



Sinful Attraction

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Billionaire Romance

Description: He stole my heist. Now I have to steal it back—and resist the urge to end him... or kiss him.

Michael Rossi is a smug, insufferable Mafia prince—and the only hacker good enough to snatch my score.

The job was supposed to secure my place in my family.

Instead, I'm left humiliated, sidelined... and burning for revenge.

Then Michael shows up with a devil's bargain: help him track down the thief who double-crossed us both, or watch us both go down in flames.

I don't trust him.

I don't even like him.

But when we're working side by side, trading barbs and code, the lines between hate and heat blur fast.

One stolen kiss becomes one unforgettable night.

And one dangerous truth could destroy us both: the real traitor is closer than we think—and they'll do whatever it takes to keep their secrets.

This is the mafia.

There's no loyalty in love... or is there?

Get ready for an enemies-to-lovers romance packed with danger, betrayal, and scorching chemistry. Grab your copy of **SINFUL Attraction** now and see what happens when hate turns into an obsession neither of them can resist.

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Chapter 1

Arya

“Look, sweetheart, all I’m saying is that you’d be much happier if you took the pressure off yourself, settled down, and got married. You can do this computer stuff from home in your spare time.” My mother aims her soup spoon at me across the table. “Mark my words. You’ll regret it in ten years if you don’t have any kids.”

“Mom, just because I want to be more than a housewife doesn’t mean I don’t want to have kids.” I feel my stomach clench around my half-eaten supper as she starts this same old stupid argument again.

She waves her hand dismissively over her gnocchi. “No, no, women tried to have it all, honey. They tried that in the seventies, the eighties, the nineties. It never works! If all you do is work, you’ll miss out on a family.” She takes a bite, still waving her spoon at me, swallows, and goes right on, “You need a man, not better computer equipment.”

I stare at her, trying to keep my expression polite, but I’m already getting a headache. It would be easier if Dad would do more than just nod along with her, but here we are.

We have supper late in the Castellucci household. It’s always awkward these days. Mom never stops talking about marrying me off. Dad never stops talking about how I’m spending his money frivolously setting up a family network and all this computer equipment.

But tonight, I have something to look forward to that makes all their dinner-table crap a lot more bearable. Tonight, I start the master plan that will ensure that they respect me from here on out.

It's 10 at night when I finally get to my workstation in the room next to my bedroom. The rest of my siblings have dressing rooms there; I have our family server, my personal computer setup, and my hacking setup. My dad likes to grumble that all the electronics I have stuffed into my suite double our power bill. Well, I'm going to prove that I can use them to double our family income as well. And not just ours, but everyone's among the Castelluccis.

My parents have considered this "computer thing" to be an expensive hobby despite the fact that I have a doctorate in it, and they go to me with every technological problem of every single family member on the West Coast. I'm their only unmarried daughter and the only one who wants a career with the family. They don't like that. Women are supposed to be mommies and push out a big pile of baby boys while still looking good in their husbands' arms and in their beds.

It's such complete and utter 1950s-era bullshit. I've been desperate to prove myself in a way they can't just dismiss in order to dispel their stupid ideas of who and what I should be.

I log on and check all my message services, the news, and every piece of information my web crawlers have picked up that day. I am preparing for the heist of a lifetime, something that will really impress my dad and make my family realize just how much I can really contribute. Maybe it'll even shut my mother up for once.

Soon, I'll impress them as much as my brothers do just by being boys.

I notice an email my filter has caught, and my thoughtful frown becomes a scowl. Michael Fucking Rossi, that pretty asshole, is trying to contact me again. I don't

know why the hell he thinks we have any kind of friendly relationship. Our families are rivals, he's my rival, and he doesn't have a chance in hell with me.

But he keeps asking me out while being annoyingly sexy. And the worst part is, if he wasn't such a giant pain in the ass, I would actually be tempted.

But he is, and it's absolutely aggravating. The guy absolutely believes he's a better hacker than I, he's ridiculously confident, and he's one of those guys who are condescending without even seeming to be aware of it. Like we're all just bit players in his grand masterpiece of an autobiographical film.

I don't really like overconfident, hot guys. They're too used to getting their way. Michael, with his great shoulders, wavy black hair, and Hollywood smile, definitely fits the mold. He's probably used to having women throw themselves at him, which is why he won't stop chasing me. I'm probably the only one who says no to him on a regular basis.

Why are guys like this? I think to myself as I close the filter folder without reading his message. If they're in competition with you, they're convinced they're better just because you have boobs. And even if you're pretty much enemies thanks to being part of rival families, they'll try and get in your panties anyway.

I haven't dated much, mostly thanks to the stink my parents kick up every single time it looks like I'm getting serious with someone they don't approve of, which has been every single boyfriend I have ever let them meet. Their whole shtick is that I should find a man and settle down, but then they pull crap like this. They have since I was 16.

When I do have kids, I swear to God I will not raise them with these kinds of messed up mixed messages. It will be tough to do that when I finally do because I'll have to explain to my kids now and then that their grandparents are kind of full of shit.

I'll owe them that much. Otherwise, they'll spend too much of their childhoods confused, conflicted, and wondering why their extended family doesn't like daughters.

Life's never been fair. But I can try to be fair, especially to kids.

One day, I'll have a family of my own, with a man who doesn't make me feel like I have to stop being myself to be loved.

But in the meantime, I'm going to prove my family wrong.

The assignment I have given myself is simple. All I have to do is pull an international electronic heist of billionaire industrialist Orson Stone's next overseas transfer and enrich my family by \$5 million in one go. Boom, instant family fame, instant legitimacy.

Well, maybe not instant, but it's going to be one hell of a card to play against my parents next time they try to have the get-married-have-a-baby-you're-wasting-your-life talk with me.

I have a plan for piercing the old bastard's security. I have a plan for covering my tracks. I know I can pull it off and dump that money untraceably into my family's accounts without any issues. I just need to time it right, keep my contingencies at hand in case anything goes wrong, finish up, and then tell Mom and Dad to check their accounts.

I can't wait to see their faces when the project I've been telling them about for months actually works.

Of course, it would be even better if I could find a way to rub my success in Mike Rossi's face, too. The guy is constantly acting like I've got no place on the Internet,

either. Like I can't possibly do the same job as him just as well as he does. It's the same bullshit that I get from my parents, except he's a little less overtly sexist about it.

Usually.

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I don't have time for that kind of bullshit, not from him, my parents, or anyone. This heist is going to be a coup for me—the coup that kick-starts my career.

The prep work is almost done, and the closer I get to dropping the hammer, the more excited I am and the less sleep I've gotten. I stifle a yawn as I double-check the programming on one of my subroutines. Yes, I'm absolutely killing it. Not a thing out of place.

I'm exhausted and stoked at the same time.

By the time I crawl off to bed, it's three in the morning. My head is throbbing, my upper back aches, and I absolutely know I've overdone it. But that's fine. It will all pay off soon enough.

I lie there in my big bed, trying not to think too hard about the risks of what I'm about to do. I can mitigate them: International law enforcement is way behind on investigative techniques for the Internet, and as for the old man himself, he'll barely miss the money. He might not even notice that it was stolen at all.

It takes a while for me to drift off. My frustrations and worries won't stop me from doing what needs to be done, but they do love to mess with my sleep.

My last thought, oddly enough, isn't of impressing my parents. It's of Michael Rossi, and how much I want to make his jaw drop in chagrin when I blow his own accomplishments out of the water.

Michael

“Billy! Beer me,” I call out to my younger brother as I walk into our vast stainless-steel kitchen. He nods and digs out a longneck for me out of the drink fridge, handing it off as I walk up.

“Hey, man. How’d it go today?” He stifles a yawn; that new-dad sleep deprivation is really getting to him.

“Uncle Ezio destroyed another laptop’s hard drive,” I sigh as I open the beer and take a swallow. It’s hot as hell for San Francisco in June, and Ezio never uses his damn air-conditioning. I’ve been sweating in his living room for most of the afternoon.

“For fuck’s sake. Porn again?”

I nodded, and he rolled his bright blue eyes. Billy is pretty much a mini-me: my same height but leaner, with similar features and the same wavy coffee-colored hair. He’s in responsible-dad-with-a-business drag: nice slacks, wingtips, and a light button-down. Me? The first thing I did after my shower was pull on my jeans and a black T-shirt.

“Yeah, well, embarrassing-ass Uncle Ezio threw a fit about being caught again when he was the one who filled up his whole laptop with viruses. I’m fixing things, and his wife and teenage daughters are yelling at him. I finally put my damn noise-canceling headphones on so I could work in peace.” I take a swallow of my beer, leaning on the wall next to the fridge.

He just laughs. “Well, that’s going to be fun when the holidays roll around, and we have to look at his dumb ass with a straight face.”

“I just had to do that for four goddamn hours. It wouldn’t piss me off, except

somehow, the guy never learns. I explain it to him, he says he understands, then he turns around and does the same dumb shit all over again. I'd expect that from a fourteen-year-old kid, not a damn church deacon."

"Everybody's got at least a few really ridiculous people in their family," Billy observes. "I mean, hell, we put up with you, right?"

"Ha ha." My family "puts up with" me because I'm the most brilliant computer guy this side of Silicon Valley and the besthacker in the whole West Coast mob, hands down. My family's relied on me for years for everything from electronic money laundering to helping my grandma figure out her new phone. "Anyway, I'm giving it another three months before I'm over there doing the same damn thing all over again."

"Hell, I'd be surprised if he makes it that long. The guy just plain doesn't learn." He takes a swallow from his own beer and looks at me. "So, what happened with Leanne, anyway?"

I wince. Leanne is an ex—a recent ex—only three months ago. We were pretty damn serious, though. Two years together. I even started looking through engagement ring catalogs before things soured over the last few months.

"The whole mobster-princess thing didn't do it for me, in the end." That is a huge understatement, but Billy doesn't need to know the whole play-by-play of the shitstorm that had happened between Leanne and I.

Leanne Castellucci is the spoiled daughter of a Capo who is set over a part of the East Bay, and she had latched onto me as the best way to rebel against Daddy. But as it turned out, her rebellion against Daddy is mostly for show and her own entertainment.

Her parents never approved of me. It was the only reason she was with me, in the end, besides the sex and the nice dates. But she wasn't much of a grown-up. Being told no was a berserk button for her, and I just got tired of it. I loved her, but what she offered in return was more like a babysitting job after a while than a relationship.

It hurt. I'm the kind of guy who wants to get serious with a lady, not waste years of my life on dating and hookup apps and meeting a new woman every weekend. But two weeks after she stormed out of our hotel room for the last time, I started feeling... relief mixed with pain.

That was when I knew she had done me a goddamn favor by dumping me before I could put a ring on her.

It's still a sore topic. I force a smile. "Anyway, you know her parents hated me."

"Yeah, I thought that didn't bother you."

I shrug. "It didn't when I thought we were really in love. But when I realized I was kind of a prop in the games she played with her dad, I suddenly didn't want anything to do with her anymore."

"Oh, yay. Wish I'd known that sooner. My wife's still Net friends with her."

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“Damn. Well, I’m not gonna be petty about it if she wants to stay friends, especially online. So don’t worry about it.” I take a swallow of my beer.

“I feel way out of touch.”

“You were vacationing with your family for the last two and a half months, bro. Don’t even worry about it. I get out of touch sometimes myself. It happens.” Another swallow of my beer.

“When do you think you’ll start dating again?”

I scoff. “Hell. Guess it depends on how lucky I get in finding someone. I really need to be careful about the next one. No more goddamn daddy’s girls, no more drama queens, and no more selfish girls. Holy shit.”

“That means getting to know ‘em. Think you can pry away from your computer long enough for some serious dating time?” he teases me.

I shake my head. “Just call me a nerd and be done with it.” Everyone in the family was on me about my lack of a steady relationship at 30. At least Billy has been just poking fun.

“So, if those princess types aren’t your type,” he asked after draining his bottle, “what is?”

I didn’t have to think about it long. Leanne’s cousin, Arya. A fucking gorgeous nerd girl who thinks we’re competitors and can’t stand me because of that. If she had so

much as smiled at me before now, I would have left Leanne and her bratty garbage for her in a hot second.

I had been drawn to Arya ever since we first met at one of the Don's events back when I was a junior in college. She was a freshman and one of the only people in the entire school who could keep up with me in computer science.

She has a hell of a lot of raw talent, she works hard, and she is so goddamn smart. The problem has been, from the moment we met, that she has apparently seen me as a rival who doesn't take her seriously.

I guess she isn't one for banter or teasing. Maybe it's a sore spot for her somehow. But damn it, ever since those early days she had—and has—acted like I'm personally out to make her look bad as her family's computer person.

I wasn't. I'm not. When I thought of her, I thought of a house with a giant computer setup and a couple of nerd kids. Hell, sometimes, I still do.

But other times, I just think about screwing that brittle, angry attitude right out of her. I think about spending the whole damn night making her shake with pleasure. I think about waking up to her and starting all over again.

Instead, I send her teasing emails to try and goad her into answering back, and I keep an eye out for her at big family gatherings, though she never seems to let me get near her. She acts like I'm some obnoxious dude who can't take a hint. Maybe I am a little, except for the obnoxious part. But I am definitely stuck on her.

Back when I was dating, I had managed to bury the feeling and focus on my partner. But now that I'm not, she's on my mind a whole hell of a lot again. Not just while I'm awake. I've even started having sex dreams about her again.

I lick my lips, pushing the memories of those really fucking hot dreams away. “Well, there’s someone who sure fits the bill. Problem is, she hates me and probably thinks I’m an asshole.”

“You kinda are, bro.” But his eyes are dancing.

I roll my eyes. “No, I mean a real asshole. The kind who looks down on her and wants to give her a hard time. She doesn’t even take banter well.”

“So? Neither does my wife. Don’t banter at women unless they start it. Some of them are good at it, but a lot really don’t like it.”

I frown thoughtfully. “Well, you’re the one with the good marriage. I’ll see about dropping that kinda bullshit when I try to talk to her again.” At this point, I’ll try anything, even cutting back on the sarcasm.

When I get back online later this afternoon, there’s an email waiting for me that I wasn’t expecting. Two months ago, my father got my help inserting a new maid into the Castellucci household to act as our spy. I didn’t like doing it, but Arya’s fucking parents are overambitious and sometimes aggressive about it. We have clashed with them over territory for years.

Now, though, the spy has found something and sent me an encrypted email about it from an Internet café. I peer at it, a frown deepening on my face. “Shit.”

Arya is about to do something superambitious: an electronic heist pulled on a billionaire. Not a huge amount by billionaire standards, just \$5 million, but definitely enough to give the Castelluccis an edge in the funding department. And if her method actually works, she can use it over and over again on people so ridiculously wealthy that they might not even notice.

I don't even know how she's going to pull it off. I wish I could get right into the code she's using and examine every line because this isn't just ambitious; it is incredibly difficult to pull off. Hacking overseas banking and wire transfer systems is also dangerous. It's a good way to end up at a government black site somewhere, with guys with no insignias on their uniforms.

But if she can really get in, get out with the money, and not get caught, I want to see that.

I have to report this to my father. The maid we placed is technically his source, not mine. But I'm not looking forward to it. I'm actually pretty damn worried about what he's going to do—or make me do—when he finds out.

I really don't want to give Arya any more reasons to hate me.

My father calls me into his office after dinner, and I bring him the printout of the email. My father is barely computer literate. He wants everything printed out, written out, or called in. No emails, no messenger, no texts, not even encrypted. He doesn't really trust any of it.

Fortunately, he trusts me.

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Dad doesn't look like the patriarch of a mob family. He's the shortest guy in the family, he's bald on top, and he looks a little like Santa Claus's younger brother. Some folks make jokes about my real dad being the mailman when they see it together, but no; I just take after Mom's brothers.

The thing is, when he speaks, people listen. He has this way of speaking with quiet authority, never raising his voice except when he's really pissed off, never making threats, never barking orders. No matter the lack of volume, he gets people to listen. And he gets people to worry about what will happen if they don't.

"What have you got for me, Mike?" he asks, his dark eyes searching my face. He frowns a little at something he sees there, and I quickly distract him by handing over the printout.

His eyes flick over it. "That Castellucci girl again. What the hell is she up to now?"

"Hijacking an overseas bank transfer and siphoning away a few million, nothing too exciting." I choose my words very carefully.

"Nonsense. If it wasn't a real innovation, you wouldn't be talking it down like that." He knows me way too well. He goes back over the printout. "It's too damn bad we can't just recruit her. So, when is this going down?"

I give him the scheduled date and time of the transfer: two days from now at 3 a.m.

He considers. Then, he sits back in his chair and tells me the last thing that I want to hear.

“All right, Michael. I need you to sabotage this heist.”

I stare at him in shock. “Wait... what?”

“What’s unclear?” He shifts in his chair and peers at me over his gold-rimmed glasses.

“You want me to sabotage the transaction so she can’t pull the cash?” I hope to hell he doesn’t mean get her caught. I won’t do that. I hate having to deal with refusing my dad anything related to business, but that’s a bridge too goddamn far.

“I’m not saying don’t let her take the money. I’m saying don’t let her keep it.”

I let out all my air. “Steal from her? From the Castellucci family accounts?”

“If she can somehow interrupt an international wire transfer and divert those funds, then you can figure out how to interrupt the transfer to her family accounts and get us that money instead.”

I think about it. It’s a tall order, but I can handle it. I really don’t want to, because it’s her, and any test of my skill against hers, I want it to be... friendly competition. Not doing something that’s going to leave her empty-handed in front of her family.

“Michael?”

“I’m thinking. Hang on a second, please.”

“Michael, let me make myself clear.” He takes a sip from his vodka and cranberry juice and looks at me pointedly. “I know you have some interest in this woman, but right now, her loyalty to her family makes her a liability to us. We can’t afford to let her keep using this technique to line their pockets.”

“We could just use the same technique,” I start to suggest, but he waves a hand dismissively.

“Not good enough. I fully intend to have you reverse engineer what she’s done and take advantage of it, but we don’t want the Castelluccis to be doing the same.

“The Castelluccis are very backward. From what we’ve learned so far, it looks like they’ve been trying to discourage Arya from working as their computer expert at all. If she fails to follow through on any promises to them, she and her technique will lose any remaining credibility with them.

“So... steal the five million, steal her technique, and undermine her family’s confidence to ruin her career and make them reject that same technique?”

Shit. Shit. Shit. I do not want to do this.

“Is there any reason why you can’t make this happen?”

I open my mouth to make an excuse—any excuse. Anything I can do to stop this from going forward while still appeasing my dad. But there is nothing.

He stares at me expectantly.

“No,” I say finally, caving in and hating myself for it. “I’ll get it done.”

Chapter 3

Arya

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By Sunday, I am almost completely ready to go. On my way to church with my family, my head is full of the plan: steps I need to take still, how I'll pull it off, and what the timing for everything needs to be.

Meanwhile, my mother is talking about eligible bachelors again as Dad drives. She claims the congregation's full of them and even reads names off a list at one point. Most of them are too old or too young for me, one of them is engaged to another woman, and another had cheated on a friend of mine. Nope, nope, no, thank you. But I sit quietly and let her ramble for as long as I can stand.

"Now, their son's not very high-ranking or anything, but he's got a good reputation, and he's even handsome. His mom says he only wants four kids, so you can have time for your little computer hobby, too!"

My smile becomes a little strained. "I'm sure he's very nice, Mom. He's also nineteen."

"Well, you always end up raising your husband a little bit—"

My father harrumphs. I roll my eyes. Poor Dad.

I shake my head. "...Mom. That's not 'raising' a husband; that is babysitting a permanent teenager."

I don't even know why the hell I'm putting up with this. I'm about to make us \$5 million richer with a proof of concept that will keep paying off for us for decades, even if I have to tweak it several times along the way. I don't even have to entertain

this bullshit.

But it's Mom on a Sunday, and despite the fact that she already has half a dozen grandbabies from her other sons and daughters, it's her favorite time to push the same old goddamn narrative on me.

"I don't understand why you're so hostile to the idea, honey! Why are you so scared of settling down? This isn't normal." The patter is so familiar that I start silently mouthing along to her words without missing a single one. "You like guys, right? This isn't some lesbian thing, is it? Or are you one of the asexual? I read in my Facebook group that—"

"Mom! For the fifth time in the last month, I am none of those things! I like guys! I just don't pair off and breed on command, okay? I haven't ever found anyone worth dating steadily, let alone marrying. And it's not exactly a priority for me right now! I have bigger things on my mind."

"Please, don't tell me this is about your stupid computer hobby—"

"Now, honey, I think this is a little more than a hobby for her," my father actually protests a little, for once. "She did go out and get her doctorate."

"Don't encourage her!" my mother snaps. "It's years of this, and she's never once done anything really useful—"

"That's about to change!" I burst out, and my mother suddenly goes quiet.

"What are you talking about, sweetheart?" my father asks, more to fill the sudden, awkward silence than anything else.

"I've come up with a way to make us money using the Internet. Lots of money."

I try not to panic as I realize I just gave away part of my plan ahead of time instead of sticking to what I'd decided and surprising them with the money later. They are both silent, waiting for me to continue.

My heart beating hard, I do just that. "I'm going to use a program that will allow me to interrupt and steal from high-ticket international wire transfers. Millions of dollars at a time."

Suddenly, the two of them are full of questions, talking over each other, my mother amazed and skeptical, and my father increasingly excited. We need an edge over the Rossis, and this could be it. If I can pull it off.

I field every question somehow, feeling nervous and dizzy and struggling with a million self-doubts that seem to come out of nowhere. Who I'm stealing from? When it's happening? How to make sure it can't be traced? On and on.

By the time we're off the freeway again and fighting downtown San Francisco traffic, I've fielded every question, and they're silent again, both mulling it over while I wait.

"I don't know about this idea, honey," my mother says predictably. "It sounds risky. Doesn't it sound risky to you?"

My father grunts as he deals with the stop-and-go traffic. "I think we should let her try it," he says, surprising me a little. "If this works, it'll pay us back for all her schooling and gear and a whole lot more."

My mother makes an indecisive noise. "But what happens if we get caught by the government?"

"That's not going to happen. I've made very sure that nothing can be traced back to us. The real issue is going to be timing it all right."

My father sniffs and glances back at me for a moment before turning onto our church's street. "Look, let's think about it and talk again after church," he says while I seethe a little inside. I don't want to wait for their permission to prove myself. I just really, desperately want to do it.

For many decades, the Families have kept to the Sunday Truce locally. No matter how bad a rivalry, grudge, or full-on feud is, we do not fight on Sundays.

Sunday is for family, for community, and, of course, for church. The truce allows us to do things like attend the same services without brawling in the aisles or visiting violence on each other in the parking lots. It lets us go out with our families, even if we pass someone we were exchanging gunfire with just days ago on the street. In short, it's one of the better old mob traditions to keep around.

And good thing it's kept because the Rossis go to the same damn church, and today, Michael's at the same service with us.

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He's here with his brother and his brother's family, and he doesn't see me at first. I'm glad of that. He doesn't need to notice how I immediately find myself unable to look away from him for long.

He's actually in a suit. He only wears suits to church and funerals, as far as I know. He looks damn good in charcoal gray tailored, though. Especially those shoulders.

But if he catches me looking, he'll take it as an invitation to saunter over, tease me, and flirt in ways that will get my mother overexcited. I'm not risking that. I already feel like duct-taping her mouth.

I wouldn't even mind the flirtation; he's hot, smart, and pretty charismatic, but he's also a rival from a family that doesn't get along with mine. He doesn't seem to care about those things, but I absolutely do. I have to prove myself in such ways he doesn't, basically, because he's a man, I'm a woman, and the Mob and my family are... the way they are.

Sometimes, I almost wish I could explain it to the big dumbass so he'd stop teasing me. But I'm really left wondering if he would even listen. So few do. They're all too wrapped up in their agendas to think about the people around them.

I wish he didn't cross a room so well. Watching him get up for Communion is an exercise in self-restraint, especially in a well-cut suit. I don't mind jeans guys, but there's something about a guy who cleans up well that I can't even put my finger on.

Once I've gotten my bite of doughy Host and sip of vinegary wine, I head back to my seat—and catch him watching me. His eyes are bright and friendly, and when he

catches me looking back, he smiles and waves.

My cheeks start burning. The audacity of this guy! I have to force myself not to hurry back to my seat. He would find that way too amusing if I did.

I spend the rest of the service trying not to think about him, thinking about him anyway, and being mad at myself for thinking about him.

After the service is the usual lunchtime potluck that has almost everyone in the congregation piled into the church's small community center. Mom's on another of her diets and has brought salad. I had to talk myself out of bringing cookies, getting a cheese plate with crackers instead.

Michael is there because, of course, he is buzzing around the room, socializing before we line up to fill our plates. He's always shaking hands, laughing with that person, or getting everyone around him to listen to one of his stories. I'd think he was a ray of sunshine if he was less obnoxious about it.

As it is, he's a pain in my butt, and I can see he's circling me. Subtly, watching me, swinging into my line of sight, even sitting in my line of sight once we fill our plates and sit down. I do my best to ignore him, feeling awkward and overheated.

Damn him, he's got me wolfing my food and thinking about waiting in the car just so I won't be caught staring again. But, instead, I'm stuck making nice with some of my mom's friends, who have planted themselves across the table from us and started chattering nonstop.

"So, your mom says you're still not seeing anyone," bottle-red-haired Mary is prying at me. I manage to keep a polite smile on my face as she goes on. "You know, my cousin's boy is about your age. I could set you up if you'd like."

Damn it, Mom. Now she's got her small army of busybody friends after me, too. It really makes me want to beg off and go home.

At least fending them off distracts me from the Michael Show happening behind them.

"I appreciate the offer, but I'm wrapped up in a work project right now and won't have time for at least another few weeks." By then, hopefully, Mary, who has an attention span as short as a six-year-old, will have moved on to something else.

"Well, how about after that?" Her smile is unnerving, mostly because her lipstick clashes with her hair, and she has flecks of it on her teeth.

"You know, I don't see why not. Could you tell me more about him?" I am never, ever, ever going on that date, but if it will appease these women and my mother long enough to make them shut up for a while, I'm happy to play along.

Deep inside, though, it angers and depresses me. I wish I had a cool rebel aunt who never got married and could guide me through all this constant pressure. But I don't. My aunts, largely, are just like my mother.

Once the holidays roll around, they will doubtless be after me, too.

I just wish there was one person in my entire family who saw my side and stood up for me. My sisters, my brothers, my dad, they try to understand a little, but they join right in with the chorus once my mother gets started.

Suddenly, I'm watching Michael just to look at something hot so I won't be quite so depressed. But he catches me again and again until it almost feels like he's laughing at me.

Chapter 4

Michael

Seeing Arya at church made me feel even worse about what I am about to do to her. I wanted to go talk to her the whole time. She was surrounded by relatives who seemed to be picking at her, and she seemed desperate to escape. But every time I tried to engage her, she avoided me despite staring at me almost constantly throughout the service and the potluck.

Last night, I had trouble sleeping. I even dreamed of her again. Not a sex dream, but a guilt dream. Her standing in front of the church congregation, asking why I ruined her life. Why I'm always in the way when she's trying to do something to impress her family. Why I smile at her face but act like I hate her.

I wake up broody, ashamed, and still horny for her, and it doesn't help when I look at the date on my phone. The heist is tonight. That means that tonight, I have to steal it all from her.

The worst part of all of it is that my father's added another requirement to my list of tasks for the night. After all the aggravation her family has caused him, he wants to make sure that they know it was us.

Which means that Arya will know... it was me.

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That makes me feel especially awful and especially weak for not standing up to my dad. He's right, we can't let the Castelluccis get that much of a financial leg up on us, but she's the one who is going to pay when that money's stolen out from under her. And she doesn't fucking deserve it.

Her father's an asshole who had my cousin shot for working in "his territory." Her mother's a social-climbing, holier-than-thou bitch who tries to control everyone around her, regardless of if they're family or strangers. Her family is a giant pain in our collective asses. But Arya?

All Arya's tried to do is keep her network secure from me. Inconvenient, but understandable, and hardly an insult.

But I still have to do this. I can't afford to die on this hill. I know better than to cross my father.

I just wish I could do anything but this.

"I don't get it," I mutter to Manny, one of my dad's enforcers and my best buddy. "I don't want to be antagonizing this woman. I want her in my bed. But now, she's going to hate me for the rest of our lives."

"Well, buddy, I hate to say it, but even if you were crazy in love with her, it still doesn't change that you don't go against the boss. I know that sucks, and I don't really agree with this. But your dad's the head of this family, and he has some seriously real reasons to hate the Castelluccis. You and Arya are just caught in the damn middle."

“Ugh, this sucks!” I get up and go over to the window, seething with excess energy. I’ll have to burn it in the family gym once I get home. “I wish I could sabotage her by distracting her with sex or something.”

“Wouldn’t change anything. You’d still have to do the whole job. Unless you feel like handing your dad five mil.” He sighs and comes over to put a hand on my shoulder. “Just get it all done, buddy, get it over with. The sooner you do, the sooner you can get past this.”

“You’re right.” Of course, he would say that even if it wasn’t because Dad’s his boss. But sometimes, being a mob man means that the only way out of an uncomfortable situation is to go through it and come out the other side.

Nobody can really help what family they’re born into. It’s the same for me. My duties aren’t going to change because they hurt a lady I’m into. I still have to get it done.

I’m sorry, Arya, I think, and I wish I could go get drunk with my friend instead.

But duty calls.

I get my first good look at Arya’s code late in the afternoon. I have her habits down and know she’s always away from her keyboard from midafternoon to midevening, probably at her family’s insistence. This gives me a chance to pop into her family network and get a good look around while she’s not around to monitor it directly.

It takes more time than expected to break into the network and then into her system. She really knows her stuff. That makes her just all that much more interesting to me. She’s definitely as good as I am, and I’m guessing that whoever ends up winning in this contest of code and hacking is going to be down to luck and small mistakes.

I’m still going to win this. I have to—and besides, I don’t like losing. Now that I’m

committed, I have no intention of letting her keep my fingers out of her stolen purse.

I look around her setup, and it impresses the hell out of me. Her programming is top-notch. She's even working on some high-level AI stuff that I can't even quite sort out at first glance. I'm tempted to grab a copy of more of her stuff, but I restrain myself. I'll stick to what I'm required to do—no more, no less.

I'm very aware, even as I prepare to mess up Arya's plans and life that I would rather be doing anything but this. Especially if it involved doing her. But I'm going to end up burning any chance with her on the pyre of my dad's ambitions because that's what I'm supposed to do.

This absolutely sucks. I know I'm going to regret it. But... there's a gun to my head.

I make a few tweaks here and there to make sure I can track what she's doing even if I'm not currently connected to her system. Hopefully, she won't notice until it's far too late. If she does, I'll have to come up with a plan B.

I manage to log off within three hours and go to make myself a hoagie that I can barely taste. Mom's mad I missed dinner, but Dad explains to her that I'm working, and she leaves it be. "Just don't let yourself go hungry, honey. You know how you get with work."

The hoagie meets with her approval, and I retreat to my room with it and a chilled energy drink. It's not exactly the dinner of champions; it's the dinner of a tech guy in a serious fucking hurry to get fed and get back to work.

At 3 a.m., she logs on and gets to work. I immediately set what's left of my hoagie down and go to jump on my system, too, and not a moment too late because she's already hijacking the overseas transfer.

I watch the flow of code in fascination, then start weaving my own little trap for the money as soon as she has her pretty little hands on it. From her point of view, it will fill her target account with five million... and then, all that money will vanish in under thirty seconds. If she's not vigilant and goes off to celebrate, she won't even notice until tomorrow.

Five minutes later, the money is hers.

Six minutes later, the money is mine.

By the time I finally get to bed, the money's secure in one of my accounts after being bounced through a couple of stops overseas. I'm exhausted, guilty, and angry that things had to go down like this. But I'm also thrilled to have accomplished it.

I left her a little note in my usual cheeky style, knowing I at least owe her the admission. She will probably already suspect me since, after all, she considers us rivals. So, when it comes to my prospects with her, I'm screwed either way.

At least this way, I am being honest. Besides... my dad didn't exactly give me a choice.

Hey babe

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It's me again. Just being honest. I know you'd figure it out anyway, so I might as well be upfront.

Good job on the heist, and I'm sorry to take your hard-stolen cash and run. But orders are orders, and I've got mine.

Your code's amazing. Go ahead and try again. But maybe you should beef up your system security first.

Michael

I stare at the ceiling, rolling the words I'd left for her through my mind and wondering if I should have been more serious. Explained more. But that email hurt me to write. I want to get it over and done with as fast as possible. Now, I'm wondering if I should have pushed myself harder to apologize and explain.

