



# Text Me, Take Me

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**Description:** Evie Davis made one reckless mistake—faking a resume that landed her in billionaire Dom Russo's crosshairs. Now she's his prisoner, trapped in his secluded estate to protect her from a dangerous biker gang.

Dom Russo is a ruthless CEO and former Navy SEAL with a dark obsession: Evie. She hates him, fears him, yet craves him with every breath. One text. One contact. That's her lifeline.

Lines blur when Dom touches her, claiming her body and igniting a fire she can't resist. Evie knows she should escape, but instead, she's falling deeper into the storm of his possessive desire. With danger looming and passion burning out of control, will Evie find freedom, or lose herself completely in Dom's dangerous embrace?

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## PROLOGUE

### EVIE

I throw myself at him, aiming a punch at his face. He ducks to the side, slips under the strike, then wraps his arms around me and pushes me against this wall.

“Do you think I want to hurt you?” he growls.

I don’t know if he’s talking about physically, spiritually, sexually, or emotionally.

He’s my kidnapper, and I have to keep fighting. But when he pushes against me and I feel his firm muscles and the heat of his body – plus the little voice whispering in the back of my head that we’re compatible – sometimes, hate is a tricky word to remember.

“I think you take what you want, and you don’t care about the consequences.”

Diving low, I rush him. He’s so muscular, I end up bouncing back instead of pushing him away. I raise my hands, ready to fight.

He smirks, infuriatingly handsome, threads of silver glinting in the jet black of his hair. Sweat makes his clothes cling to him.

“Are you going to run?” he says.

“Are you making fun of me?”

Another smirk – another challenge. “It’s a simple question.”

“Do you always tease the girls you kidnap?”

His smile falters. “I’ve never kidnapped anyone.”

“Before me.”

“That was for your safety.”

“Keep telling yourself that.”

He rushes at me, feints one way, springs up the other. With a gentle sweep of his leg, he knocks me off my feet. I shriek and fall backward, but he catches me, holding me safely in his arms.

My head spins as he leans down for a kiss.

I don’t want this. I can’t want this.

But when our lips meet, I forget there’s a difference between wrong and right.

## CHAPTER 1

DOM

Before

I’m outside Evie’s apartment in Echo Parks. I’ve followed her from the offices of Russo Multimedia Group, my company, in Century City. I’m doing this for her own good. I’m just keeping a watchful eye on her. That’s what I tell myself.

Evie Davis, twenty-one years old, turning up to an interview at my multinational, multibillion-dollar company in a dark floaty dress that had my pole growing stiff under my desk.

I'd be lying if I said she did not enthrall me. She sits at the front window of her apartment at a workbench, a pair of goggles propped on her forehead, working on something I can't see. From here, I can't see her expression, but I remember her concentrated look from the interview earlier today.

Lies riddled her resume.. The worst was she claimed to have several years' experience at a company owned by a friend of mine. One phone call shattered that deceit. Out of curiosity, I looked her up online.

When I saw her pretty, enthusiastic profile picture, I told myself her beauty had nothing to do with my decision to interview her personally. I was, my story went, making an example of her. Nobody gets to sneak their way into my company.

In the front window, she stretches her arms over her head, making my heart pound a little quicker.

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At the interview, she walked in trying to look confident, but I could discern the nerves bubbling beneath the surface. When she brushed her dress down, rubbing her shaky hands over the tempting curves of her body, my body hummed.

“Take a seat, Miss Davis.”

She sat, adjusted her dress. And just like that, she had me hooked.

A car pulls up outside her apartment, tugging me back to the present moment. Whenever somebody appears, it’s a reminder that what I’m doing is wrong. But she said something at the end of that confusing, enthralling interview that had me wondering if I could do a good deed.

When I said, “I see you have three years’ experience at Charles Menezes’ company,” she looked away, a subtle blush rising to her cheeks. I tried to control myself, but my body didn’t care about my honorable notions. My shaft was thick with desire. I refused to be controlled by my sudden, inexplicable need.

Hell, inexplicable?

It is, in fact, very explicable... her curves, her pouting lips, her wide and rebellious honey colored eyes, the braid draped over one shoulder as though giving me a handhold for when I guide her luscious body against mine.

“Uh, yes,” she said, and I think she knew I’d seen through her flimsy charade. But she wasn’t going to give up without a fight.

“Are my windows more interesting than this interview, Miss Davis?”

She turned to me quickly. “No, of course not. I was just thinking, Mr Russo.”

“Care to share with the class?”

A daring look sparked in her eyes. But then it shifted, and she looked afraid. Even before the end of the interview, when she dropped the bombshell, I felt weirdly, confusingly sorry for her. “I was thinking about how beautiful this office is.”

I didn’t buy it, and I should’ve kicked her out of my office, but I was... interested. “Thank you. That’s very kind.”

“Did you design it yourself?”

I waved a hand and almost said, You won’t get this job with compliments.

She must’ve sensed my mood change.

She leaned forward with a challenge, giving me a look at her cleavage that had me almost pulling her out of her seat. My mind, usually either a purposefully peaceful place or a world of unwanted chaos, became a lust-filled land. I imagined pushing her gorgeous globes together, pressing my face against her, biting, kissing, possessing. “Sorry, Mr Russo. I’m a littlenervous. That’s probably not the sort of thing you admit on a job interview... but I sense you value honesty.”

Now, in the car outside her apartment, I smile. She’s just returned from getting a glass of water. That was a clever line by her.

I chuckled. “Ah, a quote from my interview inTIME. It’s worth knowing, the writer took liberties.”

“You don’t value honesty, sir?” she asked, confused.

Of course, my intercom chose that moment to buzz, interrupting us. It was my assistant. “Sir, five minutes until the call with London.”

“Is that an actual call?” Evie asked.

That got another laugh out of me. Evie was going for the record. “Are you always this paranoid?”

She shrugged. “It would be a good way to seem important.”

“Do you honestly believe billionaires need to pretend to be important?”

“Touche. I guess I’m wondering why you’re interviewing me yourself?”

“I think you know why I’m interviewing you myself, Miss Davis.”

She bit her lip. Fuck. That did a number on me. My balls ached as I imagined her trembling in the throes of an orgasm right there in the office, biting her lip so that my assistant wouldn’t hear.

“No, I don’t,” she said stubbornly, refusing to give an inch.

“I’ve known Charles—you ‘previous employer’—for several years. Last night, I called him and asked if a woman named Evie Davis had ever worked for him.”

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“I never met Mr. Menezes personally?—”

“He examined his records thoroughly. Are you going to keep lying?”

Finally, she huffed, “Fine. Well done,” with a sarcastic clap that almost had me laughing again. “A girl’s got to take risk sometimes. I guess this is the part where you kick me out of your office? I can’t blame you for it. But before I go, I’d like an answer to my question.”

“Do you honestly think you’re in a position to make demands?”

“You knew I was lying from the start—is that why you interviewed me yourself, to make an example?”

She’d hit the nail on the head. I wouldn’t acknowledge the other reason, buried deep. I wanted to see if she was as beautiful in person as she was online.

“Perhaps I impressed you? Maybe you thought, heck, I’ll give the girl a shot? Okay, I lied. I know that’s wrong. But what if I said I had good reasons? What if I said I really, really need this job – and I’d work my ass off to prove it?”

“I’m not impressed by liars, Miss. Davis.”

She stood abruptly, causing her breasts to bounce. Even now, sitting in my car outside her apartment and staring at Evie in her window, my body aches thinking about it.

“Are you trying to intimidate me, then?” she demanded. “Because trust me, Mr. Russo, that won’t work. If you think I’m going to be scared by some CEO after everything I’ve been through, you’ve got another thing coming.”

She turned, dashing towards the exit. The gentle fabric of her dress draped over the roundness of her ass. But it was more than that which had me stopping her. “Wait.” It was her passion. It was... her.

Walking across the room, I stood in front of her, probably closer than any CEO or man, had any right to stand. Her perfume, or maybe it was just her natural scent, washed over me in an intoxicating wave.

“I can’t give a liar a job, but if you’re in some trouble?—”

“I didn’t say I was in any trouble.”

“You wouldn’t have gone through all this effort if you weren’t in a bind. Maybe I can help.”

I took another step forward, feeling drunk. For a brief, hungry moment, our bodies pressed against each other. She let out a gasp. I’m sure there was lust in the noise, or maybe that’s wishful thinking.

She backed away at my words. “I’m not going to let you—” she paused, flustered. “I won’t let The Vultures mess with me, and you think I’ll let you?”

She almost ran from the room at her outburst. I reached out, meaning to catch her hand, but then I realized how strange that would be. I came to my senses... for a minute or two. But then I went online and searched ‘The Vultures California’, learning they’re a biker gang out of San Bernardino.

That was the bombshell, the thing that brought me here. Is she in trouble? Does she need my help, even if she's too proud to accept it?

In the front window, she puts on her goggles and focuses on her work.

After searching The Vultures, I took my private elevator to the parking lot. As I expected, she hadn't left the lot yet, having taken the busier elevators the rest of the company used.

As I followed, I told myself it was for her own good. But the longer I sit here, the more difficult it becomes to ignore the conflicted motivations in my tangled mind. Would I do this for any other woman, or is Evie Davis just too damn interesting?

Loud engines rumble from the end of the street. Three motorbikes drive down the street, big bulky looking men with violence in their postures. I've been around enough dangerous people to see the intent in their hunched-over, focused frames.

The bikers park just around the corner from her apartment. The tool Evie is using must be making some noise, because she doesn't look up at the sound of the engines.

She admitted to running from the Vultures, so if she'd heard them, she'd know she was in danger and make a move to escape, surely. I lean forward and see that, sure enough, there are vulture images on their patches.

I can't leave now.

If they're here for Evie, I need to do something.

One man steps from his bike and takes out of his helmet, laying it on the seat. Standing tall and wide, he sports a thick brown beard. He lights a cigarette and stares at the apartmentbuilding with his head tilted. He looks like an animal appraising a

possible kill.

I clench my fists and whisper under my breath, “Just try it, motherfucker.”

## CHAPTER 2

## Page 4

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EVIE

Focusing on my work usually brings me peace. I'm working on a ring of twisted metal, but I'm distracted. Meatball, my rescue Persian with a squashed face that always makes him look mad, reclines in the sun on the windowsill. But he's not what's distracting me.

It's my roommate, Tasha, on speaker. "To me, it's obvious you liked him."

I laugh quietly and, I hope, convincingly. "He was a douchebag. The whole time, he was smoldering at me like he was some kind of bigshot."

"Smoldering is an interesting choice of words."

"Staring."

"But you said 'smoldering.'"

I don't reply for a few moments. That describes it perfectly. He wore a shirt with his sleeves rolled up, the top buttons undone, as if to advertise his hulking muscular build. His hair was black with threads of silver that made him look both youthful but with the perfect mix of maturity and experience.

When he looked at me, I felt... seen. It was as if he was interested in me for more than a job. At certain points during the interview, it felt like a date.

"Let's say I had certain thoughts about the brief conversation," I mutter. "But I'm

certain I was just getting carried away. It means nothing. I know better than to feed those fires. It can't lead anywhere good. I needed a job. He saw through my lie. The end."

"Methinks thou doth protest too much."

"Even if you were right, what do you expect me to do? Rock up to his offices in Century City? 'Hey, Mr. CEO, my roommate thinks we had some chemistry earlier, so I'm thinking you should take me on a date.'"

"It'd be easier than getting a job."

"Urgh, no. I'd rather be poor than be some rich guy's plaything for cash."

"Thenurgh, you're crazy."

Meatball purrs as if to agree with Tasha.

"If that makes me crazy, I don't want to be sane."

"I've just never heard you like this before."

"Likewhat?"

"Like you're interested in a guy."

I turn off the soldering iron and raise my goggles. "Tash, maybe you've got a point, okay? There was a certain... vibe. And at the end, when he got close, I won't lie. It was quite something. But it doesn't mean anything; I'm never going to see him again."

There was a moment right at the end when I thought he was going to come after me. My heart was pounding from the sudden physical contact, and I was certain there'd been a glimmer of interest in his dark brown eyes, but he didn't. Life goes on.

“Hey, relax, I'm just busting your lady balls.”

“I need to get a job. That's the bottom line. I need to make rent, somehow.”

“I told you, I don't mind loaning you an extra month.”

“I know you don't, and you're the best friend in the whole freaking state, but I don't want to be a leech.”

“You're not a leech.”

She's nice to say that, but how else am I supposed to describe myself when I take and take and don't give back? I borrowed one month already after the restaurant closed, and I lost my job. Since then, I've applied for dozens of positions, but I've had no luck. When I saw the ad for Russo Multimedia Group, I knew I had to give it a shot.

I shouldn't have lied. Or, if I did, I should've lied better.

“I need to get back to work,” Tasha says. “Should I pick up a pizza on the way home?”

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“Sure, that sounds nice. But make sure to add it to the bill.”

“Will you stop? When you’re uber rich from your jewelry, you can pay me back.”

“Thanks for believing in me.”

“Always.”

She ends the call. Meatball hops down from the windowsill and rubs against my leg. I pick him up, kissing his cute, grumpy face. “I shouldn’t have told him about The Vultures. But he was all up in my business, and I got flustered. That doesn’t mean I like him, though, right?”

Meatball whines. It almost sounds like he’s saying, You’re kidding yourself.

Maybe I am. The second I walked in there and felt those dark eyes on me, my body responded, a layer of sweat beading on my skin that made me wish I’d worn something more appropriate. But the call for the interview had come sooner than expected. I just threw something on and drove my jalopy car to Century City.

When the doorbell rings, I put Meatball down. It’s probably a package for Tasha. Her boyfriend is always sending her stuff. It’s sweet.

I don’t even bother to look through the peephole, which is a mistake. When I open the door, I immediately try to slam it shut.

Terror grips me as I process who I have just seen. A mess of fear and guilt and shame

tightens in my chest.

Mason sticks his boot in the door's way, grinning maniacally. I thought I'd escaped Mason, escaped the Vultures. I thought I'd escaped what I'd done: who I was when I was with them. The fear never quits, but lately, I'd let myself feel just a flicker of hope.

What an idiot.

Mason is tall, wide, with a thick brown beard and wild tangled hair. He wears his Vulture leather jacket, as usual. "There are two of my boys downstairs, hot stuff," he says. "If you don't let me in, I might have to ask them to join us. You know me, I'm an enlightened man, but they might take liberties which turn... interesting. Especially when they see what you're wearing."

"Go to hell."

"I'll drag you there with me. I think you'll find it less comfortable than I do."

"Is that supposed to make you sound tough?" I hiss, but I can't completely mask the shiver of dread in my voice.

He pushes the door open, leaving me no choice but to back up.

I need to grab Meatball and get out of here, then find somewhere to hide. Mason ducks under the doorframe and hooks his thumbs through his belt loops. The hilt of a knife sticks up from his waistband, but I don't see a gun. He's an ex-con and only wears a pistol when he needs it. With me, he's probably calculated that a knife is enough.

Meatball hisses at him, his hackles rising.

“Hey, little fella. I could make a nice hat out of you.”

“If you touch him, I’ll break your jaw.”

“So feisty, just like your mother. But I know you, Evie. That scared little squeak in your voice gives you away.”

“What do you want, Mason?”

“A coffee would be a start.”

“Please—I’ve got nothing to give you.”

“Begging, that’s more like it.”

“I just want to live my life. I just want to forget.”

He tsks. “You must not have heard the big news. I’m the new president of The Vultures now. Which means I’ve got the power to take back what rightfully belongs to me: you. Pack a bag. I’m taking you home. We’ve got work to do.”

“I’d rather die than work with you ever again.”

He snorts. “You say that like it’d be difficult to arrange.”

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“Why can’t you just let me live my life?”

He unsheathes the knife with atsknoise. Meatball whines. The blade is so thick, I can see my reflection in it, register the terror in my eyes.

“I’ll give you two minutes. Say goodbye to the kitty.”

There’s no way I’m leaving Meatball behind... and I can’t go with Mason. I can’t go back to that life. But am I willing to risk getting stabbed?

“You’re not going to hurt me,” I say.

“Things are different now. I can’t afford to be soft. I told my fellas I was bringing our master jeweler home.”

“Fine. But I’ll need more than two minutes.”

“Tick-tock.”

He follows me into the bedroom. I take my suitcase from under the bed, nerves causing my hands to shake.

“Drop that knife,” somebody growls from behind us, “or I’ll drop you.”

It takes a moment for me to register who it is. Am I dreaming? It sounds like Mr. Russo.

I turn. Dom Russo stands in the hallway, a gun aimed at Mason. Mason attempts to make his laugh sound convincing, but I know him. He's crapping his pants.

Dom looks different than he did in the interview. A cold exterior concealing a layer of burning rage. He looks ready to kill. "Last chance."

Mason drops the knife, raising his hands. "Whatever you say, big man."

Dom springs forward and slams the barrel of the gun across Mason's mouth. He grunts and flies across the room, crashing into the wall. Dom roars and kicks him twice in the stomach, his chest heaving as he glares down at the biker.

"You're lucky you caught me in my thirties," Dom snarls. "Or your brains would be splattered all over this wall, you lowlife." One hand on his pistol, he reaches into his pocket and takes out his cell.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Calling the cops."

"You can't?—"

Footsteps come down the hallway.

"Boss?" one of them calls.

Dom gestures at me to hide behind the bed, then presses himself against the door, the gun still aimed at Mason. But Mason isn't in any state to fight. He cradles his stomach, his breath wheezing.

A Vulture I don't recognize appears in the doorway. I still haven't moved, I realize

too late. It's like I'm rooted to the spot. Seeing Mason like this is surreal. Any second, it could all go wrong. Mason will hurt Dom. Mason will make him pay.

"Where's Mason?" the Vulture demands.

Dom springs into action, punching the man in the nose with the barrel of the gun. He wrestles him into the hallway, out of sight. There's a crash and a bang, and a photo of me and Mom falls from the wall, the frame shattering. Dom reappears with blood flecking his face.

"Now, everyone's going to stay calm while I call the cops."

"You can't," I say.

Mason laughs throatily. "Little princess won't allow that."

"Shut your mouth or I'll put a bullet in it." Dom looks at me. "Why not?"

Because of the past. Because of my sins, but I will not tell him that. "You just... can't, Mr. Russo. Please."

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“If I’m not calling the cops, then you’re coming with me. Now.”

“I can’t?—”

“It wasn’t a question. It’s that or the cops.”

Meatball leaps onto the bed, then leaps into my arms, shaking. Dom’s expression softens for a second, a moment so fast I wonder if I’ve imagined it. From the hallway, one man groans. “Brothke mah fuckinth jawth.”

“Fine,” I say. “I’ll let you know where to drop me.”

He steps forward and loops his arm around me, pressing his hand into my side. Meatball whines and pushes his face against my chest. In the hallway, I step over the bruised and battered Vultures.

“We’ll find you,” Mason yells after us. “We’ll always find you, Evie. And you, Mr. Russo.”

Dom pauses, turns back, his hand trembling as he holds his pistol. Do CEOs always carry guns? When he stares down the hallway as if contemplating executing all three men, he doesn’t look like a CEO.

He looks like the man I used to dream about when I was a kid, wishing that some fairytale hero would ride into mine and Mom’s lives and rescue us. But I’m too old for fairytales, and just because he saved me, that doesn’t mean I trust him.

As he drags me from the apartment, a memory strikes me with the force of a sucker punch. I'm sitting on the floor of a garage, tears streaking down my cheeks, as Mason looms over me with a vicious look on his face, "Just one more job, Evie, just one more job..."

But it was never just one more job.

## CHAPTER 3

### DOM

They don't know who I am. They don't know what they're saying. Do they think I fear some two-bit biker gang? The urge to kill these men is almost overwhelming, a clash of violence that almost engulfs me.

"Dom?" Evie whispers, cradling her cat to her chest.

Her presence snaps me out of my trance. I tuck my gun into my waistband and lead her onto the porch. Her neighbors have emerged. Luckily, no one is recording on their cellphones. Yet.

When I see that she's barefoot, I lift her off her feet. She gasps as I carry her down the stairs, my arm tucked her under legs and my other supporting her back.

Putting her in my car, I quickly run to the driver's seat. When I lock the door with a definitive click, she flinches. Her cat leaps into the backseat and purrs loudly, as if in protest.

I drive away, my wheels screeching, gripping the steering wheel hard. This wasn't part of the plan. But it's not as if I regret I was here. And even now, amidst the mayhem, my body hungers for her. She's wearing a tank top and shorts, her pink bra

clearly visible beneath the fabric, her thick delicious legs making me want to squeeze her.

Somehow, I doubt she'd want a blood-spattered monster to touch her, though.

"My friend works in Glendale. If you take me there, I'll figure out what to do."

"Hmm," I grunt.

"I left my cell behind. I need to tell her what happened, so she doesn't come home and find those assholes waiting for her."

"Listen to those sirens, Evie. Those idiots aren't going to hang around. Somebody called the cops... even if you didn't want me to."

She flinches, rubbing her hands anxiously up and down her legs. She's probably thinking of a way to persuade me to let her go. Looking anxious and caged, she seems desperate to escape. But I need to focus on practical concerns, none of which have anything to do with letting her go.

Number one: keep this woman safe. Number two: get more information.

"Why would a two-bit biker gang be interested in you, and why don't you want me to call the cops?"

She groans. "Give me your cell. I need to warn Tash."

"Give me your friend's name and I'll ensure she's safe."

"The Vultures aren't a 'two-bit gang', Dom. That knife wasn't for show."

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“And my gun was?”

“A CEO with a pistol is no match for them. You might’ve got the better of Mason because he was unprepared, but he won’t be next time. And even if you can hire some security agency or whatever, you’ll have to play by the rules. The Vultures won’t.”

“You’re assuming a lot,” I snarl. “You don’t know who or what I am.”

“You’re not just a CEO?”

“I’m the one asking questions here.”

“Just take me to Glendale. I’ll figure out what to do.”

“I’m not putting you in a position to get hurt.”

She reaches for the door, attempting to open it. But it won’t work.

“I’m not going to let you leap out of my car while it’s moving.”

“Where are we going?” she demands.

“While I figure out what’s going on, I’m taking you to my estate in Topanga Canyon.”

She gasps. “What? Why?”

“Because you won’t let me call the cops, and that asshole looked like he was ready to use that knife.”

“But—No, I can’t—I won’t be a prisoner. No freaking way.”

Guilt tugs at me. She doesn’t want to be a prisoner. I don’t want to be a jailer, but I can’t just let her go. If I did that and The Vultures got their hands on her... and I saw her on the news. Evie Davis, bright-eyed and beautiful, killed by those biker bastards, I wouldn’t forgive myself.

I glance at her, attempting to make my expression safe and understanding... if that’s possible. “Then tell me what’s going on. Why are they after you? Why can’t I call the cops?”

She groans, running her hands through her hair. Her braid is coming loose, making her look wild and somehow more attractive. “It’s none of your business.”

“If making it my business keeps you alive, Evie, I’m making it my damn business.”

“Wait, a second...” She looks at me with fresh accusation in her gorgeous eyes. “What were you even doing at my apartment?”

“Right place, wrong time,” I grunt.

“What? That doesn’t even make sense. Are you saying it was a coincidence?”

“If you give me your friend’s name, you don’t need to worry about her.”

“You’re changing the subject.”

“You want answers? Join the club.”

She huffs again. “Tasha Lin.”

I take out my cellphone. “Compose text, Rafe Torress:Rafe, I need a favor. Put a protection detail on Tasha Lin of Apartment 3B, 1446 Laveta Terrace, Echo Park. She works in Glendale. Send text.”

“Who’s Rafe Torress?”

An old friend, a man in a world I left behind a long time ago.

Ignoring her question, I say, “Why are The Vultures after you?”

She folds her arms, squashing those tempting tits together. I try to focus on the road.

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I wonder if she has any idea how attractive she is. In the interview, despite my staring at her captivating perfection, she did not show that she did. It was like she was completely unaware of it, which seems insane to me. How has somebody like her gone through her life without men fighting each other for her attention?

“You can keep asking, but you’re not going to get any answers.”

After a long pause, I snap, “I was at your apartment because you mentioned the Vultures and you sounded terrified, Evie. I could tell you didn’t mean to mention them, but when you did, you looked like you were going to break down. I thought you were in trouble—and I was right.”

She says nothing for a long time, then whispers, “Is this the part where I reveal all my secrets because you’ve given me the most basic explanation?”

I grind my teeth. “Has anybody ever told you how annoying you can be?”

“If you won’t let me go, I’m happy to drive in silence.”

“Fine by me,” I grunt.

Forty minutes later, we’re driving through the isolation of Topanga Canyon. My estate comes into view beneath us as we turn on a small hill. From this rise, I see it all: my estate stretched across the canyon like it belongs here. The glass and stone main house catches the sun, surrounded by terraced gardens, with an infinity pool spilling into the view. Winding paths cut through olive trees and wild sage. It’s quiet, private, exactly how I like it.

Evie strokes her cat, who has fallen asleep in her lap. Neither of us has said a word since we vowed to be silent, but when my property comes into view, she sighs. “Oh, to be rich...”

“You like it?”

“I don’t think I could ‘like’ any prison. Look at those tall walls; look at that big gate. I bet you’ve kept people here as prisoners before.” Bitterness laces her voice.

“That’s a losing bet.”

“So, I’m special, am I?” she says sarcastically.

She is, but I don’t tell her that.

“If you’re ready to start talking, I might not have to keep you here.”

“Might not,” she repeats. “That’s an interesting way to phrase it.”

I pull up outside the gate, lower my window, and brush my thumb against the pad. The gate makes a mechanical whirling noise as it opens onto the pathway that winds toward the main entrance.

“So, if I want to escape, I’ll need to cut off your thumb,” she says.

I smirk at her. “Do you think you’re capable of that?”

She raises an eyebrow with the sassiness I’m already finding addictive. “Don’t tempt me.”

She’s the one who’s tempting me every single second. At several points during the

drive, I've struggled to keep the hunger in me at bay.

I was relieved when her cat clambered into her lap just because it meant I couldn't devour her legs with my eyes, imagine slipping my hand between them, gently pushing them apart, pressing against her sex and discovering if her rejection of me is all for show... or if her body would tell secrets through the wetness of her desire.

These aren't the thoughts I should have at a time like this, but sue me. I'm a man and she's hotter than hell.

The garage opens automatically as I approach, then closes behind us.

"You've got two choices now," I say, as we sit in the semidarkness of the electric lights. "You can come with me to the panic room while I figure out what to do next. Or I'll take you there."

"Takeme there, huh? That sounds like a euphemism. Almost like you don't want to admit what you're doing. You don't want to accept that you're kidnapping me."

"I'm keeping you safe?—"

"If protecting somebody means doing something against their will, is that really protection?"

"Yes."

"Try saying that like you mean it."

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“It’s clear something happened to you, Evie, something that makes you think you can’t trust me?—”

“Cut the psychoanalysis. Just open the door. Let’s get this over with.”

I unlock the door and climb from the car. She immediately throws her door open and runs for the exit, grabbing the handle and turning it violently. It rattles in the frame as she tries to force it open. Turning to me, she shakes her head.

“I was right, then. This is a prison.”

I approach her, my hands at my sides. This is starting to feel wrong. I’ve come too far, though, and if I let her free, The Vultures will be free to do whatever they want to her. I could call Rafe, have him watch her instead. But this feels like my responsibility.

“It won’t be forever,” I say, going to the wall and swiping another pad. A door in the floor clicks and then slides open, revealing a clean, lit staircase. “This is my panic room, more of an underground apartment, really. It has everything you need.”

“What if I made you drag me down there?” she says. “How would that fit with your nice-guy act? Oh, wait, but you’re not a nice guy. I remember what you said. ‘You’re lucky you caught me in my thirties. Or your brains would be splattered all over this wall...’ That’s what you told Mason. Who are you, then, Dom?”

I shake my head. “You’re making this more difficult than it needs to be.”

She carefully lays her cat down, then marches right up to me. “How many women have you brought here? What sick stuff do you do to them?”

“I’m trying to help you.”

“Let me go.”

“Not happening – not yet. This is for your own good.”

“Yeah, keep telling yourself that,” she mutters.

I sigh. “Have it your way.”

She gasps when I lift her off her feet, cradling her to my chest again, my hand greedily sinking into her suppleness as I carry her down the stairs, her cat trailing after us.

When she throws her arms around me, I grunt in surprise. She snaps, “I just don’t want to you to drop me.” As she clings on, I can almost trick myself into believing it’s because she wants to.

Placing her down, I stand at the bottom of the stairs. “I’m going to call my contact and find out what’s going on. If you won’t tell me, he will. I’ll get some food for the cat, too.”

“His name is Meatball,” she says as I turn away.

“I’m going to keep you and Meatball safe.”

“You keep saying that.”

“Because it’s true.”

“If you cared about what I wanted, you’d let me go. And you wouldn’t even think about calling your friend and prying into my past. It’s none of your business.”

I walk up the stairs. “I’d never hurt you, Evie. I’m on your side.”

“Why don’t I believe you, huh?” she says with a hand on her hip.

Back in the garage, I close the trapdoor and move my car so it’s covering the exit.

I close my eyes, take a moment, a breath. She can pretend I’m the bad guy, but if I hadn’t been there earlier, those monsters would’ve taken her. Or she would’ve fought them and that jackass – Mason – would’ve used that knife on her.

