to the gym this morning. Not when I desperately need my best friend to talk some sense into me before I make a phone call that will cause me a hell of a lot more trouble.

Okay. Coffee first, workout after.

I snicker and reply with my concurrence. Whatever pacifies her. The truth is, I need her help with screwing my head on straight again.

Mafia princes don't typically take to a life of monogamy, and judging by Nico's past selections, I can't believe he'll ever settle down. He'll only settle, and only for a little while.

I roll out of my warm bed and pull on a pair of Lululemon leggings and a matching tank top. I pile my hair on top of my head and head into the bathroom to brush my teeth and dot some concealer under my eyes since I look like Night of the Living Dead right now.

A few minutes later, I run down the stairs with my sneakers in hand. I furrow my brow and walk toward my father's office. The door is closed, but I can hear elevated voices floating into the expansive foyer. High ceilings mean sound carries much farther. I don't even need to press my ear against the door to catch bits of what's being said by my dad.

"Grandfather...respect...Shaye...accident...keep away..."

My eyes widen. Grandfather? Me? What the hell are they talking about?

Max's voice rises, and I can hear everything clearly now although it makes my skin crawl.

"I told you I'll handle him my way!"

I creep closer to the door, my throat tight.

"Max, you need to get your head out of your ass. Do not let your personal feelings about him fuck up your work."

"But, Dad, I need something of my own. I can't be under Nico forever, not when—"

"You've always been so goddamned impatient! Give it time. Build back your reputation and then I can bring you in. Right now, you're too much of a loose cannon. Learn the ropes and stay out of trouble. The time will come."

Max snorts. "I don't need time. I need fucking money!"

"You need a hell of a lot more than that."

I can almost see my father's large frame hovering over Max until he finally pulls

away and concedes, which happens pretty often.

“He’s back, and you need to deal with it, not get yourself ousted from the family.”

“I can’t believe you’re telling me I need to play nice with that motherfucker after what he pulled.”

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I hear a hand slam down on a hard surface. More than likely, my father's hand. "Dammit, Max! You will do exactly what I say, exactly how I say it, or I'll put you on a fucking plane to Sicily!"

"Don't you understand that nobody will take me seriously unless I let them know who they're dealing with? They'll never come to me with business opportunities if I don't show them what I can offer."

"And don't you understand that you'll be the first one with a bullet in your skull if you're not careful? You have to pick the right allies, not continue racking up enemies. You did enough damage with the Luccheses. Your mother..." My dad sighs and I can almost see him scrubbing a hand down his face as he tries to reason with Max, a near impossible feat. "Think of your mother, Maximo. Stick with Nico. He'll take care of you."

Oh fuck. He's using Max's birth name. He must be hella frustrated.

"Fine, Dad. Just remember what happened when you and your best friend used to tag team together. How'd that turn out for you?" I hear a chair scrape against the polished hardwood floor, and I dart into the kitchen without waiting to hear my dad's response, busying myself with a glass of orange juice so they don't suspect that I've heard everything I just did. That last scathing comment was a low blow from Max, and I'm sure it hit my dad hard.

"Sweetie! Are you okay?"

I jump, nearly choking on my sip of the pulpy Tropicana I love so much. "Mom!

When did you guys get home? I didn't hear the door."

"We got home about an hour ago." My mother comes around the island and puts her hands on my shoulders. The scent of her favorite perfume wafts around my head. "I was so upset to hear what happened last night to Nico. The roads are so dangerous. He's lucky it wasn't more serious. If he'd have been going faster, that accident could have been a lot worse."

Accident. Interesting word choice. Something about that whole situation didn't sit well with me. A hit and run. Son of Joe Salesi. Not a word spoken by Max after we left the hospital. His unwillingness to work with Nico, his desire to break away and create his own opportunities, even though nobody wants to work with him because he's got such a short fuse. And then that weird mention of a dinner, one that Nico had no clue about. Max must have wanted to fuck with his head, maybe to make himself feel more empowered. These guys feed on power and control and love to exert it whenever possible. It's a never-ending game of who's got the longest dick.

And based on the heated conversation between my dad and Max a minute ago, it appears that the "accident" might not have been such an accident after all.

A tightness assaults my chest when I allow the next thought to cross my mind. But no...that would be insane. Max wouldn't do something like that...would he? To clear his path, so to speak?

The office door opens, and Max walks out, followed by my father. His dark eyes are fixed on mine and a tiny shiver slithers down my spine. Oh, God, yes, he would. In a freaking heartbeat. Because Max wants what Max wants, what everyone else wants be damned.

I flash a wide smile at my father and rush into his waiting arms. "Morning, Daddy."

He drops a kiss on top of my head. “Morning, sunshine. Headed to the gym?”

“Something like that.” I chuckle and pull away to finish my juice. “How was dinner last night?” It’s an innocent question, but I can see my dad’s spine stiffen while he exchanges a look with Max.

“It was good. We had a really nice time.”

“I’d forgotten about it until Max mentioned it to Nico last night when we ran into him at Starbucks.” This is me playing a very stupid game. I want my dad to know Max was messing with Nico last night for some reason. Despite the falling out Dad had with Joe Salesi, he’s never treated Nico with anything but respect, and Max hates that Dad values his even temper and good business sense. Truth be told, if Max is left to his own devices, he’ll end up face-down in a bloody ditch somewhere. He needs an alliance with Nico, and Dad knows that, even if Max resists.

His jaw sets and he narrows his eyes at Max before returning a relaxed gaze to me. “Yes, Mom and I were invited by a few people who wanted to show us around their new hotel. I’d been involved in the construction, and they wanted to host us for their soft opening. It was only a small group of investors.”

“Oh, that’s cool.” I nod, not daring to look at my brother, even though I could see smoke billowing out of his ears in my periphery. So it really wasn’t anything noteworthy after all. Mom and Dad get invited to those dinners all the time. I wonder if Max knew the real reason behind the invite and still felt the need to mess with Nico. Another power play? “Was it really nice or totally gaudy and overdone?”

“The latter.” My mom laughs into her coffee mug. “But you know we told them how magnificent it was.”

“Of course.” I giggle.

“I’m going to shoot some hoops,” Max grumbles, grabbing a bottle of Gatorade from the fridge and stomping toward the front door.

“What’s his problem?” I ask my dad.

Dad walks around the island and wraps his arms around my mother’s waist, leaning his chin on her shoulder. “You know your brother. He gets himself worked up about nonsense, never sees the big picture.”

Yep, that’s Max. To a T. And it’s why he keeps fighting the small bullshit battles instead of concentrating on the future. It’s how he’s always been. Always tactical, never strategic. I think that’s why Dad wants to keep him linked to Nico. He knows it’s Max’s only shot at actually having a future bigger than being someone’s hired gun.

“He’s wound up pretty tight these days. I worry about him.”

Mom nods. “We all do, sweetie. I feel like Vito’s death hit him pretty hard. But it’s good you’re home for a while. He really misses you, so maybe having you around will calm him down.”

I drain the remaining juice from my glass and put it into the sink. My chest tightens at the mention of Nico’s grandfather. He was beloved by everyone, and he’d always been so thoughtful and patient and kind to me and Max throughout our lives. It was hard to believe he’d been the boss of one of the biggest crime families in the tri-state area for so many years. “I’ll do my best to get him out of his funk.” I smile and give a little wave. “Later!”

“Have a great day, honey. And be careful, it’s still very icy.”

“I will, Mom. Love you guys!”

“Love you, too,” my parents respond in unison. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see them hugging and smiling at each other, murmuring things I have no desire to know anything about. But it’s nice to see how solid they are as a couple. At least, I hope they’re that solid. In our type of family, things are never what they seem.

Nico

Idrag my ass out of bed, wincing as I throw my legs over the side. The pain is fucking crippling, but I refuse to fill the prescription they gave me. In my line of work, you need to be aware of everything around you at all times. The last thing I need is to be operating in some kind of a hazy fog today of all days.

I squint at the clock on my nightstand and let out a groan. It's already ten o'clock. By the time I got out of the hospital, it was around two in the morning. Dad dropped me off and offered to stay here, but I sent him home. It's more important that he's with Mom and Lily. I can take care of myself. I have my trusty bat along with an assortment of handguns. You know, just in case. Never can tell when you'll need one, not that I've used any of them to do harm to an actual person. I've been trained for years, but never had a reason to plug anyone.

Until now. There are people who don't think I deserve my role in this family, that I got it by default because of my father and grandfather. I didn't earn this position, even though I earned plenty of money for all of the naysayers rooting against me.

They aren't concerned with the money. They want to see the blood on my hands. That's what would qualify me for my role as an underboss in their eyes. Being a legacy doesn't hold much water, and I know it's only a matter of time before I need to prove myself to these goons.

I rub my aching temples. Jesus, I've never had a hangover that gave me a headache like this. But deep down I know it's stress more than anything else. Stress, and whatever the fuck shit I spouted to Shaye last night in the hospital. They doped me up

pretty good from what the nurses told me, but I know exactly what came out of my mouth, and I meant every word. But I don't know if I was coherent enough that Shaye understood what I was saying.

I stagger into the bathroom, cringing with each step, and start the shower while I brush my teeth. Shaye's face flashes in front of my eyes, her expressive blue eyes, soft blonde waves with the pink-dyed tips, her pouty lips...the ones I want wrapped around my now-throbbing cock... A groan escapes my mouth as I hobble to the sink. Christ, I don't have time to jerk off to that choice fantasy right now. I've got bigger issues to deal with, like finding out who the hell mauled me last night.

I brush my teeth, shower, and throw on some clothes. Since my Range Rover was smashed beyond repair, I grab the keys to my Audi R8. I can't hang around here like a sitting duck. I need to figure out who the hell steamrolled me last night and why.

My phone pings with a text just as I walk out the door. I look down, expecting it to be the notification about my driver, but it's a text from Max.

I rub the back of my stiff neck. What the hell would my best friend do if he found out that I'm about to negotiate a job for his arch rival?

I'm pretty sure that betrayal is a gross understatement, punishable exclusively by machete.

Best friend or not.

I slide into the driver's seat and pull the door closed. The engine roars to life once I press the button on the dashboard.

The time has come to move on. For me, anyway. Before Grandpa passed away, he went through his whole plan with me, what would happen once I take over the family

down the line. He always kept me under his wing, always made sure everyone knew who I was and how successful I'd become. Let's just say I have a lot of friends now, and Dad wants me to start flexing my muscles to remind them of everything I bring to the table.

The Orianis are floundering right now without Grandpa around. He'd always kept a watch over them...maybe to keep them in line...and maybe now they're trying to get shit in order since they're on their own now. Tony has only Max to rely on, so he must be shitting bricks about the future of his family. Maybe that's what the dinner in Atlantic City was about. Strategizing about their livelihood and trying to figure out how not to wind up at the bottom of the East River since he's got no protection.

I pull up to the curb outside of the club, maneuver the car into an empty space, and slide out. I grab my key ring from my pocket and unlock the front door, flipping on a light switch so I don't crash into any of the tables and chairs that have been moved so the floor could be cleaned after what was evidently a pretty crazy night.

I shoot off a quick text to Max letting him know he can come in around two this afternoon to prep for tonight's A-lister event. Rocco should be here any minute, and I don't need Max showing up unannounced during this meeting.

I grab a bottle of water from the fridge in my office, twist off the cap, and take a long gulp before collapsing into my chair. So much plagues my mind on a daily basis when I really only want to think about one thing.

Will I ever get the chance to be happy? I mean, really happy, not just the bullshit happy façade I put on for random strangers. Because who in my position wouldn't be genuinely happy with this existence?

But they don't know the truth, and while the truth is supposed to set you free, my truth will get me strung up by the balls and dangled over the side of a building.

I love running my own show, but I'm damn tired of this life. I want it all, and I'm not willing to sacrifice for it anymore. I tried to battle these crazy thoughts, especially since Grandpa saw so much potential in me. I wanted him to be proud and to have faith that I could carry on his legacy, and he'd probably be rolling around in his grave if he knew what was stewing in my mind right now.

You have a lot of responsibilities, Nico.

I know it. Mom, Dad, Lily...they're all counting on me to do the right thing for the family. I need to protect them and their interests. It can't be about me and what I want. That's not how this works. It's only about the family. It's always been that way.

But if I want to be with Shaye, I'd have to give it all up and walk away.

Except that's not an option. I'm stuck on the inside with no available exits.

"Fuck!" I slam a hand on my desk, scattering papers over the surface. I know what's expected of me, and as much as I want to run away from it all, I can't. Not yet. Not unless—

"Good morning to you, too, Nico." Rocco appears in the doorway holding two cups of coffee. "Figured you could use this after the night you had, yeah?"

I scrub a hand over my face. "Thanks." I grasp the hot cup he holds out, my brow furrowing. "How did you find out?"

Rocco drops into the chair in front of my desk. "You know, shit gets around pretty fast. It's a real bitch that the SUV got away. Cocksucker."

I take a small sip of coffee. He wouldn't have poisoned it. Not yet, anyway. He needs

me. But I'd sure like to know who told him it was an SUV that plowed into me. Especially since I was alone on the road. I don't trust this guy, and I hate like hell that I have to work with him.

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Responsibilities. They just plain suck.

“So, what’s going on with you and Shaye? You two seemed pretty cozy at the mall yesterday.”

“Did you notice that before or after you kidnapped my sister?”

Rocco snickers. “Come on, we’re back to that? I was just trying to help you out. You left the kid by herself in the middle of an arcade. If I didn’t step in, someone else might have.” He cocks an eyebrow at me. “And that would be a fucking horrible thing, don’t you think?”

My fingers grip the cup so tight, I’m afraid the plastic lid might pop off at any second. “She was safe in there before you accosted her.”

Rocco shrugs. “I don’t know, you sure seemed freaked out when you came running over. It sucks when you lose control, huh? When it’s yanked away from you with no hope of recovering it?”

I put down the coffee cup and lean forward, my voice low and menacing. “Rocco, I’m doing this as a favor to your family. You get that, right? I don’t need you, you need me. That means you play by my rules and for my team. Don’t ask me about my personal life and don’t fucking go near my family.” I sit back and force my lips upward, knowing as well as he does that this is a win-win for both of us. But I’m still playing my hand like the ruthless asshole I’m reputed to be. “Can you handle that? Because if you can’t, walk the fuck out of here right now.”

Rocco grins at me. “Yeah, I can handle it just fine. Hey, so if you’re not nailing Shaye, maybe I’ll take a shot at her. Is that cool? Is that ‘playing by your rules’? Or is she off-limits, too? Because if I can get into Max’s head through his sister’s pussy, I’ll gladly take that path and enjoy every fucking step along the way.”

I grit my teeth. I’ll fucking kill him and make it look like an accident if he goes near her. “Do you want to be skewered by him?”

“Eh, fuck him. He’s a crazy bastard.”

“He’s my best friend, and you’re talking about his sister.”

“And you don’t like that.”

“No.”

“Okay. I’ve got it. You’re icing out your best friend to help out my family. Is that how loyalty works in your mind, Nico? Fucking over the guy who’s always been there for you for the one who can keep you in power? How do you think he’s gonna feel when he finds out about this meeting? I know your dad has been talking to mine about the new structure of the organization, and how my dad has a lot to gain by sticking close to you. What’s Tony Oriani got to gain? What about Max, for that matter?” He inches closer, a nasty smile on his tanned face. “You think I don’t know why this is happening? Yeah, I need a job, but you need us more, isn’t that true? You know we bring the muscle, while you’re busy empire-building. The Orianis are trying to do the same thing, yeah? Is this a game to see who can build theirs faster? Maybe I need to examine my options a little closer if I’m such a hot commodity.”

Blood bubbles beneath the surface, and my fist twitches, anxious to connect with this fucking guy’s jaw and knock him flat out on the floor. “You really think the other families will be fighting for the chance to hire you after you stole so much from one

of their own?”

“You’re willing to overlook the past. Why wouldn’t they do the same thing in exchange for the power?”

I cannot fucking do this. There has to be another way. I will find another goddamn way to take care of my family, and it sure as shit won’t involve the Luccheses.

I shove back my chair and stand up, ready to do something I should have done as soon as he strutted in here. Grandpa must be getting a good laugh over this shit show. I can almost hear him taunting me. “Serves you guys right. Shouldn’t have brought back the little cocksucker. Shoulda let him rot in California. Screw it, Grandpa would have found another way, too. I’ll deal with my father later. Right now, it’s time for this asshole to vacate. And I’ll be happy to escort him through a window if need be. “Interesting, because from where I’m standing, you have only one option right now. It’s to get the hell out of my office.”

A look of panic flickers across Rocco’s face for the briefest of seconds and disappears almost as quickly as it appeared. “You know what we bring to the table, Nico. Don’t make a fucking colossal mistake right now. You have too much to lose, and I’ll make sure it happens. Not. One. Fucking. Thing. Left. To. Your. Name.”

I circle his chair like a predator eyeing his next meal. “Everybody makes mistakes, Rocco. Yours got you kicked out of New Jersey. Care to try your luck again? And trust me, banishment will be the least of your concerns when I’m done with you.”

Rocco rises from the chair, a full head shorter than me. I lean over him, eyes narrowed, jaw set. Still, he doesn’t back down. “That’s the thing about not having anything to lose, Nico. Your bullshit threats don’t scare me.”

“No, but I bet your father will see things differently. He always was the more sensible

one. Maybe I should have met with him.”

“Fuck you!”

“Get out, Rocco. We’re done.”

“If I walk, you’re screwed, Nico. You know it, and I know it. And I think you know what’ll happen next.”

“Yeah, I’ll get to keep my self-respect and my reputation will remain intact. Thanks for reminding me what a fuck-up you are.”

“Your self-respect and reputation won’t mean shit when your business folds and you watch everything you worked for go up in smoke,” he sneers, grabbing his coat and stomping out of the club.

I wander out of my office, a deep sigh deflating my shoulders. Entitled prick. He knew exactly what he was doing when he came in here. I know I should have played the game according to my father’s rules. It’s what I do, what I’ve always done. But not this time.

Today, I played by my own rules. Today, I let Rocco know who’s in charge, who’s not afraid of his idle threats, who’s in complete control. And he can take that message back to his father on a fucking silver platter. Nobody plays me — not on my turf, not anywhere.

I want it all, and I’m not willing to take a loss.

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I grab my iPhone and study the screen, tracing my fingertip over Shaye's face, a picture I'd snapped before she left for school months ago. I took it because I needed to see a real smile on her face, to capture that memory forever since I knew I'd never see it again.

I was wrong. I did see it again. Last night. And I want to see it every night from now on as she's spread out before me in my bed.

I've spent my whole life wanting, pursuing, and claiming. I'm tired of the chase, sick of always having to look over my shoulder. I've made a great life for myself, but it's an empty shell without meaning. It's nothing without Shaye. And when I go after what I want this time, it's gonna put my ass on the chopping block. But it's a risk I'm willing to take because she's worth it.

