



The Sentinel

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Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance

Description: Marcus Dane is danger incarnate—a billionaire ex-soldier with a body built for sin and a gaze that promises ruin. In the sultry depths of Charleston, he’s the silent sentinel of Dominion Hall, guarding secrets that could burn his empire to ash. Enter Claire Dixon, a relentless podcast journalist chasing the truth behind the Folly Beach Pier explosion—a blaze that wasn’t an accident. She’s all sharp edges and fearless fire, and she’s about to ignite everything Marcus controls.

He warns her to back off, pinning her against walls with gravel-rough threats and a touch that sears. She dares him to try harder, digging deeper into a war she doesn’t understand—one that’s already claimed lives. But when their clashes turn to molten nights, enemies become lovers, and Marcus’s possessive need to protect her battles Claire’s hunger for answers, the lines blur. Department 77 is closing in, and every kiss, every secret, could be their last.

Total Pages (Source): 100

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CLAIRE

I stepped off the plane in Charleston with salt air already clawing its way into my lungs, thick and damp like a wet rag slapped across my face.

Folly Beach Pier had blown sky-high, and the buzz hadn't died—it'd only gotten louder and sharper, a jagged itch I couldn't scratch from my shitty Brooklyn apartment. I'd come for the story. The real one. Not the sanitized "security job gone wrong" crap the locals swallowed like sweet tea. I could smell the lie from a thousand miles away, and it stank worse than the East River in July.

The Uber dropped me at the pier's edge just as dusk bled into the Lowcountry sky, all bruised purples and smoldering oranges—a sunset that'd make a postcard weep.

But I wasn't here for the view. I slung my battered leather satchel over my shoulder, recorder in hand, and trudged onto Folly Beach, shoes sinking into sand that felt too soft, too yielding compared to New York City's concrete spine. Back home, the ground fought you—here, it just gave up.

The pier—or what was left of it—stretched ahead like a corpse half-submerged in the Atlantic. Blackened stumps of wood jutted from the waves, charred and splintered, clawing at the sky like broken fingers. The air reeked of old smoke, a sour tang that clung to my throat. Beyond the ruins, the ocean rolled in lazy and relentless, waves crashing against the pylons with a hollow groan. The sound echoed like a warning I didn't want to hear.

I'd seen destruction before. Collapsed warehouses in the Bronx, subway fires spitting ash into Midtown. But this was different. Charleston wore its wounds quieter. Like it was embarrassed to bleed.

The beach stretched wide and flat around me, dunes tufted with sea oats swaying in the humid breeze. To my left, pastel bungalows lined the shorefront—pink, mint, baby blue—cute enough to make me gag, their porches sagging under the weight of too many summers. To my right, a rickety boardwalk snaked toward a cluster of bars and crab shacks, neon signs flickering “Open” in the fading light, their buzz drowned by the tide's low growl.

It was too damn peaceful. Too pretty for an explosion that'd ripped a landmark apart.

Back in New York, chaos left scars—graffiti on blast sites, cops barking through megaphones, yellow tape snapping in the wind. Here, the locals milled around like nothing had happened, flip-flops slapping pavement, their voices a slow, syrupy drawl I could barely parse. A couple of sunburned tourists snapped photos of the wreckage, like it was some quaint roadside attraction, not a crime scene begging to be cracked open.

I hated it. The quiet. The calm. It was a lie, and I knew it.

The story was here, buried under the sand and the salt, pulsing like a heartbeat I could feel in my bones. I'd spent weeks chasing whispers—grainy 911 calls, a boat spotted fleeing the blast, a name no one would say out loud: Dominion Hall.

My producer, Diego Gil, had told me to play it safe, to “keep my distance” from whatever I found.

Fat chance. Safe didn't win Ambies. Safe didn't dig up the truth that'd been eating at me since I lost my old mentor to a story I'd pushed him into—a story that ended with

his car wrapped around a Jersey overpass and me staring at his byline on my desk, wondering what I'd missed.

I wouldn't miss this. I wouldn't let anyone else I cared about get hurt.

I stepped closer to the pier's edge, my recorder clicking on with a soft hum. The tide lapped at the broken pylons, dark water swirling around jagged wood, and I squinted into the haze. Something moved—a flicker in the wreckage, maybe a crab scuttling over ash, maybe nothing. But my pulse kicked up anyway, a familiar thud against my ribs.

This wasn't just a story. It was a war, and I'd walked right into it—jet-lagged, half-starved, and too stubborn to care.

“Seen anything worth a headline out there?” a voice drawled behind me, low and smooth, cutting through the ocean's murmur like a blade.

I froze, thumb hovering over the recorder's stop button. The hairs on my neck prickled, and I turned slow, deliberate, like I wasn't already coiled tight as a spring.

He stood ten feet back, leaning against a weathered lamppost, arms crossed over a chest that looked carved from granite. Tall, broad, with a grin that didn't reach his eyes—blue, piercing eyes that pinned me like a butterfly to a board. His hair was sandy blond, tousled by the breeze like the surfer boy he could play on TV, and his faded Nirvana tee clung to him just enough to hint at muscle I didn't want to notice.

He was too pretty to be harmless, too still to be casual.

“Depends,” I said, keeping my tone flat, New York City steel sharpening the edges. “You got something worth saying?”

His grin widened, but it was sharp, predatory, like he'd scented blood and liked it. "Just a friendly tip, darlin'. You're poking at ghosts out here. Might not like what you wake up."

Darlin'. The word grated, dripping with that Southern charm I'd already decided I despised. But his voice—low, rough, like gravel under tires—hit me somewhere I didn't expect, stirring the tension already simmering in my gut.

I squared my shoulders, stepping closer, sand crunching under my feet. "Ghosts don't blow up piers. People do. And I'm betting you know more than you're letting on."

He didn't flinch, didn't move, just tilted his head, studying me like I was a puzzle he hadn't decided to solve—or break. "You're a long way from home, Dixon. Charleston's not kind to strangers who like to dig deep."

My breath hitched. He knew my name. Not just some barfly tossing lines—he'd been waiting for me.

The air thickened, heavy with salt and something darker, and my fingers tightened around the recorder till my knuckles ached. I could smell it now, stronger than ever—the story, the truth, the war.

It was right here, staring me down with a smirk I wanted to wipe off his face.

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“Guess I’ll take my chances,” I said, voice steady despite the thudding in my chest. “I’ve got a knack for finding what’s buried.”

His eyes darkened, and for a split second, I saw it—something silent, unforgiving, a shadow ready to strike. Then he pushed off the lamppost, closing the gap between us in two easy strides, his heat brushing against me like a warning shot.

“Keep digging, Claire,” he murmured, so close I could feel his breath on my cheek, “and you’ll need more than a mic to save you.”

I didn’t back up. Didn’t blink. Just held his gaze, my pulse roaring, the story burning brighter than the sunset behind us.

This wasn’t just a lead. This was Marcus Dane—I’d bet my recorder on it—and he was the key to everything.

Tension snapped between us like a live wire, and I knew one thing for damn sure: I wasn’t walking away.

2

MARCUS

Iknew she was coming before her plane landed. Her voice hit my truck’s radio two nights back—The Unseen, tearing into the pier explosion like a live round. “No accident,” she’d said, name-dropping Dominion Defense Corporation.

I'd felt the hit fifty miles out. That look—the hunter's glint—I'd clocked it before she touched sand.

She didn't disappoint.

I leaned against a lamppost, arms crossed, wind pulling. She stepped onto Folly Beach, recorder in hand. New York hard. Her blonde hair was messy, her leather jacket tight, her jeans hugging curves like Scarlett Johansson in a dark cut.

She was hot as hell. Trouble on legs. The enemy.

They called her the best of her generation. Whispers from podcasters, X junkies, and a burned-out cop I'd leaned on once all said the same thing. Claire Dixon didn't chase stories—she tracked them, gutted them, fed them to a million ears. She'd cracked a Queens case that had cops scrambling. Took down a pharma prick in ten episodes. Now, she'd locked onto us. Me. My brothers. Dominion Hall.

She was good. Too good.

I couldn't let her have it.

The pier was a wreck. Sand stretched flat, boardwalk to the right, bungalows left. It was quiet. Too quiet for a blast that tore through not long ago. Locals shuffled by, their flip-flops slapping, like it was nothing. Tourists snapped pics—idiots. Claire stepped closer, her recorder humming, her eyes hunting.

I knew that look. I'd seen it in war zones, debriefs, and even my own damn face some nights. She smelled blood. She'd dig till she hit us. When they called her the best of her generation, they weren't wrong.

Did I mention she was hot, too? All New York bite and curves I'd pin down in a

heartbeat. I wanted to, but I couldn't.

Dominion Hall was us—seven brothers, blood and war, and the pact we'd made after Dad went dark. I was the sentinel—the eyes, ears, and the shadow catching what tried to slip past. Ryker led. Charlie hit. I watched. Always. I kept us standing when shit came knocking.

Claire wanted the pier and our secrets. That'd paint targets on every single Dane. On my company. That couldn't happen.

Even if I had to make her disappear.

That was a cold thought. Sharp. I'd done it—left bodies cold, silenced loud mouths that couldn't help themselves. It was survival, not personal. But watching her—recorder live, eyes cutting—I felt it twist. She burned bright. Too bright to waste, really. Still, I'd do anything to protect what was mine. Family. Company. Everything.

Then there was Department 77. Another problem. Much bigger than Claire Bear. But I had to deal with her first.

I grinned sharp, my mask on. She'd feel me soon. That prickle. Instinct keeping her alive. One shot. I'd scare her off, charm her back, or whatever worked. If she dug deeper, I'd end it. I didn't have a choice. It was the sentinel's job to watch, wait, and strike.

“Seen anything worth a headline out there?” I drawled, low, cutting the tide's noise.

She froze, thumb over her recorder. She felt me, then she turned slow and tight. Her gray eyes locked mine. They were sharp, no bullshit. Up close, she was even hotter—Scarlett with a New York edge, her curves screaming trouble. Heat hit low. It

was a tease I'd use later. Not now.

"Depends," she said, flatly, with steel in it. "You got something worth saying?"

I grinned wider, predator to her hunter. "Just a friendly tip, darlin'. You're poking at ghosts out here. Might not like what you wake up."

Ooh. I could see she hated "darlin'" when her eyebrows twitched. She stepped closer. She was daring me. "Ghosts don't blow up piers. People do. And I'm betting you know more than you're letting on."

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Fuck, she was good. That glint burned—the best I’d seen in a journalist. But it was a threat too close to what I guarded. I didn’t move, tilted my head, and sized her up. She’d keep coming.

“You’re a long way from home, Dixon,” I said, her name slow, catching her breath. “Charleston’s not kind to strangers who like to dig deep.”

The air thickened—her pulse, and my warning. Her fingers tightened on that recorder, knuckles white. She smelled it—the war—same as me.

“Guess I’ll take my chances,” she said, steady, chest pounding. “I’ve got a knack for finding what’s buried.”

Her eyes dared me. They were too damn bright. I closed the gap—two strides, heat brushing her.

“Keep digging, Claire,” I murmured, my breath on her cheek, “and you’ll need more than a mic to save you.”

She didn’t back off. She held my gaze, her pulse loud. She’d unravel us if I let her.

I wouldn’t.

3

CLAIRE

The second I left the pier, the weight of Charleston's humidity clamped down on me, thick and smothering, curling against my skin like something alive.

The ocean breeze barely cut through it as I stalked toward the main road. My shoes kicked up sand, my recorder still clenched in my fist, Marcus Dane's voice ringing in my ears.

Prick.

I yanked open the door of the first Uber idling near the beachside bars, ignoring the way the driver—an older guy with a salt-and-pepper beard—eyed me like I was trouble.

“Where to?” he asked, slamming the trunk shut after tossing in my bag.

“The Palmetto Rose,” I said, sliding into the back seat.

As the car pulled away, I exhaled, rolling my shoulders. The heat, the damp air, the too-quiet streets—it was all pressing in, making me feel out of my element. But none of it compared to the storm still unraveling inside me.

Because I hadn't just met some local with a chip on his shoulder back there.

I'd met Marcus Dane.

And he was going to be a problem.

As we pulled away from the curb, I rested my elbow on the window's edge, taking in Charleston's postcard-perfect scenery. The historic homes with their pastel facades, the wrought-iron balconies, the moss-draped oaks lining the streets—it was charming in that old-money, Southern hospitality kind of way I'd read about. But I wasn't here

to play tourist.

I was here because something wasn't adding up.

An explosion at Folly Beach Pier didn't just happen. Not in a place like this. Someone, somewhere, was pulling strings. And if there was one thing I was good at? It was pulling them right back.

The cab rolled onto Meeting Street, the heart of downtown Charleston, and the city unfolded before me like something out of a history book. Cobblestone streets stretched beneath grand live oaks, their sprawling branches draped in veils of Spanish moss. Pastel-colored townhouses lined the sidewalks, their wrought-iron balconies adorned with flickering gas lanterns that seemed to burn even in the daylight.

A horse-drawn carriage clattered past, its wheels rattling against the uneven stones as the driver, dressed in suspenders and a straw hat, gestured animatedly to his passengers. A group of tourists sat wide-eyed in the back, cameras ready, drinking in the charm of a city that felt untouched by time.

On the sidewalks, people moved at a different pace than I was used to—leisurely, as if they had all the time in the world. No one shoved past in a hurry, no one barked into their phones while power-walking to the next obligation. A couple strolled hand-in-hand, pausing to admire a flower box overflowing with pink camellias. A woman in a sundress leaned against a historic marker, sipping from a sweating cup of sweet tea like she had nowhere else to be.

And the smell—God, the smell.

Salt water, thick and briny, but cleaner than the air back home. The scent of it mixed with something warm and rich, the aroma of fresh pralines wafting from a nearby candy shop, mingling with the earthy, slightly bitter smell of old brick that had

soaked up centuries of sun and rain.

The cab passed a corner where a street musician played a slow, lazy tune on his saxophone, his case open for tips. The deep, velvety notes curled through the humid air, adding to the languid, dreamlike quality of the city.

This wasn't New York.

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This was something else entirely.

By the time we reached the hotel, my shirt was sticking to my back, and my patience was wearing thin.

The Palmetto Rose was grand in that old-world Charleston way—towering doors, wrought-iron accents, and gas lanterns flickering against the sky. The kind of place dripping with wealth and history.

I strode inside, my shoes squeaking against the marble floor as I approached the front desk. Two women stood behind it, deep in conversation.

The first had sleek dark hair and striking brown eyes, a natural confidence in the way she carried herself. The second—taller, with warm brown skin and loose curls—was idly tapping a pen against the desk, her expressionsomewhere between amused and unimpressed. They looked friendly enough.

Both turned when I reached the counter.

“Checking in?” the brunette asked, her Southern accent soft but unmistakable.

“Yeah.” I slid my ID and credit card across the polished wood. “Claire Dixon. I booked a suite.”

She nodded, typing something into the computer while the other girl studied me, her head tilting slightly.

“You’re not from around here,” she said.

I exhaled. “That obvious?”

Her lips twitched. “A little.”

The first woman slid my key card across the counter. “You’re in the Magnolia Suite. Elevator’s to your left.”

I tucked the card into my bag. “I need something else.”

They both looked at me.

“I’m looking for someone,” I said, keeping my tone casual. “Marcus Dane.”

The atmosphere shifted.

Subtle, but there. A pause too long, a glance too sharp.

Bingo. So they knew him.

The encounter at the pier had been on his terms, his timing—him catching me off guard, throwing me off balance. If I was going to get what I needed, I’d have to be the one setting the rules next time.

I needed to find him again. But this time, on my terms.

The brunette’s fingers tensed, while the other girl’s gaze sharpened ever so slightly.

I leaned forward. “You know him?”

The brunette's expression stayed polite, but there was a coolness to it now. "Why are you looking for him?"

"I host *The Unseen*," I said smoothly. "A true crime podcast out of New York." I let that hang in the air, watching for a reaction. When none came, I pressed on. "I came down to look into the explosion at Folly Beach Pier. My listeners like the truth, and this whole thing smells like a cover-up." I tilted my head. "I heard the Dane brothers run some kind of high-end security operation ... or something like that. Thought Marcus might have some insight. I was told he was the one to talk to."

The woman with the curls—who I was realizing had a faint New York accent herself—offered a polite, measured smile. "He's not exactly easy to pin down."

I arched a brow. "So you do know him."

The brunette behind the desk gave a small, noncommittal shrug. "Charleston's a small town. People talk."

I exhaled, keeping my tone even. "Look, I just need a meeting. If there's any way to get in touch with him?—"

The woman with the curls let out a small, knowing smile, shaking her head. "Marcus Dane isn't the easiest man to find."

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“I just need five minutes of his time,” I pressed.

The first woman glanced at her coworker before exhaling softly, folding her arms. “He’s ... particular about who he talks to.”

I raised an eyebrow. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

The other woman hesitated before offering a careful smile. “Just that Marcus values his privacy. If he wants to be found, he’ll find you.”

A thrill shot through me.

So I was onto something.

I held her gaze, steady. “Thanks for the insight.”

“Of course.”

The brunette sighed, rubbing her temple. “Claire, was it?”

“Yeah.”

The memory of him at the pier clung to me, impossible to shake. The way he’d stood—broad and unmoving, radiating that quiet, dangerous confidence—had sent something sharp and electric curling low in my stomach.

Marcus Dane was the kind of man who would ruin a woman in bed—rough hands

gripping, pinning, taking. I knew it. The kind who wouldn't ask permission but would make it so damn good she wouldn't care. I could still hear his gravel-rough voice taunting me, feel the weight of his stare as if he were stripping me down just to see how I'd react.

If he wasn't so damn insufferable, I might have let myself wonder what it would feel like to have that smirk brush against my skin, to hear his voice drop lower—not with sarcasm, but with raw, undeniable want.

I swallowed hard, pushing the thought away.

This was going to be fun.

4

MARCUS

I'd been chasing the ghost of Department 77 for weeks. Nothing. No leads, no chatter—just a wisp on the wind. I sat in my truck that morning, the radio off, staring at the pier's wreckage through a cracked windshield. It had been a while since it blew, and I had jack shit.

Part of me thought it was a hoax. Some bastard pinning a name on chaos to fuck with us. Maybe Will's ramblings from captivity had been planted—bullshit fed to throw us off. I didn't believe until I saw. Never had.

But my gut said different. It gnawed at me, steady and low. It was the same instinct my brothers lived by. Ryker's gut had caught an IED in Kabul. Atlas's had sniffed out a mole stateside. Mine had kept me breathing through hell I didn't name. Now it hummed—Department 77 was real. I just couldn't prove it.

That pissed me off most. Weeks of nada, and it was driving me nuts.

I drove back to Dominion Hall, my mind spinning. The place loomed—brick and stone, three stories of coldbulk. Towers jutted at the corners. The windows were slits, like a bunker's. It was more fortress than home. Always had been.

Sullivan's Island? Now, that was home. White sand, salt breeze, and Dad's laugh on the porch before it all went dark. I'd give anything to rewind, to ditch this concrete cage for one more day there.

But Dominion Hall was ours now. Me and my six brothers, holding the line. It was built to take war, wealth, and anything else that hit. That day, it felt like a taunt.

I parked out front, my boots hitting the ground hard. Inside, the air was cool and cleansed. Marble floors gleamed. The walls could stop a tank round.

A chandelier hung in the foyer. It was sharp, glinting, and ready to cut. Wide, steep, stairs spiraled up. It was good vantage, if you knew it. I did. I kept my sidearm on me, even here.

Fortresses got breached. I'd seen it.

I dropped into the ops room where monitors flickered and maps were scattered on the steel table. Ryker was out. Atlas was, too. It was just me and the hum.

I pulled up Claire Dixon's file for the third time that day. Her face hit the screen—gray eyes sharp, blonde hair a layered mess, lips I shouldn't have clocked. I'd set up surveillance on her an hour after our chat at the pier.

I had cameras on her hotel, The Palmetto Rose, which was soon to be in our hands. Acquiring properties on a whim was one of the few reasons I liked the money.

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I'd setup a tail—quiet, ours—tracking her. Audio taps, if I could manage it. She was a problem. I didn't give problems free rein.

I checked the feeds. She'd gone to her room after the pier.

I couldn't shake her. That New York bite, the way she'd faced me down—daring me. Best of her generation, they said. I believed it.

She was too damn good. Too damn close. I had to stop her. To scare her off, shut her down, or whatever worked.

Family first. Company second. The rest could burn.

I switched screens and hit other outlets. Post and Courier, Channel 5—all parroting the gas leak line. It was the official story from local brass, and it was being swallowed whole.

No digging. No questions. Idiots. Claire was the only one poking holes—her podcast calling bullshit. The rest were blind or bought.

I scrolled X. The same gas leak crap was trending. Conspiracy nuts got drowned out fast. Nothing else was solid. Another week and the story would be fully played out.

Then Our Washington friends called. They weren't so subtle. The who's who we sometimes worked for—suits with secrets—wanted assurances. "Pier contained?" "Dominion clean?" "No blowback?"

I gave them what I had—the situation was locked, no leaks, we're on it. I hung up before they dug deeper.

They didn't trust us. They never had. They needed us, though. It didn't stop the questions from stacking up.

It was a big fucking mess, and we were in knee-deep with no way out.

So why couldn't I stop imagining her naked?

The vision hit me hard—Claire, stripped bare. Her leather jacket gone, her jeans off. Curves in a dark alley—raw, hot, all bite. Tits pressed to my face.

I pictured her on that steel table—legs spread, wrists pinned, breath hitching. Rough. Mine. I wanted to take her, to break her, and to hear her moan.

That voice from the pier cut me open—all steel and heat stirring shit I didn't need. Not now.

I clenched my fists, jaw locked. I was the sentinel—eyes, ears, blade when it counted. No time for this shit.

Department 77 was a ghost. Claire was a live wire. Washington was on my ass.

Focus, damn it.

But there she was in my mind's eye—naked, taunting. Recorder swapped for a gasp. Fuck. I shoved it down, buried it.

It didn't matter how bad I wanted her, or how I'd make it good, rough, her breaking under me. She was a threat.

I checked the surveillance again. Her hotel feed was quiet, lights low. She'd be plotting. Same as me.

As I worked, my gut hummed louder—Department 77, her, the mess—all tied. I couldn't see it yet. I simply had to trust it.

Radio crackled—Ryker. “Anything new?”

“Nada,” I said. “Claire's holed up. Press buys the gas leak. Washington's twitchy.”

“Keep her locked down,” he said. “No more bleeding.”

“On it.” Click.

I stood, pacing the ops room. My steps echoed off marble. The fortress pressed in—walls too thick, air too still.

Sullivan's Island hit me—the sand, the waves, the life before this. I'd trade it all to ditch the weight and the blood.

But I couldn't. Dominion Hall was ours—to hold and to fight for. Claire didn't get that. She'd burn it for her truth.

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I'd bury her first.

I turned back to the monitors. Her feed was still steady. My fists clenched as I watched.

I couldn't find Department 77. I couldn't prove shit. And I couldn't stop the mess from piling up.

So why was she still in my head? Naked. Writhing. Mine.

I growled, then slammed a fist on the table. Steel rang. It didn't help.

She was under my skin. I hated it.

I had to end this—her digging, my wanting. One way or another.

5

CLAIRE

I took the key card from the counter, my mind still going over what had just happened. If the women working the front desk knew the Dane brothers—knew Marcus—then I'd just walked straight into a much bigger story than I'd expected.

I glanced at their name tags, my curiosity kicking in. Only first names were printed. Isabel and Sasha.

I nodded toward them. “Isabel. Sasha. Thanks for the help.”

The one with sleek dark hair—Isabel—offered a polite but unreadable smile. Sasha gave me an easy nod, her expression still measured.

As I stepped away, Isabel reached for her purse behind the counter, exchanging a few quiet words with Sasha. A shift change. She was heading out for the night.

Interesting.

If she was leaving, there was a chance she was going home—to someone.

My stomach tightened.

I didn’t know exactly what I’d walked into yet, but one thing was clear—I was in the right place.

With that, I turned on my heel and strode toward the elevator, keeping my posture relaxed, though inside, I was buzzing with energy.

By the time I reached the Magnolia Suite, I was itching to get to work.

The door swung open to reveal a space that was all understated Southern elegance. Soft blue walls, crisp white crown molding, antique furniture polished to a gleam. A massive four-poster bed dominated the center of the room, draped in white linen so pristine it looked untouched. The sitting area featured a tufted sofa in a shade of pale gray, with a matching armchair angled toward a fireplace that I highly doubted anyone ever used.

A set of French doors led to a balcony overlooking the historic district. Beyond the rooftops of pastel townhouses, I could see the harbor.

I dropped my bag onto the bed and pulled out my phone. It was time to check in.

Diego answered on the third ring. “Tell me you’ve already stirred up trouble.”

I rolled my eyes. “Nice to talk to you too, boss.”

“I’m not your boss, Claire, I’m your producer. But if it helps you take direction, call me whatever you want.” His voice was warm but firm, that signature mix of charm and exasperation he always used on me.

I toed off my heels and flopped onto the sofa. “I made it. And Jesus, Diego, it’s like another planet down here. People are walking around smiling at strangers. The air smells like sugar and salt water. It’s ... unsettling.”

Diego chuckled. “Careful. You might accidentally start liking it.”

“Doubtful.” I stretched out, crossing one ankle over the other. “I checked in at The Palmetto Rose. Met a couple of locals who seem like they know the Dane brothers but weren’t exactly eager to talk.”

“That’s not surprising.” His tone shifted, turning more serious. “Those guys are a different breed. Blood money. Military ties. The kind of men who don’t like reporters sniffing around their business.”

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“Yeah, well, too bad for them.”

“That’s the attitude.” I could practically hear the smirk in his voice.

I hesitated for half a second, then added, “I met Marcus, too.”

Silence.

Then Diego let out a low whistle. “Already? Damn, girl, you don’t waste time.”

I exhaled, tipping my head back against the sofa. “It wasn’t exactly planned. He found me at the pier.”

Diego’s voice sharpened. “And?”

“And he’s exactly what I expected,” I said. “Arrogant. Intense. Full of threats wrapped in Southern charm. Oh, and apparently, he already knew my name.”

Diego cursed under his breath. “Not ideal.”

“No shit.” I stared up at the ceiling, replaying the encounter in my mind—the way Marcus had moved, slow and deliberate, like a predator sizing up prey. The way his voice had curled around my name, dark and knowing. The way my pulse had spiked, heat pooling low in my stomach, because, of course, my body had to betray me.

“Careful with that one,” Diego warned. “If he already knows who you are, he’s probably keeping tabs on you.”

“Let him,” I said, stretching my legs out, forcing my tone to stay light. “If he’s watching me, that means I’m getting under his skin.”

“That’s not always a good thing.”

I smirked. “It is for the story. Look, we both know the media landscape isn’t what it used to be. People don’t want long-form investigations anymore—they want ten-second sound bites and conspiracy theories they can scroll past between TikTok videos and cat memes.”

I sighed. We’d had this conversation too many times already.

“But *The Unseen* is different,” Diego pressed. “We’re one of the last podcasts actually breaking real stories, not just rehashing old cases for entertainment. And if we want to stay at the top, we need a story that matters—something that’ll shake people awake.”

“I know.”

“Then do what you do best.” His voice dropped lower. “Get close. Get answers. And don’t stop until you have something that’ll make people put down their damn phones and actually listen.”

I swallowed, nodding even though he couldn’t see me.

“Do whatever it takes,” Diego said.

I stared out at the Charleston skyline, at the way the moonlight turned the city into something out of a painting.

Whatever it takes. I could do that. I always did.

I leaned my head back against the sofa, my fingers tightening around my phone. I knew Diego was right. My heart was still pounding as I yanked my blonde hair into a ponytail, grabbed my phone, and left the room.

I needed food. A walk. A distraction. And I needed to figure out exactly whose toes I'd already stepped on.

The lobby was quieter now, the rush having died down.

I approached the front desk, keeping my tone casual. "Hey. Any recommendations for food?"

The curly-haired woman from before—Sasha—was still there, flipping through a guest book. She glanced up, her expression unreadable.

"What are you in the mood for?" she asked.

Before I could answer, the air in the room shifted.

A presence. A weight.

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I turned my head—and immediately knew I was in trouble.

Three men stood just inside the entrance, watching me with the kind of silent intensity that could mean a hundred different things. Trouble. Protection. A warning. Or, in some cases, all three.

And I recognized every one of them.

In the center, standing with that quiet, lethal stillness, was Ryker Dane. I knew his face—not from social media, because there wasn't any. The Dane brothers stayed out of the public eye. Their company, Dominion Defense, was a fortress—private and impenetrable. Finding anything on them had been like chasing smoke.

But Ryker had been photographed recently—once. A long-lens shot from a high-profile security summit in D.C., standing near a senator with dirty money and an FBI tail. The image barely made the rounds before it was buried, but I'd seen it.

And now, standing here in front of me, was the man from that photo.

Even if I hadn't recognized him from the image, I still would've known. There was something about these men—something that made people instinctively take a step back. The way the air in the lobby subtly shifted, the way conversations softened, like the people in the room knew without knowing.

Yeah. Those were Danes.

The one on the right was leaner, sharp-featured, his easy smirk at odds with the

sharpness in his gaze. Military posture, stance loose but deceptively ready. A man trained to react in a blink.

And the one on the left?

I'd already met him.

Sharp jaw, sun-kissed surfer-boy looks, the same cocky, vaguely pissed-off expression he'd worn when he taunted me at the pier.

Marcus Dane.

His gaze locked onto me, dark and unreadable.

I rolled my shoulders, just slightly, letting my back arch in a subtle stretch. The shift pulled my sleeveless blouse tight against my curves, the buttons straining ever so slightly. The neckline dipped just enough to tease, to see if Marcus Dane—all sharp edges and simmering irritation—was immune to temptation.

His gaze flicked downward for a split second. Barely there. But I caught it.

Oh, he noticed.

A slow smirk began at the edge of my lips. Interesting.

“Well,” I murmured, more to myself than anyone else, a knowing glint in my eye. “Speak of the devil.”

Marcus's mouth curled at the edges. “I don't recall inviting you to.”

I arched a brow, letting my gaze flick over him—broad shoulders under a perfectly

tailored button-down, the way he carried himself like he owned the damn room. The city. Maybe even the world.

Asshole energy radiated off him in waves.

I smiled, slow and taunting. “I don’t need an invitation.”

“That right?”

“Yep.” I turned fully toward him, squaring my stance. “I ask questions. People answer them. It’s kind of my thing.”

He tilted his head, studying me.

I refused to squirm.

Then his gaze flicked—just for a second—toward the back room behind the front desk. A subtle shift. A flicker of acknowledgment.

A moment later, Isabel stepped out, a small crossbody bag slung over her shoulder. She barely glanced my way before walking toward the men, her movements easy, like she’d done this a hundred times before. Ryker’s arm brushed against hers as she passed, and even though they didn’t touch, there was something there. Something in the way he subtly angled his body toward her, in the way her eyes flicked up at him as if she didn’t even have to think about it.

They were together.

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And I hadn't missed the way the other two Danes shifted slightly, moving just enough to create a loose perimeter as she walked through them, like it was second nature to close ranks around her. Protecting her.

Interesting.

Marcus was still watching me, though. And he was enjoying this. I could see it in the way his smirk deepened, in the slight head tilt like he was sizing me up, deciding just how much of a problem I was going to be.

"Lucky timing," he mused. "My brother was coming by anyway, so I thought I'd tag along and pay you a visit."

His voice was deceptively casual, but something about it put me on edge.

I folded my arms. "Thought you didn't want to help me."

"Oh, I don't." His smirk sharpened. "Just wanted to see what kind of trouble you're planning to stir up."

"Right." I exhaled slowly, keeping my expression neutral. "And?"

His eyes flickered with something unreadable. "I'll be seeing you, Claire."

It wasn't a promise. It was a warning. And as he turned and walked out the door, following his brothers into the Charleston night, I knew?—

Marcus Dane wasn't done with me yet.

6

MARCUS

I stood outside The Palmetto Rose, salt air thick in my lungs. Ryker paced in front of me, boots scuffing the pavement. Night had settled hard over Charleston—streetlights buzzing, gas lanterns flickering against the hotel's fancy-ass facade. Claire was up there, in her suite, plotting.

My brother wasn't happy about how Claire had hit the pier, sniffed too close, and dared me to stop her.

"She's a fucking problem, Marcus," Ryker snapped, voice low, sharp—like a blade cutting through static. "You let her walk away?"

I crossed my arms, met his glare. "I warned her. She didn't blink."

"She's a reporter," he said. "A good one. That's worse. She'll dig till she hits bone—ours."

I didn't flinch. "I'll take care of it."

He stopped pacing, squared up—six-four of pissed-off Dane. "Take care of it how? She's got a mic and a million ears. One wrong word, and Dominion's fucked."

"I said I'll handle it," I shotback, voice steady, cold. "She's on my radar—cameras, tail, the works. She moves, I know."

"Not good enough. I want her gone—yesterday. No blood, no mess."

“I’ve got it,” I said, final. “Trust me.”

He stared me down, eyes like black ice. He didn’t trust easy—not after Dad, not after war. But he nodded, short and tight. “Make it quick.”

He turned, then stalked off toward his truck and Izzy. I watched them go, engine growling as he peeled out.

I didn’t drive far.

I swung my Bugatti into the valet line at The Battery Club. The place was private, discreet, and a half-mile from Claire’s hotel. I needed a drink. Needed to think. Away from Ryker, the ops room, the whole damn mess.

I handed the keys to a kid in a crisp vest, and ignored his wide-eyed stare at the car. I stepped inside, taking in the dark wood, leather, and the low hum of old money talking shit over bourbon.

I picked the bar, taking the back corner stool. It offered the best vantage on the room, the exit in sight. It was an old habit. A necessary one. I sat, shrugged off my jacket, and rolled my sleeves. A bartender with gray hair and quick hands nodded my way.

“Whiskey,” I said. “Neat.”

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He moved fast, bottle clinking glass. I pulled an earbud from my pocket while he poured, and slipped it in. I needed something to drown the noise in my head—Department 77, Ryker’s bitching, and Claire’s fucking eyes.

I tapped my phone, then pulled up *The Unseen*. Her podcast. Climbing the rankings. The latest episode was too new—pier shit hadn’t dropped yet. I went back six months and found the Queens cold case. The one she’d cracked wide open. I pressed play.

Her voice hit me—smoke and steel, cutting sharp. “This isn’t about justice,” she said, low and deliberate. “It’s about truth—who buries it, who dies for it.”

Fuck, she was good.

Claire had a way of getting straight to the point, with no fluff. She peeled back lies like skin, and left you raw. I listened as she laid out the case—a missing girl, a dirty cop, and evidence torched. She’d found the thread, then pulled till it snapped. That “best of her generation” line wasn’t hype. She could’ve been the female Shawn Ryan. She had grit, brains, and balls to match. Her words yanked you in and held you there.

The bartender slid my whiskey over, amber catching the dim light. I nodded, then took a slug. The burn hit my throat and settled warm. I kept listening.

“She’d been missing three years,” Claire said, voice dropping. “Cops said runaway. I said bullshit. I found her jacket in a dumpster—blood on the cuff.”

Trouble. She sniffed it out, chased it down. Liked it, too. I could hear it in her tone, that edge of thrill. Every episode had the same vibe—hunting, cutting, winning.

That's when it hit me.

Claire could find Department 77.

I froze, glass halfway to my mouth. She was good—better than good. If anyone could dig up a ghost, it was her. I'd been hitting walls and chasing smoke for weeks, but I'll bet she'd slice through it. That glint in her eyes at the pier, that knack for what's buried—she'd track them. I'd been blind, too pissed to see it.

I had to play it right. To manipulate the board, to keep her in the dark. I needed to feed her crumbs, point her at shadows, and let her hunt. She'd never guess I was pulling the strings. Would never link it back to Dominion. She was smart enough to find them, and too stubborn to stop. Perfect.

I took another slug and let it burn as the plan clicked into place—use her sources, her instincts, her mic. Steer her toward Department 77 without her catching my scent. It was risky as hell. She'd be a beacon, drawing fire. It might put her in danger.

That thought thrilled me.

I pictured it—Claire cornered, gray eyes wide, adrenaline spiking. Me watching, close but unseen, her pulse racing under my scope. Something dark twisted in me. I wanted her on that edge, wanted to see her fight. Heat hit low and sharp—her naked again, sprawled, mine, that thrill turning to want.

Then something deeper kicked in.

I wouldn't let her get hurt.

My gut clenched, whiskey souring in my throat. Why the fuck not? She was a threat—digging, daring, and too damn close. I should've been fine letting her burn as

collateral for family, for Dominion. But there it was—some buried instinct snarling I'd shield her. Pull her back before the fire hit.

Fuck.

This woman was impossible.

I drained the glass, then slammed it down as ice rattled. Claire's voice kept rolling through the earbud, calm and relentless. "The truth doesn't hide forever," she said. "Not from me."

She was trouble—pure and uncut. She liked finding it, and she liked breaking it. That made her dangerous. And it made her useful.

It didn't mean I couldn't use her.

Family came first—always had. Dominion Defense Corporation was ours—seven brothers, blood and war, built to stand. Department 77 was out there, a ghost I couldn't nail, a blade at our throats. Claire could find it. She could cut through the dark and drag it into the light. I'd keep her blind and keep her safe, while getting what I needed.

Her voice hit again—"He thought he'd buried it. I proved he didn't." Cool, steady, like she knew I was listening.

I pulled the earbud out, then pocketed it. I stared at the empty glass. The plan was solid. I'd use her to end this. Ryker wanted her gone. That didn't mean dead, just quiet. I'd make her hunt, make her mine to control. Danger or not, I'd keep her breathing.

Why, though?

I leaned back, my jaw tight. She was in my head—naked, fighting, daring me. I couldn't shake it—her curves in that jacket, her voice slicing me raw. I wanted her under me, pinned, breaking. I wanted her safe, too. Fuck that noise.

I signaled the bartender for another round. He poured quickly and silently. I took it, letting the burn ground me.

Claire was a tool. The best I'd seen. I'd wield her, point her, and watch her cut. Department 77 wouldn't know what hit them. Neither would she.

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But that thrill lingered—her in danger, me close. That deeper kick—her safe, me making sure. It was an impossible mess.

I sipped slow, staring at the bar's grain. Claire Dixon was trouble I'd use, trouble I'd keep.

Family safe. Dominion standing.

Fuck, I was in deep.

7

CLAIRE

The next morning, the air was already thick with heat and humidity by the time I stepped outside The Palmetto Rose. The scent of salt water and blooming jasmine wafted through the air, deceptively sweet, masking the rot I knew was buried somewhere beneath the surface.

Time to dig it up.

I'd barely slept. Between tossing and turning in that ridiculously soft four-poster bed and replaying every second of my encounters with Marcus Dane—first at the pier, then in the hotel lobby—my mind had been too wired.

So I did what I always did when a story had me by the throat.

I hit the pavement.

Charleston had woken slowly, stretching into its day like a cat basking in the sun. The streets hummed with easy conversation. People strolled instead of rushed, greeting each other by name, pausing to chat like time wasn't a commodity. It was almost quaint. Almost.

But underneath the pleasantries, I felt it. The caution. The hesitation. The unspoken don't ask too many questions, honeylingering behind every tight smile.

Back in New York, asking questions was expected—hell, it was a way of life. People thrived on gossip, on scandal, on knowing something before their neighbor did. You could shove a mic in someone's face, and nine times out of ten, they'd have something to say—whether it was the truth or not.

Here? Silence spoke louder than words.

People in Charleston didn't just hesitate. They calculated. Weighing whether speaking to me was worth the risk. Whether I was worth the trouble. Whether the wrong word might come back to haunt them.

In New York City, the danger was obvious. A source might slam a door in your face, maybe throw a curse or two your way, but they wouldn't hold back if they had something to spill.

Here, the threat was quieter. Polite. Wrapped in a slow smile and a soft drawl that made it feel like I was the one making a mistake by even asking.

Not to mention, the Danes weren't just known here. They were something else.

Respected. Feared. Maybe even revered in some weird way.

It was the kind of influence you couldn't buy, not even with the obscene wealth I knew they had. This was something deeper. Something woven into the city itself, into the bones of the people who lived here.