Opening my eyes, I call Rafe. It’s time for answers.

## CHAPTER 4

### EVIE

This must be the most luxurious prison anybody has ever been confined to. It’s a five-room apartment with faux-windows which show scenic nature scenes on a loop, snowy mountains dissolving into desert, and then tropical jungle. The lights are warm and feel like sunlight, and there are plenty of plants to give the space an alive feel.

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The kitchen is modern and well-equipped; the cupboards filled with tins and dried goods; the freezer is full of meat and TV dinners. I fill a bowl of water for Meatball, then crack a tin of tuna and set it next to it.

The apartment – no, the prison– has a bedroom, a gym, a study, an open plan living room/kitchen, and an enormous bathroom with a tub and a waterfall shower.

I sit on the couch, turn on the TV and switch it to a news channel. Nothing about the standoff in Echo Park.

Meatball finishes his tuna and leaps onto the coffee table, tilting his head. He whines. He wants his litter tray.

I go into the bedroom and grab a blanket, then fold it up in the bathroom's corner. "This is going to be gross for a while, boy, but it's the best I can do. Don't worry. We won't be here for long. I'll find a way out."

He glares at me.

"Don't look at me like that. Just because he saved me, it doesn't mean I have to be grateful. How many freaking times did I have to tell him to drop me at Glendale?" Meatball purrs as if questioning me. "Sure, I don't know what I would've done after that. What I would've done if they'd gone after Tash. But none of that makes this okay."

In the closet, there are clean clothes in various sizes. It seems this place was designed for a long stay in case of an attack or a natural disaster. With nothing else to do, I

strip naked and hop in the shower.

The water pressure is better than my cruddy apartment's, and the towel feels like heaven, but I don't let myself enjoy it. I quickly dry off and change into a simple T-shirt and shorts combo.

I'm full of energy, pacing, Meatball propped on the back of the couch, watching me.

"Seriously, you need to stop looking at me like that."

I haven't lost my mind. Or, if talking to my cat is a sign that I'm a little cray cray, it's nothing new. Talking to Meatball is like therapy.

"I didn't like when he carried me down the stairs. I only wrapped my arms around him because I didn't want to fall."

Meatball tilts his head.

Ugh.

Maybe a teensy part of me liked it, a forbidden piece of me I can't allow myself to acknowledge.

With nothing else to do, I sit on the couch and stare at the TV, conserving my energy for when it's time to escape.

Three hours later, I hear a mechanical noise from the top of the staircase, followed by footsteps. Dom walks into the living room with a large bag. He places it down. "Litter tray – cat food. And some supplies."

I stand, offering him a fake bow. "Thank you, my gracious lord."

I need to get him away from the staircase. I didn't hear the trapdoor buzz closed behind him, which means it might be open... What if he hasn't locked the garage door either? Maybe he thinks that now he's got me down here, I'm going to play nice.

Annoyingly, Meatball approaches him, purring and arching his back. Dom leans down and strokes him.

"Friendly cat."

Not usually, no. It took him several days to go anywhere near Tasha, and we live in the same apartment. I don't tell Dom this.

Dom walks into the room. He's changed into a T-shirt and sweatpants, both pieces of clothing hugging his muscular frame more than his business attire did. He showered too, washing the flecks of blood from his face.

"So, Mason is your mother's ex-boyfriend. You were working with The Vultures. After your mother passed away – and I'm sorry to hear that, Evie, truthfully – you didn't want to work with The Vultures anymore. You ran, and they've been hunting you down ever since."

I try not to show my surprise. "I guess money really can buy anything. But not me, Dom."

"This was easy enough to learn, but I still don't know why you refused to let me call the cops. Though I know the Vultures employed you in one of their stores, I'm not sure what you were really doing. I also don't understand what you think would've happened today if I hadn't been there."

"You still haven't told me why you were there."

He looks away. “I told you—you sounded like you were in danger.”

“Is that the only reason? Because, let’s face it, following a woman home after she drops a vague hint about being concerned about a biker gang isn’t exactly normal, is it? It’s not like you knew they were going to show up. What was your plan... to keep following me, day after day, until you could play the knight in shining armor?”

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The more I speak, the tighter his expression becomes. He looks pissed, and he's smoldering again. It seems to be his signature look.

My attraction to him annoys me, so I go on the offensive again.

"Do you have a habit of stalking women? Or is that your kink?"

"You're wrong," he says sternly.

"Maybe this isn't a panic room; maybe it's a murder dungeon."

He closes the distance between us in a heartbeat, our bodies pressed close, just like at the interview. My body thrums with tension. My nipples tickle teasingly against the T-shirt. And far too late, I realize I'm not wearing a bra.

"Are we going to pretend you didn't want me to save you?" he snaps.

"Could you carry the cat food into the kitchen, please?" I ask, my voice breathier than I would like.

He shrugs and turns away. I get the sudden, strange urge to reach out and smooth my hand down his sculpted back. Stupid, stupid!

He picks up the bag and walks toward the kitchen, Meatball trailing after him, drawn by the scent of the food. I hope, and not Dom.

Once the staircase is unguarded, I debate my options. Running will mean leaving

Meatball behind. But just because I can't call the cops on The Vultures – Mason has made sure of that, the blackmailing freak – it doesn't mean I can't call them on Dom.

I can go into his house, find the phone, and call the cops. Dom won't hurt Meatball. He might have taken me, but he did it to protect me?—

Jeez, what am I even thinking?

I run for the stairs, clamber up them, then jump out the hatch and go for the door.

Locked. Again.

Dom runs up behind me, grabs my shoulders, and turns me to face him. He looks like a feral animal... and I like it. I know I shouldn't. He slides his hands down my body and takes my hips in his hands as if he's wanted to do it since I walked into his office earlier today.

"You asked why I was at your apartment," he growls. "The answer: because you're the sort of woman who makes a man feel drunk. You're drop-dead gorgeous, with curves that make me feel alive. You can sass, you can run, but you can't hide from the fact you want this too."

"I don't," I whisper.

"Say that like you mean it."

"I... duh-don't."

Speaking becomes difficult when he slides his hand between my legs. What the heck does he think he's doing? He pushes against my sex through the fabric of the shorts. I gasp, then it's like my body takes over, my hips moving against him.

“You want this,” he says. “You think you need to be strong, to run, to resist, but you don’t – you can’t. You fucking need this.”

As he grinds his hand against my body, I believe him. I grind my core against his touch. Suddenly, for far too many confusing seconds, it all makes sense.

I grab onto his chest, sink my nails into his solid frame, letting out a heated moan. I’ve never felt pleasure like this before. I’ve never tasted this flavor of temptation.

“I followed you because I had to, because I knew you were going to be in my dreams tonight. I followed you because I was rock hard the second I saw you, Evie.”

He slips his hand beneath the shorts, gliding toward my naked lust. I almost let him. My mind is confused, but my body is certain. I want him to touch me, my needy pleasure point, my entrance. I’m getting wet. Fast.

He reaches all the way in, smoothing his hand over my folds, my tunnel.

I can’t let this happen.

“Stop,” I snap. “I mean it. Get your hands off me.”

He takes a step away, shuddering all over. “You’re irresistible,” he groans.

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“You can’t tuh-take me and then tuh-touch me.” I focus, hating the stutter, hating the fact he can apparently read my desire.

“If you want it, I can.”

“I don’t.”

He holds up his hand, showing me his glimmering fingertip.

“You’re gross,” I say, but I don’t mean it. There’s something about my wetness on his hand that turns me on even more.

“Sure I am, Evie,” he says sarcastically.

“Just... go, okay? Just leave me alone. Let me go orgo. Those are your choices.”

“I’m doing this?—”

“For my safety? Change the record.”

He steps aside, gesturing to the trapdoor. “Don’t make me carry you again.”

This time, I walk down the stairs myself. Not because I want to do what he says, but because I know if he touches me again, I might lose it.

Back in the living room, I sit on the couch, squeezing my legs together as my core pulses.

I'm not the most experienced person with sex, but this chemistry can't be normal, can it? It's like I'm hungry for him. His attention. His power. His truths. But just because my body is playing messed-up games, it doesn't mean my heart is suddenly invested in this virtual stranger.

He closes the trapdoor, leaving me alone again. I take a few minutes to calm myself down – or try to – and then go through the bag he left.

Cat food. Litter tray. Fresh produce for the refrigerator...

And a cellphone, with a single text on it.

Dom: This is a jail broken cellphone which can only text and call this number. If you need to contact me, use this.

"Maybe this is my way out," I muse, as Meatball watches me. "Maybe I can use his desire against him."

Meatball purrs doubtfully.

"I don't want him. I just... slipped. That's all."

Meatball tilts his head as if to say, You're not kidding anybody.

"Fine, maybe there's some physical... something there, Meatball. But that's all it is—if it's even that. And that doesn't mean I'm going to spill my deep. dark secrets."

Shame clings to me as my memories flood with Mason, with the Vultures and their demands and the life they tried to force on me.

## CHAPTER 5

DOM

Rafe and I sit on the back porch that overlooks my large garden. It's been several hours since the standoff in Echo Park. Rafe sips from his glass of whiskey. He's a tall man with a sinewy strength, his black hair combed back, and the sides shaved short, a flashy gold watch on his wrist.

"I've managed to stop the cops from turning this into a missing-persons case," Rafe says.

"How?"

"I assured them that Evie Davis was safe and explained to them they didn't need to know the details. I know you want to distance yourself from this life, but it has its uses."

"Hmm."

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He laughs gruffly. "I know you'd rather eat a bullet than admit that."

"Just because I left it behind, don't think I assume I'm better than you. I committed several crimes today. Assault, kidnapping, false imprisonment. She's in the panic room right now. Alive, safe, but not exactly here because she wants to be."

"What does she want?"

For a moment, I think about what happened: the slickness of her body, the connection. Then I focus on the present. "To drop her in Glendale with no cash and no plan. To go it alone against The Vultures. God knows what would've happened to her if I wasn't there. Have you got any more information about what work she was doing with them?"

"No, just whispers through the grapevine that she was affiliated with them and they've been hunting her since she ran."

"That prick brought out the old me. I wanted to kill him."

"The location wasn't ideal. I'm glad you didn't."

"Me too," I admit reluctantly. "Any sign of this Mason asshole?"

"The Vultures' hideout is mysteriously empty."

"They might know who I am. Mason said 'Mr. Russo' with emphasis. Maybe they've learned their lesson and they're going to back off."

“Or maybe they’re hiding and waiting for their chance,” Rafe muses.

“Find them for me, Rafe. I can’t let her go until I know she’s safe.”

I look at the horizon. The sky is bleeding red as dusk approaches. I feel Rafe looking at me like he used to, back when we were close friends, before I chose my path and he stuck to his.

“And here I was thinking you left the life behind,” Rafe says with a smirk.

“Don’t make a joke out of this. I went on the straight and narrow. I haven’t committed a crime in years, until today, until those pricks forced me to.”

I rarely even think about the mafia, about Father, about any of it.

After a pause, Rafe says, “Are you sure you want to let her go, even after we handle this?”

“I’ve never kidnapped anyone. I’m not some psycho.”

“No shit. But I’ve never seen you like this before. And following her? What made you do that?”

“I was scared for her. She mentioned The Vultures.”

That’s not what I told Evie when I was touching her in the garage. I told her it was because I wanted her. Maybe that’s closer to the truth.

“If I hadn’t been there, they would’ve done whatever they wanted with her.”

“Women are hurt every day, Dom. I don’t see you going out of your way to help

them.”

“Have you got the photos?” I ask, changing the subject.

“Yeah,” he says, reaching into his jacket pocket and handing me the Polaroids of her apartment.

“And her friend?” I say.

“Safe.” Rafe grins. “And spunky as hell.”

I look askance at him. He shrugs. “She’s an interesting lady.”

“As long as she’s safe.”

“I’ll make sure she’s safe—don’t worry about that. Maybe the Vultures might think they can get to Evie through her. But that’d be a big mistake.”

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I look at the first photo of her workbench, stunned by what I see. Scattered next to her tools are several impressively intricate and beautiful rings and necklaces. “She made these?”

“Yeah. Tash said Evie’s addicted to her hobby.”

“She’s got serious talent. This is impressive.” I pause as Rafe smirks at me. “Stop looking at me like that. It’s the truth.”

“I’m not some relationship guru, but if you want this girl to like you, you might want to think about how complicated it could get, you know, with her being your prisoner’n all.”

“Remind yourself of that with Tasha Lin, Rafe.”

In return, all I get is a patented Rafe Torres shrug at my words.

“I have said nothing about a relationship,” I add. “She has talent. That’s a fact.”

I flick through the rest of the photos, seeing a snap of Evie and her mother on the wall. Her mother has the same eyes, the kind that penetrate.

“How did her mother die?”

“Car crash. The police report was vague. Seems like an accident, though.”

I nod. “Thanks, Rafe. Keep me posted.”

He stands, finishing his whiskey. “We’ll find The Vultures and make them see sense. Then you’ll be free to let Evie go... and maybe ask her for a date, eh?”

“I don’t date.”

“It’s never too late to start.”

Once Rafe has left, I set into the living room, admiring her jewelry again.

I take out the burner cellphone that’s paired with the one I gave Evie and send her a text.

Dom: Is everything okay down there?

Evie: Define ‘okay’.

Dom: You’re healthy and safe.

Evie: If that’s your definition, then yes, everything is ‘okay’. But it’s a very flimsy definition.

Dom: Rafe told me that your friend is safe.

Evie: Great. Now, do me a favor and leave me alone.

This stings more than it has any right to.

Dom: You weren’t saying that earlier.

I type, but then delete the message.

She's safe and protected. That's all that matters.

I hit the gym for a workout, then take a shower. As the hot water slips down my body, my thoughts return to the garage, to the sensation of her warm, welcoming sex, her needy nub, the wetness of her entrance.

Closing my eyes, I relive the moment, remembering her panting breaths. The hottest part is the way her hips moved like she was chasing the pleasure, even if we both knew it was wrong. She couldn't help herself; neither could I.

I can't stop myself now either. My hand wraps around my dick, my tip aching as seed rushes up my firm shaft. I quickly grind my hand up and down, imagining it's the warmth of her tunnel caressing me.

My mind combines memories: the way she bit her lip in the interview, her breathing as I touched her in the garage, her hips rocking. I imagine her on her back, my staff buried in her curvaceousness, her hips bucking as she shifts against me, as consumed with pleasure as I am.

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“This is wrong,” I imagine her moaning. “But it feels so right.”

I gasp, clawing my free hand against my chest as if it were hers, and pump my hand so fast that my dick feels like it’s on fire because her tight pussy feels like it’s wrapped around me, coaxing my release. “Fuck,” I roar, the only time I can remember actually talking while jacking myself off. The fantasy is so vivid.

A hot steam of come erupts from my end, gushing out of me in what feels like an endless wave. I collapse against the wall of the shower, trembling as more and more seed escapes me.

Finally, I open my eyes, staring at the shower wall.

Guilt grips me.

I wash myself and then sit on my bed in my towel, the burner cellphone in my hand, feeling like a lovestruck teenager as I debate texting her again. But her last message is impossible to ignore.

She wants me to leave her alone... she claims.

It’s my responsibility to back off. I’m older. I’m richer. The power is mine here.

I throw the cellphone to the other side of the bed.

## CHAPTER 6

EVIE

When evening arrives, the interactive ‘windows’ turn to nighttime scenes, and the lights automatically dim. I sit in bed with the jail broken cellphone in my hand, Meatball seeming restless because I am.

Every time I check the phone, Meatball looks at me accusatorially.

“I know I said I wanted him to leave me alone, but it’s been hours...and not even a single text? How am I supposed to seduce him – to trick him – if he ghosts me?”

Meatball yawns. He’s not buying the ‘trick him’ angle at all. The way I see it, that’s my best shot to get upstairs and find a phone, call the cops, tell them some devastatingly handsome billionaire is keeping me prisoner and making me confront feelings I shouldn’t be having.

“Let’s say I gave into these feelings, then what? Do you seriously think I could have a future with a man who started as my kidnapper? It’s doomed... but that doesn’t mean we have to accept this situation.”

When I speak with Meatball, I sometimes entertain the more unlikely aspects of my life: a dream jewelry business, becoming rich... and now, an impossible relationship. It doesn’t mean I actually think anything could happen.

I almost drop the phone when three dots appear on the screen. He’s typing a message. I hold my breath... and then let it out when no message appears and the three dots disappear.

That means he typed something, then deleted it.

It’s almost midnight. Maybe he can’t sleep. Or maybe he’s already slept, but he woke

after dreaming about me. Traitor tingles attack my body when I imagine him obsessing over me.

Losing my cool, I shoot off a text.

Evie: If you've got something to say, say it.

Dom: Excuse me, Evie?

Evie: You keep typing and then deleting a message. I can see the dots on my phone. YOUR phone.

Dom: That would imply you're staring at the text thread, waiting for me to message you.

"He thinks I'm staring at the phone because I want him. He's so deluded. It's because I need to do something. I need a plan. A way out."

Meatball looks like he's tiring of my delusional justifications.

When I don't reply, he sends another message.

Dom: I checked on your apartment. I saw your workbench. You've got serious talent, Evie. Those pieces were exceptional.

I love the compliment, but I can't let him mess with my head.

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Evie: Was this before or after you went digging into my past? Into my mom?

Dom: I'm sorry about your mother. Truly. She was far too young, and a car crash was no way to go.

Two police officers' arrival at my door with the news devastated me. They think an animal ran into the road. The weather conditions made it so that when she slammed on the brakes, she skidded and crashed into a tree. Mom would never run over an animal, even if it meant sacrificing her own life.

"I don't care about his condolences," I tell a perpetually unconvinced Meatball. "Or his compliments. But if I'm going to get out of here, I need to play with him. I need to make him believe."

When Meatball jumps off the bed and leaves the room, it's the closest to 'F you' my kitty can get.

It doesn't change the fact that this is a serviceable plan. Considering the position I'm in, serviceable is the most I can reasonably expect.

Evie: Thank you. I couldn't believe it when the cops told me. She was the kindest woman I've ever known. They think an animal darted out in front of her and she slammed on her brakes... They said she should've run it over, but she was incapable of doing that. She wouldn't have been able to live with herself.

Dom: Sometimes, the ugly things are the most necessary.

Evie: It doesn't take a genius to figure out what you're hinting at, Dom.

Dom: We're going in circles, Evie.

He's right, but it's annoying he thinks he has any right to get bored with this conversation. That's one tick in the douchebag column. I'm going to need way more of those if I want to have a chance against the 'obsessed' and 'unreasonably interested' column.

Evie: Seriously though, thank you for your kind words about Mom.

Dom: How long were she and Mason together?

Evie: I thought your contact would have told you that.

Dom: I can hear your sassiness even through a text. How does that work?

I smile, then quickly wipe it away.

"I shouldn't care that he likes my so-called sassiness," I say, then remember I'm speaking to an empty room. Somehow, talking to myself makes me feel crazier than talking to my cat.

It's true. I shouldn't like it. But the protective shield I put up against the world is the traits I'm proudest of. I'm a fighter, even when my only way to 'fight' is to run.

When I don't answer, Dom goes on.

Dom: My contact found photos of them and some posts on social media, but no indication about how long they were together.

Evie: Long enough for me to hate Mason. Long enough for him to leave bruises on her beautiful skin. Long enough for me to fear him. Is that good enough for you?

Dom: I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you.

"He has no idea..." Dammit. There I go again. "Meatball, boy, please get in here."

Meatball whines as he appears in the doorway.

"I know you're tired, but momma is talking to herself like she's lost what little sanity she had. If I'm going to be cuckoo, at least let me be a cuckoo cat lady."

He jumps onto the bed with a distinct air of reluctance, curls into a ball, and closes one eye while keeping the other half-open to look at me.

"He does not know how silly that sounds. He doesn't want toupsetme—but he can kidnap me. Nuts, right?"

Meatball purrs.

Dom: I know what you're thinking. I don't want to upset you... but I've taken you. I know that seems like a contradiction, but if I were to justify myself, it would mean more stuck-record talk.

He means he'd tell me, for the umpteenth time, that he's doing this for my safety. Perhaps that's true, but he admitted to something in the garage before he slipped his hand into my underwear, before he pushed his firm touch against my sex and made me sizzle all over.

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It's time I steered the conversation in that direction. My core aches. My body betrays me. My mind, I assure myself, is my weapon. My body can do whatever it wants.

Evie: I get you. But let's not pretend that's all that's going on here. I haven't forgotten what you said to me in the garage. You wanted me when you saw me. The truth, Mr. Kidnapper? I wanted you too.

I remind myself: this is part of the P-L-A-N, nothing more.

Three dots – disappear – three dots again...

When no message arrives, I type another.

Evie: I can't believe what we did in the garage. It was so hot. I didn't mean to let it get that far, but when you touched me, it was like I lost control. I had to tell you to stop, because if I didn't do it then, I wouldn't have been able to. My body was sore all over. It still is, thinking about it, about you, about what we did... and what we might do again.

This is all a trick, right?

So why the heck is my body aching like every nerve is burning up in wildfires of lust?

I go on.

Evie: It's so lonely down here. Meatball is asleep. I've got nobody to keep me

company. What are you doing? Are you still on the estate? Or have you left me all by myself?

A long pause, more appearing and disappearing dots, and finally he texts.

Dom: I'm here. I'm trying to sleep. It's difficult.

Evie: Is that because you're thinking about me?

I lean back, way too comfortable, crossing my legs as sweat slides down the back of my neck and my inner thighs throb insistently.

Dom: Yes. I also wasn't born yesterday.

Evie: What's that supposed to mean?

Dom: Do you expect me to believe you've gone from hating me to missing me in the space of a few hours?

Evie: When you held up your hand and showed me how wet I was for you, it was the hottest thing I've ever seen. THAT'S what I believe.

I need to chill... I want to reach down and stroke my hand along my folds.

Dom: When I felt how wet you were for me, I almost lost it, too.

My heart beats quicker.

Evie: 'Lost it.' What do you mean by that?

Dom: I mean, I almost tore off your shorts to reveal your perfect wetness. Almost laid

you on the hood of my car and opened your thick, curvy legs.

This is moving beyond a plan. The muscles in my thighs burn from squeezing them so hard. My hand twitches as though screaming at me to touch myself.

Evie: Then what would you do after that?

“This is part of the plan,” I whisper aloud, but the shiver in my voice sounds unconvincing, even to my own ears. “This is about escape.”

Dom: Then I’d bring my rock hard cock to your soppiness. I’d drive in, push deep, fill your body and make you tremble with passion. I’d start slowly, sliding out and then in, making you feel every moment of pleasure. Before I even considered cumming inside of you, I would need to feel your tight pussy pulsing around my cock and your juices flowing down my dick.

I stand up, pace the bedroom. My body is shaking. I need to get a grip.

If I can keep calm, I can use this to my advantage.

Melting into the lust is just too tempting.

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Evie: Are you going to just tell me about it... or come down here and do it?

### CHAPTER 7

DOM

My hand wraps around my stiffness as I stare at her message. At her challenge.

There's a lifetime of hunger flowing through me. I'm aware this could be a trick, a way to get me down there in another bid to escape.

But as I stroke my cock, all I can think about are her gorgeous features, her wide, excited eyes, the curve of her breasts, hips, and supple ass.

Evie: Dom? It's not polite to leave a girl hanging.

Dom: I know what you're doing.

I type, then delete.

Dom: I know this is a trick.

I type, then delete.

Dom: I know you're going to try to escape.

I type... deleting the message again. Standing, I release a shuddering breath. I've

never been a man who thinks with my cock.

Instead of replying, I throw on a pair of shorts and walk through the large house to the garage. I move my car back a few feet to make room for the trapdoor, knowing I should stop.

This. Is. Wrong.

Why can't I get that through my head?

Walking down the stairs, my cock doesn't wilt, not even for a second. The fantasy of Evie is too vibrant in my thoughts. The memory of her wetness makes me ache all over. I'm salivating at the thought of her.

She must've heard the trapdoor. Seated on the couch, she eagerly expects my arrival with her legs tucked up beneath her, her nipples poking through the fabric of her shirt. She's unbraided her hair, letting it fall wildly around her shoulders.

Her eyebrows rise in a challenge.

I know what game you're playing. I think about voicing, but that would destroy the illusion.

She stands, her breasts bouncing beneath the shirt, the movement obvious by her hard nipples. Her expression is the same as in the interview, sassiness laced with nerves. In this context, it makes me even harder.

I rush across the room and sink my hands greedily into her hips. I refuse to believe her gasping moan is forced. When I kiss her and she responds with passion, I know it's real. Her tongue finds mine and we collapse onto the couch.

Kissing passionately, I drive my crotch against hers, my manhood pushing through my shorts. I can feel her sex through our clothes. She grinds against me, her hands moving over my back.

I glide my hand up her leg and slip my touch down towards her underwear, but then she pulls away.

“I want to make you feel good,” she moans.

My heart pounds hard in my chest, my lust making my manhood feel like it could explode, as I try to watch her carefully for any signs of escape. She could make a break for it at any moment.

She rubs me over my shorts, her eyes fixed on me, biting her lip like she did in the interview. “You feel so fucking horny,” she says. “So... hard.”

The hitch in her voice hints at her inexperience. Her cheeks are even more flushed than they were in the interview.

“Wait,” I groan. “Evie.”

She pouts. “What if I don’t want to wait?”

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She keeps rubbing me, her hand moving faster, stroking the clear outline of my aching cock through my shorts. When she pulls my pants down and my cock springs up, her eyes get that wide, irresistible look.

Her shock isn't fake. "You're huge," she moans. "Fuck, Dom."

She wraps her hand around my naked cock, stroking from my pre-come-slick tip to my base, spreading the wetness all over my length. I almost roar as she strokes, owning this moment, owning me.

I thought I was in charge. I was wrong.

"Wuh..."

Wait, but it's like I can't produce the word. I let out a shuddering groan instead.

She moves her hand faster, spreading the precome with a slick sound.

"I want what you said in your text." She breathes heavily. "But not here – not as your prisoner..."

There it is, a clear sign this is a trick.

"Let's go to your room." She leans down, then nervously kisses the base of my cock, sending a shockwave through my entire being. "Not here, baby. Somewhere I feel like your equal... somewhere I can moan and scream and not upset Meatball." She kisses me again, stroking all the while. "Let's go..."

Her cat whines, walking into the room. She lets go of my cock and turns to face him.

This is my only chance to break the spell. I stand and quickly pull up my pants, trembling with the effort. Part of me wants to ignore the voice of reason. To take her upstairs and let her suck my dick with her perfectly kissable lips, then slip into her soaked pussy, fuck her like she deserves, then let her try to escape.

She stands, facing me. “Why are you getting dressed? I want to see you again. Don’t make me beg.”

“Stop,” I growl. “I know what you’re doing. I’ve let it go too far already.”

“What do you think I’m doing?”

“Trying to get upstairs. Trying to escape. I can’t blame you... but I won’t take advantage of you.”

She bites her lip again, approaches me, then presses down on my shorts. “What if I want you to take advantage? What if I need it?”

I grip her shoulders, push her away. And that’s when I snap and lose it for a second. I turn her so she’s facing the wall, pushing my manhood against her round ass. She moans and shifts against me. It’s real, but that doesn’t mean there isn’t an ulterior motive. She moves her plump, luscious ass up and down.

“I love how thick you are,” I growl. “So curvy – so full.”

I grip her hips and pull her firmly against me.

“I could fuck you right here and you’d cream all over my dick. You’d tell yourself it’s part of your plan, but that’d be a damn lie. You’d come all over my cock and I’d

leave you in a shivering, sweaty, sopping heap, shaking for hours as you think about the multiple orgasms.”

She looks at me over her shoulder. “Take me upstairs.”

“No.”

I stumble away from her, my head a mess, my voice too loud.

“I had mafia princesses throwing themselves at me for years. Then it was every woman who wanted a story about bagging a SEAL. Now I’m a billionaire, and the cycle continues. I’ve never given into that fakeness. I’ve never been willfully blind like so many men I know. I will not start now.”

My bad knee aches, my back twinging, as if mentioning my SEAL career is enough to awaken the old injuries.

She gasps. “The mafia? A SEAL? Is that who you are – a mob guy turned wannabe good guy turned billionaire?”

“I’m a man trying to do the right thing. Your plan is obvious: to lure me upstairs and seduce me. I’m not going to fall for it.”

She gestures at my crotch, my manhood still hard. “Are you sure about that?”

“Is this you admitting it’s a trick?”

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“Perhaps it’s not as simple as you’re trying to make out. Maybe there are nuances.”

“Yeah... like you telling yourself it’s all a trick, but really, you’re as horny as I am.”

“If that’s true, let’s go.” She nods to the staircase. “We’ll leave Meatball in peace and give into our desire, and whatever happens, happens.”

“You’re here for your?—”

“Safety, safety, safety,” she chants, nodding. “Yeah, you might’ve said that once or twice. What about my sanity?”

“Coming down here was a mistake,” I growl.

“I asked you to.”

“As part of a plan.” I turn away.

“Did you really resist all those women?” she asks, a hitch in her voice. Is that hope I detect?