My finger hovers over the keyboard and a smile lifts my lips.

I need to see you.

A few seconds later, I receive a reply from Shaye.

You sound desperate. I figured all the drugs they pumped into you last night would make you tired.

Sleep is overrated. I can think of so many other things that I'd rather be doing with my eyes wide open. With YOU.

A minute passes, and I drum my fingertips on the bar as I wait for her response.

Patience has never been my forte, and since I just put my neck on the line, I really need to know that she's in this with me as much as I am with her.

Are you sure this is what you want, Nico?

Yeah. I've never been more certain about anything in my life.

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Shaye

“So, you’re just going to go? He texts, and you go running? Didn’t that bite you in the ass the other night when you handed over your V-card to him?” Sloane cocks an eyebrow, her hands on her hips in the center of my bedroom. “What kind of message does that send?”

I let out a sigh and rummage through my underwear drawer. I want him to peel me out of something other than the granny panties I’m currently sporting. Something pretty and glittery since it’s New Year’s Eve. “Look, I know what you’re thinking. Heck, I’ve been burned enough to know that this may be a very bad idea. But I need to see him. I need to know if this is real, or if it’s all in my mind.”

“And you think that letting him screw you senseless is going to make it real?” Sloane shakes her head. “I’ll tell you one thing. The rejection will be real, and it’s going to hurt like a bitch.”

I slap my hands against my legs. “Why do you have to be so fucking logical all the time?”

Sloane grins. “Hey, I’m the one who’s supposed to talk you out of stupid choices. And you’re going to do what you want to do, but I’ll rest easier at night knowing I tried to prevent your subsequent emotional distress.”

I snicker. “And who’s the psych major here?”

Sloane flops onto my bed and watches me shimmy into a low-cut, black jersey top.

“Well, at least you’re going to get laid. That’s something.”

“It’s not about that.” I smooth the front of the shirt and fluff out my hair. “Not at all. I just need to know once and for all if this thing between us is real. It’s not felt real with anyone else since I left for Miami.”

“How the hell are you going to even know? He’s never been straight with you, sweetie. He throws you a few crumbs and then when you lap them up, he goes running. What the hell is that all about?”

I sink down next to her on my frilly pink bedspread and trace the outline of the Eiffel Tower embroidered on the fabric. Lord, I have plenty of fantasies stored up involving me and Nico at the top, savoring everything French and fabulous...wine, cheese, baguettes, and lots of kissing. “I know you think I’m making a mistake, and maybe that’s true. But I have to find out if there’s something there, Sloane. If not, I can finally start the next chapter of my life. Hell, he’s taken up so many chapters I’m going to need to start a whole new book!” I grasp her hand and squeeze. “You’re my best friend, and I love you more than anything. But I’m going to do this. I’m going to see him.”

“And what happens if he pulls the same shit he’s done every time before this? If I can’t save you now, I sure as hell won’t be able to save you then.”

“I know, and I’m so thankful to have you looking out for me.”

“But you’re still going.”

I nod, a small smile tugging at the corners of my lips. “I’m still going.”

Sloane stands up and throws her hands into the air. “Okay, then. You’re a big girl. You seem to know what you’re doing, even though I think we both know you’re full

of crap. And I'll still be around to pick up the pieces if you need me to."

I pull her in for a quick hug and squeeze her tight. "What would I do without you?"

"I put together a list. I'll text it to you."

"God, I love you so much." I giggle and link my arm with hers. "I'm sorry for bailing on you tonight. I know we planned a big New Year's Eve celebration together with lots of hot chocolate, chick flicks, and Oreos."

"Well, lucky for you, I have a replacement date waiting in the wings. A big ol' pile of textbooks." Sloane snickers as we walk down the stairs. "It's gonna be a steamy one, so yeah. Please don't keep me from getting down and dirty with those."

"Oh my God, what an image! I'm already getting hot just thinking about it!" I giggle, tripping into her just as we step into the dimly lit foyer. I reach out to grab her arm before she stumbles into a sofa table, but I reach out a second too late. Luckily for her, Max steps out of the shadows in time for her to slam right into his massive chest.

"Max!" She gasps, jumping back.

"What's up, creeper?" I hip-check him as I walk past. "Everything okay?"

He grunts a response but never tears his eyes from Sloane's face. It's not a warm and fuzzy look either. It's cold, angry, and...something else...could it be? Hurt? Disappointment? It sure doesn't look like they had a few casual dates and then amicably parted ways. It looks...angsty.

Sloane can't seem to drag her eyes away from Max either, not that she's uttered a single syllable since she crash-landed against him.

I furrow my brow. Jesus, the tension in here is choking me, how are they still breathing? Watching this is so much better than any Netflix drama.

Sloane's lips lift, and I can see a spark ignite deep within her bright green eyes. "You look nice," she murmurs to Max.

"Event at the club," he replies. No return smile, and his words are void of tone and emotion. He gives her absolutely nothing. I wonder if he'll shut down in the same way when I hit him with my long list of questions as soon as she leaves.

"Oh, well, have fun." The look of dismay on her face isn't lost on me. Holy crap, she really does have it bad. When did she go from the little girl who used to catch worms to put in Max's shoes to the woman who is about to melt into a pile of goo under his hard stare?

I narrow my eyes at them. And why does this not at all resemble the scenario she painted for me over coffee? She made it seem like they went out and things just fizzled. But there is so much electricity in here right now, it could probably power the whole block.

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I make a mental note to call her out on her bullshit tomorrow. Someone is going to tell me what the hell is going on here.

Sloane clears her throat and slowly turns her head in my direction, almost like she's fighting against a pull so strong, she might have to use her hands to help out. "I, um, I should go. Have fun tonight. Call me tomorrow." She manages a smile, and with one last, longing look directed at Max, she pulls open the front door, inviting a whoosh of cold air to assault us until she slams it closed behind her.

Max doesn't say a word. He just stares at the door. It's not like him to watch things happen. He's usually the catalyst in all the action, so seeing him like this is a little unnerving.

"Max? Something you want to tell me?"

He turns, and now I see it. Plain as day. Holy crap.

"What do you mean?" He picks a piece of lint off of his black jacket, avoiding my eyes.

"You couldn't keep your eyes off of Sloane a few seconds ago, and yet you let her leave this house without so much as a smile. What gives? Did something happen while I was away?" I hedge a bet, not wanting to betray my best friend's confidence, but desperate for Max's perspective. God, I would love to see them end up together.

"Nothing worth mentioning." Max pushes past me and heads for the kitchen, but if he thinks I'm going to let this go, he's more insane than I thought.

“Okay, so something did happen, like past tense?” I wait, but he remains silent as he pulls out a bottle of water from the refrigerator. A loud sigh escapes my lips. “You know, it’d be nice to know what the hell I’ve missed over the past few months. Nobody is talking? Really?”

Max shrugs. “It’s no big deal. We ran into each other before Thanksgiving and went out a few times. That’s it.”

“It sure seems like there’s more to the story.”

“Not on my end.” He gulps the last of the water, my signal that big bro is finished talking. About Sloane, anyway. “Hey, have you heard from Nico today? I know he’s still battling a lot of shit, but he’s been pretty radio silent all day, and we have that New Year’s Eve event at the club tonight. He told me when to be there, but he’s gone fucking dark.”

My throat tightens, and I grip the corner of the granite island in the center of the kitchen to steady myself. “No, I haven’t heard from him at all. Not since the other night. Maybe he’s just working through things on his own. You know he doesn’t like to open up.” Yeah, I’m pretty well aware of that fact, too, which makes me question why the hell I’m even going to see him. He doesn’t do relationships or feelings. It’s just the way he’s built. Maybe it’s because of the family he was born into, maybe because he realizes that getting too tangled up in emotion is the surest way to lose focus or to expose vulnerability. This life has hardened him, made him the man he is today. He used to be different, but that was a long time ago.

Max stares at me and I shift in my boots, hoping to God he doesn’t see right through my lame explanation. “You look nice. Where are you headed tonight?”

“A couple of my friends from school are meeting at a bar in the city, and I’m going to meet them.”

He nods. “And you didn’t invite Sloane? You’re letting her spend tonight by herself?”

“Of course, I invited her, but she’s working on a paper for school so she took a rain check.”

Another nod. “I can give you a lift if you want to head into the city now. You shouldn’t be driving tonight.”

“Oh, um, thanks, but I need to get some work done, too. I’m only dressed now because Sloane came over to do my hair and makeup. I’m not leaving for a while. I’ll take an Uber.” Jeez, can I shut the heck up already because I’m digging this hole deeper with every breath?

“Okay. Well, be safe. I’ll probably be at the club late, but text me if you need a ride home.”

“Thanks. I’ll probably leave earlier than you, but I’ll text you for sure if I need a ride.”

He grins at me and gives me a little punch in the shoulder. “You look pretty good. Sloane did a halfway decent job on you.”

I roll my eyes. “Gee, thanks. What a vote of confidence.”

He leans against the counter. “Do me a favor.”

“Anything.”

“Stay away from Lucchese.”

I furrow my brow. “That’s so out of left field, Max. What’s the matter with Rocco?”

“I just don’t trust the guy, and I don’t want you anywhere around him.”

“Okay.” My thoughts rewind to the mall kidnapping incident with Lily. I was so flustered that I couldn’t focus much on anything besides finding Lily and deflecting Nico’s advances. “I did see him the other day at the mall. I ran into Nico and Lily, and he showed up. Said something about a meeting.”

Max narrows his eyes. “What kind of meeting?”

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“He didn’t give me the itinerary, if that’s what you mean.” I let out a snort. “He seemed off, but that’s just Rocco.”

“And Nico had nothing to say about this meeting?”

“No.” I left out the part where I darted away as fast as I could even though Nico kept convincing me to stay and to give him a chance...to give us a chance. From the look on my brother’s face, I can tell that information wouldn’t bode well for Nico. Or me, for that matter.

He slams a fist onto the granite. “Goddammit,” he mutters.

“What’s wrong? Is there something going on?”

His dark brown eyes, the ones that spit fire only seconds ago, now just seem sad. “I’m really glad you got out, Shaye. I hate like hell that you’re not here, but you can make a great life for yourself down in Miami. Sometimes, I...” He rakes a hand through his hair. “I’d love the chance to take a breath, too.”

I tug on a long curl and wind it around my finger. He sounds pretty defeatist right now. Not at all like the Maximo who plans to conquer the world. “You’re not stuck here, Max. You know that.”

He nods. “I know that I have responsibilities, Shaye. And that I can’t just restart every time I mess up. I have to keep playing the game. I can’t get out.”

Funny how he thinks that my ‘getting out’ is as easy as hopping a plane to another

state. I thought the same thing. I was so very wrong.

Nico

Three soft little knocks at the front door have me springing off the couch like my ass is on fire. Channel surfing has done little to keep my mind off of work. Even in the quiet peace of my own home, the feeling of being slowly suffocated always manages to consume me. Maybe that's why I asked Shaye to come over. Maybe having Shaye in my bed will chase away everything that plagues me on a nightly basis. Or maybe I just need her because she fills the void that has been eating away at my heart since she stepped onto that plane months ago.

I walk to the front door and pull it open. My lips curl upward just seeing her on my stoop, almost as if I've been given confirmation that she wants this as badly as I do. "Hey," I murmur, holding out a hand.

She takes it and steps inside, kicking off the short boot things she's wearing. I eye the heel and wonder how she managed to avoid breaking her neck on the ice on my driveway and front walkway, but she's a girl, and they seem to have some magical power over the elements when it comes to wearing heels. "Hey," she says, a tinge of pink coloring her cheeks.

I reach up and slide the beanie off of her head, freeing her blonde waves. They flow around her shoulders, which I decide I need to see more of right at this moment. I unbutton her coat, and she shrugs it off, revealing a low-cut black top that gives me an insta-hard-on.

But the art of restraint is one that I perfected long ago. I want more than anything to feel her soft skin under my fingertips, to feel the curves of her body pressed against

me, to hear her moans of pleasure when I fill her with everything I have to give.

She needs to know this is more than sex, that I want so much more than that.

I want it all, and she's it.

We may only have a few weeks before she goes back to Miami, but I'm not letting her go until she believes, to her very core, that this thing between us is the forever kind. And that leaves me with a lot of convincing to do.

I hang her coat on the rack, and cup her face with my hands, bringing my mouth down to hers. I graze them slowly. The flavor of bubble gum lingers on her lips, reminding me of that sweet innocence, the one I took away from her only days before.

No, this is so much more than just sex.

"I'm glad you came," I whisper against her mouth, unwilling to drag myself away from that kiss but knowing that if I continue, I'll lose control of my body. I've already lost control of my heart, so I don't have much left to cling to at this point.

She gazes up at me, quiet for a second. I can see a lot of apprehension in those half-hooded blue eyes, and I want to chase it all away. There's only one way to do that, and it isn't carrying her up to my bedroom. Not yet, anyway.

"I'm still not sure why I'm here, Nico."

"I needed to see you."

She cocks her head to the side, the long pink tips grazing the side of her breast. I try hard not to look because if I let my eyes linger there for one second too long, I'll

forget about my plans and slide that shirt right off of her shoulders. “I know, but this is dangerous. And stupid. And—”

“Perfect.” My hands move from her face down to her arms. “That’s what comes to my mind, Shaye.”

Her eyes widen, mouth agape. “I wasn’t expecting that...from you.”

I drop my head, nuzzling her ear, inhaling the sweet fruity scent of her hair. My head is woozy, as if I’m drunk on the emotions coursing through me, and I don’t know how to respond. I’ve always been in complete control of everything, especially my feelings. I have no tells, and I like it that way. It gives me an edge. But with Shaye, I have no advantage. She may think I hold the cards, but she’s wrong. So dead wrong.

Shaye presses her body into me, tilting her head back, giving my lips full access to the smooth column of her neck. They tingle with temptation, but I cannot give in to the urge. She doesn’t trust me. I can tell she wants to, but I haven’t done much to convince her that I’m not the guy she thinks I am, the guy I was so long ago.

Life has hardened me, and I don’t like who I’ve become. Obligation has filled me with regret. I don’t expect her to believe in me right away. Hell, I’ve given her plenty of reasons to run in the opposite direction, but yet here she is, plastered against me...so close that I can feel the quick beat of her heart in time with my own.

“I know what I want.” My fingers tangle in her soft waves, my cock straining against my jeans. It’s a silent plea for release, but tonight isn’t about me. It’s about her.

She leans her head against my chest. “This is a bad idea. I can’t...I won’t be able to...I’m leaving soon, and...I mean, what if someone finds out? Max will murder you. My father will probably murder me...”

I tilt her chin up so I can gaze deep into her soulful eyes. There was always so much going on in her expressions. It was something I'd grown to love about her. Unlike me, she could never hide her true feelings. Or play poker, for that matter. Tells. She has them all. And tonight is no exception. "Shaye, you knew the risks when you came over here."

"I didn't ever claim to be the brightest bulb in the chandelier, did I?" She puffs out her chest and cocks an eyebrow, her lips in a half-smirk. Her snarky tone coupled with that come-hither look is sexy as fuck. I have to clench my fists to keep myself from throwing her on my couch and stripping her bare.

Good God, I want to shove my dick in her mouth so badly right now...

I close the space between us, hovering over her, trying to prove...what, exactly? That she can bring me to my knees with a flip of her hair? That she always could, even though I've never let on to it? I've never allowed myself to be so affected by a woman, and when she left for Miami, I told myself a million times over it was for the best. Being in love with your best friend's sister is bad enough, but when it's Maximo Oriani's little sister? That's grounds for complete and utter decimation in his eyes.

"Tell me something." I place my hands on her shoulders. "Are the risks worth it? The sneaking around, the lying...does it change the way you feel? Does it change what you want?"

She doesn't move. Not a single muscle. She just stares me down, even though I have two hands on her. My chest is so tight. There were never any promises made, not on either of our parts. She's still leaving...moving on from this life. I'm staying behind, immersed in an existence I was plunged into without a thought. Only Shaye can yank me out. She's my lifeline. She's fucking everything, and I can't let her leave until she knows it.

I have to figure out how to make this thing between us work while she's in Miami. I won't let her slip through my fingers again, and I'll wait as long as it takes for her to come back to me.

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A smile finally plays at her shiny lips, and I slowly expel the breath I suddenly realize I've been holding. "You know, I've always put off happiness, Nico. Always moving forward with my life, always making plans and having things to look forward to. Do you know why?"

I shake my head. "Tell me."

She bites her lower lip and stares at the floor for a long minute before speaking. "It's because the one thing that made me truly happy was out of reach. So, I compensated by looking toward other things that could bring me some satisfaction. It was my way of dealing with my feelings, and it's worked for me."

"But?"

"But I don't want to live that way anymore."

"I don't either."

She furrows her brow but says nothing. She has no idea the torture that I've survived all of these years, being so close but never able to reach out and really touch her. Even that night before she left for school...I didn't let her in. I couldn't. And not because of Max or her father. I don't live the kind of life that ends with a happily ever after. There is always too much danger lurking, too many goons with axes to grind, too many power hungry cocksuckers who have nothing to lose. If I'd given in to those feelings, the ones I've been harboring for as long as I can remember, then I'd have something to lose.

And losing Shaye because of choices I've made and people I've crossed...I just couldn't live with that.

So I made a conscious, logical, and rational choice to let her go.

Burying the temptation to just walk away from everything was easy once Shaye got on that plane, and I dealt with my circumstances...until she came back and sent my whole world into complete upheaval. She makes me realize what I've been missing, what I could have in return for all of the money, toys, and power.

And I like the alternative. A lot.

SHAYE

I just boremy soul to this guy, yet again. How much more am I going to give him, for Christ's sake? Or maybe the more apropos question is how much more is he going to take from me?

But I can't hold back when it comes to Nico. I never could. It's why I ended up in his arms so many months ago...and then again the other night...and here I am, back for more of whatever he's willing to give me tonight.

I keep hoping he's going to be the one to say the words, but somehow, they all end up tumbling out of my big mouth. Hashtag no filter. Yep, that's me.

"I'm sorry, Shaye. For everything."

"I didn't come here for apologies. I knew what I was doing." I take a few steps back, because the closer he gets, the readier I am to leap into his arms. And I need to practice some restraint, dammit! I'm just as bad as those Moreno twins. Blech.

“Yeah, but I didn’t know what I was doing. I haven’t for a while.” He averts his eyes, running a hand through his tousled, dark hair. I bite the inside of my mouth, watching his fingers drag through the glossy mess of strands. I flex my fingers to eradicate the twitching sensation of wanting to replace his fingers with my own. God, I want to devour every inch of this man. I want to trace over the cuts of muscle that lay under his clothes, I want to lick each and every indentation along his arms and across his chest. But most of all, I want to taste those perfect lips. I want to feel them command my mouth, my neck, my breasts, and oh God, so much more...