Too late now. Besides, it doesn't really matter in the end. I ruined her plans. Now, she's going to hate me no matter what I say and do. I'm usually a genius at getting out of trouble with women, but this one? It fucking kills me to admit it, but now I know for sure that she's completely out of my reach.

And I probably deserve that.

Chapter 5

Arya

The day after my big chance to prove myself got stolen out from under me by the biggest bastard on the Internet, I'm still in shock. At breakfast, I'm silent, eating my food without tasting it, while my whole insides feel hollow and cold.

Michael grabbed all the money out of my hands before I could transfer it safely into the family's overseas accounts. One moment, the money was safely in my hands, and then, it was gone. He lay in wait, monitoring me somehow without my noticing, and struck at the exact right moment.

Which means he had been watching me closely for a while—or having someone else do it.

My father has been watching me the entire breakfast. I know what's coming, and it terrifies me. I know it's going to be mortifying. I know my mother's going to gloat. I know it's going to make everything I am going through all that much worse.

Finally, he sets down his fork, and the little ring of the metal on the table makes me stiffen.

“So, how did it go last night?”

I look down. “We have a problem.”

“What's that? You didn't get the money?”

“I did get the money!” I snap defensively in spite of myself. “I even have a record of it.”

My mother looks so surprised that I want to throw something at her. Of course, I don't. Instead, I focus on my father, who is staring at me thoughtfully.

“If you got the money, why isn’t it in our overseas account? I checked first thing. No five million. Were you lying about all of this?” His voice has that light tone it takes on when he’s really, really angry.

“No, I wasn’t lying. I can show you all my work, everything I did, and the financial records.”

“So, what happened?” His eyes search my face. My stomach clenches around the croissant and berries I’ve eaten so far, and my lungs feel like they’re being squeezed.

“Michael Rossi was monitoring me last night. He broke into our systems, and when I did the transfer, he used some of my own tricks against me to grab it. Someone must have been informing on me to him—”

“That’s a stupid excuse, and you know it,” he cuts in, and I stop dead, staring at him.

“What?”

“All I’m really hearing is that you fucked up. You got the money, but your system security wasn’t good enough because you don’t know what you’re doing, and because of that, you lost the money.” His voice rises with every sentence. By the end of his rant, he’s practically shouting at me. “You’re a woman. You should never have been in charge of our computer network in the first place!”

Tears fill my eyes. Oh, you absolute asshole. My mother picks at me all the time; I’m used to it. But when my father goes off and suddenly turns full misogynist, it is really hard to take. “You wouldn’t even have a computer network or any security at all without me. And even if you were right, which you are not, it doesn’t change that we’ve got a spy—”

“That’s bullshit!” he roars. My mother is glaring at me and shaking her head. My two

unmarried brothers, Paolo and James, are suddenly very busy with their breakfasts. “There’s no spy involved. Stop making excuses for your incompetence!”

I stare around at my family with a mix of crushing grief and growing disgust. At this moment, all I want to do is get up, pack my things, and walk out the door. I’ve tried to prove myself to them my whole life. I shouldn’t have to, but I’ve tried. And it’s never worked. It’s never going to work because they’re a bunch of small-minded, stubborn bigots.

My father is still screaming at me. I stare at him through a curtain of tears and then suddenly stand up and walk away.

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“Where the hell do you think you’re going, young lady?”

“I’m getting away from you. All of you. And thinking whether I want to do that for good.”

My mother gasps like I’ve just slapped her. “Arya! You screwed up here. You’re only getting what you deserve. You can’t just sulk off and run away from your family—”

“You treat me like garbage, you push me away, and then you’re surprised when I go away. It’s not my fault I was spied on and sabotaged. For all I know, you’re the ones who warned the man you know is my rival just so he could sabotage me and give you an excuse to do all this.”

My father is so shocked he actually stops yelling and bitching at me and just stares. “Why the hell would we do that?”

“To try and force me to be a fucking housewife and pump out grandkids for you and have that be my whole life. Well, you know what? You can go the hell ahead and pull my equipment and my ability to use the home network. You can yell, and bitch, and scream, and sic your friends and relatives on me, but it’s not ever going to get you any grandbabies, ever. Not from me. Because I’d rather get my tubes tied in my twenties than let you two dinosaurs decide my future!”

My mother has gone pale. “Arya... you can’t mean that!”

“I absolutely do mean that. You can force me to stop working for this family, but you can’t force me to give up my whole life because your mindset never left the 1950s.

And if you keep trying, you will no longer have a daughter to push around at all.”

My father breaks in. “Honey, look, I know I said some harsh words, but I’m angry—”

“Don’t give me your damn excuses,” I snap. “I may be a pariah in this family, but it’s not because I’m incompetent. It’s because I’m a woman, and I won’t toe the line for you.”

“Well, maybe if you actually did something to prove your competence with computers—” he starts.

Now, I really start crying. “I have been trying! But either you don’t notice, or you make excuses for why it isn’t good enough. Now, I manage to do something pretty damn spectacular, and I got sabotaged by your rivals!”

My father’s face twists with exasperation. He hates it when women cry. “Calm down,” he grumbles. “I don’t care how much it hurts your pride. You need to own up to your failings.”

“You first,” I snap and walk away. This time, I don’t let their shouting after me stop me.

It takes a while for me to pull myself back together. Knowing my parents, they’re going to pretend this blowup didn’t happen and expect me to do the same. However, they absolutely will pull all my admin privileges and equipment. They’ve been looking for an excuse to do it for years.

I feel broken inside. I was almost there. I almost managed to prove myself to my parents despite all their prejudices. I did all the work. I executed my plan perfectly.

I lost anyway.

And all because of one insufferable prick who had managed to dart in and take advantage while I was struggling to maintain security with second-rate equipment and not enough of the right software.

I hate you, Michael.

I'm so furious and disgusted that I drag his days-old email out of my filter folder and answer it. He'd asked me out again. Of course, he had. That audacious, overconfident jackass!

I answer, feeling my rage boiling inside of me as I write:

Well, I hope you're proud of yourself.

This heist had nothing to do with you or your family. It was all about me and doing something for myself. But you just had to waltz in, fuck everything up, and humiliate me in front of my family. Did you even have a reason outside of fucking with me?

Well, congratulations. You managed to completely screw me over. This doesn't even affect my family. In fact, it gives them an excuse to do some shit to me they've wanted to do for years. But my life's never going to be the same after this.

I hope someone does to you what you've gone and done to me, you sonovabitch.

I send it and then block him. I don't want to read any more of his bullshit. If I catch him at church again, and he tries to bother me, he's getting a glass of punch in his face. And a real punch in his balls if I catch him on the street and it's not Sunday.

In the meantime, though, I have to figure out how he got into my system and what inside person he has helping him. I swear to God, if I find out it's my parents or one of my brothers, I am disowning all of them. But if it isn't... then we have a spy in our

house.

And since nobody will fucking listen to me, I'll have to find them on my own.

Once I've cleared my name, I don't know what I'll do. Right now, I hate even the thought of my family. I feel trapped here. I'm sure they'll cut me off if I run, but I don't care.

But I do know one thing: Once I've sorted my life out, I'm looking up Michael Rossi again. And I'm going to make him pay.

Chapter 6

Michael

“What the hell’s got you so sour?” my sister demands over her third martini. She’s not even 21 yet. “You’re bringing the whole damn mood down. Smile or something.”

My sister is a brat, and not in a cute, charming way. She’s the youngest, my mom’s most favorite precious baby, and dear God does she act like it. She glares at me like this is her wedding reception, and I’m here specifically to fuck it up.

I shrug her off. “I was up all night getting the same shit we’re celebrating done.”

“Well, try to be happier about it!”

I roll my eyes and do my best to stay patient. “Maria. I was up all night making us money, and I still have to transfer it all to our overseas accounts as soon as I can get out of here. I can’t afford to party too hard.”

“Oh, come on, you can do that bank shit in the morning. You’re completely hashing this party, acting like it’s a wake or something. Get more drunk.”

I lift my wine glass with an ironic smirk. “Working on it.”

“Well, work harder! It’s a party!” She huffs and tosses her ponytail before traipsing off to go chatter with Mom. Probably about me.

I'm used to this kind of crap. She's technically an adult now but still acts about 13. Mommy's precious girl is never going to grow up. At least until she faces some consequences. But God forbid that Mom ever lets her.

My family's celebrating my success while I drink too much wine and try to pretend I don't feel like shit about it. Tomorrow, I'm going to have one of those wine-drunk headaches that make me feel like I want to die. That's fine. I deserve it.

Arya's email bit deep. It reminded me again that I hadn't even tried to say no to my father about stealing from her. I just... went and did it, and messed up her life worse than expected. Now, I'm living with that. But that's nothing compared to what she's living with.

God. Forget my sister. I'm the biggest asshole in this family.

"So, now that you've pulled this off once," my father ventures as he saunters up, "do you think you can pull off the same thing Arya did by yourself?"

I drag myself out of my thoughts and put on a neutral face. "I think so. I need to study what she did to make sure I fully understand it all." It stings to admit that, too. She's just as good a coder as I am—maybe even a little more talented—and she must have put at least a solid year into the project. No wonder she's so pissed at me.

"All right, well, let me know when you figure it out." And on he goes to talk to one of my uncles. I stare at his back, then look down into my wineglass and swallow the contents in one gulp.

Billy finds me soon after, eyes the empty wineglass, and steers me into the kitchen to drink a glass of water. "I'm fine," I complain, but he ignores me and prods me into drinking 16 oz before he'll even talk to me. I soldier along, swallowing it down, trying not to get too annoyed with him.

“So, what’s going on?” he asks me as we lean on the kitchen counter.

“Did the job. Left a note about it like Dad wanted. It’s all handled. But I feel like shit about it.” I want to go back to the wine. Billy’s watching me. I leave my wineglass on the counter, empty, for now.

“Because of Arya?”

I eye him, almost annoyed that I even have to confirm that. “Of course.”

“Fuck, yeah. That has to be rough.” He thumps my shoulder a little awkwardly. “I’m sorry, man. I mean, I’m glad you got it done, but it sucks that she got caught up in it.”

“Guess I’ll just have to deal with it,” I mutter, and he nods.

“Nothing else you can do except maybe find yourself a girlfriend to distract yourself with.”

I actually think about it for a moment, but all I can do is go back to thinking about Arya and how pissed she has to be at me right now. “Don’t think I’m quite ready for that yet.”

“Come on, man, I’m talking about some casual dating and fucking, not finding your true love. Lighten up about it, seriously.”

“Oh, not you, too,” I grumble before I can stop myself.

“Not me too what?” He gives me a confused look.

“Maria just bitched at me because I wasn’t being cheerful enough at a family gathering. Like she’s the goddamn Smile Police.”

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“Oh, I didn’t mean it like that. I just mean try to have a little fun. You’re usually a ray of goddamn sunshine, man. You need to work on getting past this Arya thing.”

“I’ll work on it.” But I can’t. I’ve already figured that part out.

I end up leaving the party early. I don’t want to offend anyone, so I stick around until some of the guests start to leave. Then, I say my goodbyes and head up to my suite.

Holy shit, parties are exhausting when you’re not in a good mood. I suddenly understand why people dealing with depression tend to white-knuckle their way through social events. I’m definitely ready to sleep off some of that wine by the time I get to my room.

I strip down to my shorts and T-shirt and lie down, only to find myself staring at the ceiling again. The guilt’s weighing me down, making my mind race and keeping me from properly resting.

I make the attempt anyway, closing my eyes, breathing deeply, and even managing to meditate a little. Sleep, though, seems to elude me no matter what I do. My thoughts never fully still. The guilt never fully goes away. And neither does my anger at myself, at my father, at his feud with the Castelluccis... at my own bad luck.

Maybe I could have found a way around all of this. Maybe I could have taken the L and just let Arya win this one. Right now, I feel like a dumbass kid who still jumps whenever his father barks an order.

I log on to handle the money transfer before the exhaustion fogs my brain too much. I

just want to get it over with and then immerse myself in a book until I can sleep.

The money's there waiting in the account I had targeted last night. No complications, nothing weird. I make the transfer. I'll check in ten minutes to make sure it hit the account all right.

I sit back, massaging my temples. I should be proud of my cleverness, but all I can see are the consequences I didn't want to cause.

I do a little Internet browsing, shop for a few Christmas gifts, and then go back and check the balance on the destination account. The transfer hasn't hit yet. That's strange.

I check the source account. The money's shown as transferred. I check the destination account. Still no money.

Don't panic. Sometimes, these things take a few minutes.

But my gut is suddenly curdling, like every drop of the wine I had drunk turned into vinegar. My heart is pounding.

I know. I don't believe it, I can't believe it, I don't want to think it's real—but I know.

Someone has grabbed the cash right out from under me, just the same as I did from Arya.

I stare at my screen and refresh it a few times. My stomach is boiling.

Someone just fucking robbed us!

I quickly text my father, knowing I'm neck deep in shit and have to bring him in on this as fast as possible. Otherwise, it will be his boot up my ass later.

The grandfather clock in my father's office ticks toward the hour. Is it midnight or one? I can't see it from this angle, and I don't want to check my watch. All I want right now is to give my father answers that will satisfy him so I can go to bed and mourn my battered pride.

"So, what you're saying is that somebody broke into our network, did the exact same thing to you that you did to the Castelluccis, and then made off with our five million. That's the story you're sticking to."

"That is definitely the story that I'm sticking to, at least until I have evidence to the contrary. But all the sleuthing work I have done so far says that whoever this is stole Arya's money and her idea right out from under us."

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph, Michael, how could you let this happen?" he snaps.

"I'll get the money back," I burst out. "I'll fix all of this. I just have to find out—"

He slams his fist down on his desk, making his drink jump and the ice cubes in it rattle. "You had fucking well better, Michael. Because if I find out that you willingly screwed this up to cut that Arya woman a break—"

"How does this cut her a break? She doesn't have the money either!"

That calms him down a little. "So, she didn't steal it back?"

"I'll double-check it, but unless she's got a spy on our staff, there's no way she would have known when we were making the transfer. Someone must have been monitoring me the same way I was monitoring Arya."

“How the hell could anyone manage that?” he demands. “I thought you made sure the system was secure!”

“That won’t prevent social engineering. If she put someone on our staff as a spy the same way we did to the Castelluccis, they would have inside access to our network.”

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He sits forward, frowning and gazing at me piercingly. “I’ll screen the staff. You’re sure about this?”

“There were no intrusions on our network last night or this morning. I checked thoroughly. So, either someone on our staff is a plant, or someone’s login information was stolen.” Which is always possible. Brute-force attacks are still a thing, and so is being a lazy asshole who picks a simple password and doesn’t change it often enough.

“Figure it out, Michael,” he sighs. “I’m not accepting humiliation for this whole family because you slipped up. Find me the perpetrator, and find me the money.”

I nod, and he immediately goes back to his drink and paperwork, dismissing me. I push up from my uncomfortable perch on one of his chairs and walk out, feeling his gaze on my back like a hand shoving me out the door.

Fuck. I have no idea where to start. Probably a closer look at the night’s access logs, but right now, my head is spinning from the lack of sleep. I need to rest, but I can’t rest. Too much fucking adrenaline.

I go back to my suite, feeling defeated and furious. How the hell did someone snatch Arya’s protocol and use it against me so damn quickly? I have a feeling I’m missing something very important. But my brain just plain isn’t firing right yet.

It hits me then that I’m going to need help. Expert help. I only have a few really hotshot hackers I stay friends with since a lot of them want nothing to do with mob families. I quickly send a text to all five of them, determined to get something done

on this before I let myself rest.

I stare at the ceiling for a long time, wondering who it is that has fucked me over and wondering as well if I didn't deserve it.

Then, I slowly drift off.

Arya is in my bed, naked, those gorgeous tits of hers bare and sleek as they brush against my chest. I slide down her body, skin against skin, kissing her neck and then sucking one of her nipples hungrily. She moans and whimpers and tangles her fingers in my hair, begging for more, pressing her full breast against my face while I suck until she's trembling under me.

I thrust into her, and she's slick, swollen, and perfect, wrapping her arms and legs around me as we move together. My body feels like it's dissolving in a cloud of bliss...

I sit up, gasping and sweaty, and then fall back against my pillow, suddenly awake with a stinging headache and sticky sheets. "Shit," I mutter, staring at the ceiling again. On top of all the other insane shit going on, here is a stupid one: The sex dreams won't quit. And as always, every last one of them is about Arya, the woman who officially hates my guts now.

I change my sheets, shower, get dressed in my gym clothes, and grab some coffee as I sit down at my computer. I probably don't have much time to redeem myself, and I need to get my ass moving.

I am haunted by the vision of Arya in my arms as I check my texts. Her robust curves under my hands, her full mouth against mine, and the way I blew my load so hard that it woke me. My body is still tingling and more relaxed than I am actually feeling.

My messages are chock full of disappointment. I don't know how news has gotten around so fast—maybe my brat of a youngest sister—but apparently, I'm persona non grata among my hacker buddies for fumbling the ball at the eleventh hour in what could have been an epic heist. Nobody wants to help me out. Maybe they see too much risk to their reputations in it.

“Fuck.” Well, I can't expect the situation to not come with consequences. However, the more I look at what happened, the more I sense that I'm missing something. I need a second pair of eyes on this. I need an expert in this kind of work...

I blink, sitting back suddenly. Wait.

No, no, no. That will never work. She'll never agree. Never.

Arya Castellucci will never help me fix this mess.

Unless...what if I gave her the name of the spy in her household? What if I split the money with her? What if I actually make the effort to make things good with her, like I wanted to do anyway? It's risky. Dad will be really pissed if he finds out I burned his spy. But it will take a peace offering of that caliber to even get a foot in the door with Arya. I'm certain of it.

This is an insane idea and very risky. She could refuse me, she could screw me, she could do all kinds of damage. And yet...

It is my one possible shot to make things good between us.

I just hope I can sell her on the idea.

Chapter 7

Arya

Two days after the heist, I'm no closer to figuring out who the hell gave Michael access to our family network than I am to getting my parents to stop beating what's left of our relationship to death. I'm exhausted and pissed off, and I've already gone through all my contacts on the dark web without turning up anything. I am determined to redeem myself with my family, but that's going to be such an uphill battle that I sometimes question what the point is.

My father has assigned one of his men to take my place and run the family network. Most of my equipment has been taken away, aside from my personal network. I had to copy and hide most of my programming work to keep that from being taken away from me, too. My father doesn't give a shit, and my mother is treating the whole thing like I'm a teenager being grounded for wrecking the family car.

And none of this would have happened without Michael. That son of a bitch. This was just another job for him and another chance to get up my nose. But he's ruined me. I don't even care if he didn't know that was what he was doing. That was what he did.

I hear a knock at my door as I'm rearranging my workspace, and then the door opens. Nina, my oldest sister. She's the only one who talks to me regularly right now, mostly because she's the runner-up for the black sheep in the family. She and her kids moved in a year ago after her husband had died due to financial reasons, and she's shown no interest in remarrying. That's a real crime in this family.

She dyes her hair auburn these days, and her eyes are wide and brown behind her round glasses. "How are you holding up, lil sis?"

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“I’m alive. Not sure about my dignity.” The one little laptop looks ridiculous sitting in the middle of my huge, empty workstation.

“Mom and Dad aren’t letting up, huh?” She smiles ruefully. “I get it. When they found out I had no plans to remarry after Paul died, they called my priest. Said I should get counseling.”

“Because you didn’t want to go back to being a wife when you just lost your husband? They actually did that?” I ask incredulously. She hadn’t told me about the bullshit our parents had pulled.

“They did indeed. Kind of hard to come back from that.” She chuckles and shakes her head. I have no idea how she can handle our parents’ meddling so calmly. Maybe she doesn’t get treated as badly. Certainly, they almost never take her to task in front of the family. With me, they always do.

“I can’t even try to date without them descending on me,” I grumble. “They meddle in everything I do. I can’t work without being criticized. I can’t work for the family without being discouraged. And when I look for a new man, he’s never good enough while simultaneously not moving fast enough to lock me down and put a baby in me.”

“Oh, honey,” she sighs. “You can’t let them get to you, especially Mom. Mom doesn’t even know what she really wants when it comes to you because you’ve never toed the line with her.”

“I shouldn’t have to toe the line with her. I’m in my late twenties, damn it. If she

keeps trying to be so controlling, I swear to God I may have to move out and stop talking to her for a while. Dad, too.” I wipe down the freshly cleared space on my desk, mopping up little threads of dust that used to sit between hard drives and server equipment.

“Arya, come on! This is your family. You have to be willing to put up with some eccentricities—”

I feel tears come to my eyes suddenly: tears of anger, humiliation, and frustration. “Eccentricities are one thing. Sexism, trying to control my life and treating me like garbage when I try to contribute—”

“They didn’t treat you like garbage.” She sounds exasperated.

I stare at her. She has been only witness to some of it, but what she has seen should have been more than enough for her to realize our parents are out of line with the way they treat me.

Then, I realize it. I don’t know why I haven’t gotten it before.

Every damn time Nina is around, she comes in after I’ve fought with Mom and Dad to “comfort” me. Except comforting me isn’t really what she’s doing. She’s trying to convince me to calm down, be reasonable, and go along to get along.

She’s not here in support of me. She’s sweet and oh-so-reasonable about it, but in the end, she’s here on my parents’ behalf.

“Look,” I sigh. “I get you mean well, but they’ve gone too far this time. Hell, they’ve been going too far for years. And it really hurts that you always come by to advocate for them like this.” Better to just tell her outright that I’ve caught on.

She scoffs nervously. “I’m not advocating for Mom and Dad—”

“Yeah, you are. You’re not even interested in what this does to me or what it feels like. You never actually listen to my side of the story. You cut me off, tell me I’m overreacting—”

“Okay, that is a wild generalization.” But she speaks too quickly, and she is shifting her weight nervously. “I understand you’re upset about this, but your family is your family. You can’t just go running off and forget your responsibilities because you’re angry.”

“It’s not just because I’m angry,” I say as calmly as I can manage. “Look, it’s clear you don’t get it, and you don’t want to get it. I’m the black sheep of the family because I haven’t given Mom any grandkids. If I walk away, you’ll be the black sheep for not remarrying. You don’t want that to happen, so you need to encourage me to stick around and keep taking all the heat.”

She blinks at me, looking at a loss for words. Deep in her eyes, I can see the guilt. “I’m just trying to help you patch things up—”

“I’m not the one who was out of line. Someone sabotaged my attempt to finally impress them, and now, things are even worse than they were. I just wanted to get some recognition—”

Nina sighs. “They don’t want big accomplishments out of their daughters; they want it out of their sons. All they want from you is for you to be married and give them a grandkid or two. Why is that so hard for you to understand?”

“What I find hard to understand is why you’re willing to go along with their controlling bullshit when it hurts you, too,” I snap.

She winces. “That isn’t fair, Arya.”

“How is it not fair?” I demand. “You’re here the way you always are, stepping in to get me to calm down, forgive them, and let the matter drop. But this is different. They have been hammering at me for days, even more than usual, and every time they see me, it’s the same. If they don’t stop—”

“Okay, okay, calm down,” she says, holding up a hand and pissing me off even more. “I hear you feel like they’ve got you under pressure. But you did make a big mistake—”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, Nina, we were robbed. And the only way that could have happened is if someone on the inside—on our staff, in our family—helped! Why aren’t they looking for that person instead of coming down on me? Oh, wait, I already fucking know. Because they hate me for not giving them a goddamn grandkid when they already have six!”

My voice rises, and as it does, her expression becomes closed. “Stop being dramatic,” she says in an exasperated tone. “They’re just expecting what lots of parents expect once their daughters reach a certain age.”

“Normal families don’t treat their daughters like shit—”

“Plenty do, actually.” Her voice is so cold now that I know I was right to call her out. She keeps on with her rationale, even though all it does is show me just how badly she needs to go to therapy.

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“Most families, through history, most families across the world, put pressure on their kids to get married and have babies. Especially if those kids are girls. Mom and Dad are old-fashioned like that. You can’t expect them to be okay with you dragging your feet on basic things like that.”

“You know, I’m having a hard time believing what I’m hearing,” I mutter. “Maybe I shouldn’t be. Maybe I should have come to expect this out of you, along with everyone else. You’re just a little nicer about it.”

She looks a little nervous now. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that you’re not actually on my side in this. You believe the same things that Mom and Dad do about me and what I should be doing with my life. But instead of trying to shove it down my throat with a crowbar, you do this.”

“Honey,” she says quietly. “Look, it’s not as simple as you’re making it out. But this family does have traditions, and you’re always insisting on going as hard against them as you possibly can. It aggravates Mom, it embarrasses Dad when you do it in public—”

“What does? Being myself? Not having kids yet? Not having found anyone to date who isn’t a douchebag?” She can’t even tell how she’s causing me misery. It’s like we are speaking different types of English to each other. I’m not even that angry at her. If Mom came at me as gently as my sister, I wouldn’t have half my problems with how I’m treated.

“Is that what it is?” She almost looks relieved that my excuse for not living as a

housewife and providing the required grandchildren is something normal and understandable. “Is that why you’re not married yet? You can’t find anybody worth marrying?”

I almost want to cop out and blame it all on that, even though it’s bullshit. No, I can’t find anyone decent to date, but holy shit is that irrelevant. I have a life, talent, dreams, and purpose, just like their sons. Family, love, babies, and all of those things can wait for now until I find someone who is actually worth being with. But the rest of my life can’t wait.

“I don’t know how to explain this in a way you’ll understand,” I say slowly, in a calm voice, like I’m talking to an upset child. “But I have a life and ambitions outside of having babies. I’m seriously considering leaving, going low-contact, and getting a damn job in IT. With my references—”

“You don’t want to do that, sweetie. What are you thinking?” She has an incredulous laugh in her voice that makes me want to slap her. “You don’t want to leave your family!”

“You know, as recently as a year ago, I might have agreed with you. But after all of this bullshit, the humiliation, the nagging, the emotional blackmail, all the insults... I’m done. I really am done. You can’t add your spoonful of sugar to the conversation and undo what she’s done this time. How she treats me, how Dad treats me... it’s too far. I deserve better.”

My voice is shaking with emotion. I wish that I could steady it, sound sure, sound hard. But I can’t.

“This will all blow over in a week or two. It’s not like you actually lost the family any money. You just failed to bring us more. It’s not that big a deal.”

I stare at her incredulously. “It is to me, and Mom and Dad are using it as an excuse to drive me absolutely up the wall.”

“But you can’t leave. Don’t you have any loyalty?”

“Loyalty? I’ve been trying to prove myself to Dad since I was five!” My eyes are watering, embarrassing me. I wipe them roughly, with no patience for myself.

“He doesn’t want you to prove yourself. You’re not one of his sons. He wants you to go get married and give him some grandkids, same as Mom.”

It’s like bashing myself up against the same brick wall time and again, trying to wear a way through and doing nothing in reality but getting hurt and frustrating myself. I can’t fight my way into their respect. I can’t prove my way into their respect. I will never have their respect. And I will never have their affection again, either, if I don’t do what they want.

“This is like a nightmare. It’s like I got trapped back in the 1950s. Worse. Do you people really think I’ll be a good mom if you force me into it? If you nag and nag until I marry the first guy whoshows any interest just to get you all off my back?” I wipe my eyes again.

“You’re just exaggerating because you’re upset,” she soothes, but I’m not buying it.

“I really don’t want to talk about this anymore. Neither one of us is going to get anywhere. I’m never going to be happy being a stay-at-home mom, and I’m never going to be happy with how Mom and Dad treat me.”

“So, your solution is to just tell us all to go to hell and walk away?” She sounds incredulous—almost annoyed.

“Well, I wasn’t planning to tell you to go to hell, but the way they’re treating me... nobody would put up with it. I shouldn’t have to. But Mom doesn’t know when to shut the hell up, Dad doesn’t even seem to understand that women are human beings, and you... you think if you’re just nice enough, I’ll give in and toe the line. It’s not fair.”

“God damn it, Arya!” she bursts out suddenly, frustration taking all sweetness from her voice. “There are more important things in life than your ambitions! Family duty matters!”

“Not if it only goes one way.”

She stops dead, blinking at me. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that if any of you actually cared about me, the real me, the me who has thoughts and feelings and, yes, ambitions, you wouldn’t put me through this. Mom already has enough grandkids! And I am not just marrying the first guy who shows an interest just to get her and Dad off my back. They need to stop, or I really will leave.”

I hate doing this. I hate saying it. But she’s pushed me to it with her wheedling and inability to even try and see my side. I can’t just talk about my unhappiness now. I have to stand up for myself. But every damn time I’ve ever tried to do that, Mom and Dad have taken it as some kind of personal insult.

This is a no-win situation for me, and I just want to get out.

“I’m not going to go back and tell Mom to shut up,” she grumbles.

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I shrug. “I don’t really expect you to do anything. But if they keep hounding me and I walk away, don’t say I didn’t warn you.

Half an hour after my sister leaves, I book a hotel for the weekend to go clear my head. I pack my laptop, phone, a few changes of clothes, and a wad of money from the stash I’ve been squirreling away. The rest of it I will have to pick up later.

I have no doubt that my father can find me if he really wants to, but that isn’t the point of this exercise. The point is that I need a break away from my family, and they need to know I’m serious.

I book the room and pack my overnight bag and laptop case. I’ll start looking for a job tomorrow once I’ve drunk and cried and had a chance to recover. I have no friends or allies in this fucking house, and I can’t stand it right now.

They won’t even notice I’m gone until I’m not at dinner. That gives me two hours to get in my car and drive down into the South Bay, where the hotel is. If they want to come to bother me or try to collect me, they’ll have some driving to do.

I’m on my way out the door when I see my sister again, leaning on my car. She’s been out here waiting for me, suspecting that I would actually follow up on my threats and leave.

“Don’t do this,” she says, the plea coming out of her mouth hard and angry instead of gentle. I stare at her coldly, then walk past her and unlock my driver’s side door. “I mean it, Arya. You don’t really have anyone in your corner in this family—”

“Yeah. That’s why I’m leaving. I am taking a break from you people because if I don’t do it for a while now, I’m going to end up doing it permanently later.”

“You can’t run from your problems—” she starts, then looks shocked when I hold up a hand.

“I don’t want to fucking hear it. I told you I’ve had enough of being treated like trash by all of you, and I meant it. Now, get off my car. I’m going.”

She gets off the car but comes around to my window. “You’re being irresponsible, Arie!” she calls out in frustration, using the nickname we’d stopped using in our teens.

I put the key in the ignition. “Sure. Whatever you say. Ignore what’s being done to me to try and save your precious status quo.” I start the engine. “You should step away from my car now.”

She moves away, glaring at me almost petulantly as I drive off. I want to laugh and cry and throw up all at once. What did these morons think, that I would just keep putting up with their shit when I could walk away?

I’m giving them a taste of life without me to kick around. I hope they choke on it.

I actually manage to stay dry-eyed and calm while I drive the two-and-a-half hours it takes to get to the hotel. Fifteen minutes into the drive, my phone starts going off. I mute it and keep driving.

Mom must be furious. I let out a high bark of laughter that sounds way too hysterical. Good. To hell with her. To hell with all of them.

November in the South Bay is usually in the seventies, but we’re having an

unseasonable heat wave. My air-conditioning can't quite keep up with it. The air in the car feels swampy and still too warm. I grip the wheel with sticky hands and feel glad I have worn jeans instead of shorts. That way, I won't have to peel my butt cheeks off the seat when the drive ends.

The traffic is insane. It takes me an extra 45 minutes, and by then, I feel wrung out, like my body and brain can't take any more. I'm shaking a little as I check in and ride the elevator up to my room.

Inside, I swing back and forth between feeling like a really annoyed grown-ass adult who is absolutely sick of her family treating her like a rebellious teenager... and a rebellious teenager who has gone too far and doesn't want to admit it. But that's what I am—it's how they see me. The box my family puts me in.

I am about to spend the next two days on a combination of hedonism, job searching, tears, and room service. It'll probably use up a lot of my cash, but I don't care. I need this.

The room is bigger than my one back home and overlooks a small, woodsy park with fly-casting ponds in its center. The balcony is narrow concrete, with a brown metal railing and a couple of anemic-looking potted plants. I pour them some water, then take off my shoes and look at the room service menu.

I order two bottles of white wine, a salmon platter, some strawberries, and some lemon sherbet. I grab a bucket of ice from out in the hall and wait. Once the food arrives, I eat the sherbet first, brace myself, then check my damn phone.

Fifteen calls from my mother's cell phone. Two from my sister, one from my dad. And then one from a number I don't recognize. They have all left messages. My message box is now full.