I turn back. She’s got her hands clasped in front of her, looking so... Evie: that special combination of worry and conviction.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I never wanted something fake. In my first life, they only wanted me because of who I was. My second, it was my job. In my third, it’s my cash. And with you, it’s freedom. I’ll never know if anyone actually wants me. This isn’t self-pity, you asked. It’s just something I live with, a cold fact I accept.”

“Haven’t you ever stopped to think that somebody’s job and status in life is always a big part of why anyone wants anybody? Maybe you’re not as special as you think.”

“And maybe you don’t think you’re special, but you are.”

She sucks in a shocked breath, her eyes flitting to the doorway, as if my words have made her care more than she can allow herself and the need for escape is more desperate because of it.

“Your plan would’ve failed. You wouldn’t have escaped even if I took you upstairs.”

“Then take me anyway,” she says, and I know she means it.

“I can’t.”

I leave the panic room, close the trapdoor, then move the car into place. I don’t get out of the car straightaway. Instead, I sit here, breathing hard, trying to convince myself I’m still the one in control.

But down there, when she was touching me, she was the boss.

## CHAPTER 8

### EVIE

Itoss and turn. The sheets tangled around me, struggling to settle after what happened.

Meatball isn't suffering from any similar problems. He's claimed the top of the closet, sprawled out, and is snoring contentedly.

My thoughts return to the so-called seduction. When he began touching me, I knew I had to stop him. I knew I wouldn't be able to take charge if I let him slip his hand between my legs.

Is that what I did, really – take charge? It didn't feel like that. Even when I freed his huge manhood, stroked and kissed him. It felt like he was casting a spell on me.

I was supposed to be the one tricking him, but it was like a tug-of-war of control. He saw through my plan... but by then, my plan had stopped seeming so important. It had become something else completely. Pure lust. Pure heat.

Rolling over, the sheets tangle around my legs, making me think of his hand pressing against my warmth.

At least I learned something about him, small pieces of knowledge. He was in the mob. He was a SEAL. And now, he's a billionaire.

That's one heck of a resume. Next, he'll be telling me he's an astronaut. The funny thing is, I don't doubt his story. He wasn't bragging when he brought it up. It was more like the words exploded out of him, almost against his will.

## Page 22

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Perversely, I hate thinking of him with other women. Models and actresses and whoever else threw themselves at his feet—they need to get in line. I run my hand through my hair, letting out a sigh. This line of thinking isn't helpful.

He doesn't want any of them, according to him. But I make him weak.

It shouldn't make me feel special.

It doesn't make me feel special. I correct myself, but I'm not convinced.

The jail broken phone buzzes from the bedside table. I dart at it far too eagerly. It's a text from the man himself.

Dom: I'm looking at photos of your jewelry again. Did you make these from scratch? The work is admirable.

"Is he serious?" I whisper. My thumbs moved angrily over the phone's keyboard.

Evie: So, we're just going to pretend like earlier never happened, then. Talk about my silly hobby as if I'm not your prisoner. We're going to chitchat, Mr. Kidnapper, Mr. Mafia Man, Mr. SEAL, Mr. Billionaire... is that your grand plan?

Dom:

I stare in disbelief at the screen for what feels like a long time. Everything that's happened – the fight, the kidnapping, the imprisonment, the steam – and he sends a laughing emoji.

Two can play at that game.

Evie:

He sends two emojis as his counterattack.

Dom:

Evie: This is getting juvenile.

Dom: When I saw all my credentials listed, it seemed funny to me. I can't help that.

Evie: Funny because it's all a lie?

Dom: No – it's the truth. But it's ridiculous.

Evie: You're in awe of your own brilliance?

Dom: Brilliance was never what got me anywhere, Keepsake. Just grit.

A smile touches my lips, but then I quickly banish it. Maybe he thinks he can trap me with his charm as much as in this physical prison. I can't let that happen.

Evie: Did you just call me 'Keepsake'?

Dom: It seems appropriate. First, because your passion for jewelry is clearly more than 'a little hobby'. These pieces are of excellent quality. They're keepsakes people would be proud to own or give as gifts. And secondly, because YOU'RE a keepsake.

Another smile – another banishment.

Evie: I am NOT your keepsake, Warden.

Dom: Warden?

Evie: As in... PRISON Warden.

I swear to God, if he texts me something about needing to keep me safe or any of that repetitive stuff, I'm going to scream until this prison collapses around me.

Dom: When did you start making jewelry?

I look up at Meatball, half hoping he's awake. I need to do some serious venting. My body is still tingling all over from the intimacy. I press my legs together as if to tell myself, no, I won't go there. My plan failed; it's time to move on.

## Page 23

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:48 am*

Evie: Stop pushing that point as if I'm some generational talent. I buy scrap metal online and do my best to hammer it into shape. It's a fun little hobby, Warden.

Dom: You're wrong, Keepsake. My only talent, the only reason I am where and who I am, is because I'm able to identify talent when I see it. That's what my business is: finding the best TV personalities, the best podcasters, the best dealmakers, et cetera. You've got talent.

It's like he's turned the manipulation dial up to eleven. When we were together in person, I could use his attraction to me.

But now he's hidden behind the shield of texting. I can't touch him, kiss him, or stroke him to make him lose his cool.

Evie: Are you trying to manipulate me?

I type, but then I delete the message.

What's he going to say – yes? He won't admit to it even if he is, which he's definitely doing. Maybe I need to go along with this. If I indulge this line of questioning, I can make him believe we're building a rapport, then use it against him when the time comes.

I finally reply.

Evie: Thanks.

Dom: Do you sell your pieces?

Evie: I used to have an online store, but I wasn't able to sell much. Apparently, the rest of the world didn't see what you see.

Dom: Or you needed more investment in advertising and infrastructure. I could give you that.

I squeeze my hand around the phone, almost tossing it across the room in frustration. He's offering me something I desperately wanted once upon a time. After Mom died, after I ran from The Vultures and tried to get a store started, I would've leapt at this chance.

Evie: I'm not going to let you buy me, Warden.

Dom: This has nothing to do with your perception of what I've done to you. This is about your talent.

Evie: Please, stop. My 'perception' is that I'm your prisoner and you're trying to mess with my head.

Dom: Forget I mentioned the cash, then. Tell me how you got started.

Evie: If you care that much, it's not a special story. I grew up in garages, scrap metal everywhere. One Mother's Day, I wanted to get Mom a necklace because she'd lost hers. I didn't have any money, so I scavenged around the garage until I had enough materials, then I twisted the pieces together and made a crude necklace. She loved it, and she encouraged me to keep going. The end. See? Nothing special.

I'm breathing hard, as if I didn't type this message, but yelled the words into his infuriatingly handsome face.

Dom: That sounds special to me. You had a parent who saw your gift and encouraged you to build your skill. You had somebody who believed in you. That's the most special thing a kid can ask for.

Evie: Didn't you have that? Were your parents in the mafia too? Is that why you left to join the SEALs? Did they support you?

There's a long pause, then he replies.

Dom: We're not talking about me, Keepsake.

Evie: If you refuse to have a two-way conversation, we're not going to have any kind of conversation. I'd say 'goodnight' but that would be a lie.

Dom: Bad night then, Evie.

I need to stop smiling at his stupid texts. I put the phone on silent and stuff it in a drawer so that I'm not tempted to text him again.

Rolling onto my side, I close my eyes, whispering, "His compliments won't fool me. My only goal is to get out of here."

I'm lying to myself if I claim his text didn't have an effect, and worse, the memory of the scintillating steaminess is still showering my body in unwanted and desperately wanted tingles.

Biting my lip, I stroke my hand down my body. My lip actually hurts from how hard I'm biting it, but I can't seem to stop as I get closer to my sex. I know this is wrong. My nickname for him was perfect.

Warden, because this is a prison.

## Page 24

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:48 am*

I know what Stockholm Syndrome is. Some prisoners develop feelings for their kidnappers. How fast can that happen, and can it happen if the prisoner is aware of the phenomenon?

My hand slips down my underwear, over my nub, my folds, caressing as the memory slams into the now and it's like I'm reliving it all over again. Only this time, he doesn't stop, and neither do I.

In the fantasy, I don't just nervously kiss the base of his huge, hard manhood. I suck the tip, swirl my tongue around him, causing him to groan as if I hold all the power. Then I climb into his lap and guide my slick sex onto his tip.

I imagine sitting heavily on him. As my fingers press against my clit and I grit my teeth together to stop from waking Meatball, it's like it's really happening.

He grabs my ass and moans like he's never seen or touched a more attractive woman. Whatever else is true, I know he's not faking that. His attraction toward me isn't a tool of manipulation. When he looks at me, it's with pure, animalistic hunger.

The orgasm makes my entire body tremble, my legs twisting in the sheets, sweat beading all over me as a tsunami of release floods my mind and makes me feel lightheaded.

When it's over, I sit up, gasping. Meatball leaps down from the closet and stares at me with accusation on his scrunched-up face.

"I know. That was a mistake. It won't happen again."

Meatball purrs and seems to shake his head. Sometimes, I'm certain he can understand me. He doesn't believe that was a onetime thing.

Perhaps he already knows the truth I'm trying to avoid.

Already, I want to do it again.

## CHAPTER 9

### DOM

Her braid brushes my chest as she leans in, warm breath against my neck. We're tangled in the sheets. She tastes like salt and heat, like danger I want more of. My hands are on her hips, hers in my hair, pulling just hard enough. Her eyes—those bright golden eyes—pin me down harder than her body does.

I growl at something low. She laughs. It's the sound I'd kill to keep hearing. She shifts, and I follow, every inch of her under my hands, under control.

Then the bed tilts.

Her braid turns to rope. Her mouth is gone. Sirens scream. The air goes tight.

I'm not in a bed.

I'm in the surf.

Wet sand grits between my teeth. My weapon's jammed. Someone's shouting "clear left" but no one's watching the right. I try to call out, but my comm's dead. My pulse hammers. My lungs can't get enough air. I drag myself behind a cover that doesn't exist and see Johnson drop. Chest shot. No time to help.

The woman – my Keepsake – is standing in the open.

I try to run to her. Legs don't work. Something pins me down.

She lifts a hand again, fingers curling slowly.

Then everything explodes.

Smoke. Fire. Screaming.

I jolt awake, soaked in sweat, fists clenched, the taste of her still on my mouth. Or maybe it's blood. "Evie!"

It takes me a second to realize it was a nightmare. It's been several months since my last one, and that wasn't as vivid as this. Climbing from bed, I'm relieved to realize it's morning, at least. The canyon looks peaceful and isolated from my bedroom window, as if me, Evie, and Meatball are the only ones left on this entire planet.

The illusion is shattered when I check my cellphone: several texts from my CFO, reminding me of an important meeting we have today. I shower and get dressed, then head down to the panic room to check on Keepsake.

I should probably stop using that nickname. I shouldn't let myself become comfortable with the idea of having her here all the time, like she's my personal plaything.

Part of me hungers for that. Having Evie as mine. Her curves, her sass, her talent, here for me anytime I desire her. Which is all the damn time.

## Page 25

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:48 am*

She's sitting on the couch with Meatball in her lap, her hair braided again, just like in the nightmare. For a terrifying moment, I imagine a streak of red across her face. I blink, and it's gone.

"Did you scream my name this morning?" she says.

I flinch. Was I that loud?

"Uh – yeah," I grunt.

"Why?"

"Bad dream. No big deal."

"You had a bad dream about me?"

"It started as a good dream, then turned into a nightmare."

"What was it about?" She sighs when I don't answer. "You don't want to talk about it?"

I can't talk about it, never have.

"I need to head to work. I came to check you were okay."

"That depends on your definition of 'okay'." She looks annoyed when Meatball hops down and walks over to me, rubbing against my leg. I kneel and stroke the little fella.

“He doesn’t normally like strangers. Or anybody, really, except for me and Tash.”

He purrs as I tickle behind his neck. “He seems friendly enough.”

“Not usually,” she mutters. “How long will you be gone for? We need some fresh air, and Meatball’s litter tray will need to be changed today.”

I stand, tilting my head. She stands, and tilts her head like a mirror image, a sassy display that would make the coldest of men smile.

“Why are you looking at me like that, Warden?”

“I don’t like that nickname.”

“Newsflash – that’s why I’m using it.”

I laugh gruffly. “I’ll be gone for eight or nine hours. If I were able to call the cops, you wouldn’t have to stay here. They could keep you safe instead of me.”

She folds her arms, seems conscious of the fact that this draws my gaze inexorably to her breasts. Her cheeks flush at the realization.

“You’re probably just using that as an excuse to keep me here. Because, if you were imprisoning me just because you want to, that’d make you a bad guy. You don’t want to see yourself as a bad guy.”

When I flinch, she says, “I just hit the nail on the head, didn’t I?”

“Do you think I want to keep you here?” I growl. “Do you think I want to be the goddamn bad guy? Do you think I want to look in the mirror and see a man taking advantage of a woman half his age—his prisoner? Well?”

She bites her lip, emotion entering her honeyed eyes. Then she visibly beats it back.  
“You don’t owe me anything. You could let me go.”

“And let you die? Never.”

“So you’re the hero,” she says sarcastically.

“I’m just trying to do the right thing.”

“Like messing with my...” She grits her teeth. “Nevermind.”

It doesn’t take a genius to figure out she was going to finish that sentence with ‘head’. Maybe she’s right. Maybe I’m playing with her. But if that’s true, I’m playing myself too.

I say, “When I come home?—”

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“This isn’t ‘home’ —”

“I’ll take you for a walk around the grounds.”

“Lucky me,” she says with more acid sarcasm.

I shrug, trying to act like her words don’t sting. The nightmare clings to my psyche as I head for the stairs.

“Wait,” she says, catching up with me.

I turn to face her. She smiles up at me. Is it real – is it fake? Is it somewhere between?

“Have a good day at work.”

She wraps her arms around me and pulls herself in for a kiss. I’m aware it could be another play at manipulation, but the moment I taste her lips, I forget about any possible games. I hold her tightly against me, savoring the feel of her curvy perfection. She moans as our mouths open, our tongues tussling.

After hours of meetings and conference calls, I snatch a moment to contact Rafe. He still doesn’t have any news about where The Vultures are, and he hasn’t learned anything about why Evie is reluctant to call the cops.

“Are they ghosts?” I demand.

“We’ve never interacted with them, Dom. We know nothing about their organization.

They could have safe houses all over the State for all we know. They could be in Vegas. It's not as easy to find somebody as you might think, not if they don't want to be found."

I sigh darkly. "They must have some dirt on Evie," I say, standing at my floor-to-ceiling windows and looking down at Century City. "That's why she won't let me go to the cops."

"Or maybe she feels like she has to protect them. She grew up with them, after all."

"Has her roommate said anything?"

Rafe hesitates. "No."

"What?"

"What'd you mean, what?"

"Why the hesitation?"

"Tash and I have talked, but not about this."

"Be careful," I tell him. "You don't want to fall for your prisoner."

"Ha, ha," he mutters sarcastically. "Pot, kettle, black. You get the gist. I'll keep digging, but things might go quicker if you contacted the old man yourself."

I curl my hands into fists. "As long as the women are safe from those biker bastards, I'm content with this pace."

"Anything not to speak to him, eh?"

“Something like that.”

The rest of the day passes in a blur. I’m counting down the seconds until I can drive to my estate in Topanga Canyon. When I finally return, I find Evie sitting cross-legged in front of the coffee table, wearing kitchen gloves and curling small pieces of metal into circles.

“I need new forks,” she says, a glint in her eye that somehow turns her even more beautiful.

“You can’t help yourself, can you? How did you make the metal pliable?”

“The stove.”

Her resourcefulness would make any SEAL proud. “Did you still want to get some fresh air?”

She stands, her body bouncing as it always does when she moves quickly. Her voluptuousness is a constant temptation. Just like her smile. And her scent. And the sparkle in her eyes that hasn’t dimmed even though she’s my prisoner.

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“I’ll throw on some pants.”

“I think I prefer you in the shorts.”

She looks at me over her shoulder with that complicated sense of internal conflict. “I bet you do... Warden.”

I don’t like the nickname, but at least it’s unlikely I’ll forget exactly what’s happening here.

She returns wearing pants and a hoodie, but that does nothing to dampen my hunger for her. Meatball trails after us as we walk up the stairs and out the trapdoor. When I unlock the door, I notice her watching me carefully, cogs turning in her head.

“My closest neighbor is fifteen miles away,” I tell her as we leave the garage and walk toward the nearest terraced garden. I instantly wish I could take the words back. They make me sound like an evil man. But hell, maybe that’s what I need to be to stop her from running.

“Why would you say that?” she asks innocently, looping her arm through mine.

Her closeness, her warmth, her feigned innocence combine to provoke a laugh from me. After a day spent trapped in my office, being with her is a relief.

“Because you’re thinking about escape. I can’t blame you. But The Vultures have...” I trail off, a thought occurring to me as we walk beneath the terrace. “Do you have any idea where Mason and his men would go if they didn’t want to be found?”

“No,” she says. “They kept me in the dark about the club stuff. They only told me what they had to – and that was very little.”

Her voice goes quiet, scared, when she talks about them. Leaving the terrace, I stop at my small pond, sitting on the bench next to it. She sits beside me. We’re holding hands as if it’s the most natural thing in the world.

Which it isn’t. It’s a trick, all of it. I must remember that. “You sound frightened of them,” I say.

She squeezes my hand, hesitates, then blurts out, “What was your nightmare about? Did something happen in the SEALs?”

“Way to change the subject.”

She looks up at me with her penetrating eyes. “Well?”

I shake my head.

“What does this mean?” She mimics me, shaking my head, making a scrunched-up face that has her looking like Meatball.

“Is that supposed to be me?” I chuckle.

“Who else is it going to be, smart guy?”

“I don’t talk about that.”

“Then I don’t talk about my time with The Vultures.”

“We can just sit here. I like your company, Evie. I know you’re looking for an escape

route. Thinking about how to get as far away from me as you possibly can. But maybe I'll just pretend we're a normal man and woman on a date."

"If this was a date, now would be a good time to kiss me."

I lean down and press my lips against hers. Her moaning noise sounds like pleasure, sounds genuine, and when I greedily grasp onto her hip, a vibration moves through her delectable body. She bites onto my lip, staring into my eyes.

"What if things aren't as simple as they seem?" She whispers. "Maybe I'm confused too. But I don't want to be manipulated."

"I'm not trying to manipulate you."

"The second we got intimate, the manipulation began."

"Was that me, Evie, or was that you?"

"I don't think it's possible for the kidnapeeto get Stockholm Syndrome," she replies.

"Is that what you're getting?"

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“I think I’m starting to like you – for real.”

“That sounds like manipulation to me,” I point out.

She shrugs. “Think what you want. It’s the truth.” She initiates a kiss, breathing passionately when it ends. My body roars for her. “Your dream must’ve been awful if I heard you in the panic room.”

I shut down. Turn cold. “I don’t talk about that.”

“But you want to share it with me.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah.” She kisses my cheek tenderly. It’s not sexual. It’s romantic, intimate, and makes me want to believe.

“We should get going,” I say.

“Why?”

Because I’m starting to believe in her act, and that’s dangerous.

When I don’t answer, she sighs and stands. Together, we walk back through the garden toward the garage. She stands at the garage door, looking over her shoulder at the tall wall and the gate.

“Once I’ve handled The Vultures, you’ll be free to go,” I tell her.

“Free,” she repeats, her voice low and depressed. “I haven’t been free my entire life.”

She gives the surroundings another lingering look, as if debating making a run for it, then sighs and walks into the garage and down the trapdoor. I watch her go, but Meatball remains behind, purring and rubbing against my leg.

Her dejected posture makes me feel like a demon. I ran from my life in the mob, specifically because I wanted to be better than them.

But if being a monster is what it takes to stop this bright, passionate young woman from falling into an early grave, it’s what I’ll be.

## CHAPTER 10

### EVIE

“Should I have made a run for it?” I ask Meatball, stroking my hands through his fur as I sit cross-legged on the couch and watch mindless reality TV.

Or half watch, really, because my thoughts are elsewhere.

“Maybe I could’ve made it to the gate. But could I climb over? I didn’t see any trees or plants near the walls or the gate. It’s like he designed it so nobody could climb a tree and then clamber over. He says I’m manipulating him, but can he blame me?”

Meatball whines. He doesn’t buy the manipulation angle. He thinks I’m using it as an excuse to do what I want, to get closer to Dom. When I mentioned his nightmare, Dom got this look on his face, a darkness I wanted to learn more about, maybe help him with, maybe even light it up.

The phone buzzes.

Dom: I forgot to say earlier, I heard from Rafe today. Tasha is still safe.

Evie: Are you sure?

Dom: If they find her, Rafe will fight. I know that for a fact.

What about me? Am I safe? From him – from myself, from these feelings?

The phone buzzes again.

Dom: Earlier, when you said you've never been free. What did you mean by that, Evie?

I grab the phone and type quickly.

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Evie: So, you can quiz me about my deep dark thoughts and secrets, but God forbid I ask about a single nightmare.

Dom: My dreams are nothing special. Veterans all over the country have similar experiences. You are special, Keepsake.

He says he doesn't like my nickname for him. I can't say the same. When he uses 'Keepsake', confusing emotions shiver through my being.

Dom: Did The Vultures keep you as a prisoner?

"Why is he acting like he cares? If he cared, he'd let me go."

Meatball looks at me as if to say, He's keeping you here because he cares.

Evie: It wasn't as simple as that. I shouldn't be telling you this, but if you're going to pretend to be interested... When I was a kid, I thought The Vultures were my friends. I grew up around bikes and the smell of engine oil, and the big, scary bikers never seemed scary to me. They'd wear pieces of jewelry I made. I thought they cared about me.

Dom: What changed?

Evie: What was your nightmare about? And why was I in it? Did you dream you hurt me? Was it guilt that made you roar my name so loudly I heard you all the way down here in the dungeon?

Dom: I'd never hurt you. My dream was about my time overseas, but you were there too. It was messed up. We're not talking about that.

Evie: What happened overseas?

Dom: Lots of awful shit.

Evie: Like what?

Dom: Tell me what changed with The Vultures.

Maybe he's fishing for information about where they might hide, but I honestly have no clue. I wasn't lying about that. Or is it possible he's genuinely interested?

Evie: I saw Mason hit my mom for the first time. She'd hidden it from me for years. When I got older, I noticed things, like the drugs the bikers took, and how some of their girlfriends looked scared all the time. I tried to get Mom to leave, but she wouldn't. She claimed she loved Mason. She didn't see him as a bad guy, though he was responsible for every bad thing in her life.

I send the text, then write another, getting carried away.

Evie: Mom gaslit herself and she gaslit me. Mason would hit her, belittle her, then act nice for a few days or a week. The cycle would repeat. I begged her right until the end to leave him, but she just wouldn't do it. I promised myself I'd never be in a relationship like that. I'd never let a man hurt me and mess with my head.

I click send, realizing this might screw with my plan. I should pretend to be an empty-headed person, a vessel Dom can fill with whatever idea of him he wants. If I'm going to seduce and trick him, sharing these raw details about the scars of my soul isn't a good idea.

But I can't stop. I'm angry. At him. At myself.

Dom: I'm not trying to mess with your head, Evie. I'm attracted to you. I won't lie about that. But I know how fucked this is. I know it's wrong. I just can't stand the thought of letting you go and that sick bastard getting his hands on you.

Evie: I feel like Kaelen Mirae.

Dom: Who?

Evie: The Thornbound Oath? I thought everybody had heard of those books.

Dom: I don't get much time to read these days.

Evie: It's a series about a princess who's kidnapped by a barbarian, and she knows she should hate him, but she can't.

Dom: Do you wish you could hate me?

"He brought me to a freaking dungeon," I tell Meatball. "He won't let me leave. What answer does he expect?"

Evie: Hating you wouldn't set me free, so no, I don't.

Dom: Walk me through what you think happens if I drive you into the middle of nowhere and set you free. Your friend, Tash, understands that she's better off with Rafe than she is waiting for The Vultures to show up and use her as leverage against you. What would your plan be?

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The urge to throw the phone grips me for what feels like the thousandth time. His texts are just as frustrating as his general presence is.

The sick contradiction is that I'm relieved he's keeping Tash safe – and that I believe him unquestioningly – while resenting what he's doing to me.

Evie: If you're not going to share anything about yourself, I refuse to be interrogated like this.

For a long time, he doesn't reply. I look down at my fork-turned-rings, my heart pounding as I review his question in my thoughts. Is that what I want, truly, to hate this man who messes with my head and triggers confusing emotions in me?

Dom: The operation went bad. It was supposed to be a simple, an ambush, but they were expecting us. I watched several of my friends die right in front of me. I only survived because, when I was wounded and forced to retreat, I tripped down a hill and ended up falling into a ravine. I passed out. When I woke, I was on a corpse cart. They thought I was dead. I played dead as they buried me with my buddies. Before they could fill the grave, backup arrived. That was my last operation. I left shortly after. Happy now?

I gasp, tears springing to my eyes as I read his words.

Evie: I'm so sorry.

The words feel far too small, not even close to being enough.

Dom: It was almost ten years ago.

Evie: But the pain is still there.

Dom: The scars won't heal. I've come to terms with that. Now, your turn.

I study his question again. If he let me go, what would I do?

Evie: I'd do what I always have, Dom. I'd survive.

Dom: I've got an early start tomorrow. I need to get some sleep.

Evie: Do you want some company?

Dom: So that you can sneak around while I'm asleep and look for a way out?

Evie: No – so that, if you have another nightmare, somebody will be there for you.

This is part truth and part lie. I would look for a way out... at least, I'd try, if his weirdly tempting warmth—physical and emotional—didn't glue me in place.

Dom: Get some rest, Evie. Who knows? Maybe tomorrow, I'll find The Vultures and end this.

Evie: How? What's your plan?

Dom: To make him stop.

Evie: How, though?

Dom: By doing whatever it takes.

I sigh, putting the phone aside. My thoughts go to the experience Dom suffered. I close my eyes and imagine what it must've felt like, the smells, the terror, the twisted relief when backup arrived and he was the only survivor.

"He's had nobody to share his pain with," I whisper.

Meatball whines, snuggling close to me. I slide my hands through his fur.

"I want to be there for him. But—" I grit my teeth. "I can't. I'm going in circles. He's wearing down my defenses. He's making me care. I have to remember where this started."

## CHAPTER 11

### DOM

The next day, I stand over my desk at work, looking down at the wrapped gift with Evie's name on the tag. Being ultra wealthy has its perks sometimes. I wonder if Evie's going to like it.

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I could use my funds to hire private investigators to look for The Vultures, but that would mean leaving an official trail between me and the biker gang. If this ends how I think it might – with blood – I don't want anything tying me to them. Rafe was able to make the police report disappear. And there's no firm evidence linking me to the gang, but if I make use of official channels, I'll draw a line directly from them to me.

Or is that an excuse – a way to prolong this, so that I can be with Evie longer?

The intercom buzzes. "Sir, a man is asking for you at the front desk. Mason. He refuses to give a surname."

I almost laugh in disbelief. The dumb motherfucker. "Send him up."

Going to the safe in the corner, I take out my gun and stow it under my desk. Mason arrives wearing a T-shirt and jeans, his face bruised from our last encounter, a smarmy smile on his face like he thinks he's hot shit.

When I reach under the desk, he raises his hand. "If you try anything, she dies."

I pause. "She—who?" There's no way he's got to Evie.

He turns in a circle, his hands raised. "I'm unarmed. You can clearly see that."

He's right. No gun outlined under his shirt, no holster in sight, and he's wearing sneakers, not boots, difficult to conceal a weapon in those.

"Who's 'she'?" I demand.

“You should let me show you something. I know you’ve been looking for us – well, the Italian mob has. It’s flattering, honestly, big man. The big bad mafia looking for little old me.”

He approaches the desk. I keep one hand on my gun, glaring at him.

“But the mafia are city boys. Vegas dwellers. California’s a big state, full of nooks and crannies nomads know better than men who wear slick suits and are scared to get their Louis Vuittons dusty.”

He stops on the other side of the desk. “I’m going to reach into my pocket for my phone. You need to see something.”

He places the phone down, unlocks it, then spins it so it’s facing me. The screen shows video footage of a woman bound by the wrists, a masked man standing behind her with a gun aimed at her head. They seem to be in some sort of cave... which means they could be in a countless number of locations. Still, it’s a start.

The woman looks terrified, skinny, tattoos covering her thin arms and legs. She’s only wearing a bra and underwear.

“This is Crystal,” Mason says, sounding pleased with himself.

“Who is she?” I growl.

“Not who. What. She’s the thing that’s going to make sure I walk out of here without a bullet in my head. That’s a live feed. If you get any smart ideas – like calling the cops, or keeping me here, or trying to follow me when I leave – I give the order and they execute her. Or, if I don’t check in after twenty minutes...” He mimes a gun firing. “You get the point.”

I tremble as rage grips me. This cocky bastard.

“You won’t find us,” he says. “When I took over the club, I changed things. I run it more like a military operation?—”

“If you were a military man, you wouldn’t threaten an innocent woman.”

“Don’t worry about Crystal. She’s been with us her whole life. She knows her duty. That’s more than I can say for Evie.”

“Say her name again,” I growl.

He swallows, taking a step back. “I’m not here for violence. I’m here to make a deal. See, I didn’t expect visiting Evie to cause a rift with you, Dom Russo. A billionaire. A mafia man. That wasn’t my plan. Then I thought, well, this is a chance, isn’t it? To a man like you, worth billions, fifty million is pocket change.”