My body temperature climbs about fifty degrees as my mind drifts into the land of salaciousness that is Nico Salesi. No, no, no...I really need to focus here, and not on the carnal desires that have been plaguing me at night while I sleep in my bed. Alone.

“Shaye...” His low, gravelly voice rumbles through me, sending quakes of excitement and anticipation rippling through me.

“Yes?” I whisper. My knees wobble slightly, and I lean back against the banister to steady myself, not convinced I’d be able to control my urges if I grabbed onto Nico instead. No, the banister is a much safer, albeit sobering, option. It will keep me standing upright and won’t make me tingle in places that will cloud my already questionable judgement.

“Do you want some hot chocolate?”

My jaw drops. He knows me too well.

Swiss Miss just happens to be my other kryptonite. Any time I’d been sad about something when I was younger, my mom would always make it for me. It never failed to put a smile on my face. Except that one time Nico attempted to make it just like Mom did...

He failed. Pretty miserably, since he made it with water instead of milk.

“I have the Marshmallow Lover’s kind.” His lips curl into a smirk.

“Yeah, but are they—?”

“Yep. They are. All of your favorite colors.”

I tap a finger against my mouth, pretending to consider his offer even though I know that diluting these sick, lustful fantasies with a little bit of cocoa is a damn smart idea.

“Well, then. Look who’s all prepared for visitors.”

“Not just any visitors, Shaye.” His eyes sear a hole into my soul. “Just you.”

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“Oh,” I breathe. God, it’s almost too easy for him to own every part of me, body and soul. Maybe I need something a little more...impenetrable.

Eh, what kind of fun would that be?

Nico leads me into his massive kitchen, and I sit on one of the stools surrounding his granite island. I trace a finger over the shiny stone where the dim, overhead light reflects off of the flecks of gold in the pattern. “New pots?” I point a finger to the set of copper pots hanging from the center of the ceiling.

“Yeah.” He shrugs and puts a kettle on the Wolf cooktop, flicking the bright red knob on high to heat the milk since that’s the only way I’d ever drink hot chocolate and Nico knows that all too well. He snickers and collapses onto the stool next to me. “Remember the first time I made you hot chocolate?”

A giggle escapes my lips. “I was just thinking about that. I still feel kinda bad about it.”

“I just wanted to see you smile. I felt really bad when you tripped over my bike and scraped up your knees, but you didn’t even appreciate the gesture. You just spit it out and cried. It was pretty brutal. I didn’t know anyone could fuck up hot chocolate that badly.” He shakes his head.

“Well, I was only eight, so you know, you could cut me some slack. Especially all these years later.”

“It was then that I realized how high maintenance women could be.”

“Really? It took you that long, huh?”

“I never paid much attention before that. Never really had to, you know? There was only one girl I wanted to please.”

I swallow hard, the growing lump in my throat making it increasingly difficult to breathe. “She was lucky to have had all of your attention back then.”

“I was lucky to have had hers.” Nico drums his fingertips on the countertop and looks at the stove where the kettle whistles a happier tune than the one inside my heart. All of this reminiscing can only lead to one thing, the same thing that drove me away from here, and I don’t know if I can relive that. I was doing fine in Florida where the bright sunshine artificially gave my life the light it’s been missing for so long. I’d been trying to heal instead of lamenting. Now, I’m back in the center of the chaos I’d long forgotten, and the stitches I’d carefully sewn, attempting to stem the heartache, are carelessly being torn out. It hurts, and hot chocolate won’t make it better.

“But you didn’t want it, Nico.” I’m shocked that my voice isn’t quivering like my knees are right now. Somehow, by the grace of God, it’s calm, strong, and assured. I show no signs of crumbling. Yet.

“I was stupid. It was stupid.” He turns away from me and pours the hot liquid into a pink mug. My pink mug, the one he’d bought for me when he got this house. It has my name on it. I wonder what his overnight guests think of that when they go to grab a mug for morning-after coffee. I nibble at a stray cuticle. Actually, on second thought, I’ll bet there’s no morning-after anything, knowing Nico. His shoulders sag with a deep sigh as he walks toward me with the steaming hot cocoa.

“I don’t understand,” I say, gripping the handle when I really want to claw his eyes out for that last statement.

He scrubs a hand down the front of his face, his expression pained and pinched. “Nothing about this works, Shaye. It never did, and I knew that. But I still managed to hurt you because I couldn’t walk away. I still can’t.”

I leap off the stool. A sob builds deep in my chest, and it’s only a matter of time before it explodes out of my mouth. But no fucking way will I let that happen before I get these next words out, the ones I’ve been harboring for so long. “Then why am I even here? You should have just told me all of this the night in the hospital and been done with it! Instead, you’ve been trying to convince me that this can happen, that you want it to happen!” I spin around, searching for something, anything to hurl at him. I can’t even find a goddamn pen to stab him with. Sadistic asshole. “Do you enjoy treating me like a damn yo-yo? Is this how you entertain yourself? Or is it really just about the chase for you? You get what you want from me and then you put it out with the trash when you’re done?”

He stands up and puts his hands on my shoulders. “Stop,” he murmurs, pulling me close. “You don’t understand. I do want this to happen, Shaye. That’s why I called you. I made such a mistake letting you go. But the pressure...it’s so fucking stifling. I never know who’s staking me out. I don’t know who’s got my back anymore. I don’t know if everything I’ve worked so hard to build is going to crash and burn because one of my associates fucks me over. I’ve seen all of this happen to my dad. I know what he’s battling now, and I know it’s only a matter of time before it happens to me.”

“But...”

“But I don’t care. Right now, at this second, I don’t give a flying fuck about anything except you.” He runs a hand down my spine, pressing the small of my back into him. “And for all of that, I’m a selfish bastard, Shaye. I need to care about all of this shit because you mean everything to me. I can’t put you in danger, and I can’t say you’ll ever be completely safe under my care. I’d do anything to make it so, but I can’t.”

Tears pool in my eyes. “I’ll never be safe, Nico. You know that. As long as I’m Tony Oriani’s daughter—”

He nods, swiping away the lone tear that trickles from my eye. “But this is different. I’d be responsible for you, and if anything ever fucking happened to you, to our family, our kids...it would kill me, Shaye. Kill me.”

Our kids. Our kids? I’m so freaking confused right now. I feel like this is one long therapy session and the couple of classes I’ve taken haven’t exactly prepared me for this kind of emotional outpouring, especially from the guy I’ve cursed for the better part of the past four months. “Nico,” I whisper. “This is our life. It’s all we have ever known. It has its good parts and bad parts, but we both know that nobody is ever truly safe in it, regardless of what side of the family tree they stand on. Why should we fight something we both want because of the fear of what might happen?” I reach upward, my hand snaking around the back of his neck, gently grazing the skin with my fingernails.

He lets out a little moan. “That’s not fair. You know I can’t think when you do that.”

“I think it’s time to stop thinking.” I stroke his neck harder, and he pulls me against his chest, a low growl tumbling from his lips. “Just feel, Nico. I want you to feel me, and I need to feel you. Please. Tell me everything I need to know about what we are doing by not saying another word, okay?”

He nods, dipping his head so that our foreheads touch. When his lips crash against mine, I swear I can feel the panties evaporate from my body. His mouth is just that freaking powerful.

His tongue coils with mine...hot, hungry, and intense. It knows exactly what it wants and sets on a path to take it. And I am oh so ready to give it all and then some.

He runs his hands up and down my back, his fingertips pressing into my spine, claiming every inch of my body as his own. My head falls back as I fall into him, beckoning his lips to jump on a scorching hot path to the areas begging for some attention. I'm limp in his arms and all conscious thoughts are eradicated from my body with each nip and tug of his teeth on my earlobe.

A quivering breath escapes my mouth, and the tingling sensation that I'd thought had only been reserved for certain areas now seems to have enveloped my entire being. I feel him everywhere, his hot breath fluttering against my bare skin, the pure, carnal energy coursing through my veins, the warmth generated by his very determined lips consuming my insides.

He stands me upright from my previous position hanging over his arms and grips the hem of my shirt, pulling it over my head. His eyes are dark with lust and crazed with a greedy need I am all too excited to satisfy. My breasts heave in the hot pink lace that barely covers them. I grip the edges of the island behind me until my fingertips lose blood flow. Small sacrifice, though. Every second Nico spends unbuttoning my jeans and peeling them from my wobbly legs is one less moment I have to wait for him to plunge inside of me and blast me back to that place where I'm the center of his world and nothing exists but us. I want to go back there, never to return again.

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I can't steady my breathing. It's impossible, so I stop trying. Nico's lips are searing a path down my inner thighs as he slides off my jeans. My stomach clenches with every tiny kiss he leaves in his wake. His hands grasp the back of my legs, spreading them, giving him full access to the one place that is reserved only for him. It's always been his. Always and forever.

He pushes the matching hot pink lace panties aside, and dips two fingers inside of me. They slide in so easily, and my hips rock against them, creating the friction I so badly crave. Except it's not his fingers I yearn for. What seems like seconds later, they're gone and my body immediately clenches, the loss of his touch damn-near making me scream out in frustration. "Nico..."

I let out a loud gasp as his tongue delves into my wet heat, his fingers gripping my ass tight. "Oh my God," I moan, limp once again against the counter. He pushes me into his mouth, his tongue plundering my core, stripping me of any possible hesitation I might have carried in here tonight. Nothing about this could possibly be wrong when it feels so incredibly amazing, right? Fuck, no. That would be much too cruel.

He drinks in my desire, my tiny mewls spurring him on. I grip his shoulders, digging my nails into the fabric of his shirt...the shirt I am desperate to tear off his body. When the screams come, they reverberate through my body along with the intense euphoria I've only read about in books. But holy crap...I could never write about this. Putting into words the intense feeling of sheer elation coupled with the most incredible and explosive sensations that make me believe God is, indeed, a woman...it would be impossible.

Of course, there is one little factor that makes the waves of pleasure rolling through me that much more consuming...the undying love I have for the man who is currently between my legs, catapulting me into the heavens with his deliciously devious tongue.

NICO

She pushes her hips upward, my mouth still feasting on her sweet pussy because I can't get enough of her.

I always knew I'd be a fucking goner after just one taste.

I was right, and everything about this is so goddamn wrong.

Her body quivers in my grip, her skin smooth as silk under the pads of my fingertips. I dig my fingers into her soft flesh, moaning as I lap up every last drop of her juices. She lowers her body to the floor until we are face to face. Her cheeks are stained a deep pink and her eyes....Jesus, the Hope Diamond doesn't have enough facets to sparkle as brightly. I swallow hard as her legs straddle me. Those luscious tits pressed against me, rubbing just enough, beckoning my fingers to tweak the nipples. Shaye lets out a tiny gasp and then collapses against me, laying her head on my shoulder.

My cock is damn near ready to explode, my stiff length stretching tight against my pants. But this fucking fabric is preventing me from getting close to the place I long to be. I drag my fingers down her torso and flick her clit before slipping two fingers deep into her pussy again. She shudders against me, thrusting her hips against my now-soaked fingers. I reach around her head and gently fist her hair, forcing it backward and giving my lips access to the slope of her neck. My tongue is out of my mouth before I can give the order to attack. It wastes no time sampling every inch of her supple skin and I plunge a third finger into her core. Her moans get louder every time I force my fingers deeper, her nails digging into my shirt.

My shirt. Dammit. I need to get it the hell off, along with everything else that's keeping me from diving into her slick and sinful entrance.

I've never met a woman who can undo me with so little effort, and I've had the some of the hottest pussy all over the world. Nobody has ever done to me what Shaye does every time she so much as looks at me.

I allow my eyes to flutter closed, focusing on her body writhing against my fingers. I keep one hand on the small of her back as she fucks my fingers, pressing her closer to me. If I only have a few hours with her, I'm going to make every second count.

Fuck the hot chocolate.

When she falls against my chest, breathless and heaving for the second time, I nuzzle her ear with my lips. "I'd like to go three for three, that is, if you're up for it."

That gets her attention. She sits straight up and flips her tangled waves over one shoulder. The looks she gives me...fuck. I fully expected to have an Incredible Hulk moment with my cock busting out of my pants in exchange for that look. Must be some pretty strong fibers holding these jeans together.

A seductive smile lifts the corners of her swollen lips and she rises from her position, hands held out, ready to bring me to her level, but I'm already there. The palms of my hands run the length of her torso, pausing only to cup her perfect breasts. I take each taut nipple into my mouth, flicking and suckling them until I hear that all-too-familiar squeal escape her mouth. She reaches around my head and pulls the back of my hair to detach my mouth from her tits.

"Not cool," I murmur. "I was enjoying that."

"Me, too," she breathes, sidling even closer to me. "But maybe we can do something

else instead?”

Oh, hell yes. Beg me. Saves me the trouble of falling to my knees and doing the very same thing since another second without her body plastered against mine is the worst form of torture to endure. I fucking love how into this she is...how she trusts me, how she wants to experience this with me. Only with me. My breath hitches when I see the expression of nervousness flicker in her eyes. Christ, I never want to see it again. I have a lot to prove to this girl, and it starts now. I need to make her understand that she's everything to me and more than I could have ever imagined or dreamed about.

I loop my arms around her waist and hoist her into my arms. She locks her legs around my waist, rubbing herself against my hard cock, the cock which is still pulsating against my pants “Not so innocent anymore, huh?” I groan, the friction deepening the ache in my balls.

She cups the sides of my face and presses her lips against mine, forcing them open with her hungry tongue and plundering my mouth with a voracity I'd have never expected from her. I guess I got my answer...

I can't get her into my bedroom fast enough, so I opt for the guest room. It's right off of the kitchen, and it has a very large, very plush, and much more accessible, king-sized bed, just waiting to be broken in. I kick open the door and ignore the light switch even though my feet have already crashed into various pieces of furniture scattered around the perimeter of the room. I don't care. I can take the pain. Hell, I'd suffer a lot more for the chance to be balls deep inside of Shaye again.

I lay her on the bed, our lips still firmly connected. My hands cannot get enough of her soft skin. Her toned muscles twitch and tighten under my touch, and her arms tighten around my waist. “You have on too many clothes. I want to feel you inside of me, but I can't let you go,” she whispers against my mouth, her lips nipping at mine.

“I don’t want to let go, either.” I run a hand through her hair. Even in its tousled state, it’s so silky, sliding easily between my fingers. I bring one of my hands to the buttons on my shirt and unfasten them as fast as humanly possible, sliding out one arm and then another while keeping her mouth thoroughly occupied.

Her fingers move from my waist to the front of my pants, and she fumbles a little with the belt buckle, finally pulling open the belt and sliding it off. It falls to the floor, the buckle cracking on the hardwood. “I’m sorry,” she murmurs. Uncertainty now commands her fingers as she slowly unbuttons my pants. They shake a bit against my abdomen. She’s hot, bothered, and scared. She may want this, but her last experience wasn’t exactly the best one to start out with, and if that’s creeping back into her mind, I need to eradicate it once and for all. She needs a new memory, a fucking heart-stopping, toe-curling one that will forever brand her.

I pull away slightly to slide my pants and boxers to the floor. Stepping out of them, I watch her watching me as she shifts on the mattress. She is perfection. The curves of her tan body are splayed over the bright white comforter, her legs bent and laying to the side, full breasts just begging me for a quick nip. A finger flies up to her lips, and she nibbles at her already-chipped nail polish, a tentative smile lifting her lips. “Is there usually such a long break between foreplay and the actual...you know...thing?”

I smirk and kneel over her on the bed. “It depends. I could stare at you forever and never lay a finger on you.” I smooth back a strand of her hair. “You’re gorgeous, Shaye.”

“Nico....” She runs her hands down my side, pausing at my hip and then sliding back up toward my chest.

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“Will you touch all of me, Shaye?” My voice is low, raspy, and desperate. I’m hard as an iron rod right now and ready to dive inside of her slick pussy, but I need her to feel completely comfortable so I’m taking it slow. I want to break down any barriers between us. I want all she has to give. I fucked it all up last time, and I won’t make that mistake again.

She nods and takes my dick in her hand, softly stroking the sides. Her hands are so warm. A surge of adrenaline courses through me, and my stomach tightens as I thrust into her hand. Her grip gets tighter and she cups my balls with her free hand. She’s getting bolder. I fucking love it. “Is this good?” she whispers.

I nod and groan my agreement. “Lick the palm of your hand,” I choke out, my eyes squeeze shut involuntarily. I go through a mental loop of the more grotesque images burned into my memory so I don’t come on her tits before I can even roll on a condom. My plan and the urge are quelled, at least momentarily. Then her wet palm grasps me again, working her way up and down the shaft. “Squeeze me tighter,” I grunt, clutching the bedsheets in my fists. I’m still on my knees, still straddling Shaye’s body, and still ready as ever to explode. “Fuck, Shaye, that feels so good.”

She smiles, biting her lower lip. Her hand rubs harder, her finger sliding over the tip. I let out a gasp when her finger plays with my slit. “You’re killing me.”

I reach next to her and grab a condom from the wooden box on the night stand. I bite open the foil package with my teeth and sit back on my heels. She loosens her grip, setting my cock free, still stiff as a corpse. I roll on the condom and lower myself on top of her. I gently spread her legs, allowing the head of my cock to graze her opening.

“Was that good?” she whispers. “I know not all guys like it the same way.”

“It was fucking incredible.” I trail a hand down her flat abdomen, reaching around to grab her ass, tilting it upward for leverage. “Now I want to make you feel the same way, okay?”

She nods, still biting her lip.

“It will hurt, but I’ll go slow. And then it’s gonna feel amazing, baby. I’ll make sure of that.”

A nervous smile lifts her lips part way. “Kiss me.”

My cock swells, and I slowly thrust my hips forward, stretching her open, readying her to take everything I have to give. A gasp escapes her lips and she squeezes her eyes shut, teeth clenched tight. “Ahh!”

I graze her lips with mine to distract her, feeling them relax the instant we connect. She wraps her arms around me, parting her mouth, beckoning my tongue to sweep in and erase the fear and apprehension. I hold her close, sliding in and out of her wet heat. Her walls encase my cock like a glove. They throb as I delve deeper, tightening around me. God, this pussy is like no other. I’ll be damned if I can’t have it for the rest of my fucking life. Blood rushes to the head of my dick and I grip her ass, pulling her closer and closer.

“Should I move?” she whispers against my mouth. “I don’t know what to do.”

A low growl erupts from my throat. “Just push against me, baby. Squeeze me tight. Holy fuck...”