“God,” I mutter. This is ridiculous. Now, I have to listen to at least some of the bullshit in my box to clear it out.

I start with the last one, the unknown one, since it’s three solid minutes long and that will free up a lot of space. But I’m shocked when I listen to it and hear Michael Rossi’s fucking voice in my ear.

“Hi,” he starts his message. “Look, I know you hate my guts right now, and I even know I deserve that, but we need to talk. I know who the spy is in your household, and I’ll give you her name if you’ll just hear me out.

“I didn’t take that job and end up at cross purposes with you because I wanted to. It was all my dad’s orders. I felt fucking terrible about it, all right?” He sounds a little drunk. “Look, I can’t talk about most of this on the phone. I want to meet, okay? I’ve got a proposition for you that should end up making both of us look better to our families. And I’ll throw in the info on your household spy just for coming to see me.”

He rambles on from there, mostly repeating the same things, while I listen incredulously. Then, it’s done, and I listen to the message again and one more time before I delete it. But I still have his phone number.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I ask the empty room. Michael Rossi just screwed up my entire life. Now he wants to deal?

What the hell is going on?

Chapter 8

Arya

Ten more unanswered calls from my mom, the entire salmon platter, eight frozen strawberries, and half a bottle of wine later, I'm still staring at my phone instead of watching movies or working harder on getting wine drunk.

Should I call Michael?

I'm dead curious about what he wants, I have to admit. I'm also pretty damn interested in taking an opportunity to get back at him. And as for the matter of the spy in my household... he's doubtless giving up his own stooge. But as an opening offer, it's... intriguing.

And it will vindicate me a little where my parents are concerned. It's ridiculous that my father would rather scapegoat me than check out the possibility that there's a spy among our staff. But if I serve whoever it is up to him on a platter, maybe he'll finally figure out that he should listen to me more.

Or maybe he'll just ignore the whole thing, as usual.

Trying to sort out life when I'm depressed isn't easy. I mostly want to just lie here undecided and waste the hours because focusing enough to choose—listen to my mom's bile-filled messages or just erase them; call Michael or lose his number—feels like trying to move a boulder with my tongue.

I pour another glass of white wine over a glass full of frozen strawberries and work my way through it, trying to gather courage. I eat the last strawberry in the glass before I find it.

I delete all the middle messages from my mother, leaving a few at the beginning of her tirade and a few at the end. That should cover all her main points, in case I decide I actually want to listen to them.

Then, after pouring more wine, I call Michael.

He picks up right away. “Oh, my God, you actually called me!”

I immediately regret doing so. “Why the fuck are you bugging me?” I demand.

“Not on the phone! You’re not the only one who has spies in your household right now!” His voice is hushed and urgent. If he’s playing some kind of messed-up prank, he’s putting a lot of effort into it.

“Look, I don’t know what you think you’re doing, but you’ve gone from seriously contributing to ruining my life to wanting to meet in person. If this is your idea of a booty call—”

“Um, no.” He suddenly sounds quite a bit more serious. “Not a booty call, nothing like that. I’m calling you strictly for business—and vindication. So... out with it. Can I get you to meet with me or not?”

I want with all my heart to tell this clown to go to hell. He deserves it. He could probably use the character growth. And I could use the satisfaction of doing it.

But... I really could use the name of that goddamn spy. I absolutely could.

“I’m in the South Bay. Where and when?” I don’t want him to know where my hotel room is.

He gives me the address of a nice Mexican restaurant. I make an irritated noise. “This isn’t a date. Meet someplace we can actually talk.”

We finally settle on a hotel room across town, near the San Jose airport. At 1 p.m. the next day. “We can get a nice dinner from room service,” he presses. I just plain don’t want to hear that, but I noncommittally grunt so I don’t have to deal with any arguing.

I can already tell that it is going to be a long night. But at least, I’m not meeting him in the morning.

I have to plow through exactly one bottle and one glass of wine and my entire bag of frozen strawberries before I can even think about sleeping. Even then, my phone keeps me up for a while. Even muted, the damn screen flashes on whenever there’s a call or message.

I know it’s from my family, probably my mother. I don’t want to care. I do care.

I finally have to put the phone in the bathroom before I can sleep. I have no idea why that works, but it does. Maybe it’s the lack of reminders.

My dreams are hazy. Michael’s circling me, flirting with me, laughing at me. He keeps saying he doesn’t mean any harm to me, but I don’t believe him. Can’t believe him. I’m naked and cold, and he teases me, refusing to hand me my towel. When I punch him, the dream dissolves, and I sit up to discover the fog’s returned and the temperature’s started dropping.

My mother fills up my inbox with messages again. I grit my teeth and go through a few with my morning coffee. There’s nothing in them that she hasn’t screamed at me

before in the heat of anger. How I'm ungrateful, a brat, and how there's something wrong with me. The new threat? How she and Dad are going to cut me off if I don't come home.

They can do that. I've never exactly been high maintenance, and I've put away enough in cash and private accounts that even if I can't find a good job for a while, I'll be fine for years.

I wonder what a therapist would think of my family. I couldn't spill every family secret, of course. Nobody needs to know that we're mobsters. Nobody needs to know where my parents get their wealth. But what would a professional think of these phone messages, my mother's obsessiveness, my father's dismissal, and all their demands?

They'd probably be surprised I didn't do this sooner.

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That's the crazy part about my family: I can look at what they're doing and objectively tell it's irrational and not right. Friends have said the same. But the longer things go on, the more I realize that my parents don't just ignore that they're damaging our relationship—damaging me—they've convinced themselves that they have the right, and that I deserve it.

So, why am I even thinking about going back? Why do I care about exposing the spy and vindicating myself with my parents? Because they're family.

But maybe giving up would be smarter. Maybe it would hurt less than this.

I text Michael and tell him I need to turn off my phone for a while. He asks what's wrong, surprising me. I simply say it's fallout from the shit he's pulled on me, and he goes quiet. I turn off my phone, reminding myself to check it in an hour and delete any more poison my mother might leave in my inbox.

At one exactly, I arrive at Michael's hotel, a not-too-fancy spot near the airport that was probably the best he could do on short notice. Their room service menu, however, is four pages long, which may be why he has picked the place.

It's early in the afternoon, but I'm already tired. Even though I've hydrated enough to avoid more than a token wine headache, I feel like I've wasted my time trying to drown my sorrows. It didn't help anything. It didn't even help me sleep.

Now, though, it's about 15 degrees cooler, and all that does is make me want to take a comfortable nap without the air-conditioner roaring. Instead, this meet. Michael had better not be wasting my time, or I will personally kick his ass.

He's waiting for me in the lobby. I see him before he sees me: lost in thought, pacing restlessly near the coffee bar, his expression uncharacteristically serious. He looks like something is actually wrong. He also looks like he might be worried that I won't show.

It's interesting seeing him distracted and without that annoying smirk. He's a lot easier on the eyes when he's not being a pain in the ass. He almost looks like a grown man. Though, of course, he's in jeans, a leather jacket, and a band T-shirt, like a giant teenager.

Nice engineer boots, though. And a nice ass, too.

I push my gaze away from him, steel myself, and walk into the door, clutching my laptop bag close to me. I'm paranoid about losing it after everything, and the crime rate around here is way higher than in most rich neighborhoods.

He notices almost immediately and walks over, putting on a smile. I watch his approach skeptically but keep my expression polite. I'm in a dark purple skirt suit, not really dressed up, but still more than he is. I'm glad I didn't wear higher heels; the lobby floor is slippery as hell.

"Arya! You actually showed up. This is awesome. I half-thought you wouldn't." And there comes the smirk, which seems to pop up even when he's apparently being sincere.

"You're lucky I did. Let's go upstairs. We have a lot to talk about." I keep my tone all business.

His smile falters, but then, he just nods and leads me over to the elevators. "That's fine. Hey, how come you had to turn your phone off earlier?"

“I left for the weekend to clear my head, and my mother is losing her shit about it. I almost never do things like that, but we’re fighting, so now, she’s... being like this.”

His smirk fades entirely. “Oh. Shit. I’m sorry.”

“You should be. You’re partly at fault for it.” I follow him into the elevator as the door opens and move aside so he can press the eighth-floor button.

“Look, I know you probably don’t believe me, but... I’m actually really sorry for everything,” he starts.

I feel my blood pressure rise as he speaks. His apology is so inadequate it feels like an insult. “Just shut up about that for now,” I say in a colder tone than I mean to. “Even if you are sincere, words aren’t going to fix this.”

He looks a little taken aback but nods. “Fair enough.” I can see conflict in his eyes, though. He wants to go on, and I’m actually surprised that he’s holding back.

What he says next surprises me even more, though. “That five million I yanked from you, I’m going to put it back. But I need your help to get that done.”

As we walk out of the elevator, I look back at him several times, incredulous. When we get inside his small suite, I turn to him and say, “Okay, explain yourself.”

“Okay.” he sits on the edge of the bed while I take one of the chairs. “Like I said, my father ordered me to intercept that transfer of yours as soon as we got the news you were going to pull off the electronic heist. Once that was done, I didn’t really have a choice. You must know from having a high-ranking dad yourself. Their word is law.”

“Or, they sure fucking think it is,” I quip in an exhausted tone.

“You know what I mean, though.”

“I get that you say you were under orders, and you want to blame your dad for that.” Now, I’m craving another drink. Bad sign. I grab a bottled water out of his mini-fridge instead.

“I was. But I know I also went along with it, and I feel like shit about that.”

“You should.” I take a long swallow, wondering how I can be so damn thirsty now that it’s cooled down. “So, what about it?”

He shifts in his seat, looking uncomfortable, hesitating too long. By the time he finally speaks, I know it’s something that he doesn’t want to admit to. “It turns out we have a spy in our household as well.”

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That makes my ears prick up. “Oh?”

“Yeah, and whoever it is helped someone steal that money from us in turn.”

What? I stare at him. “Say that again?”

“Someone stole the money that I stole from you. Which you stole from—”

“Yes, okay, I got that part.” It sinks in as I look at him. And suddenly, I’m laughing. I’m fucking laughing. His crestfallen look only makes me laugh louder.

“You lost the money? Someone fucking grabbed it from you?” I can’t keep the giggle out of my voice. It couldn’t have happened to a nicer guy. Seriously.

He rolls his eyes and smiles, but this time, it’s a tense, awkward line instead of his usual smirk. “Yep. They had skill, too. Snatched it during a transfer, just like I did from you. At first, I thought it was you, but I quickly realized you’d have done it sooner than instead of yelling at me.” He takes a deep breath. “I know you want to call it karma—”

“Oh, you fucking bet I do.” Now, I’m the one smirking. “After the hell I caught, the humiliation... shit, I’m in a hotel right now because I can’t take anymore. And they still won’t fucking stop. You want to listen to my damn phone messages? My mother’s being a complete psycho, between this and the fact that I haven’t pushed out any grandchildren for her yet.” I can’t keep the bitterness out of my voice.

He looks genuinely shocked. “What the hell?”

“Exactly like I said. What, did you think that your humiliating me is the worst I suffered? No. They fucking fired me, and now, all they do is either berate me or make demands.” My voice shakes a little. This isn’t good. I should be enjoying gloating over the shit he’s facing. Instead, I’m mired in my feelings and hating it.

He stares at me for a long moment. “Fuck. I got the riot act from my father, but I thought that was all of what you’ve been going through.”

“Nope. They’d have to respect me for more than my uterus if that was the case.”

He’s looking at me in a way I don’t like. There’s almost pity in his eyes now. I hate seeing it almost as much as I hate him for what he’s done. “The fuck is wrong with them?” he manages after a few seconds.

I scoff. “You want a list? I only wish getting back in their good graces was as simple as getting the money back. But that, at least, would be a start, and you owe me, Rossi.”

“Yeah. I understand that. Just listen. Now, we’re both facing heat from our families for the same damn reason. The difference is, if we work together, we can get that money back and then some. We can get back into the good graces of our families and go our separate ways, each with our share of the money.”

I stare at him. It’s tempting. Especially if I can find a way to turn it all around on him and take advantage of the situation. That’s the real temptation, and it’s what he deserves exactly.

“I’ll have to think about it,” I say coolly. “You’re not exactly known as the most honest and helpful of guys, you know? And unlike you, I don’t have much chance of winning over my family now.” His fault. I was never going to let him live that down.

“Oh, come on!” He jumps up and paces in a small circle from sheer agitation, startling me. However, he doesn’t raise his voice or make any threats. He just looks frustrated. “What is there to think about?”

“Trusting you!” I roll my eyes as I stare at him. “Did you forget that you’ve given me no reason to believe you’re not setting me up to humiliate me again?”

He stops and holds up his hands like he’s trying to calm me down. “Okay. Okay, you’re right. I get it. You really don’t have any reason to trust me right now. But I can earn it. You just have to give me a chance—”

“You had a chance. All you had to do was not fuck up my life. But you wouldn’t do that. You wanted to make things hard for me.”

“No. My Dad wanted to make things hard for your family. He didn’t want them to have any confidence in the kind of heist you wanted to set up. He wanted them to give it up so we could swoop in instead and use it to enrich ourselves.”

“Yeah, he sounds like he could be related to you. You’re both fucking vultures.” I’m not even trying to hide my bitterness now.

He finally reaches the end of his patience. “What’s it going to take for you to believe me? Whoever is doing this, I need help stopping them. The payoff for this will be around five million. You can bring it back to your family to try and regain their respect... or you can walk off with it and go make a life for yourself well away from them.”

“I don’t need you to make that happen.” I don’t. All I need is to get details on another multi-million-dollar transfer, and I can grab another chunk of money for myself.

And yet...

“I’ll tell you what. Give me the name of the spy on my family’s staff, and I’ll consider your offer and get back to you tomorrow with my decision.”

That stops his agitation cold. He looks at me for a long moment as if he’s trying to figure out how serious I am.

“Look, the only quick decision you can possibly hope for with me is a ‘no.’ Consider yourself fortunate that I’m actually considering your proposal instead of rejecting it outright because it’s you.”

He nods slowly, calms a little, his expression thoughtful.

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“I’ll give you my decision by tomorrow evening.” I finish draining the water bottle and set it aside, standing up.

“I guess that’s the best I can expect for now.” He sounds resigned. I don’t care.

“Yes, it is. But be ready anyway. If I decide to do this, I’ll want to get started right away.” The hopeful look he shoots me annoys me. I’m not giving him a definite yes.

But I’m not giving him a definite no, either. The truth is that the guy’s offer intrigues me. It offers plenty of opportunity—including the chance to completely screw him over.

That’s a chance I’d love to take. But for now, the chance to vindicate myself with my parents is enough.

Chapter 9

Michael

I go home that night frustrated and a little stoned, only to discover my parents tensely sitting in the family room waiting for me. I slow down a little when I see their faces and the way their eyes flick to me and stay on me as I walk in. My father’s mouth works like he’s trying to figure out what to say.

“What is it?” I ask as I come in.

My mother sighs. “Maria has... a friend over. Try not to disturb her.”

“Friend?” Something in her tone catches my attention.

“She keeps bringing this one really creepy guy over,” my father elaborates. “We’ve had no reason to ban him from the house yet, aside from staring at your mother’s tits for ten solid seconds when he first saw her.”

“That’s weird. Why is she hanging around with him? Is he particularly attractive or something?”

“Not at all. He looks like someone you should keep your underage daughters away from.” My mother winces. “He even has a... what do the kids call it? A neckbeard.”

“What the hell is the guy even here for?” Maria is shallow as hell. She doesn’t go near guys who aren’t model-perfect. So, why does she have some creepy, ungroomed spud following her around?

“Fixing her computer, I think.” My father rubs his temple. “She said she didn’t want to wait until you weren’t busy. Just hoping he’ll be done soon.”

A little alarm bell goes off in the back of my head, but I’m too tired and distracted to pay much attention to it. “I’ve got too much going to be dealing with her or her weird-ass friends right now anyway,” I grumble.

“Actually, I’d really like it if you kept an ear out for trouble from him,” my mother says, “since you’re right down the hall.”

I look between my parents. Did we suddenly stop being mobsters on the last day? “Why don’t you just kick him out?” I ask before I really think about it.

Dad winces. “Yeah, I confronted the guy, and your sister blew her stack completely. Told me to stop policing her friends, pitched a fit about how unfair I was being...”

I stare at him tiredly. The Golden Child strikes again. I'm willing to bet they'd come down on me or anyone else who brought in someone who creeped them out. But my family dynamic is what it is. "Okay. I'll keep an eye out."

"Have you got a lead on our stolen money yet?" My father lifts an eyebrow as he looks up at me, changing the subject to something he knows will grab my whole attention.

"Yes," I lie. "I'm designing a search program looking specifically for incidences of the wire transfer interception program's use. It has only been used a few times: by Arya, by myself, and by whoever stole from us. I am pretty sure Arya didn't steal it back, but this will make sure and hopefully point me in the right direction."

My father nods curtly. "Well, that's a start."

"Did anything come up in the staff background checks?" I'm still hopeful that it's just some social engineering by an outsider, the same as we hit the Castelluccis with.

"Not a damn thing." He shakes his head. "I can see why you wanted me to check, though."

I smile thinly. "I'll figure this shit out. Thank you for checking."

He nods distractedly, and I turn and walk away. I'm glad he's moving on this. I'm glad we can still speak with each other respectfully. Since talking to Arya, I'm realizing that I'm lucky to have a family like mine. I can actually get past humiliation, arguments, and being in the doghouse if enough time and work goes into it.

Arya, though? No wonder she's so pissed at me. She can't help how crazy her mother is or how much of an asshole her father is, but until I upset her personal apple cart,

she had been maintaining. Now, apparently, a whole lot of family crap is coming to a head for her. I just have to deal with this embarrassing theft and the surrounding mystery. She's trapped in a daytime talk show episode.

I need to find a way to make all this shit up to her. But there's a roadblock. She doesn't trust me at all, and rightly so.

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But the thing is, even if she gives up on her family, she still needs to clear her name. She's still part of the wider Family, same as me. She has a reputation to repair.

Will she let me help her fix it? I sure hope so. I need to know who stole her code a second time and that five million a third. And I suspect that the only person who can really help me do that is the woman who wrote that program in the first place.

I'm lost in thought when I catch sight of the guy hanging around with my sister. At first glance, he's less of a train wreck than my parents described: medium height and build, unkempt, unshaven. Then, I notice that his eyes are glued to my sister's ass like he's never seen a Brazilian butt lift in his entire life.

I stop, fold my arms, and stare at him. My sister is on the phone, ignoring him; she hangs up and turns around, and he reanimates, responding to a muttered question of hers with an enthusiastic nod. Then, this mouth breather starts staring at her boobs the same way.

Computer expert? This guy has to be her drug dealer for her to put up with this level of bullshit. God.

He shoots a nervous look my way as he finally notices me. I lift an eyebrow, and he shifts nervously before turning and trailing her back into her room.

Yeah, he is straight creepy. And something about all of this is really weird. What are they up to?

I grab some sleep, work the stiffness in my shoulders out in the gym, shower, and

then grab a late supper of leftovers. I'm planning to spend a big part of the evening going over the server logs to try and sort out who was online and active during the transfer. I don't know if I'll come up with anything definitive, but I need to at least make the effort. Just in case.

I'm just settling into work when Maria shoves open my door and comes strolling in without even knocking. She's in pajamabottoms and a lacy tank top and looks about 16. Bare feet on my carpet. Yay.

"Jesus, Maria, what do you want? It's almost midnight, and I have work to do," I grumble at her at once. "Should have locked that damn door."

"Why the hell is everyone around here always so uptight? Ugh! I'm bored. My computer guy's gone home, and I have nothing to do." She sits down on my bed with a high bounce that pulls my comforter out of place.

Chrissake. "How is this my problem? Go take more mirror selfies or something."

"Please, that shit is so dated. What are you doing?"

I lift an eyebrow. She never actually gives a shit about the kind of work I do. As long as her computer is working and she can buy her endless wardrobe and makeup collection through it, she normally doesn't give a shit about Internet technology. I doubt she even fully understands what I do, which is probably the real reason why she had some creepy keyboard jockey in to handle whatever has been wrong with her computer instead of coming down the hall and asking me.

"Checking the family server logs. I have to track down whoever robbed us."

She scoffs again, staring at me with an amused smirk on her face that I don't like at all. "Well, I guess you're hoping it will make any difference. But I've got to tell you,

rumors are already flying. I'm not sure you shouldn't just give up and wait for all of this to blow over." Her lips curve in... that's not a smile; it's a smirk. Not even a playful one.

"What the hell are you babbling about?" I demand, not bothering to hide my annoyance.

She bounces on my bed a little, hands clasped between her knees. "You should really check out the family chat more often. People think you were the one who stole that five million." She has the audacity to actually fucking smile. "They think you just pulled a fast one and socked it away somewhere."

"Maria," I sigh as I turn around in my office chair, "that makes absolutely no fucking sense whatsoever."

She blinks at me, and her smirk wavers just a little. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that the heist was my idea in the first place. If I wanted to go take five million from some random billionaire and put it in my own bank accounts, I could just go and do that. I didn't have to even let Mom and Dad know what I was doing. So, why the hell would I make them aware of it, fake messing up, and then walk away after torpedoing my own reputation?"

She just... blinks again. I can see the wheels turning in her head, but they don't seem to be catching on anything. "So, how come people are starting to think you did it?"

"Because that's how rumors work. They're not exactly based on logic; they're based on what's interesting and makes for a more exciting story." I'm not actually all that worried about any rumors going around. I will check the family chat, see what the hell is going on, and make any clarifications that I need to. And Maria and her assumptions can go to hell.

Maria frowns and then shakes her head. “Look, you go say whatever you want to say. I’m just telling you what people are saying. Besides, would you rather have them think that you’re dishonest and took the damn money, or would you rather have them think you’re stupid as fuck and let five million bucks slip through your fingers?”

My eyebrows shoot up. “Are you fucking kidding me? Get the hell out of my room.”

She looks at me like I just grew a second head. “Wait, you’re kicking me out for telling the truth?”

“Your shitty opinions don’t constitute ‘truth,’ kid, and if you want me to spend time with you, you don’t get to disrespect me. Get the fuck out.”

She stares back at me defiantly. I keep eye contact implacably. And slowly, she withers. Her gaze drops away from me, and she gets off my bed. “You don’t mean it,” she challenges half-heartedly.

“Out,” I say firmly. “Actions have consequences. I’ve tried to tell you this before. Go whine to Mom if you have a problem with it.”

She sulks her way out, and I lock the damn door behind her. I have no idea what possesses her to come bother me so much these days. It’s always when I’m wrapped up in something important, too. It’s like she senses I need to focus and comes waltzing in to ruin it.

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I huff a sigh and splash water on my face before I try to untangle the mystery of who has robbed us for another night. Any weird rumors circulating around the family, I can deal with, but whatever Maria's current bullshit is, I don't want to deal with it. I don't care if she's Mom's favorite. I'm not obliged to babysit her, especially when she disrespects me.

As I start going through the server history, my mind slowly turns back to Arya. How happy I was to see that she'd shown up despite everything. How good it felt to spend an hour in her company without a lot of yelling and glaring. There's a growing possibility that she'll want to go ahead with everything and give me a chance to redeem myself, not just with my family, but with her.

Of course, she's really, really pissed off at me. And I can't blame her. But now, she has the name of the spy in her midst. Once she brings that information to her parents, maybe it will actually help her. Hey, a guy can hope.

I wonder if I'll dream about her again tonight.

Chapter 10

Arya

I come home after a weekend to decompress and walk straight into a tirade from my mother. I stand there just past the front doorway with my arms folded while she screams at me for ignoring her calls and texts all weekend.

I wait for her to run out of steam. It takes a good five minutes. I can hear her voice, I

can tell what words her mouth is making, but it is all the same things, and it runs together in my head with all the other times she's said the same goddamn things.

"...and the least you could have done was pick up the phone..."

"Mother!" I snap suddenly, and she stops short, staring at me in wide-eyed shock. I don't normally even come near yelling at her unless I'm really pushed to it. This time, I don't feel like waiting. "I left for the weekend to get away from you and your constantly berating me. Of course, I'm not going to pick up the phone to do it some more. Take the hint!"

She just stares at me, blinking. My father leans over in his chair and peers at us through the living room door, apparently waiting for an explosion.

She glares at me. I glare back. "Well, I hope you got whatever that was out of your system," she says finally, "because I won't tolerate being ignored!"

"Let me make this very clear. The more you go off at me about not turning into a goddamn housewife and giving you grandkids, the more often I am going to go away, take some time for myself, and ignore your calls. If you keep doing it and don't fucking listen, one day, you'll push me away entirely, and you will have nobody but yourself to blame for it."

My heart's pounding as I deliver the hard truth and watch her eyes widen and her lips tremble in anger. But she doesn't say anything.

My dad does, after hesitating for several seconds. "Now, come on, sweetie, that's kind of a big overreaction, isn't it?"

"At this point? No. I'm still working on clearing my name without any support from you. I even think I know who our leak is, but I am tired of being Mom's favorite

person to pick at.”

My mother goes red. “I am not picking at you. I’m telling you what’s expected of you!”

“Honey, shut up a second.” My father gets up and walks over to me. I can practically feel the front door against my back. “Did you say you found the leak? Someone in my house is actually spying on us?”

“Imelda. She was paid by the Rossis to keep tabs on us and plant some spy gear in my computer nook. She’s how Michael Rossi knew when to hit us.”

“Are you even sure it’s Michael Rossi?” my mother cuts in. “You’ve been wrong so often—”

“Honey.” This time, my father’s voice has an edge to it. “Can you go make us some tea?”

She looks like he just splashed her with cold water. Confused and resentful, she turns and walks to the kitchen, mumbling to herself.

“You’re sure it’s Imelda? How do you know?”

“I listened in on a conversation Rossi had with someone he’s working with.” As in, me. I’m not about to tell my father that I’m thinking of working with the thief—who is also the son of his rival.

His eyebrows go up. “What about hard proof?”

“If you check her financials, you’ll notice she’s been receiving regular payments from a third party while working for us full-time. You’ll also notice she has several

outstanding medical bills paid off by that same third party.” I take a deep breath, calming myself now that my mother is temporarily elsewhere. “And she’ll probably have some evidence in her chambers, her computer, or her bag.”

He nods slowly, peering at me. I let myself feel a moment’s hope that he’ll actually take me seriously and acknowledge a contribution of mine, however small.

“I’ll look into Imelda, but don’t think this lets you off the hook for losing that money.”

My heart doesn’t sink too far. I’ve learned to be realistic about my expectations when it comes to my parents. It still stings, though. That, I can never find a way to block out. “I’d have an easier time finding the money if you had just let me focus on that. This whole thing was my idea in the first place anyway.”

His face darkens slightly, but he can’t look me in the eyes. “You know how your mother gets,” he mutters, almost sounding embarrassed. But then, he recovers and looks up at me. “Just remember that you’re the one who disappointed us, not the other way around. You’re the one who needs to find a way to make this up to us.”

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That sting again. I want to yell at him. Instead, I stay calm and nod. "I understand." I understand that you're being way more of an asshole about this than is warranted, and I understand that you're shortsighted and don't take it seriously when I say I have one foot out the door.

And that hurts more than anything else. My father dismisses me so much that he doesn't even pay attention when I say I might just leave and go no contact. He just wants me to shut up so I don't upset Mom.

I deserve so much better than this. But I know I can't pick my family or control how they act.

I head for my room to unpack and do my laundry, quietly seething the whole time.

Tonight, I decide to agree to Michael's team-up idea, especially since he has revealed the spy's name to me.

It's very simple. He's a thief with a big ego, guilt for screwing me over, and a huge crush on me. I am going to use how much he wants me and how much he underestimates me to my every advantage.

I'm going to get my family that money, I'm going to use the program to profit even more, and best of all, I'm going to make sure Michael takes a fall in the end and is humiliated in front of my family just like I was.

I'll have to play part of my plan by ear. I still want to find that goddamn money so I can walk away with it. He'll have to settle for knowing who screwed him, though.

I've never been the classic seductress type. I'm not manipulative enough. I can lie when I have to, but when I look at the kind of women who use men habitually, I feel a little sick. I've met plenty like that—gold-digging mob wives, private-school girls getting surgery in their teens to try and land a billionaire boyfriend—and I can't respect them.

So, I go with my strengths instead. I'm not just a computer genius who is more than a match for him. I'm also a hot single woman he's wanted for years. My first step, once I've calmed down enough to focus, is to hit up my wardrobe.

I tend to go for a modern-professional look. Dressing for success and all that. Weekends are for jeans or a nice dress, but right now, I'm looking for something a little... higher intensity.

I went through a minidress phase in college. I was going clubbing with a couple of wild friends who were trying to drag me out of my shell, and that meant dressing for it. That meant stretchy, sleek, and as short as I dared. My mother caught me once in a little black dress from the collection once and screamed like I was 14 instead of 20.

My mother can go to hell.

I pull out the three hottest dresses I own and stare between them, wondering what I can get away with when I go to meet Michael. He will know something was up if I rock up in anything too overtly hot, so I set aside the leather dress and consider the other two.

The little black dress is a staple, and I can tone it down just a tad with a charcoal blazer and matching dark gray pumps. It's prettyleavagey, but not enough that I look like I'm falling out of it. I go with that. I can always break out the leather or get something new if more subtle methods don't work. But Michael's already weak to me. I probably won't need the big guns.

I have a set of black silk underwear and stockings to go with the outfit and a black garter belt with straps that will just barely show under the skirt at certain angles. I wear ruby earrings and a matching necklace with lipstick of the same shade and simple eyeliner. My perfume is musky and slightly sweet. With my hair piled up into a messy bun, I look like a sexy librarian.

Now, I just have to figure out how to get Michael to take the bait without my emotions getting involved. I'm definitely attracted to him, and in a situation like this, we could end up getting... intimate. How can I keep from catching feelings?

That's easy. All I have to do is remind myself of all the crap he's put me through and that my parents have put me through because of him. If I do that often enough, there's no way I can actually fall for him.

My parents have no idea of my plans to work with Michael, and I don't plan to tell them. The next time I'll tell them what's going on with me, I'll have that money back in my hands. Of course, by then, I may just choose to take it and walk away if they keep treating me like this. But I'll cross that bridge when I come to it.

The outfit works like a charm. The moment I get out of my car in front of Michael's Nob Hill flat, I look up and see him standing at the big picture window, staring down at me with a stunned look in his eyes. He catches himself when he sees me stop and look up and calms his expression, even as I fight a smile.

He meets me at the door, pulling it open before I can even walk up and knock. His eyes are having trouble staying on my face. His gaze wants to roam. I pose myself subtly, toss my head back and give him plenty to look at.

"You look amazing," he says before he can stop himself.

I smile politely. "Thank you. I prefer to dress like I've already won the fight. It helps

keep me in the right mindset.” Of course, I am here for battle on two fronts: against the thief we are hunting and against the thief calling himself my ally.

I wonder how much my look turns him on. It certainly seems to distract him. Maybe he’ll pick up that I’m subtly flirting with him. It’s all right if he does. He’ll probably just take it as an invitation.

He’s one of those guys whose body could look good in rags. The jeans, boots, and button-down shirt with the rolled elbows are a step up from his usual band T-shirts look, but it doesn’t cling to his muscled shoulders like they do. I appreciate the bit of effort, but I’m still glad I outshine him.

He’s hot enough without wrapping the package nicely. I need him off-balance with a desire for me. I need to keep my own feet on the ground while I’m doing that to him. If he cleans up too well, I might be in trouble.

“I passed on the information about Imelda,” I say as he leads me inside.

He glances at me, seeming a little disappointed that I’m getting straight to business. “What was the response?”

I scoff. “My father says he’ll look into it. I even gave him the details you gave me on Imelda’s financials. It didn’t really impress him.”

He frowns. “Will he actually follow up?”

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“Oh, he will. He’ll just act like the whole thing isn’t that important because the intel came from me.” I look around as he leads me up the stairs and into his flat. It’s big, modern, and airy, with high ceilings, skylights, and huge windows. He has one of those giant sectional couches that includes a wide, flat lounge, the whole thing in brown saddle leather. “This your hideaway?”

“Yeah, I usually spend time here when my sister’s being crazy or I have a date. There’s no real privacy at the family home. You know how it is.” He heads straight to the kitchen. “You want a beer?”

I check my watch. It’s two in the afternoon. I shrug. “Sounds fine.”

He pulls two chilled longnecks out of the fridge and pops the top off with his pocketknife before handing one over. “So, one of the reasons I wanted to cut you in on all of this is that you’re the original programmer of what was used against me. I figure if anyone can help me find who else is using it or has used it besides us, it’s going to be you.”