“You’re trying to shake me down for fifty million? Or what—you’ll kill that innocent woman?”

“That’s your decision to make.”

“You’re going to leave her the fuck alone.”

“Yes, we will... when you pay up.”

“You want fifty million dollars to do the right thing, to back the fuck off? I know about you, Mason. You beat women. You mess with their heads. You’re a monster.”

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You mess with their heads. Guilt strangles me as I think of Evie. I need to focus.

He shrugs. “I’m just a man trying to do right by my organization. Let’s play it like this: you’ve got one week to give me fifty million, or things are going to get very bad for you.”

“Are you threatening me? If you know who I am, you understand what a terrible idea that’d be – for you, not me.”

“I disagree. I think you’re proud of your business. You’ve avoided contact with the mob for a long time for a reason. I think you’d prefer to end this peacefully, as would we. Fifty million, and your impressive business keeps its legitimate shine. And we leave Evie alone for the rest of her life. That’s a fair deal from where I’m standing.”

If it wasn’t for the video feed of that poor woman, I’d shoot him in the head right here. I’ve been around enough killers to know he’s not bluffing. He strikes me as a psychopath, seeing the woman as a tool. I believe he’ll let her live if I let him walk out of here. Not because it’s the right thing to do, but because killing her would no longer serve a purpose.

In my head, I hear Dad’s voice, his mobster’s tone gruff with impatience: Why do you care about some random woman? Just shoot him.

But when I left the mob, I swore I’d be better than that.

There’s no damn way I’m paying this man a single dime. With fifty mil, The Vultures could expand, become more than a two-bit gang. Drugs, trafficking, all kinds of nasty

shit. I didn't leave the mob just to fuel another criminal organization.

"I presume you want the payment in cash."

He grins. "You presume correctly."

"That'll take me longer than a week. Closer to a month."

"Pfft. I'll give you ten days."

"If you?—"

"Ten days," he cuts in. "Or things get fucking bad very fucking fast for you."

"You're used to scaring people, to being the big bad wolf."

"I have to assume, since you saved Evie like a wannabe knight in shining armor, you have some concern for her future."

I try not to let my reaction show. It'd be so easy to leap across the desk, smash his teeth in, make him beg for mercy, for daring to use my Keepsake's name.

"Before you do anything rash, I need to show you something else."

He takes his phone from the desk, swipes, then shows me the screen. It's a video taken from outside a diner. A biker pushes a satchel across the table to a younger Evie. The biker was clearly wearing a bug.

"I hope you know how important this package is," the biker says.

Evie sounds resigned and depressed. I hate hearing her like that. "Just jewelry, right?"

“Nobody gives a damn about your sad hobby.” My chest tightens. Those bastards have no right to devalue her talent. “Explain to me why this is important.”

“There are drugs hidden inside the pieces. Do you think I’ve forgotten? I’m your pet, right? Yourmule. My job is to carry the drugs to the right place at the right time so that some innocent people can shoot it up their veins and maybe OD. Do you think I need reminding? God.”

“Watch your mouth.”

Mason aims a shit-eating grin at me. “I’ve got more videos like this.”

This is why Evie didn’t want me to call the cops. He’s holding this over her head, threatening to take her down with him. The sick fuck.

“Ten days,” Mason says, pocketing his cellphone. “If I see you in my rearview, Crystal gets a bullet in the head. If you were still in the mob, you wouldn’t care about that. But now that you’re an upstanding citizen, I have to assume you care.”

And he’s right, damn it. I do care. I’ve got enough on my conscious without adding an innocent woman’s life.

He backs up toward the door. “We’ll reach out. No tricks. A war with The Vultures might not scare you, big man, but how would you feel if the world learned that little angel Evie was a criminal?”

Once he’s gone, I spin, aiming my fist at the wall. I’m about to beat my office into rubble, but I stop myself. A tantrum won’t change anything.

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I call Rafe. “They’re hiding out in a cave system of some kind. I’m going to wire you some cash. Use it to hire extra hands.”

“A cave system?” Rafe groans. “That means they could be anywhere.”

“I know that,” I growl. “But we have to try, dammit.”

## CHAPTER 12

### EVIE

Dom looks furious when he walks down the stairs, his eyes dark and smoldering like hellfire is burning deep within him. His body looks tight, his muscles bulging through his suit jacket. He places a gift bag on the coffee table. It seems out of place.

I leap to my feet. “What happened? Is it Tasha?”

“She’s safe,” he snarls. “Mason visited me at my office today.”

I gasp. “What did you do?”

“I was going to put a bullet in his sanctimonious head, but he had live footage of a woman called Crystal tied up. He claimed that if I followed him, or hurt him, his men would execute her.”

I shudder. “I don’t doubt that for a second. Crystal is like mom was... brainwashed by the club. She thinks they care, but she’s just another plaything. She belongs to...

Jack, that's his name. But Mason wouldn't hesitate to hurt her."

"He gave me a hint they might be hiding in a cave system. That means my men have to scour the state in the hopes we chance across the correct one. Either that, or I pay him fifty million. Which means he can use that cash."

"To buy drugs, guns, or to hurt more people."

"Exactly," Dom says gruffly. "But if I don't, he hinted that he'd come after me, my company." Dom's tone grows dark, almost like he wants the fight. "If that was all he had, I'd leap at the chance. I'd forfeit my business's reputation, forget the reasons I left the mob. Become the man I never wanted to be. I'd slaughter every. Single. One."

I take a step back, a shudder moving through me. Dom seems like a different person: like a wild animal ready to fight tooth and nail.

"But he's got something else. He showed me a video, Evie."

Tears rise to my eyes, stinging them.

"You should've told me," he says. "It's not like you wanted to mule those drugs for him. Like you had a choice."

"But I did. I could've left. I know Mom wanted to stay, but I was an adult. I could've gone. I did it. Don't take responsibility for me. I'm a criminal."

"They forced you."

"How do you know that? You don't even know me. Maybe I was happy to do it."

He walks right up to me, brining his heat with him, staring at me with those hellfire

eyes. “I know you’re better than a two-bit criminal in a two-bit biker gang. I know you did this for your mother, because you feared what Mason and the gang would do to her if you refused. I know you regret doing it. That you’re a good person.”

I put my hand on his chest. He’s burning up through his shirt. He looks ready to kill.

“What are you going to do?” I whisper.

“Find them. Make them stop.”

“What if you can’t?” I hesitate, then find my courage. “You’ll have to call his bluff. Let him send the video to the cops. I did what I did; I’ll do my time.”

Dom snarls and grabs my hips, pulling me violently against him. “That’s not happening under any circumstances.”

“You can’t pay them.”

“That’s not happening either.”

He kisses me suddenly, taking me off-guard. Without warning, I’ve got no time to figure out how I’m supposed to feel. My body responds as I sink my hands into his arms.

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“I’m not letting him ruin your life,” he snaps. “How many times do I have to say it? I. Am. Your. Protector. Whether you like it or not.”

He pulls me in for another kiss. My nipples push through my T-shirt, my core responding with a triggering of heat. He lifts me off my feet, and my legs wrap around him as if it’s automatic.

Laying me down on the couch, he grinds his crotch against me, his erection pushing against my sex and making me sizzle with the closeness.

“Stop,” I whisper, but he kisses me again, and I want it, and I hate I want it, and I love it. “Dom?—”

“You don’t want me to stop,” he groans, pushing his hand against my crotch, grinding up and down so that my clit grows hot and ultrasensitive.

“Maybe I don’t, but I’m telling you to!”

He stands, literally shaking, his lips red from our kisses.

“I’d say you don’t have any idea how irresistible you are, but that’d be a lie.”

“Oh, really?” I say, unable to hide the bitterness from my tone.

“You’re aware of your beauty, Keepsake. You know how difficult it is for me to hold myself back. You turned me into a savage the moment I laid eyes on you, and that hasn’t changed since. So, let me tell you something. I’m not going to allow you to

turn yourself in for The Vultures. I'm going to protect you from them – and yourself.”

He looms over me.

“And there’s something else. You might want to believe you had control, that you weren’t a pawn in their game, but you had no choice but to do what they said. They brainwashed you from the time you were a kid. They had your mother as a bargaining chip. You committed those crimes, but you’re not to blame.”

“Are you to blame for what you did?” I stand, glaring up at him, knowing I’m pissed at myself but needing to aim it elsewhere. “Back in my apartment, you told Mason he was lucky he didn’t catch you in your twenties. Was that because you committed crimes for the mob?”

He turns away in disgust. “That’s who you think I am.”

His response softens me. “I’m asking you a question... and you’re not denying it.”

“I was talking about my time in the Teams,” he grunts. “Back then, I never hesitated. When it was time to pull the trigger, I pulled it. I didn’t work with the mob, even if... certain people wanted me to.”

He walks toward the door.

“Wait,” I say, reaching out for him.

He pauses, but he doesn’t face me.

“Don’t you want to watch me open your gift? At least, I assume that’s for me?”

“It is,” he says stiffly.

“Then stay. If you want to see my reaction.”

This is all part of my plan. I try to convince myself of that as I take the wrapped gift from the bag. The gift wrap has small jewelry pictures on it: necklaces, earrings, rings, bracelets. My breath catches... and then, when I peel away the wrapping and see what the gift is, a tear slides down my cheek.

It's a signed set of The Thornbound Oath book series, all eight titles, first editions in immaculate condition.

“This is the sweetest thing anyone has ever done for me.”

He watches me with a confused, conflicted expression. “Then why do you sound angry?”

“Do I?”

Suddenly, he's close to me again, his heat washing over me. “Yes, you do.”

“I don't mean to be – thank you.”

If I accept this, am I condoning what he's done? Am I telling him I'm done fighting to earn my freedom?

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“What are you thinking about?” he demands.

“Just... how sweet it is.”

He darts his hands out, grabs onto my hips. I let out a trembling sigh that sounds more like a moan. My head feels light from the intimacy. My body responds far too quickly, too enthusiastically.

“Tell the truth,” he says sternly.

“Stop bossing me around.”

“Stop pretending you don’t like it.”

“I don’t,” I murmur, but my voice is weak with falsehood.

“This is the book series you mentioned,” he says.

“I just told you it’s the sweetest thing anybody has ever done for me. What more do you need?”

“For you to stop looking at me like I’m a monster. Or, if I am a monster, for you to stop pretending you want me to be an angel.” He sinks his touch into my hips, pulling me against him. “You want to pretend you’re tricking me – or that you’re here against your will – or that I’m the bad guy... the truth, Keepsake? You fucking want this as badly as I do.”

He spins me around so that I'm facing away from him, then drives his stiff steel against my ass. I gasp and grind against him, his tension caressing me. He's different than he's been before. After the run-in with Mason, it's like something has awoken inside of him, a feral shade of hunger.

He slips his hand around to my shorts, then roughly pulls them down with my underwear, leaving them tangled around my knees.

Stop, I attempt to say, but not very hard. Slickness slides down my legs, tickling me as my need rises like a crescendo.

"You want your Ward to take control," he snarls, gently pushing against my upper back so that I'm bent over.

I grip the edge of the couch, my head light with lust and emotion. How can this man, this beast, be the same person who gave me such a thoughtful gift?

"I'll prove it."

He spans my ass. When I moan, he growls, "You can pretend, Keepsake, to me, to yourself, but your horny, perfect lust can't lie."

He spans me again.

## CHAPTER 13

### DOM

I've lost my mind. Anger turns to desire, rage to lust, as I stare down at the thick round globes of her juicy ass. My tip inflamed, pushing against my zipper like it's trying to explode.

Her ass ripples when I spank her a third time. She moans, looking at me over her shoulder, complicatedly complicit, indulging in her illicit need, lying to herself, claiming she doesn't desire it.

“You're moaning every. Fucking. Time.”

I spank her twice more, staring in awe at the juices sliding down her thighs. Her pussy flutters for me, her pinkness beckoning, her nub swollen as if desperate for my touch, her folds looking ready to be lavished with attention.

“You're not in charge.”

“Keep telling yourself that.”

I bring my finger to her mouth. “Suck – now.”

She whimpers like she's going to say no, but then her lust takes over and she sucks on my finger, bobbing her head. I pull my finger free and bring it to her naked pussy, pushing against her, feeling her inexperienced tightness wrapping around me.

My cock pulses as I imagine her wrapped around my dick, her pussy slipping all the way to my base. She gasps, pressing against the couch so that she can push back against my finger.

“You want to...” Her moans make my balls swell. “Keep me here...” she gasps as I push deeper inside of her. “As yourplaything.”

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“Maybe I do,” I snarl, fucking her pussy faster with my finger, her body making seductive wet noises. “I own you. I’m in charge. No more games – no more manipulation. This is the real you, Evie. Bent over for me. Getting ready for my cock.”

She collapses onto the couch, then spins and jumps to her feet, grabbing my suit jacket and pulling it off. She tears at my shirt next, buttons popping. She rips off my shirt before she stops, staring wide-eyed at the scars crisscrossing my chest and shoulders, shrapnel, knives, and one bullet hole.

Locking eyes with me, suddenly, the situation becomes tender. She gently glides her hand over the scars, tracing them with her finger. “Dom,” she whispers.

“I was the lucky one. Don’t pity me.”

I grab her T-shirt and pull it over her head, her bare breasts bouncing free. A gasp escapes me as I gaze at her perfect size, her ample breasts, her large nipples, the vivacity of her curvaceous form.

Bringing one hand to her sopping sex, I lean down and suck and kiss her breasts, rubbing her clit and her folds at the same time, making her body tremble with the pleasure. She sinks her fingers into my shoulders when I guide my finger back to her entrance, pushing inside, her walls tightly pressing against me.

“You feel ready to take my cock,” I groan. “I can feel how badly you need it. No more pretending.”

“Not—here...”

“Yes, Keepsake,” I snarl, wrapping my arms around her and carrying her into the bedroom, closing the door behind us.

I lay her on the bed. She rolls onto her back, staring up at me. Ripping her shorts down the rest of the way, her legs fall open, presenting the glistening sweetness of her core, her hole winking wetly at me.

“This isn’t a chance for you to escape. This isn’t a trick. This is what we want, what we need. You don’t belong to The Vultures.” I lean down, slipping two fingers into her tight soppiness, pushing deep until she gifts me with another moan. “You belong to me.”

“Nuh-no...” She shudders. “I don’t belong to, uh, any... anyone.”

I fuck her faster, feeling the pleasure rising inside of her, threatening to reach boiling point at any moment. “I’m not going to let you come until you admit you want to belong to me.”

She grips the back of my neck and pulls me onto the bed next to her, then slides her hand over my crotch. My dick aches with heat.

“The same goes for you,” she whimpers.

“I’m not going to come until I’m buried in your perfect pussy.”

She tries to free my manhood, but when I glide my finger in circles inside of her velvety depths, her hand shudders along with the rest of her enticing body. She falls back on the bed, looking at me as her eyelids flutter.

She seems almost mad that I'm in control. But I don't, can't care about anything but her pleasure.

Her pussy makes soaked noises as I circle relentlessly. I keep going until I feel her walls fluttering around my finger, her crescendo almost here, and then I slide out of her and push my palm against her horny point of euphoria.

She gasps. "What—are—you—doing?"

"I told you. Tell me the truth; tell me who you belong to. Then, and only then, you have permission to cream all over my hand."

"Fuck, Dom."

I smirk. "That's the plan... but first."

"I'm yours," she whispers, and then something so hot happens, I almost explode in my pants. She gets off on saying it to me. She moans as if the infusion of pleasure even takes her by surprise. "I belong to you. Oh, oh, Dom. I belong to you. Yes. Please. Let me come."

"Oh my fucking God," I groan. "Say that again."

"Puh-please. Let me come. Ohhhhhh."

"Then fucking come for me."

I slip my fingers into her again. This time, I make sure the heel of my palm grinds against her clit with each motion of my fingers slipping in and out of her. She drives her hips against me, giving me an enthralling preview of how she'll ride my dick when the time comes.

Her orgasm causes her to throw her head back and let out a warbling cry of release. A rosy flush appears on her body, and I add to it by leaning down and biting her creamy tit gently... but with enough force to leave a tattoo of my desire.

Her release lasts a long time, juices gushing out of her and seeping onto the sheets.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:48 am*

She stares at me in shock once the vibrations have stopped.

I stand, tearing down my pants. My dick springs up, precome flinging from the tip. I've never been this hard, erection pointing skyward as I stare down at my woman, my property.

My head is in a chaotic clash. Part of me knows this was never the plan: thinking of her as property. But desire fuses with possession, and it feels like truth.

"Rub your clit," I snarl. "Keep yourself warm and wet for me."

"Dom..."

"Don't pretend you don't want this."

She whimpers, smoothing her hand between her legs, softly and slowly massaging her clit. I climb onto the bed, grip my length, and guide myself to her entrance.

"Wait," she moans.

"You want this."

"Wuh-wait."

I stroke myself against her clit, smoothing down to her hole, kissing her entrance and then moving back up. She gasps when my hardness strokes over her nub, then reaches down and puts her hand over her entrance.

“Dom,” she whispers. “Dom.”

I gently move her hand aside, stroking my head around her slickness, then returning to her clit. When she sinks her fingers into my chest, I know she’s got another orgasm heading her way. Her body is alight with this impossible mutual starvation, this bone-deep need.

I rub her clit with my erection, sometimes slipping down to her hole, but each time, she whimpers and curls her hand around my base, redirecting me to her nub.

“You want to come like this?”

“Hmm.” She nods. “But Dom...”

“You don’t have to explain yourself.”

“I—I—I...ahhhhh.”

I flick my dick up and down against her clit, causing a second orgasm to riot through her delicious body. She grips my cock, stroking it and guiding it against her own pussy, shifting up and down...

And then rolling away from me, crawling to the other side of the bed.

“Leave,” she says.

“Say that like you mean it?—”

“This isn’t how I lose my virginity,” she screams, suddenly springing up from the bed, her naked, flushed body jiggling gorgeously for me.

“You’re a virgin,” I say, stroking my cock.

“I told you to leave. Don’t...” She hesitates, then looks at me sternly. “Don’t come back until you’re ready to set me free.”

I walk around the bed, grab her, turn her around, and push her onto all fours. She whimpers and pouts at me over her shoulder.

“I could fuck your tight, inexperienced virgin pussy here and now and you’d cream all over my dick. You’d beg me to keep going even as you acted like you didn’t want me to.”

“I want it. That’s the problem. I don’t want to want it. You’re messing with my head.”

“And you’re not messing with mine?” I bring my hand down on her thick, creamy ass, causing her lusciousness to ripple as I spank her. “I could explode just looking at you.”

“Set me free orgo.”

“I need your pussy.”

“You’re not having it.”

“I need to explode. Fuck. Badly.”

“Buh-badly?” she groans.

I nod, staring at her like an unhinged lunatic, unable to think about anything except the tension in my cock. “Then explode. But this isn’t how I lose my virginity. I mean that.”

“Fuck.”

I push the globes of her ass together and lay my cock between them, then rock back and forth, fucking her thickness. She bounces in time with my thrusts. My dick flames with hot temptation, and then a fountain of come erupts out of me and paints her back, more and more flowing out of me, dripping down her side and onto the bed.

She falls away, glaring.

“Leave,” she whispers.

I take a few steps back, my head clearing, as I realize just how badly I’ve let myself go. It wasn’t supposed to be like this. I wasn’t supposed to take advantage.

With my Keepsake, control is a distant dream.

“You won’t see me until I can let you out of this place.”

I turn away, grabbing my clothes, making for the door.

How can I lie to myself now? How can I say I’m doing this for her own good?

In the hallway, as I pull on my clothes, Meatball looks at me judgementally.

## CHAPTER 14

EVIE

One Week Later

Apart from a repetitive exchange each morning and night –Are you safe?... Yes– we don’t text for an entire week. I’m ashamed to say I lose myself in the book series he left for me. It’s easier than thinking about reality, than The Vultures and what Dom and I did the last time we saw each other.

That washot... and wrong... and confusing.

When he was rubbing his cock against me, I wanted him to slip inside. But that was a line I couldn’t cross. It would be tantamount to telling him he’s allowed to keep me here, that I’m done fighting.

The book series doesn’t help. The main character starts by resenting her barbarian captor. Then, over time, she becomes obsessed with him. I devour all eight books within a week, reading the happily ever after with a strange longing nestled in my heart.

The hottest scene in the series is when the barbarian takes his captor’s virginity. I

read, losing her virginity here, like this, was both the best and worst thing. Her body was alive with myriad sensations, with hope and aching physical longing, but her mind was a mess of indecision.

It's like the book is taunting me with exactly how I feel.

I know Dom visits twice when I'm asleep, because there's fresh food in the refrigerator, the dirty clothes disappear, and Meatball's litter tray is changed.

The idea of him watching me sleep has my body tingling sinfully.

I resist texting him because he doesn't text me. Several times, I compose messages asking about Tash and The Vultures, but I'm afraid of where they'll lead. I also want to ask about the crashing noises I sometimes hear upstairs – it sounds like construction – but I resist that too. Maybe it's immature, but I won't be the first to reach out.

On the eighth morning, I hear the trapdoor making a whirring sound. My heart pounds in anticipation. I purposefully slow my breathing and remind myself to maintain control.

Dom walks into the room wearing a stylish suit. He's had a haircut, and he's freshly shaven. He stands with his hands behind his back as if purposefully keeping his distance.

Meatball doesn't get the memo and runs over to him eagerly, whining as he rubs his body against Dom's leg. Dom leans down. "Hey, little fella."

“Is it over?” I ask.

“We’ve had no contact from The Vultures. We’ve searched half the caves in the state, it feels like, but so far, no sign.”

“So, why are you here?”

“I’ve decided to let you live upstairs,” he says. “But I need you to put this on.”

He reaches into his inside jacket pocket and brings out a bracelet of some kind. After a moment, I realize what it is.

“That’s what they put on convicts when they’re under house arrest.”

“If you leave the estate, I’ll get an alert. It’s for your own good.”

He flinches slightly as I approach, as if my presence is dangerous.

I know the feeling. A week after the intense heat we shared, being near him feels like a recipe for soul-aching temptation.

“It’s this – or you remain down here until I’ve found The Vultures.”

“How long until he expects the cash?”

“Three days,” Dom says coldly.

Well... sort of. It's more like he's trying his best to remain cold because he knows where the opposite will lead.

"Maybe I'll wait down here for three days," I murmur.

"It might not be over then. When that lowlife doesn't get his cash, he'll come after me. Who knows how long that will last? You must be getting bored down here. If you put on this anklet, I've got something to show you – something to keep you occupied."

I'm curious, make no mistake, but if I put the anklet on, it means accepting that I'm his prisoner. But if I don't put it on, it means staying in this panic room with zero chance of escape. If he's in Century City and I'm here, will he be able to make it back in time even if he gets an alert?

I take the anklet from his hand. Our fingers brush, and that familiar electric feeling flows through me. He feels it too, taking an exaggerated step back as if he's afraid of what he'll do.

"Fine," I say, leaning down and snapping it around my ankle before I can come to my senses.

He sighs in relief. "Thank you, Evie."

"No more 'Keepsake'?" I say.

He smiles tightly. "I thought you might be done bantering me."

"I'm not letting you off that easily."

He gestures toward the stairs. "Shall we?"

He seems so stiff and formal compared to before. On the surface, at least, but I sense the smoldering depths he's trying to conceal.

With Meatball trailing after us, we walk up the stairs, into the garage, and then outside. I breathe the fresh air, the late-day sunlight feeling pleasant on my face. Shutting my eyes, I turn to the sun, letting it glow red on my closed lids.

When I open my eyes, I see Dom looking longingly at me. He quickly turns away.

I want to throw my arms around him and share a kiss, but maybe this is for the best. Maybe, from this point on, things will be simpler. We won't muddy the waters with our unhinged lust and confusing romance.

"This way," he says, leading me around the house.

I resist the urge to ask if he's had any more nightmares, if he's missed me, if it was as difficult for him not to text me as it was for me not to text him.

He leads me to the rear of his house, then opens a glass door. "I hope you like it," he says, gesturing inside.

When I step into the studio, I stop breathing for a second.

The scent hits me first: fresh wood, new leather. Warm, ergonomic lighting cascades from above, softening the shadows and catching on the brushed steel edges of the custom workbench. There's an engraving, precise and deep along the edge.

My name, carved with the finesse of someone who respects a maker's tools.

The bench itself is impressive, clearly custom, the surface solid and smooth. Reinforced for weight, with cubbies and drawers organized in a jeweler's dream configuration. Every tool I could ever need is laid out in velvet-lined compartments: high-precision calipers, multiple grades of pliers and cutters, handheld torches, polishers, clamps. Swiss-made, Italian-forged, Japanese-honed.

No expense spared. No compromises.

My fingers itch just looking at the laser engraver in the corner. And the faceting machine – German, by the look of it – is the kind of equipment you only ever see in international ateliers or whispered about in maker forums.

Then I see the safes. Two of them, reinforced and flush with the cabinetry, with biometric locks. He didn't just stock this studio with tools. He gave me materials. I open one slowly, and I almost gasp. Raw gemstones, uncut sapphires, aquamarines, a whole cluster of tourmalines like frozen candy. Some of these stones shouldn't even be outside a vault. These are collector-grade, museum-quality. I spot a watermelon tourmaline slice so perfect I want to cry.

I turn in a slow circle, my heart catching in my throat. This isn't just a studio. It's a love letter... to craftsmanship, to artistry, to me.

Tears sting my eyes, and I want to scream at him in joy and appreciation and resentment... resentment for making me care when he so clearly wants to pull this cold and distant routine.

He stands in the center of the studio, his hands behind his back, trying to look nonchalant. "Do you like it?"

Losing control, I run at him and throw myself into his arms. He catches me and spins me in a circle as our lips meet. I kiss him passionately, ignoring the weight of the anklet, the cold metal gripping my leg.

He pushes his mouth against mine, groaning as he sets me down, ending the kiss but keeping close, staring meaningfully into my eyes.

"I love it," I tell him.

"I know it's tough being here. I thought this might help."

"This is literally a dream come true."

He kisses me again. I sink into the moment, ignoring the little voice in the back of my head whispering, He's painted the bars in pretty colors, but this is still a cage.

His cellphone rings before we can get carried away. He groans when he checks it. "It's Rafe. I have to get this," He answers, then frowns. "It hasn't been ten days yet. Why would they do that? I'll be there soon."

He hangs up.

“Is it them?” I ask.

“The Vultures vandalized one of my recording studios.”

“How do you know it was The Vultures?”

“I’ve put Rafe in charge of security. He caught one. This could be our chance.”

“Are you going to... get answers from him?”

Dom stares bleakly at me. “You don’t need to know the details. But the sooner we find them, the sooner you get to leave.”

He turns away. I grab his hand, pull him toward me, and throw myself into another confusing kiss. He holds me tightly, then brushes the hair from my face. Romance and lust clash in the darkness of his eyes.

I move my hands down his arm, touching his silver cufflinks.

“Thank you for this.”

“The look on your face is all the thanks I need.”

He leaves me in the large, improbable room. Once he’s gone, I turn in a circle, taking it all in again. It honestly is like he’s reached into my imagination and plucked out my wildest, most impossible dream and brought it to life.

I go to the workbench, running my hand over my engraving: Evie Davis.

It feels permanent, like I belong here. I don't know how to feel about that.

### CHAPTER 15

#### DOM

It feels strange walking into a mob bar after all these years. The barman flinches when he sees me. His name is Mario, and I've known him since I was a kid, though I haven't seen him in almost twenty years. His hair has turned grey and thinned in the middle, but I remember his serene smile.

"Long time no see," he says. "Drink?"

I offer my hand, and we shake. Just because I resent being here, it doesn't mean I have to be rude. "No, thank you. I've got business with Rafe in the basement."

"Business," Mario repeats.

"The fewer questions, the better."

"Fair enough. Wouldn't want the Don coming after me."

He laughs, and I force a smile. I don't want to have this conversation. If it wasn't for my Keepsake, I'd never step foot in this place again. As I walk out the back and down to the basement, I think about the look of wonder on her face when she saw the studio.

During our week apart, I wondered if I'd lost my mind as I ordered the quick, expensive construction. In total, including the materials, it cost nine hundred thousand dollars... all for a studio she might only use a handful of times. Was it worth it? Hell yeah.

It doesn't change the fact she's my prisoner, but at least she won't go insane with boredom.

Rafe is waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs, leaning against the wall and smoking a cigarette.

"Has he said anything?" I ask.

"I haven't questioned him yet. Wasn't sure how far you'd want me to go. Thought it'd be better if you took the lead."

"Good, then let's get this over with. Hang back, Rafe. Try to look intimidating."

He raises an eyebrow. "What'd you mean, try?"

As I open the door, it's like I can pretend we're just two stupid kids again, two balls of mayhem who just want to go into the world and make names for ourselves. He was my brother-in-arms before I had buddies in the military: the soldier at my side before I realized this was a war I wanted no part of.

When I see the young man – more a kid, really – tied to a chair in the middle of the basement, any sense of nostalgia fades. He's got a smear of blood across his face, nothing serious, but under the bright overhead lights, it's a stark reminder of the situation he's in.