And I wasn't the only one who felt it.

A few conversations in, and I could already tell—I was an outsider, and no one was going to roll out the welcome mat just because I asked nicely.

I leaned against the counter of a small coffee shop, my iced latte sweating in my grip, while the barista—a woman in her late fifties with soft brown eyes—stirred sugar into her own cup like she suddenly had all the time in the world.

“You're not from around here,” she said, giving me a slow once-over.

I smiled. “Let me guess—the accent gives me away?”

“That and the questions.” Her gaze was steady, unreadable. “People in this city don't much like questions about the Danes.”

I tapped my nail against my cup. “That because they're dangerous?”

Her lips curved, but it wasn't quite a smile. “Because they keep us safe.”

That was the most I got out of her.

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From there, it was more of the same. Some people clammed up entirely. Others danced around my questions with the kind of well-practiced Southern charm that was both infuriating and oddly impressive. A few were just curious about what a woman like me—big-city podcaster, fast-talking and sharp—was doing sniffing around.

But one thing was clear: the Danes weren't just a family. They were a shield. And no one wanted to be the one to poke holes in that protection.

Which meant I needed to go straight to the people who had no choice but to answer.

The law.

The Charleston County Sheriff's Office was an old brick building just off King Street, the American flag flapping lazily in the sticky morning air. Inside, the cool blast of air-conditioning hit me first, followed by the scent of cheap coffee and the low hum of police radios crackling behind the front desk.

The deputy on duty—a man in his late forties with a shaved head and a no-nonsense air—barely spared me a glance.

"I'm looking for Sheriff Joe Christel," I said, slipping my press credentials onto the counter. "Claire Dixon. The Unseen."

That got his attention.

His gaze flicked from my ID to my face, his expression unreadable. "Sheriff's a busy man."

“I’m sure he is,” I said smoothly. “But I only need a few minutes.”

He didn’t move. Didn’t even pretend to type something into his computer.

“The explosion at Folly Beach,” I pressed. “Surely he has something to say about that.”

A long silence. Then, finally?—

“The sheriff’s not here.”

Bullshit.

I folded my arms, tilting my head. “So you’re telling me the highest-ranking law enforcement official in this county just isn’t here at—” I glanced at my watch, “—nine-thirty in the morning?”

“That’s right.”

I sighed through my nose, fighting the urge to bang my head against the counter.

The sheriff wasn’t just busy. He was untouchable. A man whose loyalty wasn’t to the public, but to the Danes.

Figured.

I tapped my fingers against the counter, weighing my options. I could keep pushing, try to press one of the deputies, or I could regroup and find another way in. Neither would get me what I really wanted—answers.

And then there was Marcus.

My jaw clenched just thinking about him. Arrogant, cocky, built like sin and probably twice as dangerous. He was the kind of man I hated on principle. The kind who walked through the world knowing it bent to his will. The kind who could ruin a woman in bed and walk away without looking back.

Not that I'd thought about that last night. Except I had.

I'd tossed and turned, my mind racing with leads and dead ends, and somewhere in the mess of it all, my thoughts had drifted to the way he looked at me, the way he said my name, the way I just knew he'd be the kind of lover who wouldn't bother asking, who'd just take.

A warm pressure began to build between my legs.

In another life, where I wasn't investigating a fucking explosion and he wasn't him, we'd have a wild time. A reckless, no-strings, set-the-bed-on-fire kind of time.

Too bad this wasn't that life.

I exhaled sharply and turned to leave when a voice cut through the air, low and edged with something that wasn't quite boredom, but wasn't far from it either.

"You looking for real answers or just the kind that sound good on your podcast?"

I turned.

A man stood near the entrance of the bullpen, arms crossed over his chest. He had sandy brown hair cropped short and a shadow of scruff on his jaw. He looked like the kind of man who'd been on the force long enough to be tired of it but not long enough to stop caring entirely.

He was watching me. Really watching me.

And my instincts screamed: this is something.

I took a slow step forward. "That depends," I said. "You got real answers?"

The corner of his mouth curved slightly, but there was no humor in it. "I might."

"Then I'm listening."

He flicked a glance at the deputy behind the desk—who was very clearly pretending not to listen—before jerking his head toward the hallway.

"Walk with me."

I didn't hesitate.

Falling into step beside him, I kept my pace even, my expression neutral. The hallway was quieter here, the distant sound of ringing phones and low conversations fading as we moved toward the back of the station.

“You got a name?” I asked, cutting him a sideways glance.

The man smirked, a lazy tilt of his mouth that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Deputy Eric Norton.”

He was tall, lean but solid, with a sharp jawline and the kind of weariness that came from years of seeing too much. His uniform was slightly rumpled, sleeves rolled up to reveal forearms corded with muscle.

I filed away the details. Everything about him said cop—the posture, the walk, the sharp, assessing way he glanced at the corners of the room. But there was something else, too. Something that felt ... off.

“And you are?” he asked, giving me that same assessing look.

“Claire Dixon.”

Recognition flickered in his gaze. “The Unseen.”

I lifted a brow. “You listen?”

He shrugged. “I like the cases. Not always the commentary.”

I smirked. “That’s fair. But something tells me you’re not pulling me aside to critique my hosting style.”

His smirk widened, but it was brief. The seriousness settled back in just as quickly. “No, I’m not.”

I waited, pulse picking up slightly.

We moved past rows of desks, officers murmuring into radios, paperwork spread across cluttered surfaces. The sheriff's office had that well-worn feel of a place where the people were always tired.

We reached a quieter hallway, and the cop finally stopped, leaning against the wall.

"I don't like bullshit," he said, watching me carefully. "And that's all I've been fed since that damn pier exploded."

I crossed my arms. "Meaning?"

"Meaning," he said slowly, "there's a reason this department is keeping its mouth shut. A reason people don't ask questions." He exhaled sharply. "But I heard something the other night. Something different."

The air seemed to still.

I kept my face neutral, my pulse spiking. "And what was that?"

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He studied me for a long moment, then finally?—

“Someone mentioned Department 77.”

The words hit like a gunshot.

I barely stopped myself from reacting, from shifting too quickly, from letting the shock show on my face.

The deputy shook his head. “Don’t know who said it. Just overheard it at a bar. But it sure as hell sounded like something worth digging into.”

I let out a slow breath, forcing myself to stay cool.

“And what do you think?” I asked, tilting my head. “About the Danes?”

His jaw tightened. “I think people in this city know exactly who runs things.”

Cryptic as hell.

His gaze flicked over me, slow and assessing, lingering just long enough to make a point. “And I think you should be careful, ma’am.”

I arched a brow. “Is that a threat, Deputy Norton?”

He let out a low chuckle, shaking his head. “No, ma’am. Just an observation. The Danes have a reputation—for a lot of things. Business. Power. Loyalty.” His lips

quirked, but his eyes stayed sharp. “And women.”

That got my attention.

He shrugged, all casual-like, but there was a warning in his tone. “Men like that? They take what they want. If you’re into that kind of thing, well ...” He gave me a knowing look, his gaze dragging from my eyes to my mouth, then lower, over the tailored blouse that fit just a little too well and the curve-hugging jeans I’d thrown on that morning. “Let’s just say you wouldn’t be the first woman who’s gotten caught up in their world.”

Heat pricked at my skin, but I refused to squirm.

He wasn’t wrong about one thing—I stood out here. Back in New York, my outfit was nothing. Just another woman in business-casual with a little edge. But in Charleston, where pastel sundresses and breezy linen ruled, I might as well have been wearing a sign that said not from around here.

And Marcus?

My pulse kicked up against my will.

I swallowed, pushing the thought away before it could sink its teeth in.

Norton’s eyes were still on me, sharp and amused, like he knew exactly where my mind had gone.

I squared my shoulders. “I can handle myself.”

He smirked. “Yeah, I get that.” Then he leaned in, lowering his voice enough to make it personal. “Just make sure you’re the one doing the handling. Because men like the

Danes? They don't play fair."

I already knew that. I just wasn't sure if I wanted them to.

But it didn't matter.

Because I had what I needed.

I had a name.

And now? Now I was about to really stir up the hornet's nest.

8

MARCUS

Isat in my Bugatti, parked off King Street, the engine idling low. How I loved that hum. Morning sun cut through the windshield, glinting off my phone as it buzzed—Norton's name on the screen. I'd been waiting for this. I hit answer and kept it short.

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“Yeah?”

“Crumb’s fed,” Eric Norton said, voice rough like always. He was an old pal from high school. “Didn’t take her long to get here.”

I leaned back, my jaw tight. “She bite you?”

“She tried. You picked another viper, Marcus.”

I smirked, quick and sharp. “You might be right.”

Norton chuckled—low, dry. “Still got that lacrosse hustle, Dane. Always knew how to set a play.”

“High school was a long damn time ago,” I said. “You still slow as shit off the line?”

“Faster than you, asshole.” He paused, tone shifting. “This 77 thing real?”

I didn’t answer right away. My gut hummed, that same old hum. “Maybe. You in if it is?”

“Sheriff’s office suits me for now,” he said. “But Dominion’s got a pull. Might work for you one day—better pay, better toys.”

“Door’s open,” I said. “Keep me posted.”

“Will do.” Click.

I pocketed the phone and stared out at Charleston—tourists shuffling, locals sipping coffee like nothing was burning. Norton and I went back. We'd been lacrosse champs at Sullivan's Island High. He'd been a brick wall on defense. I'd been the fast bastard scoring goals. I'd trusted him then, and I trusted him now. If Claire took the bait, we'd know soon.

I drove back to Dominion Hall, my tires chewing pavement and my mind chewing more. The gates clanged shut behind me, iron teeth locking tight.

I hit the ops room where monitors were humming. Ryker was there, pacing like a caged beast. He saw me, then stopped cold—six-four of Dane rage squared up.

“Got a call,” he said, his voice low and lethal. “Senator Holloway. Says intel's sniffing—CIA, NSA, the whole alphabet soup.”

I didn't flinch. “Sniffing what?”

“Us,” he snapped. “Dominion. Pier explosion's got traction. There are whispers it's terrorism.”

My gut clenched. “That's bullshit.”

“Is it?” His eyes burned, black and unyielding. “Feds are coming to town, Marcus. Terrorism label brings heat—eyes on us, our contracts, our dirt.”

I crossed my arms and held his stare. “We're clean.”

“Clean don't mean shit in a witch hunt,” he said. “Washington's looking for scapegoats. The senator's twitchy. Our contacts up there want assurances we're not a liability.”

“We’ve handled heat before,” I said. “They need us. Always have.”

“Not heat like this.” He stepped closer, his voice dropping. “The last thing we need is feds in our backyard. We’re the ones who watch. Not them.”

I nodded, short and tight. “I hear you.”

He didn’t back off. “Then what’s the play? Claire’s still out there, digging and talking. You said you’d handle it.”

“I am,” I said, my voice steel. “I dropped her a crumb—Department 77.”

Ryker’s face went hard, his jaw locked and his eyes blazing. “You fucking what?”

I didn’t move. “She’s got the lead now. Thinks she’s hunting it solo.”

He exploded—two strides, chest in my face. “Are you out of your goddamn mind? You fed her Department 77? You’ve lost your fucking mind.”

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I held my ground and didn't blink. "She's good, Ryker. Knows people, digs where we can't. She'll find them."

"Or bury us!" His fist slammed the table. Steel rang. "You're playing with fire—her mic, her ears—she'll link it back!"

"She won't," I said, cold, steady. "I'm steering her, blind. She'll never know it's us."

He grabbed my shirt and yanked me close, his breath hot. "You're betting our necks on a reporter? After I said to make her gone?"

I shoved him back, hard and fast. "Back off, Ryker. She's a tool—the sharpest one we've got, for now. Give me time."

He didn't swing. He wanted to, his fist clenched white. "And if she talks? If she ties us to this mess—terrorism, feds, all of it?"

"She won't," I said again. "I've got her locked—feeds, tails, every move. If she steps wrong, I end it."

He glared, black ice cutting deep. "You're too close, Marcus. I saw her in the lobby. Saw you look."

Heat hit low. Claire flashed again, naked, pinned. I buried it. "Doesn't change shit. She's a means. Family first."

"Short leash," he growled, stepping back. "All of us—her, you, this plan. One fuckup,

and we're done."

I nodded. "Understood."

He didn't buy it, though. I saw it in his jaw, his stance. "What's your next move? She's got Department 77—now what?"

I smiled—slow, sharp, with a predator's edge. "I'm inviting her to a masquerade ball."

Ryker froze, staring like I'd lost it. "A what?"

"A masquerade," I said, my grin widening. "Charleston's elite at a big event. Dominion's hosting. We open the doors wide open. She'll bite at a chance to poke, prod, and get close."

He didn't blink. "You're dangling her in our house? With feds circling?"

"She'll dig there—quiet, controlled," I said. "I'll watch her, steer her, then use her to smoke out 77. Maybe offer to help. She's too good to waste."

"Too good?" His voice dropped. "Or too hot?"

I smirked. I couldn't help it. "Both."

He lunged, his fist cocked, his eyes wild. I sidestepped fast, then caught his arm and twisted it back. "Easy, brother."

He yanked free, breathing hard. "You're playing a game. If it ends bad, it's on you."

"I know," I said, my voice steel. "Trust me. I've got this."

He didn't trust me. I saw it in his glare and his fists. "Short leash," he said again. "One slip, Marcus—one—and I bury her myself."

He turned and stormed out. The door slammed, echo ringing. I stood there, my jaw tight, my pulse steady.

Ryker was right—the heat was rising. Senator Holloway, intel sniffing, and terrorism whispers were all bad for Dominion Defense Corporation. Not to mention, feds being in town flipped the script. We watched, not them. We were used to it. We always had eyes out, not in. Now Claire had Department 77, and I'd dropped it right in her lap.

My plan was risky as hell—feds, Ryker, her mic. One wrong move, and we'd bleed.

I pictured her again—the pier, the lobby, that blouse tight, jeans hugging. The vision of her naked flashed in my mind—raw, mine, legs spread on that steel table. Heat hit him. I wanted her pinned, breaking, and moaning. The thought thrilled me—her hunting, me watching, danger close.

Then that kick hit again. I wouldn't let her burn. My gut snarled. Keep her safe, asshole. Why? Fuck if I knew.

I left the ops room, then drove back to The Battery Club. I needed air and space. The valet took the Bugatti—same kid, same stare. Inside—dark wood, leather, bourbon hum.

I sat at the bar on the same corner stool, the exit clear. "Whiskey," I told the bartender. He poured, quick and silent.

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I pulled my earbud and hit The Unseen—the Queenscase again. “Truth doesn’t hide,” she said, voice cutting me open. She was too good. Too damn hot.

The plan was locked—a masquerade ball on Dominion’s turf. I’d invite her. Would slip a note under her door, cryptic and tempting. She’d come. She couldn’t resist. Masks, shadows, elite chatter—she’d dig, I’d steer. Department 77 would show. My gut said it. I’d watch her every move.

Ryker would hate it. She’d be too close, too wild. But I didn’t care—family first, always. Claire was the key. She was sharp, dangerous, and she was mine to wield.

The whiskey burned, grounding me. I saw her naked again. I wanted her bad. Wanted her safe, too. It was an impossible mess.

I’d use her to end this. Dominion standing. Feds blind. Department 77 dead.

Fuck, I was deep.

9

CLAIRE

Charleston was a city that breathed in secrets and exhaled silence.

By midday, the sun was already relentless, beating down on the streets like it had a personal vendetta. I was following a lead, or at least, what might have been one.

Deputy Norton had thrown me a name—Department 77—and even though I had no idea if it was real, I could feel it was something. I didn't believe in gut instincts so much as experience, and experience told me that when someone tossed out a phrase like that in a town where people barely even admitted the Danes existed, it meant something.

So I went where information tended to loosen.

Bars were where people talked, even before dark. This wasn't New York, where a dive would still be dead at this hour—Charleston was slower, lazier, and people didn't wait for the clock to hit five before they started pouring bourbon.

I'd found a small, shadowed place just off a sidestreet—a bar that wasn't really open, but also not closed—and slid onto a stool, watching. Listening.

A female bartender was wiping down the counter, giving me a slow, curious glance. A man in the back corner nursed a glass of whiskey, muttering into his phone. Two others sat at a table by the window, speaking too low for me to catch.

My fingers drummed lightly against the polished wood as I let my eyes sweep the room. It wasn't much—dimly lit, smelled faintly of alcohol and fried food, the kind of place where conversations drifted low and private.

Exactly the kind of place I needed.

I'd learned a long time ago that bars were where the best information lived. The real information. Police stations had their walls, their rules, their chains of command. People in high-rises had too much to lose to spill secrets. But bars?

Bars were where the cracks showed.

I'd once spent two weeks practically living in a dive bar in Queens while investigating a missing girl—listening, watching, and waiting for the one wrong word that would send the whole case unraveling. It had worked. One guy got too drunk, let something slip about a jacket found in a dumpster, and boom—I had my story.

This was no different.

The Danes weren't just billionaires with military backgrounds. They were something bigger. Something woven into the city itself, and people didn't just not talk about them. They avoided it. And when people avoided something that hard? It meant there was something worth knowing.

And just like that, my luck ran out.

Marcus Dane.

I didn't even need to turn my head to feel him enter. The air shifted, a ripple of tension moving through the space as he stepped inside, moving toward me with the kind of slow, deliberate gait that said he knew he had my attention before I even gave it to him.

Fuck.

"Jesus," I muttered, not bothering to mask my irritation. "Do you just materialize out of nowhere?"

"Sometimes," he said easily, stepping close. Too close.

One second, I had space. The next, I had him.

Marcus Dane didn't just walk into a room—he took it over. And right now, he was

taking over me.

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He smelled dark and masculine. He'd ditched the button-down from last night, trading it for a black Henley. The fabric clung to his torso, outlining every sculpted line, every muscle, making it impossible not to look. Not to imagine what he'd feel like pressed against me, what that body could do if he wasn't just toying with me but taking.

And those jeans—dark-washed, low on his hips, worn just enough to hint at the kind of man who knew how to move. Knew how to handle himself. Knew how to handle a woman.

Heat moved deep in my belly, unwanted but undeniable. My pulse kicked up, breath hitching slightly before I forced it even. I hated him. I wanted to shove him back. But my body? My body was a traitor.

His body pressed in just enough to trap me between the bar and him. One arm braced on the counter, the other landing lightly against my hip, barely touching—just enough contact to remind me he could hold me there if he wanted to.

Heat spiked in my blood. Not just from irritation.

“Walk with me.” His voice was low, smooth.

“I haven't ordered a drink yet,” I tried.

He shrugged, and even that was somehow sexy.

I should have hesitated. Should have told him to fuck right off.

I didn't.

I slid off the stool, moving past him—but he caught me by the elbow, guiding me toward the exit. The touch was brief, but deliberate.

Possessive.

I stopped just beyond the threshold, yanking my arm free. “You always grab women like that, or is it just me?”

Marcus smirked. “Depends. You always let men you hate touch you like that?”

God, I wanted to wipe that grin right off his face.

Before I could fire back, his hand moved to my hip again, fingertips pressing enough to make me feel the heat of him through my jeans. He leaned in, his breath ghosting against my cheek, his voice dropping to something dark and edged with challenge.

“Or would you rather I kiss you instead?”

My stomach clenched, heat licking up my spine. It wasn't a question. Not really. It was a warning. A threat wrapped in temptation, because we both knew if I so much as faltered—if my breath caught, if my eyes flicked to his mouth—he'd do it.

I wasn't sure I'd stop him.

Gathering all the strength I could muster, I folded my arms, tilting my head. “What do you want, Dane?”

His gaze flicked down my body, slow and assessing.

The worst part?

I liked the way he looked at me.

Marcus took a step closer, invading my space all over again.

“I hear you’ve been making friends,” he murmured.

“Who, Norton?” I shrugged. “He approached me.”

His smirk deepened.

Asshole.

I hated him. I hated him.

And yet my body was reacting like I wanted him to press me back against the bricks, to tilt my chin up and drag his teeth along my jaw just to see how fast I’d come undone.

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I clenched my hands into fists at my sides. “You gonna tell me why you followed me, or do you just enjoy being a menace?”

“Why does it have to be one or the other?”

I exhaled sharply. “Marcus?—”

He reached into his pocket, pulled out something, and held it up between two fingers. A thick ivory card. Black ink.

My name written across the front in bold, looping script.

I snatched it from his grasp, scanning the text.

The words were simple.

Dominion Defense Corporation invites you to The Charleston Masquerade.

I blinked. Then looked up at him. “A ball?”

Marcus grinned. “I was going to slip this under your door at the hotel, but here you are instead.” His gaze flicked over me, slow and knowing. “Saves me the trouble.”

I scoffed, waving the card in the air. “This isn’t an invite. This is bait.”

His grin widened. “Smart girl.”

My heart pounded. Oh, this was dangerous.

A masquerade. An elite event, hosted by the Danes. It was exactly the kind of access I needed—an open door straight into their world. A chance to get close. To listen.

But it was also his world.

I exhaled, tilting my head, watching him. “And let me guess—you’ll be there?”

Marcus stepped in, closing the last of the space between us. He leaned down slightly, his lips brushing just past my ear.

“Better believe it,” he murmured.

A full-body shiver rolled through me.

He took a step back, like he was about to walk away.

I should have let him. I should have turned and left, should have gone back into the bar, should have sat down and ordered a drink and focused on my damn job.

Instead—

“Wait.”

The word slipped out before I could stop it, too sharp, too quick.

Marcus stilled. Then, slowly, deliberately, he turned back, his head tilting slightly as his gaze flicked over me, knowing. “Couldn’t resist, could you?”

I didn’t even know what I was about to say. Why I had stopped him.

Except that my thoughts were spinning—wild, reckless, dangerous thoughts.

The alley was dim, the bar's glow flickering just beyond us, and there was a door to my left leading to a hallway. Bathrooms. A quiet space. A place where no one would see.

Jesus.

I barely had time to shove the thought away before Marcus's smirk deepened, like he could see it written all over my face.

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“So you do want me to kiss you.”

Before I could fire back—before I could think—he was on me.

One hand buried in my hair, tilting my face up. The other wrapped around my waist, pulling me flush against him. His mouth crushed against mine, hot and demanding, a kiss that wasn't sweet or tentative—it was possession, pure and undeniable.

I gasped, and he took full advantage, his tongue sweeping against mine, coaxing, teasing, taking.

Heat flooded my veins, my body arching against his, my fingers curling into the front of his Henley before I could stop myself.

I hated him.

But God, I wanted him.

The world blurred. The sounds of the street, the low murmur of the bar, the passing hum of Charleston life—it all faded.

There was only him.

Marcus kissed like he fought. Like he won.

I wasn't sure if I wanted to push him away or pull him closer.

Apparently, I wasn't the only one caught off guard, because out of the corner of my mind, I heard something—someone passing by.

A voice, half-laughing, half-shocked. "Damn. Get a room."

Marcus smirked against my lips. "Tempting."

Reality snapped back like a whip.

I yanked away, breathless, pulse roaring in my ears.

His grip loosened—barely. But his gaze? That stayed locked on me, dark and knowing, like he'd just discovered my biggest secret.

And maybe he had.

I wiped the back of my hand across my lips, glaring up at him. "You're such an ass."

Marcus chuckled, low and rough. "And yet, you still stopped me from leaving."

I hated how smug he sounded. Hated how much my body still buzzed from his touch.

He took a step back, adjusting his shirt like he hadn't just stolen my breath. "See you at the ball."

Then he was gone, leaving me dangerously, stupidly tempted to find out just how much more trouble Marcus Dane could be.

I couldn't get that kiss out of my head.

Claire's mouth—hot, fierce, all New York bite—had hit me like a slug to the chest. One second, she was glaring at me like she wanted to gut me, the next she was melting under my hands, gasping into me like she was starved for it.

I'd meant to mess with her, to throw her off balance, but fuck, I was the one still tasting her on my lips, still feeling that jolt of heat when her fingers dug into my shirt. She was too intoxicating. Too damn good. I'd wanted to drag her into that alley, pin her against the bricks, and see how loud I could make her scream my name.

But I couldn't lose my edge. Not now. Not with her.

She was a tool—sharp, dangerous, and built to cut through the bullshit I couldn't reach. Department 77 was out there, an apparition I'd been chasing blind, and Claire was the bloodhound I need to flush them out.

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That didn't mean I couldn't have some fun first. Toy with her a little more. Push her buttons, watch hersquirm, then spring the trap hard enough to send her running back to New York City with her tail between her legs. She was too close—too good—and I needed her gone before she unraveled us. But I'd be damned if I didn't enjoy the game while it lasted.

I was parked off King Street again, Bugatti purring low, the hum vibrating through my bones. My phone was in my hand, and I was grinning—sharp, predatory—as I texted the concierge at The Palmetto Rose. Three dresses. High-end, custom shit—tens of thousands a pop—were headed straight to Claire's room. I had them picked out: one was sleek and black, elegant as hell, all understated power; another was deep red, bold and sexy, with a slit that'd show off those legs she's got no business hiding; and the third—the one I was betting on—was a silver number, barely there, cut low and tight, dripping with risk. She'd hate me for it. She'd love it, too. I could see her now—gray eyes narrowing, lips twitching, that stubborn streak kicking in as she picks the risqué one just to spite me.

God, I hope she does.

I shot off another text, this one to the florist—some overpriced boutique that caters to Charleston's old money. A handwritten note to go with the dresses: "I can't wait to see which one you choose." Simple. Personal. Just enough to crawl under her skin and make her wonder how far I'm willing to push this. She'll freak—oh, she'll definitely freak—and I'll be sipping whiskey somewhere, picturing her pacing that suite, cursing my name. Maybe she'll even try it on, that silver fabric clinging to her curves, her breath shallow as she catches herself in the mirror.

Fuck, I'd kill to see that.

I leaned back, shoving down the heat spiking low. She was a job—a threat to Dominion, a key to Department 77. That was it.

But that kiss kept clawing at me, her taste lingering like a drug I didn't mean to try. I've got to be careful. Can't let her sink those hooks too deep. I'm the one in control here. She doesn't get to flip the script. Not yet.

I fired up the engine and peeled out toward Dominion Hall. Tires squealed, wind ripped past, and Charleston blurred—pastel townhouses, smoking gas lanterns, tourists gawking like they were in a damn painting. The masquerade was tomorrow night, and we were cutting it close with the invites. Didn't matter. Money did wonders. The elite of this city—old money, new money, dirty money—would drop everything when they saw Dominion Defense Corporation on that thick ivory stock. The Danes didn't open our doors often. Hell, most of these assholes had spent years trying to peek inside our fortress, whispering about the seven brothers who ran half the shadows in this town. They would come running—masks on, egos out—because missing this wasn't an option.

I grinned. Claire would be there too, that invite burning a hole in her hand. She wouldn't resist—couldn't. A chance to dig into our world, poke at our secrets, all while I was steering her right where I wanted her. She'd think she was hunting. I'd know she was prey.

The gates loomed ahead—iron, spiked, cold teeth. I rolled through and parked out front. Dominion Hall stared back. It was more bunker than mansion, built to take a hit and keep standing. Sullivan's Island flashed in my head, as it often did—white sand, Dad's laugh, a life before this concrete cage swallowed us whole. I'd trade it all for one more day there. But this was ours now. Me and my six brothers, holding the line.

Inside, the air was cool and sharp, marble gleaming under that chandelier that looked ready to cut you if you stared too long. I headed for the ops room. Ryker was there, hunched over a laptop, his muscular frame coiled like he was about to snap. Atlas stood in the corner, arms crossed, watching me with that quiet, piercing stare he had. Charlie paced—always moving, always ready to hit something.

“Invites are going out,” I said, dropping into a chair, legs stretched. “Tomorrow night. Full house.”

Ryker didn’t look up. “Feds are still sniffing. Senator Holloway called again. Says intel’s got eyes on Charleston. Terrorism angle’s sticking.”

“Bullshit,” I said, my voice flat. “They’ve got nothing.”

“They don’t need proof,” he snapped, finally meeting my eyes. “They need a target. We’re it unless you lock this down.”

“I’m on it,” I said, leaning forward, my elbows on the table. “Claire’s got Department 77 now. She’s chasing it. Masquerade’s the play—she’ll dig there, I’ll watch. She’s useful.”

Atlas cut in, his voice low and steady. “She’s a loose end. Useful doesn’t mean safe.”

“She’s not safe,” I said, grinning sharply. “That’s why I’m having fun with her first.”

Charlie stopped pacing, smirking. “What’d you do now?”

“Sent her dresses,” I said, leaning back, my arms behind my head. “Three of ‘em—pricey as hell. One’s so thin you could see through it in the right light. Bet she picks that one just to fuck with me.”

Charlie laughed, short and rough. “You’re an asshole.”

“Yep.” I shrugged. “Keeps her off balance. She’ll show tomorrow—pissed, hot, and digging. I’ll steer her right into 77.”

Ryker wasn’t laughing. “And if she doesn’t?”

“She will,” I said.

He glared. “You’re enjoying this too much.”

“Maybe,” I said, my smirk widening. “Doesn’t change the plan.”

Atlas tilted his head, studying me. “What’s the endgame? She finds 77. What then?”

“Then we smoke ‘em out,” I said, tapping the table. “She’s the bait, she just doesn’t know it. They show, and we hit. Feds back off. Dominion stands.”

“Risky,” Atlas said, but there was a glint in his eye, like he was warming to it.

“It’s worth it,” I countered. “We’ve been chasing shadows for weeks. Claire’s the edge we need.”

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Ryker leaned in, his voice low and lethal. “And if Department 77’s already here? Watching us while you’re playing dress-up with your reporter?”

I didn’t flinch. “Then we’re ready. This place is a fortress. Let ‘em try.”

He didn’t buy it. I saw it in his jaw. “Short leash, Marcus. One slip, and I’m not cleaning up your mess.”

“Understood,” I said, holding his stare.

He turned back to the laptop, muttering something I didn’t catch. Charlie was already back to pacing, Atlas was plotting in that quiet way of his, and I was left with the hum of the monitors and the weight of tomorrow night. Masks, shadows, elite chatter. Claire in that silver dress, digging where I pointed her. Department 77 might show. My gut said they would. I’d be ready—watching her, watching them, every move locked down.

I left the ops room and headed for my car. I needed more air. The masquerade was set—caterers, security, the works—all arranged in a day because that’s how we rolled. Money, money, money. Charleston’s elite would swarm, desperate for a peek at Dominion Hall, and Claire would be right in the thick of it, thinking she was the hunter. I’d let her run, let her feel the thrill, then spring the trap. She’d bolt for New York City, story half-baked, and we’d be clear.

I slid into the Bugatti, my door slamming shut, and that was when I saw it—an envelope on the passenger seat. It was thick and unmarked, just sitting there like it belonged. My gut clenched—that same hum I’d been ignoring too long. I grabbed it,

tore it open, and seven photos spilled out.

Fuck.

Me—grainy, recent, caught mid-stride outside The Battery Club. Ryker—outside Dominion Hall, eyes sharp, Izzy at his side. Atlas—leaving a meeting downtown, posture tight. Charlie—on a run, mid-step, sweat gleaming. Three more—each brother, each one a fresh shot, taken in the last week. No note, no name, just the pictures staring back at me like a middle finger from the dark.

Department 77.

They weren't just ahead—they were fucking here. Ten steps didn't cover it—they had us pinned, scoped, and tracked like prey. My pulse kicked up. It wasn't fear. It was anger, hot and sharp. I slammed a fist into the steering wheel. The horn blared, echoing off the gates. How the hell had they gotten this close? Cameras, tails, my own damn eyes—and they'd slipped through, left this right under my nose.

I shoved the photos back in the envelope, then shoved the envelope into the glovebox. I fired up the engine, peeling out toward The Battery Club. I needed a drink. Needed to think. Claire's dresses, her kiss, the masquerade—all of it was still in play, but this changed shit. Department 77 wasn't just a ghost. They were a blade, and it was already at our throats.

I hit the bar—same corner stool, same whiskey order. The bartender poured, quick and silent, and I slugged it back, the burn grounding me. Claire was in my head—silver dress, gray eyes daring me, that kiss I couldn't shake. I'd toy with her tomorrow—push her, pull her, watch her burn bright before I sent her running. But now it wasn't just about her. Department 77 was watching, waiting, and I had to figure out how to turn this trap around.

They thought they had us. They didn't know me.

I sipped slow, staring at the bar's grain. My plan shifted. The masquerade was still on, Claire was still bait, but now I was hunting, too. They'd show—my gut screamed it—and when they did, I'd be the one springing the trap.

Fuck, I was deep. And I wasn't letting go.

11

CLAIRE

The second Diego suggested flying down, I should have shot it down.

I should have reminded him that this wasn't some luxury vacation or one of our drunken New York nights where we crashed an Upper East Side gala just for the free champagne. But the moment I told him about the masquerade ball, he'd declared that I was absolutely not going without him.

"It's investigative journalism, Diego," I had argued, pacing my hotel suite, the invitation still clutched in my hand.

"It's a masquerade ball, Claire," he'd shot back. "And you're telling me Marcus Dane personally invited you? I'm coming."

I sighed, pinching the bridge of my nose. "And why, exactly?"

"To protect you from yourself," he said, dead serious. "And to see you in a ballgown. And maybe to make your military billionaire stalker seethe with jealousy, just for fun."

I had groaned but relented, mostly because I knew Diego well enough to know there was no stopping him. And, if I was being honest with myself, having an extra set of eyes on me at that party wasn't the worst idea.

Which was how I ended up at the airport the next morning, waiting for him to strut through the arrivals gate in his signature too-expensive sunglasses and perfectly tailored linen blazer, looking ready to conquer Charleston.

When he spotted me, he spread his arms wide. "Ah, there she is. My reckless, slightly self-destructive best friend. You look stressed. It's hot. I hate it."

Diego Gil—my best friend, my producer, and the only person on Earth who could keep up with me—lowered his sunglasses just enough to give me a once-over. "And you, oh fearless leader of The Unseen, look like a woman knee-deep in a bad decision." His lips curled. "Tell me it's about a case and not the ridiculously sexy billionaire breathing down your neck."

I rolled my eyes as he pulled me into a quick but firm hug, the familiar scent of his expensive cologne wrapping around me. "Welcome to the South."

He pulled back, eyes sweeping over me. "You need a drink. But first, tell me everything. And I mean everything."

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I sighed, linking my arm through his as we walked toward my rental car. I'd finally caved and rented one—looked like I'd be here a while, and relying on Ubers for everything was getting old fast.

“Buckle up,” I muttered. “It’s a lot.”

By the time we made it back to The Palmetto Rose, Diego was fully briefed, and his mood had shifted from playful to something sharper.

That was, until we stepped inside the hotel.

Diego came to a full stop in the lobby as he took in the grand chandeliers, the polished marble floors, and the wrought-iron balconies overlooking the courtyard. “Okay,” he said, nodding approvingly. “I take back what I said about the South. If this is what it’s serving, I’m intrigued.”

I smirked. “Charleston growing on you already?”

He scoffed, dramatically adjusting the cuff of his linen blazer. “Let’s not get carried away. I’m still personally offended by the humidity and the complete lack of a decent espresso bar within walking distance. But this—” he gestured around, “—this I can work with.”

I shook my head, dragging him toward the elevator. “Your suite’s down the hall from mine. Don’t get too comfortable.”

“Oh, I fully intend to get comfortable,” he said as the elevator doors slid open. “A

king-sized bed? A clawfoot tub? Southern hospitality that includes someone calling me ‘sugar’ before noon? Claire, I may never leave.”

I rolled my eyes, stepping inside with him. “Just try not to fall in love with the place before we get out of here.”

He sighed, dramatically placing a hand over his chest. “Impossible. I already feel like I belong in some steamy Southern gothic drama where I spend my days sipping mint juleps and solving rich people’s scandals.”

I side-eyed him. “That’s literally what we’re doing.”

“So let me get this straight,” he said later, sprawling across the tufted chaise lounge in my suite. “The Dane brothers basically run this town like somekind of sexy Southern mafia, the sheriff is firmly in their pocket, you’re chasing a lead on a secret organization that may or may not exist, and Marcus Dane is flirting with you like he wants to devour you whole.” He removed his sunglasses dramatically. “Do you hear yourself?”

I groaned, rubbing my temples. “I know how it sounds, but it’s real. All of it.”

“Oh, I believe you.” His lips formed a slow, knowing smirk. “But let’s focus on the most pressing matter—Marcus fucking Dane.”

I exhaled sharply. “We’re not talking about that.”

“Oh, we are,” he said, sitting up and fixing me with that don’t bullshit me stare. “You let him kiss you?”

I crossed my arms. “I didn’t let him do anything.”

He snorted. “Uh-huh. And yet, he did. And you—” he pointed at me, “—are currently blushing like a virgin heroine in a smutty novel. Which you are not.”

“I hate you.”

“No, you love me. And you’re into him.”

“I’m not.”

He raised a perfectly groomed brow. “Claire.”

I opened my mouth, ready to argue, but nothing came out. Because the truth was, I had let Marcus kiss me. And not just that—I had kissed him back. And I had spent half the night replaying it in my head, wondering what would’ve happened if we hadn’t been interrupted.

Diego grinned like he could see right through me. “God, I cannot wait for this ball.”

I sighed, flopping onto the bed. “You realize we’re actually investigating a potentially dangerous conspiracy, right?”

He waved a dismissive hand. “Yes, yes, Department 77 and all that. We’ll dig, we’ll investigate, we’ll be our usual brilliant selves. But we’re also going to make your very dangerous man incredibly jealous.”

I groaned. “He’s not my man.”

Diego smirked. “Tell that to his possessive ass when he sees me on your arm.”

Diego could say things like that because, quite frankly, he could pull it off. He was the kind of man people noticed—tall, effortlessly put together, with sharp cheekbones

and warm brown skin that hinted at his Spanish heritage. His dark hair was always perfectly styled, and his wardrobe—no matter the occasion—looked straight off a runway. He had charm in spades, could talk his way into (and out of) anything, and had the kind of easy confidence that made people assume things about us when we were together.

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More than once, people had mistaken him for my boyfriend. He was obviously gay—once you looked past the devastating good looks and the effortless, masculine charm. But at first glance? Especially in places like Charleston, where people still clung to certain expectations? They saw a gorgeous man at my side and drew their own conclusions.

Diego never bothered to correct them right away. He loved playing into it, especially when it annoyed someone.

I groaned, covering my face with my hands. “Diego, focus.”

“Oh, I am focused,” he said, plucking the invitation off the nightstand and twirling it between his fingers. “But before we dive into the grand conspiracy portion of our program, let’s address the absolute most important detail of this masquerade—what the hell are you wearing?”

I hesitated. Then, begrudgingly, I muttered, “Marcus sent me dresses.”

Silence.

Then—

“Excuse me?” Diego sat up so fast he nearly toppled off the chaise. “Marcus Dane personally sent you dresses?”

I sighed, kicking off my heels. “Yes.”

“As in, hand-selected ballgowns for you?” His voice climbed an octave. “Did they come with a note? Roses? An ominous yet sexy threat?”

I gestured toward the closet, where the three garment bags hung neatly inside. “They’re in there.”

Diego was off the sofa in an instant, practically sprinting across the room. “Claire, I swear to God, if one of these is red?—”

He unzipped the first bag. Paused. Let out a soft gasp.

I knew exactly which one he was looking at.

“Oh.Oh.”

I flopped onto the bed, staring at the ceiling. “Which one?”

“You know which one.” His voice was reverent. “The silver one. Claire, it’s barely legal. It’s obscene. It’s—” He turned, eyes wide with delighted horror. “It’s the one you have to wear.”

I groaned into my pillow.

Diego yanked the dress free of its bag, holding it up. “This is a power move. He wants you in this because he wants to watch you walk into that ball wearing something that’ll make every man in the room want to rip it off you.” He smirked. “Including him.”

I pushed myself up, rubbing my temples. “Or he just wants to fuck with me.”

He shot me a look. “Honey.”

I sighed, glancing at the dress. He wasn't wrong. The thing was pure sin—silver, sleek, clinging to curves I hadn't even realized I wanted to show off. It was bold. Daring. The kind of dress that whispered I know exactly what I'm doing.

Which meant wearing it was either the worst idea I'd ever had or the best.

“Try it on,” Diego said, waggling his brows.