I stare at him thoughtfully as he takes a swallow of his beer, then sip my own. It’s a brown ale, nutty and mild, and goes down easy. “You drew me in by handing over your own spy.”

“My father’s spy, if you want to get technical—and I did that at particular risk to myself. He has no idea I exposed her.”

My eyebrows lift. “That is risky. I hear your father’s got a nastier temper than mine.”

“It takes a lot to piss him off, but yes, absolutely.” His gaze slides into my cleavage again, then back up to my face. “What’s your point?”

“How do you plan to keep my interest? Do you really think we can double our money while we work to get the stolen funds back?” I lift an eyebrow before taking another sip of my beer.

He smiles slowly. “Besides my charming company?”

I fight not to roll my eyes. “Yes.”

His eyes twinkle, and I find myself becoming curious. “Exposing an enemy, getting revenge, and making a pile of money above and beyond what I took or was taken from me.”

“I’m listening.” Especially about the ‘getting revenge’ part, he seems oblivious to the fact that the revenge I really want is on him.

Chapter 11

Michael

I can’t believe my good luck. Arya has actually agreed to work with me! She’s still pissed, I can tell, but she’s cooperating. With her in my corner, I can get all this done in no time, and I’ll get the chance to make it up to her for following Dad’s order to steal from her.

Now, I just have to figure out how.

I wonder if she has any idea how sexy she is. Maybe a little. She’s not the type to manipulate people with her body, but her body is amazing all on its own, and she

knows how to show it off without looking too obvious.

I want to think it's deliberate and that she has dressed like this to catch my eye. I hope so because my eye has been definitely caught. The black silk of her dress clings to her every curve, whispering against her thighs as she moves around. I can just glimpse the lacy top of her stockings or the faint gleam of a garter clip when she shifts in the right ways.

I've been sitting here with my cock regularly going hard from thinking about the possibilities since I first laid eyes on her an hour ago. It's fucking with my focus. I'm enjoying it anyway.

"I've been gathering server-access records for my family for the date of the heist, the day after, and the days leading up to it." I bring out my laptop and set it in front of my seat next to her. She's at my big, heavily carved Chinese dining table, one of the few antiques in the place. She's still on her first beer while I'm on my third. I guess she's not much of a drinker.

I bend over the laptop and bring up the access records. "Twenty family members living at the mansion, plus all my dad's men, plus the extended family, plus higher-level staff. It's just a little under two hundred people. We need to find out who was online during the heists and what they were doing."

She bends forward slightly to look at my screen as I scroll through some examples, face thoughtful. The extra glimpse of her cleavage makes me lose my breath for a moment. Does she have any idea what she's doing to me? She seems oblivious, but the longer she stays here working with me, the more desperately I want to fuck her.

I'll get there. I'm even more determined now to seduce her than I've ever been. And now, even though she might be pissed at me at the moment, I have the chance to do more than make things up to her. I have the chance to finally have her in my bed, and

that is worth risking a lot for.

Right now, though, I need to help us make some actual progress on finding whoever screwed both of us over. I focus back on the documents we're looking at while she frowns and pages through them all for a second time.

"Have you caught something?" I ask, intrigued that she's reacting like this so quickly.

"I may have. Or rather, I've caught the lack of something. There are absolutely no outside logins to your family's subnet on the night that money was taken from you."

I frown thoughtfully. "You're saying that whoever did this physically logged onto the family net from home? My parents' home?"

"It was very early in the morning. No remote logins from any family members. No remote logins from anywhere. I'm double-checking everything, but you'll need to see if someone on your system covered up a remote login." She looks up at me as I sit beside her, her gaze a touch hot. Or is that all me?

"If they did, you have someone with admin access running around your system. If they didn't, yes, someone physically logged in at one of your family computers, stole the money, and transferred it away."

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I shake my head. “Gorgeous, there’s no way. The guards would have caught anyone trying to sneak in.”

“Not if they are a family member or were invited in by one.” She looks at me pointedly, and I feel a cold finger of anxiety run down my back.

“I have trouble buying that. Nobody in my family that I have beef with knows one end of a computer from the other.” I give her a confident smile, but she stares back at me solemnly.

“People can surprise you. But let’s just see where the evidence goes.” She concedes easily, calmly. She has every right to be catty about now, but she’s not. It only intrigues me more.

“I understand, and you’re right.” I brush my hand against the back of hers as I coax the pointer over to a link. “The rest of the files had no external logins either for that time period?”

She sucks air lightly. I look up and see her startled expression. I wonder if it’s from me touching her or from her liking it.

“No,” she murmurs, her voice pitched a little lower and smoother now. “No. Only a few dozen were logged in. Maybe not even actively. I’ll have to check through.”

“Could one of your staff members have stolen a family login?” she adds, forcing herself to get back on track. I have to fight a grin. One little bit of contact, and she’s visibly thrown off-kilter. She must be starving for the good stuff.

I wonder if she's ever gotten an orgasm from a man. It depresses me sometimes how few of my female lovers have before me. How do guys expect women to keep wanting to go to bed with them when they don't even make it enjoyable? I just don't get it.

But if that's been her experience, it'll be even easier for me to catch her interest... and keep her coming back for more.

The hardest part is breaking the ice. Timing it right, making sure she's in the right mood, making sure she's already flirting back. Those first few steps can be a little uncertain and uncomfortable, or they can feel like disarming a bomb with an unfamiliar design.

Right now, I'm still proving myself to Arya. I know it. I know her guard has to be up around me because she's pissed. Five million dollars pissed. Horrifying levels of family drama pissed.

She's not the type to just let that slide because I give her some good sex and make sure she gets her money back. She's going to want something real to compensate her for all the trouble, and if I don't give it willingly, she's going to take it.

She stops going through the records and glances up at me. "Penny for your thoughts."

"Just thinking about what you said about the perpetrator being a member of staff," I lie with my dick still at attention. I am definitely going to need to stay seated for a while because, otherwise, when I get up, she's going to get an eyeful.

"Not the only possibility. Your perp could be anyone from family to a contractor visiting the house. Maybe a friend or boyfriend of one of your siblings."

I frown. That rings a bell in the back of my head, but I'm too distracted by the

sunbeam playing in Arya's hair to recall why. "So, you think someone may have social-engineered their way in by using one of my siblings as a one-night stand, or—"

"Or someone could have done the same thing to you." She looks me in the eyes for just a beat too long, and I feel my throat tighten. "Have you brought any lovers home lately?"

"No, I'm single, and I don't like dating around."

She blinks and peers at me thoughtfully. "You're not a womanizer? But you've got a hell of a reputation..."

I scoff. "Nah. One of my exes is a terrible gossip and vindictive. She spread that rumor. I think she's the one currently telling everyone that I stole that money from the family myself."

She winces. "That's insane. What is her problem?"

"I didn't want to stay with her cheating ass after I caught her." That came out a little grimmer-sounding than I wanted. I smile ironically.

She blinks. "Why is it always the ones who are clearly in the wrong who hold the biggest grudges?"

I laugh. "Beats the hell out of me. But it's definitely true."

"So, I'm still not seeing anything anomalous in these logs. I'd need to have a look at any administrative changes done during that time period." She smiles up at me almost apologetically, and I feel a tingle run down my belly and into my groin.

"That's fine. I'll pull all that up and see what we can find." I don't know which idea

bothers me more: that someone social-engineered their way into our family home, that someone in the household pulled all of this, or that someone I don't know now has admin privileges and was able to cover their tracks.

I start working, but I'm distracted by the musky scent of her perfume. She's leaning close. It's fucking killing me how much I want to touch her.

"So, you said you're single," she murmurs, her voice half-flirty and half-speculative. "Has it been a while?"

"Long enough for me to start thinking about not being single." I smile back at her a little slyly. "Why do you ask? Taking a personal interest?"

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Her smile makes my skin warm with desire. “Maybe. Though I noticed you haven’t asked if I’m single.”

I lift an eyebrow. “Are you?” She better be, after all of this. My God. My heart is pounding like I just ran a marathon.

“For a while now, yeah.” Her smile goes from sly and flirty to a little tight and forced. “Had a boyfriend. My mom meddled. She’s always scaring them off by nagging at them to propose.”

“Jesus.” I laugh in spite of myself. “I’ll need to remember to watch out for that if we ever get together.”

Both her eyebrows go up. “That’s a big ‘if.’ You’d have a lot of trust to win back to win me over.” But she’s smiling a little.

“I swear, all that work would be worth it.” I draw a steady breath that doesn’t do its job. “God, you’re beautiful,” I mutter, staring down at her.

She stops short and gives me a lopsided little smile that makes me instantly hard. “Are we working or flirting, Mr. Rossi?” she teases me softly.

My breath catches in my throat. She’s into it. She’s into me.

“Every damn time I look at you, I want to throw everything aside and make love to you,” I say honestly. “I’ve been dealing with that for a while. If I need to set that aside to get work things done and get our money back, I’ll do it. But it’s not what I

want to do.”

She lifts an eyebrow slightly again, but that sexy smirk doesn’t budge. “Well, that’s a lot more honest than I expected,” she teases.

I let out a little groan and get out of my seat. She stands up as well, and I turn to her, breathing. “Do you think I’m kidding?”

She moves a little closer to me, making my breath catch again. “Oh, I know you’re not. I’ve seen how you look at me. The question is, what are we going to do about this?”

Her voice has a low, sexy growl at the bottom of it that makes my mouth go dry.

“What do you want to do about it?” I challenge, moving into her personal space. Her lips part, she draws a shaky breath, and I know I’ve got her.

Then, she kisses me, and I know she’s got me.

Chapter 12

Arya

Michael kisses me like he’s been waiting to do it all his goddamn life, and for a moment, before I get caught up, I smile against his lips. I’ve got him.

His mouth is warm and firm against mine, his tongue just teasing a little against the inside of my lips. It sends a jolt of pleasure through me that I wasn’t expecting. So does the feeling of him shivering under my hands as I skim them up his chest. It makes me feel powerful—and sexy for the first time in too long.

He lets out a little grunt of pure delight, his big, warm hands sliding over my back to pull me against him. I hear the faint beep of the file search he was running completing, but I ignore it.

I'm committing to this, knowing the danger. The risk of being found out. The risk of my family finding out. The risk he'll turn out to be crazy with his women—even violent. The risk that I'll be manipulated. The risk that he plans to betray me, too.

The chance that I'll catch feelings.

That can't be allowed. It absolutely can't be. But as our kiss deepens and my heart starts to pound, I start to worry that I've gotten in over my head unexpectedly. We've got chemistry, Michael and I. I can feel it rushing through me like a drug.

His tongue darts against mine, and I let out a whimper in spite of myself. God, he's good at that. I might as well enjoy this while it lasts. It won't last long.

I'm so used to selfish lovers who ruin any trace of sexual chemistry with their antics that I return the kiss, confident that the same thing will happen here. It's always been the same with men, no matter how awesome things are at first.

He'll do something porn-inspired, try to skip foreplay, or pull something creepy or degrading on me out of nowhere. That's just what men do; they wind me up with some kissing and petting and then ruin it fast and thoroughly as a splash of cold water, leaving me resentful and unfulfilled.

And just like that, the spell will be broken, and I'll be back in control again. Disappointed and frustrated but back in control.

But as the kiss lingers and our hands start to explore each other, I feel myself starting to get into it. Really get into it. Kisses don't usually make me chase after more. His

does.

Now that I've decided on this and feel my hunger for him growing, I get impatient. I want to feel this good for as long as I can. I unbutton his shirt as we kiss, then push the fabric off his shoulders and start running my hands over him as he grunts and moans into my mouth. His muscles tighten under my fingertips like the slightest caress is enough to stir him up.

He shocks me in the best of ways by scooping me into his arms, leaving his shirt on the floor behind us as he carries me to his bedroom. I hang on, eyes wide with surprise at both his strength and how steadily and gently he carries me. I actually swoon a little bit against his shoulder. I'm not used to being swept off my feet.

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His bedroom is a dark, cozy cavern with blackout shades drawn. The bed is wide and low, sprawling across most of the room and covered with a velvet comforter that has to be custom-made. He settles me onto it and then kisses me again, bending over me as he pulls off my blazer and sets it aside.

He undresses me slowly between long, hungry bouts of kisses, his hands sliding over every inch of my skin as I bare it. He's taking his time—too much time, making me impatient for more. Maybe that's the play, damn him.

I give as good as I get, running my hands over his body as I help him out of his clothes. His skin is warm and smoother than I expected and wonderfully sensitive. Just running my fingertips down his belly makes him jolt and suck air as if I slapped him. I use my nails next time, and he groans through his teeth.

Pent up? Or has he been craving me this badly? Either way, it makes me want to play with him.

He has the dress off and set aside before I can catch my breath and get even a bit self-conscious. He's already in his boxers, showing off his lean, well-muscled form and that smooth skin adorned on both shoulders with bright tattoos of birds. I stretch out across the mattress in my bra and panties, my stockings still clinging to my legs. He hasn't touched them, I notice. I guess he likes them on.

I'm no pillow princess; when he bends over me again and kisses me, my hands go straight to the small of his back. I run my nails lightly up his back, down again and over his ass, and then circle down to his belly. He grunts with delight as he unfastens my bra.

I tug at the band of his boxers lightly, then nudge them down low on his hips. “Got a rubber?” I murmur when the kiss breaks, not wanting to wait until I’m so turned on that talking turns into a chore.

He flashes a grin again and fumbles for the drawer in his bedside table while covering my neck and shoulders with kisses. His dick is so hard under his boxers that I can see it jumping a little bit in time with his heart.

I take the condom out of his hand and tear the wrapper open while he eagerly shoves his shorts down. His cock springs free, and my eyes widen slightly at the sight of it. Uncut, gleaming, and thick enough that I’m just a little intimidated. Not that I’ll let that stop me.

He groans as I roll the condom on, his hips slightly jerking as I run my fingertips down his length. His chest heaves. When he bends to kiss me again, I help him pull my bra off and unfasten my garter belt.

He falls over my breasts like they’re a feast he’s been craving, kissing and nibbling all over them while I squirm and struggle against the urge to beg him to suck. When his lips finally close over one of my nipples, I groan aloud and bury my fingers in his hair.

His hands slide my panties off, leaving the stockings just as I predicted. He grips my hips, then slides one hand down between my thighs to caress me. I’m trembling and panting even before his thumb finds my clit and starts circling it slowly.

I gasp, and my hips jolt forward. His mouth and hands move in rhythm, sending shocks of pleasure through me from my nipple and my clit until my gasps turn into little cries.

I’m further gone than I’ve ever gotten with someone else in the room, so desperately

horny and dizzy with pleasure that I'm not sure I can speak at all. I'm torn between hoping he screws things up before the finish and praying he actually gets me off. The one fits my plans. The other, I need like my next breath of air.

His breath comes in shaky gasps now; I hear him curse under his breath. He leans up to kiss me, hand still resolute between my thighs, and I part them as he settles his hips over mine.

I'm so slick and hungry for him that the slow, insistent push of his cock into me makes me groan with relief and pull him closer. There's no pain at all.

We move together slowly at first, both shaking and gasping from holding back, wanting this to last. His hips pump against mine in time with the push of his thumb, and I go from gasping to letting out little cries in under a minute.

My lips move, but nothing but noise comes out. I want to beg him to keep going, just like that, Please don't stop, but I can't even draw a full breath anymore. I grab the tight muscle of his ass cheeks in both hands and grind against him fiercely until I start to lose my senses.

He groans hoarsely in my ear, and I think that's it and brace myself for another letdown... but he's only getting started. He keeps moving, keeps the rhythm, grunting harshly with the effort of holding back...

...and I go rigid under him, back arched, every muscle taut. My voice sobs with desperate need, and he pounds into me harder and pushes me roughly over the edge.

I thrash under him, nails in his back, every contraction pushing another blissful cry out of my throat as I grind on him. In the middle, he loses the fight and throws his head back, groaning, "Oh, yeah... yeah!" in a tone of shameless bliss. His cock jumps inside of me, and he shudders against me until the last contraction passes, then we lie

still together, entwined.

Oh, God, I think. Oh, God. That was so good...

I stare at the ceiling in shock as he lies over me, catching his breath, shivering a little now and then.

Finally, he drags his head up and kisses me softly. “That was amazing. You still with me, sweetheart?”

I blink up at him, and then I nod.

His smile becomes wicked. “Good. Because I’m not done with you...”

I wake up in Michael’s arms, and I don’t know what time it is. For a solid 30 seconds, I don’t even know how I got here. I’m too sleepy and relaxed; my thoughts slip away from me like a bar of soap in the bathtub.

Slowly, I come to realize that I’m in trouble.

We’re curled up in a tangle of velvet bedding, and my body doesn’t want to move. I can’t remember where my clothes are. I can’t remember how many times I came.

I lost track. I actually fucking lost track. It almost makes me want to laugh... except reality’s already sinking in, and it’s no laughing matter.

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There was nothing about last night that I could call frustrating, unfulfilling, or even forgettable. He spent plenty of time exploring my body, my reactions, and then remembered what he learned. He took the time to get me hot and make me crave his cock, and then made it worth the fucking wait.

That's never happened before.

The irony hits me like a splash of cold water, and the sweet afterglow haze I woke up with recedes. I slip out of Michael's arms and bed and hurry into the bathroom across the hall to splash water on my face and try to pull myself together.

"Shit," I mutter as I meet my own eyes in the bathroom mirror. My makeup's crazy, lipstick kissed into smudges all over my mouth and chin, and there are black tear marks where my mascara ran. I start cleaning it all off as my mind starts to race.

Last night was the best sex of my entire life... ever. And I want more. Except... there's a huge complication.

I cannot afford to fall for this guy.

I have to play along with being Michael's ally and with being interested in him, but at the end of the day, he is still the son of a bitch who screwed me and humiliated me in front of my family. I can't warm up to him too much, or I won't be able to get my revenge.

But...

Oh, hell. Now, I'm wavering in my course over some good dick. What am I, nineteen?" "Get your shit together, Arya," I mutter at my reflection.

I'm only supposed to use sex to throw off his judgment while I work on ruining him. So, what if he figured out where my clit was? He also fucked up my life.

I finally give up and take a whole-ass shower, taming down my massive bedhead and washing off our sweat. I smell like his cologne even after scrubbing down. Just a little whiff of it, but it mocks me. It's a reminder that I can't take back last night.

The worst part is, I know that as soon as I see him, I'll want him again. He has that power over me now, and I know it, and I hate it.

Chapter 13

Michael

I wake up from the deepest post-sex sleep of my life to hear Arya puttering around in my bathroom, and I'm immediately all smiles. She's still here.

I don't know why, but I half-expected her to slip out after waking up. Especially if she's decided last night was a mistake. I don't expect her to give me shit about it—she enjoyed herself too much—but I really hope she'll want to come back for seconds. And thirds.

I guess we'll see.

By the time I get out of the shower, she's already dressed and in my dining room, looking at my laptop. Her hair looks a little damp, her makeup is lighter, and she's every bit as hot as last night. I see her, and I feel it all through me, like a soft heat wave.

“Good morning. I’ll get some coffee going. You’re really diving in this early?” I try to keep the disappointment out of my voice, but her glance tells me I’ve failed.

“Sorry,” she says distractedly. “Last night was great, but now, I have to make up for lost time.”

I stare at her, not sure if I should feel disappointed or not. We do have to get all this bullshit done, but it’s like she’s flipped a switch. Is what happened last night so easy for her to pull her mind away from?

I’ll just have to spoil her even more next time.

I find my smile at that thought. “Okay, but we’re definitely going out for dinner tonight.”

She arches an eyebrow. “Are we?”

“You really want to live on takeaway while you’re here? Because I don’t cook outside of some grilling.” I flash her a winning glance. “There’s an Indian buffet two blocks from here. You’ll love it.”

“Huh. Well, I do like tandoori chicken.” She smirks slightly, and I know she’s teasing me.

My smile grows. “Once we’re done with all this, we’ll walk over.”

Once we actually buckle down and have some coffee in us, the search through server records goes fast. Unfortunately, by the end of it, I’ve lost my smile.

“That’s impossible,” I insist, denying the evidence right in front of me on the screen.

“Look, I’m sorry, but you’ve read the same records that I have. Someone logged in at admin level using a computer at your home. I don’t yet know which one, but we can track that as well.” She’s talking fast and looking a little stressed out. It must be the look on my face.

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I make a real effort to calm down. “I’m sorry. Look, yes, I know what the evidence says, and I know you’re right. I just... can’t fucking believe it was someone in the family.”

“Look, I’m really sorry, too. I don’t like being the bearer of bad news, but even if it was an outsider who got past your physical security, it’s a problem that needs to be addressed.”

“So, either our physical security needs a complete review, or we’ve got a fucking Judas in the family. I’ll sure as hell look into the first one,” I tell her firmly, “because I can’t believe the second.”

“I hate this,” she sighs. “Look, I understand how you feel. Loyalty’s everything, I get it. I’m expected to be totally loyal to my family, too, no matter how they treat me. But the thing about loyalty is... sometimes, not everyone in your family is loyal back.”

My jaw works. “Not my family. Yeah, we bicker, my little sister’s a spoiled brat; and some of my cousins like spreading stupid rumors like the ones my ex started. They’re not perfect people, but I could never believe any of them would betray me like this.”

“I didn’t think you’d screw me over the way you did,” she points out. “But you did.”

I feel some of my resolve crumble away. “Look, I really like you, and you’re amazing, but you’re not family. I had my orders. I hated carrying them out because it was against you, but I did it because Dad wanted it.”

She licks her lips and looks down. “I get that. But it doesn’t take the sting out.”

“Will getting you the money back do the trick?”

She gives me a skeptical look. “It will be a good start.”

I nod. “Okay. I need to find out if we had any visitors in the house that night. That’s going to force me to ask some awkward questions.”

“You could always just check the security camera logs.” She sees the discomfort on my face and stops short. “Sorry.”

“No, I know it’s a good idea. I’ll just feel really weird doing it. Ninety-five percent of what goes on that night is going to be my family’s private lives.”

“That’s why you should go through them without me,” she urges me gently.

I frown. “I’ll think about it.” But I really don’t want to. If she’s actually right... if someone in my family has betrayed us... it will drop a bomb on the rest of us. The Rossis will be thrown into chaos.

“Michael,” she says softly, laying a hand on the back of mine, “even if it is someone in your family, you need to protect everyone else. Because if this person will do that to you, then they’ll probably do it to others.”

I have to stop and think about it, no matter how uncomfortable it is. I hate that she’s right. But she is right. “I’ll take a look at the security footage,” I say reluctantly.

A second round with Arya ends up having to wait. Facing the possibility of either a security or loyalty problem in my household ends up killing the mood more than I want to admit. I can’t really explain it. It’s like finding a crack in my life’s foundation.

I don't blame her for pointing it out. I'm still as hot for her as ever. Just... not for a while after that.

When I get home, Billy is where he usually is when he's home, poking through the fridge in search of snacks. I have no idea how he stays as lean as he does. "Hey," I say as I come in.

"You spend the weekend at your condo?" He looks at me curiously as I sigh and lean against the counter.

"Yeah. Had to get through a whole lot of security records in a short time." I reach out, and he hands me a longneck without being asked. I pop the top off and have a swallow.

"Damn. I was hoping you were there with a woman," he says with a smirk.

"I was. For a while, anyway. All work and no play, and all of that." I return the smirk, but I can tell it's a pale imitation. I'm tired—and not just for spending a lot of the night fucking instead of sleeping.

He looks delighted. "Goddamn, it's about time. Who's the new girl?"

I freeze up immediately. I can hardly tell him it's Arya. "Nothing serious, just a friend with benefits."

He lifts an eyebrow slightly, the corner of his mouth tucking up skeptically. "Okay, man, you don't have to tell me. But if you get serious with this chick, expect me to get curious again."

I nod gratefully, glad for the reprieve. I'm suddenly preoccupied with a whole new worry: What will I do if things actually work with Arya?

I suddenly feel like an idiot. I've wanted to get with her for years, but even in my wildest fantasies, I've never thought beyond our first night together. I've never thought about what would happen if we wanted each other for keeps.

And now, I do. I've never been that sexually compatible with anyone on a first try, I like her, I'm drawn to her, and she can even keep up with me on the tech front. This is no longer just a matter of finally scratching a years-long itch. I want her.

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I want to make her want me just as badly.

But say I win. Say I persuade her, and it works. What the hell is our families' response going to be? I can't expect them to lay their feud aside just because the two of us have fallen in love. Her family especially would never go for it. I swear at times that her dad's angling for actual war between us.

And then, they find out that we're not only fucking, but getting serious. What happens then?

"You all right, bro?"

I realize I've been leaning there silently and saying nothing. "Sorry, didn't get much sleep last night," I admit. "Maybe I should be having coffee instead of beer."

"Just two-fist them both and be a wide-awake drunk," he suggests cheerily.

That helps me find a smile again. Good old Billy. "I wonder how well that would work?"

"Well, it works like shit for sobering people up. Found that out in college." His smile fades a little. "No, seriously, man, I can tell that something's wrong. What's up?"

I struggle for a minute to find the right words. I don't want to spill everything about my worries, especially since Billy's a bit of a gossip. "It's the investigation," I say finally. "It's starting to look like whoever took the money logged in from our home network."

His eyes widen. “Wait, what?”

“Either someone broke in, social-engineered their way in, or just used their home login. None of those are good things. I’ll need to look at all our security records to try and figure this one out.”

“Well, I know it wasn’t one of us. But those other two ideas don’t sound too good either. Let me know what you find out, okay?” Billy takes a big swallow of his beer, looking a little worried.

“Yeah, sorry to bring home bad news. I double-checked that shit twice.” I give him an apologetic little half-smile.

He shrugs. “Not your doing; you’re just reporting on it. I really do want to know what the security guys on duty that night have to say for themselves, though.”

I nod a little grimly. “Me too.”

When I get to my room, I set my bag down and lie back on my bed, staring at the ceiling. The memory of Arya—the softness and strength of her body, the taste of her mouth, the sound of her moans—drifts back to me for a while, and I think about calling her. But I have no real excuse to do so until I’ve gone over those security videos. And I’m not quite up to that yet.

I’m worried about what I’ll find on those tapes—or worse, what I won’t find. If nobody out of the ordinary shows up on the tapes that night, that confirms it was all an inside job. And whether it’s staff, one of Dad’s men, or a family member, one of my family’s big berserk buttons is betrayal from within.

Chapter 14

Arya

I'm only home for 15 minutes when I already want to go back to Michael's condo. It was so blessedly quiet there—at least when the two of us weren't making noise. And I miss that part, too.

But he's got to deal with what may turn into a gigantic family blowup and get our hands on those security tapes. And I need some time away from him to clear my head. If I can clear it with whatever drama is going on between Mom and Dad.

The two are arguing nonstop and loudly, which doesn't happen very often. It makes me worry. Usually, either one of them is pissed off, or they're both pissed at someone else. Generally me.

This time, they're after each other. It's far off in another wing of the house, but it's so loud I can make out the anger. Just not the words.

Whatever is going on, I'll probably learn about it soon enough. Likely against my will and in detail that I didn't ask for. But in the meantime, I need a little time to myself.

I still think about last night way too much. How good Michael made me feel. How connected. He made me forget all about my vendetta for hours, and now, as I quietly make my way back to my room, I feel a creeping sense of regret.

I shouldn't let myself fall for a guy who did what Michael did to me, no matter how amazing he is in bed. Or smart. Or cute. Or funny...

Damn it.

I shut the door and sit down in my big, squishy computer chair, letting it rotate until it

faces the window. Down the hill, past a Great Gatsby-style acre of useless rolling lawn, I can catch a glimpse of the Golden Gate Bridge where it arcs out over the water. I'm not sure who had the bright idea of painting the damn thing orange, but it is pretty striking against the deep blue water of the Bay.

I've spent a lifetime compartmentalizing, packing away thoughts and emotions I couldn't deal with or express. How pissed I really am at my parents. How lonely I get. How tired I am of fighting for the slightest sliver of recognition.

If I go work in the private sector, I might have to struggle for a few years, but I won't have to worry about pleasing people who will never be pleased with me. I could just do my work, meet requirements, make my money, and go the hell home to a peaceful space I only share with those I want there.

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Michael has a private condo just to get away, and he has a better relationship with his family than I do. So, how come I've never set aside money and gone and done that?

I can guess some of it. I don't think Michael had to pay his way to getting a doctorate. My parents are pretty generous, but they never supported me getting anything beyond a Bachelor's, so I had to take tuition, books, and everything out of what they gave me monthly. There was never much left over after that.

Now, though, I can think about it. And it's past time that I do.

I'm just starting to relax when I hear the arguing and yelling finally die down on the other side of the house. That puts me on alert again. On the one hand, I'm glad nobody got smacked, no dishes got thrown, and they've finally settled things. On the other hand, I can pretty much guess the minutes I've got until they bring the fallout of that argument to my threshold.

I try to meditate until that time comes, but my stomach is jumping around. This situation used to terrify me as a kid, and it's not very comfortable now, either.

Then, my father's rapping on my door like a cop, startling me half out of my chair. "For fuck's sake," I mutter under my breath, straightening and going to unlock my door.

My father stands there stiffly, hands shoved in the pockets of his smoking jacket. His face is reddish, and his voice is hoarse from yelling. "We need to talk about Imelda," he says simply.

I lick my lips, brace myself, and lift my chin. “All right. What about her?”

“The security records, CCTV videos, and evidence from her room all proved your story. She confessed an hour ago. She says she was employed by the Rossis.”

I nod. “That’s pretty much what I expected. It confirms how they were able to monitor my work so closely.”

“Damn it,” he snaps. “I just spent the last hour wanting to go put a gun to Rossi’s head over this, and your mom keeps telling me it’s not worth a war. It’s millions of dollars of insult!”

I stare back at him. Oh, now he’s fired up. Now that there’s evidence enough that he can blame someone besides me. He’s so damn predictable.

“Well, you don’t have to worry about them having that money long enough to enjoy it,” I say sharply. “It was stolen out from under them in under a day. My sources say they’re in an uproar over it.”

“Huh.” He frowns. “You mentioned something about that before, but I wasn’t really listening.”

That’s no surprise at all. “They have security leaks as well, and theirs aren’t caught yet. One of them stole that money out from under them, and no one knows where it is now.”

He huffs. “Can you still get it back?”

“I’m working on it. It would help if I still had admin access to our system.” I look at him meaningfully.

“Your cousin says you don’t need it. If you don’t like that, talk to him.”

I roll my eyes. “You gave chief admin privileges to Carlo? He’s fifteen! Are you kidding me?”

“He does the job for pocket money, he doesn’t ask questions, and he doesn’t even know what most of what he’s monitoring even is, so we don’t have to worry about leaks as much.”

I fold my arms, regretting coming home even more. “Until the Rossis slip someone else into our staff roster.”

“I’m changing the hiring process to help prevent that. Have a little faith.” His tone has shifted to a resentful growl. Then, he takes a deep breath and adds, “Look, I need to know where the hell you have gotten all this information about the Rossis.Imelda, the money, their current fight—where are you getting it all from?”

“I have a source inside the Rossi family.” That’s as close as I’m letting him get to the truth. If he finds out that I’m working with Michael, he’ll react almost as badly as if he finds out that I slept with Michael.

“You have... wait, who?” He peers at me.

Right now, I realize it’s time to set a boundary and stick to it, no matter how crazy he gets. I frown at him. “Ah... ah, Dad, this is my source, not a family source. If you want access, it will be through me.”

He scowls back at me... but then, his face softens slightly. “Fine, protect your source, but if I need to question them directly for the good of the family, you are not getting in my way.”

“Sure, if I agree with you.” I fold my arms.

He looks shocked for a moment, then scowls again. “Learn to be more agreeable, then, because I still run this family.”

“And you assume you run me despite my being a grown adult. Keep it up, Dad, and I’ll walk.” I stare him right in the eyes.

For a moment, he hesitates. Then, his face darkens again, and he says, “Stop assuming I give a shit. You’re just a woman. It’s your mom who wants more grandkids. I don’t care if you leave or not.”

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It hurts. I fight as hard as I can not to show it. Finally, I reply, “Just remember you said that when it happens.”

He stares at me for several beats, then says in a low growl, “Find out from your source among the Rossis whether they’re going to try to breach our security again.”

I sigh. The last thing I want is for my father to start using Michael as a leak-by-proxy. “I’ll talk to her.” I’m not even going to give him the right gender. My father would get even more suspicious if he found out my contact was a man.

“Good. Maybe you’ll finally do something useful for this family.” And he turns on his heel and stomps away.