A rag stuffed in his mouth, hands tied behind his back. I think about the girl on the

video Mason showed me, Crystal, and try not to feel pity for this kid. But it's difficult. I doubt he's the shot caller.

Rafe leans against the wall, stubbing his cigarette out on the back of his hand. It's an old intimidation tactic, and it works. The kid shivers.

I approach him, taking my gun from my waistband. If I'm going to do this, I have to play my part as well as I can, even if it sickens me.

"When I remove this gag, you're not going to scream, are you?" I grunt.

He shakes his head.

"That would be a very bad idea," I go on. "I've got no desire to hurt you, kid, honestly. I can't say the same for my friend, however."

Good cop – bad cop. It's a cliché, for a reason. It works.

He shakes his head even more vigorously.

I unknot the back of the gag and then let it fall to the floor. He gasps, dribbling spit rolls down his chin.

When I place the gun against his jaw and he flinches, I derive no pleasure from the act. That was one of the many reasons I left this life behind. Too many sadists, too many men who enjoyed the control and domination.

Isn't that what I'm doing with Evie – controlling her, dominating her?

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I try to push the thought away, try to convince myself it isn't as simple as that. I'm saving her, too.

Does that make it better?

"I understand you were involved in some arson today," I say.

The kid shivers, making a squeaking noise of fear that has me feeling like a bully.

"Let's start with your name."

Nothing.

"Your boss and I had a deal, kid. He's three days early. Why did he jump the gun?"

He bites down, tears springing to his eyes and sliding over his cheeks, shaking his head as he trembles.

I sigh, then return to Rafe, leaning in and lowering my voice. "Scare him, but don't physically hurt him."

"I might have to if scaring him doesn't work."

"I'm not my father," I growl.

"Your father would already have the answers he wants."

“Don’t push me, Rafe. I brought you in to do things my way.”

“Your way, while it might help you sleep at night, isn’t what I’d call optimal, Dom.”

“Who said I sleep at night? Just do it.”

I lean against the wall, and Rafe sighs, lighting another cigarette. He kneels beside the young man – thinking of him as akidis messing with my head; he looks at least eighteen, not that it makes it any better – and slowly brings the lit cigarette toward his face.

The man squirms away. Rafe holds the cigarette an inch away, looking at me with his eyebrow raised, as if waiting for me to give the order.

“Bobby,” the kid whimpers. “My name is Bobby.”

“That’s a start,” I say.

“Now, tell me why your boss couldn’t wait.”

“We—uh, not me, some of the guys... please.”

“Rafe,” I say, and Rafe pulls away but only slightly.

“He might stop singing without the proper motivation.”

“Rafe.”

Rafe stands, taking a drag from his cigarette.

I approach Bobby. “I will not ask anything twice now, you understand?”

“Yuh-yes.”

“Go on...”

“Some of the guys were getting restless. We’re shitting in buckets. Mason says we’re ‘doing it like the Army’, but we don’t want to live like that. Some higher-ups decided to rush things along. They thought they could scare you into coughing up the cash.”

“Are they aware of who I am?”

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“Mason and a few of the others told them it was madness, but they wouldn’t listen.”

Rafe snorts. “The Vultures against the mob. Oh, I wonder who will win.” His voice is laced with sarcasm.

“If I brought you a map, would you be able to point out where The Vultures are hiding?”

He nods. “What happens to me after?”

I know what Rafe would do if I weren’t here. If a man dared to burn down a mob asset, he’d make an example of him.

“I turn you over to the cops. They’ll try to make you testify against The Vultures, most likely, but that’s up to you. Otherwise, you’ll do your time, maybe make something of your life, maybe not. That’s not my problem. Rafe – get me a map.”

Rafe leaves the room. My phone vibrates in my pocket. I return to the wall, lean against it. It’s a text from my Keepsake, driving home the importance of what we’re doing here, though it makes me feel sour, wrong somehow, like I’m moving backward.

Evie: If a certain girl was going to make a certain man a piece of jewelry to say thank you for a certain studio, what would she make?

It’s strange to smile in a situation like this, but that’s what Evie does to me.

Dom: What if a certain man told a certain girl he doesn't wear jewelry?

Evie: She'd called him a liar. Because she knows he wears cufflinks.

Dom: Now we're going to get into a debate about whether or not cufflinks constitute jewelry.

Evie: Don't you wear necklaces, rings, anything like that?

Dom: I'm afraid not, but if you want to make to get me a gift, I won't turn you down.

Evie: It probably means I'm crazy, but I've been thinking about it.

Dom: Why would it mean you're crazy?

She sends an eye-rolling emoji, as if the answer is obvious. And it is. I just don't want to face up to it.

To hammer the point home, she texts back.

Evie: You don't need to ask me that, Warden.

I'm her prison warden, so obviously it's insane that she'd feel the urge to make me a gift. Having the studio built is the most heartfelt thing I've ever done for anyone, but it doesn't automatically make this okay.

Rafe returns with a map in his hand.

"My friend is going to cut your hands loose so you can show where your gang is hiding," I say. "Try something, Bobby, and it'll be the last thing you do."

Rafe takes a knife from his ankle holster and cuts Bobby's hands loose. Trembling like he's on the verge of a panic attack, Bobby indicates a location on the map.

"Bind him up," I say. "Gag him. Bobby, try not to freak. If you're telling the truth and we find The Vultures there – or evidence they were there – I'll turn you over to the cops. Nobody will hurt you. You have my word."

Rafe does as I say, and then we step into the hallway.

"These men burned down one of your studios, Dom."

"I know."

"And you're treating him like this is the goddamn Ritz."

"Look at him, Rafe. Scared out of his mind. He's not the man in charge."

"That wouldn't matter to?—"

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I grab Rafe's shirt and shove him against the wall. "Mention my father again, and we're going to have a problem."

Fear flickers into Rafe's eyes, and then a slow smile spreads across his lips. "Ah, there he is, the Dom I remember."

I let him go, disgusted. Sorry, I almost say, but the words won't form.

"It's time to tool up and head out."

"I'm assuming, despite this Good Samaritan routine, if The Vultures shoot at us, we're allowed to shoot back?"

## CHAPTER 16

### EVIE

I lose myself in my work for a time. A time... because when I get into a flow like this, minutes and hours cease to matter. There's just me and my craft. I only stop when I realize my thoughts are dancing away into tempting fantasies that amount to betrayals.

I imagine Dom walking in here—a different life, one that didn't start with a kidnapping. He brings me a coffee and gently kisses me on the cheek. The scene has a husband-wife air that causes a smile to spread across and stick to my face.

Pushing away from the bench, I take off my goggles and run my hand over my

engraved name one more time.

“Meatball?” I call, standing and stretching my arms over my head.

He’s nowhere in sight. I leave the studio, walking through one of the terraced gardens, calling his name. All around me, Topanga Canyon stretches out, desolate, isolated, a reminder of how fruitless running would be...

Or would it? My search takes me past the infinity pool, through another garden, and to the edge of the property where the walls reach up at least ten feet. There’s no obvious way to climb them and, if I did, no clear path to drop to the other side without hurting myself.

But Dom left hours ago, and I haven’t even searched for a landline phone, a laptop with an internet connection, anything. Who would I contact if I found one of these, though? I can’t call or message Tasha. She’s with Dom’s friend... unless he lied to me, which I somehow know he didn’t.

I trust my kidnapper. That’s a problem. One I feel less and less willing to fix as time goes on.

As I approach the front of the house, I hear a meow from above me. Looking up, I spot Meatball curled up in a cat tree built into the side of the house. Steps scale around the house, leading to more cat trees.

“He built all this for you, huh?”

Meatball meows contentedly, stretching and then walking along the steps gracefully, before climbing down and rubbing his body against my leg.

“Are you hungry?” I ask.

Meatball follows me into the large house. The entranceway is bigger than mine and Tash's apartment. On the wall, there's a photo of a younger Dom in military gear, the background of a desert. He's got his arm over another man, both of them with wild beards, and more men smile in the background.

"This must be his SEAL team," I murmur. "He lost all of these men, Meatball. All his buddies. And they tried to bury him with them. I wonder if part of him would've preferred if that happened so he didn't have to live with the survivor's guilt."

Meatball groans.

"You're right. I'm getting too gloomy."

But I can't take my eyes away from the photo for a long time, thinking about the pain he must've endured. It's not helpful to my situation. I'm becoming complacent. The week apart was supposed to harden me against this confusingly complex man, but it made me want him more.

I walk toward the large kitchen. "He could've researched The Thornbound Oath book series before he bought me those first editions. He could've learned they were about a woman who finally accepts she has feelings for her captor. Or maybe that's why he bought me that gift... to make me more like Kaelen Mirae."

In the kitchen, I see someone removed the landline phone from the wall. No, someone didn't remove it. He did.

I get Meatball some tuna and water, then start preparing a sandwich for myself.

My phone buzzes.

Dom: I'm heading out on a mission, Evie. I'll be back this evening. This might be the

end. If this goes well, you'll be free. In the meantime, I'm going to give this cellphone to your friend Tasha, so that you can talk with her. She'll call you in roughly an hour.

My throat grows tight as I read the word 'mission'. Is it going to be dangerous? What if something happens to him? He won't be able to return and set me free. Yeah, that's the reason I'm scared, right? Not because I have feelings for him. Not because it'll mean I'll never taste his lips or feel his reassuring presence again.

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As if reading my thoughts, he texts again.

Dom: If something goes wrong, I've instructed two trustworthy men to visit my property and set you free. After that, they'll take orders from you, and you will have all the funds you need if you wish to start a new life away from The Vultures.

I swallow, fighting off the tears that try to spring to my eyes.

Dom: I know this has been difficult for you. I know I'm a stuck record. But if something happened to you, I'd never forgive myself. I'm handing the phone off now. Hopefully, I'll see you later. Keep safe, Keepsake.

I put the phone on the counter, angrily wiping away my tears. He's messing with my head again, which I love, hate. He's playing me like a freaking drum.

I leave the house and walk through one garden to a shed at the rear of the property. Just as I thought there'd be, there are two step ladders. I grunt and groan as I carry one, then the other, to the nearest perimeter wall.

I could setup one ladder, then climb up while carrying the other. It will be difficult, but I'm certain I could do it. Then I could lower the other and climb down without hurting myself. After that, I'd follow the road. It'll be a long walk—I'd need to take supplies—but I'd make it.

I could be free. This is my chance.

No more head fucks. No more wanting him. No more aching at night as I squeeze my

legs together and think about what we did and what else we could do.

No more tightness in my chest as I believe his words, the protectiveness in his smoldering eyes, the warmth of his banter, and the intoxication of him looking at me like I'm the most important woman in the world.

Meatball purrs. Are we going or are we staying?

I turn away from the ladders. Heck.

We're staying... for now.

When the jail broken cellphone rings, I answer it quickly. I'm in one of the gardens, sitting next to Meatball, who's sprawled out on the bench.

"Tash!"

"Hey, chick," she says.

I laugh.

"What's funny?"

"Just how casual you are after everything that's happened. We're both prisoners, but it felt like a normal day when you said that."

"Prisoners?" Tash says. "Is that how you feel?"

"Isn't it how you feel?"

"No," she admits. "Rafe explained the situation, and honestly, I went with the flow."

Dom hasn't hurt you, has he? Rafe said he was a good man, better than Rafe, that 'he left darkness behind a long time ago' or something like that. Oh, God, don't tell he lied to me."

"He hasn't, Tash, relax. I'm glad you're okay."

"You're safe? Unharmed?"

"Yeah," I murmur. "And sorry for dragging you into this mess."

"Hush. In a weird way, I'm happy you did. If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't have met Rafe."

My mind spins. "What's going on with you two?"

"Uh... everything, I guess." She laughs, and I can tell it's genuine, that she's happy.

"We got intimate pretty much straightaway."

"And you haven't been going insane wondering if it's right, or wrong, to be with your kidnapper? You haven't eaten yourself alive with the moral dilemma?"

"No, but something tells me you have."

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“I’ve never wanted to be trapped. To be caged. To be used. Not after what happened to Mom with Mason.”

“Is Dom using you?”

I sigh. “No more than I’m using him, I suppose. Or maybe ‘using’ is the wrong word. I’m just so happy you’re okay, Tash. I was worried.”

“You don’t need to worry. Rafe won’t let anything happen to me.”

“I wish I could see things as simply as you.”

“When this is over, when we’re back in our apartment and it all seems like a blur, like a dream, you won’t have to worry about the moral dilemma. You’ll just have to ask yourself – do you like this guy?”

I don’t respond straightaway. If I answer honestly—with a resounding yes—it will feel too final. Once I’ve admitted to my best friend that my emotions toward my Warden aren’t as simple as maybe I wish they were, there’s no taking that back.

“I think it’s cray cray that we’re talking for the first time in days and it’s all men, men, men,” I tell her.

I can almost hear her rolling her honeyed eyes. “Why do I feel a subject change coming?”

“Tell me what you’ve been up to.”

“I don’t think you want all the details.”

That goes both ways. She doesn’t need to know about the steaminess I’ve shared with Dom, about the temptation that strikes me every single moment of every single day, even during the week we were apart... or the emotion tugging at me like threads of destiny telling me this is the guy for me.

“Apart from the you-know-what,” Tash says, “I’ve been catching up on some reading. Watching movies. Missing you...”

“I’ve missed you too,” I reply.

“I thought Rafe was going to bring you to the safe house at first. When he didn’t, I doubted, just a little, if he were telling the truth. That’s why it’s so, so good to hear your voice.”

“Ditto,” I admit.

Now, I have to accept that Dom isn’t a liar, at least with this.

“What about you?” she asks.

“Reading – making jewelry.”

“Did Dom bring your supplies?”

So much for not talking about our men...

“He did one better than that. He made me a studio.” I can’t hide the excitement in my voice. “It’s everything I ever dreamed a studio could be. It must’ve cost him almost a fortune. It’s the best?—”

I cut myself off, taking a breath. I sound like a giddy, deluded fool.

“But what happened to not talking about men?”

She laughs. “Fair point. So, what are you making?”

And we’ve failed... again. “Something for Dom.”

## CHAPTER 17

### DOM

Sweat slides down my forehead and sticks my clothes to my skin as we hike up the Devil’s Punchbowl in Angeles National Forest. Rafe wheezes beside me, and behind and ahead of us, the men he hired groan with the effort. It’s times like these I miss my SEAL buddies. Even with my tweaked knee and back, I have to slow down so that I don’t push too far ahead.

“It’s going to be a damn slaughter just for making us hike,” Rafe grumbles.

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“If blood is spilled, that won’t be why.”

“I thought you were against bloodshed.”

“Not if it stops Mason coming after Evie.”

We keep going across the rugged terrain, heading toward the coordinates that Bobby the prisoner pointed out on the map.

“You weren’t keen on hurting the kid,” Rafe says.

“To kill the snake, you cut off the head. You don’t mess with the tail. It’s a waste of energy.”

“If he lied to us, I might have something to say about that.”

I look grimly at him. “You’re not hurting the kid.”

After thirty minutes of tough hiking, we crest a small dusty hill and stop opposite the mouth of a cave. I shoulder my rifle, then double-check my bulletproof vest. Gesturing to the men, they fan out, getting ready to advance into the cave.

I’m about to give the order when I hear athrum-thrumnoise. Like an engine.

“Do you hear that?” Rafe asks.

A moment later, three off-road bikes explode from the mouth of the cave, followed

by four more. They bounce over the terrain and take a sharp turn, heading in the opposite direction.

“Aim for the tires!” I roar, hefting my rifle and aiming at the bikes

I let a round of bullets fly, buckling one of the bikes, and then switch my aim to another. But by then, it’s too late. They’ve shot over the opposite hill and out of sight. They chose this cave well. I jump over the hill and slide down it, then run to the opposite side. By the time I get to a firing position, the bikes have taken another turn.

“Fuck,” I growl, turning back to Rafe and the others.

“Maybe they had cameras watching the perimeter,” Rafe muses.

“Fuck.”

“At least we stopped one of them.”

“Mr. Russo,” one man says, gesturing to the man on the ground.

He wasn’t wearing a helmet, and when he fell from the bike, his unprotected head slammed against a rock. I’ve seen enough dead bodies in my time; I don’t need to check if he’s breathing. But I rush over, hoping it’s Mason, but I don’t recognize the man. He’s shirtless and covered in biker tattoos.

Somebody calls from the mouth of the cave, “Mr. Russo!”

I jog to the cave. They left fast, abandoning several weapons and crates of supplies. Sleeping bags and stinking buckets litter the cave... and, further on, lit by oil lamps, several women crouch with their hands over their eyes. I recognize one of them from the video Mason showed me when he visited my office.

“Crystal?” I say, shouldering my rifle and offering my hand. “It’s okay—you’re safe. The Vultures are gone. They can’t hurt you anymore.”

It takes a while for the women to slowly stand and leave the cave. When they do, they wince in the sunlight. They look thin, as if The Vultures have been hoarding all the food for themselves, and several of them have bruises and wear torn clothing, leaving no question about what those sick fucks have been doing to them.

One of them, a young girl with dyed red hair, sees the corpse on the ground and runs over to him, letting out a wild scream. She kicks him in the side. “I told you, you’d pay for what you did! I told you God would make you pay, you rapist fuck!”

Rafe walks up beside me. “Chin up, Dom. At least you didn’t kill an evil man.”

“We’ve got no goddamn clue where they’re going now. This is FUBAR.”

“Fucked up beyond all recognition. Do I get a gold star?”

“Can it, Rafe.”

“We could question the kid again.”

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“No, we can’t.” When Rafe looks at me curiously, I say, “I had two men stay behind and hand him off to the cops as soon as we left.”

“What? Why?”

“I don’t trust the mob.”

“Dom, you are the mob.”

I run a hand through my hair. “Let’s get these women somewhere safe. Then we’ll figure out our next step.”

As I drive through Topanga Canyon, I reflect on the fact that today’s fuck-up had a grim silver lining. It means that I don’t have to let my Keepsake go right away. I unlock the gate, park, then go searching for her.

She’s in her studio, the whir of some tool the only noise as she leans intently over her worktable. Meatball meows and approaches me. I kneel, greeting the cat, then pick him up and watch as Evie loses herself in her work.

Even with her back turned to me, I can read the passion in her movements. I wonder how long she’s been in here, utterly lost to her craft, and I imagine a different scenario, a different life, in which I was watching my woman, my girlfriend, not my prisoner.

Finally, she lays down her tool and turns, starting when she sees me.

“How long have you been there?” she asks.

“I didn’t want to disturb you. You looked lost—in love with your craft.”

She walks toward me, smiling as if she’s unsure if she should allow herself. She’s wearing a T-shirt and shorts, no bra as usual, her nipples poking through the fabric. I put Meatball down and remind myself to be calm. I can’t let my lust erupt like it did before I left her for a week.

“Are you hungry?” I ask.

She frowns.

“Is something wrong?”

“Uh – no.” She bites her lip. “Is something wrong with you? You seem tense.”

“It’s been some day.”

I gesture to the door. She walks toward it, then stops, trails her hand along my chest. She looks into my eyes with that classic Evie complexity. “I lied before. Something is wrong.”

“Tell me.”

“You don’t seem to want to kiss me hello.”

I laugh savagely. “I’m afraid what will happen if I kiss you. And I’m afraid you won’t want to kiss me when you learn what I did today.”

Her answer? She throws herself at me, wrapping her arms around me and standing on

her tiptoes to bring her lips to mine. I gasp as I kiss her, holding her tightly, my desire and my emotions responding in equal measure.

Lifting her off her feet, I let my hands move to the tempting perfection of her ass.

It takes a lot of effort to put her down, to stop myself from going the rest of the way and mauling her, but I pull back.

“What happened?” she asks.

I take a step back. “I killed a man.”

She gasps, looking at me as if she doesn’t recognize me. “Who? Why?”

“We caught a Vulture. He was just a kid.”

“You killed a kid?”

“He was a young man, but at my age, he seemed like a teenager.”

“Oh my God, Dom.”

“Wait, Keepsake. I didn’t hurt him. I’m not explaining this very well.”

“Then you need to make it make sense,” she grits out.

I want to take her hands, but I don’t allow myself. Affection radiates from her, and I know that touching would make it more difficult for her to think clearly. Just like it’s difficult for me to think around her.

“I questioned him – I didn’t hurt him – and he led us to the cave where The Vultures were hiding. They had off-road bikes, fled, and I shot out the tires to one of their bikes. The man fell and hit his head. His name was Justin. Or Justice. That’s what he liked to be called, apparently.”

Her expression changes, fear flickering in her beautiful honey colored eyes.

“You knew him?”

She nods, wrapping her arms across her midriff. “He wasn’t a good man. That’s not a revelation with The Vultures, but he was one of the terrible ones.”

“They left some women behind, Crystal and a few others. One of them kicked his corpse and called him a rapist.”

She shivers. “That tracks with what I’ve heard. Are you okay?”

I wave a hand. “Don’t worry about me.”

“But I worry about you, Dom.” She lowers her voice. “I know I shouldn’t, but I do. What was ‘the kids’ name?”

“Bobby.”

She shakes her head. “He must’ve joined after I left. What happens to him now?”

“The mob would torture him for information. They’d do sick things – things that I won’t repeat to you. But I turned him over to the cops. I left the mob for a reason. I refuse to be like my father.”

She gasps, her eyebrows shooting up. “Your father?”

I grind my teeth. I didn’t mean to share that. “Let’s get some coffee.”

She takes my hand, squeezes it, giving me a meaningful look. Some of the tension flows out of me as I hold her hand as gently as a man like me can. Together, with Meatball trailing after us, we leave her studio and step into the kitchen.

As I make the coffees, she sits on the other side of the obsidian kitchen island.

“My father is the Don of the mob,” I tell her. “From a young age, he tried to groom me for power. But when I was a teenager, I became sick with it all. Sick of the bullying. The crime. The stink of it. Mob guys take what they want, just take and take, and don’t give a damn about the consequences.”

I stop, realizing what I’ve just said.

She tilts her head with a knowing smile, but there’s sadness in her expression that

threatens to break my heart: a heart I thought was past being broken before I met Evie.

“Now, I’m doing the same.”

She stands, walks around the island, takes my hand and looks up at me with tears glistening in her eyes. “I can’t condone you taking me, Dom. But I can’t ignore the truth, either. I could’ve run today. I carried stepladders to the perimeter walls, and I knew I could make a break for it. But I didn’t. I stayed. Because—and this is hard for me to say—I wanted to. I want to.”

She pulls me in for a hug. I hold her tightly, gently smoothing my hand through her hair.

“Maybe we can forget about it for the rest of the night?” she whispers. “For a little while, we can steal this time, make it ours, pretend The Vultures and the mob and none of it exists. Just me, you, and Meatball.”

I clear my throat, shocked by how choked up I’m getting. “I’d like that.”

She looks up at me, seeming as surprised by the emotion in my voice as I am. “Wait here—I forgot your gift.”

## CHAPTER 18

### EVIE

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*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:48 am*

When I walk into the studio to collect his cufflinks, I pause, looking down at the pieces. This feels like a turning point. I meant what I said back there; I want to pretend nothing else exists, just us, just tonight.

I've crossed a line. Somehow, I don't feel like a prisoner anymore. I try to remember my ideals about not being manipulated, not succumbing to Stockholm Syndrome, but this doesn't feel like that. This is something else. This is letting go, and it's a relief I can't quantify.

Dom is trying to be tough, trying to maintain his gruff exterior, but I know he needs me tonight. When he talked about the standoff at the cave, his voice was thick with emotion, probably more than he realized.

When I return to the kitchen, Dom has his back to me. The refrigerator door open. "How do you like your steak?"

"Are you going to cook for me?"

He gives me a wry look. "It's the least I can do."

"I like it well done." He pulls a face, and I laugh. "I know that's sacrilege. I can't help it."

"For you, I'll make an exception."

I approach him, my heart beating fast and hard. "I made you these today," I say, offering him my cupped hand.

He takes the cufflinks, lifting them to the light, the delicate pieces looking tiny in his large paw-like hands. His eyes become boyish for a moment as he admires my work, the darkness draining away. “You’re so. Damn. Talented.”

A blush touches my cheeks. “I did my best.”

He carefully lays them on the counter, then grabs my waist and pulls me against him. “Seriously... one day, you’re going to have a successful business, making jewelry for the stars. I’m going to wear these tomorrow.”

I put my hand on his chest. His heart is pounding as hard and fast as mine. Maybe he knows that we’re crossing a line too, becoming something more than a prisoner and warden. “We don’t need to worry about the future, remember?”

Ignoring the guilty voice inside whispering this wasn’t part of the plan, I pull myself in for another kiss.

When dinner is almost ready, Dom smirks at me. “Wait here. I want this to be special.”

He leaves the room. Tingles dance over me when I replay the look in his eyes, his excited tone. This is a special night. Chemistry is a tricky thing, hard to define, something that goes beyond words and shared pain and even physical intimacy.

It’s the small moments, like watching him cook, the expressions he aims at me: conflicted, but making an effort... for me. It’s the fire in his voice when he says he wants to be nothing like his father.

He returns, wrapping his arms around me from behind, gently kissing my cheek... but with a clear undercurrent that he wants to go further.

“Meet me on the upstairs balcony,” he says. “I’ll bring our meals up.”

When I stand, his hand strokes over my body, down my hip, and over my ass. Lust mixes with romance and infuses me with that love-drunk sensation.

I gasp when I walk onto the balcony. He has lit candles everywhere; the table sitting in the middle, the clear sky blazing with jewel-like stars. Meatball leaps onto the nearest cat tree, purring contentedly. A bottle and two glasses are also on the table.

I sit at the table, looking up at the stars and letting myself simply exist in this moment. The stars are like precious pieces of metal on a sheet of black. The only thing in my life that usually makes it possible to forget about everything else is my craft, but here, now, I don’t think about what’s happened or what’s going to happen.

Meatball purrs at me, and I’m sure he’s smiling, because he knows how significant this is.

Soon, my man, my kidnapper, brings our meals onto the balcony. He sets them down and takes the bottle. “Champagne?” he asks.

“I’ll have a small glass.”

“Just a small glass for me too,” he replies.

“You don’t drink much?”

The cork pops and liquid gold gushes from the opening. As he pours, he says, “I rarely drink. It’s too tempting to use it to silence my demons, but my demons don’t deserve to be silenced.”

“Demons... from your time in the SEALs?”

He pours my glass, then raises his. “We don’t need to ruin the night by talking about that.”

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I raise my glass, clink glasses with him. “Who said it would ruin it?”

He laughs ruefully. I take a sip; the bubbles warming me up, then place my glass down and cut into my steak.

“You seem different tonight,” I say.

“Different?”

“Something has changed. Was it what happened with The Vultures?”

“Sort of. It was being with the mob. I never wanted to return to them, to give my father what he wanted.”

I gasp. “What do you mean, ‘father’?”

He shrugs. “I suppose you can know. My father is the don of the Family.”

I stare, rapt, my food suddenly forgotten.

“He tried to groom me to be next in line. He wanted me to be like him. Cold, ruthless, heartless. Maybe there was a time where I might’ve been what he wanted me to be, but the more I saw of that life, the more sickened I was by it... and now I’ve had to go to them for help again.”

“Because of me,” I mutter.

He reaches across and takes my hand, staring at me with those intense dark eyes, like two stars have fallen from the sky. “Don’t say that,” he says, and he’s suddenly my Warden; this is an order. “Don’t even think like that. I’m doing this because it’s the right thing.”

We hold hands for a few moments, then I pull mine away, and cut into my steak. I stuff a juicy, delicious piece in my mouth, so I don’t have to respond to what he just said.

“What?” he asks, probably reading my expression.

“Thanks for telling me about who you are.”

“No, Keepsake.”

“No?”

“That isn’t what you were going to say,” he tells me fiercely.

I shake my head. He’s right, dammit. He can read me like I could read shards of twisted metal in the old workshop and discover the beautiful pieces they could become.

“You’re lying to yourself if you think this—us—is down to you wanting to do the right thing. I see the animal in you, Dom. It scared me at first.”

“But not anymore?” he says huskily.

My breath picks up, but I control myself. As best as I can, anyway. “I don’t know. I want the truth, but you know that. There’s only so many times and so many ways I can say it.”

He looks at me for a few moments, saying nothing. Smoldering, burning up, like the man who would be Don, king of the mafia, is trying to simmer through his CEO persona.

“You’re right,” he finally says. “Damn, Keepsake. Yeah—you’re right. I can’t lie. I can’t run. I followed you because I wanted you. I took you because I needed you. You’re here because you’re mine.”

He stands, his chair falling to the floor, then walks around the table and hauls me to my feet. I gasp as he crushes me against him, his hands greedily sinking into my hips, pushing his rock-hard staff against my belly. When we kiss, it’s like he’s mesmerizing me.

I’ve got my answer. He’s my captor, my Warden. He admitted it. And yet I can’t stop kissing him.

When his hand slides down my body, toward my sex, I push him away. It takes all the self-control I have, but I manage to do it. “What am I if I let this happen?” I murmur.

“Somebody who does what she wants, what she needs,” he growls.

“Let’s just eat. We can’t do this tonight. We can’t do this until I know you’re going to let me go.”

“I’m never going to let you go. Even when I set you free, I won’t be able to let you go. Ever.”