Fingernails dig into my back, pressing me down as her hips lift into me. Once, twice,

three times. Jesus, she's a fast learner, and it's not like I gave much instruction the last time. It was more like, just lay there while I fuck the shit out of you. But this time, we move together like we were meant to be this connected. Our bodies are in sync, our souls that much more so. I can feel it. I can feel everything. Her thighs tense, legs stiffening as my movements become more and more frenzied.

"Nico!" Her screams pierce the still air and she scrapes her nails down my spine, in deep enough grooves to draw blood, but I couldn't give a flying fuck less. The only thing I care about right now is making her feel as amazing as I do because there is just nothing better.

"Enjoy every second of it, baby. Just let go." I drive into her a few more times until I can't see straight anymore and finally let my own orgasm rumble through me like an erupting volcano. My cock pulsates deep in her pussy, blood rushing to the tip, draining from every other extremity. My limbs suddenly transform into rubber, and I can barely muster the strength to keep myself from collapsing on top of her. I lay my head on top of her chest, still supporting the weight of my body with my weakened arms. My chest heaves with labored breaths, my mind a blank slate. Hell, I don't know if I'd be able to recall my own name if someone asked at this very second, but that just means one thing...it was fucking earth-shattering.

Shaye's fingers run through my hair and I lift my heavy head, flashing her a grin. Her eyes crinkle at the corners. "So that's how it's supposed to be done, huh?"

"Only for you, baby. Only for you."

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Shaye

The aftershocks are still rippling through me. I'd only read about them before, but holy crap. Amazing is an understatement. I roll over to find Nico's eyes on me. A lazy grin lifts his lips. Those lips...Jesus. They don't quit. I could live out the rest of my days very happily wearing absolutely nothing and having those lips blanket me in the sweetest of kisses from morning until night.

"How do you feel?" His eyebrows furrow, his fingertips tracing a path over my arm. "Are you sore? I tried to go easy, but..." I can see a mischievous twinkle in his eye. "It was hard, literally and figuratively."

I giggle. "I'm okay. It burned in the beginning, you know, until we really got going." Heat creeps into my cheeks and my eyes fall to the sheet covering us. "It's fine now. Trust me, any tiny bit of pain pales in comparison to that epic ending."

He winks at me. "Trust me, there's a hell of a lot more where that came from."

"Good, because I've waited a really long time for it."

A buzzing sound comes from the night stand where Nico left his phone. He groans and rolls over to pick it up.

I toy with the stitching on the sheet and watch the muscles in his back tense before he flips back over toward me. He reaches out and fingers one of my blonde-pink curls. "You are more beautiful right now than you've ever been, do you know that?"

“Why? Because I’m naked?” I roll my eyes and snicker.

“No.” He slides an arm around me and pulls me close, so he can nuzzle my ear.

“Although, I will say I much prefer you this way than with clothes on.”

“That’s such a typical guy thing to say.”

“So you’ve heard it a lot then? Can’t say I’m not a little surprised at that.”

I gasp. “Nico, you know I’ve never—”

“I know.” He smirks for a second before his expression turns serious. “Shaye, any time I tell you something, I want you to know it’s genuine. I never want you to question how many times I’ve said it to any other girl before. I never want you to think I’m using lines on you, because I’m not.” He tucks my hair behind my ear and strokes the side of my face. Tiny butterflies in my belly are roused by the gentle touch and begin swarming, waiting, hoping... “I know I haven’t been honest with you in the past, but it’s only because I didn’t know how I’d be able to keep you safe.”

“And you do now?”

“No. And there are other things to contend with...Max, your dad, my dad, Max...”

“So, you’re saying we’re doomed.” My eyes drop, and the once-anxious butterflies fall to the pit of my stomach, motionless and defeated. Kind of like the way I feel right now.

“Hey.” His voice drops to a low murmur and he tilts my chin upward. I try to shake off his hand before he can see the tears pool in my eyes. I don’t want him to see me crumble. Not again. Why do I keep letting this happen? When am I going to learn? Maybe it’s time to change majors since I clearly haven’t learned a damn thing about

how to control my own emotions.

Okay, I know it's only been four months, but still...

"Don't cry, baby." He smiles and slides closer, kissing the tears streaming down my cheeks. "You can't be sad for this next part. You're gonna ruin the moment."

A sob escapes, and I cover my mouth to keep the next one from exploding out of me.

"God, you're fucking incredible. Everything about you, Shaye. I love your passion, your sensitivity, your warmth, your fire — I love everything about you that's missing in me. That's why we're so perfect together. You fill in all the gaps, baby. Every single one."

I sniffle. "You can be so damn sweet. Sometimes."

He shakes his head. "Nobody sees me the way you do. I'd never let them. I don't want anyone to see me the way you do. All of this is for you and you alone. Nobody makes me feel the way that you do." He pauses, his hand still on my cheek. "I'd give it all up for you, Shaye. I'd walk away from everything."

My eyes widen. "Nico, don't be insane. You can't just—"

"I can," he says, his tone flat. "I can turn and leave it all behind, never looking back once. If you're by my side, I can do that."

I swallow hard. "But you're so good at what you do, and you love it..."

His arm tightens around my waist, his fingertips trailing up and down my spine. "Not as much as I love you. None of this is worth it if I don't have a fucking reason to come home at night." My heart damn-near stops once those words pierce the still air.

I part my lips to respond, but I don't hear any words spoken. I know what I want to say, but my mind and my mouth refuse to coordinate their efforts. My pulse is suddenly in my throat, throbbing with a voracity I've never experienced. I try once again to squeak out a reply, but now there's a wad of imaginary cotton in its way. How convenient.

"I'm in love with you, Shaye." And then he smiles, a real one, not one of the bullshit ones he flashes at business associates or big-boobed girls he wants to take home. A genuine smile, bright like I've never seen before. "In case that wasn't clear the first time I said it in the hospital or just now. I know how you like to be thorough. No guessing games. This is me being as honest as I've ever been in my life."

"I-I..." Well, that's an improvement. At least I have proven that I can stutter. "N-n..." I swallow once more to battle the little slice of the Sahara desert in my mouth. "I love you, too." Thank God my numb tongue is now functioning once again.

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“I wasn’t sure if you’d heard me.”

“I heard it.”

“You just wanted me to put it all out there before you responded.”

“I’ve waited a long time to hear it. I didn’t want to rush the moment.” I giggle and tweak his nose like I used to when we were little, and he was beating me at Scrabble. It was my only defense back then. Feels like some things never change...

His phone buzzes again and he lets out a loud groan before rolling over to grab it. I want to ask who’s been blowing it up for the past hour, but I know better than to pry. Some questions are better left unanswered.

“I’ve got to get back to the club.” He pulls himself to a sitting position and leans back against the headboard. “There’s an event tonight, and I should be there, at least for part of it.” His head drops to the side and his half-hooded gaze sends tingles dancing across my bare skin. “Will you be here when I get back?”

“Yes.” As if I’d leave before he sends me shooting into the heavens again. “I’ll stay.”

He leans over me, his full lips curled into a sexy smirk. “Am I gonna find you like this?”

“You’ll have to wait and see. But that’ll be your incentive to get back here fast.”

His fingertips brush against my bare breast, the warmth of his hand cupping it before

he brings his mouth to the nipple and nips at it with his teeth. I squeal and giggle, squirming out of his grasp. “Stop teasing me and go! The faster you go, the faster you can get back on top of me and back inside me, Nico.”

“You’re making me want to stay.”

I stroke the back of his head, running my fingers through his glossy dark hair. “You know you can’t. Besides, if Max is harassing you, he won’t stop. And we don’t want him showing up here to drag your ass out of here. I don’t think I need to remind you what he’ll do if he catches me in your bed.”

“Okay, okay.” He pulls me close once more, his lips grazing mine. I can still taste the faint watermelon flavor of a Jolly Rancher that still lingers. His tongue works its way into my hungry mouth, taunting me as it coils around mine, electrifying my insides. This can go sideways very quickly unless he pulls away now.

After a few more deliciously torturous seconds, he pulls away. “I didn’t want to stop.”

“I know,” I murmur, still breathless from that kiss. Sweet Jesus, the man knows how to use that mouth...and every other tool he’s been graced with.

“I promise I won’t stop later.” He cups the sides of my face “I don’t know how I’m gonna get anything done at the club knowing you’re here, naked in my bed.”

“I don’t want to be responsible for you not being productive, but I can think of a way to get you back here faster.”

“Oh yeah? Let’s hear it.”

“Well,” I drag my fingertip over the comforter and flash a seductive smile up at him.

“I may get lonely by myself. So lonely that I might need to do something to keep my mind off you not being here.”

He drops to his knees next to the bed. “Keep going.”

I stretch my arms overhead. “I’m just saying that I may need to come up with ways to occupy myself. You know, little games I can play while thinking about you.”

His mouth drops open, his fingers gripping my ankles. “In about ten seconds, I’m gonna call Max and tell him I’m sick.”

I snicker and press my lips to his. “Just do what you have to do at the club. Then get back here and do me.”

“You’re fucking killing me, Shaye.” He groans and rolls off the bed. I bite my lower lip as I watch the muscles in his back ripple in the soft moonlight streaming through the curtains. It illuminates him as if he’s a statue on display — a perfectly chiseled specimen of a man with an extremely sizeable member that I would very much like to become acquainted with again in the very near future. We’ve only just met, but I can tell we’re going to be almost inseparable over the next couple of weeks. Shit...

And just like that, my heart sinks to my stomach. I’ve finally allowed my mind to acknowledge the fact that I’m leaving soon, and the sharp pangs in my chest confirm that my heart is damn-near its breaking point.

I fist the soft sheet and swallow hard past the growing lump in my throat. Tears spring to my eyes. I dread the thought of boarding that plane to Miami, which only days earlier had been my safe haven from Nico. How ironic that the person who drove me away is the one whom I now want to cling to.

I take a few deep breaths since I don’t want him to see me having a nervous

breakdown about leaving. Hello, stage five clinger! Love or not, he doesn't need to see this. Not yet, anyway.

Nico comes out of the bathroom, his dark wash jeans just skimming his hips. He reaches into his closet for a button-down shirt but doesn't put it on right away. It's almost as if he's toying with me, slowly turning to give me a full-frontal view before covering up all of that sinfulness. The cut of that V stilts my breath, and the black cloud of sadness that had settled over me is now eclipsed by lust. I curl my toes under the sheet. We have time to figure this all out, time to get our story straight, time to figure out how this will work while I'm away, time to plan how we're going to spring the news of this forbidden secret on our families...

I keep repeating these words to myself as Nico leans over me, his hands on either side of my body, now wrapped like a mummy under the sheet. The musky scent of his cologne makes my knees knock and my pulse throb. I grip the sheet, afraid of what I might do with my hands if I let go of it. Later...later...later...forever...

"Miss me, okay?" He smiles at me, caressing my forehead with his lips. "And drink that hot chocolate. I have about ten boxes of it in the pantry, so go to town."

"It's better when you make it for me." My voice is small and timid, and as much as I want to be flirty, I'm afraid I may crumble and mess it all up.

"Then I'll make it my first priority when I get home later."

"How about you make it your second priority?" I force my lips upward and manage a watery smile.

"Point taken." He winks and slides into his black Louboutin loafers. God, I think they're so incredibly sexy on him, although I much prefer them on the floor, along with everything else he's wearing.

With a quick kiss, he's out the door, and I finally release the sobs that have been building in my chest. The tears flow and don't stop. I feel like my heart is unraveling like an old throw rug with a loose thread that constantly gets pulled until nothing is left but a pile of tattered yarn.

He loves me. I love him. Why can't everything else be that simple?

Nico

I pull into the parking lot behind the club about half an hour later. Getting into the city at this hour is a cakewalk, especially since everyone is already at their New Year's Eve parties, and the surrounding, non-descript streets are lined with limos, Escalades, and blacked out Town Cars doing drop offs. This isn't an area that's very well-traveled, which is what makes it the perfect place for A-listers to party. And at Culaccino they know I can get them anything they want and need in the most discreet manner.

I grab my jacket from the backseat and slide my arms into it before slamming the door shut. The lot is small, and it only fits a few cars, which means I don't have to worry about my R8 being sideswiped on the very narrow, cobblestone street. I head toward the back entrance, but a beat-up black car stops directly in my path, blocking me from the door. I don't make a move, but my gun is securely tucked under my shirt should I need to grab it and fire off a round. I almost forgot to grab it before I left the house and remembered because I didn't want Shaye to see it. It represents the big reason why this thing between us is still so fucking dangerous, and we have enough other shit to deal with, namely Max and our fathers. I don't need to bring this element into the mix just yet. She's not stupid. She knows the deal. She just doesn't need to see the reality sitting on the foyer table.

The driver's side door creaks open and I reach behind me, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible as I wait for the next move.

"Nico..." A low gruff voice speaks my name as the driver's head covered by a baseball cap pops out of the car. Fuck me. It's Santino Lucchese, Rocco's father. "Do

you have a minute? I need to talk to you.”

“Santino, it’s not a great time. I have a special event going on inside, and this type of business doesn’t belong here. Not tonight.”

“Please,” he repeats. He rests his hand on the hood of the beat-up old Chevy car. I squint. Odd vehicle for someone like him to drive. But then again, Santino was old school, like Grandpa, and always lived modestly. He knew exactly how to avoid raising eyebrows. His son, unfortunately, never got that message. And even after that stint in California, he still hasn’t learned his lesson.

I take a few steps toward the car, my hand still on the piece. After a minute of inner battle, I concede. Dad needs him, and I kind of fucked up his plans with Rocco. I should at least listen to what Santino has to say. “Okay. Come inside, and we can talk in my office.” This isn’t a conversation for the club, but I can’t see into the dingy windows of the car. No fucking way am I getting inside. At least if he takes me up on my offer, he’s on my turf. And there are plenty of people I can call on to take him out if it comes to that. The party is in an exclusive room reserved for special events, so there’s no risk of my personal business being made known to the masses.

Santino pauses for a split second, then nods. “Sure. Thanks.”

I watch him pull into a spot across from mine, and he struggles to get out of the car. I notice he’s walking with a limp, and he’s hunched over a bit, making him look older and feebler than his sixty years. I hold open the door and follow him inside, pointing down a darkened hallway. I let him lead since he’s got plenty of reasons to want me dead, and I have one very big one — she’s, in fact, hopefully still naked in my bed — for wanting to stay alive.

We reach my office, tucked away in the corner of the second floor. I have a handful of guys staking out this hallway whenever we host events because you can never tell

who might try to get a little too close for comfort. Santino eyes each and every beefy bodyguard as we make the trek to my little slice of peace and quiet. I open the door and wave him inside. I nod at Duke, the largest of the four guards and he slides his hand over one of the weapons in his waistband. It's the only one I see, but I know that there are plenty more on his person. And he will use them all whenever needed. It's why I pay him so much, and why he's worth every damn penny.

"Have a seat," I say to Santino as I round my desk and drop into my chair.

He sinks into the chair across from me and lets out a deep sigh. "Nico, I'm not going to waste your time. I've come to ask you to please reconsider getting Rocco a job. I know he's made his mistakes, big ones, but he needs a second chance." He slides his baseball cap off his balding head. "You're the only one who can help him out of this."

I drum my fingertips on a stack of folders. "Look, Santino. I've always respected you. You've never wronged me or my family, and I know you have a history with my dad. But Rocco really fucked up. And the only reason why he's back in Jersey right now is because my grandfather is gone. He doesn't seem to give a shit that he disrespected Max or deVincenzo with that stunt he pulled."

"Trust me, Rocco is sorry. He knows if he can't work with you, he's screwed."

"And you know that if I don't work with him, he's not the only one who'll be screwed."

"I don't think I need to tell you how hard it's been on my family, Nico. Your grandfather, God rest his soul, crushed Rocco's livelihood."

"Rocco made some pretty fucking bad decisions, Santino. Leave my grandfather out of his bad life choices."

“He knows that. Believe me. He just needs to show the world that you don’t hold it against him. He wants to make things right and to be taken seriously by your family. Nico, everyone respects you and your father. Hell, your dad had my back when nobody else did, and I owe him for that. But you know that there are plenty of people who are struggling for power now. Let us help you keep it. Rocco can help protect your place in the organization.”

“He’s got nothing to offer me. Nothing but a history of bad judgment. Why should I help him? What do I get out of it?”

“You’re a reasonable man, Nico, and you know how quickly things can change in this kind of an organization. The Don is gone, but there were a lot of people who didn’t like the way he did things, people who have new ways of doing things. We can protect you from them. Rocco can protect you.”

I rub the back of my head because I know everything Santino is saying is true. It’s why my father wanted me to work with Rocco in the first place. But the guy is a fucking lunatic, and he never knows when to keep his damn mouth shut. I can’t trust him as far as I can throw him, so how the fuck am I supposed to associate with him on a business level?

Santino is desperate. His voice wavers, and he knows this is his only shot to be taken seriously in the organization again. He’s already lost so much because of his dickhead son. He shouldn’t suffer, too. And you know what they say...a desperate man is a loyal man.

And so again, my own loyalties are pitted against one another.

“I can give him something, but he’s going to have to start small and work his way back up. He also needs to learn to keep his fucking mouth shut. If he gets greedy and takes advantage of this opportunity, I’ll find out about it. Then I walk away for good.

Understand?”

Santino nods his head, hope alive in his eyes. Lucky for him I have more tolerance for bullshit than my grandfather. Now I just have to figure out how to keep Max and Rocco, two mortal enemies, on my side and away from each other at the same time. But Dad will be happy because this move keeps the balance of power in our favor. I'd never even had a chance to tell him I told Rocco to piss off after that first meeting, but now it seems moot.

There are a lot of things that should be at the top of mind right now — how I'm going to explain all of this to Max without ending up with a bullet between my eyes, how I'm going to keep a leash on Rocco so he doesn't fuck me over, how I'm going to deal with the rage from the families that Rocco screwed over when he was running those bets. The list goes on and on, so it's not ideal that all I want to do is go home and fuck Shaye senseless until neither one of us can move.

You have a lot of responsibilities now, Nico.

My grandfather's voice drifts back into my conscious. I'd love to have a few more minutes with him to figure out why the hell he ever got involved with this shit in the first place.

I want it all, but can I have it all? That's the magic question, one I have yet to answer for myself. Seems like any direction I go will lead to a dead end. And someone's gonna have the barrel of a gun pointed directly at me.

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Shaye is right. I love what I do. I love having the freedom to make decisions, to build businesses from scratch and watch the money pour into them as time passes. I love having people at my beck and call, people who are anxious to do me favors because they sense the power and control I have — things that they want for themselves, things they know I can provide them. I love knowing that I can do whatever I please and get whatever I want at any time. I've worked my ass off for those privileges, and they don't come cheap. I've done my time. I've watched and learned. I've been groomed for this position. People put a lot of trust and faith in my ability to make them money, and I never disappoint.