I stand there with my stomach curdled and my muscles aching from tension, and what keeps going through my head is: I should have never come home.

But now, at least, I know I can get back into the family network with no problem. My teenage cousin not only doesn’t know computers anywhere near as well as he thinks but he’s also lazy.

Today, he’ll be gaming or sleeping and maybe check access logs and activity a few times just to say he did it. Nobody expects anything to actually happen on the family Net besides recipe sharing and gossip. And the family business, of course, but women are locked out of those forums.

As soon as I’m sure my father isn’t coming back, I log onto the network, remote-hack my cousin’s account, grant myself admin privileges, and then cover my tracks. It

takes me 15 minutes. The whole time, I've gradually started to feel better. Once it's done, I'm smiling.

But only just. My family took my duties away and handed them off to some idiot kid who had no idea how important they were and probably wouldn't care. I was going to look after my family and find any evidence I could, behind their backs, for their own goddamn good.

But after that, I am giving Michael a call. Not because I crave his company or time in his bed but because I need the excuse to get out of here.

He picks up on the second ring. "Hey, sweetheart. You want to come over?"

Yes. "Did you finish up gathering those security videos?"

"I'll have it done later tonight. We're also checking all the new hires for possible leaks." He sounds confident. "Maybe someone else slipped in while you and I were butting heads."

The idea sickens me a little bit. Some third party taking advantage of our family conflict is almost as disturbing to me as the idea of an inside job seems to disturb Michael. "Maybe. But once we look through those videos, we'll have a better picture of who was actually around."

"So... do you want to wait until I'm done or hang out and grab some dinner?" His voice is bright and friendly, in total contrast with the shit I ate from my father.

"I came back to get some things and get some rest, but... I don't think I can rest very well here." It slips out before I can stop it. The bald truth, as vulnerable and ugly as it is. Stop whining, I tell myself. But it's too late.

“Well, you know, if you want to come take a rest here, I sure won’t mind.” His voice is a lot gentler.

I don’t know why, but that chokes me up. I stay quiet for a few seconds while I pull myself together. “Well, I...” I shouldn’t let him affect me like this. I should go somewhere else for a while, call a friend, or just drive around and get my head together.

“I’ll be down in half an hour,” I hear myself saying, and then sit there blinking in surprise. Why did I say that?

Maybe it’s because after what my father’s said and done, having a guy actually be easygoing, accepting, and kind feels like someone offering water after a trek through the desert. It might be fake; it might be a ploy. But it’s still exactly what I need.

“Sounds great,” he says in that warm tone. “I’ll get some drinks together.”

“Okay.”

If he takes advantage of me while I’m like this, if he’s playing me to get sex or any other reason... I’ll come down on him like a ton of bricks.

But for now... I’m just glad to go somewhere where I’m not being hurt by the people closest to me.

Chapter 15

Michael

I’m full of energy as I putter around, preparing for Arya’s return. I’ve finally received the last of the security videos, so I can legitimize her coming over, but that’s not why.

I want more of her. More of her in bed and out of it. I knew sex with her would be amazing after anticipating it for so long, but it's more than that. I'm so fucking happy to have her back for the night that it actually surprises me.

I shouldn't let myself catch feelings for her, especially quickly. She's probably still pissed off at me deep down, no matter how many orgasms I give her. I need to get her that money back and help her look legitimate in the eyes of her family before I don't have to worry about a knife in my back.

It's tough, though. We have a ton in common, we make magic in the sack, she's fun, funny... and she's been a grown-up through all of this. It really might be worth all the risk and potential drama...

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...Whoah, there, cowboy. Calm down. Take it one day at a time with this chick. She's still a Castellucci, and you know how they are about revenge.

That thought, though, doesn't dampen my mood one bit. Or my boner, either.

My thoughts go back to that short and somewhat weird phone call after a little while, and I frown and mull it while I'm checking our stores of ice, juices, and booze. She had seemed very stressed out. Holding it together well, but stressed.

It's family shit, I'm sure. Her dad is a legendary asshole and a chauvinist, and I'm sure he doesn't spare his kids. He also made enemies of our family by grabbing my mom's ass at The Don's daughter's wedding five years ago. He says the cold war between us started because she punched him—for something he denies doing.

Everyone else, including The Don, says the bastard had it coming.

If I were a woman and that guy's daughter, it would be absolute hell for me. It must be hell for Arya, with her brains, ambition, and that super obvious desire to prove herself. Apparently, her mom is even worse than her dad—a controlling shrew, though I don't know the details.

It's pretty common for the different Families to live together until they marry or after a divorce, but the problem with that is that if you live at home, even in a mansion where everyone has their own wing, some parents will try to treat you like a kid when you're almost 30. My guess is they fall into old habits again—or never break them.

If I were an asshole, I could probably turn her against them. But they seem to be

doing a pretty good job of that all by themselves. Besides, I'm not big on manipulating people. I'm probably bad at it, too. I can usually see it coming a mile away, but that doesn't make me practiced in doing it myself.

Arya shows up 12 minutes later. There's rain in her hair, and her eyes look tired. There's a very promising-looking overnight bag in one hand and her laptop bag over her shoulder. She offers a smile that doesn't reach her eyes: strained, polite, empty.

"You look like you've been dealing with assholes all day," I quip, and she smirks and nods silently.

I help her out of her coat. She sets the overnight bag down in the bottom of my coat closet. I almost tell her to go drop it off in the bedroom, but she looks too troubled to start hitting on her yet.

"What is up with this weather? It's eighty-five degrees and raining. It feels like New York in summer." She starts with a good-natured grumble about nothing. But she's talking, and that's an opportunity.

"It's those Baja hurricane remnants," I tell her. "That's why the big weather shift." I pause, consider. "Are you okay?"

"No," she replies flatly. "But that has nothing to do with you this time, so don't worry about it." She lifts an eyebrow just a little. "You mentioned something about blender drinks?"

I smirk. "That I did. piña colada, a couple kinds of daiquiri, frozen margaritas."

"I'd love a margarita. You like sweet booze?"

"I'm more of a beer man, but I learned they're fun to drink with other people. Also, a

lot of women like them on hot days.” And I have absolutely always been a ladies’ man.

“That’s true. Besides, I kind of like a drink that tastes like a dessert but kicks like booze.”

I get to work putting the margaritas together. “So, we’re taking a look at all our staff, like I said, and I just got the last of the videos. We can review them together later. I would appreciate your help.” Much later, if I have any say in it. I want to solve this thing, but right now, I want her even more.

“Good going.” She hesitates. “Look, I need to ask you a favor, and it’s weird. I’ll understand if you don’t want to do it.”

I lean over and eye her curiously. “Uh... what is it?”

“To cover for what we’ve found out, I had to tell my dad I have a source within your family. He’ll only keep his nose out of our business for so long.”

I wince. “Fuck. That’s the last thing we need right now.”

“Yeah, if he’s not going to be of help, I don’t want to deal with him meddling either. He’s always looking for an excuse to get... violent.” Now, she’s the one wincing. “Anyway, now, he wants to know if anyone else is going to replace Imelda on our staff as a Rossi spy.”

“Huh.” That makes me have to stop and think for a moment. My gut wants to tell her I’ll do anything to keep her from getting in even more trouble with her maniac of a father. However, the rest of me remembers that doing that would betray my own father. “That’s a big ask.”

“I know.” She suddenly can’t look me in the eyes. “I just need something to tell him to keep him from getting suspicious.”

“Mm.” That doesn’t necessarily mean telling the old bastard the truth. “Okay. I’ll keep an eye out for anything, but remember that my father usually makes his decisions without my input.”

She relaxes a little so she can make eye contact again. “Thanks.”

“Does he usually give you loyalty tests?” I ask as I finish preparing the drinks.

“He gives everyone loyalty tests, but I go under a microscope because I haven’t followed their plan for me.”

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I recall one of her complaints from before. “Marriage and babies?”

She rolls her eyes, nodding thanks as I hand her one of the drinks. “You got it.”

“Shit. I get leaned on some, but not like that.” I grab my own drink and sit down next to her on the couch. “Doesn’t either of them get that you can’t just magic up a husband and a kid for them—and that you shouldn’t be expected to?”

“Nope.” She rubs her face distractedly, and I realize she’s getting teary-eyed at me.

Shit. “Okay. My point is, I’ve got your back. It’s the least I can do after everything.”

She swallows and nods. “Thanks. Fortunately, he isn’t pushing to meet my source. Right now, anyway.”

I take a swallow of my drink. I’ve gone heavy on the alcohol. There’s something about the tanginess mixed with the burn that I like. “Well, the elephant in the room is, if either one of our families figure out we’re working together—”

“Or fucking,” she points out bluntly, and I stop short for a few beats before I find my voice again.

“Uh... yeah, that, too.”

She smirks at my expression. “You already know my family would go nuts about it.”

I nod. “Same here. Maybe not quite as nuts, but they would. They wouldn’t be able to

understand it. We've been rivals forever."

"Yeah, except now, I don't have my job anymore."

I wince and nod. "Yeah. I know I had a hand in that—"

"They were just looking for an excuse," she sighs, surprising the hell out of me. It's true, but I didn't expect to be let off the hook, even partly, this fast.

Then again... maybe I'm not.

"You know," I say as gently as I can, "after a while, there's no real way to control anyone else's reaction to you. You can influence it, but a rotten person is just a rotten person."

She licks her lips. "I know. I have one foot out the door of that place. I even told him that today."

"Oh, baby," I sigh before I can stop myself. She lifts an eyebrow, and I shake my head a little as I take another swallow of my drink. "Mm. Look. Threatening to leave is not really going to bother him that much. It'll probably bother your mom because she's clingy, but your dad's the one who burns bridges with people like it's his favorite hobby. You know our dads used to be friends, right?"

She blinks at me in astonishment. "No, no, I did not."

I laugh a little at her expression. "Okay. Yeah. Our families have been rivals for a while, but it didn't get hostile until a few years ago. Your dad and mine started out Army buddies and really close.

"But then, Dad got married to my mom. Dad says your father started drifting away

after that. It wasn't until he got drunk and groped my mom at that wedding that Dad realized he was jealous. He'd wanted Mom for himself."

She almost chokes on her drink. "Oh, God, that's gross. Dad and Mom have been married longer than your parents, too."

"Three years longer. My dad got drunk one night about six months ago and told me the whole thing. That was a really, really weird conversation."

She's blinking at me wide-eyed. "I'll bet. What a fucked-up thing to want to drag us into a war over." I can practically see her opinion of her father falling a few notches.

"Well, I'm sure they'll go off pretty violently if they realize we're seeing each other unless we find a way of handling it. Because my point is, your father's wanted to fight over less."

"Yeah." She looks a little uncertain. "So, what do we do?"

"Play it by ear for now while we work to redeem ourselves, make sure not to let them know anything, and once we've found our perp and exposed them, we can work on figuring out what to do about... us. In general."

She purses her lips slightly. "Us?"

The skepticism in her voice stings. Maybe she thinks it's too early to talk about "us." I shouldn't take that personally, but I have to squash a bit of disappointment.

"Yeah."

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She looks distracted, conflicted... and then, she hides it all behind a smirk. “Jesus, you move fast. What’s that about? You’re not on the rebound from that ex, are you?”

That stings a little, too, and I put on my own smirk. “No, because some of us are grown-ups about this shit. My last relationship ended months ago, and I’m well over it.”

“Yeah, well.” She takes another swallow of her drink. “You make good frozen margaritas, and you’re a lot of fun in bed, but it’s gonna take a lot more than that to get me thinking in terms of ‘us.’”

The challenging stare in her eyes surprises me and heats up my blood. “Oh, yeah? So, what more do you want?”

Her smirk widens and warms just a touch. “Besides my money back, a nice payout for myself, and you not fucking with my work ever again?”

“All of that’s a given. It’s why we’re working together in the first place, besides catching that fucker,” I reassure her at once. “What else?”

Her eyebrows go up, and she thinks about it, her frown looking more like a smile. A promising sight.

“Tell you what,” she says. “I’ll think about it and let you know.”

I have to fight down a grin, but playing it cool or not, I’m delighted. I have my foot in the door with her, and I haven’t needed any bullshit to get there.

We go over the security camera footage for the night of the heist and see absolutely no one in the house who isn't supposed to be there. Maria spends the night mostly in her room. My brother has a date and comes in late. My parents knock off early after the party...

"Fuck," I mutter, realizing. "I'm a complete dumbass."

She looks up. "What is it?"

"My parents held a party earlier that evening. Someone could have slipped off during it and deployed something onto the system to lie in wait for that cash transfer."

She blinks and sits up straighter. "Oh, crap. Do you know who went to that party?"

"I can get the guest list from the app my mom used to invite people. They were mostly family, but a few brought dates."

It worries the shit out of me that I somehow managed to completely miss that the heist had happened while my parents had guests. How wrapped up in Arya have I gotten that I missed that?

It's like finally spending that wild night with her has shocked the clarity back into me. I've been off my game ever since my father had asked me to screw her over, and now, I'm getting back to myself.

As I gather the information off my phone, I notice her watching me. She seems a little worried.

"What is it?" I ask after transferring everything I need to my laptop.

"I didn't ask if you're okay." She sounds almost apologetic. "You don't... you've

gone from pinpointing when to jack my heist to missing huge details. That's not normal for you. Are you all right?"

"I..." Shit. She noticed. And yet... she cares enough to say something. That last part has me intrigued.

I can't tell her the truth. I can't say that I've had her in my head so long that screwing her over like that had felt like the worst thing I've ever done. I can't tell her how much I care about her already, even though I don't know her that well yet.

But I'm moved. And suddenly, unexpectedly, I'm so horny for her that I can barely see.

I get up and carefully draw the blinds on all the windows. My hands shake a little bit. When I sit back down, I down a sweet, cool, burning swallow of my drink and double-check my pocket for the condoms.

"I'm working on it, baby. I just don't... I don't want to think about any of it right now." Not family drama, not the possibility of a family Judas, not how much I want to punch her dad.

I set the remnants of my drink aside and move over to her, looking into her eyes. They avoid mine for a moment, then stare back at me. "Okay," she murmurs.

"I just want to be with you right now," I tell her.

She freezes for a moment as I kiss her, and then her hands settle gently in my hair and slide down to my shoulders. I feel her shivering under my hands as I caress her thigh beneath the edge of her dress. She's wearing a garter belt again... and my dick starts to throb as I realize she has absolutely worn it for me.

She makes those sweet little sounds against my mouth that she does when she's turned on: small, musical whimpers of pleasure and desire. My hand slides up to cup her breast and then pushes down the strap of her dress. The bra's a front-buttoner. I smile at the discovery.

She gasps a little as I unlatch it and push one cup aside. I immediately start kissing her breast like I can't stop. I run my tongue over her nipple and swirl the tip over her sensitive skin while she moans my name. I can feel her nails against my shoulders. I can feel the way her hips lift under me as I suckle her and pull off the rest of her clothes.

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I pull away only long enough to strip off my shirt, then pause in surprise as I see her unbuckling my belt. She's up on her knees naked, her body gleaming in the good living room lights, and her eyes have a fire in them that intrigues me.

"Lie back," she tells me.

I lie back on the broad leather couch and let her unfasten my belt and my jeans and pull them off of me. She finds the condoms and opens one, then clambers onto my thighs with the rubber in hand. "I want to make you feel good," she murmurs, and I catch my breath.

She rolls the rubber onto me slowly, her fingers sliding tenderly over my dick while I struggle to get a full breath. "God, baby," I groan, and she smiles a little more before going up on her knees again to straddle me.

I watch her settle over my aching length for as long as I can until I finally groan and close my eyes, thrusting up into her. She gasps softly and starts riding me, her low, sweet panting mixing with the soft smack of our bodies bouncing against each other.

I'm not used to being ridden. It rubs me in ways I haven't felt before, and God, it's nice to be able to use both hands on her. I can play with those gorgeous breasts of hers as much as I want. I can rub her clit without having to fit my hand between us. Her slow grind builds up my excitement gradually while she excites herself shimmying and rubbing against me.

Soon, we're both panting and clutching at each other. I grip the cheeks of her ass and arch up into her as she dances over me. She rubs her breasts against my chest. Her

nails are in my shoulders, the sting just sweetening each fresh wave of pleasure.

I hear a man's voice shouting blissfully and realize it's me a second before she moans in my ear and starts contracting around me. I push in deep and hear her crying, "Yes, yes..." as I explode.

I can't see. My heartbeat bangs away in my ears, and my voice is a hoarse, animal groan, and cum blasts out of me again and again until I'm completely spent. I relax under her, and she barely catches herself with her hands before settling over me with a soft whimper.

I bury my nose in her hair and hold her gently, struggling to catch my breath. "Oh, baby," I murmur in her ear when I can speak again. "That felt so fucking good."

"I've... never done that before," she admits, muttering into my neck.

"I'm just glad... you decided to try it with me," I manage as I struggle against the urge to drowse. I still need to get rid of the damn condom.

"Me too." She yawns and then shivers with delight as I pet my hand down her bare back. "Oh... oh. Me too."

Chapter 16

Arya

"Shit," I mutter as I lean against the wall under the cold shower spray.

I was supposed to fake interest in Michael to keep him wrapped around my finger. And okay, mission accomplished, except that I'm not faking.

I've started giving a shit about him in ways that go beyond basic human decency. I've already come to terms with being attracted to him, and I'm trying to come to terms with the amazing sex. But last night, in his arms, I slept deep and peacefully, and when I woke, I didn't want to get up.

So, here I am, swearing under my breath in his shower again, knowing that I've screwed up.

Knowing as well that it will probably happen again.

Did you catch feelings? You did, didn't you?

I frown. It's not even three days since we first slept together. It's too soon to be catching feelings. Maybe I'm just lonely. Maybe I'm just vulnerable with all the shit that's going on.

At least it looks like I'm not the only one.

My heart pounds, and my head swirls with worry. If I can't bring myself to take my revenge on this guy, what does it say about me? That I'll let men walk all over me like Dad has done his best his whole life. That I'll take good dick over getting myself some justice.

"I can't live with myself if I do that," I whisper. I need to protect my reputation and pride. If I let Michael walk on me, other men, on and off the Net, will think I'm weak like that.

But I don't want to hurt him. I am starting to feel guilty at the very thought.

I've got to find a way to rethink all of this so that I come out on top without doing anything I can't live with. He's my rival, in the end, not my enemy.

Or at least, he wasn't until our parents got involved.

It was actually pretty hot to hear him say he wanted to punch my dad. I shouldn't think that, but... I kind of want to punch my dad, too, at this point.

Hell, at this point, I want to wear a red minidress to his funeral, which is another reason not to be at my parents' place right now.

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I weigh the conflict inside of me and set my jaw. I'll find a way to handle this. I just have to admit that actually doing the big idiot harm is off the table. I'll find another way to own his ass.

My grand plan lasts only long enough for him to step, naked except for a condom, into the shower behind me. I know about the rubber because my only warning that he's on his way is the rustle of its wrapper being torn open.

I can't see a goddamn thing since my hair is full of conditioner, and I'm head-down working it through. "Uh, hey, wait a sec—" I start, but he's already in behind me and yelling in shock and dismay.

"Oh, God, what the fuck? Why is it cold?"

"I... I was trying to..." I flail for the shower knob and turn the water to warm quickly.

He lets out a sigh of relief and catches his breath. "Jesus Christ, cold showers? Are you secretly a Navy SEAL or something?"

I can't help but giggle at the absurdity as I start rinsing out my hair. "No. I was just..." Trying to stop being horny for you. "Trying to wake up."

"Sweetheart, I've got an entire fucking coffee counter for that." His tone is gentle but a little exasperated. "I've even got a milk steamer. I promise you that will do the job just as well as ball-shrinkingly freezing water at six in the morning."

I finish rinsing out and turn to look down at him. "They look fine to me."

He scoffs. “You’re biased,” he challenges, and I just roll my eyes at him. That makes him laugh.

“Guess I ruined things without meaning to, huh?” I confess as I look up at him. His dick is at half-mast, and he’s only starting to recover from being all-over gooseflesh.

He looks down at himself and shrugs, then raises his head, smirking. “Nah.”

He pins me against the wall under the spray and covers me with kisses, one hand busy between my thighs, until I’m trembling, wobbly, and clutching at him. Finally, when I’m breathless and squirming against him, he crouches down and settles me over him, gripping my hip with one hand.

He pushes up into me, and I squirm between him and the tiles, and the pressure in just the right places sends tingles through my clit that make me whimper and moan into his mouth. We move together roughly, and his hoarse groans in my ear turn me on as much as the sensations.

I almost want to fight the pleasure about to overwhelm me, to spend more time with him deliciously moaning while he fights not to blow his load until I’ve climaxed. The look on his face is priceless: eyes closed, lips parted with bliss, then widening to let out another hoarse, animal groan as I rock against him.

His cock jumps inside me, and he thrusts upward roughly as I hear him shout, “Oh,” so that it echoes inside the shower stall—and then my pussy clenches around him hard, and I sob and squirm with ecstasy. He squeezes me close and moans my name in my ear, and the way he says it hits me right in the heart.

This feeling is the antidote to everything my family makes me feel. I’ve wanted to find it for years. And now, I’m feeling it from my most dangerous professional rival. This happiness, this peace.

He helps me back to bed, my hair in a towel but my body naked and tingling. Many soft kisses and a fresh condom later, he's inside me again, slowly rocking against me while we gasp, whisper, and stroke each other.

He makes me come twice that way, the first long and luxuriant, the second, like slow sweet ripples in a summer pond. Then, he groans long and low in my ear and fucks me for a few slow, hardstrokes before arching, shuddering, and finally settling over me gently.

I lie there staring at the ceiling with blurry eyes, rosy from orgasms and more scared than I should be. I feel out of control. He could exploit this. He could use me, humiliate me. He could break my heart on top of everything else.

But that doesn't change what I'm feeling. It's raw vulnerability, and it's probably unwise. It doesn't matter. I want Michael. I don't want to walk away from this, whether or not I spank his ass for crossing me.

We go over the guest list for Michael's parents' party and check through all of them. No guest from the party entered any of the rooms where a login was recorded during the corresponding login time. Since most people logged in from bedrooms and private offices, it makes sense... but it's another goddamn dead end.

"Fuck. Thought maybe we had something," he quietly grumbles as he pushes back from his laptop.

"It was still worth checking out," I say gently. I've been subdued ever since I drowsed off in his arms again. Too much to think about. "Look, since you're feeling more focused now, let's see what other visitors your family has had."

He nods... reluctantly. He seems embarrassed that we're still not on top of this. Of course, the reason we haven't been is mostly because we've been on top of each

other. But I refuse to have any regrets about that, and I hope he doesn't either.

We'll figure it all out now.

"So... none of the guests were involved, and nobody else had access during these hours except your staff and your family." I venture this somewhat gently as we watch screen after screen of time stamp comparisons between video logs and Net logins.

"And some of my father's men, yes," he grunts and nods. "That doesn't mean the perp was family. They could have prepared for the cyber intrusion physically days in advance."

I nod, but I feel troubled as I look at him. This is a real sore point for him, and I hate pushing about it—but it's the fucking truth. "No, it doesn't. But it very likely means he or she had help from an insider."

His jaw works. "I won't believe that until I have real proof of it."

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“I get that. I’m not trying to piss you off, but I’m kind of the expert on family members doing shit they’re not supposed to. Even if they have a history of bullshit, you never expect them to do something really awful until they fucking do. Like... like finding out my dad creeped on your mom.”

He looks at me, a little embarrassed. “Okay, yeah, I get it. That was probably hard to hear.”

“Yeah, it was. But it was true. I mean... I know you think your family is so much better than mine--”

His eyebrows go up. “I never said anything—”

“You don’t have to. I know what people think about my family. My parents are obnoxious and aggressive. They’ve been driving me up the wall my whole life and embarrassing me on top of it.”

“Doesn’t mean I look down on you,” he corrects a little stiffly.

“Michael,” I say, kindly but firmly. “Thank you, but that’s not my point, okay? I’m saying that betrayal doesn’t just happen in families with bad reputations. If we find something—”

“Let’s just wait and see when and if we find it,” he cuts me off firmly.

I huff in exasperation. We’re back to this, and it’s starting to piss me off. “Okay. But let’s not ignore any evidence.”

“You don’t have evidence. You have a theory that fits the smattering of facts we have so far,” he grumbles in a low, implacable voice that worries and aggravates me at the same time.

“Yes, and it’s a working theory that will change if the facts change. Will your point of view adjust as well?”

He gives me an annoyed look. “I’m not scared of the truth. I just know my family.”

“I really hope they’re all as good as you think they are,” I say, getting increasingly uncomfortable. “I just worry about what happens if one of them turns out to disappoint you.”

“You need to drop this,” he snaps, and I feel my fists clench.

“Drop what? I’m only saying—”

“Yeah, I heard you. It’s still not the only possibility, and it’s less of a possibility than you think. Not every family is full of fucked-up people like yours is!”

Everything stops. It’s like being slapped in the face. I knew I was getting too vulnerable to him, and now, with those words out of his mouth, I’m paying for it.

I stare at him. The look on my face registers, and the anger fades slowly from his expression. Not all of it, but enough to leave room for regret. “Oh, fuck, Arya, I’m sorry—”

“You know what?” I say in a voice that’s breathless with anger and hurt. “If there’s one thing I’m fucking sick of in my life, it’s having to pay for my father’s mistakes. Do you think it’s easy having my mother always taking her anger at him out on me? Or the antiquated rules? Or how little he gives a shit?”

“Yes, fine, I’m from an abusive family, and you’re not. Congratulations.” My eyes are getting blurry from tears, and suddenly, I want to get as far away from him as possible. “That doesn’t make your family perfect, and it sure as fuck doesn’t mean I’m too broken to be right.”

“I didn’t mean it like that—” he starts, but I hold up a hand.

“You said what you fucking said. Now, I need to go get some space and think about things. You go ahead and go through the rest of those records and do whatever you need to do. I’ll pick back up with you when I don’t want to fucking slap you.”

And that’s what I do. I say goodbye as calmly as I can, get my things, and walk away. It is foggy out as I drive away, with no idea where I’m going. Not back to my parents’ place. Somewhere I could think.

Somewhere nobody could hurt me.

Chapter 17

Michael

Once Arya walks out, I stare numbly at my laptop screen for a good 15 minutes, my stomach a knot of shame, self-disgust, and worry. Why the fuck did I say that?

It was probably just a loss of temper. I lashed out at what I knew would be a sore spot for her because I was pissed and defensive of my family. Bottom line: It doesn’t really matter why. I fucked up, and I know it.

She needs time to cool off. I need time to find a way to make this shit up to her. This shit, the earlier shit, all of it. I’m no longer worried about how she’ll make me pay for it all if I don’t make good. I’m worried about never seeing her again.

Her absence doesn't just hurt my pride. It lingers. I feel it as I drink my way through four beers, spend some time exercising in my home gym, and finally dive deep into the security records we were going over. But even then, as I finally force myself to do something useful, that emptiness lingers.

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We've only been together a few days. Why do I feel like this? Because it's unnecessary and was my fault? That's probably part of it. But as time goes on and I switch from beer to iced coffee, eat leftovers I barely taste, and compare record after record, that small discomfort stays, digging in painfully the moment my mind is not occupied.

"This is ridiculous," I mutter as I force myself to keep working.

But my focus shifts within minutes. Suddenly, I'm remembering Leanne and the whole two-year struggle to impress her and make her happy. She wore me out and tried to make me feel unworthy, and the whole time, I just wanted to love her. And yet, somehow, her walking away after two years had hurt less than Arya walking out—maybe temporarily—after three days.

I don't get it.

However, not understanding it doesn't make it go away. It gnaws at me as I keep checking the records and security videos. I've been over them multiple times now—some of them I've seen enough that I can predict every second of them.

Here's Maria with her creepy probably-drug connection. He's never away from her, always following her like a puppy.

Here's Billy, thinking he's being slick about driving home drunk, parking an inch from my mom's begonias, and going in to be yelled at by Dad.

Here's Uncle Ezio being embarrassing and creepy toward a pretty new maid.

Here's my dad's midnight snack habit. And my mom's midnight snack habit, roughly an hour later. I wonder if they've ever run into each other while looking for sweets.

Here is my family in private: imperfect, messy, and sometimes embarrassing. But can one of them really have turned against me by stealing that money? And why?

If I hadn't had doubts, I wouldn't have gotten defensive with Arya.

My phone buzzes, and I snatch it off my desk, hoping it's Arya. No such luck: It's my father.

"Progress report on recovering those funds?" he asks curtly.

"I'm doing backgrounds on some friends of the family and workmen who were around during the right time frame." My voice is all business, and the emotions are shoved neatly away so that he can't see anything he might consider a weakness.

"I see." He takes a deep breath. "I just got some information back on our staff's background searches. We're sacking one maid who has a reputation for repeated theft. She paid good money to have her records scrubbed of anything negative, but we got her by talking to a few past employers. Expensive repeated theft, so that's a bullet dodged."

"Well, that part's good." I want to demand why he hadn't already made deep background searches and past employee interviews a part of the hiring process. But I know that won't cause anything but an argument. Still... I feel my respect for him waver a little. "Nothing about computer access or spying on me in particular?"

"No. At this point, it doesn't look like any of them were involved."

My heart sinks as silence stretches between us.

“You think it’s one of us, don’t you?” he asks quietly but with a stony anger in his voice.

“I don’t know that yet. That’s why I’m looking into other guests. But... it’s a growing possibility.” It hurts to even say that.

“Don’t say anything to your mother about that,” he advises in a tone that tells me it’s actually an order. “Not until we know for sure. You know it will break her.”

“I know.” It hurts thinking about my mom breaking down because one of us turned out to be rotten. “Not a word until I have real proof.”

“If you do get a name... you tell me immediately. Not her, not your siblings, me. Understood?”

I take a deep breath, thinking about the bomb that may drop on my family soon, and I say, “I’ll go straight to you, no problem.”

My stomach is churning again after he hangs up. I want to call Arya and tell her I’m sorry. That we just got more evidence that her worst-case scenario may be right. That my family is being betrayed from within.

It’s too soon. She wants space. I have to respect that, even if it’s inconvenient and hurts. I’ll pull together what I’ve learned and send the whole thing to her tomorrow instead of jumping the gun because I want her back.

I wake up reaching for Arya across my mattress, my hand grasping nothing. Hints of her scent still linger in the room.

It’s fucking killing me. I can’t believe I drove her away like that. Most of the time, I just focus on how I’m going to fix the problem. But... most of the time, I know better

than to go off like that.

This mess with the heist and my family has me off-balance. So does she. Her absence more than her presence. I know it's too soon for that. It brings up words like weird and clingy and ignores all the problems she and I have to get through.

I'm still feeling it. I just refuse to let it make me do anything crazy.

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I get back to work as soon as I have coffee in me. Focusing on solving these problems becomes a refuge. I start to understand why Arya gets like this. How much pain is she carrying that she has to distract herself like this?

I have a growing list of people to investigate, including Maria's friend. My only leads are his face, the story from my dad that he's helping her with her computer, and my suspicion that he's selling her drugs. I start with isolating images of him and running high-level image searches on them.

There are a whole hell of a lot of average-to-fat, unkempt, beardy guys out there with computer expertise, bland features, brown hair, and pervy tendencies. If only I knew this guy's name!

As it is, I have a lot of narrowing down to do, so I automate that as much as I can and go to run searches on the few others.

Three hours of that nets me a big fat zero. Annoying but not all that unexpected. I continue narrowing the search down on our mystery creep. I don't like the idea that I can't find anything on him. It's like his Internet presence has been...

Scrubbed. Like that maid. But in his case, actually, scrubbed well.

But that just makes me even more suspicious. This guy seems pretty anonymous, pretty dull... but if he really were, my sister would never bother with him. He has something that makes him stand out to her, and I don't think she'd put up with his weird behavior just for good weed.

I'm overthinking this. But what if I'm not? The guy's creepy and bland and looks like he should be incompetent. But maybe he isn't incompetent. Maybe he used my sister, who is an idiot, to get into our system somehow and rob us blind.

"How likely is this? The guy looks like a dork," I mutter to myself.

So do some serial killers. The thought makes me tense a little. There's really no bottom to how much of an airhead my sister is, so I don't know how dangerous this guy really is or what he could get her to do.

It's just a theory, but it's setting off alarm bells in my head. Why is this nondescript weirdo such a ghost online?

I need to find out more about him, but I have to do it without setting off alarm bells in my family, and that's going to be tough, especially if Maria is protective of him.

What I want to do is confront her directly and demand to know who the hell the guy is and what he's talked her into doing. But that's a good way to stir up a gigantic Maria tantrum.