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I take a step back, trying to convince my tangled mind that this is too much, that he's messing with my head and heart and I don't want it, don't need it, but I do. That's the cold truth. No—the boiling hot truth.

“Let's just eat,” I whisper.

His eyes clear after a moment, like a man waking from a dream. “You're right. I'm sorry.”

I sit, smiling at him. “No, you're not.”

He smirks. “You're right. I can't be sorry for wanting you. But I know I need to behave.”

“I'm scared, Dom. Can you blame me? I was a prisoner all my life without even knowing it, and now, it's the same thing. I'm a prisoner—but I don't feel like one.”

“I'm a prisoner too,” he snarls.

“How'd you figure that?”

“The moment you walked into my office, I was a prisoner. To you. To this feeling. To this desire. Call me crazy if you want, but I've never felt like this. When this is over and I force myself to do the right thing, to release my Keepsake, I know I'll never feel this way again.”

As we eat, he asks me about my work, changing the subject so that we can let some

of this passionate fire go. But I can tell by the way he looks at me he wants to touch me again, kiss me, own me.

I want it too, but I have to be strong.

Soon, it's time for bed. I change into shorts and a T-shirt, then climb beneath the covers. Meatball has disappeared elsewhere in the house, leaving me alone with my thoughts and the fire in my heart and sex.

I can't sleep, though. I can't stop thinking about him. I get hot and heavy, replaying every moment in my mind. To distract myself, I carefully braid my hair. The action has always brought me comfort, but with each subtle movement, I can't help but think of Dom's hand wrapped around it.

Dominating, owning, leading the way.

## CHAPTER 19

### DOM

I'm supposed to be on my best behavior, but I can't sleep. Evie dominates my thoughts. I told her the truth, revealed the savagery inside of me. She asked me to stop, to back off.

I should keep my promise.

But I can't. I move through the house like an assassin, hunger fueling me.

She must hear me coming. When I open her bedroom door and look across the moonlit room, she's no longer lying in bed.

She stands by the edge of the bed, her breathing shallow, her chest rising and falling in a teasing rhythm. Her braid lies over her shoulder, beautifully. The shirt she wears is too thin, nearly transparent in the low light. It clings to her curves like it was made for her. No bra. No shame. Her nipples are stiff, pressing against the fabric, and her thighs are just slightly parted, an invitation to my obsessed hunger.

I cross the room slowly, letting the tension stretch between us.

“Take it off,” I growl.

She hesitates for half a second—I see the flicker of rebellion in my Keepsake’s eyes—but then pulls the shirt over her head. Her breasts bounce free, full, heavy, aching to be touched. My cock stiffens at the sight of her. Her skin is smooth and glowing, her waist flaring into those thick, perfect hips.

She’s a fucking masterpiece.

“Now the shorts.”

Her fingers move slowly, teasing the waistband down, revealing more of that soft, tempting skin. She peels them off inch by inch, and when they drop to the floor, she’s bare, legs parted enough to show me the glistening heat between them.

I cup her breast with one hand, firm and warm in my palm, and pinch the nipple between my fingers. She gasps, her eyes fluttering closed as her back arches. My other hand slides down over her stomach, between her thighs. I run a single finger through her slick folds.

“So wet already. You want this cock?”

She nods, breathless.

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“Say it.”

“I want it.”

“What do you want?” I press, rubbing her clit with slow, tight circles.

“I want your cock,” she breathes. “I want it inside me. I want you to fuck me.”

So much for being good. I bet she’s been driving herself crazy since dinner, too.

We’re both as bad as each other. Perfect for each other.

I push her onto the bed. She falls against the sheets with a moan. She tries to crawl up toward the pillows, but I grab her ankle and drag her to the edge. My hand presses against the anklet, a reminder of who she is, who I am, what I am, and what I’ve done. But that doesn’t stop us.

Her thighs spread instinctively, revealing the pink, dripping folds of her pussy. I kneel between her legs, running my tongue along her inner thigh, savoring the taste of her skin.

Then I bury my mouth in her fire.

She cries out, hips bucking as I lick her slit, tongue pressing deep, then flicking over her clit in quick, hungry lashes. Her thighs clamp around my head, her hands tightening into fists on the sheets. I grab her hips, hold her still. I fucking feast.

“Fuck—Dom—oh God—yes...”

Her voice cracks, her legs trembling as I suck her clit into my mouth, teasing the sensitive nub until she’s thrashing. I don’t stop. I want her shaking. I want her wrecked.

When I feel her approaching the edge, I pull back.

“No,” she whimpers, eyes wild, body glistening with sweat. “Why’d you stop?”

I stand, towering over her, and strip. My shirt hits the floor. My pants follow. My cock springs free, veins pulsing, the head already slick with precome. Her eyes go wide.

“Don’t stop,” she whispers.

“I thought I was too savage for you.”

“Maybe I want savage. Maybe it’s easier to admit when the lights are out.”

I grab her ankles and pull her down, the anklet once again reminding me of what this truly is. But lining up with her entrance makes me forget. I drag the thick head of my cock through her folds, letting her feel just how big I am, how much she’s about to take.

She moans, her body twitching with anticipation.

“Ready?” I ask, voice rough.

She nods desperately.

I press forward slowly, the head of my cock breaching her, stretching her open. She gasps, claws at the sheets, her hips writhing.

“Fuck, you’re tight,” I growl. “So damn tight and wet.”

I pull the swollen head of my cock out and press it against her folds, dragging it through the slickness that’s already pooling between her thighs. She’s soaked, and every time I tease her entrance, her hips twitch forward like her body’s begging without words.

“Look at that,” I murmur, sliding the tip just barely inside. “Your hole’s dripping for me, Keepsake.”

She gasps, her legs trying to widen further, to take me in, but I don’t give it to her yet. I push in slowly, inch by inch, forcing her body to stretch around my girth. The tightness is unreal, a velvet vice squeezing me, resisting and welcoming all at once.

“F-fuck,” she moans, her back arching, the cords of her neck taut. “You’re... so big...”

I grit my teeth and keep going, feeding her more of me, reveling in the heat that wraps around my cock like wet silk. Her walls flutter, trying to adjust, muscles flexing as if testing me.

Her nails scratch at the sheets, her thighs trembling. “Dom... oh my god, I feel full.”

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“You’re not full yet,” I groan. “You’ll know when you’re full.”

I give her another inch, and another. She cries out, hips rolling instinctively, her clit bumping against my pelvic bone as I finally drive all the way. My balls rest against her ass, my cock buried to the root, every thick inch pulsing inside her.

We hold like that for a beat. She’s panting. My jaw clenched tight as her inner walls squeeze and ripple, adjusting to my size. She feels like heaven. Like something I was built to conquer.

I pull back halfway, then slam back in with a snap of my hips.

She yelps—high, horny—and her hands fly to my biceps, clinging like she’s being swept under a wave of desire. Her legs wrap around my waist, locking me in place.

“That’s it,” I grunt, pulling back and thrusting again, hard enough to shake the bed frame. “Take it. Take all of me. My perfect virgin.”

Each thrust forces a moan from her lips, her breath hitching with every impact. The wet sound of my cock plunging into her fills the room. Slick, raw, urgent.

I grip her wrists and pin them above her head with one hand, my other on her hip to keep her from sliding up the bed as I fuck her. Her breasts bounce with every thrust.

She’s squirming now, not to escape—she’s never wanted to escape, despite what she claims—but to get more.

“Please,” she whimpers. “Faster. Harder. I need?—”

“You don’t ask,” I snarl, slamming into her, burying myself balls deep. “You take what I give you.”

She cries out, and I see and feel it: the desperation in her eyes, the way her thighs twitch, the needy clenching of her slit.

I grind my hips in circles before pulling back and pounding into her again, shifting my angle. She shrieks and her pussy spasms around my cock.

“Right there, right, Dom,fuck?—”

I lean down, biting the curve of her shoulder, dragging my teeth along her flushed skin. “You’re going to come for me. To drench my cock with your juices.”

“Yuh-yes.” She sounds like she can’t believe it. “I can’t hold it?—”

I release her wrists and bring my hand down between us, my thumb finding her clit. I rub tight, punishing circles as I hammer into her. Her eyes roll back, her mouth falling open in a silent scream.

“Now,” I growl in her ear. “Come on this cock. Let me feel it.”

She detonates beneath me, her whole body seizing, her thighs shaking around my waist. Her pussy clamps down, soaking me, her come dripping down to the base of my cock.

But I’m not done.

I flip her over, grabbing her hips and pulling her up onto all fours. Her back arches,

her ass high in the air, glistening and gorgeous.

I plunge into her from behind without warning, earning a choked moan from her lips.

“Dom—fuck—it’s so deep...”

I wrap her braid around my fist and tug gently as I thrust, yanking her back onto my cock. Her ass ripples with each slam of my hips, her slit gripping me tighter now, wetter with every savage stroke.

I watch myself disappear into her over and over, my cock shining with her slickness. My balls swing forward, slapping her clit. Her hands slide on the sheets, her voice ragged.

“I’m going to...” she trails off with a disbelieving sigh. “I think I’m...”

“Do it,” I snarl. “Cream on my cock again. Now.”

She screams, loud and raw, as her orgasm crashes through her like a storm. I feel every pulse of her pussy, every clench, every shudder. Her arms give out and she collapses onto the mattress, but I don’t let up. I follow her down, draping my body over hers, thrusting deep and hard, grinding through her aftershocks.

“I’m going to come inside you,” I growl against her neck. “Going to fucking fill you up.”

“Yes,” she whimpers, arching back into me. “Do it. I want it. I want all of it.”

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That's all I need.

My grip tightens on her hips and I slam in one final time, cock buried to the base as I erupt. My come blasts deep inside her in thick, hot ropes, flooding her, mixing with her own wetness. My body shakes with my release, my breath hot on her skin, my groans rough and broken as the last spurts empty into her.

We collapse in a tangled, soaked heap, my cock still twitching inside her, her pussy fluttering around me, milked raw and used.

We're slick with sweat, our breath ragged, the air filled with the scent of sex.

And I still haven't had enough.

"Fuck," she moans, and that one word makes me grow hard again, my flaccid cock aching with new tension. "Oh... Dom. Seriously?"

"You're the sexiest woman alive, Keepsake. Don't sound so fucking surprised."

"You're hard already. Again."

"Only for you. Fuck. Your pussy is addictive."

"Hmm," she whimpers.

I grip her hips and pull out halfway, my cock solid again, soaking wet with our releases. When I slam back in, she cries out, hands reaching back to find a part of me

to cling onto. I set a rhythm: hard, deep, relentless. Each thrust rocks her up onto the bed. Her breasts bounce with every stroke, making fleshy curvy slapping sounds.

“Look at you,” I pant. “Taking all of me. Every. Fucking. Inch.”

She moans louder. I grab her shoulders, get her on all fours again. Her pussy grips me tighter in this position, her moans turning into screams as I fuck her deeper, harder.

The slap of skin on skin fills the room. Her juices coat my cock, dripping down my balls. She’s soaked, shivering, close.

“You’re going to come one more time,” I growl, reaching between us to rub her clit. “Come on this cock.”

She screams as she shatters, her pussy clenching wildly, her body locking up as waves of pleasure slam through her. I keep fucking her through it, riding her orgasm, not letting up.

“Dom...” she gasps. “So deep...”

Her tightness hugs me perfectly in this position, her ass bouncing as I fuck her with savage hunger. My balls slap against her soaked folds, the sound filthy and perfect.

“You were made for this,” I growl. “Made for my cock.”

She cries out, her voice breaking, one hand slipping down to rub her clit. “I’m going to come again – please – don’t stop...”

“I’m not fucking stopping.”

As she reaches yet another explosion, I greedily spank her thick ass.

“You belong...” I spank her. “To...” Harder, fiercer, leaving tattoos of hunger on her thick creaminess. “Me.”

“Ahhhh,” she gasps.

I pound into her harder, watching her body tense. When she comes again, this time with a scream so raw it tears through my control.

I pull out, flip her onto her back, and thrust back in, needing to see her face. Her eyes meet mine, filled with lust and desperation.

“Touch yourself,” I order.

She does. Rubbing her clit fast, her body tight with tension.

I lean down, pinning one wrist above her head with my hand, loving this position, knowing it will become our position, thrusting faster, losing myself. Her walls flutter around me.

I slam in deep and explode inside her a second time, my cock pulsing. Her pussy caressing me for every drop of release, both of us shuddering.

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When it's over, I collapse on top of her, breathing hard, her skin slick against mine.

Finally, I slip out of her precious petals and lie beside her. She lays her hand against my chest, looking up at me with shocked eyes. "I feel drunk. And not from the champagne."

"That was heaven," I whisper, my eyes growing heavy. "You're heaven. I haven't felt this relaxed... ever."

"Then stay with me," she says, words I'm desperate to hear.

## CHAPTER 20

### EVIE

When Dom falls asleep, it's like he hasn't rested properly for years. He breathes softly, hugging me close to him. If I move for a moment to readjust my position, he tenses up, his subconscious needing me to stay beside him. The room smells of sex... and I like it. Maybe some people would find that weird. But I love it.

I can't believe how effortless that felt. When he walked into the room and stared at me with those simmering eyes, suddenly, all my nerves melted away. There was no hesitation, no uncertainty. It was just me and him and our hunger, and that was it.

With each touch, I felt myself letting control slip. I didn't need to white-knuckle my belief that I don't want or need him. I didn't need to stubbornly convince myself that I want to get free.

When we were naked and hot and the rest of the world didn't exist, it was simple. My body and my desire didn't feel any complications. There was nothing but the wet, naked hunger.

My sex is still aching. He seriously went nuts. For a minute, I thought I might have to tell him to stop or slow down. But then sizzling pleasure zipped through me, turning the momentary virgin discomfort to something drug-like, something destiny-tinged.

It was like I became someone else as I moved with him. I couldn't think. Just feel. Just want. Even now, when I know my body needs a rest and a reset, I want it again.

I place my cheek against his chest, listening to his steady heartbeat. I don't want to sleep. If I sleep, I'll be forced to wake in the cold light of morning and confront what I've done.

My mind knows better. I know giving myself to my kidnapper, to the son of a mafia Don, is a bad idea. But my heart and my body don't give two damns. It's too easy to banter with him, to kiss him, to claim him and have him claim me.

I shift my legs, trailing the foot of one leg across the ankle of the other, feeling the anklet, the plastic device telling me in no uncertain terms what I really am.

Stockholm Syndrome. I say the word in my mind as if that will make this easier.

But the truth?

I enjoy lying in his arms. I like listening to and feeling his strong heartbeat against me. I enjoy living a real-life version of The Thornbound Oath series, except this, somehow, is hotter and more emotional and makes me feel like I belong even more.

As my eyes grow heavy and my breathing slows down, a smile spreads across my

face.

I'm lying in the arms of my kidnapper and I'm happy.

Dom yells, "No!"

I sit up quickly, finding him standing at the edge of the bed, his eyes open but glassy, disconnected somehow. I instantly know that he's sleepwalking. There's something not there about him as he stares into space, his hands clenched into fists at his side, his naked chest rising and falling rapidly, the moonlight shimmering against the scars on his chest and shoulders.

"Please," he whispers, his voice softening.

I stand and press my hands against his chest gently. "It's okay. Dom. You're safe. You're not there anymore. You're here... with me."

"Suh-safe?" he moans, looking down but still not seeing me. "I'll never be safe. It will never end. I'll always be alone."

Tears prick my eyes, making the world blurry. "That's not true. You'll find someone..." I hesitate, but he's asleep. He won't remember this, right? I need to focus on making him feel better. I hate seeing him like this. "You've already found somebody—me."

He tilts his head like a beast who's trying to understand human language, and that just brings me back to The Thornbound Oath series again, how the main character softens her captor, learns to love him, mutes the savage somewhat and teases out the softness beneath.

It's difficult to believe this scarred, scared man is the same one from a few hours ago,

the man who claimed me and made me want more.

“I... have you,” he murmurs, eyes still glassy, not really there.

“Yes,” I say. “I’m here, Dom. You don’t have to go through this alone.”

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He blinks, a single tear sliding down his cheek. I stand on my tiptoes and kiss away the salty tear.

“There’s so much blood,” he whispers. “Too much. How—how is there so much...” He suddenly goes rigid, then takes a stumbling step backward. “Evie...”

“Are you awake?” I ask.

“What happened?” He grits his teeth as though he’s mad at himself. “Did I wake you?”

“Don’t worry about that.”

“It’s a fucking joke.”

“Stop that.Now.” I grab his hands and stare into his eyes. “There’s no reason to be ashamed. You don’t have to downplay this. You don’t have to be tough all the time, Don.”

He groans and sits on the bed. I sit beside him, wrapping my arms around his waist and putting my cheek against his chest just like when we fell asleep. But unlike then, his heart is thundering, going what feels like a hundred beats per minute, a rapid-fire succession that’s like machine gun fire.

“I saw the photo of you and your team,” I murmur. “I could tell, even in the picture, you cared about them. That you all meant a lot to each other. If you weren’t suffering, you wouldn’t be human.”

“I don’t deserve it,” he snaps.

“What does that even mean? You’re a man, Dom, not a robot.”

“My buddies can’t suffer. They’re gone. And here I am, having night terrors like a little kid.”

“Stop,” I say fiercely. “I mean it. I don’t want to hear you talking that way about yourself. It’s not about what you do or don’t deserve. It’s about what’s happening.”

“I fucked up.” He leans down, putting his head in his hands. “I should’ve saved them. I should’ve done better. I can’t live with it. I close myself off, try to be cold, but since...”

“You can say it—since me. Since us.”

“I can’t be cold. But when I think of it, of them, I smell the blood and the gun smoke. I smell my shame.”

I move my face close to his, gently kissing his cheek. “Talking about it is a start, right? Have you ever talked about it before?”

“Only with you,” he says. “And even this feels wrong.”

“Wrong—how?”

He turns to me sharply.

“Don’t look at me like that,” I say. “I don’t like hearing you talk about yourself with that tone, like you’re somehow less of a man for needing to let the darkness out.”

“It’s wrong because this isn’t who I’m supposed to be.” He places his hand on my leg, holds me tightly. Tingles dance up my thigh, but I ignore them. At least, I won’t let them distract me... too much. “I was a mafia prince. Then a soldier. Then nothing, a robot, a money-making machine. That’s who I am, who I was...”

“Not anymore,” I say.

“No, now I’m worse... Now I’m a kidnapper.”

I frown, looking down at my anklet. I can’t deny his words. I can soothe him about his nightmares, perhaps, but not about this.

“Wait here.” He stands.

“Where are you going?”

“Just wait – please.”

He strides toward the door. The moonlight bouncing off his taut muscles, his naked ass shifting as his manhood hangs between his legs. I want to chase him, to claw my fingernails down his back.

He adds the please as if I have a choice.

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A few minutes later, he returns with a small key. He kneels at the edge of the bed and brings it to the anklet. I gasp, almost tell him to stop. If he removes the ankle monitor, there's nothing keeping me here... except me.

With a click, he removes the device, then tosses it into the wastebasket.

"Why?" I ask.

"I don't want you to stay here against your will," he grunts.

"But why now?"

"Because I've never talked about my time in the teams. Not with anybody, not ever. No one's ever seen this side of me, and I want..." His eyes glisten. He angrily rubs his face.

I touch his wrist, move his hand away. "If you need to cry, cry."

"I don't need to cry," he snaps.

"I won't judge you."

He shakes his head, visibly hardening himself. "I want to take what you're offering, your help, your... affection." The pause makes me think he was going to say love, which would be batshit, right? Right? "But not like this." He gestures to the wastebasket: to the anklet.

“So, I can leave?”

“I wouldn’t recommend it. The Vultures are out there. But I won’t keep you here. I want you to stay because you want to, not because you have to.”

“I... I’ll stay. Tonight.”

He sighs darkly. “Shall we go back to sleep?”

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

He climbs into bed. It feels so natural to be naked together, even when we’re not being intimate. “With you here, yes. Give me tonight, Keepsake. Tomorrow, if you decide you don’t want to stay, I’ll arrange for you to be reunited with your friend. You can go anywhere.”

I shuffle into bed next to him, sliding my hand across his middle, feeling the hard ridges of his abs. “I don’t want to leave you,” I admit. “I should, and I know that I’m probably a little cray cray, but it’s the truth. I want to be here for you. I don’t want you to wake in the middle of the night, terrified, with nobody there to comfort you.”

“I don’t...”

“What?” I urge.

“I was going to say I don’t need anybody, but that’s something the old Dom would say. It’d be a lie, and I can’t lie to you.”

“Ask me to stay.”

He rolls onto his side, our noses brushing as we stare into each other’s eyes. “Stay

with me, Keepsake.”

In the back of my head, a voice screams: a little girl trapped in the life of The Vultures, in the shadows of abuse, with Mason looming over it all, his thumbs tucked through his belt loops as he leers at me. You’ll never be free...

But Dom isn’t Mason.

“I’ll stay,” I whisper. “But I need to think of a new nickname for you.”

He laughs ruefully. “Luckily, yours is perfect as it is.”

I move closer to him, pressing my nakedness against his warm body. “I’m going to stay awake until you fall asleep. If you have another nightmare, I’m going to be here for you.”

I lay my cheek against his chest again.

I always knew you were an idiot, Mason mocks from my mind. A real fucking fool. Do you think this man cares about you? He twisted your head. Showered you with gifts. He’s the same as me, Evie. You’re a deluded little girl.

The Evie who first came here would’ve waited for Dom to sleep, then snuck out of bed, found Meatball, and got out of here. Without the ankle monitor, there’s nothing stopping me.

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But I don't want to leave, and I'm getting sick of pretending I do.

### CHAPTER 21

#### DOM

When I wake, I watch Evie sleep for a few minutes. She lies on her side. The sheets pulled up around her chin. That's probably for the best. If I saw her naked again, I'd lose it, and I know her inexperienced body probably needs the rest.

Last night was...

Magical.

Men like me aren't supposed to say or even think words like that, but I can't deny the truth of it.

First, the way she responded when I walked into this room with my mind in a lust-fueled haze. I couldn't think about anything except her perfection. I thought she might tell me to back off, but then she gave herself to me, indulging my domination.

Then after, when I woke from a night terror, on-edge, borderline goddamn hysterical, and she talked me down. She made me understand I don't have to be ashamed about my feelings.

Finally, the fact she's still here. With no anklet keeping her prisoner, she remained. She made the choice. She could've left. Maybe she should have left. It would've been

the reasonable thing for her to do.

But she stayed.

I don't want to wake her. It's only six AM. Climbing out of bed, I pull on my briefs and leave the room, but not before taking one last moment to look at her.

I shoot Rafe a text to check in about The Vultures situation, grab a quick shower, then head to the gym. Waking next to my woman has flooded me with a newfound energy. I need to work out, to exercise and exorcise these demons of desire.

Rafe texts back,

Rafe: Nothing yet.

Walking into the combat gym, I put on the MMA gloves and work the heavy bag for a few minutes, thinking about Mason and the other Vultures, thinking about what I'm going to do to those sick fucks when I get my hands on them.

The round timer goes off, and I turn, rolling my shoulders...

I stop when I see Evie standing across from me. She's got her hair in a tight braided bun and she's wearing a pair of my MMA gloves with a smile on her face. In her shorts and T-shirt, her form is outlined temptingly. My manhood shifts as it floods with firmness.

"Do you want to join me?"

"Joinyou?" She smirks. "I want to show you how it's done. Come on—put them up."

I chuckle. "You're joking."

“Do I look like I’m joking?” she says with that adorable sassiness lacing her voice. She takes a stance—a decent one, honestly—and walks toward me. “Or are you scared?”

I raise my hands. “Promise not to hurt me?”

“I can’t do that, Warden.”

Ah, so even without the anklet, she enjoys teasing my kidnapper status.

She runs across the room, then aims a punch at my face. I duck to the side and wrap my arm around her, feeling her heat, pushing her against the nearest wall. My manhood tickles with tension, growing hard. “Do you think I want to hurt you?”

She glares at me, half jokingly, half real, the constant conflict blazing in her eyes. “I think you take what you want and you don’t care about the consequences.”

I spin, and she pushes against me. I don’t move, letting her tire herself out. She blows a wayward strand of hair from her forehead and raises her hands again.

I can’t help but smirk. “Are you going to run?”

She smiles—then wipes it away as if she’s trying to stay mad. Perhaps she thinks last night was a mistake. But no, I don’t think it’s that. I think she’s keen to assert herself, to remind me that while she’s staying, she’s still Evie with all the independence and vivacity that comes along with her, being her...

As if I'd want her any other way.

“Are you making fun of me?”

It's a simple question.

“Do you always tease the girls you kidnap?”

This ruins the fun somewhat. “I've never kidnapped anyone.”

“Before me.”

I hesitate. “That was for your safety.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Keep telling yourself that.”

I rush at her, feinting one way, then springing the other. With a gentle sweep of my legs, I knock her off-balance, but I catch her before she can hit the ground. I push my lips against hers, loving the way she gasps and moans caught off-guard.

After the kiss, she says, “I thought we were done with that tired old story?”

“You can't blame me for rising to your level...or sinking to it.”

“So I'm morally corrupting you, huh, Mr. Don? I'm the bad guy here?”

I was probably an idiot for thinking her certainty would last untouched into the light

of day, for believing that she would want me, need me, and nothing else, with no confusion or doubt. But she's here, and that means everything.

I kiss her again, lifting her off her feet. She moans through the fusion of our lips and wraps her legs around me. I press her against the wall, angling so that she can feel my throbbing mass through my shorts.

"Anybody would think you get off on sassing me."

"Well—anybody would be right."

"Have you thought about what I said? About staying here? About..."

"Leaving?" she murmurs. "It's like you can't say the word."

I gently put her down, hold her hands, our touch entwined with the MMA gloves, as if symbolizing that we're going to fight through this. Together.

"That's because I can't. I don't even want to think about it. I know we had a less-than-ideal beginning, but that doesn't mean we'll have a bad ending."

"I want to stay," she says. "That hasn't changed. But it makes me feel guilty. It makes me feel like a silly little girl, honestly, like Mason when he..."

She turns away, tragedy making her voice raspy.

"What did Mason do?" I say, voice trembling, struggling not to yell the question.

I know some of it, of course. What he did to her mom, twisted her mind. But is there more?

“How long until you find him?” she asks.

“You’re changing the subject.”

“And you’re ignoring my question.”

“I don’t know,” I answer honestly. “They’re skilled at hiding in the cave systems. I fucked up yesterday letting them get away.”

“You freed their women, though. That’s how Mason thinks of them. His women. Like property. He was never shy about that.”

“But they’re still out there, and the deadline’s almost up,” I snarl. “Which means he’s going to release that video of you. Meaning that sad, pathetic prick is going to ruin your life.”

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She puts her hand on my chest as if touching my heart, then looks bravely up at me.  
“That’s why you have to let me help.”

“How?”

“I can draw Mason out. I can meet with him. I can?—”

“Meet with him?” I interrupt. “No. No fucking way. Why would you even suggest something like that? Dammit, Keepsake. If I let those psychos anywhere near you, they’ll do God knows what.”

“Mason has a soft spot for me. I’m the only person who can get his defenses down.”

“What’d you mean, a soft spot?”

She turns away, refusing to look me in the eye. Her eyes glisten, like she’s holding back tears. I caution myself to calm down, knowing no good can come from me losing my cool, but I hate the idea of that twisted psycho having any sway over my Evie.

“I’ve never told anyone this. Not even Mom. Not Tash. No one.”

She distances herself, leans against the wall, then slides down it as if her legs have given out. When I try to get closer to her, she snaps, “Don’t.” She stares into space, reminding me of... well, me, those nights I’ve woken from a terror, glanced at myself in the mirror and seen the shell shock in my eyes.

“I’ll tell you,” she goes on, “but please, don’t say anything. Don’t interrupt. You need to understand who he is, so you know why I need to do this. Need to end this. Him. Need to end him.”

It takes all my effort to remain where I am. I kneel so that we’re eye level, at least, but though she looks in my direction, it’s like she’s staring through me. Into the past.

“He used to...” she shudders.

“It’s okay,” I whisper.

“It’s really not.”

“I’m sorry—I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything. Just listen.”

I nod. After what she did for me last night, helping to soothe the hell in my memory, the least I can do is the same.

“He used to...” She lets out a trembling breath. “This is harder than I thought it’d be, but if I don’t tell you, you won’t get it. You won’t understand how I can twist him. How I can make him vulnerable to you—to us.”

I want to speak, but I stop myself, waiting. She deserves my patience.

“He used to tell me...” She pauses again, then forces herself to go on. “He was going to marry me one day. That he was waiting until I was eighteen, then he was going to make me his wife. He’d say it in secret when Mom wasn’t around. He made it seem like I should be grateful. He said he’d always had a soft spot for me, and he wasn’t going to be ashamed.”

“Did he...” I can’t even say it. She looks so small and afraid, so unlike my Keepsake, so different to how she usually is.

She glances at me sharply, and I realize my mistake.

“I’m sorry,” I tell her, miming zipping my lips.

She smiles shakily, then stares at the floor for a long time like she can’t look at me as she goes on. Her pain radiates from her, agony twisting through her perfection. It has no place there. It makes me want to roar, to hurt something or someone.

It makes me want to turn back time and be gentler with her last night. It was her first time, and I snapped—we both did. But now I’m hearing this?—

“What are you thinking?” she asks.