I hesitated. Then, with a muttered I hate you, I grabbed the dress and disappeared into the bathroom.

Two minutes later, I stepped out.

Diego sucked in a breath.

“Shut up,” I warned.

He did not shut up.

“Claire.” He clasped his hands together like he was about to cry. “If Marcus Dane doesn't lose his entire goddamn mind when he sees you in this, I will personally set fire to Dominion Hall.”

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I turned to the mirror, my breath catching slightly.

Damn.

The dress was obscene.

It clung to every inch of me, dipping low in the front, hugging my waist, falling like liquid metal over my hips. The slit was dangerous, slicing high up my thigh, a promise of scandal if I moved too fast. It was temptation stitched into fabric.

And Marcus Dane had picked it for me.

Heat licked up my spine.

Diego, sensing my weakness, grinned. “You have to wear it.”

I met his gaze in the mirror.

Yeah.

I did.

12

MARCUS

The night was alive with the buzz of Charleston’s elite spilling into Dominion Hall.

Guests arrived early—too early—like they were afraid to miss a single second of this rare crack in our armor. The best, brightest, and richest the city's got swarmed through the gates, all dolled up in masks and tuxes, dripping with old money and desperation to be seen.

I caught glimpses—senators with tight smiles, oil tycoons with cigars already lit, heiresses in gowns that cost more than most people's houses. Even the officer cadre from The Citadel strutted in, all crisp uniforms and polished brass, acting like they owned the place. I can't stand those pricks—too much ego, not enough scars. They talk war like it's a game they've mastered from textbooks.

Fucking clowns.

I lingered near the door, arms crossed, leaning against the cold stone of the foyer. The chandelier overhead glinted like a guillotine waiting to drop, casting sharp shadows over the crowd. I watched newcomers—tracked who was who, who was kissing whose ass—but mostly, I watched for her.

Claire Dixon.

She was the real prize tonight, the wild card in this rigged game. The trap was set, the bait was dangling, and I was itching to see how she played it.

That silver dress I'd sent her—fuck, I hoped she was wearing it. I wanted her walking in here, turning heads, knowing I picked it out just to mess with her.

The air shifted. Whispers rippled through the room, heads turning like a wave. I felt it before I saw her—a prickle down my spine, that hunter's instinct kicking in. Then she was there, stepping through the arched doorway, and goddamn, she didn't disappoint.

Claire was in the silver dress, and it was a fucking knockout punch.

The fabric clung to her like liquid metal, dipping low over her chest, hugging her waist, sliding over hips I'd been imagining under my hands since that kiss. The slit up her thigh flashed skin with every step—dangerous, deliberate, a dare to anyone dumb enough to look too long. Her blonde hair was swept up, a few strands loose, framing those gray eyes that cut through the room like a blade. A mask—black, simple, sharp—dangled from her fingers, not on yet, like she was too stubborn to play by the rules.

Everyone was staring, whispering behind gloved hands and crystal flutes. She blushed—actually blushed—and it was the first crack I'd seen in that New York steel.

She wasn't alone. Some handsome bastard was on her arm—tall, dark hair, sharp cheekbones, dressed in a linen suit that screamed money and confidence.

Diego Gil, her producer.

I'd done my homework. Read up on him the second I caught wind he was flying down. Gay, sharp as hell, and here to keep an eye on her. I could respect that. Hell, I might even like him for it.

I cut through the crowd, a straight line to them, ignoring the murmurs and the hands reaching for me. Claire's eyes locked on mine, narrowing just a fraction, like she was bracing for whatever I was about to throw. Diego was watching, too, head tilted, a smirk tugging at his lips. I stuck out my hand to him first—deliberate, pointed.

"Diego Gil," I said, voice low, grin sharp. "Marcus Dane. Pleasure."

His brows lifted, pleasantly surprised, and he took my hand, grip firm. "Well, I'll be. You've done your research."

"Always do," I said, letting go, glancing at Claire. She glared at me, lips pressed

tight, and I smiled wider. “Wouldn’t want to be rude to Claire’s plus-one.”

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“Charmed,” Diego said, voice smooth, eyes glinting like he was already sizing me up. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Only the good stuff, I hope.” I flicked my gaze to Claire again, catching the spark of irritation there.

She wasn’t happy I was playing nice with him instead of her. Good. I wasn’t here to make this easy.

A waiter glided by—black tie, tray gleaming—and I snagged three flutes of top-shelf champagne, handing one to Diego, then Claire. She took it with a cool nod, her fingers brushing mine just enough to send a jolt through me. That kiss flashed again—her mouth on mine, hot and fierce—and I shoved it down.

Not yet.

“Enjoying Charleston so far?” I asked Diego, keeping my tone casual, like I wasn’t plotting every move of this night.

He sipped the champagne, smirking over the rim. “It’s growing on me. Humidity’s a bitch, but the architecture? The intrigue? I could get used to it.”

“Stick around long enough, it’ll sink its teeth in,” I said, grinning. “How about a tour? Give you the lay of the land.”

Diego’s eyes lit up, but Claire cut in, voice sharp. “What about me?”

I turned to her, slow, deliberate, letting my gaze drag over that dress—those curves—before meeting her eyes. “You’ll get your turn. Patience.”

Her jaw tightened, but Diego laughed, clapping her on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, I’ll keep him in line.”

She shot him a look—half betrayal, half amusement—and I nodded toward the hall. “This way, Gil.”

We moved through the crowd, Diego keeping pace, his stride easy but his eyes sharp, taking it all in. The ops room was off-limits, obviously, but I showed him the bones of Dominion Hall—marble floors, high ceilings, the spiral stairs that could double as a sniper perch if you knew how to use ‘em. He was a good conversationalist—strategic, probing without pushing too hard. I liked him already. Guy had a brain and knew how to use it.

We hit the garage—wide, shadowed, lined with cars that cost more than most people’s lives. In the center, under a spotlight, sat our black viper, Obsidian—sleek, mean, all curves and menace. Diego stopped short, letting out a low whistle.

“Jesus,” he said, circling it. “What’s the story here?”

I leaned against the wall, arms crossed, playing coy. “Family mascot. Best not to have it out when the elite are here.”

He raised a brow, not buying it, but didn’t press. “Fascinating. Matches the vibe.”

“Does, doesn’t it?” I said, smirking. Obsidian was more than that—Dad’s find, a reminder from before everything went dark—but Diego doesn’t need to know that.

We finished the loop, back to the main hall, and there was Claire—surrounded. Men

circled her like sharks, some of Charleston's most influential assholes. Married assholes, mostly—senators, CEOs, a Citadel colonel with a smug grin I'd love to wipe off his face. She was holding court, that silver dress catching the light, her laugh sharp and controlled, but I could see the edge in her posture. She was working them, digging, and they were too dumb to notice.

I cut through the pack—straight line, no apologies—my shoulders brushing suits aside. They scattered, muttering, but I didn't give a shit. My eyes were on her—those curves, those eyes—and fuck, I couldn't tear them away.

Want clawed at me, hot and urgent. I wanted her. Right now, under me, on me, any way I could get her.

Easy, Dane. Take it easy.

"Enjoying yourself?" I asked, voice low, stepping close enough to smell her—something sharp and floral, cutting through the champagne haze.

She tilted her head, cool as hell. "It's a party. What's not to enjoy?"

"Thought you might like the grounds," I said, nodding toward the doors. "Fresh air. Quieter."

Her eyes narrowed, but she nodded and took my arm. "Lead the way."

We stepped outside, the night thick with humidity, gas lanterns flickering along the paths. The crowd was a distant hum now, and it was just us—her heels clicking on the stone, my steps silent beside her.

"Making progress on your investigation?" I asked, keeping it light, testing her.

She smirked, sidestepping. “Oh, you know. Digging where I can. Charleston’s full of secrets.”

“Like Department 77?” I tossed it out, casual, watching her face.

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Her step faltered—just a fraction—then she recovered, voice smooth. “Heard of it, have you?”

“Maybe,” I said, grinning. “You’re not the only one who listens.”

She laughed, soft and sharp. “Careful, Dane. Keep talking like that, I might think you’re helping me.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” I shot back, and she matched me, parrying like the mental warrior she was. Every word was a jab, a feint, and fuck, it was hot. Her mind was as sharp as her body was dangerous, and I was hooked—reeling her in, letting her pull me back.

We were sparring, circling, and I couldn’t resist. “What about that kiss?”

She stopped, turned, gray eyes locking on mine. “What kiss?”

“Don’t play dumb,” I said, stepping closer. “You remember.”

Her lips twitched, but her eyes—fuck, they were sparkling, inviting, wanting. “Must’ve slipped my mind.”

“Bullshit,” I murmured, voice rough. Heat slammed me—her on top, thighs gripping me, begging me to stick it in, grabbing my cock and forcing it inside her. I could see it, feel it, and I was two seconds from losing it.

She didn’t back off. Just watched me, daring me, that blush from earlier gone,

replaced by something raw and reckless. I had to have her. Now.

We'd hit a secluded spot at the far corner of the grounds, concrete decking underfoot, trees blocking the party's glow. I grinned, tapped my foot twice, and a hidden hatch clicked open—soft, mechanical, a secret sliding free. Her eyes widened, just a flicker, but she didn't flinch.

“Real tour starts here,” I said, nodding at the dark stairs descending into the tunnel. “You in?”

There was a beat—hesitation in her gaze, a shadow of doubt—but then she nodded, silent for once, no smartass comeback. Just a tilt of her chin, like she was stepping into the fight she'd been chasing all along.

We descended, the hatch sealing shut behind us, and the air turned cool, tight, electric. It was just me and her now—Claire Dixon, silver dress and all, walking into my world. I had her right where I want her.

And fuck, I wasn't sure I was the one in control anymore.

13

CLAIRE

I should have said no.

I should have turned around and walked right back to the ballroom, back to the crowd, back to the safety of Diego's knowing smirk and the watchful eyes of Charleston's elite. But instead, I followed Marcus Dane down the hidden staircase, my heels clicking against cold stone, my pulse pounding in my throat.

The hatch sealed above us with a quiet thunk, locking us away from the world above.

A smart woman would have been nervous.

Following a man like Marcus Dane into the dark, alone, where no one could hear me scream? That was the kind of reckless decision that got women in trouble. The kind of mistake whispered about in true crime podcasts, the ones where people shook their heads and said she should have known better.

And maybe I should have.

Because everything about Marcus screamed danger.

Not just the kind that came from a man with power—though he had plenty of that. Not just the kind that came from the wealth he wielded like a blade, cutting through this city with quiet, lethal precision.

No, it was the danger in him. The way he watched me, like he was deciding whether to consume me whole. The way his presence was a slow, suffocating weight, pressing against my senses, leaving no room for anything but him.

I'd spent years chasing stories that led me into dark places. Uncovering the secrets that men in power wanted buried. I knew how to read a threat. How to recognize the moment when a situation tipped from risky to lethal.

And this?

This was something else entirely.

Because Marcus wasn't just a threat. He was a temptation. A force of nature. And if I wasn't careful, I wouldn't just lose control. I'd give it to him. Willingly.

That was the real danger.

Because I had spent my entire career staying three steps ahead, always the one pulling the strings, controlling the narrative, deciding how far I'd go. But Marcus Dane had a way of making me forget that. Making me wonder what it would be like to let go. To let him have me. To let him win. And that was why I needed to remind him who was really in charge.

I wasn't nervous.

I was burning.

The tunnel stretched before us, dimly lit with recessed lighting, the air cooler here, damp with old stone and secrets. The weight of Dominion Hall sat above us, a fortress on its foundations, and yet down here, under it, there was nothing but him. The heat of his body, the slow, measured way he moved, the way he kept just enough distance to remind me I was the one who had followed him into the dark.

But I wasn't blind.

I knew exactly what I was doing.

"Where does this lead?" I asked, my voice steady despite the sharp pull of tension between us.

Marcus glanced over his shoulder, his mouth curving like he already knew the answer would be irrelevant. "Does it matter?"

No.

Because we both knew this wasn't about the tunnels. Wasn't about Dominion. Wasn't about the investigation.

It was about the way his gaze slid down my body like a touch. The way my skin prickled under the weight of his attention. The way my traitorous body had been humming with anticipation since the moment I stepped into that ballroom.

I had told myself I was wearing this dress as a power move.

Marcus had known better.

He stopped suddenly, and I nearly collided with him. He turned, slow and deliberate, watching me in that way that made my stomach tighten, my thighs clench together.

"You followed me," he murmured.

"You led me," I countered.

A ghost of a smirk spread across his face. The kind that made my pulse throb in my wrists.

"I could take you apart right here," he said, voice low, dark. "I could drop to my knees and taste you until you forget your own damn name. Until you forget why you came here in the first place."

Jesus.

Heat shot through me, sharp and electric, pooling low in my belly. I clenched my hands into fists at my sides, nails biting into my palms, grounding me, because if I

wasn't careful, I would let him.

And that was the problem. Marcus Dane was used to getting what he wanted. Used to women unraveling for him.

While I might have been on the verge of unraveling, I wasn't going to let him pull the thread. Not like that.

I tilted my head, stepping closer, close enough that my chest brushed against his. "You want to be on your knees for me, Dane?" I murmured, lifting a brow. "That's an interesting offer."

His smirk faltered—just for a second—but I caught it. The flicker of something in his eyes.

Surprise.

Like he wasn't expecting me to turn the tables.

Like he wasn't used to a woman taking control.

I reached up, dragging my nails lightly down the front of his shirt, feeling the ridges of muscle beneath the soft fabric. "But see, here's the thing," I continued, voice soft but firm. "I don't lose control. I take it."

His breath hitched, just barely, but I heard it.

I felt it.

And fuck, I liked it.

I slid my hands lower, over the hard plane of his stomach, down to the thick belt at his waist. He was already hard. I could feel the strain of it, the proof of his arousal pressing against me.

“Claire,” he warned.

I ignored him.

With a slow, deliberate motion, I popped the button of his pants.

His whole body tensed.

I flicked my gaze up, holding his. “Something wrong, Dane?”

His jaw clenched, his breath coming rougher now. “You think you’re in control?”

I smirked, slow and deliberate. “I know I am.”

I’d seen it the second I walked into Dominion Hall—Marcus watching me like a predator tracking his prey, barely holding himself back. His eyes had darkened the moment he saw Diego on my arm, his jaw going tight, fists flexing like he was itching to drag me away.

And the best part? He'd already looked Diego up. Done his homework. Knew exactly who he was.

Knew he was gay.

Knew there was nothing between us.

And still, still, it had gotten to him.

But it wasn't just Diego.

It was when I was in that ballroom, surrounded by Charleston's most powerful men, working them the way I worked every source—sharp smiles, light touches, well-placed laughter. Marcus had returned from his little tour with Diego to find me right where I wanted him—watching me charm the room, watching me command the attention of men who were used to being the ones in charge.

And he hated it.

I'd seen the muscle in his jaw tick, the way his stance shifted as he cut through the crowd, shoving past men who had been leaning in just a little too closely, speaking a little too softly, their eyes lingering on the silver fabric clinging to my body.

Marcus didn't have to say a word. His presence alone was enough to scatter them, like a wolf stepping into a pack of strays.

And now, here we were.

I let that knowledge sink in, let it move through me like heat licking up my spine. It wasn't just about possession for Marcus—it was about me. Who I let close, who I let touch me, who I let inside my world.

And I'd made damn sure he knew Diego was closer than he was.

Marcus was wound tight, barely holding himself together. His hands fisted at his sides, his entire body thrumming with tension. Not just from anger. From want. From the knowledge that I'd made him need me. That I was the one making him unravel.

I dragged a single finger down the front of his shirt.

"Admit it, Dane." My voice was a slow, taunting whisper. "It got to you."

His nostrils flared. "You think that little game with your producer did anything?"

I tilted my head, my smile widening. "Then why are you breathing like that?"

Marcus exhaled sharply, like he was on the edge of breaking. His control, his restraint—it was all slipping.

And I was the one making it happen.

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That was what I wanted.

To watch him snap.

I sank to my knees in front of him, sliding the zipper down with a sharp, deliberate motion. His curse was low and rough as his head tipped back for just a second, the tendons in his throat tightening.

God, I loved this.

The power.

The way I could make a man like him come undone.

He was used to dominance. Used to taking.

But I was going to make him give.

I pulled him free, my breath catching slightly, because fuck, of course, he was perfect. Heavy and thick, his cock jumped in my palm, velvet-smooth and hot against my skin.

I glanced up.

Marcus was staring down at me, his pupils blown, his chest rising and falling like he was trying to hold on to the last shred of control he had left.

Too bad for him.

I wrapped my fingers around him, stroking once, slow and firm. “Relax,” I murmured. “I’m just getting started.”

His hiss was sharp, his hips jerking slightly.

I smirked.

Then I leaned in, flicking my tongue over the tip.

“Jesus,” Marcus rasped, his hands shooting out, gripping my hair, not pulling, just holding. Like he needed something to hold onto.

I took him deeper, sucking him in, hollowing my cheeks as I set a slow, devastating rhythm. He was breathing ragged now, his muscles straining under my touch, the sharp, desperate sounds escaping his throat filling the tunnel.

This was power.

This was control.

I worked him harder, my hands tightening on his thighs, taking him deeper, until he groaned my name, his grip tightening in my hair.

“Claire—”

I hummed around him, and that was it.

His whole body went tight, his hips snapping forward as he came, hard and fast, a curse tearing from his lips.

I swallowed every drop.

Then I pulled back, wiping the corner of my mouth, meeting his stunned gaze as I rose to my feet.

His jaw was slack, his breathing rough, like he had just come out of a war zone.

I leaned in, brushing my lips over his ear, my voice a whisper of wicked satisfaction.

“Now who’s in control?”

Then I turned, smoothing my dress like I hadn’t just ruined Marcus Dane in a secret tunnel under Dominion Hall.

And I walked away.

14

MARCUS

I watched her walk farther down the tunnel, her heels clicking sharp against the stone, that silver dress swaying with every step like a taunt carved in liquid metal.

Shock pinned me where I stood, my breath ragged, my cock still twitching from what she'd just done. Claire Dixon had dropped to her knees and taken me apart—sucked me dry with that wicked mouth of hers—and then walked away like it was nothing. Like she hadn't just shattered every ounce of control I'd been clinging to. My knees felt weak, my head spinning, but fuck, it didn't last long.

Heat roared back, fast and vicious, clawing through my chest. I wanted her more than ever—wanted her under me, over me, screaming my name until her voice broke. She thought she'd won, thought she'd flipped the game, but this wasn't over. Not by a damn shot. I recovered quick, adrenaline spiking, and took off after her, my boots silent on the stone, closing the gap in seconds.

I caught her around the waist, my arm locking tight, pulling her back against me. She gasped, soft and sharp, and I slid one hand up her front, fingers brushing the curve of her breast through that thin silver fabric. Her body tensed, but she didn't fight—didn't pull away. I leaned in, lips grazing her ear, voice low and rough. “My turn.”

She twisted her head, gray eyes flashing, but I didn't give her time to fire back. I steered her to the left, down a narrow branch of the tunnel, my grip firm on her hip. The air grew heavier, thick with the scent of leather and cigar smoke as I pushed open a door—unmarked, hidden, a room my brothers and I carved out years ago. Dark leather sofas lined the walls, a flat-screen TV humming low in the corner, shelves stocked with bourbon and Cubans. Our sanctuary, away from the world, where we smoked and schemed and forgot the blood on our hands.

I didn't stop. I walked her straight to the nearest sofa, spun her around, and bent her over it, her hands bracing against the leather. She let out a breath—half protest, half something else—and I yanked that silver dress up over her hips, the fabric bunching in my fists. My breath caught, hard and fast, because fuck, she wasn't wearing panties. Nothing. Just bare, smooth skin, her pussy glistening wet and ready, begging for me. I nearly came undone right there, my cock throbbing, straining against my pants.

“Thought you'd tease me all night?” she said, voice coy, dripping with that New York edge, but I cut her off.

I dropped to my knees behind her, hands gripping her thighs, spreading her open. My mouth was on her before she could finish, tongue dragging slow and deep through her folds. She was soaked—hot, slick, dripping down my chin—and she tasted like sin, sharp and sweet, a flavor I could drown in and never get enough. I groaned against her, the sound vibrating through her, and fuck, I loved it—loved the way her wetness coated my lips, the way her thighs trembled under my hands. I licked her again, long and deliberate, savoring every inch, every shudder, every drop of her on my tongue.

Her shock hit fast—her body stiffening, a choked gasp tearing from her throat. “Marcus—stop—” she started, but it flipped quick. “No—keep going—please?—”

I didn't stop. Couldn't. My mouth was everywhere—licking, kissing,

sucking—tongue plunging deep, then flicking light over her clit, teasing until she bucked against me. Her taste flooded me, rich and heady, and I ate her like a man starved, lips sealing around that swollen bud, sucking hard while my hands gripped her ass, spreading her wider. She moaned, loud and broken, her fingers digging into the leather, and I didn't let up—licked her faster, deeper, chasing every sound, every twitch, every fucking plea spilling from her mouth.

I didn't want it to stop. Wanted to keep her like this, trembling and begging, my tongue buried in her forever. But she broke—tremored hard, her whole body shaking, a scream ripping out as she came, her pussy clenching, pulsing against my mouth. I lapped her through it, slow and greedy, drinking her down until she sagged against the sofa, panting.

I didn't hesitate. Stood fast, stripped my pants off in one rough motion, my cock springing free, hard and aching. She was still bent over, dress hiked up, ass bare, and I plunged into her—deep, fast, no warning. Fuck, did she feel good. Tight, hot, slick from her orgasm, her walls gripping me like a vise. I groaned, low and guttural, thrusting in again, deeper, harder, my hands locking on her hips. She pushed back against me, meeting every stroke, and oh, she was perfect—better than I'd imagined, better than that damn kiss, better than anything.

I fucked her hard, time and time again, each thrust driving me deeper, her moans filling the room, sharp and desperate. Then she moved—pushed me back with a sudden shove, hands grabbing the front of my shirt, yanking me toward the sofa. I hit the leather, and she was on me like a lioness, straddling me, eyes wild, gray and burning. She ripped at her dress, pulling it off over her head, and I froze, staring, because fuck, her body was a goddamn masterpiece.

Full tits, high and round, nipples hard and pink, begging to be sucked. A slim waist flaring into hips I wanted to bruise with my grip. Skin smooth and flushed, glowing under the dim light, every curve screaming for my hands, my mouth, my cock. I

stripped my shirt off too, tossing it aside, and she climbed on top, sinking down onto me, taking me in deep. I groaned, hands flying to her hips, guiding her as she rode me, her tits bouncing with every move, her head tipping back, blonde hair spilling loose.

She fucked me like she owned me—hard, fast, relentless—her nails digging into my chest, leaving red lines I’d feel tomorrow. I couldn’t get enough—hands roaming, gripping her ass, sliding up to cup those perfect tits, thumbs brushing her nipples until she gasped. She was tight, so fucking tight, her pussy clenching around me, wet and hot, driving me insane. I thrust up to meet her, matching her rhythm, watching her face—those parted lips, those half-closed eyes, the way she bit down on her bottom lip like she was trying to hold it together.

I didn’t hold back. I grabbed her harder, pulled her down onto me, slamming into her until the room spun, until the only sounds were her moans and my growls and the slap of skin on skin. She came first—shattered around me, a cry ripping from her throat, her body shaking, walls pulsing so tight I couldn’t breathe. It tipped me over—heat exploding down my spine, my cock jerking as I came hard, spilling into her, groaning her name like a fucking prayer.

We stayed there, panting, her forehead pressed to mine, sweat slick between us. Her breath was hot against my lips, her body limp on top of me, and I could still feel her trembling, little aftershocks rippling through her. I didn’t move—didn’t want to—just kept my hands on her hips, holding her there, marveling at the feel of her, the weight of her, the way she fit against me like she was made for it.

She shifted, finally, lifting her head, eyes meeting mine. A slow, lazy smile curved her lips, and she murmured, voice rough and sated, “You think we should get back to the party?”

I stared at her, chest still heaving, that silver dress crumpled on the floor, her naked

and fucked-out on my lap. The party—Charleston's elite, the masks, the whispers—felt a million miles away. Department 77, the photos, the feds circling—it all faded, drowned out by the pulse still pounding in my ears, the taste of her still on my tongue.

“Nah,” I said, voice gravelly, hands tightening on her. “We’re not done here.”

She laughed—soft, wicked, a sound that hit me low—and I knew right then I was fucked. Not just tonight, not just this room, but deep, all the way down. Claire Dixon had me, and I didn't care. I'd chase her into every dark corner she'd let me, and I'd burn it all down to keep her there.

15

CLAIRE

I was in trouble.

The kind I couldn't talk my way out of. The kind that had nothing to do with the investigation, Dominion Hall, or the tangled web of secrets I was trying to unravel. No, this was something worse.

This was him.

Marcus Dane, with his piercing blue eyes and his touch that burned like a brand. Marcus, who had just been under me, inside me, his breath ragged, his hands gripping my hips like he was afraid to let go.

And now, here we were.

I was still in his lap, my body flushed, my skin still humming from what we'd just done. His hands rested on my thighs, thumbs brushing idly over my skin like he wasn't quite ready to stop touching me. I wasn't sure I was ready either. That was the problem.

I should have felt victorious. I had been in control—I'd set the pace, made him come undone. I had won.

And yet ...

I swallowed hard, trying to find something sharp to say, something that would remind both of us that this wasn't about us. That this wasn't real, wasn't anything.

But before I could speak, my gaze flickered past him—over his shoulder, to the shelves lining the far side of the room.

Something caught my eye.

A file, thick and slightly out of place among the bottles of bourbon and cigars. The edge of a paper peeked out, the corner of a logo stamped in black ink.

My pulse kicked up.

Department 77.

I moved before I could think, slipping from Marcus's lap, crossing the room in a few quick steps. My fingers closed around the file, pulling it free.

"What are you doing?" Marcus's voice was calm, but I heard the shift beneath it—something taut.

I turned, holding up the file. "You tell me."

His jaw ticked. "That's not for you."

"No?" I flipped it open. Pages of reports. Surveillance images. A list of names, some blacked out. But one stood out. A name I knew. "You've been tracking Department 77."

Marcus exhaled through his nose. "I track a lot of things."

I met his gaze, searching for the truth in it. "This isn't just a rumor, is it? It's real. And you knew."

A muscle in his jaw flexed. "Be careful what you go looking for, Claire."

My stomach tightened, because that—the way he said my name, slow and dangerous—sounded an awful lot like a warning.

I snapped the file shut. "Too late."

Something flickered in his eyes, but I didn't stay to decipher it. Instead, I turned, grabbing my dress from the floor, slipping it back over my shoulders, smoothing the fabric like it could erase what had just happened between us.

"Where are you going?"

I paused at the door, glancing back over my shoulder. “Back to the party.”

He didn’t move from the sofa. Just watched me, still shirtless, his skin flushed, his chest rising and falling in slow, controlled breaths. But his eyes were something else entirely—sharp, assessing.

Like he was already planning his next move.

I smirked, flipping the file in my hand. “Don’t wait up, Dane.”

Then I left.

The shift in the air hit me the second I stepped back into the grand hall. The low sounds of conversation, the clink of glasses, the flicker of candlelight glinting off gilded masks—it all felt too bright, too normal, too fake after what had just happened below Dominion Hall.

I moved through the crowd, my body still thrumming, my mind racing, replaying Marcus’s words, the heat of his mouth on my skin, the file now burning a hole in my thoughts.

I found Diego near the bar, leaning against the counter, swirling a drink in his hand as he smirked at a tall, well-dressed man who was definitely interested. But the second his eyes landed on me, the flirtation vanished.

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He took one look at my face—at whatever this was—and his expression sharpened.

“Well, well,” he mused, lifting his glass. “Took you long enough. I was beginning to think you’d been kidnapped.”

I forced a smirk, reaching for a flute of champagne from a passing waiter. “And what? You weren’t coming to rescue me?”

Diego gave me a once-over, his gaze narrowing. “Please. You don’t need rescuing. He might, though.”

I took a sip, letting the cool bubbles settle something in me. “What are you talking about?”

Diego arched a brow, tilting his head. “You tell me. You disappeared with Marcus Dane, and now you look like—” He gestured vaguely. “Like a woman who’s been thoroughly debauched and is trying to pretend she wasn’t.”

I nearly choked on my drink. “Jesus, Diego.”

He grinned. “Am I wrong?”

I scowled. “You’re always wrong.”

He hummed, unconvinced. “Mmm. I don’t know, mija. You’ve got that freshly-fucked glow.”

I glared, but my face was definitely burning now.

Diego's smirk widened. "You did. Oh, my God."

I waved a hand. "Lower your voice."

He grabbed my wrist, yanking me in, eyes gleaming. "I need details. Immediately."

I sighed, shaking my head. "Later."

Diego made an exaggerated gasp. "Later? Later? Claire, I swear to all things holy, if you do not?—"

I cut him off with a look. "Diego."

Something in my face must have struck him, because the teasing drained just a fraction. He searched my expression, then exhaled. "All right. But you're telling me everything when we leave."

I downed the rest of my champagne. "Deal."

Diego started to say something else, but his sharp gaze flicked downward, zeroing in on my hand. His expression shifted, curiosity moving into something more serious.

"What's that?" His voice was low, cautious.

Shit.

I hadn't even realized I was still clutching the file in my fingers, its edges crumpled slightly from how tight I was holding it. Instinct kicked in fast—I turned slightly, shifting my body so that no one else in the crowd would catch sight of it. The last

thing I needed was someone here—someone loyal to Dominion—seeing me walk out of Marcus Dane’s secret underground lair with something I very much wasn’t supposed to have.

Diego’s eyes narrowed. “Claire.”

I exhaled sharply, lowering my hand between us, out of view. “I found something,” I muttered. “Something big.”

His expression darkened. “Then why the hell are we still here? Let’s go before someone notices.”

I shook my head. “No way. Not now.”

He looked at me like I’d lost my mind. “Are you serious?”

I lifted my chin. “Diego, if Marcus really didn’t want me to take this, I wouldn’t have walked out of that room with it.”

That made him pause. He studied me for a beat, then his lips pressed into a thin line. “You think he planted it for you to find?”

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I turned my champagne glass in my fingers, my mind racing. Did he?

Marcus had let me walk out with this file. He could have stopped me. Could have ripped it from my hands. Could have done a hell of a lot more than just watch me take it. And yet, he'd let me go. No fight. No warning beyond that dark look in his eyes.

That wasn't an accident.

It was a move.

The question was why.

"I think," I said slowly, "that Marcus Dane never does anything without a reason."

Diego let out a breath, glancing around like he was already calculating how fast we could get out of here without drawing attention. "And what if the reason is to see how deep you'll dig before he decides to bury you?"

I smirked. "Then I better start digging fast."

His jaw clenched. "Claire."

I set my empty glass on the bar, slipping the file into the folds of my dress as discreetly as I could. "Relax," I said lightly. "I know what I'm doing."

Diego muttered something in Spanish under his breath that I was fairly certain was

not a compliment. Then he exhaled, rolling his shoulders back, schooling his expression into something more relaxed. The perfect mask.

“Fine,” he said smoothly, taking another sip of his drink like we weren’t standing in the middle of a viper’s den. “But if we end up dead, I’m haunting you.”

I grinned. “Wouldn’t expect anything less.”

But beneath the teasing, my pulse was pounding.

Because Diego was right.

This just got a lot more interesting.

Diego didn’t let me bask in my victory for long.

“What’s the plan now?” he murmured, keeping his tone light, casual—just two friends chatting over champagne, like I hadn’t just emerged from the shadows clutching a stolen file from one of the most powerful men in Charleston. “Because if you say we keep it, I’m going to assume your orgasm rewired your common sense.”

“Two orgasms,” I replied. “Or was it three? I think I might have blacked out at some point.”

I shot him a look, but my heart was still hammering. He wasn’t wrong. Keeping the file was out of the question. I had no idea who else in this room might have eyes on me. No idea if Marcus would let me keep it, or if I was about to find out exactly how much he’d let me get away with.

“We need to find somewhere quiet,” I said under my breath.

Diego nodded, already scanning the ballroom. “Powder room?”

“Too much foot traffic.”

“The terrace?”

I shook my head. “Too open.”

His eyes flicked toward a side hall, where a set of gilded double doors stood slightly ajar. He tipped his head toward them. “Library?”

I followed his gaze. The room was dimly lit beyond the doors, just a few wall sconces casting a soft glow over shelves lined with books. More importantly—it was empty.

Perfect.

I moved first, slipping away from the crowd as naturally as I could, Diego just a step behind. We ducked inside, and I exhaled as the noise of the party muffled behind us.

“Okay,” I muttered, glancing around to make sure we were alone. “Let’s see what Marcus was so eager to hide from me.”

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I perched on the edge of a mahogany desk, yanking the file from its makeshift hiding spot in my dress. Diego leaned over my shoulder as I flipped it open.

Documents spilled across the file—dense blocks of text, surveillance logs, blurred photographs taken from too far away. But my gaze locked onto the list of names, inked in precise black letters, most of them redacted into nothingness.

Except one.

One face stood out, unredacted and unmistakable.

A sharp jolt shot through me. I knew that face.

It wasn't just familiar—it was important. A puzzle piece I hadn't even realized was missing until now.

I swallowed hard, reaching into my clutch for my phone.

Diego arched a brow. "We're committing a felony now?"

I gave him a sharp look. "We're documenting."

He sighed, but he didn't stop me.

I snapped photo after photo, making sure I got everything—names, addresses, timestamps, every tiny detail I could grab before we had to get rid of the evidence.

Once I was done, I tucked my phone away and exhaled.

“Now,” Diego said, crossing his arms, “we put it back?”

I hesitated. “Or stash it somewhere.”

He frowned. “Claire.”

Diego’s gaze flicked to the file in my hands, then back to me, his brows knitting together. “You do realize he saw you take that, right? You just told me he did.”

I exhaled sharply. “He saw me pick it up—he said as much. But maybe he doesn’t realize I actually took it.”

Diego scoffed. “Oh, come on, Claire. You were in a room alone with him, and you just casually plucked a classified-looking file off his shelf while he was still recovering from—” He gestured vaguely. “Whatever the hell happened in there. There’s no way he missed that.”

I chewed the inside of my cheek. He wasn’t wrong. Marcus was too sharp, too calculating to have overlooked something like that. Which meant ...

“He let me take it,” I murmured.

Diego tilted his head. “Or he wanted you to take it.”

I lifted a hand. “Just hear me out. If I put it back exactly where I found it, Marcus knows I saw it. He’ll know I read it, he’ll know I took something from it. But if we leave it somewhere else—somewhere discreet, somewhere he can find it later—then maybe he wonders. I want him to wonder.”

Diego let out a low whistle. “Damn, you’re ruthless.”

I smirked. “You knew that already.”

His eyes gleamed with something sharp. “Okay, fine. So where are we stashing it?”

I tapped the file against my palm, considering. “Somewhere close enough for him to find, but far enough away that it doesn’t look deliberate.” My lips curled. “And we make sure he sees me with it first.”

Diego grinned, shaking his head. “Claire Dixon, playing mind games with a Dane? God help us all.”

16

MARCUS

I let her have the file. Of course, I did. Watched her snatch it off the shelf in that underground lair, her fingers quick and sure, like she was born to steal secrets.

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She knew I saw her—those gray eyes flicked to mine, daring me to stop her—and I didn't. Because I knew she knew I'd let her. And I understood her, deep in my bones. Claire Dixon didn't give a damn about the risks, the lines she crossed, the fire she danced in. She wanted the story. The truth. That hungry glint in her eyes was the same one I'd seen in the mirror too many times—back when I was chasing ghosts through war zones, back before Dominion Hall became my cage. She'd burn it all down for that story, and I couldn't wait to see how she'd play it.

Yeah, there were pictures in that file. Grainy shots, surveillance grabs, faces half-hidden in shadows. The big one? A former CIA director—retired, supposedly, but men like that never really leave the game. His name was scratched out, but the face was unmistakable if you knew where to look. I'd clocked him years back, running ops through back channels that'd make your skin crawl.

I couldn't wait to see what Claire tried to do with that one—how deep she'd dig, who she'd piss off. But I needed her out there, moving, poking, asking her questions. She was my bloodhound now, whether she knew it or not, sniffing out Department 77 while I watched from the dark.

I was still thinking about that when she slipped away from the party—or thought she did. Every living area in Dominion Hall was wired for video, cameras tucked into corners, lenses glinting like silent sentinels. I caught her on a feed from the library, that silver dress shimmering as she and Diego ducked inside, the file clutched tight in her hand. She moved like she was slick, like she'd outsmarted me, and I grinned despite myself. Let her think it. I'd see how far she ran with it.

My mind wasn't all on the file, though. It kept dragging me back to her—naked,

sprawled across me, thighs gripping my hips, her moans echoing off the leather and stone.

That sex had been a goddamn war, and I'd lost as much as I'd won. Her mouth on me, my tongue buried in her, the way she'd ridden me till we both broke—it was burned into me, a brand I couldn't shake. Part of me wanted to call her back, pin her to that sofa again, tell her to stay. Strip that dress off slow this time, taste every inch I hadn't yet claimed.

But then I caught Ryker's glare from across the ops room—his jaw locked tight—and I knew it was a bad idea. A real bad idea.

He didn't say a word, just stared me down like he could see every filthy thought in my head.

I didn't flinch, didn't explain. He'd already ripped into me about Claire—about the file, the masquerade, the way I was playing this whole damn thing like a game of chicken with Department 77. "Short leash," he'd growled earlier, and I'd nodded like I meant it.

But I didn't. Not really.

Claire was too good, too sharp, and I needed her loose, stirring the pot. Ryker didn't get that. Not yet. He'd see it when it paid off. Or he'd bury me if it didn't.

I left the ops room, shoes echoing off the marble, and threw myself back into the masquerade. The ballroom was still alive—Charleston's elite buzzing like wasps in a jar, masks slipping as the night wore on, champagne flutes clinking too loud.

Normally, I liked parties. The energy, the power plays, the way you could read a room and know who was screwing who—figuratively and otherwise.

More than a handful of older women caught my eye as I moved through the crowd, their “fuck me” stares blatant behind feathered masks. A congressman’s wife, dripping in pearls, brushed her hand against my arm, her lips curling like an invitation. A Citadel widow, all sharp cheekbones and sharper nails, leaned in close, whispering something about a private tour of her estate. I grinned, played it off, kept moving.

Any other night, I might’ve bitten—taken one back to a dark corner and let her scream my name.

But not tonight. Tonight, all I saw was Claire. Naked Claire, her blonde hair spilling over her shoulders, gray eyes daring me, that silver dress crumpled on the floor.

Every time I blinked, she was there—curves I’d gripped, skin I’d tasted, the way she’d shattered under me and then walked away like she owned me.

My cock twitched just thinking about it, and I had to grit my teeth, force my focus back to the room. Couldn’t let her under my skin like this—not now, not with everything riding on the line.

I stood near the foyer, arms crossed, watching the party, the chandelier overhead throwing jagged shadows across the crowd.

Claire. I wanted to find Claire, feel her next to me again. But there was work to do. Always was. Plus, I could watch her on camera.

After a while, I returned to the ops room, the fortress swallowing me whole. The air was cool, sterile, the hum of monitors cutting through the silence.

Every snippet of video from the night was already being chewed up by our system—cameras in the ballroom, the halls, the grounds, all feeding into a custom AI

we'd built from scratch. It wasn't some off-the-shelf tech; this was Dominion's own, coded to spot patterns, flag faces, catch the shit human eyes missed. I'd poured blood, sweat, and a hell of a lot of money into it—because in our world, you didn't survive without eyes everywhere.

I dropped into a chair, kicked my feet up on the steel table, and cued the feeds on the main screen. Hundreds of clips—guests laughing, dancing, scheming—rolled past, the AI tagging timestamps, cross-referencing faces against our database. I didn't have to wait long. I'd let Claire take that file for a reason—not just to see what she'd do, but to see who'd react. Who'd twitch when they saw it in her hands. I'd baited the hook, tossed it into the water, and now I was reeling it in.

The system pinged—a soft chime that snapped me upright. A flagged clip loaded, timestamped 11:47 p.m.