Billy, on the other hand, is easygoing and charming and has mostly been able to stay on Maria's good side in spite of her being a gigantic pain in everyone's ass. He's also better at bullshitting than I am. If anyone can get in under Maria's guard, it's my little bro.

I phone him up and hear classic metal in the background when he picks up. "Yo," he says, sounding a little distracted.

"Hey, bro. I have more information, and I need to talk to you about it."

He cuts me off gently. "Okay, but it might have to wait a bit. I'm out with my girl."

Ouch. “Oh, shit, sorry.”

“That’s cool. Leave the details in an email for me if it’s urgent. I’ll call you back tomorrow morning.”

I sign off and mutter a curse as I shove my phone into my pocket. The last thing I want right now is to be left alone with my thoughts, waiting on other people. But here I am.

I spend the night going through the evidence and trying to chase Maria’s phantom friend down on the Internet. Nothing, nothing, and nothing.

It hurts my pride that I couldn’t find anything. It pisses me off that I am so incapable of catching up to him. Is this guy simply so nondescript and under the radar that he has no online profile to speak of? Are his features too bland and repeatable to be caught by my program? Or am I once again missing something?

Arya would know. Either she would point it out, or we’d figure it out together. God, we were such a good team. I was better around her. More focused, more skilled. Now that she is gone, all I really think of clearly is her.

I just hope that, wherever she is, she’s doing okay and plans to come back.

Chapter 18

Arya

It hurts to walk away from Michael, get in my car, keep my head up and my nerves together, and fight the San Francisco traffic until I make it across the bridge into Oakland. I know, somewhere in the back of my head, that I am overreacting a little bit. But I just keep driving, holding in my tears, curses, and regret over leaving until I

can think about my next move.

I'm now parked on a hillside overlooking the spread of Oakland. Up here in the rolling hills, the dry grass is starting to green up out of season from the rain. The city sprawls out below, so different from how it had been when I was a kid. So much changed in only 10 years here, in San Francisco, in the South Bay.

Tent cities. People with three jobs, living in four- to two-bedroom apartments. Crime rates jumping, mostly upstarts who have nothing to do with the Families, blundering around and causing problems for everyone.

It's rough out here. Rents through the roof, good jobs hard to come by, and whole cities where just parking on the street will get your car broken into or stolen at least a few times a year.

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And here I am, on the cusp of jumping away from my family and trying to navigate it all on my own. In this economy, with everything uncertain.

And with my family turning on me like this, the whole area just feels less and less like home. Michael... he might be a tie to keep me here, or here, part-time. But after what he said, I don't know if what's started up with him will turn into anything lasting. Right now, I'm so hurt and pissed I barely want to think about him.

But he keeps creeping back into my head.

I keep half an eye out for anyone coming up toward the car as I use my phone to reserve a hotel room further south. The best I can get is Fremont, which isn't great but better than staying in Oakland. I finish up and head back down the hill toward the freeway.

Even after the rain, the whole area is shrouded in a thin layer of smog. The winds keep San Francisco's air a lot cleaner, but I can't be there right now. Bad enough that I need to come by my parents' place tomorrow to grab some fresh clothes from my closet.

Despite how bad it all looks and the unshed tears hurting my eyes and choking my throat, I am determined to protect myself. My mother will probably start with her check-in calls soon since I've been away for more than twelve hours again. I'll deal with one call to make her shut up and leave me be for the day. Then, I'll order room service, call a friend or two, and try not to think too much about missing Michael.

Michael probably doesn't look down on my family that much; he is just overprotective of his own. I can see that now. The hurtful thing he said still feels like a red flag, but not a huge one. If anything, the real red flag is that he's struggling so much with the idea that one of his family members seems to have turned on him.

But that's the thing. As I think about this, my throat tightens, my vision blurs, and my eyes start to sting. I'm... I'm so jealous of him. He's had the kind of life where he can actually still believe, as a grown man, that his family is all in his corner. It might be partly self-delusion, but there has to be something real there that it was built on, and it keeps it safe.

"I want that," I mumble, even though it left Michael blind to potential betrayal. I still want a family that, for all its flaws, I can turn to and know they'll never betray me.

But that wasn't in the cards, and I can't change that now. I can go make a family of my own with someone, but I can't change my parents or somehow unlearn what I know about human nature because of them.

I think I'm doing all right driving until I nearly smack into a car that stops abruptly right in front of me. I gasp and let out a sob of shock as the sudden braking jolts me in my seat, but we haven't so much as touched bumpers. I stick my head out of my side window, angry and confused—and then see the kids who spilled into the road ahead of the other driver.

...Oh.

Okay. Maybe I'm not okay.

I pull over by the side of the road and do my deep breathing while I struggle to get myself under control.

It isn't that bad. I'm capable. I have a doctorate from a good school, two internships, my projects...I'll get a damn job, and I'll pick up some gig work in the meantime. And I do have a good amount of money socked away in case I ever get cut off. God knows Dad has threatened.

But do I really want to stay here in a Bay Area that doesn't feel like home anymore but is still under the sway of my family?

No, no, of course I don't. Who the hell would? Except... I have no idea where to go. Most places where my savings will stretch further don't have the kind of jobs I'm looking to get. I've been too wrapped up in trying to redeem myself with my family to do any real research yet. Now, I'm on the brink of fleeing—or maybe even getting kicked out—without any kind of exit plan.

That won't do. I have to think, plan, research, budget, and prepare. I have to make sure that nobody—parents, sister, family friends—knows specifics about me leaving they could use to sabotage me. I can't let them talk me out of it, either. Once my parents push me past the point of no return—and I'm realizing now that it's a matter of not if, but when—I need to know what to do exactly without anyone else getting in the way.

I have to be smart. Way smarter than they think I am. Not that that takes much.

I don't understand how my mom and my sisters can be okay with my dad's view of women. How they can not only swallow that shit and still treat him with respect but also let it change how they treat each other. How they treat me.

How do you look at other women and go, “Yeah, that's right, we're nothing but submissive baby-makers who should be forced to focus solely on serving our husbands and raising our kids,” and not want to throw up all over yourself?

“I’ll never get it,” I murmur, finally feeling calm enough that I can drive again. I put the car in gear and carefully pull out into the traffic flow, headed for the hotel.

I guess that maybe some women take going along to get along to a crazy degree, but... I’m just not made that way.

The hotel room is small but clean, with a queen bed with plain bedding and a television mounted to the wall across from it. There’s a tiny table to eat or use my laptop at, a fridge roughly the size of a sugar cube, and a bathroom with no cameras or two-way mirrors in it.

I set my bags down, feeling uncomfortable but no longer weepy. I feel like I had to hold it all back too long, and now, it’s inside me like poison. I want to be drunk, high, or asleep to get away from this knot of exhaustion and hopelessness inside of me.

Nothing but beer and wine on the room service list, of course. I order a big, gooey cheeseburger, several hundred sit-ups worth of fries, and a bottle of their best red... which is probably a little better than their worst red.

As I wait for my meal, I dial up Lisette, an old college friend who lives in the area. We mostly keep in touch to be nerdy and exchange tips on local hardware sales, but I have held her hand through a few breakups and moves.

Lisette picks up right away. “Hey, there, have you got something for me?” she asks since I’m usually calling with a list of gray-market and black-market goodies she might want.

“I wish, honey. Look, uh... I need your help.”

She’s instantly more serious. “You okay, honey? You don’t usually call with problems.”

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“Well, I just... I have to make some big life changes, and I need someone to bounce things off of.” I try to keep my voice steady and positive—anything to avoid sounding like a whiner. But under it, I’m scared and lonely, and everything feels uncertain.

“Wait... are you finally leaving your parents?”

Lisette doesn’t know my family is involved in the mob, but she does know how rough things have been on me, even if I keep a big chunk of the details from her. She knows I’ve struggled between loyalty and my own needs for a long, long time. I can’t blame her for the excitement in her voice.

“Yeah... yeah, I am,” I admit and smile tentatively. It feels strange on my face. I wonder who I’m smiling for, but it does make it easier to keep my tone optimistic. “It’s just a lot, and I feel like I barely know what I’m doing.”

“Honey, you’re a PhD. I think you know what you’re doing.” She sounds amused by my attack of self-doubt.

“Uh, sure, when I have a computer in front of me. But I’ll have to find a job, find a place, figure out health insurance, budget... it’s just this huge list, you know?”

“Oh. Oh, I get it. Arya, you’re not incompetent; you’re just overwhelmed. I know all of this is new, but so was going through school without your parents’ support when you first started. If there’s part of it you need help with, I’ll do what I can, but don’t sell yourself short.”

Now, my smile feels tight on my face. She's trying to help, but everything she's saying sounds like a platitude. My mood must be in the toilet right now.

At least she's offering real assistance with something. "I need you to put out feelers in the community. I want work in the field, whether I'm monitoring system security or fixing laptops. Can you do that for me?"

"Oh, that? Oh, hell yes, I'll put the word out. Even if I can't get you a position, I know I can get you a freelance project."

I take a deep breath, glad that I've kept calm in spite of how I'm feeling. "Okay. That would be a great start. Can we talk more later? I'm guessing this isn't the best time."

"Oh... yeah, no, I'm cooking. I'll put word out as soon as I'm back at my computer, though, and call you back... say tomorrow, late afternoon?" I hear her fridge open and close.

"Sounds great. And thank you. I'll see about some food and get a nap in."

"Take care, honey." She signs off, and I set my phone back on the table, checking the time as I do so. My room service order is taking a little while.

That's fine. My stomach is in a knot from how close I've come to losing my temper at my friend when I need her help. I need food, rest, and sleep before I deal with anyone else, or the crappy way I'm feeling may mess with those interactions, too.

I've caught it in time. That's what matters. But now, I'm trying to avoid getting unreasonably pissed about the slow room service.

By the time everything comes, I'm so hungry that I could have eaten cheap fast food and found it tasty. It even tastes pretty good, and I manage to relax after drinking

some of the wine.

And I'm still missing Michael.

My constant, simmering anger at my family barely ever eases without alcohol. My fears about the future nibble at me all the time, with only the slightest reminder needed to stir them up. But my anger at Michael slips away when I think of him now, and it's not just the wine.

Slowly, slowly, I'm forgetting why I've taken what he said so hard, why I've gotten so upset, and why I need this break. It's starting to look more and more like a typical argument caused by someone saying the wrong thing. And only that.

I'm just hurting so much from every other damn thing that it hit too hard for me to handle.

"How much of the shit I'm going through is really down to Michael anyway?" I ask the empty room suddenly. He might have screwed me over, but he is trying to make it up to me. Is my father doing that? My mother? Have any of them ever said "I'm sorry" and tried to make up for what they've done?

I'm two and a half glasses into a bottle of wine, and instead of being hazy, everything seems clearer than usual. My sense of vendetta seems to be slipping, but that doesn't bother me as much now that I've realized this.

Is Michael my real enemy here? Especially if he makes good on his word?

I think about it for a while. And finally, I let out a sigh and reach for my phone.

Chapter 19

Michael

Arya is calling. She's finally calling! I feel like jumping out of my skin when I see her ID on my phone. It's been a rough day, thinking she might not talk to me again.

I pounce on the call in spite of myself. But then, I take a moment. I need to play it cool, not come off like some desperate asshole who is at her beck and call just because the sex is good.

"Hey," I say as casually as I can manage.

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“Hey,” she says back after a confused pause. “I, uh... I gave everything some thought and... yeah, I got pissed, but I also overreacted.”

My eyebrows go up. A woman I am sexually interested in is actually apologizing first after an argument.

Holy shit.

I am suddenly so horny that my heart is pounding.

“I didn’t do too well on that score either, sweetheart,” I admit without any hesitation. It’s easy when she’s doing it first. “I said things I shouldn’t when I knew you were already heated over the whole thing.”

“Yeah, you did. But you know what? I want to give this another try anyway.”

I have never been so happy to hear someone offer me a second chance in my life. I want to rush over to her hotel room and fuck her right now and again... all night.

“That’s great news,” I say when I can trust my voice to sound calm, cheery, and in control. “Did you mean the working together thing or the fucking each others’ brains out thing?”

She laughs, which worries me for about half a second before she reassures me by saying, “Definitely the working together thing. The sex thing... well... it’s certainly still on the table.”

I'm grinning now. "Guess I better go clear it off then."

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Michael."

And that makes me laugh. And I'm so damn happy to be laughing with her again.

When I catch my breath, I ask, "So... when should we get back together?"

"I need a while longer to catch up on my sleep. Tomorrow afternoon?"

I think about it. "I have a yacht that doubles as a liveaboard. It is very private. We should head over there. We'll get takeout, use the hot tub..."

"How's the Internet connection?" she breaks in, sounding just a touch annoyed.

I'm pushing it. I smirk and push only a little bit further. "Good enough that we can get the job done early and enjoy ourselves."

She's silent for a heartbeat as I wait to see if I have gone just that step too far. Then, she scoffs again and says, "First, we do some work on finding and utterly fucking up the lives of our enemies. Then, we can talk hot tubs and wine."

"And sex?" I ask eagerly.

She snorts. "Maybe."

And for now, that's good enough for me.

I am smiling as I walk back into my parents' house to check in and grab some more clothes. It's about noon, and Mom is having lunch made while she oversees the cooks. When she sees me, she glances away quickly, awkwardly, then slowly looks

back at me.

“Have you been out drinking?” she asks out of nowhere. I’m dead sober and don’t smell of booze.

“Uh, no, I have been out at my condo so I can have a quiet place to work. What did I miss?” I feel like I’m walking into the middle of a conversation where I have no idea what is actually going on.

“Your sister has been very... vocal today. She has some strong opinions about your not being able to get all that money back yet, and it’s been... well, we had some interesting conversations. You should know, you know, in case she tries to confront you or, God forbid, goes off during lunch.”

I stare at her. I’m now almost certain that I’ve missed a whole hell of a lot more than that. But I am not interested in prying it out of her when she already looks tired and harried.

“You know, I have never in my life understood why Maria has it in for me, and I don’t think I ever will,” I mutter, shoving my hands in my pockets.

“Oh, Michael, honey, you can’t take it personally. She’s just really immature.”

“It’s more than that, Mom. I know you love her, and she’s your special girl, but... she does a lot of malicious and destructive stuff, Mom. She expects to get away with it. And I have never understood why I get to be the target of that so damn much.”

“Oh, honey.” She smiles, but her eyes are tired and troubled. “Your sister just has problems. She’s jealous of you. You really shouldn’t worry about it so much.”

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“I just walked in on being told to prepare for epic levels of Maria-drama, Mom. You can’t have it both ways. I can’t be both bracing myself for it and brushing it off.”

“I...” she starts talking but quickly closes her mouth.

“What is it, Mom?”

“I don’t know, honey. I’m sorry. I know Maria can be very hard to be around! But she’s my daughter, and I love her. I hope she’s wrong in all the things she’s saying, and we can convince her of that and just move on.”

“But Mom... you literally just told me to expect...”

She just smiles tightly. “I know. I’m in a bad position here. My daughter is saying terrible things about my son, and I don’t know if it’s true. But even if it isn’t true, I have to support her.”

I raise my eyebrows as I stare at her. “Even if she’s attacking me?”

My mother goes quiet, and I stare at her for a few moments before shaking my head and turning to walk to my room. Lunch is going to be unpleasant, I can already tell.

It is... lots of silence. Everyone else in the room looks at each other silently, and nobody looks at me. I feel like I’ve just farted in church.

Maria looks smug as hell and keeps giving me these little sidelong looks like she knows a secret I don’t. Just looking at her with that expression on her face makes me

want to smack her one. Why the hell is she smiling like that?

Sometimes, I wonder if there's something really wrong with her mind or if there really are more drugs involved than any of us would expect.

Billy isn't here. If he were, I have a feeling this would all be a hell of a lot easier. As it is, it feels like there's a pane of glass between me and my family, and it's increasingly pissing me off.

Maria seems to keep forgetting that I have a backbone just because I have a lot of patience.

I eat my burger and fries in silence, knowing the drama's going to kick off the moment I speak up. I don't give a shit, but I don't want it ruining my meal completely. The whole time I'm mechanically chewing it down, I'm watching Maria.

She smirks and makes a fancy business of eating her burger and fries while gazing at me through her lashes. It looks contrived: overacted. Like she's either covering for something or is so completely high that she's no longer really herself. I can't even tell which one it is, but the way she's acting pisses me off even more.

I manage to keep my mood down to a low simmer mostly by thinking about Arya. I'm going to see Arya soon, and then all this bullshit will get shoved back into the back of my mind where it fucking belongs. And Maria can just stew over the fact that she can never really get to me anymore like she did when we were kids.

But for now, I have a confrontation to plow through, and there's no way out of that but through it.

I finish my meal while awkward silence rules the table. Maria's smile flickers uncertainly on her face, fading away then forcing its way back. She's starting to

doubt herself.

My parents look nervous—even my dad. It's kind of ridiculous to watch. Why have they always doted on her to the point where they get scared of her tantrums? My father runs a big chunk of the Bay Area. What the hell is he scared of, some broken plates? A headache?

Most of the time, I look up to my father, but right now, all I can see of him is this cowed man who can't even discipline his own kid—because he and Mom never did, with her.

It's depressing, and it pisses me off. I wish I could do something to change it all, but their favorite is their favorite, and that favorite has never been me.

“All right,” I say finally after the last bite on my plate is gone. “What the hell is all of this about? You guys are acting like I kicked a baby.”

Maria scoffs and says nothing, annoying me even further. My whole body tenses, but I just stare at her expectantly.

My father clears his throat. “Son... we need to address all of these rumors that you deliberately dropped the ball on that \$5 million heist.”

I stare at him incredulously. “That is what all of this is about? Haven't I explained away that stupid rumor already?”

He can't look at me. “Well... the problem is, it's a more believable explanation than your idea that one of us, or someone on the staff, managed to take that money.”

“This is ridiculous. I already pointed out that I wouldn't gratuitously torpedo my reputation with the family like this.” My heart isn't even beating that fast over this.

I'm just too tired. I'm too... done.

“Maybe you weren't thinking straight?” my mother ventures diplomatically. “Maybe you even made a mistake and lost the money somehow. Sent it to the wrong account.”

“Sent it to the wrong account, that's it.” My father bobs his head, and I roll my eyes and rub one of my temples in exasperation.

“Dad. I triple-checked everything. I even offered to show you the records.” Is this kind of bullshit what Arya goes through with her family? Is this how hard it is for her? Is it even harder?

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I would lose my fucking mind if I were her—if it's even harder than this for her.

"I know you did, but—"

"Oh, come on, everybody, this is really stupid. If I was into lying to you, wouldn't I have just grabbed another five million, claimed I got the original heist back, and handed it over? Why would I face all these complications and all this drama—"

"Maybe you're just stupid," my sister breaks in suddenly. "Maybe you're so deep in lying to cover for being stupid that you can't even remember what lies you told anymore."

"What?" I look between them all. "Holy hell, would you listen to this girl?"

She scowls at me. "I'm in my twenties, idiot. I'm a woman now."

"Could have fucking fooled me," I clap back at once. "Spreading all sorts of crazy rumors about me on and offline, trying to turn Mom and Dad against me... acting like you're a genius and the first person ever to come up with the idea to pull shit likethis. What the hell is your endgame, Maria? Is it anything at all besides pissing me off?"

My mother's face falls. "Michael, sweetie, don't raise your voice at the table."

I eye her for just a moment and force my voice to be calmer. "All right, Mom. Look, Maria, if you're going to do this, will you at least tell me why? When exactly did I take a piss in your cornflakes?"

My father scoffs and snorts; my mom forces herself to scowl disapprovingly at me.

Maria looks from me to our parents and down at her phone. Her face is petulant as always, and for a bit, I expect some kind of nasty retort that a 14-year-old might think up.

Finally, she says, “You always think you’re so damn smart, Michael. Smarter than me. But the truth is, I’m smarter than you, and I always have been.”

I stare at her. My sister is as brilliant as she is mature. She flunked out of junior college. She destroyed two BMWs my dad got her within three months of each other. She has to be reminded regularly how cell phones actually work. And, of course, she thinks she is the smartest person in any room anywhere on the planet.

“If you’re so damn smart, why are you pulling dumb crap to try and mess up my relationship with everyone?” I don’t get it. I have never gotten it.

“You deserve it! That’s what actually happened, and you’re lying about it!”

Oh, great, she actually believes her own bullshit. “You just won’t let any of this go no matter how many times I explain it, will you?”

“No!”

I just don’t get it. Maybe I never will. “Mom, Dad, look. I know you feel caught in the middle here, but Maria is dead wrong, and I’m going to prove it one way or the other. And once I do, I want you to make her put all this shit to rest. I’m done.”

Maria’s jaw drops, and for a moment, I think we are going to get somewhere with her. But the next thing out of her mouth is, “He’s just bullshitting again. He won’t find anything! You’re a failure, Mike! Just admit it!”

I stare at her. God, I want so much to just tell her to shut the hell up so I can enjoy some time with my family without her crazy manufactured drama ruining everything. But the day's already ruined, and she just keeps staring at me with that blank-eyed, petulant malice that I can't understand what I've done to deserve.

"I'll find the damn money," I say again, knowing nobody in the room believes me but me. "And when I do, I want a goddamn apology."

"You won't get one because you won't find that money," Maria scoffs.

I get up suddenly. "I'm going away for a few more days," I say as I walk away. "I have work to do."

And I'll be doing it in a way better company than I have here.

Chapter 20

Arya

Michael's yacht is less huge and ostentatious than I expected, despite his father's wealth. The deck is just big enough for a large Jacuzzi. The main cabin is the size of a house's great room. There are four sleeping cabins and a galley below the decks.

Everything is done up in blond wood, with touches of navy, white, and brass. It's cleaner and more elegant than I expected and a bit more old-fashioned compared to his ultramodern condo. I'm not surprised when I come in and see he already has champagne on ice and a bowl of strawberries ready.

"Now, what did I tell you about starting the party early?" I tease him gently as he leads me in.

“Sorry, sweetheart, but I need a little hedonism right now. It’s been a hell of a day already.” His smile looks a little strained.

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“Damn. What happened?” I come in and hang my bag up on a hook across from the door.

“Let’s just say that I have assholes in my family, too.” He sighs when he sees my alarmed look. “My sister. She’s convinced I lost all that money through incompetence if I didn’t steal it outright. And she’s trying to convince my family of the same—and it is just fucking wearing me down.”

“That’s crazy.” I come and sit down on the couch next to him. “Have you ever asked her why in the world she’s doing all of this?”

“When I did, she went off on this rant about how I’m not smarter than her... she’s smarter than me. It was weird, really juvenile. Also, it was a serious case of the Dunning-Kruger effect in action.”

That makes me laugh a little in spite of myself. “Sorry... I’m sorry.” But really, that was pretty funny. “It sounds like she’s got some kind of longstanding grudge about your intelligence and accomplishments compared to hers.”

“Yeah, but the thing is, if she cares so much, how come she’s never even applied herself to anything?”

“I have no idea.” He rakes a hand back through his hair, his mouth a line. “Maybe she’s just that spoiled. Maybe there’s something messed up in her head. But it’s always been this way to at least some degree?”

“When she was five, she flushed my goldfish because she was jealous I could keep

mine alive, and she killed hers in less than a month. At eight, she got in trouble for biting one of her tutors and tried to blame me for it. Thirteen? The weed found in her purse? She said I stashed it there. It just... goes on and on.”

“And nobody has ever thought of putting her in therapy?”

“My parents wouldn’t do it back when they could. And, of course, I never had a say.” He gives me a bleak look. “Honestly, she might just manipulate the therapist. She’s not smart, but she’s crafty.”

“Bad combination,” I comment, reaching over to put a hand on his shoulder. I can feel his muscles tense under my hand, and pet him gently through his shirt until he relaxes a little.

“Yeah,” he breathes. “Bad combination.”

There’s grilled salmon to go with our champagne and strawberries. It’s a surprise, competently done on his little galley grill, with a side of chopped salad. “You cooked!” I say with a mix of shock and pride.

“I figured out how to follow a recipe. This was pretty simple. You said you were getting a little tired of takeout, anyway.”

“Yeah, I did. Thanks for this. Dinners at home just aren’t worth the price of admission anymore.” I join him at the table, and he hands me a full plate.

“Oh, boy, do I understand that after lunch today.” He chuckles humorlessly. “Food tastes like cardboard in bad company. It was even burgers. I love burgers.”

“Family drama fucks up many a family meal,” I sigh, then smile. “But I’m flattered that you cooked for me.”

He flashes a grin in return, seeming happy that I like it. Though it's not hard to like, any more than he is. "Maybe we can start fixing stuff together sometimes. Because I have no idea what I am doing—"

"Um, Michael? Sweetie? Me neither. I'm a programmer, too. My mother and our cook have handled everything since I was born. The only advantage I have on you is that my stack of cookbooks is probably bigger—just from unwanted gifts." I munch on the surprisingly moist and tasty salmon.

"Huh. Okay." He thinks about it. "We could learn together?"

"Once we've found your thief and found a way to pull even more money—and shut my parents up—I will absolutely learn to cook with you if you want. I just," I snort and look down unhappily, "can't really think about that right now."

He looks at me, and his smile goes sad, then he reaches over and wipes a crumb off my cheek. "Having trouble letting go of everything that is happening?" he asks gently.

"I have to keep my focus," I protest. "We have to find your perp and get my damn money. I know that the investigation's getting close to home, but... please."

I smile at him. "Please, what?"

"Please don't be adorable and distracting. It's just as important for you that we—"

"That we find our bad guy. I know, I know. Okay? I understand. I just... want to be with you for a while."

I blink at him in surprise. There's something shocking in the sincerity on his face. "What the hell happened at that lunch, Michael?"

“I told you the basics. There was no special new component to it. It was just the same crap, but more of it. Escalated. My sister’s driving me completely up the wall with her weird rumors and crazy accusations, my parents are going along with it, and my family loves gossip. I know nobody in my family, but my sister is that much of an asshole. I know I’m luckier than you are, but I’m still not that lucky.”

He looks down, and I move my chair over so we’re sitting on the same side of the table. I put my hand on his shoulder and say, “Hey. Hey, look... I get it, okay? It’s... not a contest. It’s never been about who has it worse between us.”

Sitting here right now, it hits me that my plan has gone completely off the rails. I only agreed to this half-baked scheme to get the information I needed and a chance to completely wreck Michael’s life as revenge. But now... all of that’s done. I know it’s done.

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He's gotten too far under my skin. I actually care about him now. And just like me, he has come here to be with me and get away from his family.

Fuck. What do I do now?

We eat in silence for a while. Finally, he says, "Thank you. I'm glad you get it."

"Oh, yeah, I get it. I understand now when you mentioned wanting to punch my dad." Is that too much to admit? I glance at him, wondering if I overstepped at a sensitive moment.

He scoffs. "You're going to girl-fight my sister?" He eyes me, and I see the amusement on his lean face.

I blink a few times. "I mean... if she doesn't shut up and act right, I'll certainly be tempted..."

He chuckles and gets his smile back on his face. "I get it. I mean, probably not a good idea to do it, but I have to admit... the mental image kinda makes me smile. She's the sort who cries when she breaks a nail."

"I am... definitely not. Nothing against super feminine women, but I never saw the point of a manicure so expensive it leaves you in tears when it gets ruined."

That makes him squint thoughtfully between bites of salmon and salad. "I wouldn't call her super feminine. She's just super vain. Not the same thing."

“All crazy for spending Daddy’s money, huh?”

“Absolutely. And she’s got a crazy grudge against me. I can’t even fully explain why, either. It’s just always been that way.” He finishes his salmon and picks at his salad like he isn’t sure why he put leaves on his plate.

I chuckle. “Are you one of those guys who never eats vegetables unless they’re mixed in with other stuff you actually like?”

“Nah, I just apparently suck at making vinaigrette.” He laughs it off.

An hour later, I’m full, slightly drunk from the champagne, and thinking less and less about my messed up family. We have his laptop open in front of us and are going through the last of the security videos. I catch myself staring at one guy on the tapes who doesn’t fit with everyone else.

He’s medium height, neither skinny nor fat, with a bland, unkempt look that reminds me of the kind of guys who pack gaming stores and conventions. I can practically tell how he smells just from his appearance. I remember seeing him before from the tapes, but for some reason, he didn’t jump out at me the way he does now.

“Who is this guy?” I ask, wondering why he’s caught my attention so completely.

“My sister’s weed connection, I’m almost certain. The guy’s been hanging around off and on for a couple of weeks. She says he’s fixing her computer, but that’s bullshit. When she breaks things, she just gets my parents to buy her another.”

“Weird.” But is it relevant?

No way of knowing. But even as we move on, I can’t stop thinking about the guy and how out of place he looks.

Another hour, and we are done looking through the videos, with nothing to show except for one nagging feeling about one guy that I can't even back up with facts. It pisses me off. I really just want to have all this over with, have it behind us, bad guys punished, money gotten, parents satisfied.

But there's still a lot of work and some luck between here and there.

"I want to look closer at this 'weed connection' of your sister's. Who the hell is he? Where did he come from? What is his actual relationship with your sister?" I say it carefully, worried that Michael is going to get defensive of his family again.

And he does. "I don't think my sister's wrapped up in any of this. She's not the one. She's not even smart enough to pull off something like stealing from me."

"Maybe she isn't, but maybe he is," I urge, as his mouth works and he looks away from me. Fuck, not this again. "Look, you keep talking about how she's dumber than a box of hammers. Maybe he's manipulating her."

He looks up at me, some of the anger and defensiveness fading from his face. "Manipulating her?"

But then, he shakes his head. "No, she's... look, I told you she's vain as hell. Vain people are also shallow as hell, for the most part. I don't think this guy could manipulate her very easily. He's a schlub. A hot guy could manipulate her easily."

"Well, it was a thought." I'm backpedaling more than I should. It's stupid how defensive he gets about his family and how he does it in the weirdest ways. "It seems like we should finish a look into his background just for thoroughness."

He gestures in that fake, nonchalant way I hate. "Okay, yeah, you've got a point, spend time on it if you want—"

“Michael... if I do that, will you actually be willing to look at what I find for you?” I ask quietly.

He bristles, his eyes flashing slightly. “What does that mean? Of course, I’ll want to know if he’s the guy.”

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“Even if it implicates your sister?”

I keep my voice as gentle as I can, as kind as I can, but his obvious discomfort makes my heart sink. He’s still having problems with the whole idea of an internal betrayal, even though his sister has always been a raging asshole. It’s driving me up the wall.

But maybe nothing but hard evidence is going to change his mind.

“Yes,” he says finally, looking resolute. “He might not have manipulated her, but he could have outright lied.”

Or Maria could be manipulating the guy on the video, I want to suggest. But I know he’s not ready to hear that. And it’s frustrating the hell out of me.

“Michael,” I say finally, “I believe you want to believe that. But what if—”

“Look.” He is starting to sound irritated. “Like I said, have a look at the guy, try and actually find anything substantial on him if you feel like it. I just think it will end up a dead end.”

“Michael—”

“Arya, please,” he breaks in. “Please, don’t do that. Don’t accuse my sister of anything. Don’t leave me feeling caught between two people I... I care about.”

I stop dead, blinking. What did he just say?

“Michael, I’m not accusing your sister of anything unless the evidence proves she’s involved. You’re not caught between us. The truth is going to be what it’s going to be, and we’ll just have to deal with it.”

He takes a shivery breath. “I feel caught between you and my family. If they knew we’re together, or even working together... let alone getting close to accusing one of us of doing this...”

“I know, I get it. It really wouldn’t go over well. I understand that, and I hate it. I’ve been thinking about how my family would react, but in my case... I... I can do no right with them anyway. Maybe it’s time I did something that they really don’t approve of so I can at least make a clean break.”

I have a huge lump in my throat as I admit this.

He reaches over and brushes the fingers of one hand down my hair gently, his eyes softer than I am used to. “I thought we agreed we could just cross the bridge about our parents’ reactions when we came to it,” he says gently.

“What I’m saying is, why can’t we just do the same when we find out who the suspect is?”

He pauses, his hand still on my hair, and then pulls away a little as he thinks about this. “I guess I have to, or none of this is ever getting done.”

That’s a start. It’s all I can expect. I lean my head on his shoulder and sigh with relief.

After a few heartbeats, his hand comes down and cups my face, and I look up at him, and he kisses me. It’s warm and slow, and it creeps up on me until suddenly, we’re out of our chairs and in each other’s arms, starved for each other after only two days.

We don't make it to bed. We barely manage the couch. Before I know it, I'm panting under him with my skirt up to my waist, one shoe off, and my blouse unbuttoned. He's shoved my bra aside and is sucking urgently at my breast while his hands burrow under my skirt.