“Huh?”

“You just got a really, uh, sort of scared look on your face.”

“It’s nothing.”

“Dom.”

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Saying my name in that purposeful tone is enough to let me know she deserves the truth. “I was thinking about last night. Your first time. I was wondering if I should’ve been gentler with you.”

A wicked smile replaces her unsure expression. “Do you think you could have? You seemed out of control to me... Anyway, that has nothing to do with this. You don’t have to give me special treatment because some freak had weirdo ideas about me.”

I sit beside her, take her hand, saying nothing. Together, we sit in the silence for a time before she goes on.

“He never did anything to me, except he would make me sit on his knee and tell me about our apparent future together. He didn’t cross any lines apart from that one. Nothing like you’re probably thinking.”

I wait, then she chuckles, nudging me. “You can talk now.”

“It’s enough,” I tell her. “It’s fucking evil.”

“I’m telling you because I need you to see. I know I can twist him. He’s probably told the club he wants me back so I can mule more drugs for him, but that’s an excuse. He wants me because he thinks he owns me, that I belong to him. It’s always been like that. He’s warped in the head.”

“My entire purpose is to keep you safe.”

“To keep me safe, you need to let me take a risk. If I don’t draw him out, he’ll keep

attacking your businesses. He'll leak that video of me. Worse, now that you've freed his women, as he calls them, he'll go out and find more. You need to help me do this."

"I'd never forgive myself if something happened to you."

"Unless we end this, we'll never know if we can have a real relationship," she counters. "We need to be together—freely, without this... this mess hanging over our heads."

There's a part of me, a roaring beast who wants to drag her back to the garage and into the underground panic room, close the door, keep her there, make it so she doesn't have to face the evil of the world.

"I can see it," I whisper. "That fucked-up man filling your head with poison, twisting you against your own best interests. If we do this, it won't be with the cops. It will be with the Family. He'll die, Keepsake. I'll make sure of it myself. Understand?"

She looks at me coldly. "Do you think I have a problem with that?"

I brush the hair from her face, lean in, and tenderly kiss her on the cheek. She turns her face and pushes her lips passionately against mine. She bites my lip, then grabs my arms and climbs into my lap.

"Don't treat me like I'm made of glass now, Dom. Not because of this. That's not fair."

I wrap my arms firmly around her, standing with her in my embrace, driving my manhood against her. Meatball whines from the corner of the room.

"I should feed him," she says. "Then—I'm calling Mason. I'll get that jerk's defenses

down. We'll end this... together."

"Together," I repeat, thinking about how far we've come, how much we have to lose.

## CHAPTER 22

### EVIE

We sit on opposite sides of the kitchen island, Dom leaning against it, his thick arm like cords of rope as he tensely stares down at the ringing cellphone. He stares at the device as though it's Mason, and he wants to smash it to pieces as badly as obliterating the man himself.

I didn't plan on telling Dom any of this, but I knew he wouldn't let me help otherwise. He needed to understand that I've got some sway over the Vultures.

Finally, Mason picks up. "Speak."

"It's..." I wish I could say I'm playacting the shaky hesitation, but I'm not. "It's me."

"Ah, Evie. To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"I fucked up."

"Louder, please."

"I fucked up," I say, raising my voice. "I should've gone with you when I had the chance."

"Is that so?" he asks, chuckling, seeming unconvinced.

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“This guy is nuts,” I whisper, then mouth sorry to Dom. “I don’t want to stay here anymore, but he won’t let me leave. I want my family back. The Vultures, the workshop, a purpose with my work... and you, Mason.” I sniffle, feeling sick, hating the words. “I’ve been thinking about what you said. When I was a kid. I’m not a kid anymore...”

A long pause. Mason finally says, “Do you think I was born yesterday?”

“Seriously. I made a mistake. You gave me a future on a platter, and I spit in your face. Don’t you remember the good times when you’d bring me pieces of metal and I’d make jewelry for the club? Don’t you remember giving me rides on the back of your bike? It can be like that again.”

More hesitation. Dom is seething, grinding his teeth from side to side, staring daggers at the cell. I reach across the island and touch his hand, squeezing it so he knows I don’t mean any of this.

“They were some good days,” he mutters. “But what about Mr. Billionaire?”

“He’s never going to pay you, but I’ve been busy. I’ve stolen a bunch of his watches—and he’s got rolls of cash lying around everywhere. I can make a break for it, but I need to know I’ve got somewhere to go.”

“You want back in,” he says, hope in his voice now.

“Yeah—but I’ve got conditions. I’m coming for you, Mason. No blackmail video. No club looming over me. Just us.” I swallow a mouthful of bile and regret as I make my

voice saccharine sweet.

“Your mother’s grave,” he grunts.

“What time?”

“Sunset. Don’t fuck me around. Come alone, or I swear, I take it all away. Those promises of a future, of marriage, of a life. I take it all away.”

When he hangs up, I grab the phone and throw it at the wall. Dom rushes around the kitchen island and wraps his arms around me. I grip onto him firmly, digging my nails into him, pressing my face into his chest as tears erupt from me.

“I hated saying that. Ihatedit.”

“It worked,” Dom whispers, running his hand through my hair. “You did a good job, Evie. This will be over soon. And then...”

“Me, you—giving it a shot.”

When he kisses me, it feels different from every other time. I can feel the passion burning inside of him behind the layer of softness, but he keeps it at bay... for now. I think about what I said to him in the gym about treating me like glass. But it’s nice, I can’t lie, when he touches me as if I might break.

He ends the kiss. “I need to get ready. Call... my father.”

“Your dad?”

“I’ll need his approval for a job this big. Rafe won’t cut it.”

“I’m sorry you have to get involved with the mob again.”

“For you, I’d do anything,” he says.

The tires hum softly against the road, the canyon unfurling in front of us like a secret we’re finally ready to share.

“This feels different to last time,” I murmur.

He glances at me, nods. “More dangerous. But somehow, better too.”

“Because I’m not your prisoner anymore?”

“Before, I needed you on a level I didn’t understand, but I never thought you’d want anything even remotely like I did... because I took you like a damn savage. And now...”

“We have a chance,” I tell him.

He doesn’t speak, and I don’t need him to. His hand is resting palm-up on the center console, fingers open like he’s offering something without saying it out loud. I slip mine into his.

His thumb strokes across mine in slow circles, like we’ve done this a hundred times. As if there wasn’t ever a version of us that started with a slammed door and a locked panic room.

“Do you ever think about... the future?” I ask, eyes on the road, even though I feel the shift in him immediately.

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His thumb pauses for half a beat, then resumes. “All the time.”

“Really?”

A small smile tugs at the corner of his mouth. “You sound surprised.”

“I guess I didn’t picture you as a five-year plan guy.”

“I’m not,” he says. “More like... flashes. Moments I’d like to have. Someone there. A house with actual mess in it. Noise that isn’t just the wind or an alarm system.”

“Messy house,” I murmur. “Got it.”

“And maybe,” he adds carefully, “a kid or two running around. Someone small and loud who has your eyes.”

That stops my breath, just for a second. He doesn’t look at me when he says it. Just watches the road like he doesn’t want to press too hard.

“Mine?” I ask, trying to keep it light, teasing, but my voice cracks anyway.

He nods. “Yeah.”

I stare out the window. The canyon is behind us now. The world ahead is wider, less certain. “I used to say I never wanted kids.”

“What changed?”

I turn to him, watching the way the light touches the strong line of his jaw. “I started thinking about what kind of world I’d want them in. And who I’d want to raise them with.”

His hand tightens around mine.

“I’d want someone steady,” I say. “Someone who makes me feel safe even when everything’s on fire. Someone who sees all my worst parts and still shows up, anyway.”

Dom doesn’t speak. He just pulls our joined hands to his lips and kisses the back of mine gently.

“I’d want someone who’d fight for me,” I whisper.

He looks at me then, fully, openly. “You’d have that.”

I nod. My heart’s thudding in my throat, but somehow, I’m calm. “You’d be a good dad.”

He lets out a breath that sounds half like a laugh, half like a prayer. “You’d be an amazing mom.”

Silence stretches between us again, but it’s not empty. It’s full of things we’re not saying yet. Maybe we don’t need to.

We both know what we’re building. And we’re already on the way there.

If we don’t mess this up. If Mason doesn’t somehow get the better of the mob. If I can keep my cool.

If, if, if...

“Are you okay?” he asks.

“There’s still a voice inside me,” I admit, “a scream in the back of my head, telling me I’ve been duped, that your attention and this... this confusion between us has intoxicated me. It’s telling me I need to find a way out. But I don’t want a way out, not really. It’s just what I think I should want.” I let go of his hand, throwing mine up in exasperation. “Don’t you think it’s crazy we’re talking about a future when it’s been—what? Weeks?”

“The world is crazy, Keepsake,” he says. “A hundred shades of batshit. There are monsters and devils and even the occasional angel. There are horrors I’d never share with you, even though I know you’re strong enough, and tough enough.”

“I can’t disagree about the world,” I mutter. “But what does that have to do with us?”

“When this all started, I had a thought: if stalking you makes me crazy, I don’t want to be sane.”

I laugh, surprising myself. There’s a version of me that would’ve found that shocking, even offensive.

“Okay...”

“Now, I think, if loving you makes me crazy, I don’t want to be sane?—”

It takes me a moment to realize what he’s just said. “Loving?”

He looks at me for a moment. The canyon moving behind him. “You heard me.”

From the backseat, Meatball whines in his carrier as if to say, Say it back, Evie. You know you want to.

“That’s... too much.”

Another whine from Meatball: liar.

“I can’t process that right now.”

Dom’s expression gets dark as he nods. “I shouldn’t have said it.”

“Did you mean it?” I ask.

“I think sanity is overrated,” he grunts. “We’ve just got to pick our own flavor of crazy.”

I touch his hand. “We’ll talk about this when this is over.”

Which will, hopefully, be soon.

“What’s the next step?” I say.

“Father wants to meet us in a diner before he gives us the go-ahead.”

“I can’t believe I’m meeting your parent already.”

Dom winks at me, but I can tell he’s still a little hurt. “Moving fast is our flavor of crazy, Keepsake.”

## CHAPTER 23

### DOM

The diner sits at the edge of the city, surrounded by black sedans, men in suits standing outside the vehicles with earpieces attached to their ears and guns on their hips, clearly ready to fight if Father commanded it. As I stop, Evie lets out a shudder, her arms wrapped across her middle.

I look at her for a moment, thinking about what I said: about crazy and love and not wanting to be sane. She didn’t say she didn’t feel the same. Instead, she made the mature decision to talk about it once this is over.

Can I blame her?

I push those concerns down so I can focus on the matter at hand.

“The diner looks empty,” Evie mutters.

“He won’t want anybody overhearing this conversation.”

“Why?” she asks.

“I haven’t seen him for years. He might get angry or emotional, so he won’t want his men seeing that.”

She gasps. “Years?”

“Every time I saw him before, he tried to get me to join the Family again. It became easier to just avoid him at a certain point. I had no desire to deal with his guilt tripping.”

“But you’ll do it for me.”

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“Newsflash, Evie. I’d do anything for you. Will Meatball be okay?”

She lights up for a moment. “I love that you asked that. And yeah, he’ll be okay as long we’re not gone too long.”

“I’ll crack the window and turn on the AC.”

“Good thinking.”

I climb from the car and walk around to her side, meaning to open the door for her. But she’s already climbing out, pure independence. Together, we walk toward the diner. A few of the men nod at me, and I nod back, recognizing them from my youth.

Father is already watching us when we walk in. Not with suspicion. Nor the sharp-eyed coldness I’ve seen him turn on rivals, allies, even me.

I hold the door open for Evie. My hand finds the small of her back instinctively. Her presence steadies me. Seeing Father again is rocking my confidence, truth be told.

He stands before we even reach the booth.

That nearly knocks the breath out of me. He’s never stood for anyone. But he’s on his feet now, gray suit crisp, silver hair neat, face open in a way I don’t remember seeing on his tough face.

“Dom.” His voice is low, warm. A different tone than the usual. “You look good.”

“Father,” I reply, giving him a nod. My chest tightens when his hand clasps my shoulder, firm and steady, before turning to Evie.

“And you must be Evie,” he says, softer now. “It’s good to meet you.”

Evie steps forward, extending her hand. “Thank you for making time for us.”

“I’d clear a week for you two if you needed it,” he says with a smile that reaches his eyes. “Sit, sit.”

We slide into the booth. I let Evie take the inside seat, tucking in next to her.

He watches us both for a long moment. Not saying anything. Just taking us in.

“You remind me of Dom’s mother,” he says quietly.

That’s not the direction I expected.

“The way you look at her,” he adds. “I used to look at your mother like that. Like the world stopped spinning when she smiled.”

Evie glances at me, her hand finding mine beneath the table.

He chuckles and leans back. “I didn’t ask you here for strategy. I wanted to meet the woman who’s made my son sound like he’s finally found something worth living for.”

“We only had a short phone call to arrange this meeting,” I murmur.

“And that was enough. I haven’t heard your voice in years... and suddenly, it was like a weight had been lifted. You weren’t the usual, Dom.”

“You make it sound like I’ve been angry since birth.”

“You were,” he says, smiling again. “I didn’t help it. I was too busy grooming you to take over a life you never asked for.”

I swallow hard. I didn’t expect this, and it’s a lot to take in. “You were trying to protect me. That was always your logic. Groom me for the Family so that when our enemies came for me, I was ready. That’s what you said.”

Under the table, Evie presses down on my hand, silently warning me to calm down.

“I know. And I was wrong.” His voice drops, honest in a way that feels foreign coming from him. “I should’ve been more of a father. Less of a don. And when you walked away, I told myself I didn’t blame you, but the truth is... I did. Because I missed you. But I was also proud. I just didn’t know how to say it.”

He shifts his gaze to Evie. “But then you called, told me you’d found a girl, and now it all makes sense. The leaving. The walls you built. You weren’t running. You were waiting.”

“For what?” Evie asks.

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His smile lights up, making me think about what an incredible grandfather he'd make for my and Evie's children. "For you, sweetheart."

Evie's eyes glisten. She blinks quickly, as if trying to hide it. He notices and smiles like he's already made his mind up.

"She's strong," he says to me.

I almost tell him he can't know that from a short meeting, but that'd make me a hypocrite. I knew it the moment she walked into my office. "She's the strongest person I've ever met."

Evie laughs under her breath, eyes on the table for a second before she looks up. "Thank you—both of you."

He nods. "I hope you know what you've done for him."

"I'm starting to," she says, glancing at me.

My father stands. "Whatever you need, you have it. I'm not here as the man with men and guns and power. I'm here as Dom's father. And as a man who's glad to finally meet the woman who gave my son his heart back."

I stand. He walks around the table and pulls me into a hug, catching me off guard. Then he leans in and murmurs against my ear. "She's the best decision you've ever made."

I nod, not trusting my voice.

“We’ll talk again,” he says, looking at Evie. “When this is over, I’d like to be in your lives. As a father-in-law. As a grandfather. Not as a Don.”

After he leaves, Evie stands. “That was... not what I expected.”

“Me neither.”

She wraps her arm around my waist and leans her head against my chest. “But I think it’s what you needed.”

She’s right. I didn’t know how badly.

“I thought I was here to beg for his help, but he heard me sound happy for the first time in my life, and it turned him into a different person.” I laugh in disbelief. “You’re magic, Keepsake.”

She laughs, but then grows quiet. “We shouldn’t celebrate yet.”

I swallow. “You’re right. We’ve got work to do.”

## CHAPTER 24

### EVIE

I throw my arms around Tash the moment I see her, squeezing her close to me. Talking to her on the phone and being with her aren’t the same things. She clutches me tightly.

“It’s so good to see you,” I say.

My friend and roommate beams at me. “You look different.” She lowers her voice, glancing around the bar: the staging area for the standoff with Mason. Mom’s grave is three miles from here, and soon, it’ll be sunset. Time to meet with him and end this.

“I feel different,” I admit.

“Love will do that.”

I shake my head, but Tash is looking at me in a knowing way. She sees right through my defenses. She’s been through something similar with Rafe, but she’s facing it without doubt, or complication, without torturing herself by questioning every impulse and desire.

When Meatball whines from his carrier, Tash leans down and tickles him on the nose. “I haven’t forgotten about you, handsome. How’s it going?”

I set the carrier down on the bar and sit on a stool, Tash sitting beside me. Across the room, Dom, Rafe, and the other men talk in a quiet huddle, laying out their weapons on the table. We haven’t discussed the specifics of the plan yet, but every few moments, Dom glances over at me, worry etched into his handsome features.

“Is he good with this?” Task asks.

“No.”

“But he’s letting you do it, anyway?”

“We’ve sort of got to a place where letting me isn’t really the point. If we’re going to make this work, I have to be more than his prisoner, you know? We have to be equals.”

“I know the feeling,” Tash murmurs. “When Rafe tried to stop me from coming here, for example, I put my foot down big time.”

“Doesn’t it mess with your head? They took us against our will.”

Tash shrugs. “Finding a meaningful connection is a rare thing, Evie. The way I see it, I will not waste all this love by interrogating it.”

“Love,” I murmur. “You don’t seem confused about it.”

“I’m not. Are you?”

I bite my lip, looking at Dom. He seemed different after the meeting with his dad. I don’t know what I was expecting, but it wasn’t a tragic-looking, emotional older man who seemed desperate to reconnect with his son, a husky voice stating, in clear terms, that I’m the person who has made Dom happy for the first time in his life.

“I can’t think about that now,” I admit.

Dom approaches us, smiling at Tasha. “Hi, Tasha. It’s nice to meet you. Rafe has been singing your praises.”

She looks over at Rafe uncomplicatedly, adoringly. Dom's lip twitches, and I wonder if he's jealous. But we're never going to be uncomplicated, are we? Can we get there?

"I bet he has," Tash says, laughing.

"Evie," Dom says, turning to me. "Can I get a moment?"

"Tash, will you watch Meatball?"

"Gladly."

Dom takes my arm and leads me into the backroom. When he looks down at me, it's impossible not to feel the emotion emanating off of him. He takes my hands. "I need to ask you one last time?—"

"If he turns up and I'm not there, he'll run," I cut in. "You were going to ask me to wait behind, right? Not to do this?"

He nods, eyes smoldering. I see the old version of Dom trying to break through, the version who carried me from my apartment and locked me in the panic room, my captor, my Warden. But then he lets out a shuddering breath.

"If anything happens to you..."

"It won't," I affirm. "Not with you watching over me."

"Even if the plan goes smoothly, it'll still mean you watching a man die in front of you. I'm aiming for the head, Evie. That will not be pretty."

"I can handle it. He deserves it. After all, he's done—all he's tried to do. And then, this

is over. We're free..."

His eyes grow glassy. To love each other, he wants to say, but then he swallows, like he's forcing the words down.

"Keep the phone on you at all times," he says. "I'm going to be watching you. If anything happens, drop to the ground." He grits his teeth. "Fuck—I shouldn't let you do this."

I put my hand on his chest, feeling his heart pounding below. "This isn't about letting me do anything, remember? If we're going to be anything, you have to understand that. I'm..." I hesitate, but then I remember the look on Tash's face, the unashamed and unabashed love. "I'm yours, Dom, but that doesn't mean you control me."

He places his hands on my shoulders and pulls me in for a hug. He holds me like it might be the last time, kissing the top of my head and taking a moment to inhale, as if he needs to savor my scent. I cling onto his sides, holding firmly, almost desperately.

Desperation is the best way to think about it, about us. I was desperate to find someone—then desperate to be free—and now, I'm desperate for the tension to end so we can clear the fallout and finally face how we truly feel when there's not a boot on our neck.

"Do you know the plan?" he asks softly.

"I need to keep Mason talking," I say. "Then create some distance between us so that when you take the shot, you don't hit me." I tremble all over, but then I force down the nerves. "But you need to give me some time so he can delete the video. I can't risk him having backups that could bury me."

He holds me tightly. “I have to ask you, Keepsake, one final time.”

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Don't do this...That's what he thinks he has to say.

"But you won't. You know what my answer is. I've been running for too long. I have to do this."

He sighs, kisses me again. "When this is over, we'll be happy. You'll see."

"The Keepsake and her Warden. Do you think you'll still want me when you can't keep me in a cage?"

"I don't want power over you, Evie. I just want a relationship worth fighting for. Before you, I didn't think that was possible."

I love you. I think, but don't say. I won't cross that line, not yet, not until I know for sure that we've got a future.

The brutal fact is, this could be our last hug, our last words, our last kiss.

I stand at Mom's grave, studying the headstone, blinking away tears. After running from The Vultures, I was always wary of coming back here in case someone recognized me. I lay flowers on it, then lay the rucksack on the ground.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. It's Dom.

Dom: No sign of him yet. Part of me hopes he won't show up.

This isn't a jail broken phone this time. I can text and call anyone. I could call the

cops if I wanted, but I'm way past that.

Evie: He needs to show. This can't end if he chickens out. I know you're worried, but soon, this will be over.

Dom: I don't want you to see what happens to a person when they're shot, Keepsake. When the time comes, drop to the ground, cover your ears, close your eyes.

Evie: I'm tougher than you think.

Dom: You don't need to be tough. That's my job.

This text appears, then another immediately follows it.

Dom: I need you to know that I meant what I said. I love you. Maybe I've got no right to say it. Perhaps I'm moving too fast when too much is going on. But it's the truth. I love you.

Evie: Moving fast is our flavor of crazy.

It might not be what he wants to hear. He probably wishes I'd tell him I love him, too. And heck, maybe that's true.

Dom: Put the phone away. I hear a motorcycle. And remember—if he makes a move I don't like, I'm going to drop him.

Evie: Let me get him to delete the video first. He might have a backup!

Dom: You're in control, Keepsake, but that doesn't mean I'll let anybody hurt you. Ever.

I slide the phone into my pocket. “Wish me luck, Mom. It’s probably fitting, right? That asshole made your life hell before the car crash, and now you’re going to get to watch him get sent straight to Hell.”

My breath catches when I see Mason swaggering across the empty cemetery. The sun has set, and no one else is around. I know that Dom and the others are watching from all around us through their rifle scopes, but I can’t see them. My old fear threatens to grip me.

I stand up straighter, even when he smirks at me, laughing, trying to belittle me just like he used to.

“I knew you’d come back to me, little flower.”

That makes me cringe and want to slap him.

“But I’m not an idiot,” he goes on. “I know you’re not here for me. You’re not here because you want me or any of that crap. And I know you don’t want to marry me.”

“Why am I here then?”

“To pay me off, so I’ll delete the video and leave you alone. It’s simple.”

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I shrug. Fine. It's better if I don't have to pretend to want the sick psychopath, anyway. I gesture to the bag on the ground, filled with valuables that Dom provided me with, stuff that will make Mason's head spin.

"There's enough in that bag to fund the club for a few years," I tell him. "Dom won't miss it."

"Is he going to come looking for this?"

"Why? Are you scared, Mason?"

He snorts. "I'm being nice here, Evie. I've decided, you know what—let's let the girl live her life. Let her go on with her silly dreams of making jewelry and pretending that she's worth a damn."

"Delete the video then," I snap.

He shrugs, then reaches into his jacket pocket and takes out his phone. He shows me the screen: the video waiting to be played, a big icon on the screen. He wriggles his eyebrows like he used to when I was a kid, when I found it funny, before I knew what he was.

"First—show me the goods."

I grab the bag and unzip it.

"Come here. Show me."

I hesitate, knowing this goes against the plan. Dom warned me to keep my distance. The only reason Mason isn't dead right now is because I begged Dom to let me ensure the video was deleted first.

"Fine," I huff, carrying the bag to Mason, showing him the rolled-up bundles of cash and expensive watches. "There's enough here to?—"

I scream when he lunges at me, wrapping an arm around my neck and pushing his body against mine, spinning in a circle as he laughs maniacally. "Where are they?" he yells. "I'm not a goddamn idiot. They're here, aren't they? Dom and his mafia buddies? Come out, come out, where ever you are!"

I struggle against him. "You're an idiot. No one's here. I came alone."

"Bull. Shit."

"There's nobody here!"

"Stop fucking lying to me. You were always a dumbass, Evie, just like your bitch mother. But you're not this stupid."

"Says the man who came to a meeting he thought was an ambush!"

He coughs out a laugh. "Something tells me dear Dom isn't going to risk killing you along with me. Call it stupidity. I call it gonads. They better show themselves, Evie, or I'll kill you like I killed your bitch mother."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"You heard me."

“You’re talking out of your ass.”

“Oh, right, of course,” he says with that heavy sarcasm I hate so much. “Because it would be impossible for me to bribe the cops and tell them to inform the grieving, deluded little daughter that Mommy was all alone in the car... impossible to instruct them to withhold the information that I was behind the wheel. The only reason I crashed is because her mouth was wrapped around my co?—”

“You weredriving?” I scream, grunting as I try to free myself. “You killed my mom!”

“I would argue she killed herself, but yeah, I was behind the wheel that day.”

“You’re a sick fuck.”

“If you don’t come out in ten goddamn seconds, I snap her neck!”

Dom won’t let this happen. I know he’s going to come out, and then Mason will have all the power, like he always has. As Mason’s grip tightens, I realize something with stunning clarity. Dom never trapped me. This is what being trapped feels like.

When Dom took me to his estate, he set me free.

It’d be a cruel world if I realized this, only to have Mason crush the life out of me.

“Five seconds!”

I let myself go lax, which causes him to relax just a tiny bit... just enough for me to spring up and throw my head back. I hear the crunch of his nose. He grunts and loosens his arms a little more, letting me slide out of his grip and crawl along the ground, my fingers sinking into the cold earth.

“Get back here, you bit?—”

A gunshot rings out.

Time slows as I remember what Dom said.

Cover my ears, close my eyes, look away.

But I refuse to turn a blind eye. I did enough of that as a kid, pretending I didn't know what Mason was doing to Mom, burying my head in my craft, in dreams of metal and beauty so I didn't have to see the ugly cruelty that was standing right in front of me.

I look up—big mistake.

It's... gore, so much more vivid than a horror movie.

I turn away and let out a primal scream.

CHAPTER 25

DOM

I rush across the cemetery, drawn to my woman's scream, my rifle slung across my back. Regret twists like a knife in my gut, telling me I shouldn't have let her do this.

She's crawling across the earth, gasping. Her eyes are wide with terror. For a moment, it's like she doesn't recognize me. Civilians think they're prepared to see true violence, but they rarely are. She should've listened, but I don't blame her. She thought she needed to see her tormentor fall.

"Clean this up," I roar at Rafe. "And delete that video from his phone. Take it to someone who can see if there are copies."

"You got it."

"I'm getting her someplace safe."

"Go, Dom—we'll handle this."

I kneel and scoop my arms under Evie, cradling her back and tucking my other arm under her knees. Unlike the first time I carried her, she doesn't struggle this time. She throws her arms around me, pressing her face against my chest.

Running across the cemetery, I make for the back of the van, stunned when I find my father sitting on the other side of it, his hands clasped, looking at me with that same surprising emotion on his face.

"Is it done?" he asks.

Evie wriggles from my grasp and slumps against the edge of the van, breathing hard, shaking all over as tears slide down her cheeks. "He—he—he said that he... he kuh-

killed Mom. I wuh-wanted to suh-see...”

“She’s having a panic attack, poor thing,” Father mutters.

His empathy catches me by surprise again, but I haven’t got time to analyze it. I kneel in front of Evie, taking both her hands. She was there for me when the night terror woke me, and I’m going to be here for her now.

“Evie, your first job is to breathe as slowly as you can,” I say, meeting her eye. “I’m going to count your breaths with you. Try to be slow, okay, beautiful? Try to make your breaths last to a three count, in and out. That will help slow your heartbeat. With me—one, two, three...”

It takes a few tries, but slowly, she paces her breathing. She presses firmly into my hands.

“I should’ve listened to you,” she says after a pause. She turns to my father. “How’s this for strong, Mr. Russo?”

My father’s soft smile makes him look like a different man, one I don’t remember from my childhood. “The fact you’re able to speak after a panic attack like that means you’re strong, Evie. Don’t beat yourself up.”

Evie bites her lip and looks at me. “Mason said he was driving the car when Mom died. He bragged about it. Do you think he was telling the truth?”

“Perhaps—or maybe he was just trying to hurt you. He’s dead now, Evie. It doesn’t make any difference.”

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“I shouldn’t have looked,” she murmurs. “I thought it’d be like the movies, but it was... How do you live with that, Dom? With that in your head? With countless memories of that?”

“Don’t worry about me,” I tell her fervently. “This is about you. I’m taking you back to the estate. Rafe and Tash are going to meet us there. We’ll lie low until we’re sure The Vultures have backed off.”

“Without Mason, they won’t keep this up,” she whispers.

“If they do, I’ll kill them all,” I snarl. “All they had was the video. That was the only thing stopping me from ending their miserable lives. If they flee into the cave systems again, I’ll hire the best security forces money can buy and hunt them down. Nothing will stop me now.”

When I feel Father looking at me with pride, I glance at him. “This means nothing. I’m not a mafioso just because I’m willing to do anything to keep my woman safe.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“But you were thinking it.”

“Don’t fight,” Evie murmurs, and that defuses the tension immediately.

After all she’s been through, she’s still had the voice of reason.