But despite everything I've achieved, I know there's always someone lurking, positioned to pull the rug out from under me because he thinks he can do it better. I pay for protection, just as my father does, but that doesn't mean someone else's money isn't just as green. Loyalty is fleeting. If someone comes along with a grand plan and a hell of a lot of cash behind him, my good looks and charm won't be able to protect my position for too long.

Grandpa made sure to keep me front and center, letting everyone know, in no uncertain terms, that his protégé would eventually carry on his legacy. But for as strong as I appear to be, I know I'm vulnerable. We all are. All it takes is one bullet and someone with a motive.

Santino stands up and reaches for my hand. "Thank you so much, Nico. Rocco won't let you down. He knows how fortunate he is to have this chance to prove himself to you."

Yeah, except he doesn't. Rocco doesn't have any desire to be perceived as my peon.

He always wanted more for himself, always thought he should be on top, which is why he went behind everyone's backs and started taking those bets without permission. He knew the gambling business was run by deVincenzo, but he didn't give a fuck. He only cared about making money. Screw the consequences. That's his MO. Hence, the reason why he shot off his big ass mouth the other day. He'll never appreciate any bones I throw his way. And for that reason, he'll stay at the bottom, exactly where he belongs and exactly where I want him. Santino doesn't need to know that, though.

I nod and shake Santino's hand. "Tell him I'll be in touch. And tell him this stays between us until further notice. I'll handle the details and make sure people are aware of his position once everything is finalized. But right now, it's important to keep this under wraps. Are we clear?"

Santino nods his head. "Yes. I appreciate it, Nico." He puts on his cap and hobbles over to the door.

"Take care of that leg." I smirk when he looks my way. "Don't chase the ladies so hard. Let them come to you."

He chuckles. "Will do. Take care of yourself, Nico."

"Duke will show you out." I fold my fingers together and watch the door close. I know I've forever gained the loyalty of Santino Lucchese. His son, on the other hand, is a liability.

I get up and open the door, motioning for Carlo Batta, one of my other trusted security guards. He steps into my office and stands at attention.

"Relax, Carlo. Shut the door and take a seat."

He does what I ask and sinks into one of the chairs. “What do you need, boss?”

“I’m going to need you to keep an eye on someone for me. I’m putting him on the payroll, but he’ll be doing something small, just to help him get on his feet.”

Carlo nods. “Anything you need.”

“We need to keep this quiet, though. Just between you and me. You watch him, listen to his conversations, follow him, and let me know what he’s up to, okay?”

“Are you gonna tell me who?”

I sigh. “Yes, I’ll let you know in the next couple of days. I need to iron out some details first.”

“Okay, boss.” Carlo stands up and walks out of the office, closing the door behind him. I rub the back of my neck. The more people we have in our corner, the better positioned we are to keep Grandpa’s legacy alive.

A loud knock startles me, and the door creaks open. Speak of the devil.

“Glad you finally decided to show up tonight.” I look up to find Max standing in my doorway, the edge in his voice making me furrow my brow. I hope to hell there are no issues downstairs.

“Is everything okay down there?”

Max shrugs, his mouth stretched into a thin line. “Typical bullshit. They’re all hammered or high. Actually, both in most cases. Fucking like rabbits all over the place.”

“Discretion comes with a pretty steep price tag. And the other guests we brought in?”

He averts his eyes, fists clenching and unclenching by his sides. “They’re doing their part to make the event a raging success, as usual.”

“Any of them turn your head?” The promise of sex usually lightens up his mood.

“Plenty, but I don’t know if I’m up for it tonight.” He rakes a hand through his hair. “I saw Sloane before.”

“I heard. And? Did something happen?” I lean forward on my elbows. “Have you spoken to her?” At least his shitty mood makes sense now.

“Nah.” Max shrugs. “There’s not much to say. Come on, you’re here now. Let’s take a walk downstairs.”

I follow him to the private elevator reserved for me and anyone I choose to take with me. Everyone else knows to use the stairs, basically because I have the key and they can’t get inside of it without me.

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“How many women you fuck in this thing?”

I roll my eyes. “Why would I need to fuck them in the elevator when there are plenty of other places to choose from in this building?”

“I don’t know. I guess it’s not exactly the thrill of the forbidden since it’s your place.”

“Trust me, I’d opt for other locations over my private elevator.”

The car zips down to the bottom level of the club and the doors slide open. The expansive space is dark, save for wall sconces that give off the dimmest of light. Music pulsates, the beats reverberating between my ears, making my temples throb. I can’t even remember the details of this event; my mind has been so preoccupied with thoughts of Shaye. But Max was right. Same shit, different night. These people play hard, that’s for sure. And they love having an audience for whatever sick and twisted shit they do. And nobody has to worry about ending up on YouTube since all cell phones are confiscated before they make their way into the den of ill repute.

I wander around, shake hands with a few people who are still dressed, distracted by the images floating around in my head. Walking past hot, sweaty bodies in the most compromising of positions doesn’t make me the least bit hard. The only thing that makes my cock twitch is the thought of Shaye lying on my bed, naked and dripping wet for me.

Two barely-dressed blondes in heels slide up against me. “Nico,” the taller one of them, Jayla, murmurs, running a finger down the front of my chest. She toys with the buttons on my shirt, and my back stiffens. “We’ve been waiting for you.”

Kara, the other blonde with the bigger tits, flashes a seductive smile as she slides herself against me. “We were afraid you forgot about us.”

I rake a hand through my hair, catching Max’s gaze. His jaw is set, eyes narrowed. He watches without a word. What the fuck is up with him tonight? It has to be more than that run-in with Sloane. This kind of situation would normally amuse him, but he just looks pissed off right now. He stiffens and turns toward another woman who looks about ready to fuck him against the wall.

Weird that he’s not taking the bait.

“Nico,” Jayla whispers, cupping my cock in one hand and massaging Kara’s tits with the other. “Don’t you want to fuck us? And then watch us fuck each other?” She squeezes my cock and gasps. “We’re so wet for you. Let us ride that fat cock just the way you like it.”

Kara moans when Jayla’s fingers drift south, plunging into her pussy. She grips my arm, tossing her head back as Jayla finger-fucks her. “Nico, don’t make us wait. Let’s go to your room.” She slides one of my hands over her smooth ass cheek and squeezes it. “I know how much you want this ass. Take it, Nico. Now.”

I pull away my hand. “Not tonight.”

Jayla’s lips curl into a smirk. “Oh, so you want to play hard to get for a change, huh?” She pushes her tits against me and starts to unbuckle my belt. “I like this game.”

I grab her wrist. “It’s not a game. I mean it. This isn’t happening.”

Kara’s mouth drops open. “But we always—”

“No.” I fix my jacket and nod my head toward Max as a signal to get the fuck away

from these women...just two of the hundreds of women that I've brought to my own private room over the years. The best pussy money can buy, not that I have to pay a cent for it. Truth be told, I never wanted it in the first place, and I sure as hell don't need it anymore now that I've pulled my head out of my ass and finally made the right choice for my future.

I lead Max around a darkened corner in the direction of my private elevator. I really hope nobody else tries to manhandle me tonight. There's only one person I want executing that kind of carnal assault.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Max mutters, walking next to me. "You feeling sick or something?"

I shrug. "I guess I'm not in the mood tonight either." My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I pull it out to find a text from Shaye. I clearly have a death wish as I walk next to her brother and stare at the X-rated selfie she just sent with her legs spread and her fingers rubbing against her pussy. But it's the message that makes my dick thicken to the point where I'm afraid it may just bust through the fabric of my pants.

I like playing this game. Wanna come here and watch?

Fuck me, I need to get home. Immediately, if not sooner.

"You bang these chicks ten at a time every time there's an event. Why not tonight? What the fuck is up with you?"

That angry tone is back. Christ, he is such a moody bitch. He really needs to get laid tonight. "Nothing. I'm just a little out of it, I guess. Shit's been weighing on me these days. I don't think I need to tell you that. And my back is still seriously messed up from that wreck."

Max narrows his eyes and folds his massive arms over his chest. “You seemed fine to me until a little while ago...until you got a flash of pussy. That’s not like you.”

I grip the phone in my hand. “I think I just need a break. Listen, I’m gonna head out soon. You can handle things here, right?” I turn and force us to walk the last few steps to the elevator. I pull my key out of my pocket and stick it into the lock next to the elevator door.

“Yeah.” Max looks at me, a strange expression on his face. “Hey, how’d you hear about me seeing Sloane earlier, anyway?”

Fuck. I had to open my damn mouth, didn’t I? “Oh, yeah, Shaye texted me about picking up that Scrabble game my grandfather got for her, and said she’d be by to get it tomorrow since she’d been with Sloane all day and was going to some party with her tonight. I just figured you saw her since you were home today.” Jesus Christ, could I back myself farther into a corner with a bullshit response that I literally just pulled out of my ass?

Max doesn’t say anything for a few seconds. I keep my gaze on him, steady and unwavering, because if I show any sign that I just fucked myself, he’ll leap over the desk and attack like a wolverine. I’ve seen it, and the aftermath ain’t pretty.

You don’t touch your best friend’s baby sister. Ever. It’s an unspoken rule, one that I’ve now broken too many times to count. I’m realizing all of this again as my balls ache with the knowledge that she’s waiting for me in my bed, and I’m still here.

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He finally speaks. “Take care, man. I’ll talk to you later.”

I step into the elevator and watch his eyes darken as the doors close. I can’t get out of here fast enough. I don’t even stop back into my office before flying down the back stairs. I jump into my car and peel out of the parking lot. The New Jersey Turnpike is clear, save for a couple of trucks which I weave around in an attempt to clear my path. It takes me less than half an hour, but it feels like years have passed since I left the club. I know I should call to check in with Max again tonight, but not until after I taste that sweet pussy again. I’m sure he’ll find me if there’s a problem.

I pull into the driveway and slam the door, taking the front steps two at a time. If someone was trying to take me out right now they’d have a fucking clear shot since my mind isn’t where it’s supposed to be...it’s only where it should never have gone.

I let myself into the house and toss my keys onto the table in the foyer before kicking off my shoes and heading toward the bedroom. I stop in the doorway and lean against the wall, a slow grin lifting my lips when I see her lying on top of the sheet, stroking her breasts. She doesn’t break her gaze as her hands travel down her torso, halting right above her pussy.

“Don’t stop,” I grunt, stepping inside and stripping off my clothes as fast as humanly possible. “Let me see you touch yourself. I want to see you make yourself come.”

A sexy smile lifts her lips. “So you do want to watch. Good.”

She has no idea how sexy she is, how fucking turned on I am by the fact that she’s never done this before and wants to please me by giving herself to me in this way. I

inch closer to the bed, unbuckling my pants as I walk. I climb on top of her, sitting on my heels. I put my hand over hers and slide it over her pussy. I grit my teeth, fighting every carnal urge to plow into her slick opening with my hard cock. A little more torture won't kill me, although the ache runs very fucking deep, and I crave the release only she can give me.

I guide her finger over her clit, rubbing it slowly at first, letting the intensity build. Her body quakes with each flick, and I dip two fingers inside of her, sliding them in and out of her wet heat, soaked with her desire. Her breath hitches, and a tiny moan escapes her lips as she rubs it harder. I grasp my dick with my free hand and pump, squeezing and stroking as I watch her come undone. Her body quakes and quivers as the orgasm tears through her. She writhes under me, screaming for God. Fuck, I need to be inside of her right now. I want to feel that wet pussy blanket my dick. Precum glistens on my tip, and I rise on to my knees, clutching my throbbing cock.

Her eyes flutter open, and I drown in the lust-filled pools of blue. A deep pink stains her cheeks as her hand moves slowly toward my cock, her fingers snaking around the shaft. Every movement is tentative, as if she's taking me out for a test drive. I just want her to jump into the driver's seat and slam on the gas, but I need to be patient. She leans forward to take me into her mouth, gripping my ass as I thrust against her lips. They're so tight around my dick, sucking and moaning and squeezing. She takes me deep, so deep that my swollen head hits the back of her throat...over and over and over. I slide three fingers into her pussy, the soft folds clamping around them. She pulls harder with those devious lips, teasing my slit with her tongue. She may not have done this before, but she's a natural talent. I wonder what other hidden skills she's saving for me.

I slide my hands down her slim torso, caressing her hips as I rock against her face. Her teeth nip the tip of my cock, and I let out a yelp.

"I'm so sorry!" she rasps.

“Just took me by surprise, babe. Don’t ever say you’re sorry. You’re fucking amazing,” I growl. “God, Shaye. I don’t know where you learned how to do this, but it feels incredible.”

She lets out a breathless giggle before taking me into her mouth again. My balls tighten, and I clench every muscle, desperate to keep the release from exploding out of me like Old Faithful. “Baby, I need to be inside of you. Now.”

My cock slips from her swollen lips and she gazes up at me, a sexy smile on her face. “Take me, Nico.”

I grab a condom packet from my nightstand and rip it open before rolling it on. I straddle her body with my knees, the head of my cock hovering at her entrance for mere seconds before I slowly push inside of her. She digs her nails into my back as I fill her, inch by inch. “Does that hurt?” I whisper against her hair.

She shakes her head, but her fingertips are still pressed tight into my flesh. I pause for a second and ease the rest of the way inside of her. My cock throbs with each thrust deeper. Her walls are so fucking tight around me, and she locks her ankles around me, urging my body to plunge farther.

It’s so damn easy to lose myself with her. I could let myself drift away so easily right now, never to return. She’s all I want, all I really—

“What in the ever-lovingfuck are you doing?”

The crack of something hard against something decidedly harder makes me jump and roll off of Shaye. I cover her with my body and twist around to see Max holding the baseball bat I keep hidden by the front door. Occupational habit and all.

“Max, what the hell are you doing here?” I’m still covering Shaye, although judging

from the menacing look on his face and the murderous look in his eyes, it's pretty damn clear he spotted her car in the driveway.

"You motherfucking, backstabbing, sonofabitch!" Max creeps into the room, his hair sticking up in a million different directions as if he's been tugging at it, trying to decide exactly how to murder me and make it look like an accident. He swings the bat, and Shaye screams, her fingernails digging into my arms.

Crash!

I let out a deep sigh. Fuck, I really liked that lamp. It was a commemorative one we'd gotten years ago at Shea Stadium for opening day. They'd beaten the Dodgers...actually, they crushed them. That made the lamp shine that much brighter.

Until tonight.

"Max, before you—"

And there goes my television. At least this one isn't a wall-mounted plasma screen. I need to get that bat out of his hands before he wanders into my living room, or before he realizes my head is still fucking attached to my neck.

"Stop it, Max! You're acting like a crazy person!" Shaye pulls the sheet up to her neck and pushes past me.

"Liar! You fucking lied to my face before!" He points the bat at her. "You haven't seen anything yet, baby sister. Get the fuck out of that bed. Now! We're leaving!"

"No." Shaye doesn't move. "I'm not going anywhere, Max."

Max lets out a low growl that morphs into a scream, a sound that I've never actually

heard a human make before. And the sound of the ceramic planter in the corner of the room shattering into a million pieces does nothing to drown it out. I need to get him out of here before that bat targets my skull.

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I grab my boxers and slide them on under the sheet. I rise from the bed, hands up, and I move slowly toward him. He tosses the bat from hand to hand, his eyes narrowed, his chest heaving.

“Let’s go into the kitchen and talk.” I try to keep my voice calm as I inch closer to him and the bat.

“There isn’t much to talk about now, is there? The damage has already been done. You are gonna pay now.”

“Listen,” I drop my voice and place a tentative hand on his shoulder. “She’s a big girl, and she can make her own decisions.”

Max snickers and rakes a hand through his hair again, fisting it this time. He’s about ready to blow, which isn’t going to bode well for me or Shaye. “Oh, that. You think your little fuckfest is the reason why I’m here. Well, think again, cocksucker. I’m here because you betrayed me, brother. I’m here because you set me up to look like a complete fucking asshole to the entire organization. I’m here because you turned me into your little bitch, and now I have to stand by and watch that bastard Lucchese take my place and become your right hand!” He circles me, smashing the bat against the hardwood floor with each step. “I know everything. I know Santino came crying to you before, to give Rocco a chance to prove himself and how you said you’d take care of him.” He stops circling and faces me, his face only inches from mine. “After everything Rocco did, after Grandpa sent him packing, you’re just gonna erase all of that and help him get back on his feet? What the fuck are you getting out of this, Nico?”

My mouth opens, but no words come out. How in the fuck did he know any of that, unless...

The Bluetooth headset. It had been on my desk when Santino and I were talking. The switch must have been on, and Max would have heard every word if his earpiece had been in. Goddammit! That explains his mood at the club. I knew it was more than just Sloane.

“Max, I was going to tell you, but it’s not what—”

“It’s exactly what I think. I heard every fucking word, asshole. But I couldn’t beat the shit out of you at your own club.” He slams the bat against the wall, smashing a hole into the sheet rock. “Not like I can here.” He swings the bat into a Bose speaker. “You don’t give a shit about anything but yourself! You make it look like you’re doing favors for people, but you know damn well why you do the shit you do. It’s all to line your pockets and protect your interests. You care about you. Period.”

“You have no fucking idea what you’re talking about.” I clench my fists, my chest tight. Of course, he doesn’t. His tirade proves that I’ve played my role so well, even my best friend can’t see through the smoke and mirrors. It means I’ve been hardened enough to focus on my goals and ignore anything that can distract me from reaching them. It means that I’ve successfully cast aside the things that mean the most to me. It means I’ve been successful, and I have absolutely nothing of value to show for it.

And the Oscar goes to...

“Don’t I?” He lets out a sinister laugh. “And you know what’s worse? Coming here to confront you and finding you fucking my little sister. She’s not one of your whores, dickhead. You can’t have her! You can’t have everything!” He swings the bat around toward me, and I duck just in time for him to connect not with my jaw but with a framed picture of the two of us on the desk. The frame crashes to the floor. But

in true Max fashion, he doesn't stop there. No, he pounds the fuck out of it, smashing the glass into tiny smithereens. "You've always had it all, and you've never been happy. It's never enough. You always want more, and I've watched you take it, over and over again. I'm sick of watching, Nico. I'm done. I don't want a goddamned thing from you ever again."

He tosses the bat onto the floor and stomps out of the room. His feet pound on the hardwood, and the front door slams shut so hard the walls shudder. At least I still have most of my walls...always look for that silver lining.

I push back my hair and sink onto the edge of the bed.

"Nico," Shaye whispers. I turn my head to find her clutching the sheet to her chest, her blue eyes wide. "What the hell was that all about?"

"He knows." I fall backward onto the bed, my fingers pressed to my temples. "He fucking knows."

"Uh, yeah. He definitely knows about us, Professor Obvious." She creeps toward me, her eyes narrowed. "But there's more, isn't there? What was Max talking about? What do you have going on with Rocco?"