I hear my voice coming out in little yelps of pleasure and need. One of my hands is in his hair while the other braces me against the arm of the couch. He's pulling my panties down off my hips, down to my knees. I kick off my other shoe and help him pull it off.

I hear the tear of a condom wrapper and some impatient fumbling. His breath is coming in harsh pants through his nose. His mouth switches to my other breast, and I arch and squirm under him while he crouches between my thighs.

He slides up my body, leaving my nipples aching and tingling from his attention. But then, the velvety head of his cock is rubbing against my pussy lips, pushing in.

He pushes in hard, and I shout, "Yes!" before I can stop myself, and he groans through his teeth in reply. My legs wrap around him, and he starts pounding into me, just the right side of too rough, our hips clapping together and sending jolts of delight through me.

I won't last long. It's not that kind of sex. Every thrust pushes me another half inch closer to the edge. I can hear my voice starting to rise and my cries starting to sound desperate. I'm begging him not to stop...

He groans loudly, his back arches, and he shudders so hard that it sets me off by itself. I clench around him, sobbing with delight, so completely into it that I hear myself screaming, but I don't even care.

He settles over me and lays his head on my shoulder, and I wrap my arms around him

and close my eyes.

I don't know where my loyalties lie anymore. I don't know if the fight to get that money back is worth it beyond having it. If his family or my family will ever just let us live as we are. I don't even know if what Michael and I have is something that has a chance of lasting. However, as I feel him get up to get rid of the rubber, all I can think of is wanting him back in my arms again.

Have I lost the game here? Or have I won something I never expected?

Chapter 21

Michael

After Arya left to do her research on Maria's computer guy, I knock around the houseboat for a while, restless and not even really knowing why. I should be relaxed and happy. Arya and I are back together, I just had ground-shakingly awesome sex with her, and I finally have someone close in my life who won't be swayed against me by stupid family rumors.

We spent the night together. It should have left me feeling great. But something she had said before she left is sticking with me, like a burr in my sock that I can't seem to get rid of.

I had finally admitted I cared about her, and over breakfast, I told her that I was still having trouble figuring out what I would do if it turned out that one of my kin had really betrayed me and the family that way.

She told me I had to figure it out because blind loyalty to someone who hurts you is just inviting yourself to get hurt worse. We have managed to avoid another argument, but now... now, it's gnawing at me.

I don't get why this is all so fucking difficult. Am I really as blind in my loyalties as she thinks?

No, no. Loyalty is absolutely important. This is the Mob. Loyalty is the only glue that can really hold a bunch of dangerous, ambitious people together. And even more, this is my own damn family.

She thinks I have a blind spot, but I just don't see it. My sister acts up, but she wouldn't betray all of us. If for no other reason than she knows all her special treatment would evaporate, and my father would show her his scary side.

She has to know that's what will happen. I sure do. There's no mobster's son who doesn't grow up with at least a little fear of his dad's temper.

Arya doesn't know us. Her family is rotten and has no honor. She'll assume all families are the same. Right?

Right?

I have to go home to deal with my family again and face more questions from my father that all amount to the same thing. Yes, I'm still chasing leads on whoever stole the money. No, I don't have anything worth sharing about it yet.

The tension around my family is killing me. Billy and I retreat to the kitchen for beers and, when that isn't enough, go out to the gazebo in the backyard.

"This is fucking crazy," I say. He grunts and nods.

"I don't know what to tell you, man. I think Maria's really going around the bend with this sibling rivalry crap. Didn't we leave this behind in high school?" He looks baffled as he takes a swig of beer.

"We did. She didn't. And for some reason, she just decided to double down when this whole heist thing happened." And it is really, really pissing me off.

"She's seeing an opening to get under your skin, man. That is literally all it is. She is on one of her shit-disturbing binges. You know she's done this before." He's watching me. He seems relieved that I'm keeping my temper. Maybe he expects me

not to.

“I do, but this is completely crazy. Is she still going to be doing this at thirty? Forty? We have to put up with Dad’s temper, our uncle’s porn addiction, and a lot of drunken gossip. Her crap is too much.” I rub my face, suddenly craving something a lot stronger than beer.

“Well, for the record, I don’t believe a word of what she’s saying. You’ve never dropped the ball before now, and you’re about the last person in the family who would betray us.”

“That’s good to hear, man.” It is. I’m grateful, but I’m also completely fucking exhausted from all of this. “I think it would bother me a lot less if Mom and Dad didn’t believe every damn word that comes out of her mouth.”

“Just keep working to prove her wrong, then. She’ll crumble in the face of evidence.” He takes another swallow of beer. I wonder how he can keep so calm all the time. I guess he’s just really good at not letting any of our family drama get too far under his skin.

I’d kill for that talent.

“That’s what I plan to do. But it’s hit a snag. The person I’m working with is investigating a couple of possibilities, but... well... one of them is the guy that Maria keeps bringing home.”

“The smelly one who stares at women?” His eyebrows rise. “Oh, this sounds juicy. Do you think he got up to some thievery shenanigans while he was on our property?”

“It makes as much sense as anything. I’m just worried about what else it might... implicate.”

I hesitate as I see curiosity gleam in his eyes. Is it even safe to be talking about this? Someone might overhear, or Billy might spill what I'm saying to someone.

"What do you mean?" His eyebrow is up again, but he's still drinking. Not too captivated.

"I don't like the possibility that Maria's in on it."

He scoffs. "Maria's no criminal mastermind, man. She's got the audacity and the ego but no plan, no brains, and no work ethic."

"Yeah, I know. Maybe I'm just pissed because she's stirring people up against me. But..."

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“The answer is gonna be whatever it’s gonna be, man. The only things I’m sure of right now is that you didn’t steal that money, and I didn’t steal that money.”

I’m glad for his support, but the answer doesn’t help. The conversation dissolves into catching up. Small talk. I want to tell him about Arya, but I can’t.

Two beers later, I walk into the family room, unlock the bar, grab a good bottle of whiskey and a tumbler I probably don’t need, and go back to my room to try and forget things for a while. It’s cowardly and probably a little self-destructive, and I know it. Right now, though, I really don’t care.

A friend told me once that sometimes, the best you can do is wait and see with people. Watch them, pay attention to what they say, and see how it matches up with what they do.

That’s all I can think of to do in this Maria situation. When we tried to find information about her friend before, we’d found exactly nothing. I figured that was proof that he was innocent and uninvolved. Arya seemed to think it means his Internet record has been scrubbed, meaning he’s even more suspicious.

I’m letting her chase the truth for now. Maybe it’s cowardly, but at least I’m not getting in her way.

Do I really have a blind spot when it comes to my family? Maybe. The thought of that betrayal, beyond every other piece of misery I’ve suffered from my sister, haunts me. I can barely face it.

She's still my sister. Can she just go and forget that I'm still her brother? How does someone even do that?

"Impossible," I mumble. Arya has to be wrong. "She's a little shit, but she's not a Judas."

And yet, here I am, dwelling on it, and drinking myself halfway into a stupor before I can stop myself.

I have a good buzz on by the time the conflict and despair finally start to ebb away inside of me. I have some blues playing—Eric Clapton—and I think I might even be able to sit through a family dinner later without getting into any arguments.

Galvanized by the liquor, I emerge from my room in search of snacks, only to hear shouting coming down the hall from my sister's room.

"What the fuck is this now?" I mutter to myself as I approach her door.

I know it's a bad idea to get involved, but my mother's been asking me to keep an eye out when she has guests over—especially the one—and it sounds like she's arguing with a guest.

I should really leave her to it, I think, even as I'm reaching for the doorknob. If she's gotten into conflict with one of her friends, it's her problem. And probably her fault.

I decide to stop and listen and determine what to do after I've had an earful of what the issue is. Whatever else happens, Mom can't say I haven't done my job as this idiot's brother.

The first voice I hear is a man's: "I don't care what you fucking say, you stupid fool, you promised me ten percent, and I've only seen half that. I want my money, and I

want it now, or I'll walk out there and—”

“You will do no such thing.” That’s my sister using a tone I have never heard from her before. Harsh, angry, firm, and years older than I am used to hearing.

I freeze, my heart pounding. What the fuck is going on?

She goes on, her voice like a whipcrack, “If you go out there and start talking to my family about what we have been doing, you will end up dumped off the end of a pier with a bullet in your head. These are mobsters, you idiot!”

He doesn’t seem to get it. “I have done my work for you. I have taken risks for you. I got all of this done, and you could not have done it without me. The agreement was \$500,000 dollars. Ten percent. Not five!”

“I understand that, asshole. And if you call me a ‘fool’ again, I’ll call in security and tell them you grabbed my tit.”

I’m breathless. Doing the math confirms it. Ten percent of a \$5 million dollar take.

My \$5 million dollar take.

My throat closes up, and my gut suddenly clenches around all that alcohol like I’m about to throw it all up against her bedroom door. No, I think. No, no, no.

Arya was right. I was wrong. In the worst way possible.

“You wouldn’t dare,” the whiny-voiced man growls.

“You know what? You’re pissing me off so badly that maybe I’ll just do that anyway and have you thrown out.” Maria’s not throwing a tantrum. She’s standing up to the

guy with a cold assertiveness I didn't even know she was capable of.

His voice rises enough that I could have heard it down the hall. "Maybe I'll just strangle you in your bedroom so you can't call out to anyone!"

I go cold, and my hand clenches around the doorknob. Alarm bells are going off in my head. Those are not the words to say to my sister, no matter what in the hell she is up to.

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“And what happens when you walk out the door after murdering me, asshole? My family would kill you. Hell, even the idiot brother we took the money from would kill you!” I can hear the urgency and tension behind Maria’s words. She seems to understand that this man is unstable. “Besides, you’ll never get that quarter million if I’m dead.”

That seems to give him pause. I can hear him huffing in anger like a bull in the quiet. I keep my hand on the doorknob. I don’t trust him.

“It would almost be worth it, you’re such a cunt,” he grumbles.

“You know, I can really see now why nobody will hire you,” she claps back. “Now, you want that quarter mil? It will take a few days.”

I take a deep breath. I have my sister and her asshole crony dead to rights. I know in the back of my head that I should be recording this on my phone, taking that recording to my father, and ending this all as neatly as possible.

Instead, the booze wins.

I step back and kick the door right by the lock; the latch gives, and the door swings open. My sister shrieks in shock and anger and gets up from her seat at her computer, where the schlub who has been threatening her is leaning into her personal space.

He straightens, looking at me with a mixture of petulance and fear.

“I heard everything, you miserable, thieving fuckers!” I shout. “Every goddamned

thing!”

My sister goes pale as milk, and the schlub starts sweating. “How dare you break in here!” Maria shrieks, but I’m not remotely impressed by her bullshit now.

“You stole \$5 million from the family and then tried to make me look bad to cover your own ass!” I jab a finger at her, my voice breaking with anger and disgust.

“You’re drunk, Michael!” she yells back. “Get out of my room!”

Her accomplice is in a panic, shuffling back and forth, looking for a way past me and out of the room, a tiny whine in his breathing as he tries to figure out if he should make a break for it.

I hold my ground, ignoring him. “I came down here because this piece of shit was threatening to strangle you at the top of his lungs. And then, I find this out? What the fuck, Maria? What the hell were you thinking? Why did you do this?”

She stares at me with panic growing on her face, and I know that I have her dead to rights. I’m furious. Righteous anger is thrumming all through me, and as I stare down at her, I know that this time, she absolutely will not get away with it.

“Help!” she starts screaming at the top of her voice. “Help! Help! Michael’s drunk, and he’s gone crazy!”

Oh, hell no.

Right at that moment, her partner tries to bull his way past me, shoulder-checking me hard and grunting as his smelly dad bod thuds into mine. I take advantage, snaking my hand inside his trench coat and finding a thick leather square. I grab it and shove him back, quickly pocketing it. You are not getting away again.

“Stop fucking lying, Maria!” I yell as she continues screaming for help. Everything’s going to hell in a handbasket. I can hear running feet outside.

My head is foggy from all the whiskey, but I know I’m in the right. I’ve just heard the truth with my own two ears, and once I explain it to the rest of the family, I’ll finally be vindicated—

Hands grab me from behind, yanking me out of the room. I hear people yelling in confusion. Then, my father becomes one of them. His men have me by the shoulders and arms. I’m not fighting, only standing there confused as they surround me.

“Michael, what the hell did you do?” My father is in my face now, demanding the truth. I stare at him dizzily for a few beats before my brain kicks in.

He’s here. He’s asking. Good. Saves me time.

“Maria and her asshole hireling here did it, Dad. They stole that money. She has it hidden somewhere. Bitch is so greedy she didn’t even pay the guy his end.”

I’m so confident right now that I’m almost smug. It’s finally over. In 10 minutes, the whole story will be out, with a witness, and—

“Do not call your sister a bitch!” my father yells almost reflexively, shocking me partway sober.

Fuck. He’s not listening. Even now, he’s not listening. He’s too busy defending her.

“Dad, what the hell? I’m telling you, I just caught them talking about it!” The security guys loosen their grip, and I shrug free of them.

Maria is watching from the doorway. Her eyes are terrified, desperate, but not for the

reasons that my father seems to think. There's still something sly in her gaze. Just seeing her face right now makes me want to strangle her. Instead, I focus back on my father.

“Why were you listening at her door?” My father's eyes are narrow with suspicion.

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“Because the batshit insane hacker she hired was threatening to choke her to death at pretty much the top of his lungs. I heard it down the damn hall.”

Everyone’s focus turns to my sister’s accomplice, who seems ready to sink into the floor. “I was just here to get paid for fixing her computer! She said she’d pay me, and she’s been putting me off!” he whines. “Then, this drunk comes bashing through the door because he took our argument out of context—”

“Jesus Christ, you’re both a couple of lying freaks. I can’t even believe this! Where do you get off being like this? To your own family?” I glare at Maria, who stares back at me blankly, her strange absence of response somehow more unnerving than if she’d thrown another tantrum.

“Michael!” My father’s voice is as sharp as a gunshot. “You are drunk. Your judgment is shit right now. You need to back off right now, or I’m going to have to—”

Maria breaks in by bursting into tears. “He broke my door, Dad! He was threatening me!”

My father stiffens and glares at me. And that’s when I know.

The truth doesn’t matter because right now, it’s my word against his precious, golden daughter’s, and he’s too fucking biased to even look into anything.

“Explain yourself,” he demands.

The words spill out. I tell him everything I've heard, every threat, and every detail. I explain how it fits the evidence. I even explain why I was listening to their conversation in the first place.

It doesn't matter. He just keeps staring at me angrily while I beat my head against the same brick wall.

This can't be how it ends. Anger boils up in me, and I finally shout, "And she's going to get away with it because you're too busy playing favorites with us to realize she's fucking you over, too!"

My father's eyes flash, and his face darkens. I've gone way too far this time. And yet, it feels like I haven't gone far enough because he's still not hearing me.

"Get out of my house," he snaps suddenly.

It stops me cold. "What?"

"You're drunk, you're violent, you were an inch from attacking your sister, and you've scared her to death. I don't give a goddamn what you think you heard. There is no excuse for this.

"Get out of my home, and don't think about coming back until you have that money or can tell me where it went. And I want evidence, not more bullshit! Now, get your shit and go!"

I stare at him in pained astonishment, and the first thing that goes through my head is bitter as hell: This is what I get for having loyalty.

The worst part, as I turn to walk away, is catching a glimpse of Maria smirking as she watches me go.

Outside, I sit on the steps and hold my head, baffled and pissed off. I heard what I heard. I know what I know, but it's not enough for my father, even as the knowledge of the truth burns me up inside.

I'm too fucking drunk to drive. I should call a service and get picked up, but right now, my head is throbbing so hard that I can't focus.

I don't realize Billy has come out after me until he sits down next to me.

"What the fuck happened?"

I tell him.

He stares at me incredulously, like he doesn't know whether to believe me or not. I wince and look away from him.

"Yeah, I thought so," I grumble. "You don't believe me either."

"I don't know what to believe. Dad's furious, Mom's crying, Maria's crying, some asshole just ran out the backdoor like he was caught fucking her... and now, you're saying she and this guy are the ones who stole from us?"

I look at him gravely. "Yeah," I say. "Yeah, I am."

"Can you prove that?"

I stop short. "I think so."

"Well... that's what you are going to need to get back in Dad's good graces and prove what you're saying. Hard evidence, or a witness."

“Do you believe me?”

He shoots me a troubled look. “Would you believe me straight off if I leveled that kind of accusation at family? Even a brat like her?”

“God.” I rake a hand back through my hair. “I get it. I get it.”

I just hate it. I understand now exactly how Arya must feel: Like the whole world is against her, and she has no one in her corner.

“At least I have her,” I mumble.

“Who?” he asks distractedly.

I shake my head. “Never mind.”

He goes quiet for a few seconds. “Not driving while you’re this drunk?”

“Hell no.”

“Good man. Did you call a cab?”

“Can’t quite manage it yet.” That embarrasses me, but there is not much I can do about it at the moment, between the whiskey and the adrenaline.

“Okay. I’m gonna give you a ride. Where are you headed? The condo?”

I shake my head. “Houseboat.”

“The houseboat it is,” he says indulgently. “Just don’t puke in my car.”

Chapter 22

Arya

I’m now splitting my time between my parents’ place and Michael’s houseboat. I actually spend as little time home as I possibly can, and I barely talk to anyone while I’m there.

It hurts, but I have a feeling that whatever they will have to say will hurt worse than us avoiding each other.

I’m officially a pariah now. I’ve tried as hard as I could to make a place for myself in this family outside of goddamned gender roles, and instead, I’ve ended up on the outs with everyone.

It isn’t fucking fair, but that’s life sometimes, I guess.

I still feel like crying by the time I clean up my room, grab a couple of outfits, and pack another box to shove into the back of my walk-in closet.

Have any of them even noticed that I’m on the verge of moving out? Do any of them even care?

Fuck. I need to stop doing this to myself.

I leave without speaking to anyone, feeling like fifteen and plotting to run away again. Back then, one of Dad’s men would always catch me and haul me back

home—four times between the ages of twelve and seventeen. This time, I know nobody's going to go after me.

That's both freeing and painful. As I drive away, though, the pain fades, and all I think about is the relief of not being there.

But then I remember why, and it hurts all over again.

“Maybe I need a damn therapist,” I say to myself as I pull onto the road. I've always held off because how the hell do you talk about the problems of being a mobster's daughter without your therapist calling the cops?

But maybe if I'm careful, I can talk about their failures as parents and my feelings without bringing up hacking jobs, mob families, and the million dirty secrets that separate people like me from others like a therapist from a normal family.

Maybe it's time.

Or, maybe it won't help, and I'll be stuck carrying this crap for years. No way of knowing. That burden's in my present and future, whether I like it or not.

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The only question now is whether I let it rule my thoughts or go somewhere I know it will get pushed out by something a lot more pleasant quickly enough.

The parking lots are full when I get to the docks, and I swear as I circle them for a while. Finally, someone pulls out, and I take their place.

It rains on me the whole three-block walk to Michael's houseboat. I do my best to watch my footing and not let the downpour dampen my mood further, but I'm nearly soaked by the time I step off the pier, and he opens the houseboat door for me.

"Jesus, that was crazy," I sigh as I walk in. Then, I see two filled suitcases of his, smell whiskey on him, and stop short, turning to stare at him in surprise.

He shuts the door behind me and locks it before he says anything. Then, he quietly says, "I found our perp, and I got kicked out of my house for it."

His expression looks so desolate that I know his day has been a lot worse than mine. "Shit," I say unhappily. "It's your sister, isn't it?"

He nods silently. "Don't say 'I told you so,' please."

"I'm not that much of an asshole." I hug him instead. "What can I do?"

"Come sit with me, have some iced tea. I'm off booze for right now." He leads me around the suitcases to the couch. I sit down with him and nestle against him, and he slings an arm around me to pull me closer against his side.

We stay there for a while. He sometimes goes in for a kiss: slow, sweet, and lingering. But then, he just goes back to sitting there.

By the end of that, he seems better, and I feel a little better, too. “It’s definitely my sister,” he says finally. “With the guy you were looking into as an accomplice. She has the money, and she’s even hiding it from him.”

He sounds almost despairing in spots. I brush my fingertips over his shoulder, and he sighs.

“My father won’t accept the truth without hard evidence or a witness, and since I can’t pin my sister to anything directly, we have to go with the witness. But my dad’s men let the sonovabitch go.”

“So, we have to find him. We’ve already made some progress...”

That’s when he pulls out a wallet. It has a naked woman with giant tits branded into the leather on one side and “NO LUBE NO WARNING” branded into the other. “This should help.”

I stare. “Wait a second. You lifted his fucking wallet?”

That’s when he grins, and I start to be a lot less worried.

But I’m still pissed, especially when I begin getting more details out of Michael while I go through the wallet. Brian Cleary. Late thirties, had a card for his own computer business. And from what Michael is saying, an incel. The kind of shit that flies out of this Brian guy’s mouth just screams it.

“So, here’s my big theory on what happened, using the facts we know,” I say finally.

He nods. “Let’s hear it,” he says without a hint of contentiousness in his tone. The argument that almost tore us apart has been settled.

I don’t feel smug about that. I’m not happy that he has been proven wrong and that it turns out his sister is not only a brat but a family Judas. I’m not enjoying being right, not when I see the tired and baffled sadness lurking in Michael’s eyes.

It hurts to see it, but since he kept his wits during one of the hardest moments of his life, we now know a lot more about his sister’s accomplice.

“Your sister has no common sense and is an airhead, but people like that can still be very cunning. She paid attention to the details of you planning to take money from me and my family, and she decided to hire a black hat to do the same to you. She hires this asshole Brian Cleary, who probably talks his way out of a lot of good jobs with that mouth of his and is thus financially desperate.”

He’s starting to smirk again. “Go on.”

“So, he steals my work from you just like you stole it from me, and then he leaves it for your sister to use, probably using a plug-and-play system on a thumb drive or similar so she can’t fuck it up. She steals the money. She pays him half of what she owes him and tells him to come back in a week for the rest.”

He nods, looking a touch grimmer. I am sure it hurt his pride to be stolen from, but he has to know I still don’t have much sympathy for his situation. He didn’t break my relationship with my family—it was already falling apart—but he did steal from me and humiliate me, and so far, I haven’t seen any kind of compensation.

But that’s a bill to settle once his sister has seen her comeuppance, and we have the original five million back. Right now, I’m focused on that.

“So, my family freaks out, your family freaks out, your sister gets your extended family gossiping to throw up a smoke screen around her activities and sap your energy. And meanwhile, she still hasn’t paid Brian Cleary his other quarter million.”

He sighs. “And that brings us to tonight when he went off like a fireworks display in my sister’s bedroom and nearly strangled her. Because she decided to hire an unstable creep.”

“Lowest bidder?” I suggest as a motive.

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He eyes me and then lets out a soft scoff. “Yeah, probably. But she miscalculated, big surprise. I don’t know what would have happened if they had been alone somewhere—”

“Hey,” I break in gently, putting a hand on his shoulder. “Don’t. That’s not what happened. He screwed up, he’s on the run, and he’ll screw up again. We’ll find him and get him to give testimony in front of your father and the Don.”

“You’re suggesting we kidnap him? Personally? And scare him into talking? None of our fathers’ men, no backup, just... us?” He’s staring at me now, incredulously. Looking a little worried, even. “When did we stop being computer nerds and turn into enforcers?”

“When this guy helped blow both our lives up,” I reply. “I’m sorry if that makes me look a little bloodthirsty, but I’m really having trouble caring right now because my life is blown up.”

My voice is shaky, and I don’t like that one damn bit, but I can’t stop it. Pride wounded, I look away from him... but he gently takes my chin and steers my gaze back to his.

“I’m sorry. I had a hand in that, and... whatever else happens, I’ll put in the time and work to help you get back on your feet without your family if that’s what you decide.”

I stare at him. I want to hug him, want to cry... and want to walk the hell out because I still can’t help but wonder if the offer he’s making is some kind of bait. Where’s the

hook hiding? What does he expect in return?

Or has my family just messed me up in some really interesting ways?

Take the chance.

I swallow hard. “Thank you. If... I do end up breaking away on my own... I’ll need that kind of backup.”

He rubs my shoulder gently, soothingly. “I understand. Some of it you should just expect, though. If we’re staying lovers after all of this, you should be able to rely on me. But... I’m planning to go beyond that. I...”

Don’t say it.

We both go quiet. I guess it’s hit him, too, that it really hasn’t been that long. We’ve been together barely a week in crazy circumstances that have messed with both of us. It’s not time for I love you’s. It’s just not time yet.

But it sure as hell feels like time.

He breaks the silence after a few moments and says, “So... are we really tracking Brian Cleary down and kidnapping him?”

“Yeah. Not what I had on my weekend to-do list originally, but I guess I need to adapt quick. We need to grab that guy before he leaves town.”

“How do we know he hasn’t already?”

We look at each other and immediately go to his laptop. It’s time to do some sleuthing. Now that we have a name and some solid leads, Brian Cleary’s not going

to be able to hide from us for long.

Chapter 23

Arya

It's funny how many messed up things I've learned listening to my father's conversations with his men and friends over the years.

One of the things that I have been able to figure out from all those nightmare-inducing lessons is that if a person is a loner asshole with no friends and a perpetually-online life, he's going to be a lot easier to kidnap than someone with a family, an outside job, or a healthy social life.

Brian Cleary is exactly the kind of guy in danger of disappearing off the face of the planet without anyone noticing except the dozen or so women he's harassing online at any given time.

He's scrubbed a lot of his online presence, but now that we know more of what to look for, we can still find bits of it. He's done a sloppy job, incomplete, and now that he's so upset, he's making even more mistakes.

We find his rants online about his "half-million contract job he's getting stiffed on by a bunch of mobsters." We also find his porn accounts and various little conservative social-media bolt-holes.

And finally, we find him.

He's holed up in a hotel near the Oakland Airport, one with ample Internet-connected security cameras. Moreover, he has already managed to kick up an unnecessary fuss about his room and the hours for the continental breakfast during check-in.

He's been there with the lights on since sundown that day. His flight out to Canada leaves at 10 in the morning. I have no idea if he is armed, but I can absolutely guarantee that he does not have a backup.

"You'd better take custody of him while I back you up online. If I try to do it—" I start, but he's already shaking his head.

"I don't want you going anywhere near that guy until he's safely tied to a chair. He's too nuts, and he hates women."

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“Thank you.” I feel better about this... but I also hate the idea of Michael going in there alone. “I’ll make sure to scrub the security videos of your presence. We’ll time it for when there’s only one person on and they have to pee or something.”

“Sounds good.” He sighs and gets up, going over to the safe bolted under one of the great room counters. “I never actually thought I’d be in a position where I’d have to use a gun on a job, but here we are.”

“You’re practiced with it, right?”

He unlocks the safe and pulls out a black 9 mm handgun that would scare the piss out of me if it was pointed at my face. It will definitely do the job of intimidating Cleary. “Are you kidding? My dad dragged me to the range every weekend, starting as soon as it was legal. Yours?”

“I wish. I’m a girl, so I had to learn on my own. But I do know how to shoot straight.”

He nods and pulls out his shoulder holster, putting it on. “Well, hopefully, neither of us will have to apply those skills tonight.”

I nod, praying that as well. The prospect of losing Michael when I’ve just found him gnaws at me, and I try to push it aside as he drives.

The drive to Oakland is long and chilly. Fog hangs over the Bay, filling the air with a faint, foul smell of the sea. Jazz plays on the radio, and the heater hums constantly.

We're not driving his usual car. This is a small panel truck, the kind that swarms around that area day and night. In the back are two rolls of duct tape, a pair of handcuffs, and a lot of dark,uncomfortable space for Cleary to knock around in. That should take some of the fight out of him.

If it doesn't, I'm not sure what we're going to do. But Michael says he's got it covered. I just wish he'd tell me what his contingency plan actually is. I suspect, though he hasn't said, that he's worried.

"Will you be able to remote-hack the hotel from out here with that gear?" he asks as he drives.

"I've done more with less. This system's been heavily modded, and as long as their Internet isn't out, I should be good to go as soon as we're in the parking lot."

"Good." He put his earpiece in. "You got your microphone on?"

I sigh and put in my earpiece. "It's ready to go. Are you?"

He nods, patting the pistol under his leather jacket. "I'll be back with our asshole within fifteen minutes."

My stomach tightens as I turn to my laptop and start the fight to get in past the motel's online security. It isn't much to speak of: These smaller places in undesirable spots usually don't pull in the cash for real Net security. This isn't going to take me long.

It doesn't. By the time Michael is almost at the lobby door, I'm already looking at him through the security cameras. "I'm in," I tell him through the microphone.

"All right. I don't want to hang out outside. Should we wait for a pee break or—"

“No. Act natural. Walk in like you belong there. Go straight for the elevator.” I pick up my phone to distract the desk person with a call.

She yawns in my ear when she picks up. “East Oakland Fairway Hotel, can I help you?”

“Yes, hi, when is checkout in the morning?”

I watch the camera as she turns her attention away from the lobby toward the call, and Michael becomes a background activity in the corner of her eye. She doesn’t call after him or even look his way. I smile with relief.

I keep her on the phone with a few small, inane questions she probably gets dozens of times a day until Michael is safely in the elevator and heading up. Then, I let her sign off so she can get back to work, none the wiser that an armed kidnapper has just slipped past her.

It takes almost no time for me to find the footage of Michael’s walking through in the system and replace it with a copy of another guest’s late-night arrival.

Things are going smoothly so far. But Michael hasn’t even made contact with our target yet, and the closer he gets to doing that, the more dangerous it becomes. I concentrate on getting him the right room number and then remote-unlocking the door for him.

“You’re ready to go,” I tell him as he reaches the right floor and heads for Brian Cleary’s room. “Good luck. Please...”

“I know, sweetheart. Thank you. This will be over soon.”

He opens the door to Cleary’s room and closes it behind him. I hear a muffled yell

over his microphone and then Michael speaking in a stern voice I have never heard from him before.

“Shut up. Keep your hands where I can see them.”

“I... I... I... oh, God, what is this...” Brian stammers in a low, choked voice. “Are you here to kill me?”

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“Not unless you fuck up. By which I mean you try to run, you try to yell for help, or you don’t cooperate. If you do any of that, I’ll empty this gun into your ass without thinking twice about it.”

“I didn’t—”

“I don’t want to hear it.” I have no idea how Michael sounds so quiet and calm and yet so menacing at the same time. It scares me and turns me on all at once. And God, does Cleary deserve every bit of the terror he’s feeling.

“What do you want?” Cleary whimpers. It’s clear he’s never had a gun pointed at him before in his entire fucking life. “Just tell me!”

“I want you to come with me.” Michael’s voice stays low and commanding. “I want you to walk out with me calmly like we’re going out for a late-night drink.”

Cleary starts to pant in terror. “No! I can’t let you take me to some secondary location—”

“I don’t give a fuck what you think you can or cannot do. See, you just helped a really stupid girl steal \$5 million from a powerful mob family. People are reckless enough to do something like that; well, they don’t generally survive very long. And as I have just proven, we can find you anywhere.”

Cleary is blubbering, sobbing like a five-year-old boy with a skinned knee. “I don’t want to die... it wasn’t even my idea! She never told me who she was even stealing from—”

“Oh, bullshit,” Michael grumbles.

“Please... I’ll do anything...”

Michael is quiet for a few moments while Cleary sobs. Then, he speaks calmly again: “If you cooperate, you have a single fucking chance of surviving the night. If you do not, I’ll scapegoat you for everything my sister did, claim she was coerced, and hand you over to my father and his men. Or I’ll just hole you out right here.”

“No... please...” he starts sobbing harder. “Please...”

“Calm down and dry your fucking face. If you cooperate properly, you have nothing to worry about. If you don’t, you die. You already know how to make sure you live. So, pull yourself together and listen.” Icicles are hanging from Michael’s tone.

“How do I know you won’t shoot me the moment you get what you want?” His voice is so high and reedy with terror that I almost feel bad for him. Almost.

“I’m not going to shoot you. What my father will do isn’t up to me. But I’ll tell you this right now: If he has to go chase you down after this, he absolutely will kill you. Cooperating with me is your only chance.”

I sit back in my seat in the van, keeping half an eye on the security feeds and half on the parking lot around me. It’s hard to listen to this. Cleary keeps crying like a little kid in a way that almost embarrasses me, and Michael’s cold, hard voice in my ear does weird things to me. I don’t like feeling horny and scared at the same time.

But I’m both, though right now I’m mostly chilly from worrying that Cleary will snap and screw everything up.