There she was—Claire, gliding through the ballroom, silver dress catching the light, the file tucked under her arm like it was nothing. Diego was at her side, all sharp suit and sharper eyes, but the camera didn't linger on them. It zoomed in tight on someone else, a figure standing near the bar, half-turned, mask dangling from their hand. Their gaze locked on Claire—on that file—and stayed there, longer than it should've.

Too long.

I froze, breath catching in my chest. The AI spit out a name, overlaying it on the screen in cold white text: Mayor Evelyn Hart.

The mayor of Charleston.

I leaned back, staring at the screen, a slow grin tugging at my lips.

Not some lowlife fixer, not a Dominion rival, not even one of the Washington suits sniffing around. Evelyn fucking Hart—Charleston's golden girl, all polished smiles and ribbon-cutting charm. Hart looked better suited to being the mayor of Mayberry, not Charleston.

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I rewound the clip, played it again. Same beat—Claire moving through the crowd, file in hand, Hart's gaze lingering like a predator clocking prey. The AI had caught it, flagged the anomaly: her stare held 2.7 seconds longer than the average glance in the room. Subtle, but damning.

I scrubbed through more footage, pulling every angle.

There—11:52 p.m., Hart slipping away from the bar, phone pressed to her ear, her posture tight. Again at 12:19 a.m., lingering near the terrace doors, eyes darting back to Claire like she was waiting for something.

Holy shit.

Had we underestimated her? Was Evelyn Hart not just some figurehead mayor coasting on charm and old money? If not, she was in this—deep, dirty, and connected. That former CIA director in the file? Suddenly didn't feel so random. Hart could have the pull, the access, the kind of quiet power that could tie a ghost like Department 77 to a city like Charleston. But for what? And she'd reacted to Claire—to that file—like it was a live grenade.

I stood, pacing the ops room. My mind was racing, piecing it together.

Claire had the file now, and Hart knew it. That meant the mayor was either scared, pissed, or both—and she'd move soon. I'd wanted Claire to stir the pot, and fuck, she'd done it without even trying. But this—this was bigger than I'd planned. Hart wasn't just a loose thread. She was a damn fuse, and Claire was holding the match.

I should've been pissed. Should've stormed out, tracked Claire down, ripped that file from her hands before she lit the whole thing up.

But I wasn't.

I grinned wider, a sharp, feral thing cutting across my face. This was it—the break I'd been chasing. Department 77 wasn't just a shadow anymore. It had a face, and it was one I could hit.

Hart didn't know I'd seen her. Claire was out there, digging, hunting, and Hart would come for her—whether to shut her up or snatch the file back. And when she did, I'd be there, waiting.

But Claire—fuck, Claire. Naked Claire flashed again, her body arching under me, her voice breaking as she came.

I stopped pacing, jaw tight, heat spiking again. I couldn't shake her—didn't want to. She was in my head, under my skin, driving me half-mad with want even now, with all this shit crashing down. Part of me wanted to find her, drag her back here, fuck her senseless on that steel table until we both forgot the mess we were in.

The other part—the sentinel part, the one forged in war and blood—knew I had to focus. Had to play this right.

I dropped back into the chair, pulling up Hart's profile on another screen. Fifty-two, married, two kids, elected three years back on a platform of “cleaning up Charleston.”

Bullshit.

Her history was spotless—too spotless. No scandals, no dirt, just a string of photo ops and vague promises. I'd never dug deep because she'd never pinged as a threat. But

now? Now I saw it—the cracks. Her husband was a shipping magnate, tied to half the docks on the coast. Her brother was ex-military, some black-ops stint he never talked about.

I scrubbed a hand over my face, exhaustion warring with adrenaline. The night was done, but the war was just starting. Claire was out there with that file, Hart was watching her, and Department 77 was closer than ever. I'd let her take it—wanted her to—and now it was paying off.

But it was a tightrope, and one slip could bury us all. Ryker'd lose his shit when I told him—probably already sensed I was playing too loose.

It didn't matter. This was my call, my move, and I'd see it through.

I leaned back, staring at the frozen frame of Hart's face on the screen—cool, composed, but with that telltale glint of something darker.

Claire had no idea what she'd kicked up. She'd dig, push, chase that story until it bit her—and it would. Hart wasn't some small-time crook. She had reach, resources, the kind of power that could crush a podcaster like Claire without breaking a sweat.

But Claire was mine to wield. Mine to protect.

That thought hit hard, unbidden, and I growled low, shoving it down.

She wasn't mine—not like that. She was a tool, a weapon, the sharpest damn blade I'd ever held. I'd steer her, point her, and keep her safe while she cut through the dark. Hart wouldn't touch her—not if I got there first.

I grabbed my phone, shot a text to Norton:Mayor Hart. Dig. Deep.

He'd get it—fantastic cop—knew everyone. Then I pulled the Bugatti keys from my pocket, the weight of them grounding me. I needed air, needed to move.

Claire was out there, plotting her next step, and Hart was watching her. I'd watch them both—closer now, tighter.

The game had shifted, and I was all in.

Fuck, I was deep. And I wasn't backing out.

Now, I needed to see Claire.

17

CLAIRE

The night had taken on a surreal edge. The masquerade was winding down, but the energy outside Dominion Hall still crackled—cars idling at the curb, voices murmuring in the warm Charleston night, the faint clink of champagne glasses as the last of the city’s elite lingered on the steps.

I exhaled, smoothing my dress, still hyperaware of what Diego and I had just done. The file was no longer with me—I had stashed it in the library, tucked neatly between two old leather-bound books, right where Marcus would find it. Not a trace of it left on me. But my heart was still hammering, my nerves still on edge. Because even without the file, the night wasn’t over.

Diego stood beside me, lazily scrolling on his phone. “Remind me why we walked when you have a perfectly good rental?” He sighed dramatically. “Next time, I’m seducing a billionaire. Private drivers, champagne in the back seat—that’s the life we deserve.”

I huffed out a quiet laugh, trying to shake off the tension swirling in my stomach.

“Speaking of seduction,” I drawled, turning to Diego with a smirk. “Are we just going to ignore the fact that you spent half the night making eyes at that very tall, very well-dressed man at the bar?”

Diego didn't look up from his phone, but the corner of his mouth twitched. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

I scoffed. "Oh, please. You were practically purring."

He sighed dramatically, slipping his phone into his pocket. "What can I say? Southern charm is real, and that man had it in spades. Plus, he smelled like cedarwood and expensive sin."

I grinned. "So, did you get his number?"

Diego pressed a hand to his chest, feigning offense. "Claire, mija, do I look like the kind of man who asks for numbers?" He tossed his head back with a smirk. "No, no. I make them chase me."

I rolled my eyes. "So, you'll be seeing him again?"

"Depends," he mused. "Is Marcus Dane the kind of billionaire who throws multiple fancy parties? Because I could suffer through another night of Charleston's elite if it means another round of that man's attention."

I laughed, shaking my head. "You're impossible."

"And yet, you love me," he quipped, flashing me a knowing smile. "Now, let's talk about your love life, because?—"

"Absolutely not," I cut in, but Diego's grin only widened.

Diego crossed his arms, giving me a slow, assessing look. "Oh, I think we absolutely should. Because remind me—what was our goal tonight?"

I groaned, tipping my head back toward the sky. “Diego?—”

“Make Marcus Dane jealous,” he finished for me. “And?”

I sighed, fighting a smirk. “And what?”

Diego gestured dramatically. “And did it work? Because based on the way you disappeared with him for—what was it? An hour? Two?—I’m thinking the answer is yes.”

I pursed my lips, pretending to think. “I don’t know. He seemed pretty in control to me.”

Diego’s laughter was sharp, delighted. “Please. That man was vibrating every time he looked at you. I half expected him to throw me into the harbor just for existing.”

I rolled my eyes, but warmth curled in my stomach. “You’re exaggerating.”

“Am I?” Diego challenged, tilting his head. “Because from where I was standing, he did not appreciate seeing me on your arm. And he sure as hell didn’t appreciate the way you worked that room.”

I chewed my lip, remembering the way Marcus had looked at me—possessive, dark, like he was barely restraining himself from dragging me away the second he saw me laughing with those men.

“So, what’s the verdict?” Diego pressed, nudging my arm. “Mission accomplished?”

I let out a slow breath, my pulse still thrumming from everything that had happened tonight. “Yeah,” I admitted. “I think it worked.”

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Diego grinned. “Excellent. Now, what’s our next move?”

Before I could answer, a familiar, commanding voice cut through the night.

“You’re not walking back alone.”

My stomach flipped.

Diego muttered a quiet “Oh, this is going to be good” under his breath as we both turned.

Marcus stood at the top of the steps, mask discarded, his suit still pristine despite the chaos of the night. His gaze locked onto mine, unreadable but intense, the kind of look that made my breath catch.

I lifted a brow. “It’s not far.”

“I don’t care,” Marcus said smoothly, descending the steps like he owned the damn city. “You’re not walking.”

Diego made a quiet sound of delight, watching this unfold like it was the best show of his life.

I crossed my arms, tilting my head. “Is that an order?”

Marcus smirked, but there was no humor in it. “It’s a fact.”

Diego leaned in slightly, whispering, “I love this.”

I ignored him, holding Marcus’s gaze. “We’re capable of walking, Dane.”

His jaw tightened slightly. “And I’m capable of making sure you don’t have to.”

The protective edge in his voice sent something sharp through me—annoyance, intrigue, maybe something deeper I didn’t want to name.

Diego let out a dramatic sigh. “Oh, just say thank you and let the man drive us, Claire. I need the full billionaire experience.”

Marcus’s lips twitched, but his eyes stayed on me. Waiting.

I exhaled, finally relenting. “Fine.”

Marcus didn’t gloat. Didn’t smirk in victory. He just nodded once, turning toward the sleek luxury car idling nearby.

Diego gave me a delighted look as we followed. “He is obsessed with you.”

I didn’t answer. But I felt it. And I wasn’t sure what the hell I was going to do about it.

The valet line was still crowded, guests draping themselves against shiny cars, lingering in the warm Charleston night. The air smelled like jasmine and expensive perfume, laced with the lingering scent of cigars.

Diego was still whispering delighted commentary under his breath as Marcus led us toward his car, but I barely heard him. My nerves were still wired too tight, my skin still humming from everything that had happened tonight. From the stolen file, the

tension in the library, the way Marcus had touched me like he was willing to break every rule to have me.

I was so caught up in my own head that I almost didn't notice the man approaching from the side.

He was older, mid-fifties, with a weathered face and sharp, assessing eyes. He didn't look like he belonged among the glittering partygoers—a little too rough, his suit a little too ill-fitted, the faint shadow of stubble making him look like he'd had a long night.

But he moved with purpose, and before I could react, he was right in front of me.

“Miss Dixon.” His voice was quiet, meant only for me.

Marcus moved instantly, stepping closer, his presence going sharp, predatory.

The man didn't flinch. He just reached into his pocket—slow, deliberate—and held something out to me. A simple white envelope, creased at the edges, my name scrawled across the front in an unsteady hand.

I took it before I could think, my fingers brushing against the rough paper.

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“From a friend,” the man said, then turned and disappeared into the crowd.

I blinked, pulse kicking up.

Marcus was watching me carefully. “What is it?”

I turned the envelope over in my hands. No return address. No markings. Just my name.

“I don’t know.”

I could feel Diego brimming with curiosity beside me, but Marcus’s gaze was unreadable, his jaw tight. He didn’t like this.

Hell, I didn’t like it either.

I swallowed, shoving the envelope into my clutch. “Let’s get out of here.”

The short driveback to the hotel was tense.

Diego, of course, didn’t seem to notice. He stretched out in the back seat, sipping from a bottle of still-chilled champagne Marcus had in the car, humming to himself like this was just another night.

I, on the other hand, was hyper-aware of Marcus in the driver’s seat. The way his hands gripped the wheel, the way his sleeves were still pushed up from earlier, exposing the strong lines of his forearms. The way he glanced at me every so often,

sharp and assessing, like he was trying to read my mind.

I kept my clutch pressed against my lap, the weight of the envelope burning through the fabric.

By the time we pulled up to The Palmetto Rose, I was ready to escape.

Diego was already halfway out of the car before it had fully stopped, stretching with a groan. “Well, that was an evening.”

I slid out after him, smoothing my dress. “Understatement of the year.”

Diego yawned, shooting me a knowing look. “Are we having a debrief, or am I being abandoned for broody billionaire time?”

I rolled my eyes. “Go to bed, Diego.”

He grinned, giving me an exaggerated kiss on the cheek before sauntering toward the elevator. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” he called over his shoulder.

Marcus was still watching me from where he leaned against the car.

I crossed my arms once more. “You don’t have to stand there like my personal security detail.”

His gaze darkened. “Someone handed you an unmarked envelope outside Dominion Hall, Claire. Forgive me for not liking that.”

I exhaled, pressing a hand to my temple. “I’m fine.”

Marcus didn’t look convinced, but he didn’t push.

I turned and headed inside, the cool air of the lobby washing over me. The late hour had thinned the crowd—just a few lingering guests near the bar, the receptionist giving me a polite nod as I stepped into the elevator.

It wasn't until I reached my suite that I knew something was wrong.

The moment I stepped inside, every instinct went on high alert.

Nothing was out of place. No broken locks, no forced entry. But I knew.

The air felt different.

Slightly off.

Like someone had been here.

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A chill crawled up my spine as I slowly stepped inside, my heels muffled against the plush carpet.

I scanned the room, my heart pounding. The bed was still neatly made. My suitcase still sat where I left it. My laptop was still on the desk.

But the glass on the nightstand—empty when I left—was half-full now.

My breath caught.

Someone had been in here.

And they wanted me to know it.

My stomach twisted, panic pressing against my ribs.

I turned and bolted from the room, my pulse hammering. I barely made it into the hall before I crashed into something solid.

No—someone.

Marcus.

His hands caught me instantly, gripping my arms, his body a wall of heat and tension. “Claire?—”

“There was someone in my room.” The words tumbled out, breathless, urgent. “They

were inside?—”

Marcus’s face went sharp, all hard lines and steel. He didn’t ask questions. Didn’t hesitate.

He moved.

Fast.

He pushed me behind him, stepping into my suite, scanning every inch with the practiced efficiency of a man trained for war.

I stood in the doorway, pulse thrumming in my ears, my hands shaking slightly at my sides.

Marcus was silent as he checked the room, checked the locks, checked every damn corner.

Then he turned to me, his expression unreadable.

His voice was low, lethal. “Pack your things.”

I swallowed. “Marcus?—”

“You’re not staying here.” His tone left no room for argument.

I stared at him, my heart still pounding. “Where am I staying, then?”

Marcus didn’t blink.

“With me.”

MARCUS

I practically had to drag Claire out of that hotel room, my grip tight on her arm as her heels skidded against the carpet. She fought me—stubborn as hell, twisting in my hold—but I wasn't letting go. Not now. Not after that glass, half-full when it should've been empty, screaming someone had been in there.

She'd been expendable before—a tool, a sword I could wield and toss when it dulled. But fuck if she felt that way now. Something had shifted, hard and fast, and I'd do anything—anything—to keep her safe.

“Marcus—what about Diego?” she snapped, her voice cutting through the lobby's hum as we rushed past the desk, the receptionist barely glancing up.

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“Diego’ll be fine,” I snapped, shoving the glass doors open. Truth was, I didn’t give a damn about Diego right then. He could flirt his way out of Charleston for all I cared. My mind was spinning, a mess of jagged edges and cold panic.

How could I have been so stupid? Letting her stay at The Palmetto Rose, thinking cameras and a tail were enough, when Department 77 was already ten steps ahead, playing me like a damn fiddle. I’d underestimated them, and now Claire was in the crosshairs because of it.

We hit the valet line outside the hotel, the night air thick with jasmine and exhaust, and I shoved her toward the Bugatti, my hand still locked on her wrist. She stumbled, yanking against me, but I didn’t ease up until she was in the passenger seat, door slamming shut behind her. I slid in, keys already in hand, when it hit me—the envelope. That weathered bastard outside Dominion Hall, slipping it to her like a ghost.

“Open it,” I said, voice rough, nodding at her clutch as I fired up the engine.

Claire shot me a look—wary, pissed—but she pulled it out, her fingers careful as she tore the creased edge. A single slip of paper fluttered into her lap, scrawled with jagged ink.

Don’t listen to the Danes. They’re a pack of liars.

Her head snapped up, gray eyes blazing, and she lunged for the door handle. “Let me out?—”

“No fucking way.” I slammed the gas, tires screeching as the Bugatti tore away from the curb, the hotel shrinking in the rearview. She twisted in her seat, clawing at my arm, nails digging into my skin, but I held the wheel tight, eyes locked straight ahead.

“Pull over, Marcus! Now!” she screamed, her voice raw, bouncing off the leather interior. “Let me out, you asshole?—”

“Not happening,” I growled, swerving past a slow-moving cab, the city lights blurring into streaks. My mind was a goddamn tornado—Department 77 knew about us, had to. That note wasn’t random. It was a wedge, sharp and deliberate, meant to split us apart. And fuck, it was working.

Claire was losing it, her hands scrabbling at me, her breath hitching with fury, and I didn’t know what to do. For the first time in years—years of war, blood, and cold decisions—I didn’t know what the hell to do.

“Marcus—stop the fucking car!” She grabbed my forearm, yanking hard, and the Bugatti swerved, tires squealing against asphalt. I shook her off, barely keeping us straight, my pulse hammering in my ears.

“Enough!” I roared, slowing just enough to take a breath, my hands white-knuckling the wheel. No more games. No more subterfuge. I had to tell her—maybe not everything, but enough to pull her back, to get her on my side again. “I’m ready,” I said, voice low, steady despite the chaos in my chest.

She glared at me, chest heaving. “Ready for what? Another fuck?”

I let out a rough laugh, heat flashing low despite everything. “Tempting. Maybe after. But no—I want to tell you the truth.”

Her eyes narrowed, skepticism etched into every line of her face. She looked like

she'd bolt the second I stopped, but after a beat, she nodded—sharp, reluctant. “Fine.”

I didn't waste it. I yanked the wheel right, tires biting into the turn, and gunned it toward Sullivan's Island. Not Dominion Hall—this wasn't for the fortress. This was home, the old Dane place on the water, where the air smelled like salt and sea foam. The road stretched dark ahead, the city fading into marsh and moonlight, and I felt her watching me, waiting. I drove without speaking. Claire just sat there, waiting.

“What is this place?” she asked as we pulled down the dirt drive, her voice quieter now, edged with something I couldn't pin down as we pulled up to the weathered beach house. The wraparound porch sagged under years of storms, the white paint chipped, but it still stood—solid, ours.

“Sullivan's Island,” I said, cutting the engine. “The old Dane home. Before Dominion. Before everything went to shit.”

She didn't snap back, didn't fire off something sharp. She just listened, her head tilted slightly, gray eyes locked on me. I exhaled, staring out at the black waves crashing beyond the dunes, and let it spill.

“Yeah, I've been lying to you,” I started, voice rougher than I meant it. “That file? It was a plant. The CIA director—piece of shit, yeah, but he's got nothing to do with Department 77. Just a name to throw you off, keep you chasing shadows.”

Claire's eyes narrowed, but she didn't interrupt. “Why tell me now?”

I gripped the wheel, even with the car still, my knuckles ached. “Because the hotel scared the shit out of me. Someone else that close to you—someone who could've hurt you—it flipped something. I don't want to see you hurt, Claire. Not by them. Not by anyone.”

Her breath caught, just enough to notice, and her eyes softened—not much, but enough. Shock, maybe, but the good kind. Neither of us knew what to say, the silence thick between us, the sound of the ocean filling it. I swallowed hard, pushing forward before I lost my nerve.

“What I’m about to tell you could get me in deep shit with my brothers,” I said, low and careful. “Department 77—they’re real. They kidnapped Will, one of our guys. Ryker’s best friend, Izzy’s brother. The pier explosion? That was meant to take out Will and Ryker. Ryker burned one of his nine lives dodging that blast. I’ve been trying to protect my family—everything we’ve built. That’s all this is.”

I couldn’t look at her. Couldn’t believe I’d just laid it out like that—raw, unguarded, the kind of truth that could bury me. She could run with it now, splash it across her podcast, a million ears tearing into Dominion’s guts. And if she did, I knew—deep down, cold and certain—I might have to kill her. The thought twisted in me, sharp and sick, but it was there. Family first. Always had been.

Then her hand was on my face, warm against my jaw, turning my head until I had to meet her eyes. They were steady, piercing, and fuck, they hit me harder than I expected.

“Okay,” she said, voice soft but firm. “Now that we’re on the same page, tell me how I can help.”

I blinked, surprise slamming into me, stirring something deep—relief, want, something I couldn’t name. A grin tugged at my mouth, slow and real. “What do you know about Evelyn Hart?”

She leaned back, a spark flaring in her gaze, like she’d been waiting for this. “The mayor? Not much—yet. Polished, connected, clean as Dorothy skipping down the yellow brick road. Why?”

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“Because she’s in it,” I said, leaning closer, the space between us shrinking. “Caught her on camera tonight, staring at that file in your hand like it was a loaded gun. She’s tied to Department 77—don’t know how deep, but she’s not just a bystander.”

Claire’s lips parted, processing fast, that hunter’s glint I loved sharpening her features. “You think she’s the one who broke into my room?”

“Probably not. I’ll bet she’s got people who did.” I scrubbed a hand through my hair, the weight of it settling in. “Point is, she’s moving, and she knows you’ve got something. That note—‘pack of liars’—it’s them trying to turn you against me. And it almost worked.”

She smirked, a flicker of that New York steel cutting through. “Almost.”

I laughed, short and rough, the tension easing just enough to breathe. “Yeah, well, you’re still here.”

“For now,” she shot back, but there was no bite in it—just a challenge, daring me to keep her there.

I held her gaze, the air between us crackling again, different this time. Not just heat, not just the pull that’d landed us naked in that tunnel. This was something else—trust, fragile and untested, but there. I’d given her a piece of me, more than I’d meant to, and she hadn’t run. Not yet.

“Tell me about Will,” she said, breaking the silence, her voice steady but curious. “What happened?”

I leaned back in the seat, staring out at the dark water, the waves glinting under moonlight. “He was one of ours—Dominion through and through. Ryker’s shadow growing up, damn near a brother. Izzy’s actual brother, blood and all. Department 77 snatched him—clean op, no trace. We tried everything to get him back. Then, the pier. The pier was their kill shot—blow him and Ryker sky-high, send a message. Ryker got out with Will, alive. Lucky.”

Her brows knit, piecing it together. “And you’ve been chasing them ever since.”

“Every damn day,” I said, voice low, the ache of it still raw. “They’re ghosts—slippery, connected, always ahead. Until tonight. Hart’s the first solid thread I’ve had.”

Claire nodded, slow, like she was slotting it into her own puzzle. “So you planted the file to see who’d bite.”

“Yeah,” I admitted, glancing at her. “Didn’t expect it’d be her. Or that they’d come for you so fast.”

She snorted, a dry laugh. “Guess I’m flattered.”

“Don’t be,” I said, sharper than I meant. “They’re not playing. That hotel stunt? That’s a warning—or worse.”

Her smirk faded, replaced by something harder, resolute. “Then we hit back. Hart’s the key—dig into her, find the cracks. I’ve got sources, ways to pull strings you can’t.”

I raised a brow, caught off guard again. “You’re in?”

“I’m already in,” she said, simple, like it was a done deal. “You just made it official.”

Fuck, she was something else. I grinned wider, leaning toward her, close enough to catch that sharp floral scent of hers that'd been driving me crazy all night. "All right. Partners, then."

"Partners," she echoed, her voice dropping, a glint in her eyes that said she wasn't done pushing me yet. "But don't think this means I trust you completely."

"Wouldn't dream of it," I shot back, matching her tone. "Wouldn't want you to."

She laughed—soft, real, cutting through the heavy air—and it hit me low, stirring that mix of want and something deeper. I'd brought her here to come clean, to pull her back from the edge, but now? Now she was diving in with me, eyes wide open, and I wasn't sure I could keep her safe from what was coming.

"Let's get inside," I said, nodding toward the house. "Figure out our next move."

She didn't argue, just grabbed her clutch and stepped out, the silver dress catching the moonlight as she moved. I followed, my mind racing—Hart, Department 77, the mess I'd just dragged Claire deeper into. But as I watched her climb the porch steps, that stubborn tilt to her chin, I knew one thing for damn sure: I wasn't letting her out of my sight. Not tonight. Not until this was done.

The old Dane home creaked under our weight as we stepped inside, the smell of salt and wood hitting me like a memory. The living room was sparse—faded sofa, a scratched coffee table, a few framed photos of us as kids before it all went to hell. Claire glanced around, taking it in, but didn't comment. She just dropped onto the sofa, kicking off her heels with a sigh, and looked at me expectantly.

"All right, Dane," she said, folding her arms. "Hart. Spill it."

I paced to the window, staring out at the black water, the horizon lost in the dark.

“She’s mayor—elected three years back, all smiles and promises. Too clean, like I said. Husband’s a shipping guy, controls half the docks. Brother’s ex-military, black-ops type, maybe. Not confirmed. And tonight, she couldn’t take her eyes off that file. She’s in—maybe running point, maybe just a cog, but she’s tied to them.”

Claire leaned forward, elbows on her knees. “Shipping’s a goldmine for smuggling—drugs, weapons, whatever Department 77’s moving. And black-ops? That’s not a coincidence.”

“Sure,” I said, turning to face her. “She’s got the connections to make it work. But we need more—proof, something solid.”

“I can get it,” she said, voice steady, that glint back in her eyes. “I’ve got a contact in D.C.—old-schooljournalist, owes me a favor. He’s dug into worse than Hart before.”

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I nodded, impressed despite myself. “Good. I’ll lean on Norton—you met him. He’s already digging into her. Between us, we’ll crack her open.”

Claire smirked, leaning back. “Look at us—teamwork.”

“Yeah,” I said, crossing to the sofa, dropping beside her. “Don’t get used to it.”

She laughed again, and fuck, it was a sound I could live on. But as the quiet settled, her hand brushed mine—just a graze, unintentional—and the air shifted again. Heat, trust, danger—all tangled up, pulling tight. I didn’t move, didn’t dare, but I felt it: we were in this now, together, and whatever came next, I’d kill to keep her breathing.

19

CLAIRE

“Where am I sleeping?”

Marcus didn’t answer right away.

He stood in front of me, still in that damn suit, his tie loosened, his shirt unbuttoned just enough to tease the hard ridges of muscle beneath. He had one hand braced against the wooden beam of the old Dane house, his blue eyes scanning me like he was already imagining exactly where I should be.

Like he already knew.

Heat licked up my spine, settling low in my stomach. Because I knew, too.

“Stay here,” he said finally, his voice rough. He disappeared down a hall, shoes barely making a sound against the creaking floorboards. I heard a door open, something rustling, and then he was back, tossing a worn black Metallica T-shirt toward me.

I caught it, glancing down at the faded cotton, the edges slightly frayed with time. The scent of him clung to it—clean, masculine, something darker beneath.

“From your room?” I asked, arching a brow.

Marcus leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed. “Yeah. Teenage me had excellent taste.”

I smirked, holding it up. “Was teenage you built like a linebacker, too?”

His lips curved slightly, gaze flicking over me in that slow, consuming way that made my skin prickle. “Not quite.”

Curious, I slipped it over my head, letting the soft fabric fall into place. It wasn’t oversized like I expected—it fit snug, clinging to my breasts, hugging my waist.

I smoothed my hands over the hem, feeling the way it skimmed my bare thighs, the only barrier between me and Marcus’s dark, hungry stare. The silver dress still hung on my frame, loose now, straps slipping from my shoulders where I hadn’t fully removed it.

I felt the heat of his gaze trace every inch of exposed skin.

Marcus’s voice was low, rough. “Take the dress off.”

A shiver ran down my spine.

I met his eyes, slow and deliberate, watching the way his jaw tightened, the way his fingers flexed at his sides like he was barely holding himself back.

“You could help me,” I murmured, tilting my head in challenge.

Something dangerous flashed across his face, but he didn’t move. “I want to watch.”

The air between us crackled, thick with something neither of us could ignore.

I dragged my hands up, sliding my fingers under the straps of my dress, pushing them down, inch by inch. The fabric whispered over my skin, cool against the heat spreading through me. It pooled at my waist, baring my shoulders, my collarbones, the swell of my breasts beneath the too-tight cotton of his shirt.

Marcus’s throat worked, his restraint razor-thin.

I let the dress fall lower, past my hips, down my thighs, until it finally slipped to the floor in a shimmer of silver fabric.

Now it was just me, standing in Marcus Dane’s childhood home, wearing nothing but his old T-shirt and the heat of his stare.

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No heels. No panties. Just his shirt.

Marcus exhaled harshly, his control splintering.

I smoothed my hands down the hem. “I could grab something from my suitcase,” I murmured.

Marcus moved fast. One second he was leaning against the frame, the next he was in front of me, fingers twisting around the bottom of the shirt, toying with the fabric.

“No,” he said, voice low. “I like you better like this.”

My breath caught.

His fingers skimmed my thigh, teasing, deliberate, and the shift in the air was instant. The exhaustion, the adrenaline crash, the weight of the night—it all burned away, leaving only this. Only him.

I tilted my head, meeting his gaze. “You think you get a say in what I wear?”

His smirk was slow, dark. “You want to argue about it?”

No. Not even a little.

Marcus didn’t wait for permission. He reached for me, fingers slipping beneath the hem of the T-shirt, dragging it up just enough to bare my thighs, my hips. His knuckles brushed my stomach, a ghost of a touch, and I sucked in a sharp breath.

“You’re not wearing anything underneath,” he murmured, his voice shifting, going darker.

I bit my lip. “You knew that already.”

His hands flexed against my skin. “Yeah,” he admitted. “But it’s different now. Now it’s just you. No party. No dress. No distractions.”

Just me. Just him. Just this sharp, electric thing between us that neither of us could fight.

I let him lift the shirt higher, baring me completely. I should have felt exposed, vulnerable—but all I felt was his. His hands on me, his eyes devouring me, the rough pads of his fingers dragging over my stomach, my hips, my thighs.

“Marcus,” I whispered, a plea, a challenge—both.

He dropped to his knees.

My breath stalled.

I had expected him to lift me, pin me against the wall, take what he wanted. But this?

This was worship.

His fingers wrapped around my thighs, gripping, spreading, his mouth ghosting over my bare skin. He didn’t dive in right away—no, he took his damn time, pressing slow, open-mouthed kisses along the inside of my thigh, his breath warm and teasing.

I dug my fingers into his hair. “Stop teasing.”

He looked up at me, wicked amusement flashing in his features. “You’re in my house. My rules.”

I’d been in his house earlier—Dominion Hall, with its looming presence, its corridors steeped in secrets. But this was different. That fortress had been built for power, for strategy, for control. This place—the old Dane house on Sullivan’s Island—felt raw. Real. It wasn’t curated for appearances or intimidation. It was lived-in, worn by time and weather, shaped by something far more personal than empire-building.

And that made it more dangerous.

Because Dominion was Marcus’s battlefield. But this? This felt like his past. His bones. His breath.

I didn’t have time to argue.

His mouth was on me, hot, slow, devastating.

A sharp gasp tore from my throat as he licked into me, soft at first, a slow stroke designed to drive me insane. His hands tightened on my hips, holding me in place as he worked me open, each flick of his tongue sending pleasure shooting through me.

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I trembled, thighs threatening to close, but he just pushed them wider, pinning me against the wall with nothing but his mouth and the slow, relentless pace of his tongue.

“Marcus,” I moaned, trying to grind against him, trying to get more.

His grip tightened. “I said, my rules.”

Then he sucked my clit into his mouth, hard, and my vision whited out.

Pleasure slammed into me, my body shaking, every muscle pulling tight as he drove me toward the edge. He didn’t let up, didn’t slow—just kept eating me like he couldn’t get enough, like he wanted to break me completely.

And then, just as I was about to shatter, he did something unexpected.

He dragged his teeth over me.

Not enough to hurt—just enough to make me snap.

A strangled cry ripped from my throat as I came, pleasure crashing through me so hard I almost collapsed. Marcus caught me, hands strong, steady, guiding me through it.

By the time he pulled away, I was shaking. He looked wrecked—his mouth slick, his pupils blown, his breathing uneven.

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, grinning like a fucking devil.

“Still want to argue with me?” he murmured, voice deep and wrecked.

I didn’t hesitate. I dropped to my knees in front of him, fingers already working at his belt.

His smirk faltered.

“Claire—”

I looked up at him through my lashes, slow and teasing as I pulled his zipper down.

“My turn, Dane.”

His breath caught, hands flexing at his sides.

I tightened my fingers around him, stroking once, slow and firm. “And I don’t play by your rules.”

And then I took him into my mouth.

This time, I was the one making him lose control.

I kept my grip light, my fingers wrapping around the base of his cock, my tongue flicking over the head just to taste him. He was hot, thick, pulsing against my palm, his whole body vibrating with restraint. I could feel it—the way he was barely holding himself together, the way his muscles tensed.

I met his gaze as I slid my tongue along the underside of his cock, slow and deliberate. His jaw was clenched so tight it looked like it might crack.

“Fuck,” he muttered, his voice rough, wrecked. His hands flexed in my hair, like he wanted to guide me, but he was fighting it—letting me do this my way.

Good.

Because I planned to take my time.

I sucked him in, hollowing my cheeks, taking him deeper, letting my nails trail lightly along his thighs as I set a slow rhythm. I could hear his breath quicken, feel the way his body coiled, could taste the salt of his skin as I worked him over, inch by inch.

Marcus let out a ragged groan, his fingers tightening in my hair. “Claire.” My name sounded delicious on his lips.

I hummed around him, just like I had below Dominion Hall, sending a shiver through his whole body. Then I pulled back, lips slick, breath warm as I dragged my mouth along his length, teasing him with just the edge of my tongue. “Something wrong, Dane?” I murmured, stroking him, slow and firm.

He growled, dark and dangerous. “You’re playing with fire.”

I smirked. “And?”

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His hand fisted in my hair, tilting my head back, forcing my gaze to his. “And I don’t fucking burn alone.”

Before I could respond, he moved.

Fast.

One second, I was on my knees, the next, I was flat on my back on the old wooden floor, Marcus looming over me, his hands braced on either side of my head. The Metallica shirt had ridden up, baring my stomach, my thighs, leaving me completely exposed beneath him.

I let out a sharp breath, but I wasn’t scared. No, I was turned on as hell.

I licked my lips, watching his eyes track the movement. “Gonna do something about it?”

A wicked grin flashed across his face. He reached between us, palming himself, lining up. “You have no fucking idea.”

He thrust into me, deep and slow, filling me to the hilt, stretching me open.

I gasped, back arching, nails digging into his shoulders as he started to move. He wasn’t gentle. He wasn’t careful. He fucked me like he wanted to claim every inch of me, like he wanted me to feel him for days.

And I did.

Every stroke, every drag of his cock, every rough sound he made against my skin—it was all fire, all consuming, all him.

My nails raked down his back, my hips lifting to meet every thrust, the friction sending sparks through my veins. “Marcus?—”

His hand shot between us, his thumb finding my clit, pressing just enough to make me see stars. “Come for me,” he rasped, voice dark, demanding.

And fuck, I did.

Pleasure crashed through me, sharp and sudden, my whole body seizing around him as I shattered. Marcus groaned, his thrusts turning erratic, his breath hot against my neck as he chased his own release.

A heartbeat later, he tensed, his grip tightening, a rough curse tumbling from his lips as he came, buried deep inside me.

For a long moment, neither of us moved. Just the sound of our ragged breathing, the distant crash of waves outside, the heat of his body pressing me into the floor.

Then Marcus lifted his head, his dark gaze locking onto mine, something unreadable flickering behind his eyes.

I smirked, running a slow hand down his chest, feeling the rapid beat of his heart. “So, about where I’m sleeping ...”

He chuckled, low and rough, brushing a damp strand of hair from my face. “With me.”

I arched a brow. “That wasn’t a request, was it?”

His lips quirked. “No.”

I rolled my eyes, but I didn’t argue. Because honestly? I didn’t want to be anywhere else.

20

MARCUS

I woke up with Claire’s heat pressed against me, her bare legs tangled in mine, the old Metallica T-shirt riding up her hips as she breathed slow and steady on the creaky mattress. Sullivan’s Island had swallowed us whole last night—the salt air, the crash of waves, the whispers of a life I’d left behind—and for a few hours, I’d let it. Let her.

But dawn crept through the cracked blinds, slicing the room into jagged strips of light, and reality clawed its way back. Department 77 wasn’t waiting, Evelyn Hart wasn’t sleeping, and I’d just spilled enough truth to Claire to sink us both if she turned it loose.

I slid out from under her, careful not to wake her, and stood by the window, staring at the water churning beyond the dunes. The old Dane house groaned around me, a tired beast settling its bones, and I felt the weight of it—of her—settling into me, too. Claire wasn’t just a tool anymore, wasn’t just a wand to point at shadows. She was under my skin, in my blood, and I’d kill to keep her safe. That scared me more than the mess we were in.

“Marcus?” Her voice was rough with sleep, pulling me back. She propped herself up on one elbow, blonde hair a mess, gray eyes sharp even half-awake. The T-shirt clung to her, barely covering what I’d claimed last night, and I had to look away before I dragged her back under me.

“We’re heading to Dominion,” I said, grabbing my keys off the dresser. “Time to move.”

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She didn't argue, just nodded and swung her legs off the bed, stretching in a way that made the shirt lift, exposing a sliver of skin I wanted to taste again. "Gimme five," she muttered, padding toward her suitcase in the corner.

"Keep the shirt," I said, voice low, and she shot me a smirk over her shoulder that hit me square in the chest.

We hit the road fast, the Bugatti eating up the miles between Sullivan's and Dominion Hall. Claire sat shotgun, barefoot, legs tucked under her, still in that faded black tee and nothing else but a pair of jeans she'd yanked on. The windows were down, the marsh air whipping through, carrying the tang of brackish water and the faint rot of low tide. She didn't talk much, just stared out at the blur of green and gray, her fingers tapping a restless rhythm on her knee. I kept my eyes on the road, but my head was spinning—Hart, that envelope, the hotel break-in, all of it piling up like storm clouds ready to burst.

Dominion Hall loomed ahead as we crested the last rise, its gates glinting under the morning sun like teeth bared for a fight. I pulled in slow, the mechanism whining as the gate swung open, and drove through, gravel crunching under the tires. The place felt heavier today, like it knew what was coming.

I parked out front, cutting the engine, and Claire climbed out before I could say anything, her bare feet hitting the ground like she owned it. That T-shirt fluttered in the breeze, too tight across her chest, too short to hide the curve of her hips, and I caught myself staring longer than I should've. She didn't notice—or didn't care—just strode toward the entrance, all New York sass in a Southern war zone.

The foyer hit us with its chill, marble floors gleaming under the cold light. I'd barely shut the door when Ryker's voice sliced through the air, sharp and pissed, echoing off the walls.

"Marcus, what the fuck?"

He was waiting, pacing the ops room doorway, six-four of coiled fury in a black shirt and boots that looked ready to stomp through concrete. His eyes locked on me first, then flicked to Claire—still in my shirt, still barefoot—and his jaw tightened so hard I thought it'd crack.

"Ryker—" I started, but he cut me off, storming forward, his steps thudding like war drums.

"You bring herhere?" he snapped, voice low and venomous, stopping a foot from me. "After last night? After you let her walk off with that file? I told you to keep her on a leash, not drag her into the fucking heart of it!"

Claire stepped up beside me, chin lifted, unfazed. "Hey, ease up. It's not what you think."

Ryker's gaze swung to her, dark and cutting, like she was a grenade he hadn't decided to pull the pin on yet. "Not what I think? You're a podcast journalist sniffing around our dirt, and now you're standing in my house wearing his goddamn shirt. Lady, we're in enough trouble without you stirring the pot louder than a fuckin' tornado."

"It's different now," she said, voice steady, meeting his glare head-on.

"How?" Ryker shot back, crossing his arms, his stance wide like he was ready to throw us both out.

I caught his eye, held it—long, deliberate, letting him see it wasn't just some fling, wasn't just me screwing around. This was more, deeper, and I wasn't backing off. His brows twitched, a flicker of something crossing his face—disbelief, maybe, or just exhaustion.