I peer up at her through my fingers. Christ, I hate like hell to admit to any of this shit. It goes against the code. But I can't have her thinking that I'm fucking over her family. I'm not. If Max had just given me a chance to explain...I have a plan, a good one, dammit.

She inches closer, her fists clenching tighter. "And what does all of this have to do with the accident the other night? Who was in that car, Nico? Tell me the truth. I need to hear it from you."

I let out a groan. “You think you do, but trust me, you don’t.”

“If you can’t be honest with me—”

“Shaye, do you really think I like carrying this shit inside of me? Not being able to talk to anyone about it because there are expectations I have to fulfill? Responsibilities to maintain?”

“I’m always here for you, Nico. Don’t shut me out.”

I lean on my elbows. “But I can’t bring you inside, babe. You think you know...but you don’t. You can’t.”

“I know enough. I’m not an idiot, Nico.”

“No, you aren’t.”

“So why can’t you just level with me? What the hell is going on and how are you involved?” Tears pool in her eyes. “We’re talking about my family, Nico. Don’t shut me out.”

She has no idea what she’s asking me to do right now. She thinks she’s gathering intel so she can protect her family, but if I tell her what she thinks she wants to hear, it’ll fuck everyone, myself included. “I can’t, Shaye. I’m sorry.”

“You’re a fucking asshole,” she seethes, the tears spilling over and streaming down her cheeks. She pushes me away and slides out of the bed in search of her clothes. “I can’t believe I trusted you for even a second. Max was right. You always come first. Tell me, how did you get so fucking good at talking out of both sides of your slimy mouth?”

I jump off the bed and grab her wrist. “Shaye, please. You have to understand my position. I’m trying to get shit in order before it all implodes.”

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“What the hell does that even mean?” she shrieks, pulling her shirt over her head. “You know something about my family, and you won’t tell me how I can protect them!”

“Because you can’t, babe.” I put my hands on her shoulders. “You have to trust me. I’ll take care of everything.”

“That’s just the thing. I don’t know if I can. I can’t just sit around in the dark, waiting and wondering about every move you make, not with our families at odds like this. There’s too much bad blood, Nico.” She shrugs off my hands and runs a hand through her hair. “You’ll never put me first. My family will always be at the bottom of the food chain with you on top. I can’t...I can’t...” A sob explodes out of her mouth. “I can’t do this. I thought we could figure things out and find a way to make it work, but you’ll never walk away from your responsibilities. It’s not the kind of guy you are. You always do what’s expected of you. And the people you’re going to look out for...they’re not my people, they’re yours. You asked me to trust you but trust works both ways, Nico.”

“Don’t do this.” My voice drops, cracking a bit. Another fucking sign of weakness. Each word twists the knife in my chest, slicing away at what remains in the hollow space where my heart once was. For a fleeting moment in time, I had it all.

And now I’m back to square one where I have nothing that matters.

Respect, money, houses, expensive toys — yeah, great. It’s nothing that I want and everything that I have.

I stand back while she zips up her black boots, unable to say anything to make her stay. I can't. I need to fix this organization. That's my job. There is no out for me. I am the job. It's my legacy to fulfill. I didn't ask for this life, it was given to me. I have to accept it or die. Those are my options, and as much as I want Shaye by my side, I have to do my job, a job she'll never understand. A job she'll always fear. A job that will always come first.

The hurt and devastation in her eyes pierces my soul. With a final, pained glance over her shoulder, she grabs her handbag from the hall table, and walks out of my house.

The door slams shut for the second time, closing the chapter on a love story that was never meant to be told.

Shaye

Great. Exactly the way I planned to spend New Year's Eve. Pissed off and alone.

I press my foot on the gas pedal, the engine roaring as my car gathers speed. I pull onto the entrance of the New Jersey Turnpike, not knowing where I'm even headed at this hour. I can't go home. Max will probably be there with a knife, waiting to skin me alive for getting involved with Nico.

And my parents... God, what the hell is going to become of us? This life, so full of superficial bullshit, it's toxic to the touch. And once you get sucked in, there's no path out. Not unless you're in a body bag.

They think I don't know. And Lord, I wish I didn't. But when you listen a bit too long, watch a little too long, and hear a bit too much, it's not too difficult to piece together the complex jigsaw puzzle of this all-consuming existence. I don't have it all figured out, but it's enough to remind me that danger is lurking in every corner. Grandpa Vito had things under his tight control, but now things are at risk of falling apart.

That's all I need to know.

Nico is on the hook for making sure that doesn't happen, and my family is the enemy. He's pretending to help Max, but it's only to keep him close and under control.

I'm not stupid. I know how this game is played.

Hell, he probably fucked me to get me close, too. Maybe to give him leverage against my dad.

I slam my hands on the steering wheel as the car flies past the next exit. He told me he loved me. I gave him everything I have, and he gave me lip service. Literally and figuratively.

Well, that and an inordinate number of mind-numbing orgasms. Shivers of pleasure ripple through my insides despite the anger bubbling in my veins.

I remove my foot from the gas and pull off the next exit. My car slows at the red light off the ramp, and I squeeze my eyes shut for a brief second. I need to find my brother. He may not be the most stable of people, but things can go downhill very fast if he's left to his own devices.

Nico has plenty of security people watching over the club, and I'm pretty sure Max wouldn't go back into the city at this hour. My phone buzzes on the passenger seat and my eyes fly open.

It's Nico. Well, fuck him, I've got bigger fish to fry right now. Like how I'm going to stop the demise of my family.

The phone buzzes again...and again...and again.

My fingertips are almost numb from clutching the steering wheel so tight. But I know the second I loosen my grip, they'll be tempted to stab the Accept button on my screen. Traitors.

The light finally turns green, and I turn right down an unlit service road. Northern Jersey has its fair share of these types of roads because of all of the factories and delightfully scented refineries that occupy the upper part of the state. I realized a bit

too late that I'd ended up in kind of a crap hole area because I was more focused on the salacious memories of Nico's lips all over my body.

I glance at the clock on the dashboard. 11:15 PM. Dammit, I should be back in Nico's bed, cuddling under the sheets, drunk on champagne, and pure, unadulterated ecstasy. Not the drug...the sensation, of course.

A sensation I fear I'll never experience again since our party is officially over. Over before it ever got in full swing.

I squint in the darkness and flick on my brights, illuminating at least some of the pavement in front of me. I ease my foot off the gas since I can't see anything on either side of the road. It's damn-near pitch black, and you never can tell when an animal is going to prance across the road.

Charming place, I know.

I scroll through my favorite satellite stations, landing on one of my favorite Metallica songs. Perfect. Just what I need. Something else to fuel my rage.

My phone buzzes again and I grip it, unleashing a string of expletives against the man on the other end. But he can't hear me. I squeeze it tighter. Or maybe he can. Maybe that's why he keeps calling. Maybe he wants me to react, to scream these very obscene words at him. Maybe he needs to hear how deep my anger runs. Maybe—

Crack!

"Ahh! Sonofabitch!" I yell. Damn potholes! The roads out here are like active minefields with new potholes blowing up the concrete on a daily basis, and my car just crashed into one of the giant pits littering my path. The loud bang assures me that my rim is completely fucked. Hundreds of bucks down the drain. I grit my teeth,

heading for the on ramp for the turnpike so I can get home and figure out what the hell to do next.

A bright flashing light coming from the dashboard startles me back to my current reality...a tire that is rapidly depressurizing, and one that won't get me to the Stop sign even at the end of this road, much less home.

I pull over, off of the main part of the road, but since there's no curb to speak of, I'm technically still in the road. In the dark. By myself.

Can this night get any more fabulous?

I flip on my hazards and dig around in the glove compartment for the emergency services card. I wonder if anyone will even answer. Eleven-thirty. I roll my eyes. Everyone else in the world is probably drinking themselves into a stupor by now, getting ready to watch that sparkly Swarovski crystal ball slither down its cord closer to the crowd of inebriated people below.

I'd like to be there. I'd like to be just about anywhere except here.

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Blinding headlights glare at me through my rearview mirror and I raise my arm to protect my eyes. I flip off my hazards, my throat tight. Just keep going, just keep going...

A large black SUV pulls to the side of the road, just in front of my car. A second one appears out of nowhere, stopping just before it rear-ends my Infinity Q60. My car is now sandwiched between them, and panic floods my body. My finger creeps over to the door and presses the lock button. As if that barrier is going to save me.

Three men spill out of the first SUV but nobody from the second vehicle joins them. Yet. I swallow hard, cowering in my seat. I fumble in the darkness for my phone and stab the dial button.

The men approach my car, one coming closer than the others. Dressed from head to toe in black. They look like classic movie-version cat burglars. But I know they are way worse than that. The man who is the closest slides back his black overcoat to reveal...I squint, swallowing a scream.

The line rings and rings...where the hell is he? Why isn't he picking up? And even if he did, what the hell am I going to tell him? He can't save me!

The man pulls out a gun and points it directly at me through the window. "Get out of the car, Shaye."

My body freezes. He knows my name. How does he know my name? Who the hell is he? And what do they—?

He taps on the window with the tip of the gun. “I will shoot through the window and drag you out if I have to. But this whole thing would be much more civilized if you’d just open the door and save me the trouble.”

My finger trembles, hovering over the lock.

“Shaye! I’ve been calling you for an hour. Where are you? We need to talk. Now. Tell me where you are, and—”

My mouth drops open, but I can’t squeak out a single word. I don’t think, I don’t speak. I duck down, throw the car into Drive, and press the gas. The tire clunks on the ground, but at least I’m moving. Breaths come fast and furious, almost choking me.

Smash!

The back window shatters into the car, and I let out a bloodcurdling scream as I lose control of the car, and it careens into a nearby pole.

“Shaye! What the fuck is going on?”

Another loud crack from the gun and my car is rendered immobile with a second flat tire. My shoulders quake, my hands shaking as I grab the phone and stutter out a plea...maybe my final plea. “Nico...someone...here...have guns...please...help...”

I push open the door just before the men get close enough to grab me and I leap out of the driver’s seat, tearing down the road in my insensible heels. They click and clack on the pavement with each panicked step away from the goons in hot pursuit. “Please help me!”

“Tell me where you are!”

A gaggle of tears catch in my throat as a beefy hand grasps my wrist from behind. I yank it out of his grip. "Leave me alone!"

One of the trucks blows past me, skidding to a stop in front of me, blocking my path. I clutch my phone to my chest, tears streaking my face. Another menacing thug steps out from the truck, a sinister smile on his face. "There's nowhere to go, Shaye."

"Shaye, who the fuck is that? Tell me who's there with you!"

I shake my head. "I don't know," I whisper, my teeth chattering. Yes, the temperatures are below freezing, but I think it's more due to the threat of impending death than anything else.

Another beefy hand grabs the phone from me. A deep growl emerges from the depths of his throat as he holds the phone up to his ear. "Why don't you come and see for yourself, Salesi? I think it's about time we met, don't you?"

NICO

I hurl the television remote against the wall. "Fuck!" That sonofabitch Cappodamo is behind this. There's no doubt in my mind. I knew this would happen. I just didn't plan on him baiting me like this. Tonight. I thought we'd have more fucking time to prepare. And I figured he'd go after my dad since he's the one who pulled the plug on Oriani's drug deal.

But my dad is the boss now. And if you try to take out the boss and fail...well, you're pretty much fucked. So coming after me makes more sense. After all, I just moved into my role because of blood, not because of commitment.

I haven't proven a damn thing to anyone in this family except the fact that I can run a more successful business than any other capo and bring in more cash than all of those

dipshits combined. That's my claim to fame. Not brute force and bragging rights for the highest number of kills.

I look down at the address I typed into my phone. According to Google Maps, Cappodamo dragged her to some shithole warehouse in Bayonne, and I'm sure they aren't the only two waiting for me. I fist my hair to keep my hand from smashing into a wall. If this bastard wants to play so badly, I need to get my team together, and unfortunately, one of the key players is in danger of dissenting.

I stab a set of numbers on my iPhone keyboard and wait. Two rings later, a deep, heavily accented voice growls at me. "Tell me it's time."

"It's time. Get your guys together and meet me at 2134 Oil Refinery Way in Bayonne. They've got..." I swallow hard. "They've got my girl."

A slow, deliberate laugh vibrates in my ear. "Then let's get her back. Our way."

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I hang up the phone and toss it next to my keys and coat. Tonight is the night I show all of those bastards why I deserve my position. Nobody will ever again think I got this role because of my father and grandfather. They're gonna know I got it because I fucking deserve it, because I've proven my loyalty.

I run into a hidden room off the kitchen and spin the dial on the combination to unlock the safe with all of the weapons I've collected. Tonight I wear a bullseye on my forehead, but damn the motherfucker who thinks he's taking the shot.

I stick two Glocks into the back waistband of my jeans and grab a black duffel bag that holds three more guns and as much ammo as I need to pepper those assholes with lead until it comes out of their asses.

My iPhone buzzes with a text, and I run back to the bedroom, stumbling forward as my foot catches on a corner of a throw rug. I land on the bed and slide my finger across the screen. It's a picture of Shaye, blindfolded, gagged, wrists bound with duct tape. Her head is leaning back against a cement wall and her feet are bare.

There's no message, No caption. No need.

My chest tightens as I pick up my phone and forward the image to Max. I know he sure as hell won't pick up the phone if he sees my number, not that I blame him. But I need that crazy motherfucker now more than ever.

Not a minute passes before I get a response.

Where are we going?

I let out a shaky breath and respond.

Bayonne. I'll be over in 5.

I throw on my coat, toss the duffel over my shoulder, and grab my keys before tearing through the front door. Once I'm in the driver's seat of my car, I allow the toxic thoughts to erupt.

You fucking let this happen. You watched her leave, and you didn't even try to stop her. This is your fault!

I press the button to start the engine and stomp on the gas, the accusations looping through my mind as I maneuver through the side streets in the direction of Max's house. My pulse throbs against my neck. They won't hurt her. They only want me.

I hope. I pray.

The tires screech to a halt in front of the house and he's already out the door, wearing a black baseball cap and black overcoat. I know what he's packing under it. I've seen this getup plenty of times before.

As soon as he's inside the car, I zoom down the street, headed toward the northbound entrance of the turnpike. "Get in touch with Duke at the club. Let him know what's going down. Send the address to the other guys." I swallow hard. "And call Rocco. He's part of this now, too, and we need all the backup we can get. Make sure he gets his ass up there as soon as possible."

Max's jaw twitches, but he does what I ask without saying a damn thing. I need the few minutes to get my head screwed on straight before telling him what I allowed to happen.

The silence is deafening. I scrub a hand down my face, accelerating onto the ramp. Wind whips across the car, making the Range Rover sway back and forth. I grip the steering wheel tight, so tight I lose feeling in my fingertips.

Shaye tied up. Shaye gagged. Shaye unconscious.

My stomach rolls, and I clamp a hand over my mouth to hold down the Kind bar I'd eaten on my way home from the club.

"Don't you fucking dare, you asshole. This is all your fault. You couldn't keep your dick in your pants, could you? If I'd have smashed in your pretty little face before like I'd wanted to, she wouldn't be holed up in that warehouse."

I swallow hard and take a few deep breaths. "Don't you think I know that?" I rasp, swerving around a slow-moving car. A dumbass move, especially on New Year's Eve. Getting pulled over right now is not an option, not with the fucking arsenal we're hauling.

"I don't know, Nico. You don't tell me shit these days. You fucked my sister, hired my damn nemesis. Those fucking images of your naked ass plowing my sister are burned into my memory, thank you very much. Anything else I'm gonna find out about tonight? 'Cause I'd like to be mentally prepared this time."

I rub my temple, debating which of the two things he needs to know. "I'm in love with her, Max." My voice cracks again, my mind conjuring up a hell of a lot of stomach-clenching scenarios involving Shaye and those goons. They may not kill her, but Christ only knows what they've done to her, what they may still do if I don't step on it.

Max turns to face me, his mouth twisted into a grimace that I can clearly see in my periphery. "You don't love her. You love you, Nico. And that's exactly why we're

headed to the armpit of New Jersey right now. You saw something you wanted, and you took it with no regard for her safety. So either you never thought she'd be a target or you just didn't give a fuck one way or the other. Both of those scenarios show how fucking selfish you are."

His voice drips with disdain and anger, and if circumstances were different right now, I know he wouldn't hesitate to take that baseball bat to my skull. "You're wrong."

"You're full of shit."

"Look, I hired Rocco, yes, and I'd do it again to protect my dad's interests. I did what was expected of me because it's what I always do. But just so you're completely informed, the dickhead who grabbed Shaye? He's the same guy your father tried to get involved with years back."

I stomp on the brake outside of the warehouse and glare at Max who stares at me, open-mouthed. "Yeah, that's right. Cappadamo, your dad's buddy? He's the one who has her in there. The drug smuggler who has been on the FBI's radar for the past decade, the one who would have brought down our whole family if my dad hadn't stopped it. And just so we're clear, and so you're completely informed, the other guys who are meeting me here tonight? They're the fucking Russian bratva. I've been working with Viktor Ivanov for the past couple of years now, another thing I couldn't tell you because, again, it's to protect our interests against this motherfucker Cappodamo."

I throw the car into park and turn off the engine. "Before you start pointing fingers, just think about your father. He's the fucking reason why we're all here right now. If he hadn't been such a greedy and underhanded bastard, none of this would be happening. And if my grandfather had any foresight at all, he'd have had a bullet put into his brain a long fucking time ago!" I reach behind me and grab the duffel before shoving open the door. In the distance, I see a few blacked-out Ford F-150s. The

Russians always seem to favor the pickups. Maybe it's because they're usually transporting body bags.

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I jog toward the caravan of trucks hidden off to the side of the warehouse. There are no other cars in sight, and for a second, I doubt my location. Throat tight, I stare back at my iPhone. Google Maps confirms I'm in the right spot...

A loud, blaring sound jolts me from my moment of panic, and I stab the Accept button. "Yeah?"

"Nico! Where the fuck are you? Duke just called. Don't play his game. Get out of wherever you are now. You can't take Cap down on your own."

I let out a breath. "Dad, I've got this. I can't leave now. He has...he has Shaye."

"Shaye? Why in the hell—?"

"Don't ask. I can't get into it now, but I have to get her out. We're in Bayonne. He's holding her at some abandoned warehouse. My guys just showed up. So did Ivanov and his crew. This ends tonight. On my terms. If I wait, they'll hurt her. Or worse. I won't let that happen."

Max walks toward me, but I hold out my hand, signaling for him to stop. He adjusts his cap and looks away, giving me the privacy I need for this next part. The final part.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the Russian contingent pile out of the trucks, moving stealthily around, arming themselves for the unknown. My voice drops. "Listen, you were worried about what might happen to me if I stayed focused on my businesses and never prove that I deserve my position as the underboss. I know you think if I back away, it'll make you vulnerable, too. But tonight I'm gonna make sure

they all know my place in this organization and how I'll do what I need to protect it. And they're gonna see firsthand what will happen to anyone who tries to cross us. I have to do it, Dad. Without you."