“What are you doing here, Father?” I ask, my tone softer.

“I had to make sure you were safe. My son. My future daughter-in-law.”

I remember what Evie said about love—or, more accurately, didn’t say. “Don’t jump the gun. It’s early days. The last thing Evie needs right now is pressure.”

He holds his hands up. “My apologies.”

Evie smiles at me, gratefully, regretfully, her expression clashing. She’s been through too much for me to press her for answers now.

She needs peace and support. I sit beside her as the van bumps up and down, wrapping my arm around her and pulling her in for a hug.

“Thank you,” she murmurs.

“What for?”

She laughs darkly. “Not missing.”

When this started, I never thought the five of us would sit around a table: me, Evie, Tash, Rafe, and my father. We sip lemonade as the fire flickering in the grate lights up the night, Meatball reclining on the cat tree nearest to the flames, lazily licking his paw.

Rafe and Tash hold hands, Rafe looking more peaceful than I can ever remember seeing him, like a man who’s ready to leave behind the darkness of his old life and find something new.

Father has taken off his suit jacket, looking somehow more... well, like a person. A man instead of the dark figure he’s been my entire life.

I clutch Evie's hand tightly under the table, feeling her fear blazing up her arm.

"Our tech guy used Mason's phone to trace all copies of the video," Rafe says. "They're all gone, Evie, every single one. You don't have to worry about it ever again."

"Thank you," Evie replies. "You've all done so much."

"It's the least we could do," I tell her fiercely. "I mean that. It's less than you deserve."

That's not saying a lot, because she deserves the world.

"What happens now?" Tash asks.

"I'll keep my feelers out for The Vultures," Father says. "But if they know what's good for them, they'll go to ground. They've lost their only leverage. I'd recommend that you ladies stay with your men for the time being."

"That's their choice," I growl.

Evie turns to me sharply with clear shock on her beautiful face.

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“Your. Choice.” I lean down and kiss her on the cheek. “If you want to leave, you can leave. I’ll arrange for a security detail to watch you – or you can go without.”

“You’d leave her unprotected?” Father says in shock.

I swallow. “I’d hate myself for it. And I’d never forgive myself if something happened to her. But I will not to be her prison warden anymore. I’m a man hungry, desperate for my woman to need me like I need her. It’s true. But I won’t force it. Evie is her own person who can make her own choices.”

She smooths her hand up my back, over my neck, and through my hair. “Thank you,” she whispers. “Tonight, I choose to get some sleep... alone, if that’s okay?”

I try to hide my hurt.

“I need some time to decompress, to let my thoughts settle.”

“You don’t have to explain yourself,” I tell her. “You can have the master bedroom.”

“No—it’s okay. I’ll take one of the spare rooms.” She turns to the table. “Would you guys be offended if?—”

“Are you kidding?” Tash cuts in. “Go, hon, get some rest.”

I stand when Evie does, taking her hand and walking with her through my house.

“Thank you,” she says outside the door of the spare room. Meatball meows, and Evie

smiles a little nervously, almost like she's afraid to let herself smile. "Meatball says you're the best kidnapper a woman could ask for."

I laugh ruefully. "You better tell the little man I'm not a kidnapper anymore."

She grabs my shirt, pulls herself in for a kiss. "Just know, Dom, I haven't lied to you. About what I want. About us. It's just... everything. My head is a mess. I need to sleep. To forget."

"I understand." I pull her in for another hug. "If you need me tonight, wake me up. Don't suffer alone."

"I won't."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

We share a kiss, then I return to the others.

"Is she okay?" Tash asks.

"She's a fighter," Father says.

I run my hand through my hair. "It's been a long day. She needs time for her mind to settle."

"For what it's worth, I think she cares about you too," Tash says. "But Evie hates feeling trapped... I wouldn't push her."

"I won't," I say. "From now on, we're a partnership."

If she'll have me—if she doesn't change her mind. If she doesn't decide, she needs her independence back.

## CHAPTER 26

EVIE

I try to sleep, but I can't stop tossing and turning.

It's not just the memory of Mason keeping me awake. I think about the drive into Vulture territory earlier today, talking about kids and a future with Dom. I think about what Mr. Russo said, saying he wanted to be involved in our lives... as a grandfather and father-in-law.

I think about the future twinkling in front of me, tempting and promising.

But how can I be certain I have control? That I'm choosing this?

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Sitting up, I nibble on my lip, looking at the door. Perhaps there's one way to prove I'm in charge... or maybe that's my neediness tricking my mind into doing what I desperately want.

"Stay here, boy," I whisper.

Meatball huffs and rolls onto his back like he's saying, You don't need to tell me twice.

I walk through the estate, heading toward the master bedroom.

I don't knock. I step into his room without hesitation, because I don't need to be uncertain anymore. Not with him, not when the lights go out. The door clicks shut softly behind me, sealing us off from the rest of the world.

He's sitting on the edge of the bed, elbows resting on his knees, hands loose, almost relaxed but with a quiet tension humming beneath the surface. His head tilts just the slightest, as if caught somewhere between waiting and something more. Something dangerous, magnetic.

When his eyes lift to meet mine, they're already burning, smoldering embers behind a calm facade.

We're past the point of pretending either of us can fight what's pulling us in.

Tonight, I don't want to fight it. I want to lead it.

Our gazes lock. For a long moment, silence hangs between us. My heart beats hard. His hunger is written in every line of his body: the tightness of his jaw, the slight shake of his breath, the way his eyes drop slowly to my mouth and linger with raw, starving intention.

“You waiting for something?” I ask softly, voice low, teasing just enough to unsettle him. He’s probably wondering if this means I’m staying, like I said I would... but he knew better than to take my words for a promise.

He’s giving me leeway, giving me control. And I’m going to use it.

“It’s like my father said. I’ve been waiting a long time, Keepsake—for you, only you.”

I cross the room deliberately, each step slow, controlled, letting him watch the sway of my hips, letting him feel the rope of anticipation coil tighter around us. The air is heavy with it, electric.

When I reach him, I slide into his lap. My hands find his face gently, thumbs brushing his cheekbones with deliberate care.

“I want tonight to be different,” I murmur, voice barely more than a breath. “No pushing. No games. Just... us.”

He nods once, slow and sure. “Tell me what to do.”

I lean forward, pressing a soft kiss to his forehead. Then a gentle kiss to his cheek, then finally, his mouth. He groans quietly as he sinks into it, hands resting on the bed, restrained but desperate.

“Touch me,” I whisper, guiding his palms down to my waist. “But let me set the pace.”

His grip is tentative, thumbs brushing beneath the hem of my tank top, fingertips warming my skin. Slowly, I slide the tank top over my head, letting it fall to the floor. The way his eyes darken when he sees I'm bare beneath it... heck, it's like he's worshipping me. His hands tremble where they rest, and I feel it like a spark, an ache blooming deep between my legs.

"You're so beautiful," he groans.

I smile, bending to kiss him again. "You'll get to show me how much you mean that."

I ease him backward, lowering him onto the pillows with care, then climb over him, straddling his hips. His cock presses against me—thick, hot, already fully hard beneath his sweatpants—and it sends fresh heat rippling through me. I grind down just enough to tease, and his head falls back with a hiss of breath.

I lean in close, kissing the side of his neck, tracing the nighttime stubble with my lips. "You okay, letting me take this where I want?"

His voice is rough, husky with need. "You can take me anywhere. Just don't stop."

That makes me smile. He might as well say, Just don't leave. I can't leave, I realize now, with the lights out, when it's just us. It's an impulse that will always be there: run, hide, get away. But with my Warden, it settles.

I sit up slightly and reach for the waistband of his pants, tugging them down slowly, savoring the slow reveal. His cock springs free, flushed and glistening with desire, and I drink him in. To see how hard he is, how much he wants me. All of me.

"I used to think," I say, wrapping my fingers around his shaft, slow and steady. "I'd never want anyone to see me like this. Not really. Not all of me."

He groans, a sound torn between frustration and need. I stroke him, teasing, coaxing.  
“Evie...”

“But you see everything, don’t you?” I murmur, leaning down, brushing my lips against his chest, feeling the warmth of his skin, the steady beat of his heart beneath my mouth. “And you still want me.”

“Always.”

His hands reach for me, but I gently guide them back to the bed, holding the power between us. “Not yet. Let me... have you for a while.”

His jaw clenches, breath hitching, as I move lower, trailing kisses down his chest and stomach. I hover over him, cock hot and pulsing, and look up, locking eyes with him.

“This is mine tonight.”

“Yes,” he whispers in awe.

I take him in slowly, licking up the shaft first, tasting his desire on my tongue. He throbs beneath me, hips twitching with need, but he doesn’t thrust, just watches me, eyes wild and soft at the same time.

I slide my lips over the head, then lower, sucking gently, then harder, finding the rhythm I want. His groans turn ragged, fingers curling into the sheets. My hand strokes what I can’t fit, working him with a hunger I didn’t expect to feel until he first touched me, when I was a virgin who didn’t know any better.

With him, it feels natural, like we were made for this.

He groans, giving all the power to me, all the control.

I crawl back up his body, letting my breasts brush across his chest, and kiss him deeply.

“Evie,” he pants, voice rough and needy. “If you don’t sit on me right now, I’m going to beg.”

I laugh in delight. “That doesn’t sound so bad.”

He bucks his hips. My SEAL. My mafioso. My billionaire. My man. “Please.”

I guide him to my entrance, wet and aching and so ready for him. I lower myself inch by inch, feeling him stretch me open. My breath catches, shallow and sharp. His head hits the pillow with a curse.

“Fuck. You feel like heaven.”

I roll my hips slow and deep until I’m fully seated. His hands tremble on the bed, resisting the urge to grab me. I ride him gently at first, savoring the fullness, the stretch, the slick heat building with every movement.

“You don’t have to hold back,” I whisper. “Not your words. Not your sounds.”

He groans loud and needy, hips twitching beneath me.

“I’ve never wanted anything like this,” he says hoarsely. “Never felt anything like this.”

“Me neither.”

I pick up the pace, grinding down harder, my clit catching deliciously against his pubic bone. He’s so deep inside me, it feels like he’s everywhere, like we’ve melted together into a single pulse of heat and hunger.

He lifts his head, eyes locked on mine, and I see the edge creeping up on him: the

need to come, the battle not to.

“You close?” I whisper.

“Yeah. But I don’t want to finish until you fall apart for me.”

Fuck. How does he say things like that and make my whole body tremble?

“Then keep looking at me. Watch me fall apart.”

I ride him harder, faster, chasing the pressure building deep inside. My thighs shake, pleasure ripples through my core, and I reach between us, circling my clit with tight, frantic strokes.

He watches, panting and groaning, fists clenched, control slipping.

“I’m going to come,” I moan. “I want you to feel it. Feel me take you with me.”

“Yes—Evie—fuck...”

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The orgasm crashes through me, stealing my breath as I clench around him. He throbs deep inside, spilling with a raw, primal sound. We ride it together, panting, shaking, my hands braced on his chest, his arms finally wrapping around me, pulling me down into him.

He holds me there, his heart pounding against mine.

I let my forehead fall to his shoulder, my hair damp with sweat, his body flushed and trembling beneath me.

“Still in control?” he asks, tone teasing.

I lift my head, smile. “Always.”

“I’ll die if I let you go.”

I should panic. But his tone isn’t possessive this time. It’s worshipful. Hopeful. And I feel it too. Our flavor of crazy: the desire to be chained.

I press a kiss to his chest, let myself melt into his warmth, and whisper, “Then don’t. I love you, Dom.”

“Hush—you don’t have to say anything tonight.”

“I mean it,” I tell him. “I love you, and I’m tired of pretending, of fighting. I don’t care how we started; I just care where we’re going.”

“You’ve been through a lot?—”

I prop my arm on his chest, sitting up, staring confidently at him. “Listen to me. I love you.”

He leans up, finding my lips. “I love you too.”

## CHAPTER 27

DOM

One Week Later

I wait in the bar’s backroom in San Bernardino. A couple Vultures are clinging onto the idea they can go up against me, though most have seen sense and fled south. My phone buzzes. It’s Evie, labelled as Keepsake in my contacts.

Keepsake: This piece is absolutely enthralling. Whoever gets this engagement ring is going to be one lucky lady.

I smile. A genuine ear-to-ear grin that feels almost second nature since I met Evie. This past week has been heaven. We’ve spent every night together, in bed, sharing meals, talking dreamily about the future.

After that first night when she came to me and took control, I felt a shift in her. It was like she tattooed the truth into her being. She has agency. She can take the lead. I was powerless to her that night, completely enthralled, her prisoner, as she rode me and made me hers.

Since then, the L-word has flowed like wine.

Dom: I know you're doing an incredible job. Soon, it'll be time to establish a permanent location and start taking regular orders. You're going to be amazingly successful.

Keepsake: I have more ideas about my business, actually. I got my start turning everyday bits of metal into jewelry, right? What if that's my whole schtick? I could have customers bring in pieces from their lives and interweave them into custom jewelry.

My smile somehow grows wider, more magical.

Dom: That's an incredible idea.

Keepsake: Is 'the thing' done yet?

Once upon a time, I wouldn't have discussed this with Evie, but we keep no secrets from each other now. There's only openness, like when we discussed my CEO role and how stressful this week has been... catching up on all the work I missed while I was hunting the Vultures. But the dark times are behind us, and we're moving into the light.

Dom: I'm waiting for the remaining Vultures to arrive.

Keepsake: Be careful. I'd hate for us to go through all this to have it end here.

Dom: We're not even close to the end. This is just the beginning, Evie. This is our first chapter.

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Keepsake: It's probably the craziest first chapter in the history of relationships. You know that phrase, 'that's a story we can tell our grandkids?' I'm not sure we'll be able to tell ours about our beginning.

I chuckle.

Dom: I don't need it to make sense to anybody else as long as it makes sense to us.

Keepsake: It does. Now, let me get back to work. I love you. Call me when it's done.

Dom: I will. Go and make a masterpiece. I love you, angel.

She was shocked when a mystery client contacted her via her social media to request a custom engagement ring, but she rose to the challenge just like she has her entire life. We've slept in the same bed every night since the standoff in the cemetery.

When I wake from a nightmare, she's there for me, and when she jolts awake with terror in her heart, I'm there for her. Are we perfect? Nobody is. Are we a team? You bet your ass we are.

We're a rock-solid partnership and I'll never stop being proud of what we've built together.

From the main bar, I hear the door open. Father raises his voice. "Did you bring the cash?"

One of the Vulture's laughs. "I thought you'd have backup, Don Russo. Selling out

your son is dangerous business.”

Father contacted the stragglers to let them know he will trade me for cold hard cash. The idiots believed it, probably because they cynically think everyone is as callous as they are.

“The cash?” My father snaps.

“Let’s talk specifics first,” the second Vulture says. “How are you going to give us your son?”

“It’s easy. I’ll call him and he’ll come to us.”

“Go on, then—call him.”

“Not until you give me the cash.”

I slip out the back door and walk around to the entrance, taking my gun from my waistband. The past week has reminded me of who I really am, as I spend time in business meetings, conference calls, focusing on my legitimate business in my expensive suits in my offices: offices I earned with wits and ruthlessness, not bloodshed.

But these bastards won’t quit, hounding my woman, clinging on as if they think there’s even a one percent chance I’ll let them hurt my new family, my new life.

I walk quietly into the bar, the Vultures with their backs to me.

Their names are Henrik and Larson, and both are wanted for multiple sex crimes. Both are going to spend a long, long time in prison.

I raise my gun. “Hands in the air or I blow your fucking heads off.”

“Ah, ah,” Father says, when one of them goes for their gun. Father reveals the shotgun hidden under his jacket. “My son wants to do the right thing. Make sure you two scumbags are imprisoned for what you’ve done. Me? I’ll happily paint the floor with your brains and be done with it.”

Slowly, they drop their weapons and fall to their knees. I take the zip-ties from my pocket as my father keeps his shotgun aimed at them.

“We could make this easier,” Father says.

“No,” I growl. “Let them rot.”

“They’ll rot in the ground more than in a cage.”

“There’s been enough bloodshed. Call the cops.”

After we’ve handed the Vultures over to the police, I call Evie.

“Does that mean it’s over?” she asks, voice shaky, like she can barely believe it.

“It’s done,” I tell her. “We’re free.”

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“Free,” she repeats. “To be who we want. What we want.”

“Yeah, Keepsake. Free as a goddamn bird.”

She laughs. “I can’t believe it. It doesn’t feel real. All my life, I’ve had them hanging over my head. Thank you, Dom. I love you.”

“I love you, too,” I reply. “How’s the ring coming along?”

“It’s almost done,” she says. “I’ve messaged the customer. They want me to meet them in Century City tomorrow afternoon to hand it over. Would you mind coming with me? They might be some weirdo—or a Vulture in disguise.”

“The Vultures are over,” I snarl. “You don’t have to worry about them. But yes, I’ll come.”

After the phone call, I join my father in his car. He drums his fingers against the dashboard. “I guess this is goodbye, then,” he says.

“Not goodbye. But it’s the last time we do anything like this. You go back to the mob. I’ll go back to my legitimate business.”

“I haven’t had a chance to tell you, since we last spoke, I’ve moved a large majority of the operation to legitimate businesses. We don’t deal drugs. We don’t hurt people... unless we have to. I did it for you, Dom. So that, maybe, you’d be proud of me.”

I clap him on the shoulder. “That matters, Dad. It does.”

He laughs darkly.

“What?” I ask.

“You called me ‘Dad’, not ‘Father’. Call me sentimental, but that feels like it means something.”

“If tomorrow goes well, you’ll be ‘father-in-law’.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “Don’t you think it’s too soon?”

“There’s no such thing as ‘too soon’ for me and Evie.”

It’s our flavor of crazy, and goddamn, I love the taste.

## CHAPTER 28

### EVIE

Evie: I’m in the window seat of the cafe.

It’s Dom, a smile on my face, but that’s not a mind-blowing statement. This past week has been one full of smiles, of letting go, of accepting that, sure, we’ll never be ‘normal’ but ‘normal’ is overrated, anyway.

We’ve both got our fair share of darkness, especially when the nightmares come, but we’re there for each other. The confusion has diffused into a solid certainty. We started as a complicated mess, as a prisoner and her captor, but we’re something else now. We’ve evolved, and we’re going to keep evolving.

Forever.

At first, that felt like a weighty word, like I was venturing into territory I had no right in. I've spent so long living from moment to moment, from disaster to disaster, that 'forever' felt like a promise I had no right to make. But the more time I spend with Dom, the more believable it feels.

I deserve love. Happiness. And I'm done doubting.

Dom: I won't be long. I'll honk when I'm outside.

Evie: It's going to be interesting to see who this mystery client is.

I sip my coffee. I've been busy the past week, focusing on the engagement ring, applying love and care to every detail. The ring costs two hundred thousand dollars. Two hundred thousand. I have to repeat it in my head just to convince myself this is my life.

I started in a cruddy apartment, struggling to pay rent. Now Tash and I have found men we love, who love us, and we have security.

Since the ring is so expensive, Dom agreed to take it to work with him this morning so that I wouldn't have to carry it alone. I drove one of his cars from the estate into Century City. No—our cars. That's what he told me to call them when he showed me the garage last night.

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“Nothing is just mine anymore,” he told me. “The sooner you get used to that, the better.”

A limo pulls up outside the café, honking its horn. I take another sip of my coffee as I wait for Dom to arrive. He left in one of his sports cars this morning.

Dom: Hey, Keepsake, did you hear the honk?

I almost spit my coffee out.

Evie: Are you in a LIMO? Why?

Dom: You’ll see – come on. Join me.

As I walk from the café, I feel everyone’s eyes on me. I used to get paranoid about people watching me in public. What if they were working with The Vultures? Now, I feel special, singled-out in the best way.

The driver climbs from the car and opens the back door for me. I climb in and fall into Dom’s arms. He pulls me close for a kiss, tucking my hair behind my ear, making me tingle in that irresistible, hungry way that never gets old.

“What’s all this?” I ask.

He winks. “You’ll see.”

“Do you want to impress my customer?”

“Something like that.”

I lean back, drinking in my man with his sparkling eyes and his knowing smirk.

“Why do I feel like I’m missing something?” I ask.

He leans in and pulls me in for another kiss, pressing his lips firmly against mine, sliding his hand up my leg. Tingles dance and shimmer up my thigh, teasing my core. After our first time, I thought I’d need time to recover – and I do, but nowhere near as long as I thought.

“Now you’re trying to distract me,” I murmur, slipping my hand under his suit jacket and feeling the firmness of his chest, his heat blazing through the fabric of his expensive shirt.

“Trying?” He kisses me again, our tongues hungrily finding each other, pleasure simmering and singing. “It feels like I’m succeeding.”

“Do you want me all hot and flustered when I meet this mystery customer?” I counter.

He leans back, looks out the window, the light catching him just so. His stylish clothes outlined perfectly in his muscular form. I press my legs together to stop myself from jumping his bones.

Soon, the car stops outside a large, empty storefront on Century City, a big old sign outside it.

“This is a great location,” I say as we step from the limo, Dom’s hand on the small of my back. “Maybe the customer is going to open a store.”

Dom tilts his head at me as he leads me to the entrance and opens the door to reveal a gorgeous interior, glistening display cases just waiting to show their wares, with tall windows letting in floods of sunlight. I walk around the store, taking it all in, forgetting why I'm here for a moment.

"Hello?" I call, snapping to my senses.

"It's just us," Dom says from behind me, wrapping his arms around me and pressing his body against mine.

"I don't under..." My heart pounds when realization hits me. "Wait—you're the customer?"

"I knew nobody else would make a better ring."

I turn to him. The world going blurry as tears fill my eyes. "What are we doing here?"

"This is yours, Keepsake. This is where you'll build your empire. Do you like it?"

I can barely speak as a sob of pure joy tries to escape me. "I love it."

He takes a step back, his eyes glistening. "Evie Davis," he says, reaching into his pocket and taking out a jewelry box. He kneels, opening the box, showing the ring I've been working on all week.

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The ring features a stunning 5-carat, D-color, internally flawless oval diamond set in a custom platinum band, flanked by two perfectly matched half-moon diamonds. Delicate micro-pave accents line the band, adding a subtle sparkle without overpowering the center stone. The setting is sleek and minimal, with a hidden halo beneath the main diamond for a touch I'm proud of.

I blink as tears make the diamonds glisten even more.

“Evie–Davis,” he says again, getting choked up.

“Oh, Dom.”

He knows how much I love this ring; I've been gushing about it all week.

“Will you marry me?” he asks huskily.

I think about where we started, where we're going, the confusion leading to lust, then love. Even now, there's that voice in me, the scared little kid screaming to find a way out. But it's so quiet, I can barely hear it. And now, in this beautiful moment, I realize she needs me to lead the way, to make the choices she's too afraid to make.

“Yes!” I cry, offering him my hand.

He slides the ring onto my finger, leaps up, and pulls me into his arms.

## EPILOGUE

EVIE

Six Years Later

Sunlight slants through the dusty windows of the garage, glinting off the scattered pieces of chrome and copper like treasure waiting to be found. I crouch beside the workbench, while our daughter – yes, our daughter, still a miracle to me every single day – digs with focused intensity through a crate of vintage scrap Dom picked out just for us.

Sowe always accompany him to the garage. Once, the idea of looking through scrap metal was scary to me, memories dragging me to dark places. But through our little angel, we're able to turn dark to light.

“Mommy, look at this one!” Angelica squeals, holding up a chunky gear like it's a diamond from a princess's tiara.

“It's perfect,” I say, kissing her on the forehead, unable to stop myself. “That'll make the most stunning necklace. What do you think? Hung on a leather cord with a couple of those turquoise beads we found last weekend?”

Angelica nods, then grins wide enough to light up the whole garage... and my soul along with it. “We'll call it The Turbo Talisman.”

I laugh, my heart bursting at the seams. “I love it. You're a genius.”

Dom's laugh echoes from across the garage, where he's deep in conversation with a mechanic about one of his sports cars.

When his eyes meet mine, I still feel that tingle down my spine. All these years later, I'm still dizzy for him. Love is too small a word. Obsession isn't quite right either.

Perhaps it's destiny. Or maybe it's just... Dom.

We've built a life for ourselves we can be proud of. My store has become a success, and Dom has focused on being the most kick ass CEO imaginable. No mafia. No biker gangs. No violence. Just love and the warm glow of family.

Angelica skips and shows him the gear. "Daddy, it's going to be the Turbo Talisman!"

He lifts her into his arms, kissing her cheek. "With a name like that, you might have to make one for me, too."

"You'd wear jewelry?" she asks, scandalized in that sassy way Dom always says reminds him of me.

"If you made it," he replies, nuzzling her nose. "I'd wear it every single day."

I snap a photo of them, of course. It's become a thing. I have galleries on my phone of Daddy-and-daughter cuteness. One day, when she's older and rolling her eyes at him, I'll show her how fiercely she was adored. How adored she is.

Rafe and Tash arrive hand-in-hand. Tash is glowing with happiness. Rafe looks at her like she's the answer to all life's questions.

"Evie!" Tash calls, waving a bag of donuts. "I brought the goods!"

"You angel woman," I beam, wrapping her in a hug, careful not to disturb her baby bump. She's almost ready to pop.

As we sit together in the sun-drenched garage, our daughter making up names for each new piece of scrap we find—The Rocket Ring, The Sparkle Screw, The Piston of

Power-Dom wraps an arm around my shoulders and pulls me close. His lips find the top of my head and linger there, and I swear time stops.

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This is our life now. Not chaos. Not fear. Not escape routes and hiding places and adrenaline at midnight... though we still have our fair share of steamy nighttime adventures.

Messy, bright, ever-evolving love. Jewelry made of junk and stories whispered over donuts.

“I never imagined that this would be what forever looked like,” I whisper, resting my head on Dom’s chest.

He chuckles. “I did.”

Angelica skips up to us, her hands full of bolts and magic. “We’re making a family necklace next. One piece for each of us. And maybe one for Meatball too!”

We all laugh.

## EPILOGUE

### DOM

#### Ten Years Later

I hold Jax in my arms, rocking him softly as our baby sleeps. I’m standing at the back window of our home, looking across the garden as Evie and Angelica stand side by side, Angelica already almost as tall as her mother. She tells her grandad a joke, making him laugh.

Closer to us, Rafe, Tash, and my godson Liam stand in a small circle, enjoying their hot dogs. All around the backyard party, people are laughing, joking, having the time of their lives.

My heart swells with joy as I turn and carry Jax back into the house.

“I never could’ve imagined this once upon a time, little man,” I whisper, carrying him to his crib.

I kiss him on his head and gently lay him down, then sit in my usual chair while he settles.

My phone buzzes. It’s my Keepsake. The name has only developed more significance as the bright, loving, starry years have gone on, as she’s tattooed a place in my soul, become an irreplaceable piece of me. I’ve loved watching her grow into a confident business owner, a powerful mama bear, a beautiful thirty-two-year-old bombshell who makes my body ache every time I look at her.

Keepsake: Where have you disappeared to?

Dom: The little man was demanding my time.

Meatball meows, walking into the room and leaping into his place near the sill, looking down at Jax with love in his kitty eyes.

Dom: But Meatball has come to keep watch over him. He’s such a good big brother.

Keepsake: I know he’s the best. Angelica is the life and soul of the party. She’s got your dad laughing so hard, I think he might break a bone.

I grin with love flowing through me. Dad has more than made up for lost time,

throwing himself into grandad duties, starting with Angelica's birth and never letting up. He's been there for birthdays, Christmases, Easter, everything. Angelica only knows him as her kind, doting grandfather, nothing else.

Dom: That girl's going to be a comedian when she grows up.

Keepsake: I'm just happy she's going to get a chance to grow up without ever knowing what it's like to be afraid.

Dom: You're the best mom, Evie. The BEST.

"And you're the best dad," she murmurs from the door.

I look up, my chest growing light, love blazing through me. She's wearing a summer dress that shows the shape of her gorgeously curvy, recently pregnant body, her cheeks still flushed and glowing with that pregnant perfection.

She brushes a hand through her hair. "Are you seriously looking at me like a meal – so soon after you-know-who popped outta me?" She gestures at Jax.

I laugh quietly. Jax has a habit of waking if we use his name near him. I stand, sweeping my wife, the love of my life, my soulmate into my arms. "You were beautiful before you were pregnant, beautiful when you were pregnant, and you're beautiful now you're not pregnant anymore."

She moans as I lean down for a kiss, grabbing my arms and pulling herself firmly against me.

"Wait," she whispers. "We can't – it's almost time for Angelica's cake. But... later?" She slides her hand down my body. "Maybe we could meet in the panic room, hmm? Like old times?"

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*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:49 am*

“I love you, Keepsake.”

She slides her hand lower. “Is that a yes?”

“That’s a... heck yes.”

She giggles, moving her hand away. “I never thought I’d see the day big bad Dom Russo saidheck.”

“You changed me for the better, Evie. I’m not ashamed of that.”

“Mom, Dad,” Angelica says, knocking gently on the door. “Is it time for my cake yet?”

“Yes, angel,” Evie says, taking my hand.

“Can I kiss you-know-who first?” Angelica asks.

“Of course you can.”

She tiptoes across the room, carefully leans down, and lays a soft kiss on his forehead. “Sleep well, little brother. I’ll save you a slice.”

THE END