He groaned, loud and rough, dragging a hand down his face. “Fuck me, I must be as crazy as you two to even consider this.” He pointed at me, then her, his voice dropping to a growl. “But if we're doing this, we're doing it my way. No podcasts, no reckless bullshit. We're going after Hart—hard and fast—and you're either in line or out the door.”

Claire didn't flinch. “I'm in.”

I nodded once, sharp. “We've got a rough plan. Hart's the target—crack her open, find the ties. We'll sort the rest as it comes.”

Ryker exhaled through his nose, still eyeing us like we were a bad bet, but he didn't push back. “Fine. But this stays tight—me, you, her. No one else until we know what we're dealing with.”

We'd just hashed out the edges of it—nothing concrete, just a skeleton of intent—when Ryker's phone buzzed in his pocket, a harsh vibration that cut through the room's heavy silence. He yanked it out, glanced at the screen, and his face shifted, a shadow of concern passing over it.

“It's Isabel,” he said, voice clipped, already stepping away. “I gotta take this.”

He moved toward the corner, phone pressed to his ear, but I caught the tension in his shoulders, the way his free hand flexed like he was bracing for a hit. Something was off—badly off—and my gut twisted, a cold thread snaking through me. Isabel didn't call during working hours unless it mattered, and Ryker didn't look like that unless it

was serious.

Claire shifted beside me, picking up on it too, her eyes narrowing as she watched him. Ryker's voice stayed low, a murmur I couldn't catch, but his gaze darted to Claire—quick, sharp, loaded—and my stomach dropped.

He ended the call fast, shoving the phone back in his pocket, and turned to us, his expression carved from stone. He didn't speak right away, just stood there, breathing hard, like he was weighing how to drop whatever bomb he'd just caught.

"Spit it out," I said, stepping forward, my voice tight with a mix of dread and impatience.

Ryker's eyes flicked between us, settling on Claire, and when he spoke, his words landed like a sledgehammer. "Isabel's at The Palmetto Rose. With the police. I'm sorry, Claire. They found Diego Gil—face down in the pool. He's dead."

The air sucked out of the room, leaving a hollow roar in my ears. Claire froze beside me, her face draining of color, those gray eyes wide and unblinking. I felt it hit her—shock first, then something rawer, sharper, cutting through the steel she usually wore.

"Dead?" she whispered, barely audible, her hands tightening into fists at her sides. "Diego's ... dead?"

Ryker nodded, slow, his jaw tight. "Yeah. Cops are calling it an accident—drowning, too much booze. But Isabel's not buying it. Said the camera footage was weird, and that it kept going in and out all night."

My mind raced, gears grinding as the piecesslammed together. Diego—flirty, sharp, a loose end who'd been with Claire all night, who'd seen the file, who'd been at the

masquerade. Department 77 didn't fuck around. This was a message, a knife aimed at Claire, at us, and they'd carved it right through her best friend's chest.

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Claire's breath heaved, a sound that sliced into me, and she took a step back, her bare feet scuffing the marble. "No. No, that's not—he wouldn't—" She stopped, swallowing hard, her hands trembling now. "He was fine. He was fine when we left him."

"Claire," I said, low, reaching for her, but she jerked away, her eyes blazing with something wild—grief, fury, guilt, all tangled up and spilling over.

"Don't," she snapped, voice cracking. "Don't tell me it's okay. It's not fucking okay." She turned to Ryker, her stance shifting, like she was gearing up to fight. "You're sure? You're absolutely sure it's him?"

Ryker's nod was curt, unflinching. "Isabel ID'd him. No mistake."

She pressed a hand to her mouth, muffling a sound—half sob, half growl—and I saw it: the moment she locked it down, shoving the pain somewhere deep where it couldn't touch her yet. Her shoulders squared, her jaw set, and when she spoke again, her voice was cold, lethal. "This isn't an accident. They did this. Department 77. Hart. Someone."

"Yeah," I said, stepping closer, my own anger simmering, a slow burn igniting in my gut. "They're tightening the noose. Hitting where it hurts."

Ryker's eyes flicked to me, dark and unreadable. "If they're bold enough to take out her friend, we're not just in trouble—we're fucked. They know she's with us now. They're not playing defense anymore."

Claire's gaze snapped to him, sharp as a blade. "Then we don't either. We go after Hart—now, harder. She's the key—I'll rip her apart if I have to."

I caught the edge in her voice, the way it trembled just under the surface, and I knew she wasn't just talking strategy. This was personal now, a wound bleeding fresh, and she'd tear through anything to make it right. I'd seen that look before—in war zones, in men who'd lost brothers—and it scared me, because I couldn't let her burn herself out. Not her.

"Claire," I said, softer this time, grabbing her arm, forcing her to look at me. "We'll get them. But we do it smart—we don't charge in blind, too fast."

She yanked free, eyes flashing. "Smart? Diego's dead, Marcus. They're not waiting for us to besmart."

"She's right," Ryker cut in, voice flat but heavy. "They're moving fast. We've got no time to pussyfoot around Hart. But we've got to be precise—hit where it counts, not just swing wild."

I nodded, the three of us locked in a silent pact, the air thick with unspoken stakes. Diego's death wasn't just a blow—it was a flare, lighting up how deep we were, how close they'd gotten. Hart was the thread, the one we could pull to unravel this, and we'd do it together—me, Claire, Ryker. No plan laid out yet, just the raw intent to bury her and whoever she answered to.

Claire's hands balled into fists again, her bare feet planted like she was ready to storm out right then. "I need to see him. I need to?—"

"No," Ryker said, sharp, stepping in front of her. "You go near that hotel, you're a target. Isabel's handling it—let her. I've got our guys looking out for her."

“She’s right,” I added, hating the way Claire’s face twisted, like I’d betrayed her. “They’ll be watching. Waiting for you to show.”

Her eyes met mine, and for a second, I saw it—the crack in her armor, the grief she couldn’t hide. Then it was gone, replaced by that cold, cutting resolve. “Fine. But I’m not sitting here doing nothing. We move on Hart—today.”

“Agreed,” Ryker said, glancing at me, a silent question in his eyes. I gave him a nod—small, firm. We were in, all the way, and whatever came next, we’d face it head-on.

The room pulsed with tension, a live current tying us together—anger, loss, purpose—and I felt it settle into me, a weight I’d carry as long as Claire was beside me. Diego’s death was fuel now, and we’d burn it all down to get to the truth. Hart didn’t know what was coming, but she’d feel it soon enough.

21

CLAIRE

The grief was raw. A jagged wound inside me, gaping and unrelenting. I wasn’t sure how long I stood there, silent and still, staring at the floor of Dominion Hall as my pulse thudded dully in my ears. The weight of what had happened settled over me, pressing, suffocating.

Marcus and Ryker were near—close enough that I could feel their presence, their intensity—but neither of them spoke. The air in the vast space was thick with something unspoken, something I couldn’t name.

I should have cried.

Normal people would have.

When I'd heard the news, when Ryker's words had reached my ears in a voice that didn't sound real—flat, clinical, shattering—I should have broken. Should have felt my knees buckle, should have felt the tears come, hot and endless.

But there was nothing.

No sobs, no shaking, no flood of grief to drown in. Just an empty, hollow kind of numbness. A slow-building pressure in my chest that felt more like anger than sadness.

Was that wrong?

Was I wrong?

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I didn't know how to process this. Didn't know what to do with it. My brain kept skipping over the loss, like a record stuck on a scratch, replaying the same thought over and over.

He's gone. He's gone. He's gone.

Diego.

I swallowed hard, my throat tight, my fingers curling into fists at my sides.

I should call his parents. Should hear his mother's voice, his father's quiet grief. But the thought made my stomach turn, made the walls feel too close, like I couldn't get enough air.

I wasn't ready for that.

I didn't have the strength to hear their pain, to be the one who had to explain, who had to speak the words that still didn't feel real.

Maybe tomorrow.

Maybe never.

I drew in a breath, slow and deep, forcing my lungs to expand against the crushing weight inside me. My pulse thudded in my ears, a dull, relentless rhythm.

Diego was gone.

And I was still standing.

Numb. Angry.

Waiting for the grief to come.

Then, warm fingers brushed my wrist. Light. Careful. A touch that could have been an accident if not for the heat of it.

I swallowed again.

Marcus.

I didn't look up at first. I couldn't. My body felt brittle, as if the moment I moved, I'd shatter into a thousand sharp-edged pieces. But then his fingers curled, not tightly, just enough to anchor me. I let out a slow, uneven breath.

"Come with me," he said, his voice softer than I'd ever heard it.

Not a command. Not a threat.

A request.

I finally lifted my gaze to his, and what I saw there nearly undid me.

He wasn't cold, wasn't sharp-edged and unreadable like he'd been at the start. His expression was steady, but something dark lurked behind it. Not anger. Not irritation. Something deeper.

Something I didn't know how to handle.

I didn't resist when he led me up the grand staircase, the weight of his palm at the small of my back both grounding and electric. Ryker watched us go, his expression unreadable, but he didn't stop us.

Marcus's suite was exactly what I should have expected from him, and yet, it still stole my breath.

Sleek. Dark. Masculine.

Not cold.

The walls were deep slate, the kind of color that absorbed the daylight filtering through the tall windows rather than reflecting it. A massive bed dominated the space, covered in charcoal-gray sheets and a thick, unrumpled duvet. A fireplace stood against one wall, the black marble frame striking against the raw brick of the hearth.

Built-in bookshelves lined another wall, filled with an array of books that were worn but not dusty, their spines cracked with use. Not just décor. He actually read them.

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It was intimate. Personal.

And that was what made it different from the rest of Dominion Hall.

Marcus shut the door behind us, the heavy latch clicking into place, and when I turned to face him, something unreadable flickered in his expression.

“No woman has ever been in here,” he said simply.

My pulse ticked up.

“In Dominion Hall?” I asked, though I already knew the answer.

His lips quirked, just slightly. “In my private quarters. When I entertain, I use a guest room.”

The word entertain sent a slow, sharp prickle through my chest. I shouldn’t have cared. Shouldn’t have felt anything about the way he phrased it.

But I did.

Still, the thought of this—of standing in a space that no other woman had touched—was a thrill I hadn’t expected.

I studied him. “And the house on Sullivan’s Island?”

His jaw tensed, just slightly, before he spoke. “No woman has ever been intimate

with me inside that house. Not until you.”

Something inside me twisted. Tightened.

I wasn’t stupid. I knew Marcus Dane had a past, that he wasn’t a man who spent his nights alone. But the knowledge that no woman had ever been inside his sanctuary—not here, not there—sent a shiver through me.

I didn’t know what it meant. But I knew it meant something.

For the first time since stepping into Dominion Hall, I felt special.

Maybe even ... his.

I swallowed, my throat thick, my grief still hovering like a storm cloud, but the weight of it had shifted, just slightly.

The air between us changed. The grief was still there, but so was the tension—the thing between us that neither of us could seem to sever, no matter how hard we tried.

Marcus exhaled sharply, as if he could feel it, too. “Come on. Shower. I’ll get your bag from the car.”

I nodded, grateful for the moment to collect myself.

The shower was hot, steam swirling around me as I braced my hands against the cool tile and let the water wash over me. My body was sore, exhaustion pulling at my muscles, but it wasn’t the kind of exhaustion sleep could fix.

Still, for those few minutes, I let myself be still. Let myself breathe.

When I finally stepped out of the shower, my skin flushed and warm, my suitcase was waiting just inside the bathroom. The zipper was already halfway undone, Marcus's silent way of telling me he'd left it for me to use but hadn't dared open it.

I rifled through the clothes, looking for something clean. Something that didn't smell like yesterday's mistakes and exhaustion.

I pulled out a fitted black tank top, soft and ribbed. The neckline dipped low—not scandalous, but enough to catch the eye. Enough that I knew Marcus would notice.

Next, a pair of dark-wash denim shorts. They weren't too short, but they hugged my hips in a way that felt just a little dangerous, a little tempting. The fabric was soft, broken-in, the kind that felt like home.

I dug for a bra and found a simple black lace one, unlined but delicate, the floral patterns just barely visible through the tank top when the light hit just right.

My sandals were near the bottom of the suitcase—leather, well-worn, comfortable. I slipped them on, then ran my fingers through my damp hair, letting it fall in loose waves around my shoulders.

I glanced at the other clothes in my suitcase—the dressier blouses, the sleek jeans I normally wore when I needed to look sharp, polished, untouchable. Those were the things I usually reached for. The things that made me feel like I had armor.

But not today.

Today, I needed comfort.

I needed fabric that didn't suffocate me, that didn't remind me of press junkets and calculated appearances. I needed something soft, something worn. Something that didn't feel like a costume.

The tank top and shorts weren't what I usually wore in the field, but this wasn't just a case anymore. Diego was gone. And the world had changed.

The weight of that truth settled deeper into my bones as I took a slow breath, pushing back the edges of the grief that still refused to fully take shape.

I turned away from my suitcase, running a towel through the ends of my hair.

And when I looked up, Marcus was there.

He stood near the door, leaning against the frame, arms crossed—but not in that usual defensive, closed-off way. His posture was relaxed, his expression unreadable but not hard. Just watching. Waiting.

He didn't say anything, didn't rush me. Just let me move at my own pace, let me have the space to breathe. It was strange, seeing this side of him—the quietpatience, the gentleness lurking beneath all the sharp edges.

And then, taking a breath, I turned toward the door.

It was still strange, being in his space.

As I walked slowly around his room, I trailed my fingers along the dark wood of his dresser, taking things in more carefully now. The bookshelves, the rich textures, the neatly arranged bottles of cologne—evidence of the man behind the fortress.

But it wasn't until I noticed the framed photo on his desk that I stopped.

It was small, unassuming, as if he hadn't intended it to be a centerpiece.

Two men stood side by side in fatigues, the desert stretching behind them in a blur of heat and dust. One was Marcus—his face younger but still carrying that sharp, unreadable intensity. The other man was grinning, his arm slung around Marcus's shoulder, his teeth flashing bright against sun-darkened skin.

I reached for the frame without thinking, my fingers brushing over the smooth glass.

Behind me, I heard Marcus shift.

His gaze locked onto the picture in my hands, and in that moment, the air changed.

Something flickered in his expression—something fast, almost imperceptible. Not anger. Not irritation. Something closer to shame.

I lifted the frame slightly, my voice soft. "Who is he?"

Marcus didn't answer right away.

Instead, he stepped forward, his jaw ticking as he took the frame from my hands. He stared at it, thumb brushing over the edge, before exhaling through his nose.

“Jason Lawson,” he said finally. His voice was different now—rougher, quieter. “We served together.”

I waited, sensing there was more.

Marcus set the frame back down, but he didn’t look away from it.

“We were on assignment overseas,” he continued, his fingers tightening into a fist at his side. “Marine Raiders. Covert op. Intel was bad. They said the village was clear.” A slow, humorless laugh escaped him, but there was nothing funny about it. “It wasn’t.”

I didn’t move. Didn’t breathe.

Marcus’s shoulders had gone stiff, his entire body coiled like a wire stretched too tight.

“They ambushed us,” he said. “Took out our lead vehicle with an IED. We scrambled, tried to recover, but we were outnumbered. Cut off.” His jaw clenched. “Lawson was on my six. He should have made it out.”

I knew where this was going. I felt the answer in my bones before he even spoke it.

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“But he didn’t,” I murmured.

Marcus’s throat worked as he swallowed. “No.” His voice was quieter now, just a breath above a whisper. “He didn’t.”

I could picture it—the heat, the sand, the gunfire splitting the air. I could see Jason turning toward Marcus in the chaos, shouting something, reaching for him?—

And then, nothing.

Gone.

Just like Diego.

Marcus lifted a hand and dragged it through his hair, exhaling sharply as if he was trying to shake off the memory.

I didn’t know that feeling. Not yet.

But I suspected I would.

Diego’s death hadn’t sunk in fully—not in the way that cracked you open and left you hollow. I hadn’t lost someone that close before. Not someone who had been in my life every damn day, who had known me better than I knew myself.

But I knew it was coming.

I would wake up expecting his texts, his calls, his sarcastic remarks on my latest episode. I would turn to share something with him and remember—he's gone.

And then, I would understand.

I would know what it was like to carry ghosts. To wake up expecting someone's voice only to remember they'd been silenced.

"Marcus." His name left my lips before I even knew I was saying it.

He looked at me then, really looked at me, and the storm in his eyes was the same one I felt raging inside me.

We weren't the same. But in this, we understood each other.

I took a step closer. So did he.

Neither of us spoke.

We didn't need to.

22

MARCUS

I couldn't take my eyes off her.

Claire stood there in my room, her damp hair falling in loose waves over her shoulders, the black tank top clinging to her swells, those denim shorts hugging her hips in a way that made my throat tighten.

She was barefoot, toes curling slightly against the hardwood, and something about that—her raw, unguarded presence—hit me differently.

This wasn't the same as before, not the wild, carnal pull that had us tearing at each other in tunnels and on weathered floors. This was new, softer, a quiet ache that settled deep in my chest and wouldn't let go.

She was the first woman to step into this space—my private quarters at Dominion Hall, my inner sanctum where no one else had ever been. Not a lover, not a fling, not even the women I'd taken to guest rooms for a night and sent away before dawn.

And she was the first, outside my father and brothers, to hear about Jason—his name spilling from me like blood from an old wound, unbidden and raw. Why her? Why did I feel this pull, this need to let her in? Was it like the bond I'd forged with men in battle—friends turned brothers through spilled blood, lives saved and lost, a brotherhood sealed in the dirt and chaos? Maybe. Maybe it was that kind of fire, tempered now into something gentler, something I didn't know how to name.

We came together slowly, not with the frantic hunger of before. I stepped closer, my feet silent on the floor, and she didn't move away.

Her gray eyes locked on mine, steady and searching, and I reached out, my fingers brushing her arm—tentative, like I was touching her for the first time. Her skin was warm, soft under the rough pads of my hands, and I traced the line of her elbow, up to her shoulder, feeling the faint shiver that ran through her.

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This wasn't about claiming her, not yet. It was about feeling her, knowing her in a way I hadn't before.

She tilted her head, her lips parting just enough to draw my gaze, and then she lifted her hands to the hem of that tank top. My breath caught as she peeled it off, slow and deliberate, the fabric sliding over her head and dropping to the floor.

The black lace bra came next, her fingers deft at the clasp, and when it fell away, I went hard—instantly, painfully—yearning pulsing through me like a live current.

Her shorts followed, unbuttoned and tugged down her thighs, leaving her bare except for the air between us. She stood there, unashamed, staring up at me with those piercing eyes, and I felt stripped too, like she could see every crack I'd hidden for years.

“Go shower,” she said, her voice low, steady, cutting through the haze in my head.

I didn't argue.

I nodded, turning toward the bathroom, my pulse thudding in my ears. The door clicked shut behind me, and I stripped off my clothes—shirt, pants, boxers—leaving them in a heap on the tile.

The shower hissed to life, steam rising fast, and I stepped under the spray, letting the hot water pound against my shoulders. I didn't rush. My hands moved slow, soaping my chest, my arms, the tension in my muscles easing but not the ache in my core.

I was almost nervous—me, Marcus Dane, who'd faced death without blinking, who'd buried men and secrets without a second thought. Nervous because of her, because of what this was becoming.

The water sluiced over me, rinsing away the sweat and the day, but my mind stayed on her—on the way she'd looked at me, the way her voice had softened when she'd said my name.

I shut off the shower, grabbed a towel, and dried off, wrapping it around my hips before stepping back into the room.

She was on my bed, under the sheets, the charcoal-gray duvet pushed aside in a careless heap. She lay on her side, one arm tucked under her head, the curve of her hip outlined beneath the thin fabric.

My breath hitched, and I let the towel drop, crossing the room in silence. The mattress dipped under my weight as I slipped in behind her, my chest pressing against her back, my arms sliding around her waist. Her skin was warm, her scent sharp and floral, and I buried my face in her hair, inhaling deep.

We didn't speak. Words felt too heavy, too fragile for what this was. I just held her, my hands splayed across her stomach, feeling the slow rise and fall of herbreathing. Her body fit against mine like it belonged there, and for a long time, that was enough—just the quiet, the closeness, the way her heartbeat pulsed under my palm.

Then she turned, shifting in my arms until she faced me, her eyes locking onto mine. She didn't say anything, just leaned in and kissed me—soft at first, her lips brushing mine like a question. I answered, kissing her back, slow and deep, tasting the salt of her grief and the heat of something else.

Our eyes stayed open, locked, and I felt her hand slide down my chest, over the

ridges of my stomach, until her fingers found my cock—rigid, waiting, straining for her touch.

Her grip was gentle, tentative, stroking me fully from base to tip, her thumb brushing over the head in a way that made my breath catch. She didn't look away, didn't break that gaze, and I let her—let her touch me, let her see me, raw and unguarded.

My hips twitched, a low groan escaping my throat, but I didn't rush her. This was hers to lead, and I gave it to her, every shudder, every pulse of want.

Then she moved, climbing over me, her thighs straddling my face as she lowered herself down. My hands slid to her hips, gripping her tight, and my mouth dove in, tasting her—hot, slick, sweet as sin.

She gasped, a sound that shot straight through me, and then her lips closed around my cock, taking me deep. The room narrowed to this—to her, to us, to the wet heat of her mouth and the velvet of her against my tongue.

I licked her slow, deliberate, my tongue tracing her folds, circling her clit with a pressure that made her moan around me. The vibration hummed through mycock, and I groaned into her, my fingers digging into her thighs to hold her steady. She was dripping, coating my lips, my chin, and I drank her in, savoring every shudder, every hitch in her breath.

My tongue flattened, pressing hard against her clit, then flicked fast, relentless, until her hips bucked, grinding against my face.

Her mouth worked me in tandem—sucking me deep, her tongue swirling over the tip, her hand stroking what she couldn't take. The heat of her, the tightness, the way she hollowed her cheeks—it was too much, too good, and I felt the edge creeping closer.

I wanted her to come first, needed it, so I ran my thumbs down the middle of her ass, spreading everything, angled my head, sucking her clit into my mouth, rolling it gently between my lips while my tongue flicked over it, fast and firm.

She whimpered, the sound muffled around my cock, and her thighs trembled, clamping tighter around my head. I could feel her tightening, her body coiling, and I didn't let up—sucking harder, licking faster, my hands pulling her down so she couldn't escape the pressure.

Her hips rocked, desperate, chasing it, and then she broke—coming hard, her cry vibrating through me as her release flooded my mouth. I lapped at her, greedy, drawing it out, feeling her shake and pulse against my tongue.

The sensation tipped me over. Her mouth tightened around me, her hand stroking faster, and I groaned—low, guttural—as heat surged down my spine. My cock jerked, spilling into her mouth, and she took it all, swallowing me down with a soft hum that made my vision blur. My hands gripped her hips, holding her there as I rode it out, every pulse a shudder that left me wrecked.

She pulled back first, breathless, and slid off me, collapsing beside me on the sheets. Her chest heaved, her skin flushed, and she turned onto her side, pressing against me again.

I wrapped an arm around her, pulling her close, her head resting on my chest as our breathing slowed. Her hair tickled my skin, damp and wild, and I ran my fingers through it, grounding myself in the feel of her.

We lay there, tangled, quiet, the aftershocks fading into a stillness that felt fragile but real. Then she lifted her head, her gray eyes meeting mine, and her voice came soft, steady despite the weight behind it. “What are we going to do?”

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I didn't hesitate. My hand tightened on her waist, my jaw setting as the answer burned through me. "We're going to find whoever killed Diego," I said, voice low, lethal. "And we're going to put them in the ground."

Her lips pressed into a thin line, a flicker of that cold resolve flashing in her gaze. She didn't say anything, just nodded once, sharp and sure, and settled back against me.

I held her tighter, feeling the steady beat of her heart against my ribs, and knew—whatever it took, whoever it was, they'd pay. For Diego. For her. For us.

23

CLAIRE

Later that day, the hotel lobby was too bright. Too polished. Too full of people whose lives hadn't just shattered.

I stepped inside, the air-conditioning sharp against my skin, and let my eyes sweep the room. Too many suits. Too many tourists dragging overpriced luggage across marble floors, their conversations a dull hum that made my pulse throb.

Marcus was behind me. Close enough that I could feel him, his presence a steady heat at my back. He hadn't wanted me to come alone. He hadn't said that outright—he never did—but the way his jaw had ticked when I told him my plan had been enough.

Now, he was here. A shadow at my side, a protector I hadn't asked for but wasn't stupid enough to refuse.

I didn't have the energy to fight him on it. Not today.

Isabel was waiting for me near the concierge desk, her arms crossed, weight shifted onto one hip like she was prepared for a battle. I barely knew her, but I knew of her—she was engaged to Ryker Dane, which meant she'd been pulled into this world the same as I had.

She was beautiful in a way that felt effortless. The kind of woman who looked like she had secrets. Like she knew how to use them.

Her gaze flicked to Marcus, then back to me. "I'm guessing this isn't a social visit."

"No," I said, my voice steady despite the exhaustion dragging at me. "It's about Diego."

Her expression softened just slightly. "I'm so sorry."

A beat of silence stretched between us.

I wasn't here as a journalist. I wasn't here to twist her into giving me something she shouldn't. I was here as a woman who had lost someone.

She must have seen it in my face, because after a long breath, she nodded. "Come on."

She turned, leading us past the front desk, through a hallway marked Staff Only.

I followed, but not before noticing the two men positioned near the entrance of the lobby—broad shoulders, sharp gazes, the kind of alert stillness that only came from training. They weren't hotel security. They were Ryker's men.

Of course.

It shouldn't have surprised me. The fact that Ryker had even let Isabel stay at work today was unexpected, but now I understood. He wasn't stupid, and he sure as hell wasn't careless when it came to what was his. If she was here, it was because he'd made damn sure she was protected.

Marcus stayed close as we stepped inside a small security office, his hand brushing my lower back. The touch was light. Almost absentminded.

But I felt it everywhere.

Isabel closed the door behind us, exhaling as she moved toward the monitors. "For what it's worth, I don't think I'll be working here much longer. At least, not in my current capacity."

I glanced at her, arching a brow.

She let out a soft, knowing laugh. "Ryker's buying the hotel. The deal should close soon." She shrugged. "Apparently, owning half the city wasn't enough for him."

I shouldn't have been surprised. Of course, Ryker Dane wasn't content with just running a billion-dollar security empire. The Palmetto Rose would be his soon enough, which meant Isabel wouldn't just be an employee—she'd be untouchable.

Safe.

Protected.

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Something twisted in my chest at the thought. Not jealousy, not exactly, but something close.

The walls were lined with monitors, feeds from different angles of the hotel looping in real time. Isabel gestured toward a chair near the desk. “I shouldn’t be doing this.”

I sank into it, my throat thick. “I know.”

She sighed, crossing her arms again. “Ryker’s not going to like it.”

Marcus let out a low, unimpressed sound. “Ryker already agreed we’d do whatever it takes.”

Isabel’s gaze flicked to him, then back to me, still reluctant but no longer arguing. “What exactly are you looking for?”

“The last time Diego was seen,” I said. “Anything unusual. Anyone following him.”

She hesitated, fingers hovering over the keyboard. “If this gets traced back to me?—”

“It won’t,” Marcus said, his tone final.

I swallowed hard. “I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important.”

For a moment, I thought she’d refuse.

But then she exhaled sharply and started typing. “We’re not so different, you know.”

I glanced at her. “How do you figure?”

She gave me a knowing look. “You’re involved with a Dane brother.”

I opened my mouth, but the denial stuck in my throat.

Isabel arched a brow, unimpressed. “You can try to lie to me, but I know what it looks like.” Her gaze flicked briefly to Marcus, then back to me. “I know what it feels like.”

“That’s different,” I said, even though I wasn’t sure it was. “You and Ryker are engaged.”

She let out a soft, almost pitying laugh. “You think a ring makes the difference? Honey, those men don’t date. They claim. And you?” She shook her head. “You’re already his.”

Marcus shifted behind me. I could feel the weight of his stare, the silent intensity that never seemed to waver.

I wanted to argue. To tell her she was wrong. That I wasn’t his, that whatever was between us was temporary, circumstantial, something that would burn out just as fast as it started.

But then the footage started playing, and the air in the room turned razor-sharp.

Diego.

He moved across the screen, the timestamp marking it before dawn. His posture was tense, his head swiveling slightly as if he were looking for someone.

Or watching for someone.

My stomach twisted as the footage played. He walked through the lobby, toward the elevators. He pressed the button. Waited.

And then?—

I leaned forward.

A man in a dark jacket stepped into the frame. He wasn't close enough to touch Diego, but he wasn't far either.

His face was obscured by the angle.

But Diego had noticed him.

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I could see it in the way his shoulders stiffened. The way his fingers bunched into fists at his sides.

And then the elevator doors slid open, and Diego disappeared inside.

The footage kept rolling. The man didn't follow. He just stood there.

Watching.

And then he turned and walked away.

A slow, cold chill spread down my spine.

"Who is he?" I asked.

Isabel shook her head. "He wasn't a guest here. If he was, his face would be in the system."

Marcus didn't say anything, but I felt his body tense behind me.

Ryker had told me not to come here. Had looked me in the eye, voice low and edged with warning, and told me to stay the fuck away from The Palmetto Rose. He'd already decided it was too risky, too exposed.

And yet, here I was.

Watching footage of Diego's last moments.

Standing in a hotel Ryker was about to own.

His name was already stamped on the contracts. As soon as the deal closed, this place would be his. Which meant I wasn't just looking at security footage—I was looking at something that, soon enough, would be Dane property.

And if Ryker had already claimed it, it meant one thing: this place mattered.

“We need a clearer image, Izzy,” Marcus said, his voice tight.

Isabel's fingers paused over the keyboard, and she smirked slightly. “Ryker calls me Isabel. It's so formal.”

Marcus gave a low, knowing sound. “Of course, he does.”

She rolled her eyes, then turned to me. “But you can call me Izzy. All of my friends do.”

There was something unspoken in the offer—an acknowledgment that we were in this together now, whether we liked it or not. A quiet sort of loyalty.

“Thanks, Izzy.”

She sighed, rubbing her temple before turning back to the screen. “I'll see what I can do.”

I nodded, my mind racing, trying to make sense of what I'd just seen.

Then the phone at the security desk rang.

Izzy's head snapped toward it. “That's the main line.”

She hesitated before picking it up. “The Palmetto Rose, security office.”

A pause.

Her face changed as she listened. Her eyes flicked to me. Then she slowly held out the phone.

“It’s for you,” she said. “Diego’s parents.”

My breath hitched.

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Marcus's hand landed on my shoulder, warm and solid.

Ryker had been right. Coming here was a mistake. But I reached for the phone anyway, my fingers shaking slightly.

I wasn't ready for this. But I didn't have a choice.

I lifted the receiver with unsteady fingers, pressing it to my ear. "Hello?"

A sharp inhale crackled through the line, followed by a woman's voice—soft, desperate. "Clara? Mija, gracias a Dios."

María Gil. Diego's mother.

Her relief hit me like a punch to the gut. My throat tightened as I gripped the phone harder, trying to keep my voice steady. "Señora Gil, I?—"

"Where is Diego?" she cut in, her voice trembling. "He hasn't answered all day. Not his phone, not his texts. We've been calling you too, but—" Her voice broke. "He always calls or texts us back, always."

Guilt twisted sharp inside me. My own phone was still buried in my bag, silenced beneath hours of grief and chaos. I hadn't seen their calls, hadn't even thought to check.

Beside me, Marcus shifted, his presence grounding, his eyes locked on me, unreadable.

Señor Gil's voice rumbled faintly in the background—lower, steadier, but laced with the same strain. “His phone ...” he said in halting English, his accent thicker with emotion. “The locator ... it was last here. At the hotel.”

My stomach dropped.

They knew. Not everything, not yet. But they felt it. The same way I had before Ryker's call shattered my world.

I forced myself to speak, to breathe. “When was the last time you talked to him?”

“Yesterday,” María whispered. “After the gala. He sent a message saying he got back to the hotel safe. That he'd call today.” A shaky breath. “But he never did.”

Her words blurred in my mind, tangling with the image on the screen—Diego, shoulders tense, waiting for the elevator, sensing something was wrong.

They didn't know.

They hadn't heard from the police yet. Hadn't gotten the call that would change their lives forever.

Marcus stepped in closer, his hand still firm on my shoulder, like he knew exactly what was coming next.

Because I had to say it.

I had to be the one to shatter them.

I swallowed hard. “Señora Gil, listen to me.” My voice wavered, and I hated it. “Have the police contacted you yet?”

A pause. Then, softer, wary: “No.”

My heart clenched painfully.

They don’t know. They don’t know. They don’t?—

“Clara,” María whispered, voice barely audible. “Is my son okay?”

The grief I’d been holding back all day surged up my throat, sharp and unforgiving.

I turned my head slightly, my temple brushing against Marcus’s chest, just for a second, just to ground myself. His grip tightened in silent understanding.

And then, voice breaking, I whispered the words I never should have had to say.

“I’m so sorry.”

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María made a small, strangled sound—half gasp, half sob—before the words even sank in.

“No,” she whispered. Then louder, desperate, her voice cracking like splintered glass. “No, Clara, no me digas eso.”

Don’t tell me that.

I squeezed my eyes shut. The grief in her voice was unbearable, a mother’s world tilting off its axis.

In the background, I heard Señor Gil’s voice—lower, steadier, but no less broken. “Qué pasó?”

What happened?

How was I supposed to answer that?

I gripped the phone tighter. “We—we don’t know everything yet,” I managed, my voice barely holding. “The police?—”

“What happened to my son?” María’s voice rose, high and trembling, each syllable edged in agony. “Dime la verdad, Clara!”

The truth.

But what was the truth? That I didn’t know how Diego had ended up face-down in a

pool? That I didn't know why someone had targeted him? That all I had were grainy security images, a feeling in my gut, and an anger so sharp it could cut through bone?

My breath hitched.

Marcus moved closer, so close his chest pressed against my back, his warmth a barrier against the ice creeping into my veins. His hand skimmed down my arm before settling over mine, steadying, grounding.

I swallowed hard. "They found him at the hotel," I said finally, my voice hollow. "In the pool."

A sharp inhale from María. "En la piscina?"

"I don't believe it was an accident." The words came out low, firm. "I think someone did this."

Señor Gil cursed under his breath, but María made another choked sound, and the devastation in it shattered something inside me.

"Mi niño ..." she sobbed, the words slipping into frantic Spanish, too fast for me to catch everything. But I didn't need a translation.

She had just lost her son.

A son who was supposed to be safe.

A son who had promised to call.

"María," I said, barely holding myself together. "I—I don't have answers yet, but I swear to you, I'm going to find out who did this."

Silence.

Then a broken, fragile whisper. “¿Dónde está?”

Where is he?

My throat burned.

“The police have him now,” I forced out. “They’ll—” My voice faltered. “They’ll be calling you soon.”

Marcus’s grip on my hand tightened.

María made a sound that wasn’t quite human—something ripped straight from a mother’s soul—and I had to bite my lip hard to keep from breaking.

I should have been stronger.

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But I wasn't.

I wasn't ready for this.

“Nosotros vamos para allá,” Señor Gil said.

We're coming there.

The weight of those words settled over me, cold and final.

I should have told them not to. Should have told them to stay where they were, to wait for the authorities.

But how could I?

If it were me, if I had lost someone I loved, no force on Earth could keep me away.

I nodded, even though they couldn't see me. “Okay.” My voice barely worked. “I'll be here.”

Another sharp breath, a sniffle, and then a click.

Silence.

The dial tone buzzed in my ear.

I let the phone slip from my fingers, landing with a dull clatter on the desk.

For a second, I just sat there, staring at nothing, the weight of what had just happened pressing down on my chest like a boulder.

Then a hand wrapped around the back of my neck, warm and firm.

Marcus.

He didn't say anything, just held me there, his thumb brushing the base of my skull. A silent anchor. A reminder that I wasn't alone, even when it felt like the whole world had collapsed.

I swallowed hard, forcing myself to sit up straighter, to breathe.

Then I turned back to the screen.

"Play it again," I said, my voice steadier than I felt. "From the beginning."

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MARCUS

I stood there in the security office of The Palmetto Rose, Claire's shoulders trembling under my hand as she stared at the blank screen where Diego's last moments had just played out. The dial tone from the dropped call buzzed faintly, a dull hum against the silence that had swallowed the room after she'd broken the news to his parents.

Izzy shifted awkwardly by the desk, her gaze flicking between us like she wasn't sure whether to stay or bolt. I didn't blame her. This wasn't her mess, but she was in it now, same as me. Same as Claire.

Diego's parents. María's shattered sobs still echoed in my head, clawing at something

I didn't know how to name. I'd never been good with that kind of pain—other people's pain. My brothers, sure. My unit, back in the day, when the bullets flew and the blood ran hot—yeah, I'd carried them, patched them up, dragged them out of hell and then me.

But this? A mother's grief spilling through a phoneline, a father's quiet, broken questions? That was uncharted territory, and I was fumbling through it blind.

I cleared my throat, the sound rough in the stillness. "I'll send the plane," I said, my voice low, steady, like I was giving an order on a mission. "The company jet. For Diego's folks. We'll get them here."

Claire's head snapped up, her gray eyes locking onto mine, wide and searching. "What?"

"The jet," I repeated, shoving my hands into my pockets to keep from reaching for her again. "It can be in New York in a couple hours, bring them right back. It's the least we can do."

Her lips parted, like she wanted to argue, but then she just nodded—short, sharp, like she was too tired to fight it. "Okay. Yeah. Thanks."

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I pulled out my phone, firing off a text to our logistics guy, terse and to the point: Get the Gulfstream airborne. JFK pickup, Diego Gil's parents. Now.

He'd handle it. Always did. But my gut twisted as I hit send. This wasn't like arranging a dust-off for a wounded brother or calling in a favor for Ryker. This was personal, messy, and I didn't know what the hell I was doing. I'd spent years keeping people alive—my family, my team—but comforting strangers? Helping Claire carry this? I was out of my depth, and it pissed me off how much I wanted to get it right.

She turned back to the screen, her fingers tightening into fists at her sides, and I watched her—really watched her. The way she stood there, spine straight, jaw tight, refusing to break even after that call. She was a goddamn force, stronger than I'd ever expected, and it hit me hard. I'd seen men crumble under less—hell, I'd carried their pieces myself—but Claire? She was steel wrapped in fire, and it made something ache deep in my chest. Made me want to pull her close, hold her, never let her go.

That wasn't me. Not usually. I'd chased plenty of women off before—quick flings, guest-room nights, a smirk and a wave as they left at dawn.

Easy.

Clean.

But Claire wasn't them. She was under my skin, in my blood, and the thought of her staying—really staying—unsettled me in a way I wasn't used to.

Part of me wondered if I should just tell her to go. Pack her bags, get on that plane

with Diego's parents, get the hell out of Charleston and away from this war. Be safe.

I could do it—cut her loose, scare her off like I'd done before. But the idea of her leaving twisted something sharp inside me, and I knew I wouldn't. Not her.

"How long?" she asked, breaking the silence, her voice steady despite the faint tremor in her hands.

I glanced at my phone, doing the math. "Jet'll take off soon. Couple hours to JFK, load up, couple more back, barring delays."

She nodded again, slower this time, her gaze drifting to the floor. "Perfect. Because I can't sit around anymore."

I raised a brow, stepping closer. "What do you want to do?"

Her eyes flicked up to mine, sharp and blazing, like the grief had burned away everything soft and left only edges. "I want to pay the mayor a visit. Now."

My gut clenched. Evelyn Hart. The name alone was a live wire, and Claire wanted to walk straight into the current. "Claire?—"

"Don't," she cut me off, her tone hard, final. "I'm not asking permission."

I didn't like it. Not one damn bit.

Hart was a snake—slippery, connected, and dangerous as hell, if our assumptions were right. Department 77's shadow hung over her, and Claire marching in there was like waving a red flag in a war zone.

But the look in her eyes told me I wasn't talking her out of this—not unless I tied her

up and locked her in my room. My mind flashed to that—her wrists bound, her body pinned under mine, that fire in her gaze daring me to try. Heat licked low in my stomach, and I shoved it down hard. Later. When we were alone. For now, she was calling the shots, and I'd have to deal.