My dad lets out a deep sigh after an excruciatingly long minute. "Okay, son. Do what you need to do. I'll have the doc on standby."

The doc. That's assuming there are wounds that can be healed after this decimation. "Dad, you've gotta call Tony. He needs to know but has to stand down. He's already caused enough damage."

I can almost hear the wheels turning in my father's head. I know he's had plenty bottled up for the past few years, but none of that matters right now. The first order of business is letting his old friend know that his daughter is tied up in an abandoned warehouse with a gun pointed to her temple. "I'll take care of it." As much as he despises that cocksucker, nobody wants to be the bearer of this news.

I click off the phone and motion for Max to join me before we approach the Russians. Viktor hops out of one of the cabs and nods to me. Two Ford Expeditions roll into the overgrown weeds and Duke jumps out, followed by two other soldiers. "The club's on quiet lock-down as a precaution. Nobody comes in or goes out." he murmurs once he approaches. "I called in more security. They're waiting on your word."

"We need to handle this fast and quietly. We don't know who else is out there right now. They could be watching every location, and we have to assume they are."

Viktor lights a cigarette and blows a stream of smoke into the freezing night air. "What's the plan, Nico?"

"I'm going in alone. It's me they're after." I rake a hand through my hair, sweat pebbling on the back of my neck despite the wind chill making the temperatures well

below zero.

“They’ll slit your throat before you can make it inside the building.” Max rolls his eyes. “This isn’t exactly your thing, Mr. CEO. You need us with you.”

I know I’m in over my head here, which is why I called in my associates. But I also know if I storm that place with my horde, Shaye is as good as dead. So, I need to play this smart. I point at Viktor and his hulking guys. “Look, you guys clear the perimeter. His guys will be waiting. I’m going in.” I nod at Max. “You’re with me.”

An unsettling smile curls the corners of his lips. “Let’s get these fuckers,” he growls, crouching low to the ground and running toward the dilapidated building that looks as though it can crumble down around us at any given second. I follow him, my chest feeling like someone is jumping around on it. In fucking cleats. “Max,” I hiss. “You’ve got to fall back a little. We don’t know who he has inside.”

“Screw that, bro. That bastard has my sister in there. We’re taking him and his whole crew out.”

I know what I have to do, but I’ll be damned if I know how this will all play out. And if they don’t kill us on sight, Christ only knows what they have in store for the people who iced them out and cost them millions. It ain’t gonna be pretty. I just hope that doc has actual work to do when this is all over, and by real work, I’m not talking about a body bag pickup and an autopsy.

The overgrown weeds camouflage us as we near the entrance. At least, I think it’s the entrance. It looks like some kind of ominous cavern that is damn close to swallowing us whole.

My pulse is about ready to explode out of my neck as we creep a few steps closer. A thin stream of smoke billows around a chain link fence a few feet ahead of us, and the

sound of a sinister laugh pierces the air. I point and Max nods, pulling out his gun and attaching the silencer. No need to alert the enemy that we're here to get back our girl.

I follow close behind as he inches toward the low rumbling. I don't even know if he looked before he took those two close-range shots. The men hit the ground with a loud thump before I could even identify them. Hell, for all Max knew, they may have been on our side.

But discretion has never been Max's thing. It's one of the reasons why he's with me right now. As panicked as I am that he's going to make the wrong move with Cappodamo, he's the only one I trust to have my back.

He grins at me and salutes. "What's next, boss?"

After checking both directions to make sure there aren't more goons lurking, I grab his arm and hustle him into the dark and dank building. I push him against a wall. "Follow my lead with Cappodamo, okay? I know you're gonna want to pump him with lead, but try to restrain yourself."

"I'm just your backup bitch, huh? You're leading this charge, the guy who wears BOSS Black to grab a sub from the deli? The one who doesn't do anything with his hands except lift weights and finger chicks?"

I grab both sides of his coat and back him against a wall. "You're going to have to trust me. I know what I'm doing." The truth is, I have no fucking clue, and Max can see right through me. But I'm the target here, and it's up to me to end this war. I look around, squinting in the darkness. A sliver of light comes from the corner of the expansive space. Looks like some kind of hallway. She has to be close.

"Your little power play is gonna get us all killed. These guys don't do reason and logic. They do death. You get that?"

I clamp a hand over his mouth. “I appreciate your concerns, and I’ll take them into consideration. Now shut the fuck up, and let’s find Shaye.”

Pulling away my hand, he says, “You don’t even know how many guys he has in there, dumbass. Besides, it’s my sister he’s got. I should be the one to—”

A loud screech, followed by a whimper, reverberates between the concrete walls. My heart plunges into my gut with the realization that it’s Shaye and that they’re inflicting some kind of torture on her. The pictures were bad enough, but hearing her tearfully plead for her life from the bowels of this sewer? Adrenaline courses through me, fueling me with rage and I swallow hard, my fingers digging into my clenched palm. “You’re not doing a fucking thing. This asshole is mine.” I spin around, my pulse throbbing against my throat as another cry echoes in the depths.

Cold fingers snake around my wrist, yanking me back around. “You’re not going to stop me. Let go of my fucking arm, Ma—”

Rocco’s narrowed eyes stare back at me. “I’m going in first. So just shut the fuck up, okay?”

Shaye

“It shouldn’t be too long now, princess. Your knight in shining armor will be here soon enough, and then I can take care of business and get on with my night.” Frank Cappodamo leans in close, so close that I can smell the stench of stale scotch on his breath. I’d never seen him before, but he’s made me painfully aware of who he is tonight and what he plans to do to those who have the balls to attempt a rescue. “I think it’s fitting, don’t you? Start the New Year out right, putting all vendettas behind me. I need to make room for the new ones...because there are always people getting in the way of the things I need to handle. Shit your boyfriend will never understand since he’s never done anything besides sit at a desk all day. He’s never gotten his hands dirty, has he? Must be nice to have everything handed to you on a silver platter.” He stretches to his full height and struts around the chair I’m tied to, pausing only to drag a fingertip down the front of my shirt, tugging at the deep v-neck. I struggle away from the finger, but that only eggs him on.

He cups one of my breasts and I scream, except the intended piercing sound comes out more like a loud moan because of the duct tape plastered across my mouth. He lets out an evil chuckle. “I hope I don’t have to wait too much longer. I’m getting antsy, and bad shit happens when I get antsy.” He squeezes my breast, and I yelp again. “But, I’m sure I can think of some things to do right now that will keep me occupied.”

My pulse throbs, tears blurring my vision. “Mmmphoo!”

He leans down, fisting my hair. “What was that? I can interpret it a few different ways, none of which will make you very happy right now.”

I peer up at Cappodamo's face, tears streaming down my cheeks. He's about my father's age, maybe a little older. Beady black eyes that make him look soulless are crowned by thick dark eyebrows that give him a naturally menacing look. He's built like a linebacker with a thick chest, and I'm pretty sure his beefy hands have snapped plenty of necks. I pray mine doesn't fall victim to those hands...

"Boss, we don't have a lot a time left. How much longer are we gonna wait?"

"We wait until they show up!" Cappodamo kicks over another chair. "I didn't bring this little bitch all the way up here so we could sit around and play with our dicks! Tonight, I make them all pay! We wait for Salesi, and then we take him out. That'll send a damn clear message to his father. And to Oriani, too. Nobody fucks with my business. Ever!"

Three other men exchange glances and Cappodamo paces the cold and damp room, muttering to himself in Italian. I can't make out the words, but I'll bet anything they have something to do with what he plans to do to Nico when he shows up. A shiver runs through me, silent sobs quaking my shoulders. I have no idea how many other men are outside this room. I only saw a few as they dragged me inside.

Questions explode through my mind like bullets, and piecing together this story while consumed by fear isn't the easiest feat. If I hadn't left Nico tonight, none of this would be happening. They're going to kill him because of me. They're going to extinguish the one bright spot in my life because I had to walk away. If I'd have let him explain, none of this would be happening. We'd be at home in his bed, making love into the New Year. Instead, he's walking into a death trap, and I have a front row seat.

I squint through the tears, a moving shadow catching my attention. The other men don't notice anything. One of them pulled out a bottle of some amber-colored liquor and now they're doing shots of it. But not Cappodamo. No, his face is twisted into a

grimace directed straight at me. I try not to move my head in the direction of the shadow, knowing it will only cause Cappodamo to follow my gaze. And something tells me I want his attention focused in the opposite direction.

A loud bang from somewhere outside makes me jump and the guys all drop their shot glasses and pull out their guns. They creep toward the narrow hallway just outside of this room. Something drags across the floor. Something heavy.

“Ahh! Sonofabitch! I’m fucking leaking out here!” A deep voice grumbles loudly from outside of the room. “I need help!”

“What the fuck?” Cappodamo cocks his gun and nods to one of his guys. “See what the hell that is. Now!”

A short, husky thug peeks around the wall, gun pointed, and then disappears, only to report back a second later. “Man down. He’s been shot, and he’s unarmed.”

“Drag his ass in here now!” Cappodamo bellows.

I gasp as the thug drags Rocco into the room, dumping him at my feet. “Well, well, look at what Tomaso dragged in. Rocco Lucchese. I heard you came back. Ready to fuck shit up again, huh?”

Rocco pulls himself to a seated position, mumbling in pain. “Yeah, well, I walked into this shit show to redeem myself and took a bullet instead.” He winces, clutching his side. My eyes widen at the blood stain that has traveled from his lower abdomen to the top of his leg. Holy hell, who shot him?

“Who sent you, you little cocksucker?” Cappodamo presses his hand over Rocco’s, and Rocco yells, his face twisted in excruciating pain.

“Salesi. He told me he was on his way, but I guess he didn’t give a fuck enough about Shaye to get himself over here in person. Instead, he sent me into the crossfire.” Rocco shifts, letting out another loud moan. “Fucking pussy.”

Cappodamo flips over the table, sending shot glasses and liquor flying into the air. “What fucking crossfire are you talking about? If Salesi isn’t here, then who the hell is?”

In the distance, a slew of gunshots echo into the air. A slow grin lifts the corners of Rocco’s lips. “The fucking Russian bratva, you asshole. I think they may have a fun way to ring in the New Year. Buckle up, bitch. Shit’s about to get real.”

Another string of mini explosions sends a violent shudder through me. My fingers, almost numb from being bound so tightly, tremble and shake. I have no idea what the bratva is or what the hell they are doing here tonight of all nights.

Cappodamo points his gun at one of the men and orders him outside. “Those Russian bastards! Is Ivanov here?” He presses his finger into Rocco’s wound again and Rocco unleashes a string of expletives in response. “Is he?”

The other two goons creep around the opposite side of the room. Cappodamo stands over Rocco and swings the gun across his face.

Rocco groans and spits blood at Cappodamo’s feet. “Let’s just say that pretty soon you’re gonna wish the taste of blood was the only thing you experienced tonight, fucker.”

Cappodamo drops to one knee and grasps Rocco’s neck with one of his hands, his other one now pointed at me. “Tell me who’s out there now or Princess takes one between the eyes.”

A muffled sob escapes my throat, halted by the tape yet again. Rocco squirms in Cappodamo's grip, and a series of bullets ricochet off the concrete walls outside of this room.

One of the guys' panicked voices shatters the silence. "Tomaso and Luca are down! Boss, there are six of them coming in now. Six! Get the fuck—"

Out.

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My shoulders shake as I intake quick and sharp gasps of air through my nose. A few more bullets explode outside the room. Cappodamo stumbles backward, releasing his grip on Rocco's neck. His gun is still pointed at me, his hand unwavering even in the face of imminent death. Rocco rolls away, his hand still pressed to his side. He flounders around on the concrete slab floor, gasping for air. "You think they won't find you back here?" he rasps. "They will. They always do. You of all people should know that, Cap. The Russians aren't walking away. Not tonight."

"That's right, Cap." A gunshot rings out. and Cappodamo falls to the floor, face-first, yelping in agony. A tall, gangly man, dressed in black fatigues, appears in the doorway, a malicious smile on his face. "Did you think I'd forgotten about you?"

"Viktor." Cappodamo rolls to his side, glaring up at the man. "Are you that hard up for business that you need to take me out? I'm disappointed. I thought you liked the competition."

"Oh. I do," The man, Viktor, says in a heavy Russian accent. He stands aside. "But not everyone thinks you're worthy."

Nico slips into the room, walking around Viktor. "Well, happy fucking New Year, Cap. Tell me, was this the party you had in mind? Was there enough action for you? Or should we really blow shit up?"

Cappodamo laughs, a low, dry rumbling sound that makes my skin crawl. "Shooting me in the foot. What a safe move by the man who's rumored to have never taken a shot at another man. Did it feel good to pull that trigger, Nico? Do you feel like a badass now for shooting me? Like you can run your fucking family now without

Daddy and Grandpa calling out the plays for you?” He leans back against the cement wall, his hand still on the trigger of the gun pointed at me. “Your father...both of your fathers...fucked me.” He waves the gun at Nico. “I’ve got one shot, Salesi. Should I blow the head off your pretty little girlfriend? Or should I take you out and give one of the other capos a chance to take control since neither you nor your father know the first thing about how to run your organization?”

Nico creeps closer, not once averting his eyes from Cappodamo’s pinched face. “I don’t know, Cap. Look at yourself. You can barely keep your own head above water. Is it any wonder why we didn’t want to do business with you? You skimmed hundreds of thousands, you stole from your own suppliers, and you laced your shit with chemicals so you could make it on the cheap.”

“You don’t know the first thing about my business, you little bastard. And don’t think this ends tonight. There will be payback. Trust me on that. And Princess won’t fare so well next time around.”

“There won’t be a fucking next time!” A gun shot fires up at the ceiling, and I flinch at the loud crack.

“Max! What the fuck are you doing? You’re supposed to be standing watch, for fuck’s sake!”

Cappodamo chuckles and slithers around Nico. “You fucking idiots can’t get out of your own way. It wouldn’t be any fun to shoot you. I’m having too good of a time watching this shit show. And this next part gets even better.” He points the gun at me and my eyes widen. “Say goodnight, Princess.”

A resounding crack explodes just beyond my ear, and I shoot my legs upward, my full weight forcing the chair against the wall behind me. My head smacks hard against the cold concrete before the chair collapses onto the damp floor.

Somewhere in the depths of my foggy mind, I hear more gunshots. They're muffled, just like the sound of my own screams. Or maybe other people are screaming. Since my ears refuse to function, I crack open my eyes from my horizontal position on the scratchy floor. There are a lot of blotches of color in my line of sight, but I can't make out a single one. Bodies standing, bodies lying on the ground. I can't tell who's who. I can't see Nico. I can't find Max.

My eyes drift closed. The heavy and incessant pounding between my temples drown out the distant sounds until the peaceful darkness swallows me whole.

Nico

Idrop the gun, my finger still trembling from pulling that trigger, the one that extinguished the life of Frank Cappodamo. The metal piece crashes to the ground a couple of feet away from his slumped-over body. One shot to the head. I knew I had to do it, but I hesitated a second too long, and now...

Goddammit! I allowed the fear and self-doubt to paralyze my actions and because I wasn't strong enough to break away fast enough, Shaye is lying on the floor hurt...or worse. My stomach roils as I collapse to my knees next to her. Nausea rushes over me as I drag a hand through her tousled hair. The thumping in my chest is deafening, so much so that I barely hear the instructions being shouted at me. Max pushes me out of the way and slices through the duct tape binding her hands and feet together. I reach for a corner of the tape on her mouth, which is already loosened by the tears she'd been crying for the better part of the hour, waiting for me. Me, who was one second too late. Yeah, I'd gotten my first kill, my rite of passage, earned my place...all of that shit, but at what cost?

It was a price I wasn't willing to pay, but that choice was yanked away from me moments earlier.

I slide the chair out from under Shaye, careful not to move her. Still motionless, her head is lying in a puddle of blood, and my heart damn-near stops when I see it. My fingers hover just above her face. Oh fuck, where is this blood coming from? No, no, no...

Rocco creeps closer, grumbling in pain with each inch covered. "Fuck, is she

breathing?”

I lean closer, pulling the corner of the tape away. Short gasps of air slice at my lungs like I’m inhaling tiny shards of glass, nothing compared to the agony of her not coming back to me. The tape peels away easily enough, but she still doesn’t stir. I lower my head to her mouth, a thin stream of breath warming my nose. “She’s breathing!”

“Thank fuck.” Max rakes a hand through his hair and kneels next to me. “I’m gonna move her head, okay? Not much, but we need to see where the blood is coming from.”

“Be careful,” I murmur, squeezing her hands.

He smooths back her hair and shifts her head to the side just enough to get a look before sitting back on his heels, letting out a deep breath. “The fucking bullet grazed the side of her head. There’s no entry wound. She’s okay. She’s fucking okay!”

My head falls to her chest and I wrap my arms around her waist. “Come back to me, Shaye,” I murmur. “Come back, baby.”

Max grabs his phone and dials a number. “Joe, it’s Max. Yeah, it’s done. Nico took care of him.” He grins at me and gives me the thumbs up. “Cap? He’s got a mad headache, the kind that just explodes out of your neck, you know what I’m saying?” He chuckles.

Rocco groans from his spot on the floor. “Can you stop dicking around and tell old man Salesi we need the doc? I’m fucking bleeding out here.”

“Don’t be such a pussy,” Max mutters, his hand over the mouthpiece. “It’s a flesh wound.”

“And I have to work with this douchebag?” Rocco mumbles, still squeezing his side.

“I may come up with another job for you.” I hold out my hand to him and he smacks it. “You really came through tonight. You took a bullet for me and helped me plug this asshole.” I nod to Cappodamo. “I owe you for that.”

He nods. “Yeah, you fucking do. And I’ll collect, too.”

I smirk. “I know it.”

Max stabs the End button and turns back to us. “Doc is ready for us at his place. We need to get the hell out of here before the cops show up.”

I eye Cap’s crumpled body one more time, knowing I’ll have to step over plenty more on our way out of this death trap of a building.

Except we’re the ones leaving in one piece. The trio most likely to get lit up just took out one of the most notorious crews on the East Coast. I popped Cap and my kill cherry. Two birds with one bullet. Happy fucking New Year to me.

“I’m proud of you, bro. You fucked his shit up pretty good.” Max pounds me in the shoulder with his fist. “Now take one last look, and let’s go.”

I gather Shaye’s trembling body in my arms. Her eyelids flutter, but they still don’t open. A disturbing, grapefruit-sized lump has already formed on the side of her head that had slammed into the concrete. A tiny moan emerges from her pale lips as we meander around the cavernous building in search of the nearest exit.