Please, I sort of pray as I keep quiet and let Michael do his thing. Please, let this work.

Please, let Cleary just give in so we can resolve this.

Finally, the sobbing and whimpering lets up. Cleary manages to pull himself together. And they leave, barely speaking further.

My lungs feel like I'm breathing helium. I see them exit Cleary's room together, no gun evident, and both acting calm. I start editing security camera footage to cover Michael's tracks again. The desk person retreats to the back for a while. I tell Michael, and he and Cleary step onto the elevator and quickly make their way down and out of the building.

I do the last of the cleanup, and suddenly, there's no evidence that anyone was with Cleary when he left. By the time I'm getting out to unlock the back of the van for them, the whole job is done.

Cleary glares at me with suspicious rage. "Why's there a female here?"

"Oh, for fuck's sake," I growl, staring at him in disdain. I go back to sit in the driver's seat.

"You're really pushing your fucking luck with me," Michael tells him in that same murderously cold voice. It makes me shudder even more in person. "That's my woman and our driver. Get in the van."

They both get in, and Michael pulls the van doors shut after them. I hear the rattle of chains and Cleary whimpering in terror. "You can't let her drive; she's going to kill us!"

"Jesus Christ, dude. Do you see this syringe?" A pause. The sounds of a struggle stop dead. "Yeah. Good. Hold still, or this needle is going in your thigh. If you're lucky, all it will do is tranquilize you. If you're not, you'll stop breathing."

I hear the click of locks and then the ripping sound of duct tape being pulled off its spool. “Believe me, at this point, this part is for your own safety.”

Cleary’s whimpering gets more muffled. His mouth’s been taped. I sigh with relief.

When Michael gets up front, he buckles in and lets me drive. “Don’t go too easy on these roads,” he suggests, and I scoff with amusement.

“Thanks for shutting him up,” I say, and he chuckles.

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“No problem, sweetheart. I didn’t want to subject you to any of that.”

I smile shakily and, once we’re buckled in, steer us out into traffic.

I drive with incredible care. I take every poorly paved backstreet and uncomfortably tight turn possible between the hotel and Michael’s parents’ home, keeping tight control and maintaining a responsible speed. And yet every turn and jostle gets me a squeak of pure terror from the back of the van as if I’m inches from driving us off a cliff.

I’ve never been to Michael’s family home before. Even before our families became rivals, I’ve never been invited over. Finding out that my father is a creep explains a lot of that. But as we walk in with a trembling, pale Brian Cleary walking ahead of us, I can’t help but feel like I’m walking into enemy territory.

We get curious looks as we walk in. One of the guards is muttering on his cell phone. Michael sees him and sighs. “Well, Dad knows we’re here now.”

I try not to get too scared when he says that, but I know the truth: He’s here uninvited, with the daughter of an enemy and a captive whose testimony was the only excuse we had to be here. And that hinges on whether Michael’s father would even hear it.

One of the guards, a lean man with a heavy five o’clock shadow, walks up to Michael. “Sir, you know you’ve been banned from the premises.”

“Tell my father I have one of the thieves in my hands right now for him to question.”

The guard looks between me and Cleary and notices the latter is pale and sweating. He nods after a moment and moves away to speak into his phone. When he returns, he has a solemn look on his face.

“He’ll see you.”

Within a minute, we are standing in his father’s elegant office, across the desk from a solemn, scowling man who bears a strong resemblance to Michael. Cleary starts shivering when he sees our host, who looks him up and down dubiously.

“I said not to come back until you found the money.”

His voice is quiet and cold, and I hear echoes of Michael’s earlier voice in it—the one that scared me and turned me on at the same time. This is where he’s got it from.

“This man is the thief’s accomplice. He can tell us how it was done, who was involved, and where the money went. And as for the money itself, only the thief can access and return it.”

“So, where’s the thief?” His father’s eyebrow goes up, and I see Michael tense slightly. “And while we’re on the subject, why the hell is Castellucci’s daughter with you?”

“Arya wrote the program, and she’s been working with me to find out who did this.” Michael squares his shoulders as his father stares between us. “She’s also my woman.”

His father splutters in astonishment for a few moments before saying, “You accepted a job to steal from her heist, from me, when you were—”

“When I was in love with her, yes. It’s why I asked you to reconsider.”

He shakes his head incredulously and points to two of his guards. “Take this meat sack out of here; I have family business to tend to.”

The guards drag a terrified-looking Cleary out of the room, and I don’t know whether to be relieved or even more worried. Michael is fudging the timeline of our relationship with his father. I don’t know why he’s doing it, but I’m going to play along.

“I wasn’t intending to test your loyalty that harshly,” he admits, and I blink in shock and something like sadness. My own father would never have expressed regret over his actions, no matter how much they hurt me.

“Well, it’s the truth. I never mentioned it because I didn’t know how you’d take it.” Michael looks at me, and I nod and turn my gaze to his father, who is staring at me thoughtfully.

“But what about your family?” he asks me directly.

My throat seizes up, and Michael reaches over and squeezes my hand.

“I’m not really sure I’m going to have one for much longer,” I hear myself say softly. “It’s not just being with Michael, and it’s not just the heist.”

He sits back, readjusting his reading glasses on his nose. “What is it, then?”

“You already know how he treats women outside our family, in public,” I say. His face darkens, and he nods. I go on. “Imagine how he treats women he has power over, in private.”

His eyebrows go up, and then he sighs and nods. “Seems like I’ve caused trouble for one of the few Castelluccis that didn’t deserve it,” he rasps, watching my face for my

response.

“Well, I’m not happy to be out a great big pile of money, but Michael and I are working on fixing that as well.”

He considers us both. “This is unusual, Michael, and I’m guessing you’re sticking to your blaming your sister for the money being missing.”

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“Honestly, I don’t know if she was using him or he was using her,” Michael lies, and I nod along. “I was hoping that if you had your experts question him, you could get the facts.”

He sniffs, looking between us again. “We should have grabbed him the night I kicked you out, but I was too busy with every other damn thing.”

“I know,” Michael says stiffly. I can tell there’s a lot of unexpressed anger in this conversation, which makes me feel awkward.

“You can’t expect me to just take it at your word that your own little sister, my daughter, is behind this. I don’t even know what her motivation could possibly be.”

Michael spreads his hands. “Dad, I’ve been trying to understand why since we figured out it’s her. I wish I could tell you, but I’m not a psychologist. I just... I’m surprised you’re even listening to this now.”

“I’m listening to this because your mother isn’t in my ear about how her precious daughter is just being scapegoated right now. She’s too upset over me forcing you out, though she hardly gave me a choice.” He sighs and looks at me. “Still wondering what I’m going to tell her about who my son’s going steady with.”

I blink at him. ‘Going steady?’ Is it 1970? I keep my mouth shut about it, realizing that I won’t be helping anything by commenting on it.

“You know, Dad, sometimes I wish you and Arya’s father would just go fight it out with your fists and leave the rest of us out of it,” Michael sighs. “None of the rest of

us wanted this, and none of the rest of us have a stake in it.”

“Except your mother,” his father reminds him harshly.

“Yeah, I am taking that into account. You could kick his ass with your hands shackled.”

I end up nodding. “He doesn’t even work out anymore.”

His father sits back again with a little bit of a smirk on his face. “All right. Look, you do have a point, but even right now, while things are calm, I have to say that unless your guy Cleary comes through with a lot of good details, I’m not moving against your sister. I can’t tear the family apart over this.”

“Dad,” Michael sighs, “Maria is already tearing the family apart over this.”

The older man’s expression hardens, and I realize he’s still wrestling with the idea that his daughter might really be responsible. “We’ll question the guy. We’ll see what he says, what he knows. And once we have the details, I’ll call you back and let you know what I decide.”

There’s a note of finality to his tone that I really don’t like. I’m being shut out of the questioning and the chance to advocate for the truth. And so is Michael.

And just as fast as we were seen in, he shoos us back out again, telling us that he’ll handle everything from here. Michael and I walk out into the parking circle under the weight of exhaustion, and I can see the strain on his face.

“You okay?” I ask him.

He shakes his head. “I wanted to be there for the questioning. I’m the one with the

expertise to explain what that moron is even saying. My father may miss some of the fine details by having some generalist handle the interrogation.”

“I get it,” I tell him. “But I’m also too fucking tired to figure out how we could have done better. He was reasonable, but... not that reasonable.”

Michael grunts in acknowledgment as we walk to the van. “It went both better and worse than expected,” he mutters. “I can’t really think about any of it anymore right now, either.”

“Let’s not,” I urge softly. “Let’s go back to the houseboat and not worry about it for a little while.”

He’s quiet for a while as he unlocks the van, and we get in. Finally, he says, “Fine,” in such a flat tone that I know he won’t stop worrying, no matter what I do. And I don’t even know if I can blame him.

Chapter 24

Michael

After kidnapping Brian Cleary and having him taken off our hands by my father without even a proper questioning, I’m somewhere between totally exhausted and completely pissed off. I’m lying here with this gorgeous woman in my arms, and we’re both aching from tiredness to the point where even sex barely sounds appealing.

And I hardly feel even a half step closer to resolving all of this and getting that damn money back. In fact, I’m pretty certain that my sister is currently spending that stolen money as fast as she possibly can, like a dog caught with something they shouldn’t eat chewing it up while running away.

If only my father would listen to me as closely as he listened to the women in his life. But I know it could be worse. He could be like Arya's father and not listen to those women at all.

Arya is sleeping in my arms, so tired she narrowly managed to take her work clothes off and crawl between the sheets in panties and one of my T-shirts. She's warm in my arms, and her soft breath on my neck soothes me. I'm so fucking tired; maybe enough curling up with her will ease away all these thoughts and finally let me sleep.

When I finally do, though, my sister's there, sitting sullenly on the bed in her room, her eyes dilated from whatever drugs are in her system.

"Why did you fuck me over?" I ask her, and she just stares at me blankly.

“Why?”

She doesn't know, I realize as I drift out of the dream to warm darkness and Arya's soft breathing. Maria's never stopped to think about her motives, about why she does what she does. She just does it, and damn the torpedoes.

Will my father figure that out? And if he does, will he act on it? Or will he let my mother keep shielding Maria from the consequences of her actions?

I close my eyes again, burying my nose in Arya's hair. Right now, it's all down to a waiting game, and I hate it. But at least I'm waiting with someone who makes all of this a lot easier to bear.

It's funny how things worked out. My father thinks that Arya and I were together when he ordered me to intercept her heist. So now he's actually feeling a little guilty about it. And yeah, I've been crazy for her for years, but I've never actually had her before now.

He doesn't need to know that, though, especially not after how he's acted around my sister.

What are the odds that my father will actually respond properly to what's gone on? What are the odds that he'll call me in and say that it's all resolved, my sister is being punished, and I'm off the hook?

Not as good as they should be, and that's what's keeping me up tonight and focused on something besides sex despite there being a gorgeous woman I'm crazy about

right here in my arms.

God, I want all of this to be over, but I'm worried that it will end with no real resolution at all. My sister will get away with it. Brian Cleary will disappear. I may even stay a pariah in my own damned family.

But at least I'll have Arya. Provided, of course, that she can stand to be with someone who can't keep his idiot younger sister from bullying him out of the family.

No. No fucking way. No matter what it takes, I have to make sure that Maria does not get away with this. I don't care how much she or my mother cries, I'm not taking this shit so they can keep up their pretense of a perfect goddamn family.

No. This time, I will find a way to make them listen, not just for my pride's sake but for my family's sake. Maria can't be allowed to keep acting like this, and my mother can't be allowed to coddle her any longer, either.

But how the hell do you break over 20 years of bad family habits all at once? Will proving what Maria did even be enough?

I'll have to fucking see this through somehow.

It's late morning before either one of us can bring ourselves to leave that bed. Sex, warmth, cuddling, just spending time with her... all of those things are a million times better to face than the million problems waiting outside the bedroom door.

But that's how things go. Either you face your problems, or they pile up at your door until they smash it in and completely inundate your life.

So, by early afternoon, we were both on our phones, each dealing with our own family drama.

“So... you’ve been dating Castellucci’s daughter this entire time and didn’t say anything?” Billy sounds astonished.

“I’ve been crazy about her for years. I tried to get Dad to see reason, but he wanted his proof of concept. We could have gone out and interrupted any wire transfer with her protocol. It didn’t have to be hers. He just wanted to hurt her to show up her father—who doesn’t even care about her.”

“God, what a clusterfuck. Is she okay now?”

“More or less. There has been a lot of fallout with her family.” It feels good to finally give him the details. I rarely leave my brother out of much because sometimes, he feels like the only one in my family who really has my back. So, this is all a big surprise to him, and I feel a little bad about it.

“How did Dad take it?”

“Dad underreacted to everything that whole evening. I don’t know what’s going on with him. He seems to be apologetic and calm about the idea, but... I don’t know. I worry that he’s going to just let our witness go and go back to pretending like Maria’s a normal, well-behaved daughter, and I’m just incompetent and paranoid.”

I glance at the bedroom’s open door, hearing Arya’s voice as she whispers to her sister and mother on a conference call. I don’t like that they have both insisted on talking to her at once. She says her sister is trying to moderate things, but I suspect they’re double-teaming her.

“Shit. Yeah. I get it. Dad’s always saying that it’s Mom who is overprotective of Maria, and that’s why she’s like that, but then, he does absolutely nothing to fix the situation.” I hear him take a swig of something. It fizzes faintly: beer. He doesn’t drink soda unless he’s hung over.

I don't really blame him for day-drinking around our family right now.

"So, have you heard anything about what he's doing with Cleary? The guy locked in our basement, I mean." Dad has a holding cell down there, usually unused unless he wants a personal crack at some captured asshole who has wronged the family.

"He's been down there four times already, from what I know. The guards are talking about it. He goes down angry, he comes up frustrated. The guy must still be alive," Billy muses, "and Dad must be learning something, or he wouldn't keep trying."

"Well, that's hopeful." I hesitate, then catch myself at it and push on. "How's Mom doing?"

"She's upset. Maria has taken off with her latest boyfriend and is insisting on staying away until 'the family comes to its senses.' She may try to run if it turns out she's guilty."

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I feel my blood pressure rising as this news hits my ears. “She’s already running,” I growl. “Damn it. Do you think Dad can find her if he decides she’s guilty?”

“Dad can find pretty much anyone, Mike. If he wants to.”

And there’s the rub. It would be so easy and convenient to satisfy Mom by simply... not finding Maria. Acknowledging what she did for about three seconds, then burying it and ignoring why she’s suddenly disappeared from our lives.

“Fuck,” I mutter.

“Yeah.” He huffs, and I hear him take another swig. “But just because this could all turn out badly doesn’t mean it’s actually going to. Dad is interrogating that guy, and at the end of the day, he’ll deal with any threat to the family. Even ones that come from within.”

I really hope he’s right. “Did Maria say anything to you before she took off?”

“Not a damn thing. She knows she’s cooked. What I don’t get is why Dad didn’t grab that guy we’ve got in the basement the night he threw you out.”

I do my best to forgive him in my head, at least while I’m talking to Billy. “Probably an oversight. Emotions were high. But God, it would have made things so much simpler if he had.”

I hear something from the bedroom then, something that sets my nerves on edge. A sob.

“Billy, I’m gonna have to call you back,” I mutter. “Got something up here.”

“You okay?”

I’m not. “I’m fine. I’ll call you back later tonight. Text me if you learn anything.” I hang up and turn to hurry into the bedroom and see what’s happening with Arya.

I almost immediately know, and my heart sinks.

Arya is holding her phone away from her ear with tears in her eyes while her mother is screaming and her sister lecturing. They’re double-teaming her. I don’t even have to make out the words to know it’s a whole giant undeserved pile of abuse.

My blood boils. I come over to her, put an arm around her, kiss her hair... and then gently take the phone out of her hands. She resists for a moment and then lets it go and buries her face in my chest.

I put the phone to my ear.

“And on top of everything else, we find out that your silent partner in this investigation is the very man you let steal from us? Are you completely out of your goddamned mind, Arya?”

I wince. Ouch. It seems that the Castelluccis have found out about Arya working with me. That level of pissed off isn’t entirely expected... but she is still their daughter, damn it.

They fill up the silence with more yelling. Her sister, this time, from her slightly more reasonable tone: “You’re betraying the family, Arya. First, you refuse to get married, then you screw up being our computer person, and now this? Do you hate us?”

That's emotional manipulation at its finest, and it makes me see red in the corners of my vision. I take a deep breath and weigh whether to answer for her or not. I'm done with letting them make her cry, and Arya clearly hasn't learned yet how to tell bad relatives to fuck off.

Then, again, she doesn't seem to have any good ones.

"Arya?" the sister asks.

I decide speaking won't do anything to help and hang up instead.

Arya continues sobbing, and I drop the phone on the bed. It's set to vibrate and starts buzzing right away. We ignore it as I hold her.

"Thank you," she mumbles into my neck. I pet her hair and say nothing for a while.

"I should have hung up when they said the family's disowning me," she mutters, her voice breaking up in the end. "But they are, they're really actually doing it this time." Her arms wrap around me, she jams her face against my shoulder, and I hold her tighter.

"Fuck," I murmur. This isn't the first time we've talked about this possibility, but talking about it is way different than facing it. I want to go storming off to her house to confront them in her defense, but that would be a bad idea even if we weren't mob families.

"I'm sorry, baby," I add, not sure what to say beyond that. "I didn't talk to anyone about my working with you except my family."

"They must have had someone keep tabs on me," she mumbles against me. "And now, they've gotten the report back, so they do this."

“Arya...”God fucking damn it.I hate this feeling. I can’t hack or fight or talk away this problem for her. I can’t defend her from her family being shitheads. But I still want to.

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“I love you, baby,” I say. “I’m so sorry. If I can do anything—”

“Just hold me,” she breathes against my neck. “I love you, too.”

It doesn’t fix everything. It doesn’t make her family sane or unbreak her heart, but it gives her something to lean on, and that will need to be enough for now.

I’ve lost count of how many times we’ve had sex at this point, and that’s a good thing. We’ve started really discovering each other. This time, it builds up slowly as the weight of her grief eases away, and our caresses start to take on heat.

Her fingers tremble as they slide up my bare chest; her back shivers under my palms. Her mouth is warm, sleek, and yielding against mine. Comfort-seeking, distraction-seeking, call it what you want. I don’t care, as long as her cries aren’t of grief anymore.

I don’t really know who kissed who first this time, when her hands started moving over me, or when our clothes started coming off. It was all a slow blur of kisses and murmurs, my lips at her neck, her tears on my tongue, and her nimble little hands unbuckling my belt.

Now, I can feel my comforter sliding under us as I lower her onto it. Her body tenses and squirms under me as I pull her jeans down off her hips and take her panties with them. I cover her thighs with kisses before working my way up to caress her warm pussy with my fingers and my tongue.

I have her gasping and squirming in seconds; in under a minute, she’s fighting to

keep her legs apart. I prop them open, holding one while bracing the other against my shoulder, and listen to her voice rising up into desperate cries of pleasure.

She squeals, her hips buck, and I hold her, lapping at her clit insistently until her sobs of ecstasy die down into whimpers and aftershocks. Then, I wipe my mouth, grinning when she moans out a plea to fuck her.

Rolling on a condom takes ten seconds and a million years. By then, her eyes are dry, and her breath comes in little gasps. Her nipples are tight little beads against my chest as I press down against her.

I go in in one long, easy thrust, letting out a blissful groan as her arms and legs tighten around me. My breathing shudders as we find a rhythm together, and I feel her stretch and shiver under me as her body starts ramping up again.

I'm so turned on I can barely see. My eyes swim; I shiver as I move against her, each stroke feeling better than the last. She coos and groans in my ear as I struggle for self-control. Our lips meet in rough kisses, tongues tangling and hands sliding over each other frantically.

I feel her trembling under me, hear the way her breath catches, and delve into her hot, sleek pussy even harder. The pleasure dizzies me as I feel her tighten around me. Then, her back arches, and her eyes fly open before squeezing shut in bliss. Her grinding and thrashing carry me over the edge with her, and ecstasy cracks through me like lightning.

Minutes later, drifting off with her, I feel the slightest twinge of apprehension about my family and how this will all shake out. But then, I push those thoughts away and bury my face in her hair.

Chapter 25

Arya

We spend the afternoon and night making love, stopping to nap, eat, and eventually shower. The raw wound of my family's abandonment still aches in my chest, but Michael's presence makes it manageable.

And when I think about it here, on the morning after, I almost feel relieved, like the pain is the soreness left after you rip a Band-Aid off. I can focus past it now.

I can focus on figuring out how in the hell we're going to wrap up the situation with Michael's family and get that money back.

By lunchtime, Michael is fielding another phone call with his brother Billy. The guy seems pretty easygoing, which is a blessing in the middle of all this. However, what Billy starts saying soon after the phone rings has both of us on edge.

"Maria's come back. She's here now," Billy says as we listen to Michael's phone. "She wants to see the guy you brought in. She says she can help us get the location of the money out of him."

"Out of him?" Michael's expression shows his alarm. "Billy, she's lying. She can't be allowed to make contact with Brian Cleary. She's up to something."

"Dad won't let her go near him alone, but he wants all of us here to confront her and make Cleary tell his story with Mom there."

I let out a wordless huff. This is going to be a ton of drama—at best. "Has she been checked for weapons?" I ask. Michael repeats the question urgently into the phone.

"The guards haven't checked her for weapons, no. You know Mom would never allow that." Billy sighs. "Look, you're needed here. They want to talk to Arya, too."

Just get everything sorted out tonight and be done with it.”

The alarm bells in my head ring louder, but when Michael looks over at me, I set my jaw and nod to him. He turns his attention back to the call.

“We’ll be there.”

“How are we going to handle this?” I ask Michael as we pull into his family’s driveway.

He glances at me. “That’s the problem. Maria’s impulsive. It’s hard to predict how we should handle it. Just... follow my lead and watch out for her.

“Cleary is just as crazy and more of a danger to you, but he has guards on him. My parents still aren’t taking it seriously that Maria is a hazard.”

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I frown. I really want something more concrete than ‘follow my lead,’ but what can be done? He knows everything about his family, and I know almost nothing. I’ll just have to trust him.

This time, when we go inside, I get a surprise. Not a pleasant one. It’s Michael’s mother, eyeing me angrily as I come in with him.

I stop short. Michael tries to greet and hug his mother, but she just glares at me. Finally, she says, “Did you turn my boy against his sister?”

I squash a surge of panic. For a moment, I get a hint of where Maria got her irrational streak from.

Fortunately, I soon learn it’s not actually as strong as Maria’s.

“Mom,” Michael sighs. “I overheard Maria and Brian Cleary arguing about the crime in her room. Arya didn’t have anything to do with it. Please, don’t start this. Things are bad enough for all of us.”

She frowns up at me... and then relents, her face softening. Then, she goes off to direct the kitchen staff.

I let out a breath as she walks away. I see the set of Michael’s jaw and touch his shoulder.

“She wants to blame everything but Maria for why Maria is this way. She’s not going to realize the truth until she sees it for herself. Maybe not even then.”

“I almost feel sorry for her,” I say quietly. “But I know she’s caused you a lot of problems.”

“It’s not her, it’s Maria. My mom’s just so biased she can’t even think straight about it.”

There’s a small crowd in the dining room when Michael’s father brings us in. His wife joins us, Billy, and finally, Maria.

I feel those alarm bells go off in my head again when I see her. She looks haggard, her eyes sunken, like she’s just come off a bender. They fix on me like flat, dark beads with no real expression in them. Not on Michael, but on me.

Michael’s father sits at the head of the table, with Maria at the far end, his mother and Billy on one side of his father’s end, and us on the other. I sit nearest Maria, which could have excused her glaring if it started after I took my seat. But no. I’m not just in her line of fire as she glares up the table.

She’s looking at me like she wants to murder me, personally, in the nastiest way she can.

I stare back a moment before turning my attention back to Michael. I want to get his attention, but he’s stuck talking to his father.

“All right, people,” his dad speaks up. “I think you all know why we’re here. Michael says Maria took the money, there’s a guy downstairs who either helped her or conned her into doing it, and Maria keeps saying Michael is falsely accusing her and knows where the money is. So... I had my guys look into it.

“It turns out that everything we picked up corroborates this guy Brian Cleary’s story.” He stares down the table at Maria, who tenses, and then at his wife, who shifts

uncomfortably in her seat. “So, I’m going to bring that guy up here and give him a chance to say what he has to say. And once that’s done, I’m going to decide what we do next.”

I feel Michael move restlessly next to me. Billy can’t look at anyone. Maria seems to have forgotten how to blink. That scares me more with each passing minute.

Michael’s father sends his men to bring Cleary up. Maria tries to slip out of the room, mumbling something about a bathroom break. Michael’s father gently stops her. His eyes are on her like a hawk’s on a squirrel. She flops back into her seat, sulking.

I’m not convinced. Everything in me is screaming that something is wrong.

When they bring Brian Cleary in, he looks haunted. His eyes are sunken and full of fear. He looks like he has lost 10 lbs, and he’s as pale as a dying man. His gaze flits to us as he walks in, and for a moment, he actually looks relieved.

Then, I hear Maria’s chair shift behind me.

The gun goes off before I can act: one, two, three times, louder than anything I have ever heard in my life. I scream, and Michael pushes me to cover under the 6-in. thick tabletop, and I hear Cleary gibbering in terror.

Everyone is yelling at once. Michael and Billy are yelling at their sister to put the gun down. His father is bellowing at his men to get Cleary out of the room. His mother is wailing in disbelief, begging her daughter to stop: “Please, just stop.”

There’s silence for a moment as I crouch under the edge of the heavy oak table, and I dare to hope that it’s over and they’ve talked that maniac into setting down her gun. I wait for it to hit the tabletop.

It doesn't.

Suddenly, before anyone can react, the gun goes off twice more, forcing Michael away from me as two bullets bite into the floorboards. My ears ring, and my nostrils are full of gun smoke. Then, someone grabs me by the hair and drags me out into the hallway.

It hurts worse than I would have expected; tears squirt out of my eyes as pain lances through my scalp. She's dragging me, crazy strong with adrenaline, with the pistol held in her other hand.

"Let me go!" I yell and try to squirm away, but she whacks me with the barrel of the gun and curses at me.

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“I’m getting the fuck out of here, and you’re going with me. I’m not letting them punish me. I deserve that money. It’s mine!”

I can’t argue with someone with a gun to my head. I hiss with pain, praying that security, Michael’s family, or someone can get this nut off of me before she hurts me or anyone else. I don’t even know if Michael is hurt from those shots or even if he’s still alive.

Somewhere in the background, Michael’s mother is screaming like a siren. That is not a good sign. Not at all.

Then, suddenly, Michael is standing in the hallway with us, cutting off her escape. I see him upside down as she grips my hair, stern as iron, and his own gun pointed at her head.

“Let her go,” he demands.

“No. I’m taking her hostage, and we’re getting out of here. You can’t stop me.”

“I can fucking shoot you.” Michael’s voice goes even more terrifyingly flat, and my heart jumps into my throat.

Her voice lowers to a hiss. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“You’ve got my woman at gunpoint. You betrayed me. You robbed me. You betrayed this fucking family. And now, you’re opening fire in our home, trying to kill a witness, and then trying to kill me. You really think we’re going to let you get away

with that? How can you possibly believe that?"

"You're my brother!" Her voice cracks with a mix of what sounds like outrage and emotional pain.

"You're not my sister. You're some bitch who betrays her own family and blames everything on other people! Now, let her go!" I hear him thumb back the hammer of his revolver.

Their family spills out into the hallway. Billy's trying to calm things down. His dad is barking orders for both of them to drop the guns. His mom is begging him not to shoot her precious baby.

Maria finally lets my hair go, and I scramble backward across the slippery parquet floor away from her. "Oh, God," I mumble, and then, Michael steps between us and his father and brother with him.

Suddenly, my heart's not pounding even half as hard.

"Now, you're going to tell us where the money is," Michael growls.

Maria starts sobbing. Their mother is still begging Michael to stand down. He ignores their distress, and despite it all, I can't blame him.

"It's in the Caymans!" she wails. "You piece of shit, making me give it back on top of everything else!"

"What the hell is wrong with you?" her father demands. "You robbed us, here, you are shooting up my house, taking hostages... trying to kill the one witness against you right in front of me, like that's going to make me not suspect you somehow?"

“Drop the damn gun, Maria, honey,” Billy sighs like he’s telling a small child to drop a permanent marker.

“Him first,” she snaps, but Michael holds steady with the gun on her.

Her father steps forward and gently takes the gun from her. She stares at him, then at me, and then bursts out into tears and falls to her knees.

Her mom sees her like that and almost goes to her, her arms out and her eyes full of grief. But she doesn’t come over. Instead, she simply asks her daughter, “Why? Why did you do this?”

“I don’t know.” Maria gulps and looks down. I can’t tell if she’s lying or not. Maybe she really doesn’t know. Maybe she’s too far gone.

I get up slowly and go to Michael, who is still pointing the gun at her, his face white with rage. I put my hand on his arm gently. “Michael,” I murmur. “Come on. It’s over. She’s caught, they’re convinced. You don’t need this anymore.”

“She tried to fucking kidnap you,” he growls.

“I know. But she’s still family, and I don’t think she’s in her right mind.”

He looks at me, and then sighs and slowly lowers the revolver. He puts it away but keeps a hand free just in case as he hugs me tight.

“Sir,” one of the guards tells Michael’s father. “Cleary has collapsed from all the excitement. What do we do with him?”

“Drop him at a hospital and have him watched. We’ve gotten what we need from him.” Michael’s father looks spent. His wife comes to him, and he holds her, but

distractedly, as he stares down at his daughter.

“What about Maria?” Michael asks sternly. His mom flinches.

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His father sighs, looking years older suddenly. “We’ll get her the help she needs.”

Hours later, in each other’s arms, as we lie in bed in the houseboat in silence, I know Michael’s thinking about what happened today. “Penny for your thoughts?”

“Just... wondering if this is all really over,” he sighs, turning his head to kiss my bare shoulder. “I keep expecting something else crazy to pop up and throw us back into chaos.”

“I’m sure there will be plenty of crazy going on in the future,” I murmur as I roll over to nestle my face against his chest. “This is a mob family, after all. But for now... let’s just enjoy the quiet until the next crazy adventure comes along.”

“Mmm, you have a point,” he admits, dropping a kiss into my hair. “I might feel ready for anything with you around... but that doesn’t mean I want to face it just now.”

Fortunately, we probably won’t have to. I hope. I have a future to build... a future with him.

Epilogue

Arya

Michael and I get married three months after we move in together. It’s not one of those big, lavish mob weddings my mom always wanted me to have. It’s cozy. Friends, Michael’s family, a tasteful gift of a bedroom set from the Don...

We hold it on the grounds of his family estate on a warm day, under a canopy of hundred-year-old live oaks and a pergola pinned up with roses. Michael's mom is weepy but gracious. His father's tentatively warm and congratulates Michael on stealing something far more valuable than my programs: my heart, talents, and skills for the Rossi family.

I'm sure my parents are furious about it, but they did this to themselves. Suddenly, in the middle of all the feasting and dancing after the wedding, the pain hits me again in full force, and I have to stop what I'm doing for a few minutes to pull myself together.

It's all right. It will fade with time. One day, the pain won't dig into me as deeply. Maybe when I tell our future kids why they only have one set of grandparents. But I'll deal with that when I come to it.

Michael's happy, attentive, and a little drunk.

I'm really glad to see it, after everything. I used to see him as a carefree idiot, but now, I realize my assessment was all surface. There's nothing like going through hell together to give you perspective on people.

His sister's been shipped off to a private sanitarium in Sicily. His relatives are embarrassed and have varying degrees of apology. As I watch him chatting with his brother Billy while I wait for questions from our photographer, he's mostly smiles.

I know that leaving and marrying into a rival family has made waves within the Families. It doesn't happen very often, but I haven't dealt with fallout from anyone but my own family. It's like everyone else doesn't know how to deal with the issue but knows that I don't deserve to face trouble for it. Maybe my father's reputation has spread further than he ever wanted.

I don't know if I'll ever talk to any of my blood family again, and that uncertainty

makes things worse. But no matter what, I've got Michael, and he's made it clear to his family that we're a package deal now.

Life goes on. I'll miss my sister, and sometimes, I'll miss my parents, too. But they've chosen this, piece by piece, year after year, well before the heist that shamed me in their eyes.

I've always thought that when it reached this point, if it ever did, I would walk around burdened by the fact that I no longer had any family.

Now, I know that isn't true. My situation isn't perfect, no more than anyone's, but I'll never be without family. Not after today.