“Fine,” I said, keeping my voice even. “Let’s go.”

She didn’t waste time. She grabbed her bag from the chair, slung it over her shoulder, and headed for the door, all purpose and no hesitation. I followed, nodding to Izzy as we passed—her lips pressed into a thin line, like she knew this was a bad idea, too, but wasn’t about to stop us.

We hit the parking lot, the midday sun beating down, humidity sticking my shirt to my back as I unlocked the Bugatti. Claire slid into the passenger seat without a word, her jaw set, her hands folded tight in her lap. I climbed in, started the engine, and pulled out, the low growl of the car cutting through the thick Charleston air.

She didn’t speak as I drove, her silence heavy, loaded, like a storm brewing just under the surface. I wanted to ask what her plan was—hell, I wanted to demand it—but I didn’t. My M.O. was watching, waiting, striking when the moment hit. Killing, if it came to that. Hers was questioning, digging, peeling back lies until the truth bled out. This was her show, and for now, I had to trust her to run it.

The city complex loomed ahead—a squat, modern building that clashed with Charleston’s old-world charm, all glass and concrete and bureaucratic bullshit. I swung into the parking lot and killed the engine. My phone dinged before I could even unbuckle—a sharp chime that made my jaw tighten. Ryker. I yanked it out, scanning the text.

Might have an ID on the hotel guy. Working it now.

I glanced at Claire, her hand already on the door. “Ryker says they might have something on the mystery man from the footage.”

She nodded, barely a flicker of reaction, her eyes locked on the building ahead.

“Good.”

Then she was out, slamming the door, marching straight for the entrance like she was storming a fortress. I followed, a step behind, my pulse kicking up despite myself. She was a force—hair swinging, shoulders back, that tank top and shorts combo somehow making her look more dangerous than if she’d been in full combat gear.

I caught myself thinking the only thing hotter would be her with one of those old-school mics, shoving it in Hart’s face, demanding answers. Fuck, that’d be a sight.

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She hit the lobby hard and zeroed in on the guy at the front desk—a kid, maybe early-twenties, all nervous energy and cheap polyester tie. He looked up as she loomed over him, her hands slamming down on the counter, her voice sharp enough to cut glass.

“I need to see Evelyn Hart,” she said, leaning in, her tone leaving no room for bullshit. “Now.”

The kid blinked, fumbling for words. “Uh, ma’am, the mayor’s schedule—do you have an appointment?”

Claire’s laugh was cold, biting. “Do I look like I need an appointment? Tell her Claire Dixon’s here. She knows who I am.”

He stammered, reaching for the phone, and my own buzzed again in my pocket. I pulled it out, keeping Claire in my peripheral as I opened Ryker’s next message.

ID confirmed. Official pic attached. Check it.

I tapped the file, and a photo loaded—young guy, clean-cut, suit crisp, hair neat. My eyes flicked up to tell Claire, to pull her back for a second so we could regroup—and then I froze.

The kid at the desk was scrambling, the phone slipping from his sweaty hands as Claire glowered over him, her voice rising. “Tell her it’s about Diego Gil. Tell her I know what happened at The Palmetto Rose.”

He ducked his head, grabbing the receiver again, and the light caught his face just right—sharp jaw, nervous twitch in his cheek, the same damn profile staring back at me from my phone.

Holy shit.

It was him. The guy from the footage. The one who'd followed Diego to the elevator, watched him like prey before he disappeared. The last person to see him alive.

My pulse slammed into overdrive, adrenaline flooding hot and fast. I stepped forward, keeping my voice low, controlled, as I murmured to Claire, "That's him."

She didn't turn, didn't flinch, but I saw her shoulders stiffen, her hands pressing harder against the counter. "What?"

"The kid you're tearing into," I said, nodding toward him. "He's the one from the hotel. Ryker just sent me his picture."

Her head snapped to me then, gray eyes blazing, and for a split second, I saw it—the raw, unfiltered fury she'd been holding back since Diego's death hit her. Then she turned to the kid, slow, deliberate, like a predator locking onto a target.

He was still fumbling with the phone, oblivious, muttering into it—"Uh, yeah, Ms. Hart, there's a Claire Dixon here, says it's urgent?—"

Claire didn't wait. She leaned in closer, her voice dropping to a lethal whisper. "You were there, weren't you? At the hotel. Last night."

The kid's eyes widened, the phone slipping again, clattering onto the desk. "W-what? I don't?—"

“Don’t lie to me,” she snapped, cutting him off. “I’ve got you on camera. Following Diego Gil. Right before he ended up dead in that pool.”

His face drained of color, sweat beading on his forehead, and he stammered, hands shaking. “I—I don’t know what you’re talking about?”

“Bullshit,” she spat, slamming her palm down again, the sound echoing in the lobby. “You were there. I saw you.”

I stayed back, watching. This was her play, her interrogation, and she was damn good at it. But my gut was screaming now, every instinct on edge. This kid wasn’t just some lackey caught off guard—he was scared, cornered, and that made him dangerous. I scanned the room, clocking the exits, the handful of staffers pretending not to stare. If he bolted, I’d have him. If he tried anything else, I’d end it.

“Claire,” I said, low, warning, but she didn’t hear me—or didn’t care. She was too deep, too focused, her anger a blade she was wielding with precision.

“Tell me what you did,” she said, her voice steady now, cold as ice. “Tell me why Diego’s dead, or I swear to God, I’ll make sure everyone in this city knows your face by tomorrow.”

The kid swallowed hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing, and I saw it—the crack. He was breaking, fast, and whatever came out of his mouth next was going to change everything.

“I—I didn’t—” he started, voice shaking, but then the phone on the desk buzzed, cutting through the tension like a gunshot. He flinched, staring at it, and I caught the name flashing on the caller ID: E. Hart.

Claire saw it, too. Her lips curled into a grim, feral smile. “Answer it,” she said,

stepping back just enough to give him room, her eyes never leaving his face. “Let’s see what your boss has to say.”

He hesitated, hands trembling, then reached for the phone like it was a live grenade. I shifted closer, my shadow falling over him, and he froze again, caught between us.

This was it. The thread we’d been chasing, unraveling right here. Diego’s killer—or at least the bastard who’d watched him die—was in our hands, and Evelyn Hart was about to step into the crosshairs. I didn’t know what Claire would do next, but I knew one thing for damn sure: I wasn’t letting her face it alone.

CLAIRE

The tension in the city complex lobby was suffocating, thick enough to choke on. My pulse pounded in my ears as the kid at the desk—the kid who had been at The Palmetto Rose, watching Diego—stared at the flashing name on the phone’s screen like it might detonate in his hands.

E. Hart.

Marcus stood beside me, silent, but radiating lethal energy, his body coiled tight, ready to strike. His gaze flicked from the kid to the phone, calculating, already working three steps ahead.

“Answer it,” I said, my voice steady despite the fury clawing at my throat.

The kid swallowed hard, his fingers trembling as he lifted the receiver. “M-Mayor Hart?”

Whatever she said made his shoulders snap straight. “Yes, ma’am. I understand.” He darted a wide-eyed look at me, then at Marcus, before nodding sharply into the phone. “Right away.”

He hung up too quickly. Then cleared his throat, shifting in his chair like he was about to pass out.

“The mayor will see you now.” His voice wobbled, but he gestured toward the hallway behind him, where frosted glass doors led to the offices of Charleston’s

highest-ranking officials.

I didn't wait. I stepped past the desk, through the doors, not bothering to check if Marcus was behind me.

I already knew he was.

Evelyn Hart was polished, poised, and a predator.

She stood behind an oversized desk, her office sleek and modern, filled with polished mahogany, gold accents, and a wall of windows overlooking downtown Charleston. Sunlight spilled over her shoulder, casting a halo around her blond bob, making her look every bit the picture-perfect politician.

She smiled when we entered, smooth and easy, the kind of smile made for cameras and campaign trails.

"Ms. Dixon," she said, spreading her hands as if we were old friends. "Mr. Dane. What a surprise."

Her voice was honeyed silk, warm and welcoming, but the steel underneath was unmistakable. A woman who had never been caught off guard a day in her life.

I didn't play along.

"Cut the act, Mayor." My heels clicked against the floor as I stepped forward. "You knew we were coming."

Something flickered in her sharp blue eyes.

Her smile didn't fade, but the warmth in it was already gone.

Marcus moved in beside me, his presence a solid wall of heat. “Let’s skip the bullshit,” he said, voice low, even. Dangerous. “We know about The Palmetto Rose. About the man watching Diego before he died. And we know you’re connected to Department 77.”

Evelyn barely blinked. If anything, her smile grew.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” she said smoothly, taking her seat behind the desk. She laced her fingers together, tilting her head, studying me.

Then she sighed, almost like she pitied me.

“Ms. Dixon, I understand this must be difficult for you. Losing a friend, especially so suddenly ...” She made a small, sympathetic sound. “Tragic.”

I clenched my fists. “He didn’t drown.”

She arched a perfectly groomed brow. “No?”

“No,” I snapped, stepping forward. “Someone murdered him.”

Hart didn’t react. Didn’t so much as flinch.

I felt Marcus shift beside me, but I was locked on her. On the careful way she held herself, controlled, like she was waiting.

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And then—so soft I almost didn't catch it—her lips parted, and she murmured: "You have no idea what you've stirred up."

A shiver ran down my spine.

She wasn't warning me. She was informing me. Like I'd already stepped into something I wasn't crawling out of.

Marcus let out a slow exhale, the kind that sent a very clear message—he was five seconds away from losing his patience, and Hart wouldn't like what happened when he did.

Her gaze flicked to him then.

And something shifted. A hint of recognition. A calculating gleam. She leaned back in her chair, steepling her fingers.

"You look just like him," she said softly.

I felt Marcus go still beside me, but Hart wasn't looking at him anymore. She was studying him.

"You all do," she mused, tilting her head. "Every one of you Dane boys carries his face. But you ..." Her gaze sharpened, mouth curving in something that wasn't quite a smile. "You wear it the way he did."

I swallowed hard, a slow chill creeping up my spine.

She wasn't wrong.

I hadn't seen a picture of Byron Dane until I met Marcus. Not in any of my research, not in any of the articles that whispered about Dominion Hall like it was some kind of myth. The Dane patriarch didn't do press. He didn't pose for cameras. He existed in shadows, in power plays written in blood and contracts.

But at Dominion Hall, I'd seen him. A framed photograph. A younger version of Marcus stood beside him, posture rigid, expression unreadable.

All seven Dane brothers carried their father's presence—the sharp jaw, the unreadable eyes, the quiet, unshakable weight that made people tread carefully around them. But Marcus?

Marcus wasn't just his father's son. He was his father's legacy.

The same quiet, controlled power. The same lethal, unwavering edge. His brothers had inherited pieces of their father. Marcus had inherited the whole damn war. And Evelyn Hart knew it.

The air in the room went razor-sharp.

Marcus didn't move, but I felt the change in him, the sudden, almost imperceptible tightening of his muscles.

Hart tilted her head.

“Your father should have known better.”

The room tilted.

Marcus's father.

Hart knew him.

Marcus's jaw flexed, his shoulders going rigid. His voice, when he finally spoke, was deadly quiet.

"What did you just say?"

Hart's lips quirked at the corner, a ghost of amusement. But she didn't get the chance to answer. Because the door behind us opened—without a knock, without hesitation.

I turned just as two men in dark suits stepped inside.

Private security. Not police. Not city officials. Hart's own men.

Bigger than me. Maybe even bigger than Marcus. Armed. And standing like they had orders.

Hart sighed, like she was bored. "I'd love to stay and chat," she said, glancing at a gold watch on her wrist. "But I have a press conference in twenty minutes, and I don't have time for ... conspiracy theories."

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She nodded once. One of her men stepped forward.

“Ms. Dixon. Mr. Dane,” he said, voice clipped, professional. “This way.”

A dismissal. A threat wrapped in civility.

I should have fought it. Should have demanded answers, forced her hand, something.

But Marcus’s body was already tense beside me, his breathing controlled, his stance shifting into something predatory. And if I pushed this too far, right now, I wasn’t sure who would walk out of here alive. Because I had never seen Marcus Dane angry.

I’d seen him cold. Calculating. Dangerous in a way that didn’t require volume or threats, just the quiet certainty that if he wanted to break you, he already knew how. But this?

This was something else.

His body was taut with restrained force, his muscles locked so tight I could feel the tension radiating off him. He hadn’t moved, hadn’t spoken, but the room had shifted around him—like a fault line waiting to snap.

And if it did?

I didn’t know what would happen.

Would he lunge for Hart? Would he drag her across that sleek mahogany desk and

make her regret whatever history she had with his father? Would her security react fast enough to stop him?

Would I?

I pictured it—chaos unraveling in seconds, Marcus slamming one of her men against the wall, the sick crack of bone giving way, the other reaching for a gun he wouldn't have time to use. I imagined Hart sitting there, calm and composed, watching it all unfold with the detached amusement of a woman who had already planned for every possible outcome.

I couldn't let it get that far.

We weren't ready. Not yet.

So I did the only thing I could—I stepped closer to Marcus, close enough that my arm brushed his, that he could feel me there. A tether. A warning.

“Not here,” I murmured, so quiet only he could hear.

For a long, agonizing second, he didn't move. Didn't breathe.

Then, finally, his exhale came—slow and measured, but no less lethal. A war delayed, not won.

I exhaled slowly, too, relieved.

Then I turned back to Hart. She was already looking at me, an almost lazy satisfaction in her gaze.

“This isn't over,” I said quietly.

Her smile returned.

“No,” she agreed, tilting her head. “It’s not.”

Then, just before I turned away, she added, almost like an afterthought?—

“Give my regards to Dominion Hall, Mr. Dane.”

Marcus went still. Like the final breath before an explosion.

Hart saw it, too.

And she liked it.

Her lips curved, the barest flicker of amusement in her gaze. She was testing him, pressing at the cracks, looking for the weakness that would make him snap.

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“I always wondered how much Byron told his sons,” she mused, tilting her head. “How much he let you boys see before he was gone.”

Marcus didn't blink. Didn't move.

Hart leaned forward slightly, resting her elbows on the desk. “You think you have power, don't you? That Dominion Hall and your father's name still mean something?” She gave a slow, deliberate shake of her head. “You don't know half of what he was involved in.”

A muscle ticked in Marcus's jaw.

“Careful,” he said, his voice low, quiet. Too quiet.

Hart's smirk deepened.

“Or what?” she murmured. “You'll lose that infamous Dane control? Make a mess right here, in my office, on government property?” She tsked, shaking her head. “Come now, Marcus. You were raised better than that.”

I felt Marcus shift beside me, a fraction of movement that sent every nerve in my body screaming.

He was incredibly close to losing it.

Hart must have seen it, too, because she went for the kill.

“Do you even know why your father died?” she asked, voice soft. Dangerous.

The room froze.

Hart smiled, slow and knowing.

“There are a lot of things you and your brothers don’t know.” She tilted her head. “A lot of truths buried with Byron Dane.”

Something in Marcus fractured.

I saw it in the tension coiling through his body, in the way his fingers twitched like he was one second away from reaching for her.

That was when I realized—this was the point. She wanted him to snap. She was pushing, testing, waiting to see if she could make Marcus Dane lose control in a way she could use against him. And he was right on the edge.

I moved fast.

Before he could react, before he could say something we couldn’t take back, I stepped even closer, my palm pressing lightly against his wrist.

It was instinct. A pull I couldn’t fight.

Not long ago, I would have let him burn. Would have welcomed it—his rage, his ruin—if only to watch him fall. I had hated him. The way he towered over me, pushing, threatening, making it clear that I didn’t belong in his world. That if I got too close, I’d get burned.

And I had.

But Marcus Dane wasn't just fire. He was everything beneath it.

I had seen the tender side of him—the one no one else got to see. I had felt his hands on me, not just possessive, but reverent, as if he didn't quite know how to hold something he didn't want to break. I had learned the way he touched me in the dark, the way his body covered mine, claiming me, owning me, showing me in ways he could never say that I was his.

And worse—I had given myself to him.

Not just my body.

But something deeper.

And that was why I couldn't let him lose himself now.

Not for her. Not for Evelyn Hart and whatever the hell she thought she knew about his father.

So I curled my fingers around his wrist, my touch gentle but firm, my pulse hammering against my ribs as I whispered, "Marcus."

Not now. Not yet.

For a long second, he didn't move. Didn't breathe.

Then, after an agonizing pause, he inhaled slow and deep, his knuckles cracking as he flexed his fingers open. Reining himself back in.

Hart let out a soft laugh. "Good boy."

I clenched my teeth.

Marcus? He just stared at her.

"You're going to regret this," I told her instead, my voice steady.

Hart just smiled.

"I doubt that."

And then, with a flick of her finger, she gestured to the two men in dark suits.

"Escort them out."

The security stepped forward.

Dismissal.

Marcus didn't look at them. Didn't even glance their way.

He was still staring at Hart.

26

MARCUS

We drove back to Dominion Hall in silence, the Bugatti's engine a low growl beneath the weight of everything Hart had said. Claire sat beside me, her hands folded tight in her lap, her jaw set, staring out at the blur of Charleston's streets like she could will the answers out of the humid air.

I didn't speak either. Didn't trust myself to. My mind was a roiling mess, Hart's words looping like a sniper's scope I couldn't shake—"Do you even know why your father died?"—each syllable a bullet I didn't know how to dodge.

Evelyn Hart was a snake in Little Bo Peep's clothing, all blond bob and polished smiles, the perfect goddamn disguise. I'd seen it the second we walked into her office—those sharp blue eyes cutting through the room, the way she'd leaned back in her chair like a queen on a throne, daring us to take a swing.

She'd played us, pushed me right to the edge, and I'd almost fallen. If Claire hadn't grabbed my wrist, hadn't anchored me with that quiet "Marcus," I'd have torn Hart's throat out right there, security be damned.

But it wasn't just her taunts about me that had my blood simmering. It was my father. Byron Dane. The man who'd raised us—me and my six brothers—on grit and silence, who'd never once talked about his work.

Ever.

Sure, he'd spin a story now and then about his Army days, dumb shit like the time he and his buddies rigged a latrine with firecrackers just to watch the new guy jump. Laughs, nothing more. Never a word about missions, about what he'd done before he died. We'd suspected there was more after he died—after that call from some slick attorney in the Bahamas telling us we'd inherited billions we didn't even know he had. Billions tied to shadows we couldn't name.

Now Hart had cracked that open wider. Department 77. The ghost we'd been chasing, the blade at our throats, and somehow, our father had been tangled up in it. We'd always figured he'd been more than just a soldier turned businessman—Ryker, Atlas, Charlie, all of us had felt it—but this? This was a punch to the gut I hadn't seen coming.

The gates of Dominion Hall loomed ahead, iron teeth glinting under the sun, and I pulled through slow, gravel crunching under the tires. Claire didn't move, didn't look at me, just kept her eyes on the horizon like she was piecing it together, too.

I parked out front, killed the engine, and sat there for a beat, my hands still gripping the wheel.

“We need to talk to Ryker,” I said finally, voice rough, breaking the quiet.

She nodded, short and sharp, and climbed out. Ifollowed, the weight of Hart's words pressing down like a hundred-pound pack.

Ryker was in the ops room—where else?—leaning over the steel table, maps and monitors spread out like a battlefield. He looked up when we walked in, his eyes narrowing as he clocked the tension rolling off me.

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“What happened?” he asked, straight to it, no bullshit.

I crossed my arms, leaning against the wall. “Hart knows something about Dad. Said we don’t know why he died, that there’s shit buried with him we don’t even touch.”

Ryker’s jaw tightened, but he didn’t flinch. “She say anything else?”

“Yeah,” I said, voice low. “That we don’t know half of what he was into. Threw it in my face like a goddamn grenade.”

Claire shifted beside me, her shoes scuffing the floor, but she stayed quiet, letting me lay it out. Ryker dragged a hand down his face, exhaling hard through his nose.

“I know as much as you do,” he said, voice steady, no trace of a fight in it. “Dad didn’t tell us shit. Army stories, sure, but nothing real. After the Bahamas call, I figured he’d been playing a bigger game. Didn’t know it tied to this.”

“Department 77,” I said, the name heavy on my tongue. “She’s linked to them. But we still don’t know who the fuck they are.”

Ryker nodded, slow, thoughtful. “Earnest agreement here, brother. Something’s gotta be done.”

“We should recall the others,” I said, pushing off the wall. “All the brothers. Get them back in town, just in case this blows up bigger than we think.”

He shook his head, crossing his arms. “They’re assafe out there as they’d be here.

Charleston's the hotspot right now, not them. No point dragging them into this before we know what this is."

I didn't argue. He was right—out of town, they had distance, cover. Here, we were in the crosshairs.

"Why Hart?" Ryker mused aloud, staring at the map like it might spit out an answer. "Why Charleston?"

"No fucking clue," I said, frustration bleeding into my tone. "But she's sitting on something big. I'm gonna let her stew for a bit—give her time to think she's won—then I'm going in. Tear her office apart, her house, whatever it takes."

Ryker didn't disagree. Just tilted his head, sizing me up. "Wait 'til night. Cleaner that way."

I nodded, sharp.

He glanced between me and Claire, his brow furrowing. "You two look like death warmed over. When's the last time you slept?"

I shrugged, not wanting to admit it'd been days since I'd gotten more than a couple hours. Claire didn't answer either, just shifted her weight, her gray eyes shadowed.

"Get some rest," Ryker said, voice firm. "Both of you. You're no good to anyone like this."

"Yeah," I muttered, already turning for the door. "Come on," I said to Claire, jerking my head toward the stairs.

She followed without a word, her steps steady behind me as we climbed to my

quarters. The whole way, I stewed—Hart’s smirk, her jabs about Dad, the way she’d played me like a damn fiddle.

My hands flexed, knuckles cracking, the tension in me coiling tighter with every step. Claire didn’t pester, didn’t push, and I appreciated that. She was trying to crack this too, her mind spinning as fast as mine, but she gave me space.

Until we hit my room.

The door clicked shut behind us, and something in me snapped. The silence, the weight, the fucking want I’d been shoving down since Hart’s office—it all boiled over, hot and sharp. I turned to Claire, my chest tight, my blood roaring.

“Take off your clothes,” I said, voice rough, low. “Now.”

She froze, her gray eyes locking onto mine. There was a flicker of fear there—small, fleeting—but beneath it, I saw the heat, the wanting. She didn’t move, didn’t speak, just held my gaze, and that only stoked the fire in me higher.

“You’re mine,” I said, stepping closer. “And you’re gonna do what I say.”

Her lips parted, a soft breath slipping out, but she didn’t back away. Her hands moved slow, deliberate, reaching for the hem of that black tank top. She peeled it off, the fabric sliding over her head, revealing the black lace bra underneath, the one that barely hid the swell of her tits. My cock twitched, already hard, straining against my jeans as she dropped the tank to the floor.

The bra came next, her fingers unhooking it with a quick flick, and when it fell away, I groaned low in my throat. Her nipples were tight, pink, begging for my mouth, and I clenched my fists to keep from lunging at her right then. She kicked off her shoes, then unbuttoned those denim shorts, shoving them down her thighs along with her

panties in one smooth move. They hit the floor, and there she was—naked, bare, all curves and fire, staring at me with that mix of defiance and need that drove me fucking wild.

“On the bed,” I growled, yanking my shirt over my head, tossing it aside. “Now.”

She obeyed, climbing onto the mattress, her ass swaying as she crawled to the center. I kicked off my boots, unbuckled my belt, and shed my jeans and boxers, my cock springing free, thick and heavy, already leaking pre-come at the sight of her. She turned, sitting back on her heels, watching me, and I stalked toward her, the bed creaking under my weight as I climbed on.

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I grabbed her hips, flipping her onto her stomach in one rough move, and she gasped, her hands fisting the sheets. I dragged her up onto her knees, spreading her thighs wide, and fuck, she was dripping—pink and glistening, her cunt slick and ready for me. I ran my fingers through her folds, slow, teasing, and she moaned, pushing back against my hand.

“You want this?” I rasped, smearing her wetness over her clit, circling it hard with my thumb.

“Yes,” she breathed, voice shaky, needy. “Marcus?—”

I didn’t let her finish. I lined my cock up with her entrance, the head nudging her open, and thrust in—deep, hard, burying myself to the hilt in one brutal stroke. She cried out, her back arching, her walls clamping tight around me, hot and wet and perfect. I gripped her hips, bruising, and pulled out slow, just to slam back in, the slap of skin on skin echoing in the room.

“Fuck,” I groaned, setting a punishing rhythm, each thrust driving her forward, her tits bouncing, her ass jiggling with every hit. She moaned, loud and raw, her hands scrabbling at the sheets as I fucked her senseless. I reached around, finding her clit with my fingers, pinching it, rolling it, and she bucked, her whole body trembling.

“Marcus—oh God—” Her voice broke, high and desperate, and I felt her tighten, her cunt pulsing around my cock as she teetered on the edge.

I leaned over her, my chest pressing against her back, my mouth at her ear. “Come for me,” I snarled, biting her shoulder, my fingers relentless on her clit, my thrusts

brutal. “Now.”

She shattered, screaming my name, her orgasm ripping through her so hard her legs shook, her walls milking me tight. I didn’t stop—couldn’t—driving into her harder, chasing my own release, the heat of her soaking me, her slickness coating my thighs.

But I wasn’t done. I pulled out, flipped her onto her back, and spread her legs wide, hooking them over my shoulders. Her eyes were hazy, pupils blown, her chest heaving as she panted up at me. I thrust back in, deeper this time, the angle letting me hit that spot inside her that made her sob with pleasure.

“Look at me,” I growled, grabbing her jaw, forcing her gaze to mine as I fucked her raw. Her tits bounced with every slam, her nipples brushing my chest, and I leaned down, sucking one into my mouth, biting hard enough to make her gasp.

“Marcus—fuck—” She clawed at my back, nails digging in, and I felt the sting, the burn, fueling me harder. I shifted, grinding my pelvis against her clit with every thrust, and she whimpered, her body arching, chasing another peak.

I slid a hand between us, finding her ass, my thumb pressing against the tight ring there. She tensed, then moaned, loud and filthy, as I pushed in, slow, stretching her. “You like that?” I rasped, fucking her cunt and her ass at the same time, my cock pounding, my thumb sinking deeper.

“Yes—yes—” Her voice was a wrecked sob, her head thrashing, and I felt her clamp down again, another orgasm hitting her like a freight train. She screamed, her body convulsing, come gushing around my cock, soaking the sheets, and that was it—I lost it.

Heat roared down my spine, my balls tightening, and I thrust once, twice, then buried myself deep, coming hard, ropes of it spilling into her, marking her, claiming her. I

groaned, low and guttural, my vision blurring as I rode it out, her cunt still pulsing around me, pulling every last drop.

We collapsed, slick with sweat, her legs trembling over my shoulders, my breath ragged against her neck. I stayed inside her, softening slow, feeling her heartbeat thud against my chest. She reached up, fingers threading through my hair, and I pressed my forehead to hers, both of us spent, wrecked.

“You’re mine,” I murmured, voice hoarse, and she nodded, a small, shaky smile tugging at her lips.

“Yeah,” she whispered back. “I am.”

For a long moment, we just lay there, tangled, the chaos of Hart and Dad and Department 77 fading into the background. It’d come back—soon—but for now, it was just us, and that was enough.

27

CLAIRE

I woke up alone.

The bed was still warm, Marcus’s scent tangled in the sheets, but he was gone.

For a long moment, I just lay there, staring at the ceiling, my body sore in all the best ways, my mind still sluggish from my nap. The past few days had been a blur of grief, tension, and unanswered questions—but in this bed, with Marcus above me, inside me, claiming me with every rough touch, everything else had disappeared.

And now, he was gone. A thread of unease tightened in my chest.

Marcus didn't just leave. Not like this.

Something was wrong.

I could feel it in the quiet hum of Dominion Hall, in the absence of his steady presence, in the way the air itself felt heavier, like the walls were keeping secrets.

I gripped the sheets tighter, my stomach knotting.

And then, another thought hit me—Diego's parents.

The jet Marcus had sent for them was already on its way. Within hours, they'd be landing in Charleston, stepping onto the tarmac expecting answers. Expecting comfort.

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I barely survived telling them over the phone.

Hearing María Gil's sobs crack through the line, listening to the devastation in her voice as she begged me to tell her it wasn't true—it had nearly broken me.

And now, I'd have to look them in the eye.

I swallowed hard, forcing myself to move. I couldn't think about that right now. Not when I knew, deep in my gut, that Marcus was doing something I wouldn't be able to ignore.

I forced myself up, pushing tangled hair out of my face. I reached for my phone, squinting at the screen. No messages.

I slid out of bed, grabbed my clothes from the floor and dressed quickly, then padded barefoot toward the door. The hallway was quiet, the whole house still, but something felt off.

Like Dominion Hall was holding its breath.

I checked the op room first. Empty. The kitchen, the gym—nothing.

The ache in my stomach sharpened.

I found Ryker in the armory, cleaning a rifle. He glanced up when I stepped inside, dark eyes unreadable.

“Where’s Marcus?” I asked.

Ryker didn’t answer right away. Just set the rifle down and leaned back against the counter, arms crossing over his chest.

It was subtle, the shift in his expression. But I caught it. He knew where Marcus was. And he wasn’t telling me.

The unease hardened into something heavier.

“Ryker,” I pressed, stepping closer. “Where is he?”

A long pause.

Then, finally, Ryker sighed. “You should stay out of this one, Claire.”

My pulse skipped. This one.

That meant something was happening. Right now.

I took another step forward. “Where. Is. Marcus.”

Ryker studied me, his jaw ticking. Then, with another sigh, he reached for his phone, tapped something, and turned the screen toward me.

A grainy security feed flickered to life.

Concrete walls. A single steel chair. And in it—the kid from the city complex.

The same guy who had been at The Palmetto Rose, watching Diego that night. The one who had answered Hart’s call, stammering, shaking, hiding something.

Now?

Now, he was strapped to a chair, his face already bloody, his body trembling.

And Marcus—my Marcus—was crouched in front of him, fingers digging into his jaw, voice low, controlled, deadly.

My breath caught in my throat.

“Where is this?” My voice barely worked.

Ryker shut off the screen, sliding the phone back into his pocket. “You don’t want to know.”

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The finality in his voice sent ice through my veins.

I stepped forward, pulse hammering. “Where is he?”

Ryker exhaled hard, like he was already regretting this conversation. “North Charleston. Near the base.”

I froze. Near the base.

Joint Base Charleston. Military presence. And if Marcus was out there, if Ryker was trying this hard to keep me from asking questions, it wasn’t just some abandoned warehouse.

It was something worse.

Something designed for men like Marcus.

Ryker must have seen the realization dawn in my eyes because his expression darkened. “Don’t do this, Claire.”

A warning. A command.

I ignored both. “He took that kid, didn’t he?”

Ryker’s jaw tightened.

I took another step closer. “Didn’t he?”

His hands curled into fists at his sides. “You don’t get it. That kid is not innocent in this.”

“He’s also not Diego’s killer.” My voice rose, frustration clawing at my throat. “You don’t know that he did anything more than watch.”

Ryker scoffed. “Then he watched your friend die and did nothing. That doesn’t deserve a little incentive to talk?”

I clenched my teeth, breathing hard.

Marcus wasn’t just trying to get answers. He was punishing this guy. Maybe for Diego. Maybe for me. Maybe just because he needed to hurt someone.

And Ryker wasn’t going to help me stop him.

I swallowed, switching tactics. “If this were Izzy?”

Ryker’s expression barely flickered.

I pressed on. “If Izzy had lost her best friend—to someone you knew was guilty, but you couldn’t prove it yet? If she was grieving, lost, drowning in it?” I held his gaze, unwavering. “And she asked you to find the person responsible? Would you stop?”

Ryker’s jaw ticked.

“Would you stop, Ryker?” I repeated, quieter, more dangerous.

His nostrils flared.

“No,” he admitted finally, voice low and rough. “I’d hunt them down.” His gaze

turned sharp, something dangerous flickering behind his dark eyes. “I’d take my time. Make them feel it. Make them beg to tell me what I wanted to know.”

I swallowed hard.

“So don’t stand there acting like you don’t understand why he’s doing this,” Ryker said, stepping closer. “Because you do.”

I did. And that was the problem.

I knew Marcus wasn’t just looking for answers. He was looking for retribution. And that meant he wasn’t coming back until he got it.

Unless I stopped him first.

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My stomach bottomed out.

Ryker exhaled, dragging a hand through his hair. “I get it, Claire. You want to save him.” His voice dropped. “But you can’t. Not from this.”

I swallowed against the tightness in my throat. “That’s not your call to make.”

“It is when you’re standing in my house asking me to go against my own damn brother,” he shot back. “Marcus is doing what needs to be done.”

I shook my head. “No. He’s doing what he needs. Not what Diego needs. Not what I need.” I took a step forward, leveling my gaze with his. “You can pretend this is about justice all you want, but you and I both know the truth. This is about control. About Marcus holding onto something when everything else is slipping through his fingers.”

Ryker’s jaw clenched. His silence was confirmation enough.

I softened my voice, careful now. “And you’d do the same thing if it were Izzy.”

Something flickered in his dark eyes.

I pressed on. “If someone hurt her, if she lost someone the way I just lost Diego, you’d move heaven and earth to fix it. To take the weight off her shoulders. You’d burn the world down to make sure she never had to carry that pain alone.”

His nostrils flared, but he didn’t argue.

“You have your men watching over her even when she doesn’t ask for it,” I said, tilting my head. “Right now, she’s at the hotel, and I’m willing to bet you’ve got eyes on her. Just in case.”

Ryker’s lips pressed into a thin line.

I nodded. “Because you can’t stand the idea of something happening to her. You feel like you need to protect her, even when she tells you not to. Even when she says she’s fine.”

He let out a long breath. “Yeah.” His voice was lower now. “I do.”

“Then you get it,” I said. “That’s why I need to go to him.”

Ryker’s eyes narrowed. “You really think you showing up is gonna change anything?”

“I think it’s the only thing that can,” I shot back. “If I’m there, he won’t lose himself completely.”

Ryker rolled his shoulders, tension bleeding through. He wasn’t convinced, but he was close.

I moved in for the kill. “If it were Izzy in my place, would you let her go?”

His jaw ticked.

“If she begged you to take her to you—to stop you before you did something you couldn’t come back from—would you really just stand there?” I lowered my voice. “Or would you take her hand and let her try?”

His breath left him in a slow, controlled exhale. He wasn't looking at me anymore—he was somewhere else, playing out the scenario, seeing Izzy in my place, feeling the way I felt right now.

I held my breath, waiting.

Ryker stayed quiet for a long moment, his gaze fixed on some unseen point, tension radiating off him like a storm rolling in. I could almost hear the war inside his head—his loyalty to Marcus, his own instincts, the undeniable truth in what I'd just said.

Then he exhaled slowly, shaking his head. "You're making a mistake."

I swallowed hard. "Maybe. But I have to try."

He let out another rough breath, muttered a curse, and scrubbed a hand down his face.

I pushed on, voice softer now. "Ryker, he's just a kid."

Ryker's gaze snapped back to mine, sharp and unreadable.

"He might know something. He might have seen something," I said, forcing my voice to stay even, to stay logical. "But that doesn't mean he deserves to be tortured over it."

Ryker's jaw flexed, but he didn't interrupt.

I took a breath, forcing the next words out. "I've spent my entire career investigating crime. Murders. People who go missing and never come back. I've talked to victims' families, I've followed leads that ran cold, I've uncovered things the police were too slow—or too corrupt—to chase down." I shook my head, crossing my arms tightly over my chest. "And I've seen what revenge does to people. It doesn't fix anything. It doesn't bring the dead back. And half the time?" I swallowed. "It makes things worse."

Ryker didn't move, but something shifted behind his eyes.

I pressed on. "I get it. I do. Marcus is furious. So am I. Diego is dead, and we don't know why. We don't know who really pulled the strings. But hurting this guy?" I shook my head. "This isn't justice. It's just pain looking for somewhere to land."

Ryker exhaled slowly, but the muscle in his jaw kept ticking. "Marcus doesn't see it that way."

"Then maybe someone needs to make him."

A long silence stretched between us.

Then Ryker pulled out his keys, cursing under his breath..

"Get in the damn car," he muttered.

Relief crashed over me so fast my knees nearly buckled.

But I couldn't fall apart now.

I turned and strode out of the armory, my steps echoing against the polished floors of Dominion Hall. The weight of what I was about to do pressed down on me, but I forced my legs to keep moving.

Halfway down the hall, I veered toward Marcus's room. "Give me two minutes," I called over my shoulder.

Ryker didn't argue.

I shoved the door open and grabbed my leather satchel from where I'd left it by the bed, slinging it over my shoulder with shaky fingers. My heart was still pounding, adrenaline making my limbs feel too light, too unsteady. I stepped into the bathroom, twisting the faucet on, and splashed cold water over my face, letting the shock of it ground me.

Breathe. Focus.

I ran a brush through my hair, pulling it into a quick ponytail, then grabbed a fresh shirt from my bag and yanked it on. I didn't have time for more than that.

I caught my reflection in the mirror as I turned to leave. My cheeks were still flushed, my eyes bright with something sharp and determined.

Good.

I slung my satchel higher onto my shoulder, squared my jaw, and headed for the door.

Ryker was waiting by the front entrance, keys in hand, expression unreadable.

I nodded once. “Let’s go.”

28

MARCUS

I’d always had my little hiding spots scattered around Charleston—dark corners and quiet haunts where me and my brothers could have what I liked to call intimate conversations with our guests. Places like the rusted-out shed behind the old textile mill on the edge of town, the basement of that abandoned bar off King Street with walls thick enough to muffle screams, or the concrete box near Joint Base Charleston we were in now, a familiar haunt from the early days when we’d first started building Dominion into what it was.

They weren’t pretty, weren’t comfortable, but they did the job. Sound didn’t carry, neighbors didn’t snoop, and the shadows kept our secrets. Perfect for getting answers out of people who didn’t want to give them.

Earlier, I’d gone looking for Evelyn Hart. Started at her house—a sleek, modern place on the Battery, all glass and white brick, the kind of home that screamed money and power. I’d slipped in through a side window, silent as a ghost, expecting to find her sipping tea or plotting her next move. But the place was ashell. No clothes in the closets, no papers on the desk, no dishes in the sink—just furniture, cold and untouched, like she’d packed up her life and vanished. Poof.

Same story at her office in the city complex. Desk cleared, files gone, nothing but the faint scent of her perfume lingering like a taunt. She’d rabbited, and I hadn’t seen it coming.

I'd been pacing my room at Dominion, stewing on it, Claire still asleep in my bed, her naked curves a distraction I couldn't afford, when my phone buzzed. One of my guys—Tommy, ex-Ranger with eyes like a hawk—called in.

“Spotted that kid from the mayor's office. The twitchy one. Walking home from some Mexican joint on East Bay, bag of takeout in his hand.”

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Gibson Sinclair. The little prick from the lobby, the one who'd been at The Palmetto Rose the night Diego died, watching him like a vulture.

I didn't think—just acted. I snatched him off the street as he fumbled with his keys, the greasy bag of tacos spilling across the pavement. He didn't even fight, just yelped like a kicked dog as I shoved him into the back of the van, blindfolded him, and hauled him out to the concrete box near the base. Logical move. Only move.

Now here we were, him strapped to a steel chair in the middle of the room, me circling him like a shark.

The place was bare—gray walls, a single flickering bulb overhead, the faint hum of distant traffic filtering through the reinforced door. Smelled like damp concrete and old blood, a scent I knew too well. Very Tarantino.

Gibson Sinclair—twenty-something, scrawny, with a mop of dark hair and a face that screamed soft—sat there trembling, his cheap tie loosened, his button-down stained with sweat.

I hated him from the jump. Hated his nervous ticks, the way his eyes darted like a cornered rat, the way he looked like he'd fold under a stiff breeze. I couldn't wait to pound the truth out of him, to feel his bones give under my fists, to hear him spill everything he knew about Hart, about Diego, about Department 77.

Didn't take punches at first. The kid was a weakling—well-placed slaps did the trick, sharp cracks across his cheeks that turned his pale skin red fast. He started talking, voice high and shaky, blood trickling from a split lip.

“I was just there to keep an eye on him—Diego Gil. Discreet, she said. That’s all I was told!”