“Wait.” I stop and pull out my cell phone. “Let me text Viktor to make sure we’re all clear. I need to make sure there are no other jackasses hanging around outside, waiting to jump us on the way out of here.”

“If there are, you’ll pump ’em up real good. Just like you did to Cap.” Max snickers and jogs ahead to check the darkened corners of the hallway.

I’d like to not have to kill anyone else tonight. If I’m being honest, I’d prefer not to have to do it ever again. People talk about the adrenaline rush that they get when they pull the trigger, how it makes them feel all-powerful and shit like that. I pulled it, not because I wanted to, but to send a message. You fuck with my people, you die. Period.

I lean against a wall and stab at the screen, my other arm still tight around Shaye. “Okay, all clear. They’re waiting for us at the car.”

Max has his gun drawn, ready for any unsuspecting goon to leap out at us. But we only pass bloody, motionless bodies. Not only is Viktor’s crew stealthy and deadly, but they had a vendetta of their own to carry out. New Year’s Eve or not, they weren’t missing an opportunity to take out their biggest competition.

Rocco lets out a wheeze and leans against the chain link fence outside of the warehouse. His face is pinched, teeth gritted.

“You okay?” I shift Shaye in my arms and stop next to him. “Can you make it?”

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Rocco nods, his eyes squeezed shut. Jaw set, he opens his eyes and winks at me. “Fuck yeah. I’m no pussy. And I don’t plan on being wheeled out of here on a gurney. Let’s go.”

I stay close to him just in case his body gives out before his mouth utters a warning. One of Viktor’s guys approaches and snakes an arm around Rocco to support him. A loud siren blares out into the otherwise still air. “Cops. We’ve gotta get out of here now.”

A few steps later, we load Rocco and Shaye into Rocco’s car. “Viktor, thanks for tonight. You and your guys really saved our asses.”

“It was worth it to see that motherfucker’s head blown off. You did good work.” Viktor opens the passenger door of the truck. “I’ll be around. But now, we leave because I can’t do your business any good if I’m rotting in some shithole prison waiting to be deported.”

“Wait.” I toss him my car keys. A two-seater ain’t getting us to the doc. “Get it out of here. I’ll find you tomorrow.”

He nods and opens the driver’s side door, sliding into the bucket seat. The truck’s engine roars to life next to my R8, and I watch the taillights from both vehicles shrink until blackness consumes my line of sight. I can see now that it’s impossible to be successful without trusting those around you. I’ve always felt like people have had my back because of who my father and grandfather are. But tonight, I was on my own against an enemy with a grudge and a shit-ton of firepower, and who I’m related to didn’t amount to crap. I came here to settle a score, to save face, and get my girl. I

may not have whacked anyone before tonight, but I came in strong and left stronger with the unlikeliest of allies.

“Nico, get the fuck into the car so Rocco doesn’t die on the way.”

I slide into the backseat, resting Shaye’s head on my lap, while Rocco writhes around in the front with Max at the wheel.

“You’re the fucking snitch,” he grumbles. “And I’m the one who gets shot. Where’s the justice?”

“Stop your bullshit whining. Consider yourself lucky that nobody’s put a bullet in your brain yet.” Max zooms out of the parking lot and maneuvers the car down a service road with only seconds to spare before the sirens pierced the night air in our wake. He pulls over to the side of the road behind a group of trees and shuts off the engine and the lights. About half a dozen cop cars peel around a corner and tear down the street in the direction of the warehouse. Talk about a night of dodging bullets, literally and figuratively.

When the lights dim to the point that we know we’re safe from the law, Max starts the car and pulls out into the road, heading in the opposite direction toward the turnpike. Doc has a place in Edgewater, and about twenty minutes later, we’re driving around the back of the building and heading down to the basement parking garage where the service elevators ensure the utmost discretion for shuttling bloody bodies.

Max rolls to a stop right next to the elevator bank, gets out and presses the Up button. There’s no doorman down here, no security cameras to fear. Just a plain metal box that’ll transport us to the one place we can go for medical attention without getting hammered by the cops. He pulls open the back door and Shaye stirs, her eyes fluttering open.

“Where are we?” she murmurs.

I stroke her hair. “We’re getting help for you and Rocco.”

Max leans in and wraps his arms around her waist. “Come on, sis. Let me get you out, okay?”

“Max, hang on to her, okay?” I jump out of the back and yank open the passenger side door. “Come on, Rocco. You’re almost there.”

He lets out a yelp, and I clap a hand over his mouth. “Not here, buddy. Zip it until we’re upstairs.”

I snake an arm under his and hoist him up, guiding him to the elevator door, now open and waiting for us. Shaye leans against Max, her eyes drooping closed again. I still can’t believe what went down tonight and how we ever got out of it.

But we fucking did.

The elevator creeps up to the tenth floor and opens right into the doc’s makeshift waiting room.

Tony jumps when the elevator dings and runs over to Shaye, but not before he silently wishes instant death upon me from across the room. Actually, it may not have been silent. I think my ears are still numb right now from the gunshots, along with every other extremity, that is. Yes, even that one, for the first time in my life.

After getting Rocco into one of the exam rooms with Doc’s help, Max and I guide Shaye into the other room and gently lay her on the gurney. Her eyes are glassy and unfocused, and a sharp pang in my chest alerts me to the fact that nobody knows how far things have gotten with us. Well, except for Max, and I’m sure he’ll have quite a

time wiping those images from his memory. I squeeze her hand, and her lips curl upward in response.

“I love you,” I mouth, careful not to make any suspicious sounds.

Max rolls his eyes and mouths a few choice words of his own at me.

“How the fuck did this happen?” Tony barges into the room with my dad right behind him. He narrows his eyes at me, and I debate which lie to let roll off my tongue since the reality of me sleeping with his daughter not one hour before the kidnapping doesn’t seem to be my best shot at surviving this line of questioning.

Fortunately, I don’t have to say a word because Max offers the explanation. And it’s a damn good one, if I say so myself. “Dad, Shaye’s tire caught a flat when she was coming home from the city. She pulled off the turnpike and got stuck in a pothole. She called me for help, and that’s when they grabbed her.” He shrugs. “They must have been looking to bait me, so when I found out Cap had her, I called Nico and Rocco for backup.”

Nice. Leave the Russians out of this. There’s enough bad blood between them and Tony. And Max didn’t even know about Viktor before tonight anyway. We’ll just keep that part to ourselves for now. I’m sure it’ll come out later...everything does at some point or other.

Tony’s gaze is still fixed on me, like he’s trying to sear a hole into my brain to see if I have a different take on the night’s events. I stare right back and nod. “That’s how it went down, Tony.”

“Really,” he spats, moving closer to the bed.

“That’s what happened, for Christ’s sake!” Rocco moans loudly from the neighboring

room. “Fuck! Am I eligible for some medical attention, guys? Or are you all going to let me die while you argue about timelines? The bastard is dead, Shaye is safe, and I’m bleeding out like I’ve just given birth. Those are the most important things here, yeah? So can we get on with this? Please?”

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Doc comes out of the washing area, suited up and ready to put Rocco back together. “Okay, time to get out of here and let me work on these two. Argue in the waiting room.”

Max leads the way out of Shaye’s room, and I’m on his heels, anxious to put as much distance between me and Tony as possible.

Tony wants exactly the opposite. He grabs my wrist and pushes me into a corner. “Do you know how wrong things could have gone tonight? You had no idea who you were dealing with, and you went in there guns blazing. Tell me how the hell you managed to come out alive!”

Dad muscles his way between us and places his hands on Tony’s chest to hold him back. “Stop browbeating him. Shaye is alive. Rocco is right. That’s the most important thing.”

Tony glares at my dad. “You knew this was happening, didn’t you? And you also know this won’t be the end of them.” He turns back to me. “But you didn’t consider that, did you, Nico? You and the other two clowns just figured you could take them all out in one shot, right? Always got something to prove. This time you messed up big. Because Cap ain’t going to lie still in his fucking grave. He’s too busy directing his fucking minions from the afterlife. He’ll be back, and when he shows up, trust me, you’ll be wishing for a replay of this night.”

“What the hell were we supposed to do, let them kill her?” Max raises his voice and barrels into the conversation. “We did what we had to do, Dad. For fuck’s sake, how can you say we messed up?”

Tony clenches his fists. “You didn’t call us, goddammit! This was a time when you needed us in your corner to handle things with Cappodamo the right way, but you didn’t abide by the rules. You made ’em up as you went, and now we’re all gonna pay. It didn’t have to come to this!”

I rake a hand through my hair. Popping a cap between the boss’s eyes showed strength and resolve, and that was one of my goals. I needed to get my guys to trust me. Without trust, there’s no respect. Without respect, there’s no loyalty. But that’s not the only reason why I went in there, and I can’t hide the truth from him any longer.

“He wanted me,” I say quietly, and Tony’s head snaps in my direction.

“What do you mean, he wanted you?”

I let out a deep sigh, avoiding my dad’s pleading eyes. Like I said, everything comes out sooner or later. “Cap knew I was with Shaye tonight. I was on the phone with her when they grabbed her. She was leaving my house.”

Tony moves Max out of the way using only his shoulder and he closes the gap between us. “You’d better tell me everything, Nico,” he hisses. “Fucking everything, starting right now.”

“Shaye and I—”

“Daddy!” Shaye’s weak voice stops me mid-confession. “Please come in here.”

Tony leaves me with another death glare and stomps into the exam room, slamming the door behind him.

“Are you insane?” Max exclaims in a loud whisper. “You were gonna tell him about

you and Shaye?”

I nod. “Max, I know you’re angry about what you saw, but it’s not what you think. I’m in love with her. I have been for as long as I could remember. And I almost lost her. Three times now. I won’t risk losing her again. And I’ll blow away anyone who dares touch her again.”

“Aren’t you a big man riding high on your first kill?” Max’s jaw twitches. “I can’t get that shit out of my head, Nico. Knowing the way you are with chicks, and now you’re with my baby sister...it had better be for real, bro. I’ll fuck you up if you hurt her.” He peeks his head around mine and points to my dad. “I’m serious. I’ll pop a cap in his ass if he missteps. And I think Grandpa Vito would be okay with that.”

Dad cracks a smile. “I think so, too. And can we please not go into any more detail about this?”

I snicker. “Yeah, I’m good with that.”

Tony pushes open the exam room and walks back over to us. “She said she loves you.”

“I love her, too.”

“She said that also,” he grumbles. “But I’m glad to hear it from you.”

“Look, I know there’s a lot between our families — a lot of bad blood, but a lot of history, too. I’m not saying we have to put it all behind us, but you’re all going to have to be okay with this thing between me and Shaye. I’d give my life for her without a thought. That’s why things happened the way they did tonight. She was in trouble, and I did what I had to do to protect her. To protect all of us.”

“I get why you did it, Nico.” Tony leans back against the wall outside the exam room. “You just don’t know what you started. You think you ended things, but you couldn’t be more wrong. It’s nothing you could have anticipated.” He nods toward my dad. “Hell, you probably didn’t even know anything about it.”

Dad shakes his head. “I told him to handle it his way. He needed to command the situation, and he did.”

Tony pushes back his hair and grunts. “Yeah, but at what cost?”

“Negotiating with him wouldn’t have gotten us anywhere. You know that. They got your daughter out of there and in one piece. We can deal with everything else.”

“Even you don’t understand—”

“Okay, Rocco is about ready to go in for repair. I just finished prepping him. He’s close to drifting off.” Doc appears from the other exam room. “Anyone want to leave him with a few final words while he’s still lucid enough to understand them?”

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“I’ll go.” I leave the conversation because I’m just too tired to follow the circle talk anymore. I walk into the room where Rocco is laid out on his gurney, an IV stuck into his hand. Fucking needles. I’ve always hated them. “How are you doing?”

Rocco lets out a low moan. “I’m okay. As long as he keeps giving me morphine.”

“Listen, Rocco. You really went above and beyond for the family tonight. You could have bailed when Max called. You could have dissented and gotten in with Cap’s team. You could have done a lot of things differently, things that would have gotten most of us, if not all of us, killed.”

He didn’t. He stuck with the family and put his own life on the line. He just earned my eternal gratitude and respect, two things I don’t give easily.

“So what does that mean for me?” he mumbles. “I still have to work for that asswad Max?”

“For a while.” I chuckle. “But I’ll be there to referee, don’t worry.”

“I’d better get some of the good jobs, Nico.”

“You’re not really in a position to make demands.”

“Eh.” He smirks. “I figured I’d give it a shot.”

“I’d rather not see you take any more shots tonight, okay?”

“Yeah...” His voice drifts off and his eyes float closed. The morphine has officially kicked in. I back out of the room and nod at the doc. “He’s out.”

“He’ll be in surgery for a few hours, and then it’ll be awhile before he’s awake.” Doc heads back into the exam room.

Dad claps me on the shoulder. “Want to head out? Or are you staying?”

“I’m staying. He did a lot for me tonight. I’m not going to leave him now. Besides,” I wink at Tony and Max. “My girl’s still in there. You couldn’t chase me out of here with a machete.”

Dad looks over at Tony. “Coffee?”

Tony stares back at him. It looks like he’s debating his answer. He’s always been a stubborn bastard. Let it go, Tony. Let it fucking go already. “Yeah,” he grumbles. “We’ll be back soon.”

Max collapses into a cushioned chair. “Yep, you’re stuck with me. Sorry. I owe that jackass, too. Wouldn’t feel right to leave.”

Dad and Tony disappear into the elevator. Max swipes through screens on his phone without looking up at me. “Think they’re gonna finally put this shit to rest?”

“I hope so. It’s been long enough.”

“Cappodamo is bad news.” Max sticks his phone back into his pocket. “You know that, right? He’s like gonorrhea. He’ll always be around, waiting to flare up. And he’s invaded all of the families in some way or other.”

“He never infiltrated ours.”

“No...” Max looks up. “And that pisses him off.”

“You mean pissed him off.”

Max taps his fingers on the arms of the chair. “No, I meant pisses. The dude ain’t dead. He’s got claws into everything, and he has an army who will carry out his plans. Those plans include taking us down, more so now than ever. Kidnapping Shaye was only the beginning.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean he never intended for you to leave that place alive. Anyone else would have been a bonus, but you? You’re the top prize. Don’t think they’re gonna walk away from seeing his plan carried out just because he’s six feet under. And don’t think you can ‘business’ your way out of this.”

I lean forward, my head in my hands. “I did what I had to do.”

“I know. Just don’t be stupid enough to think they won’t try to finish the job. Because they will. They always do.”

Except this time, they won’t. But nobody needs to know why...yet.

I stand up and stretch my arms overhead. “I’m going to check in on Shaye.”

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He nods at me without looking up from his phone. “Okay, I’ll be here.”

“Do me a favor and call Duke for me. Let him know we’re all clear to vacate the club with heavy security at all exits, and I’ll touch base later.”

“Will do, bro.”

I knock lightly on the door in case she’s asleep, and I open it a crack to see her smiling face.

“How was my dad with you?” Shaye lets out a deep sigh, lacing her fingers through mine once I settle onto the gurney next to her.

I laugh. “Did you think he was going to beat me with a bat?”

“A little part of me was afraid of that very thing.” She giggles, licking her dry lips. But they’re still so plump and kissable, enough that I can’t resist the urge to lean over her and brush my mouth against hers. “Mmm, that was nice,” she murmurs when I pull away. “I’m glad he didn’t beat you into the ground. I’d be really upset if I couldn’t have your kisses on demand.”

“That good, huh?” I brush the hair away from her bruised face.

“Better.” She smiles. “Hey, by the way, Happy New Year.”

“I think we’re going to have to do a replay of the ball dropping when you’re feeling stronger. I have some ideas, but they require you to be in tip-top condition.”

“Tell me more,” she whispers, her fingers dancing up and down my arm.

“Let’s just say we’re going to make that last ten seconds last and last and last.”

“I can’t wait.”

“Me either.”

“Nico...”

“Yeah, baby? What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know, I guess I’m just wondering what comes next for us. Is this feud finally going to be over? Are our dads going to actually resolve this now?”

I take a deep breath. If Tony knows what’s good for him, he’ll figure out how to bury his issues once and for all. Any sign of dissention from the family won’t bode well for the Orianis, and I can only do so much damage control if Tony decides to air his grievances to others outside of the family.

For his sake, and the sake of his family, I hope he thinks long and hard before shooting off his big mouth to the wrong people. They won’t see him as an ally. They’ll see him as the weak link of our family, and the weak link is always the first to break.

Nobody wants to take on a liability like Tony, but they’ll use him to infiltrate our organization. And that would cripple us, causing complete anarchy within the ranks.

I know what comes next, and now is the time to tighten our security, not plug leaky holes.

“I think there’s a good chance of that,” I lie. Dad may get Tony’s ear for a while, but it won’t be enough, not when Tony has his own ideas about how the family needs to be run. The problem is that they’re shitty ideas, which is how he got us into this situation with Cappodamo in the first place. He’s not a leader or a visionary. He’s always been the muscle. But he fights it because he knows muscle doesn’t equate to power and respect.

He wants it all, but in the face of opposition, he acts rashly and doesn’t think about longer-term consequences.

Very bad for business.

“I’m transferring.”

My brow furrows. “You’re what?”

“Transferring. Up here. I’ll start applying for next fall.”

“No way.” I shake my head. “You love school. Besides, I like having you far away from this world. The farther away you are, the safer you are.”

“Too bad. I can’t be that far anymore, Nico. I’d be freaking out constantly, wondering where you are, if anyone attacks the club, if anyone tries to—”

I place a finger over her lips. “Hey, you don’t ever have to worry about me. I’ll be fine. The club will be fine. I have plenty of guys who have a vested interest in keeping me alive.”

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Tears gather in the corners of her eyes. “But these people...they’re dangerous. And they’ll be back. I heard my dad before. I can’t live without you, Nico. I just can’t. Even when I hated you, I couldn’t. And now?”

“Wait, when did you hate me?”

A snort of laughter escapes her mouth and a single tear rolls down her cheek. “Don’t try to change the subject.”

I grin. “It made you smile, though.”

“It won’t erase the panic, Nico.” Her smile fades, and fear is etched into her expression.

“You have to trust me. Do you really think I’m going to let anyone get to me? I have too much at stake now.” I tap her nose with my index finger. “And yes, that means you.”

“I just love you so much. I can’t bear the thought—”

“Then don’t.” My forehead touches hers, the warmth of her breath tickling my skin. I breathe in the sweet scent of her body lotion. It smells like vanilla frosting. And God, do I want to coat every inch of her body in frosting and lick it off before diving deep inside of her, over and over again.

I should be thinking about so many other things right now — strategizing, plotting, conspiring.

But I choose sex and frosting because it's my only chance for a temporary escape from my reality.

And also because it can't kill me.

Unless, of course, it's manufactured in a facility that may contain peanuts.