I didn’t buy it. Leaned in closer, my shadow swallowing him, my breath hot on his face.

“You expect me to believe that? You were there when he died, and you just watched?”

He flinched, hands twisting against the zip ties. “It’s the truth! I swear! Hart told me to tail him, report back. I didn’t—I didn’t do anything to him!”

Bullshit. I drove a fist into his ribs, precise, hard enough to make him grunt but not to crack bone. He doubled over as much as the ties let him, gasping, tears mixing with the blood on his chin.

“Why you?” I growled, grabbing his jaw, forcing his head up. “Why send a sniveling little shit like you? You’re not cut for this.”

“I don’t know!” he whined, voice breaking. “I work for the mayor—odd jobs, whatever she needs. She’s been giving me weird tasks lately, that’s all I know!”

“Weird tasks?” I tightened my grip, my knuckles white against his skin. “What kind?”

He stammered, snot bubbling from his nose. “Stupid stuff—pick up her dry cleaning, drop off envelopes, follow people sometimes. Nothing big, I swear!”

I cut him off with a slap, harder this time, his head whipping to the side so fast I thought it might spin off. He was an easy bleeder—red streaked down his face, dripping onto his shirt, pooling on the concrete.

“Where’s Hart?” I snarled, leaning in so close I could smell the fear on him, sour and sharp.

“Home or the office, probably,” he mumbled, eyes squeezed shut. “She works a lot.”

“Wrong answer.” I straightened, driving another punch into his gut, this one lifting him an inch off the chair. He wheezed, choking on his own spit. “I’ve been to both. She’s gone. Poof. Where is she?”

“I don’t know!” he sobbed, head lolling. “She told me to take the rest of the day off—said she had to catch up after the masquerade. That’s all I got!”

Masquerade. The word hit like a ricochet, but it didn’t tell me shit. I’d been at that damn gala too, watching Claire, watching Diego, and Hart had been there, all smiles and silk. Now she was smoke, and this kid was my only lead.

I laid into him harder—fists finding his ribs, his chest, his face, each hit calculated to hurt, to break, but not to kill. Not yet. Pain radiated up my knuckles, a dull ache I welcomed, grounding me as his cries turned shrill, then ragged.

“Where. Is. She?” I roared, punctuating each word with a blow, his blood slicking my hands, splattering my shirt. He didn’t answer—just whimpered, head rolling, too weak to even beg.

My desperation clawed at me, raw and jagged, a beast I couldn’t cage. Nothing was working. Not my contacts, silent as graves. Not our tech, spitting out dead ends.

Hart was the only thread tying us to Department 77, and she’d slipped through my fingers. I had to know. Had to. For me. For Claire. For my father, whose ghost loomed larger every second, his secrets choking me like smoke I couldn’t clear.

I didn't want to admit I was unraveling. That'd mean weakness, and I wasn't weak. I'd buried men stronger than Gibson Sinclair, walked through fire without blinking, built Dominion with my bare hands alongside my brothers.

But this—this was different. This was personal, a wound I couldn't cauterize, and I was ready to kill this kid even if he knew nothing, just to feel something give under the weight of it all.

I raised my fist again, blood dripping from my knuckles, Gibson's face a mess of red and purple, when the door banged open behind me. I spun, rage flaring hot, and there she was—Claire, storming in, gray eyes blazing, Ryker on her heels like a shadow.

“What the fuck?” I roared, rounding on my brother first, my voice bouncing off the concrete. “You brought her here?”

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Ryker didn't flinch, just crossed his arms, his face carved from stone. "She wouldn't stay put."

I turned on Claire, closing the gap between us in two strides, my chest heaving. "You shouldn't be here. This is my work—this has to be done!"

She didn't back down, didn't blink, just squared her shoulders and met my glare head-on. "No, Marcus, it doesn't." Her voice was steady, cutting through my fury like a blade. "Look at him. He doesn't know anything."

I laughed, sharp and bitter, gesturing at Gibson's slumped form. "He was there, Claire. The night Diego died. He knows something."

She stepped closer, her eyes searching mine. "He's an assistant. A nobody. You think Hart would trust him with anything real? He's scared, bleeding, and still telling you the same story, right? Because it's all he's got." She shook her head, voice softening but firm. "This isn't how Diego would've wanted it. Or your father."

Her words hit like a gut punch, and I hated her for it. Hated how they sank in, hooking into the cracks I'd been ignoring. I turned away, fists clenching, ready to go back to Gibson, to pound until something—anything—gave.

"You don't get it," I growled, stepping toward him, my shadow falling over his crumpled body.

"She's right," Ryker said, voice low, cutting through the haze. I froze, glancing back at him. He met my eyes, unflinching. "There's a better way."

“How?” I snapped, desperation bleeding into my tone. “Tell me how, Ryker, because I’m out of fucking moves here!”

He shrugged, slow, deliberate. “I don’t know. But maybe Claire’s people can help where we’ve failed.”

I looked at Claire, my chest tight, my hands still slick with Gibson’s blood. Her face was set, determined, but there was something else there—something pleading, like she was begging me to listen, to stop. “What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked, voice rough, almost breaking.

She took a breath, stepping closer, her gaze locking onto mine. “I have an idea.”

29

CLAIRE

I had chased monsters my entire career, but tonight, I had walked straight into the dark and found the man I couldn’t bear to lose becoming one.

Wasn’t it ironic?

I could only hope I had arrived before it was too late.

Before we left, Ryker made a quick call, his voice low and clipped as he gave instructions. Sinclair wouldn’t be left to bleed out alone in that concrete box. One of their men would clean him up, patch what needed patching, and keep him under watch until they decided what to do with him.

The van, still parked outside the black site, was being handled, too. Ryker had left the keys with one of their guys, ensuring it would be wiped down and moved before

anyone started asking the wrong questions.

Efficient. Precise. Like this was just another night at the office.

As we pulled onto the highway, though, the scent of blood still thick on Marcus, I wasn't sure anyone had walked away from this unscathed.

Gibson Sinclair's face—swollen, bloody, barely recognizable.

Marcus's fists—red, raw, shaking with restrained fury.

The moment I'd stepped between them, put my body between Marcus and the wreckage of what used to be a man.

I should have been scared of him. The way he'd looked at me, eyes full of something unhinged, his body thrumming with the need to destroy. But I wasn't. Not even for a second.

Because I understood it.

The need to do something. When the world takes everything from you, when justice feels like a ghost you can never quite touch—you lash out. You burn everything down just to feel the heat.

I knew that feeling too well. But I also knew it wasn't going to get us what we needed.

And now? Now, I had a plan.

Dominion Hall was eerily silent when we arrived.

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Ryker killed the engine, but Marcus didn't move. He just sat there, staring through the windshield, his chest rising and falling in slow, controlled breaths, like he was still trying to claw his way back from the edge.

Ryker got out first, leaving us alone.

I reached out, my fingers brushing Marcus's forearm, and finally—finally—he looked at me.

“What you did back there,” I said softly. “It won't bring Diego back.”

His nostrils flared. “I know that.”

“But you wanted it to.”

A muscle ticked in his jaw.

I trailed my fingers down his arm, lacing them through his, feeling the tension under his skin, the raw, unspent violence still coiled tight in his muscles. “Let me try this my way.”

He didn't pull away, but he didn't relax.

I swallowed, my voice quieter now. “You know, it wouldn't have brought Jason back either.”

Marcus stiffened. His grip on my fingers turned rigid, not tight, not crushing, but

suddenly still, like the weight of that name had frozen him.

Jason Lawson. His friend. His brother-in-arms. A man who had fought beside him, bled beside him, and never made it home. I didn't know all the details, but I knew enough—Jason had been taken from him, just like Diego had been taken from me.

And then there was Byron Dane.

I didn't say his name, but I didn't have to. It was there, a specter between us, filling the space that grief always left behind. Marcus had lost his father, lost Jason, and now, he was grasping at vengeance like it was the only thing keeping him standing.

But it wouldn't bring them back. Not Jason, not Byron, not Diego.

Loss didn't work like that.

It hollowed you out, carved you from the inside until you were just remnants of the person you used to be. And the worst part? The world didn't care. It kept spinning, kept moving forward, while you were stuck—trapped in the moment they took their last breath, reliving it, rewriting it, trying to imagine some version where you could have stopped it.

I knew that feeling. I was drowning in it.

And so was he.

I squeezed his hand, my voice softer now, careful. "Marcus."

His gaze flicked to mine, dark and unreadable, but I saw it. The fracture in his control, the quiet, brutal grief clawing at him from the inside.

“I need you,” I whispered. “Not like that. Not lost in this.”

He exhaled sharply, running his free hand over his face, like he was trying to wipe something away. His fingers tightened around mine, grounding himself. Grounding us both.

“Let me try,” I said again, firmer this time. “Please.”

For a long, agonizing moment, he didn’t answer. Then, finally, his shoulders slumped, just slightly, just enough.

“All right,” he muttered. “We do this your way.”

I let out a slow breath, my fingers still tangled with his. It wasn’t a victory. Not really.

But it was a start.

His fingers tightened around mine. He exhaled slowly. “Tell me what you need.”

That was Marcus. He didn’t try to talk me out of it. Didn’t argue, didn’t dismiss me. He just looked at me with those calculating eyes and waited for me to tell him what to burn.

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I squeezed his hand. “Come inside. I’ll show you.”

The op room was cold, the walls lined with monitors still flickering with grainy footage from the black site. I pushed past it, forcing myself not to look, not to think about the bruised, broken mess Marcus had left behind. That wasn’t my focus now.

I kept walking, my pulse hammering, heading straight for the stairs. In Marcus’s room, the air still carried the scent of him. The bed was rumpled, the sheets tangled from where we’d slept, from where he’d had me.

I ignored the heat that tried to creep up my spine and grabbed my suitcase from where I’d left it near the dresser. My laptop was inside, cool and solid beneath my fingertips. I pulled it out, clutching it tight for a second before turning on my heel and heading back downstairs.

By the time I reached the op room again, my decision was made.

This wasn’t just about finding answers. This was about setting the world on fire.

Marcus stood close, his presence a steady heat at my back, watching me like I was something rare. Something important.

I shoved my hair out of my face and opened the laptop. “We can’t find Hart, but someone else can.”

His eyes narrowed slightly. “Who?”

I met his gaze. “My listeners.”

His brows furrowed.

“I’ve been running The Unseen for years. Millions of downloads. Millions of people who live for this kind of hunt.” I took a deep breath. “If we turn this into a real-time investigation, they’ll track her down before the sun rises.”

Marcus studied me for a long moment. Then, to my surprise, a slow, dangerous smirk spread across his face. “You want to sic the internet on her.”

“Hard.”

His smirk deepened. “I like it.”

I tried not to let that do things to me, but it did.

The way he watched me—like he wanted to devour me right there, push everything off this table and put me on top of it. His gaze dragged over me, slow and deliberate, dark with possession. Heat coiled low in my stomach, pooling between my thighs, my pulse a traitorous thrum beneath my skin.

Marcus leaned against the edge of the table, arms crossed over his broad chest, but there was nothing casual about it. His jaw was tight, his breathing controlled, like he was barely holding himself back. Like he was remembering exactly how I’d looked spread out beneath him hours ago, how I’d sounded moaning his name.

I shifted, thighs pressing together, a spark of frustration flickering through me. I had work to do. But his presence wrapped around me, distracting, intoxicating, the weight of his gaze stripping me bare.

I bit my lip, fighting the urge to push him further, to test the limits of that control. Instead, I turned away—forcing myself to focus, to ignore the heat simmering between us. For now.

I pulled my mic from my bag, setting it up, checking the levels, and then—just like that—I was live.

My voice was steady, smooth, controlled. A skill I'd perfected over the years.

“This is Claire Dixon, and you’re listening to *The Unseen*. But tonight, I’m doing something different. Something I’ve never done before.”

I glanced up at Marcus. I swallowed hard.

“This isn’t a case I pulled from old police files. This isn’t an urban legend or a disappearance that’s gone cold. This is happening right now. And I need your help.”

I took a steadying breath, my fingers tightening around the mic. My voice had to be strong, unwavering. For Diego.

“His name was Diego Gil. He was my friend. And he was found dead in the pool of The Palmetto Rose hotel in Charleston, South Carolina.” I swallowed, the lump in my throat thick, but I pushed through. “The police are calling it an accident. But I know it wasn’t.”

A beat of silence stretched, heavy and charged.

“He wasn’t just my friend,” I continued, my voice softer now, thick with grief I hadn’t had time to process. “He was the producer of *The Unseen*. Every single episode you’ve ever heard of this show? Diego was behind it. The edits, the sound design, the music—he was the one who made sure my voice reached you. That every

story we covered was told with care. That the victims weren't forgotten."

A deep breath. I could do this.

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“This show mattered to him,” I said, the words sharp with the truth of it. “Not just because it was his job. But because he believed in it. He believed in uncovering the truth. In shining a light on the things people tried to keep buried. In giving voices to the ones who didn’t have them.”

A thousand memories threatened to crash over me. Diego, sprawled in a chair at my apartment, laptop open, headphones on, grinning as he tweaked an episode’s intro music for the fifth time just to get it perfect. Diego rolling his eyes every time I spiraled about a script but still reading through every word, pointing out the parts that needed tightening. Diego calling me, voice buzzing with excitement, because a new lead had come through on one of our deep-dive cases.

And now? Now, his voice was gone.

I clenched my jaw, forcing the grief down.

“Diego knew what he was doing. He knew how to dig, how to follow a trail. He knew when a story wasn’t adding up.” My pulse pounded. “And now, he’s dead. And the police don’t care.”

My hands shook, but I kept my voice steady.

“His parents are on a plane right now,” I said, my breath hitching slightly. “They’re flying to Charleston. To the place where their son died. They deserve answers. They deserve justice. And right now, they have nothing.”

A hollow ache burned in my chest. I could still hear María Gil’s sobs over the phone,

the way her voice had cracked when she asked *Dónde está?*—where is he?

I closed my eyes for a brief second, exhaling.

“I’m not going to let this go,” I promised, my voice firm. “And if you’ve ever trusted me—if you’ve ever believed in what we do here—then I need you now.”

I leaned forward, gripping the edge of the table.

“I need your help.”

Marcus’s fingers twitched. His expression didn’t change, but I saw the ripple of tension go through him.

“I’m asking you—all of you—to help me find the woman who holds the key to this. Her name is Evelyn Hart. She’s the mayor of Charleston. And she’s disappeared.”

I paused, letting the weight of it settle.

“I don’t need conspiracy theories. I don’t need speculation. I need real leads. I need eyes. If you’ve seen her—if you know where she’s staying, who she’s talking to, what car she’s driving—I want to know.”

I let my voice soften, threading it with something raw, something real.

“Diego deserves justice. And I can’t do this alone.”

I let the words hang for a beat, then pushed forward.

“I’m putting something on the table. If you help, you won’t just get a mention on the show—you’ll get more. A private event, in Charleston, fully paid. And I’ll attend,

too. We'll celebrate together."

I lifted my gaze again, locking onto Marcus. His eyes had darkened, but there was something else there too—something quieter.

Pride. Not just in me, but in this. In the way we wereworking together, in the way his resources were fueling something bigger than just vengeance. He didn't need the credit. Didn't want it.

Because this? This was mine.

"This is personal," I said, voice thick. "And if you've ever lost someone and been told to just move on—to let it go—then you know why I'm doing this. Why I have to do this."

A long exhale.

"Let's find her."

Then I killed the mic.

The room went silent.

I barely had time to breathe before Marcus was there, fingers brushing my wrist, his body so close I could feel the heat of him everywhere.

"You're incredible," he murmured, voice low, dark, reverent.

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I turned my head, my pulse skittering. “You think it’ll work?”

He exhaled sharply, then leaned in, lips ghosting the shell of my ear. “It’s already working.”

My skin erupted in chills.

The laptop screen was lighting up with messages, notifications flying in at breakneck speed. My email was already pinging with tips, theories, names, locations.

We had set the fire. Now we just had to watch it burn. And when it did?

Evelyn Hart would have nowhere to hide.

30

MARCUS

I stood in the ops room, watching Claire work, and I couldn’t shake the amazement buzzing through me. Never in a million years would I have thought to use a podcast like this. Me? I’d been ready to break bones, burn bridges, tear the city apart brick by brick until Evelyn Hart coughed up what she knew. That was my playbook—direct, brutal, effective in its own way.

But Claire? She’d flipped the script, turned her voice into a weapon, and unleashed a goddamn army of listeners to hunt for us. It was genius, and I’d been too buried in my own rage to see it coming.

Sure, this took the operation public to a degree—flashed a spotlight we usually kept dim. Who cared? Maybe it'd piss off Department 77 enough to make them slink back into the shadows, give us some breathing room.

I didn't think that'd hold for the long haul—ghosts like them didn't stay spooked forever—but in the short term? It was a nudge forward, a shift from defense to offense. We weren't just reacting anymore; we were hunting. And it was all because of her.

Claire sat at the steel table, her laptop open, her gray eyes locked on the screen as notifications poured in like a flood. I leaned closer, arms crossed, trying to play it cool, but my pulse was hammering. Her voice—steady, raw, cutting through the air—had just set the world on fire. She'd laid Diego's death bare for millions, turned her grief into a rallying cry, and now her listeners were answering. It was like watching a general call her troops to war, and fuck if it didn't make me want her more than I already did.

I pushed off the chair, moving to the bank of monitors behind her. "Let's get some order to this chaos," I said. I fired up Dominion's AI—custom-built, bleeding-edge, the kind of tech that could sift through a haystack of bullshit and find the needle in seconds. "Feed it everything coming in. Emails, comments, whatever's hitting your inbox."

She nodded, quick and sharp, her fingers flying over the keys to forward the data stream. "There's a lot of noise already. People are gonna jump at the chance to be part of this."

"Yeah," I muttered, watching the AI's interface light up as it started chewing through the flood. "Most of it'll be garbage—attention whores, wannabe sleuths, trolls looking for a shoutout."

And it was. The first wave was a mess—bogus tips like “Saw Hart at a gas station in Ohio” or “She’s hiding in my grandma’s attic,” dumb shit from people who just wanted to be famous for fifteen seconds.

I rolled my eyes, scrolling through the junk as the AI flagged it red—useless, irrelevant, out-of-state nonsense. But then, buried in the noise, a pattern started to pokethrough. Little comments, anonymous but steady, from people in the Lowcountry. Stuff like, “I’ve got friends in low places. They’re on the lookout.” Or, “I’ll keep an eye out during my shift.” Nothing flashy, nothing specific—just quiet, earnest promises from folks who lived here, worked here, knew the streets.

I froze, staring at the screen, a slow grin tugging at my lips. “Holy shit.”

Claire glanced over, her brow furrowing. “What?”

“Look at this.” I tapped the monitor, highlighting a cluster of those messages. “They’re not screaming for attention. They’re just ... doing it. Working the case like it’s theirs, too.”

She leaned closer, her shoulder brushing mine, and I caught the faint scent of her—something clean and smooth, cutting through the stale air of the ops room. Her eyes scanned the lines, and a small, surprised smile flickered across her face. “They’re with us.”

“Yeah,” I said. “They’re fucking with us.” I turned to her, meeting her gaze head-on. “You did this, Claire. You turned a million strangers into your eyes out there. I’m amazed—fucking floored, honestly.”

Her cheeks flushed, just a little, but her eyes didn’t waver. “You’re not so bad yourself, Dane. That AI’s a hell of a trick.”

I smirked, leaning in a fraction closer, letting my voice drop. “Not as good as you. Never would’ve thought of this. You’re a goddamn force.”

She held my stare, and fuck, the air between us crackled. I’d always been drawn to her—those curves, that New York bite, the way she didn’t flinch when I pushed—but this? Seeing her wield her power like a longsword, slicing through the dark with nothing but her voice and her will? It lit something in me, hot and fierce, and I had to clench my fists to keep from dragging her against me right then and there.

Almost forgot what I’d done to Sinclair. Almost.

The memory hit like a cold splash—Gibson’s blood on my knuckles, his whimpers echoing in that concrete box, the way I’d lost it, unraveling like some rabid animal. I was supposed to be the cool one, the guy with the surfer vibe who didn’t crack, who kept his shit locked down no matter what.

Well, I’d cracked wide open, and why? Hart’s taunts about my father, sure—those had cut deep, reopening wounds I’d thought were scarred over. But it wasn’t just that. It was Claire, too—her grief, her fight, the way she’d looked at me like I could fix this for her. I’d wanted to. Needed to. And when I couldn’t, I’d taken it out on that kid’s face.

I’d have to figure that out—why I’d let it get that far, why I’d let myself become something I didn’t recognize. But not now. Not with Claire beside me, her fire pulling me back from the edge.

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We didn't leave the ops room. Couldn't. The messages kept rolling in, a relentless tide of highs and lows like a stakeout stretched across the whole damn city. One minute, we'd get a lead that sounded promising—"Saw a blonde in a black SUV near Mount Pleasant"—only for the AI to cross-check it and flag it as too vague, too far off Hart's profile. The next, some asshole would send a dick pic with "Found her!" scrawled over it, and I'd groan, scrubbing a hand down my face while Claire muttered, "Fucking idiots."

But we kept going, scanning every line, chasing the signal through the noise. The minutes blurred, the flickering monitors casting shadows across her face, and I caught myself watching her more than the screens. The way her lips pressed together when she focused, the way her fingers tapped a restless rhythm against the table, the way she didn't quit, didn't falter, even as the night dragged on. She was relentless, and it made me want her so bad it hurt.

Then, not long after daybreak, it happened. A ping cut through the hum—a message from some listener named chipshot59. I leaned over Claire's shoulder, reading it aloud as it popped up: "Just saw Hart check in for a massage at the Daniel Island Club. Blonde, fancy, with a couple suits trailing her."

My pulse kicked up, sharp and fast. "Bingo."

Claire's head snapped to me, her eyes wide, blazing with that hunter's glint I'd seen at the pier all those weeks ago. "Daniel Island Club. That's what, twenty minutes from here?"

"Fifteen if I drive," I said, already moving, adrenaline flooding my system like a shot

of pure heat. I grabbed my phone, texting our tech wizard.

Tap the club's surveillance feed. Now.

Claire was on her feet, shoving her laptop into her satchel, her movements quick and sure. "You think it's her?"

"I think we're about to find out." My phone buzzed back—fast as always.

Feed's live. Blonde woman, mid-40s, checked in 10 mins ago. Husband and three bodyguards with her. Matches Hart's profile. Sending stills.

The images loaded—a grainy shot of Evelyn Hart, all polished poise, striding through the club's lobby taking off oversized sunglasses, her husband at her side, three suits in dark jackets fanned out behind her. I turned the screen to Claire, and her lips moved into a grim, feral smile.

"Let's go get the bitch," she said, voice low, lethal, echoing my own thoughts so perfectly I almost laughed.

I didn't have to say it—she'd beaten me to it. I grabbed my keys off the table, the Bugatti's fob cold against my palm, and headed for the door, Claire right on my heels. The ops room's hum faded behind us as we hit the hallway, the weight of what we were doing settling into something sharp and focused.

Outside, the air was thick and humid, as usual. The kind of Charleston weather that clung to your skin. I unlocked the car, sliding into the driver's seat as Claire climbed in beside me, her satchel dumped on the floor, her posture coiled tight like a spring ready to snap. I gunned the engine, the low growl vibrating through us, and peeled out of Dominion's gates, tires chewing gravel then asphalt as we hit the road.

“Fifteen minutes,” I said, eyes on the stretch ahead, the city blurring past. “We’ll be there before she’s done with her massage.”

Claire nodded, her hands flexing in her lap. “She’s got bodyguards. Three of them.”

“Yeah,” I said, voice steady. “I’ve got us.”

She shot me a look—half challenge, half trust—and I felt it hit me low, a jolt that had nothing to do with the speed I was pushing. I’d lost my shit with Sinclair, let the beast out, but with her beside me, I was locked in again. Cool. Controlled. The surfer vibe was back, but sharper now, edged with something deadly. Hart wasn’t slipping away this time.

+++

The Daniel Island Club loomed ahead, a sprawl of manicured lawns and low-lit luxury, the kind of place where Charleston’s elite hid behind membership fees and velvet ropes. I swung into the lot, parking out of sight near a service entrance—old habits from darker days. Claire was out before I’d even killed the engine, her steps silent on the pavement, her gray eyes scanning the building like a predator locking onto prey.

I followed, my hand brushing the pistol holstered under my jacket, a reflex more than a plan. “Service door,” I said, nodding toward the side. “Less eyes.”

She didn’t argue, falling into step beside me as we moved, shadows swallowing us. My phone buzzed—my tech guy again.

Hart’s still in the spa. Husband’s at the bar. Guards split—two outside, one inside.

“Perfect,” I muttered, relaying it to Claire. “We’ve got a window.”

Her smile was tight, dangerous. “Then let’s not waste it.”

We slipped through the service door, the buzz of the club’s HVAC masking our steps. The hallway was narrow, lined with staff lockers and carts—backstage for the rich and pampered. I led the way, muscle memory kicking in from years of moving unseen, Claire a silent force at my back.

The spa was close—I could smell the lavender and eucalyptus bullshit wafting through the air. A staffer in a crisp white uniform passed us, barely glancing up from her clipboard, and I kept my pace steady, casual, like we belonged. Claire matched me, her presence electric, her focus razor-sharp.

We hit the spa’s entrance—a frosted glass door, soft music seeping through. I paused, glancing at her. “Ready?”

Her eyes met mine, fierce and unyielding. “Let’s end this.”

I pushed the door open, and we stepped inside, the game shifting from hunt to strike. Hart was in there, oblivious, thinking she’d outrun us. She hadn’t. Not this time.

31

CLAIRE

I pushed the spa door open, stepping inside after Marcus?—

And immediately knew something was wrong.

The air felt thick. Too still.

Not the hushed, meditative quiet of a high-end retreat, but something heavier. Something waiting.

Marcus must have felt it, too. His posture shifted, barely perceptible, but I caught it—the way his shoulders squared, the subtle roll of tension through his muscles. A predator scenting the trap before it could spring.

And yet, I had wanted this. Wanted to be here, working alongside him, proving—to him, to myself—that I could. That I wasn't just the woman in his bed or the voice behind a microphone. That I wasn't some outsider playing at war, using my words while men like him used their fists.

I had felt like I was doing something real. Taking control. Fighting back. And more than that—I was with Marcus, not just in a way that burned in the dark, but in the light, standing at his side, building something together. It mattered.

But maybe I had been foolish.

Because knowing something was off wasn't the same as being prepared for it. I wasn't. Not for this.

A woman sat behind the reception desk, blonde hair sleek and perfect, eyes barely flicking up from her screen. "Welcome to Island Spa," she said smoothly. "Are you checking in?"

Marcus didn't answer. His gaze slid past her, scanning the hall beyond. His presence beside me was calm, but I felt the change in him. The way the air had sharpened, edged with something wrong.

My pulse skittered. I knew Marcus was dangerous. I'd seen the wreckage he could leave behind. But this was different. This wasn't him on the attack.

This was him realizing he might be the target.

A chill ghosted down my spine, and I fought the urge to glance over my shoulder, to search for the eyes I suddenly felt on me. My body knew before my brain did.

Marcus must have felt it, too. He was utterly still beside me, tension rolling through him like a tide pulling back before the crash.

Had he ever felt like this before?

I wondered if he had as a Marine Raider, if there had been moments buried deep in his past where the animal part of him—pure instinct, pure survival—had risen like this. Had it happened the day Jason Lawson was killed? Had Marcus felt this same cold grip on his spine, this same unnatural stillness in his blood, the moment he realized death was closer than he'd thought?

Was this the fear that shaped him? The reason he and his brothers didn't hesitate

when others froze?

I'd been in danger before. Plenty of times. My work with The Unseen had taken me into bad neighborhoods, had led me to interview killers in prison, to dig too deep into places that wanted to stay buried. I'd received death threats, been followed home, been told in no uncertain terms to let things go.

But this—this was different.

This wasn't a rational fear, the kind you could argue yourself out of. It wasn't the kind that came with logic and probability. This was something older. Deeper. A primitive, lizard-brain terror whispering run. And I wasn't sure I'd ever felt it before.

I opened my mouth, ready to say something, to play along?—

And then I heard it.

Footsteps.

Behind us.

Too many.

I didn't turn my head. Didn't look. Looking would confirm it, would make it real. But my heart was already hammering, my stomach twisting into knots, my breath coming too shallow, too fast.

I had to think. Had to act.

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If this went bad, how the hell was I getting out of it?

Panic clawed at my ribs, but I shoved it down, scanning the spa's layout in my mind, searching for exits, weapons—anything. But I had nothing. No gun, no knife, not even fucking pepper spray. What had I been thinking? I had walked into this like a goddamn amateur, with nothing but my voice and my convictions, like either of those would mean a damn thing if someone put a bullet in my head.

I should have learned how to fight. Should have learned how to shoot. Should have done more than just trust that Marcus or Ryker or one of the other Dane brothers would always be there to protect me.

Because what if they couldn't?

What if this was the one time Marcus wasn't fast enough, wasn't strong enough? Even Superman had his kryptonite.

And I—I was Marcus Dane's.

That thought hit hard, lodged deep in my chest like shrapnel. Marcus would burn the world down before he let something happen to me. I knew that. But I also knew something else.

Men like him didn't get to save everyone. Not forever.

Jason Lawson was proof of that.

Byron Dane was proof of that.

And I—I didn't want to be next.

Marcus moved first. He grabbed my wrist and shoved me behind him as the room exploded into motion.

The first man came from the hallway—big, fast, trained—but Marcus was faster. He caught him mid-lunge, slammed him into the reception desk so hard the blonde woman gasped, her empty smile vanishing.

Another set of footsteps. A second man. This one didn't hesitate—he charged, reaching for something at his waist.

Gun.

I saw it, my breath locking in my throat, but Marcus was already moving. A brutal strike to the throat, a sweep of his leg, and the guy hit the floor, gagging.

I staggered back, heart hammering, trying to process what was happening—really happening.

A part of me refused to accept it, as if my brain was scrambling for some kind of rational explanation, some excuse that would make this not what I already knew it was. Maybe this was just a misunderstanding. Maybe the footsteps behind us were just other guests. Maybe the blonde receptionist had only hesitated because she recognized Marcus, not because she was waiting for something—someone.

But my gut knew better.

That deep, primal part of my brain—the one that had been sharpened by years of

chasing stories that led to dark places—was screaming that this was wrong. That we were trapped. That I was already a step behind.

I had spent my entire life chasing the truth. Hunting it down. Dragging it into the light. And yet here I was, standing in the middle of this sleek, quiet spa, my body rigid with an instinct my mind didn't want to name, clinging to the absurd hope that this wasn't what it looked like.

But it was.

Marcus's tension, the shift in his stance, the way the air itself had changed—those weren't my imagination. My body had recognized the danger before my mind could catch up, before I could fully admit that we weren't walking out of here the same way we came in.

This was happening. And we were already in it.

Something cold clamped over my mouth.

Panic surged, sharp, blinding.

I fought. Twisted, kicked, my elbow driving backward, but my attacker was too strong, too fast.

An arm locked around my waist, lifting me clear off my feet, dragging me toward the back door.

No.

No, no, no.

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I kicked harder, dug my nails in, tried to scream against the gloved hand muffling my mouth?—

Marcus roared my name.

I caught a flash of him through my wild, thrashing panic—his face murderous, his body already moving toward me?—

And then the world went black.

A hood. Tight. Suffocating. A sharp sting in my neck.

The last thing I heard was Marcus's voice, furious, desperate?—

And then, nothing.

32

MARCUS

Ididn't think. Didn't breathe. Just moved.

The spa door slammed shut behind Claire's muffled scream, and I was already on the second bastard—his gun skittering across the tile as my fist cracked his jaw. Blood sprayed, hot and wet, splattering my shirt, my face, but it wasn't enough. Not nearly enough. The first guy groaned from the wrecked reception desk, clutching his gut where I'd slammed him, but I didn't stop to finish him. They'd taken her. Taken her.

My Claire.

I roared her name again, voice tearing out of me like shrapnel, and bolted for the back door they'd dragged her through. The blonde at the desk shrieked—useless, fake, probably in on it—but I didn't give a shit. My boots pounded the polished floor, slipping in some asshole's blood, and I caught the frame just as the service hallway loomed ahead. Dark. Narrow. A fucking trap, and I'd walked us right into it.

“Claire!”

No answer. Just the echo of my own rage bouncing off concrete. I drew my pistol, barrel steady despite the tremor in my hands, and charged in. Shadows moved—two of them, big, hauling something limp between them. Her. Hooded, slumped, but alive—I'd know her shape anywhere, even in the dark. My vision tunneled, red and black, and I fired. One dropped, a clean shot through the shoulder, his scream cut short as he hit the ground. The other spun, dragging her faster, disappearing around a corner.

I ran harder, lungs burning, every step a promise—I'd kill them. All of them. Rip their spines out and choke Hart with the pieces for daring to touch what was mine. The hallway split, and I caught a flash of movement—tires squealing outside, a door sliding shut. I burst through the service exit into humid air, gun raised, but they were gone. Van taillights flared red, then vanished down the access road.

Gone.

I stood there, chest heaving, the Bugatti waiting fifty yards away where I'd parked it. My fist slammed into the wall—concrete bit my knuckles, splitting skin, but I didn't feel it. She was gone, and I'd let it happen. Right in front of me. My fault. My fucking fault.

I could still hear her—her sharp gasp, the scuffle of her feet as she fought, the way she'd twisted against them before they took her down. I'd been too slow. Too fucking slow. I'd seen the trap coming—felt it in my gut the second we stepped into that spa, the air too still, the blonde too calm—but I hadn't moved fast enough. Hadn't gotten her out.

I yanked my phone out, blood smearing the screen, and dialed Ryker. He picked up on the first ring.

"She's gone," I snarled, voice raw. "They took her. Daniel Island Club. Hart's goons. I need everyone—now."

A beat of silence, then his voice, cold and hard: "On it. Stay put."

"Fuck that," I snapped, already moving for the car. "I'm going after her."

"Marcus—"

I hung up, slid into the driver's seat, and gunned it. The engine roared, a beast waking up, and I tore out of the lot. They had a head start, but I'd find them. I'd tear Charleston apart street by street, burn every shadow until I had her back. And when I did? Hart and whoever she worked for—Department 77, God, the devil himself—would beg for a mercy I wouldn't give.

The Bugatti ate the road, asphalt blurring beneath me as I pushed it past ninety, weaving through traffic. Horns blared, headlights flashed, but I didn't care. My hands gripped the wheel, knuckles white, blood dripping onto the leather from where I'd split them open.

I couldn't stop seeing her—gray eyes wide with that hunter's glint, blonde hair spilling over her shoulders, the way she'd smirked at me in the ops room like she

owned the damn world. She'd been mine to protect, mine to keep, and I'd failed her.

Jason hit me then, unbidden, a memory slicing through the haze. Iraq. Sand in my teeth, heat baking my skin, his laugh cutting through the tension as we rolled out on patrol.

"You're too pretty to die, Dane," he'd said, clapping my shoulder.

Two hours later, he was gone—IED, no warning, just a flash and a crater where my brother-in-arms used to be.

I'd felt it then, too—that cold grip on my spine, the instinct screaming something was wrong.

Too late.

Always too fucking late.

And Dad. His shadow loomed bigger, darker, a wound that never closed.

I'd been deployed when he went dark—too far away to stop it, too disconnected to understand the secrets he'd buried with him. Hart's taunts about him had ripped that scab wide open, and now Claire was paying for it. My past, my failures, bleeding into her present.

I growled, low and guttural, slamming the heel of my hand against the wheel. Not this time. I wouldn't lose her, too.

I hit the access road hard, tires screaming as I took the turn. The van couldn't be far—two minutes, maybe three ahead. I scanned the dark, searching for those taillights, for any sign of her. The island's quiet streets stretched out, lined with oaks and manicured lawns, a mockery of peace when my world was shredding apart. Then I saw it—a glint of metal in the distance, a black van swerving onto a side road toward the marsh.

I floored it, closing the gap, the speedometer ticking past a hundred. The road narrowed, pavement giving way to gravel, crunching under the tires as I gained on them.

My pulse thundered, a war drum in my chest. I could see her in there—hooded, drugged, but fighting. She'd fight. Claire didn't break. She'd claw, kick, tear at them

with everything she had. I had to believe that, because the alternative—her still, her gone—was a wound I couldn't take.

The van veered again, cutting toward a dirt track that snaked into the reeds. I followed, the Bugattifishtailing but holding, my hands steady on the wheel despite the chaos in my head.

I was close—fifty yards, then thirty. I could ram them, force them off, end this now. My finger hovered over the pistol on the seat beside me, ready to finish it the second I had a shot.

Then they pulled a move I didn't see coming. The van's back doors flew open, and a figure leaned out—big, masked, a rifle in his hands. Bullets sprayed, a staccato roar cutting through the air. I swerved, glass shattering as the driver's side window blew out, shards slicing my cheek. The car spun, tires biting dirt, and I fought to keep it on the road, cursing as the van pulled ahead.

That's when I realized my tires were shot. I tried straightening out, blood trickling warm down my face, and pushed harder on the gas.

Twenty yards.

I could still catch them.

I lost control as the Bugatti gave out to the flat tires and slippery road. I did a full 360 before she came to a stop.

I got out of the car thinking to run after the van. Then something glinted in the dark—a small, black shape that I'd seen tumble from the van's open doors, hitting the ground and rolling into the grass. My gut twisted. I knew it before I saw it clearly—her recorder. The one she'd carried everywhere, clutched in her hand like a

lifeline.

The van disappeared into the marsh, and I couldn't chase it. My boots sunk into the soft earth as I ran to where it lay. My hands shook as I picked it up—scratched, dented, but hers. A sign. She was alive. She'd fought. Dropped it to mark her trail, to pull me to her.

I clutched it, my breath ragged, and straightened. The van was gone, lost in the maze of backroads and waterways, and I was standing there with nothing but a piece of her in my hands. Rage boiled up, hot and blinding, and I roared, the sound tearing out of me until my throat bled raw. They'd pay. Every last one of them.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, snapping me back. I yanked it out—Ryker.

“Where the fuck are you?” he barked, no preamble.

“Marsh road off Daniel Island,” I said, voice like gravel. “Lost them. They had a shooter. Took out my ride. She's gone, Ryker.”

“Stay there,” he ordered. “We're five out. Atlas is with me. He's got drones in the air.”

I didn't argue. Couldn't. The fight had drained out of me, replaced by something colder, sharper. I slid the recorder into my pocket and leaned against the car, blood and glass crunching under my feet. Five minutes stretched like hours, the humidity pressing in. I replayed it all—her scream, the hood, the van—searching for what I'd missed, what I could've done.

Finally, Ryker's truck rolled up, kicking gravel. He climbed out, all six-four of him radiating that quiet, lethal calm I'd seen in war zones. Atlas followed, his eyes already scanning the scene like a hawk. They didn't say shit, just moved. Ryker

clapped a hand on my shoulder, hard enough to ground me, while Atlas crouched by the tire marks, tracing the van's path.

"She dropped this," I said, holding up the recorder, my voice steady now, edged with ice. "She's alive. Fighting."

Ryker nodded, once, tight. "We'll get her back."

Atlas stood, brushing dirt off his hands. "Tracks head east—toward the docks, maybe. Drones are closing in. We'll find them."

I opened my mouth to respond, but something caught my eye—a glint in the grass, a few feet from where the recorder had landed. I stepped over, bending to pick it up. A burner phone, cheap and black, screen cracked but glowing. My stomach dropped as I thumbed it on—a single voice message waiting.

I hit play, and a voice slithered out, low and mocking. "Dane, you're late again. Ask your father how this ends."

The line went dead.

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Ryker's jaw tightened as he heard it, Atlas's eyes narrowing to slits. Department 77. My father's ghost loomed again, his secrets a noose tightening around us all.

I crushed the phone in my fist, plastic splintering, and turned to my brothers. "They want a war? They've got one."

Ryker met my gaze, dark and unyielding. "Then let's burn them down."

The night swallowed us as we moved—Dominion rising, a fortress waking up. Claire was out there, and I'd find her. I'd bury anyone who stood in my way.

33

CLAIRE

The world was darkness. Thick, suffocating, absolute.

A hood covered my head, its rough fabric damp with sweat and my own breath, muffling the outside world. The air inside it was stale, hot, tainted with the sharp tang of chemicals—whatever they had used to knock me out. My stomach churned, nausea rolling over me in waves, but I forced it down. I couldn't afford to be weak.

I was sitting. My wrists were bound behind me—zip ties, biting into the skin, cutting off circulation. My ankles, too. A rough wooden chair was beneath me, solid but old, the kind that creaked with the slightest shift of my weight. The air was damp, thick with mildew and something else. Gasoline? Blood? My head was pounding, the echo of whatever they had injected into me still rattling through my skull.

I swallowed against the dryness in my throat, forcing myself to focus.

Where am I?

Darkness pressed against the edges of my mind, blurring reality, pulling me under. And then—light. Soft, golden. The familiar glow of my apartment in New York, the city outside my window humming with life.

I blinked, disoriented. My sofa was there, covered in a mess of blankets from the last time Diego had crashed after a late editing session. My laptop sat open on the coffee table, audio waves frozen on the screen, half of an Unseen episode waiting to be finished.

And then—footsteps.

“Claire, please tell me you ordered food.”

I turned, and there he was.

Diego.

Laughing, exasperated, shaking his head as he kicked the door shut behind him. He dropped his bag on the floor, unzipping his hoodie as he walked toward me, his dark hair an absolute mess, his warm brown eyes gleaming with mischief.

“Let me guess,” he said, flopping onto my sofa and throwing a pillow at me. “You got distracted by some murder mystery again instead of eating like a normal human?”

I laughed. Laughed. The sound bubbled up so easily, so naturally, it almost convinced me this was real.

Because this was us.

Me and Diego.

The late nights, the endless debates over edits, the inside jokes that had built over years of working side by side. The ridiculous conversations that spiraled into absurdity when we were both running on too much caffeine and too little sleep.

“That transition was sloppy, Dixon.”

“Sloppy? Diego, I spent two hours making that transition seamless.”

“Okay, okay. But what if we added a little reverb? Just to be dramatic.”

“This isn’t a horror podcast.”

“Says you.”

I had spent more hours with him than I had with anyone else. In recording studios, in coffee shops, in my tiny New York apartment where we camped out when deadlines loomed too close. I knew exactly how he took his coffee—black, two sugars—how he hummed under his breath when he edited, how he’d make the same exasperated sigh every single time I veered off-script in a voiceover.

I had never doubted that he had my back. Not once.

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I'd felt like I belonged. Like I was doing something real. Like I had someone who understood me, who cared about this work as much as I did, who cared about me.

That's what Diego had been. My friend. My producer. My partner in this crazy, chaotic career we'd built together.

And I had never, never imagined a world where he wasn't in it.

"You are my producer," I shot back, tucking my feet under me. "If I die of starvation, that's technically your fault."

Diego groaned, dragging a hand down his face. "You're impossible."

I grinned, about to fire back?—

And then I saw it. The hoodie he was wearing. The same gray one I had stashed in the bottom of my suitcase at Dominion Hall.

Because Diego was dead.

The laughter strangled in my throat. The warmth bled from the room. I blinked, and he was gone. The sofa, the golden light, the city beyond my window—gone. I was back in the dark.

Back in the damp, stinking air.

Back in Charleston.

A slow, aching horror unfurled inside me, as sharp as the pain radiating through my ribs.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

Not my apartment. A warehouse. Fluorescent lights flickering overhead. Footsteps. Boots scuffing against concrete.

I choked on a breath.

Diego was gone. Really, truly gone.

And then—voices.

Low. Male. Close.

I strained to make out words, but they were just beyond reach, swallowed by the thick press of the hood.

Think, Claire. Think.

Panic wouldn't save me. Hyperventilating wouldn't break the zip ties. Crying wouldn't bring Marcus crashing through the door with a gun in his hand and murder in his eyes.

Marcus.

A lump rose in my throat, thick and suffocating. Had he seen them take me? Had he fought? Had he been hurt?

He would come for me. I had to believe that. But what if he couldn't? What if—this

time—he was too late?

A sharp chill ran through me.

Jason Lawson had been his best friend, his brother-in-arms. And Marcus hadn't been able to save him. Byron Dane had been the man who raised seven sons to be unstoppable. And yet, something in the dark had swallowed him, too.

A door creaked open. I froze, breath catching.

The voices grew clearer. Footsteps approached. Heavy. Deliberate.

Then—rough hands grabbed my hood.

I barely had time to brace before it was yanked off.

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Light exploded into my vision. I flinched, my eyes burning, my head jerking to the side against the sudden exposure. The room swam in a dizzy blur of gray concrete, metal beams, dim buzzing lights.

A warehouse. A bad one.

The walls were damp with condensation. Rust streaked down from bolts in the ceiling. The air reeked of oil and wet wood, like we were near water—maybe a dock.

The man standing in front of me was tall, broad-shouldered, dressed in dark tactical gear that screamed military but wasn't quite right. His stance was too loose, his expression too smug. He was ex-military, maybe, but not one of the good ones.

He was a mercenary.

And behind him?—

My stomach dropped.

Evelyn Hart.

She stood just beyond my captor's shoulder, wrapped in a pale gray coat that cinched at the waist, her blonde bob sleek as ever. Her lipstick was flawless, her nails pristine.

Like she had just walked out of a campaign event. Like this wasn't happening. Like she wasn't standing in a goddamn warehouse, watching me like I was an inconvenience instead of a kidnapped woman tied to a chair.

I swallowed hard, forcing my spine straight.

She tilted her head, eyes sharp. “You really should have stayed in New York, Ms. Dixon.”

I lifted my chin. “Go to hell.”

Hart’s lips curved in something like amusement. “Now, now. No need to be rude.” She took a step forward, her heels clicking against the concrete. “You’re quite the troublemaker, aren’t you?”

I didn’t answer.

She sighed, almost like she pitied me. “You must be scared.”

I was. But I refused to let her see it. I held her gaze, steady and silent.

Hart hummed. “Tell me, Ms. Dixon. Do you think he’s coming for you?”

A beat of silence.

Marcus’s face filled my mind—fierce and unrelenting, the way he had looked at me that first day at the pier, the way he had touched me in his bed, the way he had roared my name when they took me.

I squeezed my eyes shut, my breath hitching.

I didn’t want to think about him. I couldn’t think about him. Not here, not now, not when I was trapped in this darkness, held by people who wanted to break me. But I couldn’t stop it. Couldn’t stop him.

Because there was no part of my life that he hadn't already reached into and rewritten.

I thought I had known obsession before. Thought I had known desire, attachment, need. But Marcus had taken all of those things and shattered them, built something new out of the wreckage. Something that terrified me as much as it consumed me.

Because I didn't just need him. I loved him.

The realization cracked through me like a bullet. A sharp, painful, undeniable truth I had been circling around, maybe from the moment I had met him.

I had fought him. Resisted him. Hated him at first, the way he towered over me, the way he made me feel small and seen all at once. The way he pushed, threatened, got under my skin in a way no one ever had.

But then—then he had touched me.

He had looked at me like I was the only thing in the world worth protecting. Held me like he didn't know how to be careful but was trying so hard not to break me. Laid claim to me with his body, his hands, his rough, possessive mouth, as if he had been waiting for me before he even knew I existed.

And now? Now, I was locked in this suffocating dark, stolen away from him, and there was only one thought cutting through the fear.

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I needed Marcus Dane. Not just to save me. Not just to storm in like the monster I knew he could be, to lay waste to anyone who had dared to touch me.

I needed him. The man. The warrior. The storm that had torn through my life and left me ruined in the best possible way.

I needed to get back to him. I needed to tell him.

My heart slammed against my ribs.

“Yes,” I said simply, certainly. “He’s coming for me.”

Hart’s lips pressed together in a mockery of a smile. “Then let’s make sure he finds exactly what he’s looking for.”

She turned to the man beside her. “Make her scream.”

My stomach bottomed out.

He grinned.

I barely had time to brace before his fist slammed into my ribs.

Pain detonated through my side, white-hot and breath-stealing. My chair rocked back, nearly tipping, my lungs seizing in protest.

I sucked in a breath, forced myself to stay upright.

The man stepped closer. “Come on, you yankee cunt,” he crooned, mockingly. “Give the boss what she wants.”

I clenched my teeth. I refused to give them what they wanted.

The second blow was worse. A fist to my stomach, driving all the air from my lungs in a brutal, unforgiving rush. My body seized, muscles locking up, my knees straining against the zip ties as I fought against the pain.

I gasped, trying to drag in air, but the agony was immediate, sharp as broken glass in my ribs. I felt something shift inside me—maybe a bruise forming, maybe worse.

A cruel laugh echoed in the warehouse, bouncing off the damp concrete walls.

“That one looked like it hurt,” the man taunted, his voice thick with amusement.

I refused to look at him. Refused to give him the satisfaction of acknowledging the pain flooding my body.

I thought of Marcus instead.

Of his hands on me—rough and reverent, claiming and careful, never cruel. I thought of the way he had held me that first night, the way he had pushed me up against the wall underneath Dominion Hall like he couldn’t get close enough.

I had spent so long fighting him, resisting the pull, convincing myself that what we had wasn’t real, wasn’t something I could trust. But Marcus had always known. He had always seen it, seen me, long before I was ready to see it myself.

And now, I might never get the chance to tell him.

The thought sent a fresh wave of terror through me, one that I couldn't let settle.

Marcus was coming for me. I had to hold on. I had to make it through this.

I squared my jaw, forced my head up. "You hit like a bitch."

His expression darkened.

The next blow sent my chair skidding across the floor.

I barely had time to process the impact before he grabbed my jaw, yanking my head up so I was forced to look at him. His grip was bruising, fingers digging into my skin hard enough to leave marks.

"I can do this all night." His breath was hot against my cheek, reeking of cigarettes and something sour. "Can you?"

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I swallowed the bile rising in my throat, ignoring the way my ribs screamed, the way my wrists throbbed from the zip ties cutting into my skin.

“Yes,” I whispered.

His nostrils flared.

He released me with a sharp shove, and my head snapped back against the chair.

Hart sighed. A slow, almost bored sound. “You’re stubborn.”

I didn’t answer.

She took a slow step forward, lowering herself into a crouch beside me. Close. Too close.

Hart’s lips pursed, her expression shifting from cold amusement to something sharper, something angry.

“You don’t have to be,” she murmured, tilting her head as if she were speaking to a child who had disappointed her. “I don’t particularly want to hurt you, Claire.”

A cold, manic laugh bubbled up in my throat, scraping against my raw nerves. “Is that why you just had your pet gorilla use me as a punching bag?”

She ignored the remark.

Instead, she stepped closer, her eyes narrowing, the smooth veneer of her politician's mask slipping just enough for me to see the rage simmering beneath.

"You just couldn't leave it alone, could you?" she hissed. "It wasn't enough for you to poke around, to stir up trouble where it didn't belong. No, you had to go and put my name on your little show. You had to make me the headline."

Her voice dripped with venom, and suddenly, I understood—this was what had sent her over the edge.

Not Diego's death. Not my investigation. It was the podcast. The fact that I had turned my microphone on her. That I had exposed her.

She wasn't just a politician. She wasn't just a woman with power. She was a woman who needed control, who had spent years—decades—carefully curating her image, building her legacy piece by piece. And I had shattered it in an instant.

A million listeners, all digging into her life. Hunting for her. Turning over stones she had worked so hard to keep buried.

My pulse stuttered.

She didn't just want me dead—she wanted me silenced.

Hart crouched beside me, her expensive perfume clashing with the stench of damp concrete and blood.

"You have no idea the mess you've made," she seethed. "Do you know how many people are looking for me now? How many eyes are suddenly watching? How many questions are being asked?"

I clenched my jaw, refusing to look away.

“Good,” I rasped.

Her hand snapped out so fast I didn’t see it coming. The slap cracked across my cheek, white-hot pain flaring through my skull. My head jerked to the side, my vision swimming for a moment before I forced it back into focus.

Hart exhaled slowly, straightening. The mask slid back into place, but I had seen beneath it now. I had rattled her. And that meant I had power, too. Even tied to this chair, bleeding, gasping through the pain—I had struck a nerve.

“Smart,” she continued, smoothing down the lapel of her coat. “Resourceful. And if things had gone differently, I think we could have been friends.”

I let out a shaky breath, tasting blood.

I turned my head just enough to meet her gaze. My vision was blurry at the edges, my breathing shallow, but I managed to lift my chin.

“Well,” I said, my voice hoarse but steady. “I have enough friends.”

Hart smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes.

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“That’s a shame.” She reached out, brushing a strand of hair from my face with an almost maternal touch. “Because I’m the only person who can stop what happens next.”

A shiver rippled through me, but I didn’t let her see it. I wouldn’t give her that.

“You don’t scare me.”

Hart’s gaze softened—mocking. “That’s because you don’t understand what’s coming yet.”

She straightened, adjusting the belt of her coat like we were at a fucking dinner party instead of a goddamn torture warehouse.

Then she turned to her man.

“Break her.”

And just like that, the real pain began.

34

MARCUS

I stood in the marsh, Claire’s recorder in my fist, blood dripping from my knuckles onto the dirt. The Bugatti sat useless behind me, tires shredded, glass glinting in the sun like broken teeth. Ryker and Atlas flanked me, their silence a weight I didn’t

need but couldn't shake. The van was gone, swallowed by the marsh, and with it, her—my Claire. Every second she was out there, with them, carved a fresh wound I couldn't bleed out.

Ryker's truck idled. Atlas tapped his phone, drones humming overhead, their feeds streaming to his screen. "Tracks head east," he said, voice sharp, no bullshit. "Toward the docks. Cooper River, maybe."

"Then we move," I growled, shoving the recorder into my pocket. My boots crunched glass as I stalked to the truck, sliding into the back. Ryker took the wheel, Atlas up front, and we peeled out, gravel spitting like shrapnel. The engine roared, a match to the fire in my chest, but it wasn't enough. Nothing would be until I had her back—until I had their blood on my hands.

I stared out the window, the humid air thick with salt and rot. Her scream echoed in my skull, that last desperate thrash before they'd hooded her, drugged her, taken her from me. I'd been close—thirty yards, gun raised, ready to end it—and still too fucking late.

Jason's laugh hit me then, unbidden, a ghost from the sand. Iraq, years back. "Keep your head, pretty boy," he'd said, grinning as we loaded up. Then the blast, the crater, his blood on my clothes. Too late then, too.

And Dad's shadow loomed darker, a specter I couldn't outrun. I'd been sixteen, sneaking a beer on the porch when I'd heard him—low, tense, on the phone in his study. "They're closing in," he'd muttered. "We can't stop it." No names, just dread, a warning I'd ignored until he was gone, secrets buried with him. Hart's taunt on that burner—"Ask your father how this ends"—twisted the knife. Whatever he'd tangled with, it was here now, and Claire was in its jaws.

I slammed my fist into the seat, leather creaking. "Faster," I snapped.

Ryker didn't flinch, just pushed the truck harder, the speedometer climbing. "Drones are locking in," Atlas said, eyes on his screen. "Got a hit—black van, parked at an old warehouse, waterfront. Five minutes out."

Five minutes. Too long. I pictured her—gray eyes fierce, fighting even now, refusing to break. I'd find her. I'd rip through every bastard in my way, paint the docks red with their guts. Hart, Department 77, whoever—they'd learn what happened when you touched what was mine.

We hit the industrial stretch, the river's stink seeping through the windows—oil, rust, and decay. The warehouse loomed ahead, a rotting hulk of concrete and steel, windows smashed, walls streaked with grime. The van sat out front, black and silent, a taunt. Ten guys milled around it—dark gear, rifles slung, moving like they'd done this before. Mercenaries. Hart's dogs.

Ryker killed the engine a hundred yards out, parking in the shadows. "Ten on three," he said, voice flat, like it was nothing.

"Good odds," Atlas muttered, checking his weapon.

I didn't smile. Didn't care.

"They're dead already." I drew my pistol, checked the magazine—full, ready—and grabbed a knife from the truck's kit, its weight cold in my hand. "No mercy. We cut through, get her. Hart's mine."

Ryker nodded, dark eyes unreadable. Atlas cracked his neck, a predator waking up. We moved, silent, shadows on the crumbling pavement, the river lapping at the docks behind us. No words, just instinct—years of war, blood, and brotherhood honed to a blade.

The first two went down easy. I came in low, knife slashing across the back of one's knee, tendons snapping like twine. He went to scream and I drove the blade up through his throat, blood gushing hot over my hand. Ryker took the other—a single shot, silenced, skull exploding in a red mist. They hit the ground before the others turned.

Then it was chaos.

A shout went up, rifles swinging our way. I dove behind the van as bullets chewed the concrete, sparks flying. Atlas rolled right, popping up to drop a guy with chest shots—clean, brutal, the body crumpling like a rag doll. Ryker charged left, a fucking tank, slamming one into the warehouse wall, his knife sinking into the guy's gut. He twisted it, yanked it free, blood sluicing down the steel.

I didn't wait. I vaulted the van's hood, landing on a bastard mid-reload. My fist smashed his nose, cartilage crunching, then my knife found his ribs—once, twice, a wet pop as it punched through. He gurgled, eyes wide, and I shoved him off, blood pooling under my feet. Five down.

The rest came hard. A big fucker swung a rifle butt at my head—I ducked, grabbed his arm, snapped it at the elbow. Bone cracked loud, his scream louder, cut short when I pressed my pistol into his temple and pulled the trigger, brains splattering the wall. Ryker took two more—one with a throat shot, arterial spray painting the air, the other with a knee-cap blast, finished with a curb stomp that left his face a ruin.

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Atlas danced through them, precise, lethal—a headshot here, a knife to the spine there, bodies piling up like cordwood. Nine down. One left. He bolted for the warehouse door, panic in his steps. I caught him, tackled him into the gravel, my knee pinning his chest. He clawed at me, desperate, so I drove my knife through his eye, deep, twisting until he went still. Blood ran thick, soaking my sleeve.

Ten dead. Ten fucking corpses littering the ground, and I didn't feel a damn thing but the need to get inside. Ryker wiped his blade on a body's jacket, calm as ever. Atlas checked his pistol, breathing steady. "Clear," he said.

I didn't answer. Just kicked the warehouse door in, wood splintering, and stormed inside. The air hit me—damp, sour with mildew and oil, the river's rot seeping through the walls. Dim fluorescents buzzed overhead, casting jagged shadows. And then I heard it—a scream, raw, hers, cutting through the dark like a blade to my gut.

My voice almost tore out. I ran, pistol up, Ryker and Atlas on my heels. The sound came again—weaker, pained, but alive. I rounded a stack of crates, and there she was.

Tied to a chair, zip ties cutting into her wrists and ankles, blood streaking her swollen face. Her blonde hair was matted with it, her ribs heaving under a torn shirt—probably broken, I could tell by the way she hunched, gasping. The mercenary loomed over her, fist raised, grinning like a sick fuck enjoying his work. Hart stood behind him, pristine in her gray coat, watching like it was a goddamn show.

I didn't think. Just fired. The shot took the bastard in the shoulder, spinning him, blood spraying. He snarled, reaching for his gun, but I was on him—pistol-whipped his face, teeth flying, then drove my knee into his gut. He doubled over, and I

grabbed his head, slamming it into the concrete floor—once, twice, three times—until his skull cracked open, brains oozing out like spilled jelly.

Hart shrieked, bolting for a side door, but Atlas was faster—cut her off, gun to her temple, forcing her to her knees. Ryker secured the room, checking corners, but I didn't care. I dropped to Claire, knife out, cutting her ties. Her wrists were raw, bloody, her hands trembling as the zip ties fell away. She slumped forward, and I caught her, her blood smearing my shirt, my hands, my fucking soul.

“Claire,” I rasped, voice breaking. “I’ve got you.”

Her face was a mess—swollen, bruised, one eye half-shut—but those gray eyes locked onto mine, fierce, unbroken. She coughed, wincing, a hand clutching her ribs, and I knew they were shattered. I’d kill them all again for that, slower, make them feel every second.

Then she moved. Slow, shaky, she reached for a pistol on the floor—one of the mercenary’s, dropped in the carnage. Her fingers closed around it, and she pushed herself up, stumbling toward Hart.

“Stay back,” she croaked, waving me off, Ryker, too. Her grip was unsteady, but her intent was steel. She’d kill. I had no doubt.

Hart knelt there, Atlas’s gun still on her, but her eyes were on Claire—wide, panicked, the mask gone. “You don’t have to do this,” she said, voice trembling. “We can talk?—”

“Shut up,” Claire spat, blood on her lips, the gun shaking but aimed true. “You took Diego. You took everything.”

Hart’s mouth opened, a plea forming, but Claire cut her off. “You thought you could

break me? You thought I'd just roll over?" Her voice cracked, raw with pain, rage. "I exposed you. I ruined you. And now you're nothing."

The air thickened, time slowing. Claire's finger tightened on the trigger, her swollen face a mask of fury. I watched, heart pounding, torn. Should I stop her? Pull her back from the edge, keep her hands clean? She'd live with it—killing Hart—and I'd carry that weight for her if I could. But this was her fight, her justice, and I'd be damned if I took it away.

Then she stopped. Cocked her head, a dark glint in her eye. "You know what?" she asked, her voice low and lethal. "I'd rather see what my boyfriend's gonna do with you."

She lowered the gun, swaying, and I caught her as her legs buckled, pulling her against me. Her breath hitched, a sob breaking through, but she held on, fierce even now. I looked at Hart, kneeling there, pale and trembling, and felt nothing but cold, endless hate.

"Get her up," I told Atlas, voice ice. He hauled Hart to her feet, zip-tying her wrists, her coat smudged with warehouse grime. She'd live—for now. Long enough to spill everything about Department 77, about Dad, about this war she'd started. I'd make her beg for death before I gave it.

Ryker stepped closer, eyeing Claire. "We need to move. Drones picked up chatter—more coming."

I nodded, lifting Claire gently, her weight light but solid in my arms. She winced, clutching her ribs, but her hand gripped my shirt, anchoring herself. "Marcus," she whispered, voice hoarse, "I?—"

"Later," I said, soft but firm. "You're safe. That's all."

But her eyes held mine, and I heard it anyway—the “I love you” she didn’t say. It hit me harder than any bullet, a truth I’d known since the pier, since she’d dared me to stop her. I’d burn the world for her, and she knew it.

A radio crackled on the mercenary’s corpse, cutting through: “Status requested.”

Ryker’s jaw tightened. Atlas cursed low. Department 77 wasn’t done—Hart was just the start.

I picked up the radio, keyed the mic and said, “Game over, motherfuckers.” And then I dropped it to the ground and stomped it to pieces.

I held Claire closer, her blood on my hands, and met my brothers’ gazes. “They want war,” I said, voice a promise. “We’ll give it to them.”

The warehouse swallowed our steps as we moved out, Claire in my arms, Hart bound and dragged behind. The world was alive with threat, but I’d bury it all—every last one of them—before I let her go again.

35

CLAIRE

The world had narrowed to two things: pain and Marcus.

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Pain was expected. It lived in my ribs, a sharp reminder of every fist that had landed, every bruise that would bloom deep beneath my skin. It curled in my wrists and ankles, raw from the zip ties, throbbed in my face where Hart's mercenary had struck me. I could feel it everywhere, a map of violence written across my body.

But Marcus—Marcus was something else entirely.

The next day, I sat on the edge of his bed in Dominion Hall, wrapped in one of his t-shirts, my hands curled around a bottle of water I had barely touched. The room was dim, quiet, the kind of stillness that only came after the storm. But Marcus wasn't still.

He was pacing.

Back and forth across the room, his hands in his hair, his jaw clenched so tight I swore I could hear his teeth grinding. His knuckles were split, his breathing uneven, his entire body coiled with something unleashed, something that had no outlet now that I was here, safe.

Safe.

The word didn't feel real yet.

Hart was gone—taken by the Agency's quiet cleanup crew, a group of men who had stepped out of the dark like ghosts and looked at her like she was already dead. Marcus and his brothers had worked her over first, but she had given them little. Just confirmation that the Charleston operation had been about the port. Control it. Use it.

For what? That part was still a mystery.

Atlas had been the first to step back when the suits arrived, his expression unreadable as he watched them drag Hart out. He knew something. Something he hadn't said yet. And now? Now, he was gone. Vanished into the night to chase whatever truth was waiting for him.

But I wasn't thinking about Atlas now.

I was watching Marcus. Watching him come apart, watching the storm inside him rage without release.

"You're going to wear a hole in the floor," I murmured, my voice hoarse.

Marcus stopped. Turned.

His eyes locked onto me, dark and wild, and suddenly, he was right there, kneeling in front of me, his hands coming up like he wanted to touch me but couldn't.

"I almost lost you."

His voice was raw. Wrecked.

I swallowed hard, reaching for him first. Because I could. Because I was alive. Because he needed it. Because I needed it.

I traced my fingers over his jaw, my touch featherlight, but he shuddered. His hands closed around my wrists—not to stop me, just to hold on. His grip was tight, like he was grounding himself with the feel of me.

"You didn't," I whispered. "I'm here."

He exhaled sharply, his fingers flexing against my skin. “You don’t get it, Claire. I saw them take you. I was right there, and I—” He cut himself off, shaking his head.

I knew what he was thinking. That he had failed.

“Marcus.” I leaned in, pressing my forehead to his. “You saved me.”

His breath hitched, but he shook his head. “Not fast enough.”

There was something fractured in his voice, something I had never heard before. Marcus Dane, the man who burned like a wildfire, was unraveling.

And God, I loved him.

It hit me then, in a way that left no room for doubt, no space for denial.

I loved him.

Not just the protector, not just the man who had cut through bodies to find me. I loved all of him. The sharp edges. The broken parts. The violence and the vulnerability, the loyalty so fierce it was terrifying.

I had spent my life chasing the truth. And this? This was the truth.

I lifted my hand, cupping his face. “Marcus, look at me.”

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He did. And in that moment, I saw everything.

The fury. The grief. The desperate, terrifying love he was holding back, afraid it would consume me, afraid it would destroy him.

I wouldn't let it.

I leaned in, kissed him softly. Not like before. Not like the frantic, desperate kisses we had shared in the dark, fueled by adrenaline and hunger. This was different.

This was a promise.

"I love you," I whispered against his lips. "I love you, and I'm right here."

His entire body shook.

And then—then he was kissing me back, his hands framing my face, his touch reverent and desperate all at once.

"Say it again," he rasped, his forehead pressing to mine.

"I love you."

He exhaled roughly, like I had just given him the one thing in this world that he didn't know how to ask for.

Then his hands slid lower. And the storm inside him finally broke.

Marcus kissed me like he was drowning, like he was still caught in the moment where I had been ripped from his hands, where I had been gone.

I felt it in the way his lips crashed against mine, in the way his hands clutched at me—my waist, my back, the curve of my hip—like he needed proof that I was real, that I was here. That I hadn't disappeared.

I melted into him, my body aching, but not from the bruises. From him. From the need that had been simmering between us since the moment we met, since the moment he stalked toward me on the pier with that knowing look in his eyes, like he had already decided I was his.

But now? Now, I was deciding, too.

I pressed closer, gasping as he lifted me effortlessly, his hands gripping my thighs. My legs wrapped around his waist, my fingers tangling in his hair, pulling, gripping, trying to get closer because closer wasn't enough.

Marcus groaned into my mouth as he dropped me onto the bed, his weight pressing me down into the mattress, into him. My body screamed from the impact, my bruises protesting, but I didn't care. I wanted this. I wanted him.

His lips left mine, dragging down the column of my throat, his teeth scraping, his breath hot and uneven. His hands pushed up the hem of the t-shirt I was wearing—his t-shirt—exposing my bare skin to the cool air.

His fingers hesitated over the bruises on my ribs.

His breath hitched.

And then he pulled back.

“Marcus—”

He shook his head, his jaw clenched, his hands trembling against my waist. “I can’t—” His voice was hoarse, raw. “You’re hurt, Claire.”

“I don’t care.” I reached for him, desperate to pull him back down, but he resisted.

His eyes burned as they roamed over me, his fingers brushing so lightly over my bruised skin that it sent a shiver through me. “I do.”

I swallowed hard, my chest tightening. “Then don’t be gentle.”

His nostrils flared. His jaw ticked. And something shifted in his expression—something dark, something primal.

He didn’t hesitate after that.

He kissed me again, harder, deeper, his hands gripping my thighs as he spread me beneath him, as he settled between my legs like he belonged there. He did belong there. He always had.

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There was no restraint now. No hesitation. Just us.

The room disappeared. The world disappeared. There was only Marcus—his hands, his mouth, his body claiming mine.

It was desperate. Fierce. Possessive.

And I let him take me. Because I was his.

Because I had never belonged to anyone the way I belonged to Marcus Dane.

Marcus moved above me, inside me, like he was making sure I felt it—every inch of him, every hard, unyielding part of his body pressing into mine, surrounding me, owning me.

He didn't hold back.

Didn't ease into it.

He took me like he needed it, like he was still chasing the proof that I was here, alive, breathing beneath him. And I gave it to him.

Because I needed him just as badly.

I arched up, wrapping my legs around his waist, digging my fingers into his back, my nails leaving red lines against his skin. He growled into my neck, the sound vibrating through me, raw and hungry and possessive.

“You’re mine,” he rasped against my skin, his breath hot, his voice thick with wreckage and devotion.

“Yes.” My gasp broke into a moan as he slammed deeper, as he buried himself inside me like he was staking his claim in a way that no one—not Hart, not Department 77, not even the ghosts of our pasts—could take away.

He wanted me here.

With him.

Not just in this moment, tangled in sweat-damp sheets, his body flush against mine, but always.

Forever.

And God, I wanted that, too.

His hand tangled in my hair, tilting my head back as his teeth scraped my throat, his lips following, softer now, reverent.

His thrusts slowed, deepened, his hands smoothing over my hips, my thighs, like he was memorizing me. As if he already owned me, but still couldn’t quite believe I was here.

I pressed my palm to his chest, feeling the pounding of his heart, the heat of his skin, the raw power coiled beneath the surface.

This man had torn through the city for me. Had put bullets in bodies, broken bones, spilled blood?—

And now he held me like I was something fragile. Something he couldn't risk losing.

I lifted my lips to his ear, my breath uneven but certain. "Yours."

A growl rumbled deep in his chest. Dark. Satisfied.

He caught my mouth in a brutal kiss, swallowing my cries, driving into me harder, faster, rougher. His hands slid under my thighs, lifting me to take him deeper, to let him pound into me exactly how I needed.

His control was unraveling.

I wanted it gone.

"Marcus," I whispered, my lips brushing his jaw, my teeth scraping his skin. "More."

Something snapped.

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He flipped me onto my stomach in one swift motion, dragging me onto my knees, his body caging mine, covering me, dominating me.

His hand fisted in my hair, tugging my head back just enough to make me arch, just enough to make me feel the sharp edge of control he still had left.

“You’re playing a dangerous game, baby,” he warned, his voice like gravel and thunder, his cock teasing my entrance, sending shudders through me. “You don’t know what you’re asking for.”

I turned my head slightly, my lips curving. Daring him.

“Show me.”

A growl tore from his throat, and then he was inside me again, pushing in so deep I saw stars.

I cried out, my fingers fisting the sheets as he fucked me like he meant to leave a mark, like he needed to rewrite the pain I’d endured with pleasure.

Every thrust was relentless, brutal, his hips snapping forward as his grip tightened on my waist, pulling me back onto him like he couldn’t stand to be even a fraction away.

I felt wrecked.

I felt worshipped.

Every inch of me was his, claimed and possessed in a way that was more than just physical. It was deeper than that, a burn in my soul, a hunger in my bones.

And he felt it, too. I could tell in the way he grunted my name, in the way his fingers dug into my skin like he'd never let go again.

One of his hands slid around to my throat, not squeezing, just holding me, tilting my head back until his lips dragged along the shell of my ear.

His voice was a snarl, a promise as his hips drove into me harder.

“You think you can just say you love me and not expect me to ruin you for anyone else?”

I shuddered violently, my whole body trembling beneath him. “Marcus?—”

“Say it again,” he demanded, his grip tightening just slightly, just enough to own every inch of me.

My entire body tightened, pleasure coiling low, winding tighter and tighter.

“I love you,” I gasped. “I love you.”

His body stiffened behind me, his thrusts turning erratic, desperate.

He dragged me up, pressing my back against his chest, his hand sliding between my thighs, finding the most sensitive part of me, rubbing, circling, owning.

“Come for me, baby,” he ordered, his voice nothing but gravel and fire.

And I did.

I shattered.

Completely.

Pleasure ripped through me, a white-hot explosion that left me shaking, pulsing around him, my fingers grasping for him like he was the only thing tethering me to reality.

Marcus cursed harshly, his grip bruising, his body surging forward one last time before he followed me over the edge, spilling inside me, claiming me in every possible way.

I felt it. Felt the way he shuddered, felt the way he buried his face against my neck, his breath ragged, his hands still gripping me like I could disappear again if he let go.

I turned my head slightly, kissing him softly, lazily.

His lips softened against mine, and when he pulled out, he didn't let me go. He flipped me onto my back, pulling me into his chest, wrapping me up in his arms.

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I barely registered the way he tucked the blanket over us, the way he pressed slow kisses to my shoulder, silent promises I knew he meant.

His voice was low, barely a whisper against my hair.

“You’re mine, Claire Dixon.”

I smiled sleepily, already drifting.

“Yours,” I murmured.

And I meant it.

His lips found my temple, pressing there, lingering. “I’m not letting you go.”

I smiled sleepily, already knowing I wasn’t going anywhere.

But he wasn’t done.

His fingers brushed along my spine, spreading warmth, possession. “Tomorrow, I’m calling movers. They’ll pack up your things in New York, ship them here.”

I stiffened slightly, tilting my head to meet his gaze. “Here?”

His blue eyes burned into mine, absolute. Unwavering.

“With me. At Dominion Hall.”

My breath caught.

This wasn't just Marcus taking me, loving me, claiming me. This was Marcus keeping me.

The words settled somewhere deep inside, their weight heavy, real.

A past version of myself might have hesitated. Might have tried to push back, to hold on to some illusion of independence, of distance. But I wasn't that version of myself anymore.

I wasn't the woman who had arrived in Charleston looking for answers, determined to chase the truth no matter where it led.

I wasn't the woman who had thought she could walk away from Marcus Dane.

Because there was no walking away.

And I didn't want to.

I lifted myself just enough to press my lips to his, slow and soft, a promise wrapped in something deeper than words.

"Okay," I murmured. "I'll stay."

Something shifted in his face.

Relief. Possession. Something like love, but even darker and deeper.

His grip tightened on me, his voice rough as he pulled me even closer. "You were never leaving."

And I knew he was right.

I tilted my head, pressing a kiss to his temple. “I love you,” I murmured again, just because I could.

His grip on me tightened. His breath shuddered out.

Then he lifted his head, his eyes finding mine. “I love you, too,” he whispered.

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My heart clenched, my breath catching in my throat.

I had known. Of course, I had known. But hearing it? Hearing it broke something in me in the best possible way.

He kissed me—slow this time, reverent. And then he buried his face in my neck, holding me like he never wanted to let go.

I held him just as tightly.

Because neither of us had to let go. Not now. Not ever.

EPILOGUE

CLAIRE

Another day later, I woke to the sound of a door closing.

I sat up, groggy, the sheets tangled around me, Marcus's scent still clinging to my skin. The bed beside me was empty, the warmth of his body already fading from the space where he had slept.

Frowning, I pushed the covers back and slid out of bed, my body aching—not from pain, not from bruises, but from the way Marcus had worshipped me, again and again.

I found his t-shirt on the floor and pulled it over my head, padding barefoot toward

the door.

The house was quiet, the kind of stillness that only came after a storm. But when I stepped into the hall, I saw them.

Marcus stood by the front door, his back to me, his broad shoulders tense. Atlas was there too, a duffel bag slung over his shoulder, his expression unreadable.

He was leaving.

“Where are you going?” My voice came out rough, thick with sleep.

Atlas glanced at me. “Got some things to take care of.”

I didn’t miss the way Marcus’s jaw tightened. His fists were clenched at his sides, his posture rigid. This wasn’t just about Hart.

This was about something bigger. Something they weren’t telling me.

Atlas smirked. “Don’t worry, Claire. I’ll be back.”

And then he was gone.

Marcus stood there for a long moment after the door shut, his breathing slow, measured, controlled. Too controlled.

I stepped closer, resting a hand on his arm, and just like that, the tension in his body eased.

His blue eyes met mine, and the storm that lived inside them settled.

I didn't ask where Atlas was going. Not yet. Because today, there was something else waiting for us.

Diego's parents.

We had made arrangements to have my friend's body sent back to New York, where he would be laid to rest. The Gils had barely stopped crying when we'd met with them yesterday, their grief raw and endless. Today wouldn't be any easier. But at least they wouldn't be alone.

And neither would I.

Later, after the meeting, Marcus and Ryker—plus me and Izzy—would head to the Sullivan's Island house for a cookout and some much-needed time on the beach. Noah, Charlie, Elias, and Silas had just returned to town to regroup after everything that had happened, and they'd be there, too, reconnecting, catching their breath before the next inevitable storm. The Gils would stop by before they left town, a quiet goodbye before they returned to the city.

Atlas had said his goodbyes already. Whatever he was chasing, it wouldn't wait.

The late afternoon sun was golden, stretching long across the sand. Waves lapped lazily at the shore, and the scent of grilled steak and salt air filled the breeze. The backyard of the Sullivan's Island house was alive with laughter. Charlie was throwing a football with Elias while Silas was perched on a lounge chair, sipping whiskey like a king surveying his kingdom.

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I stood by the railing of the deck, Izzy beside me, both of us watching the chaos unfold.

She nudged me with her shoulder. “We’re really in it now, huh?”

I smiled, shaking my head. “Yeah. I guess we are.”

She was right.

This wasn’t just Marcus and me. This was all of them. The brothers. The fights. The loyalty that ran deeper than blood. We weren’t just guests here. We were part of it now.

Family.

Marcus caught my eye from where he stood near the grill, talking to Ryker. His gaze never lingered far from me.

The possessiveness in it sent a shiver down my spine. The love in it wrecked me.

And suddenly, I knew.

I couldn’t wait.

I turned, plucked a beer bottle off the table, and climbed onto one of the deck chairs, clearing my throat.

“Can I have everyone’s attention for a second?”

Marcus’s brow furrowed, but the conversation died around me. Six Dane brothers. One Isabel. And me. Everyone was here but Atlas.

My family.

I swallowed hard, feeling my pulse race, then lifted my chin.

“I’m doing this before one of you tries to claim it first,” I announced, my voice steady but my heart hammering. “Because let’s be real, Marcus Dane would probably make a big show of it, and this big city girl doesn’t have the patience for all that.”

A slow, dangerous smirk curled on Marcus’s lips. His eyes darkened.

The others were watching now, curiosity sparking.

I took a breath. “Marcus, I love you.”

The smirk vanished. Something flickered across his face—shock, awe, something unguarded, completely open.

“I love you,” I said again, my voice softer now. “And I already live in your house, so I figured we might as well make it official.”

I tossed him the beer bottle cap, my makeshift engagement ring.

A stunned silence stretched.

Then Ryker barked out a laugh. “Holy shit. Should we make it a double wedding?”

Charlie whistled. Silas grinned. Isabel was already crying.

Marcus ... Marcus just stared at me.

I swallowed. “You don’t have to say yes. But I?—”

I didn’t get to finish.

Marcus grabbed me, pulled me off the chair, and kissed me so hard I forgot my own damn name.

Laughter and cheers erupted around us, but all I could feel was him.

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When he finally broke the kiss, his forehead pressed against mine, his breath uneven, he muttered against my lips?—

“You’re mine.”

I smiled. “I was always yours.”

His chest shook with laughter. Then he growled, low and possessive.

“We’re getting a real ring, baby.”

I grinned. “Fine. But I get to pick it.”

His hands tightened on my waist. “Like hell you do.”

The argument dissolved into another kiss, into laughter, into a life that had once seemed impossible but was now undeniably mine.

Because I hadn’t just found Marcus.

I had found all of them.

A family. A home.

A future.

And I wasn’t letting go.